

## The Wokingham Society

Open Meeting, Wednesday March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2010 at 7.30 at the Bradbury Centre

Present: Members of the Executive Committee: Peter Must (Chairman), John Bingham (Vice-Chairman), Jane Bingham (Membership Secretary), Neil Hines (Treasurer), Hazel Guile (Planning Officer), John Griffin (Secretary), Ann Davis

Also present: Members of the Wokingham Society and the public

Visiting Speaker: David Lee, Leader, Wokingham Borough Council

Executive Member for Local and Regional Planning, Wokingham Borough Council: Gary Cowan

The Chairman welcomed Councillor Lee and the many members of the Wokingham Society and residents of Wokingham to the meeting where Councillor Lee would make a presentation about the Wokingham Core Strategy Development Locations in North and South Wokingham and the Town Centre Regeneration Plan. There would be an opportunity to ask questions in the course of the presentation. He hoped that those present who were not members of the Society might, as a result of the meeting, consider taking up membership.

Councillor Lee started by informing the meeting that in the previous 33 years an average of 763 houses per year had been built in Wokingham, predominantly in the back gardens of existing houses. Because of the nature of the building the developers had not been required to contribute to the improvement of the infrastructure and, although in the past 16 years 623 dwellings had been built every year, the predominance of apartments and the designation of the back gardens of private dwellings as brownfield sites added to the congestion in the Town.

The Council felt therefore, in aiming to meet the Government's housing target by 2026, it was essential to ensure that the major developments, the North Wokingham, South Wokingham, South of the M4 and Arborfield sites, proceeded in the full understanding that the developers would be responsible for creating the essential infrastructure. The Council's aim was to ensure that the housing was of the highest quality, that schools would meet the needs of all the families involved and that the roads would not make the prevailing road network and current traffic problems worse. He advised that Highways modelling procedures had indicated that the situation would not improve, but that it would not worsen

At this point Councillor Lee asked for questions and the subsequent debate focussed on the problems with the proposed distribution roads. Most present felt that the proposals would make the current traffic problems far worse, particularly given the growth of traffic entering Wokingham from Arborfield along the Barkham Road.

Councillor Cowan was asked to explain the road provision South of Wokingham. He said that it was planned for the distributor road to join Finchampstead Road near Tesco's. The Gatwick Railway Bridge would be raised and widened and the developers would contribute to the raising of the Waterloo Bridge. There would be an improved roundabout at the Finchampstead Road end of Molly Millar's Lane. The Railway Station would be moved some 50 yards west to allow room for the intended transport interchange, with a station relief road running from the bottom of Station Road to the Reading Road., but the level crossing would remain in place. There were many objections to

the proposals on the grounds that the Finchampstead and Barkham Roads would remain blighted by through traffic.

In answer to questions from those concerned about the North Wokingham Development, Councillor Lee explained that the Council was still in discussion with the Highways Agency about the proposed Ahshridge interchange onto the A329M. The Agency would only permit entrance and exit from the east, which would not meet the needs for traffic easing in this area. At present the only way of achieving full interchange would be for that motorway to become an A road.

Although there was a long-term aspiration to extend the distributor road round to London Road), this would require compulsory purchase orders and thus money the Council did not currently have. Therefore the distributor road was at present planned to extend only from Toutley Road in the west to the eastern end of the development area.

Those present were unhappy at the absence of solutions, and concerned that there would be considerable congestion both on existing roads and at the entrance and exit points on the A329 London and Reading Roads.

As concerned traffic relief towards the centre of town Councillors Lee and Cowan said that there would be a new through road running round Elms Field from Wellington Road to Broad Street, the intended Station Relief Road, and one-way movement along Station Road, all of which was designed to ease congestion, particularly at the station level crossing.

Councillor Lee assured the meeting that all the modelling done by the Highways planners showed that the situation would not be any worse than at present.

When asked which would come first, houses or infrastructure, Councillor Lee informed the meeting that roads would take priority and would be phased appropriately, but, in accordance with the stated wishes of the residents who had responded to the Council's consultation process, there would be no dual carriageway and also there would not be a road leading to the Coppid Beech roundabout because there are already too many roads joining the roundabout. He also said the Council would look at the possibility of linking Barkham Road with the Woosehill Spine Road.

At the end of this part of the presentation, Peter Must proposed that a meeting or workshop on road infrastructure might be held and Councillors Lee and Cowan agreed to this proposal once the traffic modelling data is on the WBC website at the beginning of April. They also agreed to the possibility that the SANG (park) currently planned to abut Hilton St Anne's Manor land could be moved to near Clay Lane.

Councillor Lee then moved the debate to the Wokingham Town Development Plan. He told the meeting that the Town Centre had been dying for several years and it was necessary to take steps to halt the slide. The proposals put forward by WBC had been fully open to public participation and many of the ideas in the plans arose from consultations with residents and interested parties. Notice had been taken of public feeling when the original plans were drawn up and also after the Exhibition in the Council Offices. He said the Council had operated entirely with the interests of the people of Wokingham in mind.

There was a strong response from the meeting, particularly on the subject of Elms Field Councillors Lee and Cowan recognised that there was a need to ensure that the residents of the Town continue to be consulted. Councillor Lee pointed out that changes to the original plan had already been made as a result of responses to the Public Exhibition. There would be a larger central area of open space

on Elms Field on the western side and only one tree would be cut down on that site. He said that it was vital that residents realise that they own Elms Field and the Council feels responsible for ensuring that its future is controlled by the Council and not by developers. He also said that there would be no trees planted in Rose Street as requested by the local Residents' Association, and agreed that thought should be given to designating Elms Field and Howard Palmer Park as Town Greens to protect them from future development.

Many present still felt that the Town Centre Plan was unsatisfactory and that it would completely spoil Wokingham as a market town of character. Many questioned the need to link the Elms Field project with the Peach Street development. In response, Councillor Lee advised that the Peach Street area was not owned by the Council and, although it could apply a compulsory purchase order to the properties owned by Rock Development Company, it could only afford to do so if the Plan as a whole were to go ahead.

Other concerns were expressed about car parks and residents' parking spaces and the residents were assured that they would not lose any spaces. Councillor Lee was asked if he could ensure that *The Redan* public house would not be demolished and he said that it could not be guaranteed that this would not happen. He was also asked to investigate the status and quality of the Victorian properties next to *The Redan* and consider whether they should be preserved.

A number of those present told Councillor Lee that they had sent letters to the Council in 2009 about some of the issues raised and had received no reply. They were told to write in again since all views submitted would be taken seriously. Many present were not satisfied with the reply but they would certainly write again to the Council expressing their views.

Councillor Lee concluded by saying that all views on the Town Centre Regeneration Plan would be considered before the final submission to be presented to the preferred developers, who would be appointed in the next few weeks. He stressed that if the residents of Wokingham rejected the proposals out of hand then the Council would listen to their voice and the Plan would be withdrawn. However, he felt that this would not be in the best interest of the community.

Peter Must thanked Councillors Lee and Cowan and said that the Society appreciated their presence at the meeting. He hoped that those present would continue to be interested in the future of the Town Centre and would make known to the Council their views and feelings.