

WOKINGHAM TOWN COUNCIL



COMMENTS ON THE PROPOSALS FOR REGENERATING WOKINGHAM TOWN CENTRE

INTRODUCTION

The Town Council broadly agrees with WBC strategy on Town Centre Regeneration. However, it has concerns on the infrastructure proposed, both within the Town Centre and N and S Wokingham SDLs, its phasing, and a number of points as contained in the following text.

ROAD SYSTEM

There is an inconsistent vision for the road system in central Wokingham with the route from Wellington Rd to Shute End having had 4 versions:

- non-existent;
- restricted movement with a dog-leg at the Council Offices;
- dominant with sweep from Wellington Road giving it priority;
- subordinate to the Wellington/Station Link Road.

Further, part of Wellington Road becoming one-way is considered.

Wellington Road does not meet current needs due to inadequate width, lack of provision for cyclists and missing pavements. The impact that other developments and additional roads will have is unknown.

With the increased traffic likely from the Town Centre regeneration and the building of the Sothern Relief Road, terminating at Tesco's, more traffic will use Wellington Road. This road is at the present inadequate, and has only one narrow dangerous footpath. It is visually unattractive and a pedestrian unfriendly route from the station to the town centre. WBC could, even at this late stage, change this, plant the trees on this route as shown on the Town Centre Regeneration plans, by widening the road. This could be done by agreement or CPO to over-ride the planning permission given for the cricket ground to enable a slightly wider road with pavements on both sides of the road. WBC owns the land from the level crossing roundabout up to Park Road. It could reduce the size of the proposed building in the Town plan in this situation and widen the road here. This would leave approx 100m between private houses and Cantley Lodge Hotel which would need CPOs to give width to complete the road widening. This would give an attractive road to and from the station and also provide a safe pavement for mothers with prams and toddlers and wheelchair users. Ignoring Wellington Road now, by not widening it whilst still possible, will condemn it to be a scruffy unappealing and dangerous pedestrian access from the station to the Town Centre.

There should be no further commitment to investment in the road system until traffic modelling, based on up-to-date traffic data, has been evaluated and justification for that investment made public.

PEDESTRIAN SAFETY

Pedestrians should be segregated as far as possible from business deliveries and other traffic.

Adequate provision must be made for pedestrian crossings, seating, disabled/elderly access, street lighting and CCTV.

TRAFFIC

Traffic planning for the Town needs to be more than just the Elms Field and Station Link roads.

The current volume of traffic, even without the addition of 12,000 houses, makes the shopping experience unattractive due to difficulty of access, fumes and the combination of local and through traffic within the Town. Consideration should be given to introducing the following measures:

- One-way road systems, including Rose Street and Broad Street;
- Closure of roads which disrupt flow such as Cross Street and Luckley Path;
- Free flow at all junctions, assisted by no-merge, merge and divide sections between junctions;
- Removal of parking where a third lane would assist traffic flow, such as into Waitrose;
- Provision of “must turn lanes” with islands, e.g. into Glebelands Road and Easthampstead Road;
- Removal of all traffic lights, both at junctions and at pedestrian crossings;
- Pedestrian crossings to have road surfaces to encourage “shared space”.

Consideration should be given to the partial closure of Denmark Street between 10 am and 4pm on weekdays and all day Saturday and Sunday.

CAR PARKING

There should be a further consultation on parking strategy with the views of residents, retailers and other commercial businesses made public. The Borough Council's view that additional parking space is not required ignores the current displacement of parking on to residential roads owing to car park charges and a 6-hour time limit on some central parking.

The removal of parking in Rose Street must not reduce the availability of short-term parking in the Town Centre, essential for elderly and disabled shoppers. Clarification of the parking proposals for Peach Place is needed.

Will the Elms Road multi-storey car park be retained and if so what will be done to encourage its use, considering signage, charging and maximum stay?

The lack of enforcement means that short-term free parking is abused and those wanting to “shop quickly” may be deterred by having to pay parking charges.

De-criminalisation of parking is needed urgently with a review of structured parking duration and charging, including 30-minute free parking, with enforcement. Parking fees should be set to encourage shoppers to come to Wokingham instead of other nearby towns, at least during the period when Wokingham will be intending to increase its share of the retail market with regeneration.

Easily accessible parking should be provided at all town gateways including Shute End and London Road, with display of numbers of free spaces at each to avoid unnecessary circulation of traffic in the town centre.

Low-cost, residential permits should be introduced across the town.

RETAIL MIX

The provision of small units in Peach Place and medium-sized units facing Elms Field is applauded. However, the benefit of a further supermarket is questionable, and many women shoppers have told us that they don't combine browsing shops with visiting a supermarket on the same trip

The majority of residents to whom we have spoken have expressed the wish for a non-food departmental store on Elms Field. This might not be possible, but the developers should look at a preferred retail mix for this store with at least 60% being given to non food items. With the building of over 12,000 houses by 2026, a substantial number of new home owners will be looking for opportunities to improve their properties with DIY, furniture, soft furnishings and white goods. Suitable alternative stores might include John Lewis, Fenwicks and Bentalls. Where such retailers would prefer larger stores, the proposed John Lewis “Magic Mirror” venture would be an alternative.

However, we must not try to compete with Reading or Bracknell, but instead provide something different – the key concept is “niche”. We need to create the right economic environment to encourage the return of retailers that we have lost, such as haberdasher, draper, butcher, greengrocer, crafts and other small, distinctive shops. Specific types of shops could be grouped together, so that locations become known for providing a particular type of service.

It is important that the different areas of the town being developed can be easily accessed from each other, for instance the station leading to the Elms Field site, into Denmark Street, the Market Place, Peach Street, Waitrose and Broad Street. It would be desirable to create attractive links between parking, retail and recreational centres and to include signage where possible of areas or places of specific interest. The Market Place by the Town Hall should be considered as a central area via which the other areas of the Town can be linked. However, concern has been expressed about moving the focus of retail away from the area around Market Place.

Wilson Bowden should aim to reassure residents by reference to similar towns where success in attracting new or returning retailers can be demonstrated.

INTERNET SHOPPING AND OTHER SERVICES

The growth of internet shopping is a major factor in the decline of many retail centres, including Wokingham. This threat could however be regarded as an opportunity, as in many families both partners work away from home and experience problems when receiving goods purchased over the internet. This could be addressed by providing a DHL "Service Point" or similar internet sales collection facility as another anchor in the Town Centre.

Equally, consideration should be given to the allocation of space to those businesses and other organisations which cannot trade or operate online and which do not compete with out-of-town supermarkets. Examples would be medical services and products which require a degree of support at the point of sale. A Medical Centre closer to Market Place would overcome the present fragmentation of doctors' surgeries and draw more people into the town itself.

ARCHITECTURE

Benoy is an experienced, international company with about 30 UK retail development references on its website. It is surprising that its retail images for Wokingham do not represent the traditional market-town feel that most residents expected, particularly the façade at the junction of Rose Street and Peach Street. Although WBC personnel stressed that the images did not reflect the final view, their selection did not assist the public's acceptance of the proposals.

The quality of the architecture is crucial if the new developments are to complement and enhance the existing buildings. It would help if Wilson Bowden could direct us to which of the Benoy reference sites have architecture which most closely resemble a typical market town such as Wokingham.

Also, there should be an emphasis on minimising street furniture in line with the Victorian and earlier heritage of our street scenes.

SOUTHERN GATEWAY

Previously it has been difficult to obtain an unequivocal statement on the visual aspect of the Southern Gateway. It is now clear that all the oak trees go, the new hotel will have 5 storeys and HGV access to the supermarket will adjoin Wellington Road. We should look urgently at redesigning this area, giving consideration to relocating the hotel, car park access and HGV movements; this might be achieved by creation of a joint delivery area to the rear of the proposed hotel, accessed from the bottom of Denmark Street rather than Wellington Road. The retention or replacement of the mature oak trees is essential. The effectiveness of proposed planting of mature trees is questioned, considering the age and size of the trees being considered for replacement.

GREEN SPACE

In recent years, Wokingham has lost many of its green areas and leisure facilities: Martin's Pool, Carnival Field, the Football Club, Elms Field tennis courts and Pitch & Put; soon the Cricket Club and more tennis courts will go. Whilst alternative swimming and tennis facilities are available, provision should be made for cricket and football close to Wokingham.

How does Wokingham, past and future, compare with other towns for its proportion of central green space?

Under the S106 regime, it is understood that the contributions must be spent in the area from which the levy is obtained. However, the Community Infrastructure Levy is not so prescriptive, so would this permit housing that is built elsewhere to fund Town Centre Regeneration and thus enable more of Elms Field to be retained?

If residential development must take place on Elms Field, we should be aware that residents do not accept the statement: "30% reduction of Elms Field green space", saying "30% of what?" There needs to be a simple

statement from the developers identifying the precise amount of green space remaining after development, e.g. 3 acres.

There should be sufficient open green space for people to relax in, and it should not be dwarfed by high-rise retail or residential development.

There should also be public areas that can be easily converted for use open air stages and covered entertainment / exhibition areas, with the option to fit temporary side walls and portable heating solutions for colder/wetter times of the year. There is a big demand from organisations such as the Wokingham Choral Society, brass bands, Scouts, etc. for large central venues with indoor and outdoor options.

Improved pedestrian access should be provided to Howard Palmer Gardens.

HOUSING

If we are obliged to build additional central housing, this should be targeted at those who need to live in, and will benefit from, the Town Centre. Town Centre housing must include ground floor flats for older residents, with easy access to shopping facilities. Such housing will not necessarily have the 35% affordable content, with its inherently lower disposable income occupiers.

PUBLIC LAVATORIES

The Town Centre Regeneration Masterplan makes no mention of Public Lavatories and these must be provided in at least one location in the town centre. Residents consider the current provision of facilities solely within retail or other private premises to be inadequate.

HOTELS

The more logical location for a hotel is close to the station, limiting the distance which those arriving by train have to walk. This facility is already provided by Cantley Lodge and raises the questions: should a new hotel be built closer to the station, what is the occupancy rate for Cantley Lodge and would a possible joint venture for its further development meet the Town's needs more accurately, without the loss of the Southern Gateway's green aspect?

Guests who drive to the new hotel will increase the flow of traffic in the town but are unlikely to benefit the local economy, as the hotel will try to provide everything they need in-house.

INVESTMENT APPRAISAL

The Town Centre Regeneration and growth of footfall in Wokingham is, in part, an act of faith. However, with an investment of £100m, we need to be able to monitor its success.

Footfall should be measured now and during regeneration, both in Wokingham and other towns locally, to gauge our increase in market share. Such data will provide reassurance to WBC and its partners and be the basis to encourage other retailers to come to the Town.

Can estimates of development costs for the various aspects and source of funding of the proposed renovation and regeneration be published?

What is maximum cash demand on WBC and when, considering the likely and worst-case take-up of retail space and any phasing problems with the development?

LONGER-TERM ISSUES

Whilst we need to "get started" we should also take a longer term view to ensure actions now do not prevent a solution later. The Core Strategy sets a course to 2026 but may inhibit lateral thought on solutions after that date. A case in point is the road system.

Pedestrianisation of Denmark Street for part of the day has been mooted, yet we put a fire station on the route of a possible southern inner distribution road. Such short-sighted action may cause regret later.

In his report on the Core Strategy, the Inspector noted: "The existing level crossing by the station is an acknowledged constraint that would be extremely difficult and expensive to improve" – should we consider a South-Western Relief Road, for example roughly along the line of Smith's Walk?

The new road to the South of Wokingham, now dubbed the Southern Distributor rather than Relief Road, will take traffic through the middle of new residential areas. At a later stage we may want HGVs to avoid the town centre to a greater degree, perhaps restricting their access for loading and unloading at certain times. At other times, these HGVs will then be obliged to pass along an inappropriate road in the South Wokingham SDL. To plan for these situations, we should be looking at infrastructure beyond the Core Strategy and 2026, asking ourselves "what do we want for Wokingham 25 years or more from now?"

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