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27 July 2011

Response to Wokingham Town Centre Regeneration Exhibition July 2011

The Society is grateful for the opportunity to comment on the Wokingham Town Centre Regeneration Exhibition and wishes to offer the following response. Not all of the headings in the questionnaire are appropriate in respect of a combined submission like this, but we do seek to answer the questions raised while preferring to reply in the form of a letter.

1. Initial comments

- (a) We thought it very sensible to hold the Exhibition in the town centre, but there were a few issues about publicity and display:
- (i) The location was not clear in the initial publicity. No one to our knowledge knew where 'Unit 4' was and some people went to the More Arts display at the other end of Peach Street in search of it
 - (ii) The initial letters of invitation missed many people who have attended earlier workshops, forums and other events – the Borough Council seems to have somewhat haphazard lists that need coordinating and streamlining
 - (iii) With greater forethought, more space should have been found for the event. The display itself was squeezed into the back of the area provided and quite a few people left without viewing the panels sufficiently or, sometimes, at all because of the press of numbers.

These lapses tended to give the impression of a rushed process with inadequate planning or thought for the local community who were the Exhibition's target.

- (b) We are surprised that the questionnaire says 'completed forms... may be passed onto Wokingham Borough Council'. Would they not be passed on to both Wilson Bowden (who are not mentioned as recipients) and the Council, on whose joint behalf Snapdragon Consulting are acting? And what is meant by 'may'? Does this imply that the Council may be told nothing, or that they (and Wilson Bowden?) will receive an analysis of the forms but not necessarily the forms themselves? We would urge that both parties should receive everything, so that Snapdragon is not seen as deciding what is of interest and what is not. **Could we be specifically advised as to what will be done, and that the outcomes of all forms of response, whether by questionnaire, post-it, letter or email, be made available to the public in evidence of the overall and specific responses of the public.**
- (c) We have been pressing the Council to announce when, and in what form, the 'public engagement exercise' to determine the 'mixed landscape strategy including hard and soft landscape and built form' on Elms Field (referred to repeatedly in the Masterplan) is to be held. This must surely come soon to enable the developers and their architects to ascertain from the public what sort of

landscape strategy and design they would favour. This Exhibition was not about that process but **we urge all parties to address this issue and make an announcement in the near future.**

2. The concept of regeneration

We wish to record at the outset our strong support for the concept of regenerating our town centre. Our members, and especially those on the Committee, have been involved from the outset with discussions about how best to protect and enhance the commercial activity of this market town while conserving the historic heart that makes it an attractive place for townfolk and visitors alike. We have particularly welcomed the acquisition of Peach Place so that it can recover its vital role as a focus for retail activity while its appearance is enhanced in recognition of its central location.

The Society's major function, as a civic trust, is to represent the need to conserve the essential heritage of Wokingham while supporting, with a critical eye, sympathetic development of the town's fabric and landscape. To that end, we were and are not fully persuaded that regeneration can only be achieved through taking away a significant proportion of open space at Elms Field for retail development. The signals emerging from recent discussion about the future for small provincial towns is that they are unlikely to succeed commercially now by expanding their retail provision when consumer demand is moving towards online purchasing and treating shops as demonstration areas for products. If anything, towns like ours should be thinking of consolidating and enhancing existing provision rather than risking money on expensive new development. Thus the renewal of Peach Place and careful redevelopment of Peach Street and Denmark Street would be a more judicious choice than taking away much cherished open space enjoyed by the local community for just being there as a 'green lung' and not necessarily to be used actively (a strange criticism used by proponents to justify its loss, exemplified by the question '*How often do you use the existing open space in the town centre?*', as if its merely being there is not sufficient reason to retain it).

As indicated, considerable public money is being devoted to the costs of large-scale regeneration. The hope is that this will be a successful enterprise and pay for itself in due course. There has, however, been no indication of what would happen to this investment, and to the resultant buildings, should it fail in its aims and retailers abandon both new and refurbished premises, leaving many empty shops with the consequent shortfall in income for all parties. **We would urge that the local community, whose taxes are being spent on this initiative, be told how failure, and not just success, would be managed.**

3. The proposed new retail areas

While the enhancement of Peach Place and the development on Elms Field offer the potential for attractive and economically viable retail activity, the message we hear from the public, and which we support, is:

- (a) There is no desire for a food store on Elms Field, whatever the financial arguments for its location. It is curious that, in its Masterplan, the Council made no mention of such a need and their support for it now has the ring of expediency rather than conviction.
- (b) There is similarly no perceived demand for a hotel in the same location. There is understood to be overcapacity at present in the town's hotels and guest houses, so further room provision seems unnecessary. Again, the Masterplan saw a hotel, if such were to be built, as being decently tucked away on the Carnival Pool site.
- (c) Putting a food store and a hotel on the southern edge of Elms Field makes a complete nonsense of the Council's original and oft-restated aim to provide an attractive Southern Gateway to the town. Even the developers are at a loss to say in what way an economy rooms-only hotel and a food store with its goods-delivery rear facing south can possibly be

considered to fulfil this brief. This is effectively a betrayal of the local community, whose support was sought on the very basis of enhancing this approach to the town.

- (d) People do not want a 'clone' town, with nothing but chain stores from end to end. Given these are often the retailers who are moving into online retailing, every opportunity should be given to independent shops to find their place in the town, at affordable rents and business rates. It will be for such providers to decide whether the town will support 'lost' trades such as greengrocer's, butcher's, fishmonger's and music shops, alongside the market stalls we have at present. We would hope that, whether as local initiatives or multiples, clothes shops will come to meet the needs of every age group all fashion choices and every pocket.
- (e) Shop fronts should conform to our market town traditions and retailers should not be allowed to display their standard headboards if they do not meet these criteria.
- (f) While the concept of traditional materials and modern design sounds reasonable, it is what a building looks like which meets the eye, not whether it is made of one material rather than another. The architect's drawings, albeit indicative or illustrative, suggest an approach which is monolithic in its concept for key buildings. Much will need to be done to persuade townsfolk that they will be getting new buildings worthy of their town rather than future eyesores, such as those from the mid-20thC easily derided by the council and the developers alike.

4. Housing

While many people accept that a modicum of housing adjacent to open space provides surveillance to help ensure its safe use, the amount of housing proposed for Elms Field is disproportionate both to this need and to the balance of space allocation in this location, being at the expense of open areas. Such housing as is provided should be predominantly affordable and consist of one or two bedrooms.

5. Open space

Despite our opposition to Elms Field being developed, we have been fully involved in discussions to try and ensure that any development is complementary to the needs and wishes of the local community. An essential principle of open space is that there should be enough of it in easy reach of residents. The Government's Planning policy Guidance Note 17 states that 'open space, sports and recreational buildings and land should not be built on unless an assessment has been undertaken which has clearly shown the open space to be surplus to requirements'. The Developers' Guide issued by the Council required that any open space to be used for new buildings should be replaced by open space nearby. **We ask that this guidance be applied to Elms Field and that there be full public disclosure of the measures taken to ensure compliance.**

At every workshop leading up to the Masterplan, participants have stressed the need for the open space to be consolidated into one large area. In one way the developers' proposals meet this demand, but the concept then betrays it by segmenting the space into what the architect has described as 'rooms'. This is a further indication of a mindset which requires that open space be fully 'used' rather than just enjoyed as a pleasant and necessary green area in the centre of town. By all means provide a children's (and adults'?) play area, formal gardens, an entertainment area with hard standing (probably not a bandstand, which may be costly and inappropriate to many performance purposes), benches for rest, but do not do this at the expense of the park losing its openness.

The public were heartened to hear that the developers propose to include public toilets on Elms Field. Please maintain this intention despite the Council's much disliked preference for toilets to be provided by in other commercial buildings.

6. Roads and parking

It is recognised that, in many respects, roads and parking are outside the remit of this specific development, but there is some provision which falls within its purview.

(a) *Elms Field Road*

The Executive Member for Planning and Strategic Highways and officers from the planning Department have confirmed that the proposed new Elms Field Road, running through from Wellington Road to Shute End, is intended for access and not as a traffic route. The developers seemed less sure of this and still thought that it would serve as an alternative way of travelling through the town. This needs to be clarified, and we keenly await the much delayed traffic analyses now due in September, together with the public consultations to follow, to see what is actually proposed. Public sentiment seems to be concerned about the possibility that the new road will serve as a rat-run, posing danger to pedestrians and especially to those in the adjacent new housing. The promised traffic calming measures will not in themselves deter drivers from using this route if they find Wellington Road congested from before this entry point.

(b) *Parking*

The Council's stated aim is to have as many parking spaces at the end of the development period as there are now. This is a remarkable unambitious target, given the large growth in housing in north and South Wokingham and the intention that the regeneration should greatly increase the numbers coming to the town. The loss of parking at Peach Place, with a consequent difficulty for visitors to the Methodist Church and Centre, and the positioning of a car park below the hotel and food store at Elms Field – with many places no doubt being reserved for employees and food store visitors – imply a worsening of provision and a much further walk for less mobile residents and visitors. **We ask that there be a proper and open debate about car parking provision so that the local community can have its say about what is needed.**

7. The public realm

The Council held a Workshop in June, seeking the local community's views on what should be provided in the public realm, from the developers' pocket within the development areas and their Section 106 contribution beyond it, and from the Council's own funds. **It is essential that both parties take note of and act on the proposals contained in the Report of that workshop, and show to the public that they have done so.** The Society's views will be incorporated into the report so we shall not rehearse them again here, other than to reiterate the need for a cultural/heritage centre with a museum incorporated.

8 Conclusion

We thank you for taking the time to read this and trust you will view it as a positive contribution to the debate about the regeneration project. **We would be grateful for acknowledgement of receipt.**



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