

The Wokingham Society

Wokingham Town Centre Masterplan Informal Exhibition

A submission in response to the Wokingham Town Centre Masterplan Informal Exhibition has been sent to Wokingham Borough Council on behalf of the Executive Committee of the Wokingham Society and the Chairs of 10 residents' associations.

We have said that we found the tick box questionnaire unsatisfactory since it merely asks respondents to approve or disapprove of the overall aims of the planned redevelopment and gives no chance to comment on the detailed proposals for achieving these aims. This is a sadly wasted opportunity to engage with the local community in deciding on the most important changes to the town centre in half a century.

In our submission we endorse the vision and objectives of the proposed regeneration, but raise the following concerns below about implementation:

- (a) the need for convergence with the Core Strategy, and in particular the plans for housing developments in North and South Wokingham, to ensure that key infrastructure requirements are dove-tailed rather than potentially conflicting
- (b) the lack of a strategic transport plan, and thus a continuing fear that the traffic congestion will be worsened by the town centre and North and South Wokingham housing developments. Recent responses from Council members and officials have suggested that transport planning is in their view something to be done at the end of, and not before the start of, the town centre development, and this is entirely the wrong way round. As an instance of 'lines on paper' without any evidence of purpose is a proposed road through the west side of Elms Field joining Wellington Road to Broad Street, which threatens a rat run and thus emphasises the need for public consultation
- (c) the application of the concept of 'traffic calming' appears contradictory when applied to streets elsewhere identified as 'vehicle dominant' such as Peach Street and Denmark Street
- (d) parking off Rose Street, Denmark Street and Cockpit Path has disappeared in the plans with no apparent compensatory provision in these areas
- (e) the potentially overwhelming size and height of large retail and leisure buildings on the Elms Field and Carnival Pool sites, and the amount and elevation of flats on the western edge of Elms Field. The scale of the buildings fronting both sides of Wellington Road leaves no green space adjacent to the pavements, and threatens to turn that part of the road into a canyon!). Assurances are needed that all new building will, as promised in the exhibition, be on a scale and of a design that is sympathetic to the local grain
- (f) the remaining green open space at Elms field would be only about three times the size of the pocket-handkerchief Howard Palmer Park and in no way meets the definition of 'significant' open space that the public was promised. What little space is left is, on the plan, fragmented into three small elements by the positioning of a cultural centre and pavilion, rather than consolidated into one area. It could not accommodate play and recreational activity as well as fairs and festivals. Whatever open space is provided needs to be protected from any further development by legally binding prohibitions (eg making it a Town Green!)
- (g) Carnival Pool and Broad Street Walk are scheduled for, respectively, recreational and commercial buildings without these having been discussed in any previous consultation.

- (h) the Southward drift of the town centre, and the absence of any clear policy towards regenerating the eastern approach, threaten dereliction in that area
- (i) the Council needs to demonstrate, as it has not done to date, that any development will follow the principles of sustainability in the key areas of consumption, climate, energy, natural resources, environmental enhancement and sustainable communities.

We have reiterated our support for the aims and vision of the Masterplan. Our concerns relate entirely to how these are interpreted and are to be delivered. Our overall sense is that the general principles are in line with the wishes expressed in public forums, but that the detailed descriptions and plans look like they have been largely driven by developer interests.

As residents, workers and users of our local facilities who care for the future of our town, we wish to emphasise our view that the Council's over-riding responsibility is to serve its community when it approaches a task as fundamental as this, and that the Masterplan should set out what the Council and its electorate want developers to do. The Council should assert that the client for the development of the town centre is and will be local community, and not the developer chosen from those short-listed companies with which the Council has conducted a private dialogue to date.