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My ref: Great Langborough RA



**WOKINGHAM
BOROUGH COUNCIL**

Mrs Pat Smith
Sent Via Email

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Dear Pat,

RE: WOKINGHAM TOWN CENTRE REGENERATION

As discussed here is a written response to your original letter written on behalf of the Great Langborough Residents Association.

I can only apologise if you think we have misrepresented you and your residents comments and it was never my intention to do so.

I know from my conversations with many members of the public that there is much support for our regeneration plans, although we recognise that there remains concerns and confusion around specific elements of the scheme such as the need to develop Elms Field and a new foodstore.

The Council undertook a Competitive Dialogue process to identify a development partner for this scheme. Because of the nature of this procurement process a variety of ideas have been looked at and tested before the final scheme layout and content was decided. The scheme has consistently evolved and some initial ideas have been superseded by others for a range of reasons as the designs have developed.

My apologies for the length of this response but I wanted to set out the explanation as fully as possible so your members have the reasoning for each of the decisions made.

Why no department store?

There has never been an 'either / or' discussion around a department store Vs a foodstore. There is sufficient floor space within the proposal that we could have included both these facilities within the development if it had been in the best interest of the town.

Indeed in the early stages of the project we considered including a department store and carried out some investigations around this, however it was dismissed for several key reasons.

- Conversations with the main department store companies showed a lack of interest in locating to Wokingham as the town is too small and the majority of them are already located in neighbouring towns such as Reading and Bracknell.

- A department store would also fail to create the type of anchor store necessary to get the level of daily footfall and strengthened retail circuits that Wokingham needs to thrive.
- The modern department store has changed and rather than offering unique goods, they are now made up of small branded concessions under one roof. For Wokingham to work as a whole it's important that these types of unit go back onto the 'high street' interspersed amongst our independent retailers to draw shoppers around the town and not concentrate them in a one stop location.
- In addition, even if we had found a provider who might consider Wokingham as a location, the inclusion of a department store would impact on the overall project viability as the Council would be expected to make significant financial contributions towards them locating here. The resulting subsidy to gain a department store would mean that other areas of the scheme would have to be developed at a much more intense level to offset the cost incurred. E.g. the Council is using the more profitable Elms development to offset the cost of Peach Place which cannot be delivered as a standalone viable project without significant levels of what we consider over-development

Why a foodstore?

In regards to the foodstore Wokingham is entering a period of significant change. The new strategic developments will see over 4,000 new homes built within a mile or two of the town centre.

That's over 10,000 new residents coming to the town. Retail studies carried out during this process show that new retail, including a new foodstore, must be built to support this growth. It has never been a case as to will it be needed but a case of where it will be located.

With the knowledge that a new foodstore was going to have to be provided somewhere within the town, the Council looked carefully at where this should be located to work best for Wokingham. The proposed town centre location was selected for some key reasons –

- The loss of footfall to out of town retail parks is now seen as one of the biggest factors in the killing off of the high street. Local traders tell us the drop in trade when Tesco left the town centre was enormous and has never been reversed. Adding a further foodstore outside of the town centre would simply continue to reinforce the loss of footfall and help kill off our town centre even quicker.
- We feel it's important to bring the foodstore back into the town so that it can support the other traders in the town by bringing back the core daily footfall that is currently missing; this will help strengthen the vitality of the town centre.
- There will always be some people who simply do their food shopping and leave but national research shows, along with local evidence from those using existing town centre stores such as Waitrose and M&S, that a large proportion of shoppers will link trips to a foodstore with other shopping and leisure if the offer is right within the town and the parking is managed properly. That's why we are working hard on the mix of units within the town and looking at car parking in a wider strategic approach outside of just the regeneration parking.
- By placing important shops, known as anchors, at key points within the town you encourage people to move between these locations and strengthen retail circuits. By locating the foodstore at the south of town, and reinforcing anchors at other main points such as Peach Place, we will be able to draw people through the town and create increased footfall past the areas where the majority of our smaller units are located.

Loss of Trees

The Council recognises the importance of open space and planting within the town but has to carefully balance this with the need to deliver the infrastructure required for a significantly growing local population and the need to create a sustainable town centre for the future.

Detailed tree surveys have been undertaken to look at the existing trees including quality, canopy/root ball and expected life span. As part of the necessary development we acknowledge that many of the trees will be lost but the design has been developed to retain as many of the best quality trees as possible by incorporating them into the scheme.

We are also working closely with our Arboriculture team and landscape designers to ensure that any trees lost due to the development will be replaced. We will ensure high quality new trees are planted at appropriate locations ensuring the town continues to maintain its pleasant green feel and there is a legacy of well thought out planting for both the short term but also for the long term heritage of the town.

The project is driven by retail strategy and rental income

There has never been any change to the fact this project is driven by the retail strategy and we stand by this. However we would not be looking to deliver the new retail and a foodstore if we didn't have the evidence to prove it was needed..

As set out earlier there are many important reasons for locating the foodstore within the town centre. Whilst it does help finance the scheme this certainly is not the main driver for its inclusion and primarily this is about delivering the necessary facilities for the town's residents, both existing and future. The fact remains that with unprecedented local growth coming to the town we must deliver the infrastructure necessary to support this

The Council's approach to the development is to treat all parts of the scheme as a single project allowing us to use more profitable elements of the scheme, such as the income from the new foodstore, to offset the costs of less-profitable parts.

As an example of this offset approach we know that Peach Place can't be developed as a financially stand-alone scheme without chronic overdevelopment. Indeed if you look back at the original private scheme the developers were proposing 137 flats, 5 houses and a multi-storey car park all on the same small area for which we are proposing around 10 new properties in addition to the 6 flats which are currently there.

The Council could have simply chosen to not redevelop Peach Place, or left it for a profit driven scheme which would mean overdevelopment of the site but we did not feel this was appropriate with our intent of regenerating the town. The Elms and Paddocks development would be developed regardless of the other phases and this ability to cross subsidise is a benefit rather than a necessity.

In addition to the benefits of treating the overall site as one entity securing elements such as a foodstore and hotel increases commercial confidence in the town both locally and nationally, brings in good investment, support jobs and reinforce Wokingham's reputation as a great destination.

Creating a balanced and viable scheme, including income from things such as the foodstore, will also help guarantee that the regeneration works will go ahead when other local and national schemes have failed to deliver.

Why a Premier Inn and not a statement hotel?

We talked to a range of providers, including higher-end boutique style hotels. The more conversations we had around this, the more we realised that a higher-end option would not necessarily achieve what was needed for the town. After careful consideration we selected Premier Inn for a range of reasons.

- A good branded hotel in the town centre from a known and respected chain such as Premier Inn will help raise the identity of Wokingham as a 'location to be' on a national basis. Premier Inn is one of the most respected and popular hotel chains in the country; and have won the awards for being the best business, leisure and overall hotel provider at the British Travel Awards for several years running beating other hotel providers such as Marriott, Warner and Hilton to the prize. It's this existing travel market and customer base that we need to bring to the area. Premier Inn is a well-known hotel chain and is very popular with the business sector.
- In order to support local growth, Wokingham needs to place itself as being a key location for business. This will provide the necessary jobs to support the area and economy in the long term. At the moment the town centre and surrounding area lack the range of facilities that business requires including suitable hotel provision. Wokingham is home to many of the top international businesses and seeks to attract more to the area but if we can't meet their needs then they will go elsewhere.
- Although primarily a business hotel during the week, the booking approach to off peak rooms will also help bring a wider range of visitors to the town centre at the weekend for leisure opportunities. Wokingham itself is not a particular tourist draw but is ideally located to offer a base for visiting other places in the area such as Windsor and Ascot.
- Town centre locations are becoming increasingly popular with travellers. They want the facilities that can be offered in a town such as a wider range of restaurant choice and the opportunity to pop to the shops without having to travel. Wokingham is ideally placed to capitalise on this sort of requirement and, based upon Premier Inn's occupancy calculations, the hotel will bring over 2,000 visitors to the town centre each month, this is new non-local footfall that is being brought to the area
- The additional footfall generated by people staying within the town centre also helps reinforce the wider 18 hour economy which was identified as being a key objective early on in the project brief to help create a more vibrant and secure town centre for all.

Listening to consultations

Firstly I thank you for you, and your Residents Association members, for your continued involvement in the scheme as it has developed but I would dispute that we do not listen to the comments which have been made. Over the past years we have made many changes to the scheme in response to a variety of things such as the ones quoted above and also public consultation.

I'm not sure what you mean by having to comment around the same issues again as the questions asked at consultation have continued to evolve as we have moved from strategic need (Core Strategy), to where this will be delivered in the town (Masterplan SPD), through to detailed designs and delivery (regeneration scheme). Consultations and changes have been appropriate to the specific stage of the project and any final principles have been adopted based around what is right for the town's long term success. We recognise that sometimes these decisions cannot make all our residents happy especially when they relate to major changes which have to be made in the Borough.

It is our experience as a council that it is certain elements of the audience who refuse to accept these decisions have been fixed and attempt to go back over this ground again rather than the Council repeating the same questions. Unpopular as it may seem at this stage there are things that are set and are no longer open for consultation.

For example some people continue to raise questions around the need for the foodstore in the town and yet we continue to include this element within the scheme. This is not a case of us wilfully ignoring comments but a case of us making the decisions necessary to do the right thing for the town as a whole. As you can see from our earlier comments the need for such a store and the reason for its location is clearly evidenced and established in the planning policy against which our scheme will be judged.

Proposals are based on what's good for the developer rather than the town

The main reason for the Council proceeding with this project rather than letting it be delivered by a private developer is so that we can ensure what is developed is 'what's good for the town' rather than 'what's good for the developers'.

Every decision in relation to the scheme has been carefully considered and is included, or indeed not included, entirely for the good of the town. This project has come forth in response to delivering the infrastructure the town needs to cope with a period of enormous growth. We have a responsibility to ensure the success of the town for both existing and future residents

Throughout the entire process the Council's guiding principle has been creating a solution which is right for the town and not what will give the highest return. If this was the case we would simply have sold the site to the highest bidding private developer or come up with a much greater density of development than that currently proposed.

We believe the proposed scheme offers the best possible solution to delivering the infrastructure changes the town centre must have constructed. We have appointed some of the best architects around to advise us on getting this right and they have spent a lot of time coming up with a design response which is specific to Wokingham rather than simply a generic approach as can be seen in many developments.

Where is the supporting evidence and guidance?

There is a whole host of supporting Planning policy, guidance and evidence which backs up our proposals available on the Council's website at <http://www.wokingham.gov.uk/planning/planning/>

This includes elements such as the policy documentation for the Core Strategy, the Wokingham Town Centre Masterplan SPD and the Borough Design Guide.

There is also a variety of information available to members of the public on the internet around the areas of urban design and retail.

We have also undertaken a wide range of supporting information specific to our scheme which will be submitted as part of our planning application. This includes things such as an environmental statement, the design and access statement, a traffic impact assessment and assorted studies.

Members of the public will be able to view these during the statutory planning application consultation process.

Will there be further consultation on whether the proposals go ahead?

There will be a further opportunity for people to make comments about the scheme as part of the planning application process which includes a statutory consultation period.

The final design which will be put forward for planning application is a response to a range of consultation processes. Changes to the proposals have continued to occur as a result of comments made by the different parties. This includes our consultations with members of the public and businesses, as well as with statutory bodies such as English Heritage and discussions with the local planning authority during the pre-application process.

Building on any open space is not something we take lightly and it has taken many years of consultation and the development of guiding principles, with adopted policies, to reach the point at which we are ready to come forward with a scheme for planning approval. As can be seen in our response above the need to develop on part of Elms Field is necessary in order to see to the long term survival of the town centre.

The scheme sits within a whole host of strategic projects, such as the Station Link Road, which are being undertaken on a wider basis to tackle things such as traffic congestion and amenity space. However we have been careful in producing our designs that the scheme can stand on its own, with these external factors identified as benefits rather than necessities. This will all be set out and challenged within the planning application process. We would not submit our application unless we were satisfied with our proposals.

The Council do respect the views of our local residents in regards to the town centre and have made sure that we have undertaken even more consultation on this project than required as part of the usual planning process.

The reasons for progressing with the regeneration proposals are clear and remain as strong as when we first entered this process. We cannot continue to offer to consult on the same questions when our answers will remain the same.

I would also query whether we are failing to represent the views and true wishes of the wider public. Councillors are elected to position through a democratic process by these very residents to represent their wishes

I hope that my response above answers many of your resident's questions around why certain decisions have been made in regards to the regeneration proposals. However I will be happy to respond further if there are additional questions.

Yours sincerely

Cllr Alistair Corrie
Executive Member for Regeneration