

Wokingham Borough Council

Public Questions Extract from Draft Council Minutes 4 December 2013

67.01 Question

Rachel Lloyd asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question:

I am a resident of Wokingham living in Evendons Lane and I have a concern regarding the likes of music and food festivals which may disappear with the regeneration of the town. Can you please comment on this and what facilities will there be for residents?

Answer

The park has been carefully designed to improve the on-site facilities available for concerts, fayres and other special events.

A large area of open grassed space remains for events, which is bigger and much more practicable than that currently used on the East side of Elms. In addition to this there are also new flexible areas of hard standing provided which can also be utilised for events, markets and fayres.

Those responsible for running our existing events, such as the May Fayre and Food and Drink Festival, have been involved in the design process to ensure that the facilities they need to improve their events are delivered. This includes things such as reinforced surfaces, improved vehicle access, and access to electricity, water and drainage.

We are confident that this will help existing events flourish and also offer opportunities for a wider programme of new events throughout the year.

67.02 Question

Mark Walton asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question which was answered by the Deputy Leader of the Council:

With local competition such as Reading, Bracknell and Maidenhead getting on with their own regeneration schemes what are the risks to Wokingham and its business communities if we do not get on with things. If we do not proceed what opportunities have we lost?

Answer

We know that Wokingham has been in decline over many years due in a large part to its lack of retail units suitable for today's operators. We also know that many retailers want to come to town and have advised us they would do if suitable premises were available, including some pretty big international chains. If we do not take this opportunity to deliver the regeneration of our town, then the decline could continue and almost certainly would. This will be exacerbated by neighbouring towns which are regenerating and offering better facilities. Wokingham's decline is likely to increase if we do not act now.

Let me be clear, we are not attempting to compete with the likes of Reading and Bracknell, but we must ensure we retain and increase footfall by offering something very different to these neighbouring towns. We are really a niche player.

Wokingham has been talking of regeneration for many years. Frankly, the retailers in the market are aware of this and will only believe it when they see it. If we do not take this opportunity now we will send a very negative message to the market which will preclude

us from coming forward with further proposals for many years. And that would be, in my view, very sad.

67.03 Question

Wendy Benmesbah asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question:

I am aware that there was a market stall for two weekends in October. Can I ask what the level of Public interest was, and did anyone have an opinion of such?

Answer

The Council recently held four pop-up information events on Friday 25 October, Saturday 26 October, Friday 1 November and Saturday 2 November.

The aim of the events was to deal with a lot of recent misinformation about the scheme, show residents what was actually planned and answer some of the questions about the proposals.

We were very pleased by the good turnout at these events as several hundred people came to look at the plans and talk to us on each of the days. Some people came along specifically to see the plans and ask questions whilst others were in the town for other purposes and came over to see what was happening.

Comments and responses from those who came along were very varied with many people being highly supportive and excited by what they saw, whilst others had concerns primarily around loss of open space and the need for a food store.

67.04 Question

Jane Holmes asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question:

Can we regenerate the town without developing on any of the Elms Field green space?

Answer

The simple answer is no. We know in order to cater for the existing population and the growth that is coming that Wokingham Town needs to expand. From the studies carried out for the Masterplan and included in the application, the growth required is much greater than that proposed within the regeneration applications.

Even if there was adequate space elsewhere, it would likely lead to over-development of areas within the heart of the town, which we are trying to avoid in order to maintain Wokingham's character. Our approach maintains the historic centre of the town and expands it southwards onto part of Elms Field. We do not take this decision lightly but believe firmly that it is in the interests of the town as a whole

67.05 Question

Linda Brooks asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question which was answered by the Executive Member for Children's Services.

I understand various workshops have been held in schools regarding the proposed regeneration of Wokingham Town Centre.

As these young people are the future of Wokingham Town what were their views of the proposals?

Answer

We have carried out numerous presentations and discussion with local schools.

At the time of each of the main consultation events in mid-2011 and mid-2012, we targeted each of the 4 secondary schools within the town, presenting and talking to students across all ages, 11 to 18. In addition to this, we continue to talk to other schools including primary and junior, often as part of their curriculum.

The over-whelming view from our younger people is that they clearly want a town centre that caters for their needs and they find little that would attract them to use the existing centre. Their requests include a much improved retail offer, café outlets together with leisure facilities including places to hang out and relax.

You rightly point out that younger people are the future and the main beneficiaries of the regeneration of our town. I also believe that on many wider issues we should communicate more regularly with the young people within our society and give more credit to their views

Supplementary Question

Will you continue to ask young people what they want in our proposed new town, so that you deliver what young people will come and use?

Supplementary Answer

Absolutely. Yes.

67.06 Question

Jim Bell asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question:

What are the plans around Wokingham Town Hall and other ancient buildings?

Answer

The intent is to create a much improved setting for our historic buildings such as the Town Hall which is one of the most beautiful buildings in Wokingham. We have been working in close partnership with Wokingham Town Council to ensure this can be achieved.

The town centre has been very much let down by poor buildings dating from the sixties which have taken no influence from the surrounding architecture and ruin the visual appearance of Wokingham.

People can already start to see some of the improvements being made around the town hall with the restoration of the façade of 38 Market Place which has now been revealed and the, soon to be revealed, changes to the unattractive pink building that was above Boots.

We are also taking this same approach with the rest of the scheme where the designs are heavily influenced by the detailing of Wokingham's existing buildings, including things such as roof lines, brickwork and windows.

Outside of the regeneration project the Council has also started working on a wider Public Realm Strategy. This strategy looks to completely readdress our existing public spaces including roads and pathways to create a fantastic town centre experience. This includes

much improved public spaces which will be a credit to Wokingham and help to enhance the beautiful buildings within the town.

67.07 Question

Alex Forrest asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question which was answered by the Deputy Leader of the Council.

Many factors in recent years, such as the moving of Tesco to an out of town location, have contributed to a decline in trade to Denmark Street. Can you reassure the public that the regeneration project aims to reverse this trend?

Answer

One of the main drivers for the regeneration project has been the need to reverse the decline in the town centre including Denmark Street. Over 60% of existing residents non-food spend, is spent elsewhere because they cannot find the goods they want to buy here in Wokingham.

The shift to out of town retail, such as when Tesco left Wokingham centre, is seen as one of the main factors in destroying town centres and you see that you yourselves all around the country, on TV, in the newspapers every day. It is critical that such shops come back to the centre to get people back on a daily basis to the town centre. We know that with all these new houses coming to the town over the next 20 years, a new food store must be built and by bringing this back to the centre, along with a much improved mix and range of new shops, we can get people to come back to town and increase footfall.

The aim of the regeneration project is to get many more niche and independent retailers to come to Wokingham so we can maintain something which sets us apart from Bracknell and Reading, taking towns like Marlow and Henley on Thames as our influencers and responding to the kinds of shops our residents tell us they want to see in the town and would get them to come here rather than elsewhere.

With the regeneration plans to create anchor stores at key locations in the town, such as the food store in the south and improved provision at Peach Place, we will encourage people to move between these locations and help raise footfall along quieter sections of the town such as Denmark Street where many of our existing independent shops currently trade. I have to say that I think it is absolutely vital that any local authority does everything it can to protect and enhance its town centre. Out of town retailing has damaged the town centre seriously and we are trying to reverse that trend.

Supplementary Question

I was interested in what the Councillor said about out of town developments as many people here tonight are very concerned about the protection of green spaces. Does the Council believe that by regenerating the town centre we can prevent further out of town developments so preserving some of our green space around Wokingham?

Supplementary Answer

Absolutely. If we do not develop the town centre there is inherent danger that retailers will move out of town. We have seen it all over the country. I was a retailer for 35 years and there are not many high streets in this country I have not seen or worked in. I could name dozens that have been destroyed by out of town shopping and the consequential loss of green space. So in answer to your question, absolutely that is the issue.

67.08 Question

Marian Robertson asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question:

Some people are concerned that the town will lose its character because of the regeneration. Is this true?

Answer

No, I do not believe that to be the case. The regeneration project has worked very hard to enhance the character of Wokingham as a historic Market Town. This includes actions taken in both the design and the content of the scheme.

In terms of design one of the very reasons our architects were selected was because of their experience on designing schemes in historic towns and cathedral cities and striking the right balance of architecture to enhance a town and last into the future.

To make sure the designs are right extensive studies of Wokingham have been undertaken to look at what makes up the essence of Wokingham's architecture and these elements have been applied to ensure that our new designs will fit into the town, whilst meeting the requirements of modern life and the comments of statutory bodies such as English Heritage.

When people think back to what the north side of the Market Place originally looked like, the facades which have started to be revealed around there should help reassure people about the quality of the work being delivered.

We have also worked hard on the public spaces and content of the scheme so Wokingham can get back to its heyday as a proper market town, creating opportunities for bigger and better markets to occur on a regular basis as well as the events that make the town unique and give Wokingham its strong community character as one of the best places to live in the Country.

67.09 Question

Ruth Gibbs asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question which was answered by Councillor Philip Mirfin as Leader of Wokingham Town Council.

There are so many shop spaces that are unoccupied (or occupied by Charity shops) because they are too small, too expensive and not properly maintained. Why are you not working more with those property management companies to create great spaces in the town centre itself to attract businesses rather than building more lots on green space where they are not wanted?

Answer

First of all, I do not accept that there are many shops empty at present. Just walking around town today you will see that there are very few empty units. There are charity shops in town but I do not understand the negative connotation as they bring many benefits to the High Street as they:

- Provide active frontage and assist in footfall;
- Do not preclude other tenants from operating;
- Provide opportunities for unemployed/voluntary members of the community;
- Act as a social hub for many lonely citizens

- Re-use and re-cycle items which contributes in a large way to reducing CO2 emissions.

You are correct in identifying part of the problem with our town is that units generally are too small for retailers today, but there is little which can be done with these as they are very much part of the historic fabric of Wokingham.

We have successfully intervened in purchasing Peach Street to deal with this issue as this is a great opportunity to take something of poor quality and replace it with something much more appropriate and this is very much part of our plans. However, there is a real need for growth within Wokingham to cater for the current demand together with the increase in population which requires an increase in retail space within the town.

Indeed, we have already started to be approached by existing local retailers about the opportunity to move to larger premises as the regenerated units come onto the market, a true sign of the growing retail confidence to our plans.

67.10 Question

Jeremy Allison had asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question, but in his absence the following written answer was provided.

Due to the over development in our small market Town with additional housing and unnecessary supermarkets (we have Waitrose, Tesco, Morrison's, Lidl already) and the reduction of children's green areas due to developments such as the Elms Field proposed development, how will the Council reduce the current vehicle congestion they have created with cars using Wokingham as a thoroughfare. (Langborough Road is buckling under the strain already) and will the current Council's legacy be turning Wokingham into Bracknell?

Answer

The Council has worked hard with local people to produce the Core Strategy which looks at how the level of local development can best be integrated into the borough which, like the rest of the country is set to grow significantly in the coming years.

As part of this the Council has carried out extensive traffic modelling of the Borough and town centre to determine the likely impact of the proposed development across the town. As a consequence of this significant major road schemes are proposed around the south and north of the town. These schemes are already coming forward as a part of the development sites already underway and the Council is committed to deliver these roads over the term of the current core strategy.

These new roads will reduce the need for through traffic to use the town centre. In addition to this the Council continues to look at the best steps it can take to address residents' concerns about traffic congestion. Current initiatives include investing in new roads, an improved railway station, extending and improving park and ride, better cycling and walking facilities and improved technology to increase capacity at existing junctions.

One of the main reasons for the Council to step in and take over the regeneration of the town from private development companies was to ensure Wokingham could continue to offer something very different from neighbours such as Bracknell and Reading.

These types of large shopping destinations are not something Wokingham could, or even should, aspire to emulate as they do not reflect the community led, market town strength of Wokingham. The designs for the regeneration have been specifically produced to ensure we can grow the Market offer, bring back more of the daily footfall and concentrate on increasing the smaller independent and niche retail experience that will set us apart and offer a real alternative to larger towns that meets our local residents' needs.

67.11 Question

Mike Smith asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question which was answered by the Deputy Leader of the Council.

In the Land Conveyance of March 1956 the Council bought Elms Field on behalf of the people of Wokingham, for the stated aim in that Conveyance of it being a 'Public Open Space.'

For the loss of potential profitable development land the owners were paid a premium.

The Town and Country Planning Act 1971 states that a Council may not appropriate land forming part of a common etc. unless the total of the land appropriated 'does not in aggregate exceed 250 square yards' The current plan clearly exceeds this. The Local Government Act of 1992, para 122 subsection (1) states that appropriation of land may only take place if the land is no longer required for the purpose for which it was held immediately before appropriation. This is not the case; the land is used as a public open space and can reasonably be described as 'public trust land'

How does the council reconcile the original aims of the Council in 1956, the requirements of the Local Government Acts of 1971 and 1992, with their current actions and can they demonstrate that these Acts have been complied with?

Answer

This is a technical legal answer and I have taken advice from our legal department and will read their statement.

The *Town and Country Planning Act 1971* has not been current law for 23 years and was repealed in August 1990. The *Local Government Act 1992* has been repealed for a number of years.

The provision attributed to the *Town and Country Planning Act 1971* or *Local Government Act 1992* is in fact s122(2) of the *Local Government Act 1972*. This is not the actual authority within s122 used by the Council.

The appropriation of Elms Field was carried out under Section 122(1) of the *Local Government Act 1972*, and the subsequent sections of the legislation specify restrictions which apply in different circumstances. Section 122(2) does not apply in this case.

In this context, section 122(2) only applies to land which is already registered as a common or village green. This is, in part, because of the wording of Section 229 of the *Town and Country Planning Act 1990*, and the definition of "common" in Section 336 of said Act. The definition of "common" was further considered and clarified by the House of Lords in *Oxfordshire County Council v Oxford City Council* [2006] 21 WLR 1235.

There is a legal distinction between the phrases “common” and “open space”. It is clear that the land was not a common, town or village green, and is therefore not a “common” for the purposes of Section 229 and Section 122(2).

In response to the second point, appropriation of land can only take place if the land is no longer required for the purpose for which it is held immediately before the appropriation. This is a matter for the local authority to determine. At the meeting of the Executive held on 26 July 2007, the Members in attendance resolved that the land was no longer required for the purpose for which it was held. This is not rubbish, I am merely reporting from the minutes of the Council meeting in July 2007. This also satisfies the requirement in Section 122(1) of the *Local Government Act 1972*.

It is on this basis that the Council can demonstrate full compliance with the relevant legislation at the time of appropriation in July 2007. I can confirm that it was I who put that motion to the Executive on that night and I was extremely careful that we were legally tight and it was correct.

Supplementary Question

Will your response be published?

Supplementary Answer

My response will be a public document as part of the minutes of the Council fully as I have explained it.

67.12 Question

Robin Cops asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question which was answered by the Executive Member for Finance:

The lack of transparency on the financial need to destroy half of Elms Field has given rise to concerns about whether this scheme will either cross fund other developments or worse, lose money for the tax payers of Wokingham.

Will Wokingham Borough Council now publish the full business and financial plan for this redevelopment, including cash flows, to allay those fears?

Answer

There are real reasons as to why we are not in a position to release this information in detail at this current time.

It is for the very need to protect the investment being made by the Council and to ensure that we get the best deal for local tax payers that leads us to withhold this information.

These plans are still very much living documents and will be used actively as we move forward with a range of detailed transactions such as the appointment of the build contractors, selection of tenants and the final land negotiations.

Should these detailed figures become public knowledge then the Council and our partners will lose the ability to negotiate the best deals on the project for the very people who are concerned about these investments.

As an example if you were buying a house you would not tell the vendor your absolute upper limit but would go in with an offer below this and work up to an agreed price.

However we have made every effort to release information where we can to show the good financial benefits of this scheme for the local residents and have also been very careful to show how we are de-risking this investment through things such as the pre-let clause where we will not be building this scheme until we have secured enough guaranteed pre-let tenants to ensure the costs of the scheme can be met from scheme income rather than from taxpayers pockets.

Supplementary Question

This lack of transparency in this Borough Council is now going to extremes and therefore, my question is, if you cannot publish the detail of commercial negotiations, set out the ground rules by which you are working, for instance and I will give you an example, are you selling any Elms Field to developers for houses and other developments. Can we see some form of cash flow so that we can understand whether the Council is making money from capital or rental or lease costs?

Supplementary Answer

I cannot disclose to you the sort of detail you are wanting, but if you wish to come and see me at the Council offices I will see what information I can give you to allay your fears.

67.13 Question

Philip Lawman asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question which was answered by the Leader of the Council:

Now that the proposed planning details are finally available for public viewing will the Council confirm that it will make all responses available to the public in a timely manner before the closure date for responses and will you ensure to take a collaborative and consultative approach, which fully takes into account public feedback, to ensure a development that is balanced and not just financially driven?

Answer

The applications that have been submitted are detailed and have been the subject of extensive and prolonged consultation and review over a long period of time and are based upon adopted planning policy and guidance which have been the subject of extensive public consultation in their own right.

The Local Planning Authority is required to make an objective assessment of the proposals against planning policy and other material considerations, taking into consideration planning issues received through consultation

All comments received by the Council relating to the Town Centre Regeneration planning submissions will be logged, acknowledged and made available on the Councils website in the same way that they are for all other applications.

The planning applications will as a matter of the law be determined in accordance with the development plan and all other material considerations and development viability will need to be balanced with all of the factors.

However we need to be clear that the main driver behind this Council led scheme is not financial and is the need to provide the additional retail floor space within the town centre. Yes, we have insisted that any scheme we produce is commercially viable and will fund itself without reliance on the tax payer, but the Council took this project on ourselves to

ensure that what was delivered is the best scheme possible for the town and not for the developers or their shareholders.

Supplementary Question

You said that the Council would follow standard procedures for making response available. Can you clarify what those procedures are? Is that real time, would we see that in real time before the closure date?

Supplementary Answer

Yes, those comments will be available on the website as they come in.

Additional Question – allowed at the Mayor’s discretion

When will you publish the decision criteria you will be using to make your decision?

Answer

It is published very clearly for all planning applications. This is no different from any other planning application. There is no change from any other application and if you look on the Council’s website you will see exactly what that is. There is no difference.

67.14 Question

Pat Smith asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question:

Given the planning application to place a Sainsbury’s store in Norreys and the proposal to redevelop the Cantley Lodge site into retirement housing will the Council reconsider the plans for developing Elm’s Field?

Answer

The simple answer is no. The need for increased retail within our town centre is evidenced by the Nathaniel Lichfield Study Refresh in 2010.

The proposals which have now been submitted do not take up by any means all of the retail capacity need identified therein, and we fully expect growth in other parts of the town and beyond. Furthermore, the Retail and Hotel Assessment, October 2013 which has been submitted as part of the Planning Applications, demonstrates this need.

As such, the recent proposals for a Sainsbury’s Local store in Norreys has no impact on our proposals.

The proposal for retirement housing at the Cantley Lodge site, also has little bearing on our proposals. Residential development within a town centre is arguably the most sustainable location for housing and it also provides the following benefits for the town:

- Extending the economic and social life of the town into the evening;
- Framing the new Park;
- Creating a more secure setting of the Park by providing surveillance over it.

Supplementary Question

Firstly of course, the retirement home does not frame the park. They are much further along. Secondly the premise of the hotel was based on much greater need for increased capacity. How does that hotel meet the need of our increased need for capacity if we have already lost one of the hotels that are currently available?

Supplementary Answer

In order to make sure that we provide you with an appropriate and proper answer I will provide you with a written answer.

67.15 Question

Kazek Lokuciewski asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question which was answered by the Leader of the Council.

Do you accept that Elms Field has become a staging ground for a wider view that the level of development and conversion to a business hub, with an 18 hour economy that will destroy what local residents love about Wokingham?

Answer

No.

Supplementary Question

How can the public be expected to trust when the actions of our Councillors have not been what one would expect of a volunteer? There have been no honest public posters in town since 2010 when you made the decision, no electoral campaigns from which you could have gained a democratic mandate which you do not have. How can we trust a Council that does so many things that are contrary to their own Code of Conduct on transparency?

Supplementary Answer

Very simply because there have been elections since 2010 when we put out the Masterplan for this town centre regeneration. There have been numerous elections. I myself stood on that basis.

67.16 Question

Barbara Young asked the Leader of the Council the following question:

Only once in the entire history of the Elms Field Public Open Space has there been any Appropriation procedure. However this appropriation in 2007 did not follow the legal guidelines of the Local Government Act 1972 Section 122. No evidence was produced to demonstrate that the land was no longer needed for the purpose for which it was held. No consideration was given to the rights of interested parties. No exchange land was offered. The Committee Leader and Deputy declared an interest in the proposal yet, without dispensation being granted, both continued to actively participate and considerably dominated discussion.

Why did this happen when you are supposed to be representing us?

Answer

The Committee Leader and Deputy from that decision are no longer with us tonight and are no longer on this authority. This answer is very similar to the answer given by my colleague Rob Stanton earlier.

The appropriation process in 2007 was fully compliant with the legal requirements of the *Local Government Act 1972* and all other relevant legislation. Full consideration was given to the rights of interested parties through the consultation process. The Council has published a detailed legal statement addressing the common misconceptions surrounding this issue, and this can be found on the Council's website.

The interests referred to were personal interests, and after taking advice from the Council's Monitoring Officer at the meeting these were considered not prejudicial to the issues being discussed. As we can see from the minutes of the meeting held on 26 July 2007, the advice given at that time was that consideration by those Members of individual proposals for development would be considered prejudicial, but that these Members were allowed to consider the appropriation process itself. This declaration of personal interests was fully compliant with the Council's Constitution at that time.

Supplementary Question

How many of the Councillors have an interest in this project from the start?

Supplementary Answer

I am not aware of any Councillors with an interest and if they did have a financial or other interest, they would have to declare it. I have an interest as a resident of this Borough and I have an interest on that basis only.

67.17 Question

Tony Weston asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question which was answered by the Executive Member for Finance.

Is it the intention of the Borough Council to sell or to lease the land at Elms Field to the supermarket and hotel and in either case, what level of contribution do you expect to get from these commercial partners to ensure viability of the whole regeneration project?

Answer

The Council has the option to either sell or lease the land and buildings, depending on a number of market conditions and consideration of what is in the best interests of the local community.

If the supermarket and hotel are leased, the contributions provided, as part of a pre-let contract, will account for 43% of the overall rental income provided by the regenerated town centre.

If the supermarket and hotel are sold, the receipt generated will subsequently reduce the debt remaining at the end of the project.

Supplementary Question

If it is a case of selling the land to the hotel and supermarket, would the Council accept that you will have sold off the family silver with no possibility of it ever being returned to the people of Wokingham?

Supplementary Answer

The decision to sell or to retain is a decision for the future. However, as will be said later, the rest of this development will generate substantial long term income streams for the Council and the Council will have to consider and balance the benefits of long term income over many years and against a short term interest of selling the site. But as I said that is a decision for the future.

67.18 Question

Leslie David Roland asked the Leader of the Council the following question which was answered by the Leader of the Council.

One of the reasons for the petition is that WBC have assumed that although the residents of Wokingham want the town regenerated in the Peach Place area the concerned residents have never agreed to a significant area of Elms Field being built upon. At which consultation of WBC's plans was there any agreement by concerned residents, not Councillors or WBC planners, that there should be building on a significant area of Elms Field?

Answer

We have never said that we believe everyone supports the proposals for the open space, but we know from our consultations and discussions that many people do support our scheme and what we are trying to achieve including our plans for the open space.

The principle of development has been set through several processes, each of which underwent significant levels of statutory and public consultation. This started with the Core Strategy, through the Town Centre Masterplan SPD and finally the current Regeneration proposals. The Masterplan SPD itself came directly out of a workshop with local residents and groups who looked at where this level of retail growth could best be delivered for the town as a whole, rather than as standalone sections, to thrive. Their solutions all included development on part of Elms Field.

We know through extensive research and studies that there are no viable alternatives to deliver the amount of retail floorspace growth required in the town centre by 2026 without using some of the Elms. Every viable town centre development site is identified and utilised within the Masterplan SPD so it is not a case that the town can be regenerated by simply re-doing Peach Place and ignoring the Elms site.

We would not deny that we are using the development of Elms which is less popular to help keep the development at Peach Place, which pretty much everyone agrees is desperately required, at a more appropriate level. However, the development at Elms is essential to allow the necessary growth to happen and would be happening regardless of whether the land at Peach Place is delivered or not.

It is not and will never be a case of an either/or situation as both developments are required for the town to thrive. Even with the proposed development at both Elms Field and Peach Place there is still a significant retail shortfall which will need to be delivered through other projects such as the private scheme coming forward for the old Firserve building on the corner of Peach Street and Cross Street.

Supplementary Question

The petition was signed by more than 1,700 people. Although at various times, Councillors have claimed support for building on the Elms Field, they have never, ever, been able to produce proof of that claims support. Do the Council believe that a majority view should be accepted democratically or not?

Supplementary Answer

I do believe in democracy and that is why we have elections.

67.19 Question

Stu Campbell asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question which was answered by the Executive Member for Strategic Planning and Highways.

What is the traffic management plan for the residential roads within the near vicinity to Elms Field – specifically Langborough Road?

Answer

There are a number of changes planned for the local highway network as a part of the wider Wokingham town which should help reduce the need for through traffic to use the town centre and reduce pressure on the surrounding roads. In regards specifically to Langborough Road, the road is currently subject to a 1.9m (6'6") width restriction. The restriction is clearly signed in both metric and imperial units at the junction with Wellington Road and at the junction of Murdoch and Easthampstead Road. The restriction itself is a physical barrier (steel bollards and bells). There have been a number of incidents of vehicles wider than the restriction trying to pass the physical barrier and becoming stuck. Whilst we make every effort to avoid this happening it is not possible to allow for those drivers who are determined to ignore the signs. When it does happen it is extremely inconvenient, but it does not happen often enough for this to be seen as having a major impact on town centre traffic flows.

There is no restriction on HGVs that can pass through a 1.9m gap using Langborough Road.

We have spoken to the police who have confirmed that their frequency of attendance at the site you mention is very low and they do not seem to view it as a concern.

We do not have any recent speed or traffic counts on Langborough Road. However a survey on Murdoch Road in May 2013 showed the mean speed to be below the posted speed limit and a total two way flow of 31 HGVs over a 24 hour period. It is likely that most of those did not proceed to Langborough Road.

I have asked Officers to undertake a speed survey and report the outcome back to the questioner and local Members. In the last 3 years there has been one reported accident involving two cars that resulted in a slight injury to one of the vehicle occupants. For the volume of flow on this road this level of accidents does not warrant any action.

The parking arrangement on the section of road between Denmark Street and Murdoch Road encourages drivers to drive with some caution. This not only provides parking for residents but also contributes to the low number of reportable accidents on the road.

The parking on Langborough Road would be reviewed if the Council undertook to implement civil parking enforcement. This may be an opportunity to look at options for better parking for residents if this is felt to be an issue by those residents.

Supplementary Question

I understand that the entrance to Denmark Street car park is relocating to the end opposite Gypsy Lane, so does the Council not believe that this will not have a huge impact on all the residents of Gypsy Lane and Langborough Road?

Supplementary Answer

Officers have looked at that extensively and believe that there is no major impact.

67.20 Question

Gordon Jones asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question:

Have any agreements already been signed with hotel, supermarket or other retail operators for the Elms Field site and if not, when do you expect such agreements to be signed?

Answer

An agreement for lease has been signed with Premier Inn, the hotel operator, which includes the lease itself which will come into force once the development is complete

We are in final negotiations with a food store operator and hope to announce completion of this deal in the New Year

Once the foodstore operator is signed up, this will be a clear sign to the market that the regeneration is real and it is at that time that we will commence more detailed discussions with other national operators.

We very much want to encourage local and independent traders into the town and, whilst it is early in the process to start this process, we are keen to understand potential need and opportunities in this and will be advertising in to the market in 2014.

Supplementary Question

If Sainsburys is the supermarket operator, are you aware that they are first of all, upset about their name being trailed in the press and secondly, if they were to undertake something in Elms Field, they would wish to undertake a public consultation exercise with the residents of Wokingham first?

Supplementary Answer

Obviously it is totally inappropriate for me to discuss any of those details as it is commercially sensitive information.

67.21 Question

Francine Twitchett had asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question, but in her absence a written answer was supplied.

Why destroy Elms Field, which is much used by the public, when you could use the whole of the old Woodcraay Manor Golf Course to regenerate Wokingham which has laid waste for many years. You could build houses, supermarkets, hotels and even a play park and fountain on this land. The government's dictum with non-developed land is 'if you do not use it you lose it' so why not use it instead of causing so much upset?

Answer

We do not accept that our plans are destroying Elms Field and would also dispute that is much used by the public as for the majority of the year, apart from the annual events and the play area, it is underutilised by our residents especially considering its important location.

The proposals for the town park at Elms Field will see an increase in its usability and also offer something which will meet the needs of many more residents than currently access it.

The move to out of town retail facilities, such as when Tesco left Wokingham Town Centre, is now known to be one of the largest contributing factors to the decline of the traditional town centre which was the heart of the community. One of the primary aims of the regeneration project is to address the decline in the high street by bringing people back

into the centre and providing the retail infrastructure required by a growing town in the right locations.

Should the Council allow the development of this foodstore at an out of town location, such as Woodcray Manor, then this would simply reinforce the issues already experienced in Wokingham, draw even more footfall away from the town and speed up the death of our town.

67.22 Question

Mike O'Riley asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question:

The Town Centre Regeneration Scheme is publicised as costing £95m. What are the financial breakdowns of the various components of the scheme, in terms of the net cost or net contribution to the overall scheme (totalling £95m) with particular reference to the housing development on the western edge of Elms Field and the associated access road to Wellington Road?

Answer

The regeneration project has been approached as a single comprehensive scheme and as such it is difficult to separate out the phases into separate costings for each element. However we have carried out a apportionment of costs against different elements of the scheme. Please bear in mind that these are approximate for the following reasons.

- Only high level costings are provided as the detailed cost plans remain commercially sensitive as they will form the basis of evaluating future tenders for the build contracts and associated services;
- Generally a single professional team has been appointed to deliver all three phases of the project and as such much of their work, such as appointment and management of consultancy services, relates to all phases of the project as opposed to an individual package;
- The planning applications are accompanied by a suite of shared supporting information and studies. These have been produced specifically to overarch all phases of the project to ensure the town can cope with all the development rather than attempting a more piecemeal approach;
- Although the costs have been apportioned for this exercise, these cannot be taken as an accurate representation of the costs of running these as stand-alone projects. Should the project have been designed and developed individually then there would be no economy of scale as there would need to be three different professional teams appointed and three suites of supporting studies etc. As such the costs of producing Elms Field or Peach Place separately would be significantly higher than the costs shown below.

However, bearing in mind the above points we have attempted to breakdown against the scheme

- Total Elms Commercial Development costs approximately £40m;
- Total Elms Residential Development costs approximately £32m;
- Total Peach Place Development costs approximately £23m.

It should also be noted that these costs are based upon the proposed scheme and will be subject to change as the planning stage continues.

Supplementary Question

David Lee met with residents on the 22 October and estimated the contribution from the houses on the western edge of Elms Field to a mere £5 million, a mere sum in the scheme of things which is actually £125 per head on a town population of 40,000, but I guess he probably should not have told us that if it is commercially sensitive. So maybe you can at least clarify the commercial reasons for moving the five storey hotel from the Carnival Pool area to Elms Field? For guests, a hotel with parking 200 yards away is certainly not as attractive as a hotel with onsite parking. What are the financial reasons for a change from your proposed Masterplan which was the basis of your election campaign. What else is going to change in the future?

Supplementary Answer provided by the Leader of the Council

The meeting which I held with those residents, we were discussing numerous things and we simply looked at the drawings that were discussing and it was an exceptionally rough estimate. I was trying to be helpful to the residents.

67.23 Question

Brian Hoare has asked the Leader of Council the following question:

As a member of the Executive and Council at their meetings on Thursday 26 July 2007 when the decisions to appropriate Elms Field were made, can you confirm that all attending Councillors were fully aware beforehand of the conditions set out in the legal Conveyance of March 1956 for the purchase of 18.4 acres of land, inclusive of Elms Field, between the Vendors (Trustees of the Ellisons') and the Borough Council, was for the use of the land for the purpose of a Public Open Space and as a consequence any decision to appropriate the land for other purposes would conflict with that legal agreement?

Answer

I again have taken advice from our legal department and will read their statement initially

Elms Field was part of a larger area (known as the Elms) and the overall area of land was purchased by the former Borough of Wokingham in 1956. In the conveyance, the recital stated the intent at that time was for "public open space purposes", but there are no restrictions in the conveyance limiting its use. The appropriation does not conflict with the 1956 conveyance.

The parties in 1956 never intended that the Council was bound to any particular purpose or use for the land. Some examples of prior changes of use to the land covered by the Conveyance include the construction of Wellington House, Elms Road itself, the tennis courts and pitch and putt course.

At the Executive meeting on the 26 July 2007, Members resolved that the land was no longer required for the purpose for which it was held. The report to Members, detailing exactly what information Members were referred to, can be found in the Agenda to this meeting on the Wokingham Borough Council website.

Supplementary Question

I have here the wills of the Ellison family and the conveyance of 1956. For over 60 years, the Ellison family were generous, honourable people. A will was made and conveyance was made setting out their will. The position is that they entered into that contract in good faith. Is it not a fact that there is the overarching legal requirement for matters of

appropriation to be made in good will and good faith? How the Council acted in good will and good faith?

Supplementary Answer

I believe the Council did act in good faith. The one thing that I would point out is that the figure that paid by the residents of this Borough was not in any way a discounted sum. It was a very full and fair price, £8,900. Now if anyone thinks that in 1956 that was not a very fair price then I think you look back at the history of land transactions in this area.

Further extension of time period for questions

At this point it was proposed by Tom McCann and seconded by David Lee that the time period allowed for public questions be further extended for a maximum period of 30 minutes. Upon being put to the vote this was agreed.

67.24 Question

Trevor Ottlewski asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question: Given the fact that Elms Field had enjoyed in excess of 21 years of unrestricted use as a public open space prior to WBC's appropriation of such for development use, by what legal means has the freedom to enjoy this space been legally removed? This action has culminated in the current petition to retain something for use that was previously not an issue.

Answer

I have taken advice from our legal department and will read their statement initially

At the Executive meeting on the 26 July 2007, Members resolved that the land was no longer required for the purpose for which it was held. The Executive was satisfied that the appropriation was necessary in order to assist the promotion and improvement of the economic, social and environmental well-being of the Wokingham town area.

The legal power for appropriation is set out at Section 122 of the *Local Government Act 1972*, and the appropriation process set out in that legislation carried out by the Council in 2007. This is the legal process which has resulted in the appropriation of this land.

Supplementary Question

Considering that there seems to be a great groundswell of opinion that we would prefer to keep Elms Field green open space rather than develop it, despite what the Council may feel, would the Council consider a request to include the whole of Elms Field under new powers to nominate public space for inclusion in the local plan the new designation being Local Open Space Designation?

Supplementary Answer

I will need to have that question sent to me so that I can get a proper written answer sent to you as I am not sure that I fully understood it and I will need to obtain legal advice on it. If you will send it to me, we will get that sorted.

67.25 Question

Mel Horton asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question which was answered by the Executive Member for Environment:

The Elms Field site is an important biodiversity and geological conservation area, providing a home and a natural green pathway between the North and South green belt

zones around Wokingham. It is home, or adjacent to homes of bat populations, newt populations and stag beetles, as well as many species of birds, some of which are protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. 127 of the 139 trees should not be removed because they are part of this biodiversity balance. What measures has the Council taken to assess the full biodiversity and geological conservation impact of developing this land?

Answer

As can now be seen from the suite of documents accompanying the planning applications, the Council has undertaken extensive ecological surveys of this site since moving forward with this project, including assessing any impact on local wildlife which will be tested through the planning process and any conditions set by the Planning Authority, including those arising through discussions with statutory consultation bodies such as Natural England, would be complied with.

Our proposals include many improvements to the site to make it more biodiverse than it currently is and to ensure wildlife can be better supported in the future. Much of the existing planting is of poor quality and was never chosen with local ecology in mind.

We will be offering a much greater variety of planting and an increased number of trees on what is there now, with decisions around the varieties proposed made not just for aesthetic reasons, but with biodiversity and animal habitat very much in mind.

Given that a large amount of green space will remain at Elms, a natural green pathway is preserved, and indeed is reinforced by the work going on across the Borough with the creation of over 160 hectares of new parks and open spaces around Wokingham to ensure such a green infrastructure remains for our future.

Supplementary Question

Whilst I am reassured that the Council has invested significant funding in these studies, can the esteemed Councillors guarantee that they will comply with the recommendation in the bat survey which states that where possible, existing habitat features such as hedgerows and mature trees bordering the park should be retained since these offer potential roosting opportunities and sheltered areas of habitat for foraging and commuting. If so, is retaining nine trees and no remaining original hedging really the best they can do?

Supplementary Answer

In terms of the bats, as a preserved species and as many people have probably found when they have had planning applications on their house, there are very strict rules which are laid down as conditions on planning applications to deal with any bats that are found to be present, at any time of the year. This will, of course, be applied right across the area as it is developed.

67.26 Question

Peter Humphreys asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question which was answered by Councillor Philip Mirfin as Leader of Wokingham Town Council.

WBC have stated that one of the major reasons behind the regeneration initiative is that the town lacks a broad range of shops and that because of this many residents feel it necessary to travel to larger shopping centres such as Reading. Other than the proposed supermarket the current planning application has provision for 12 new retail units to be built on Elms Field of which, according to Councillor Mirfin, three are 'potentially attractive

to cafes or restaurants'. Taking account of shops, restaurants, estate agents etc., there are currently about 180 retail units in the town centre plus market stalls.

Why do you consider it worth destroying one of our town's prime assets, Elms Field, for so little gain and would adding another 9 shops really make a difference?

Answer

Firstly, I am firmly of the belief that our plans greatly improve the open space within the town. We acknowledge that there is an overall loss of current space, but we also acknowledge that this space is fragmented, cut off from the town and, apart from the play area, not well used. We will be creating a new park with a larger space for events with infrastructure in place, a re-aligned road which will bring the park into the town, a better play area and a park that is framed with housing to provide a safer and more secure environment.

In terms of the retail units, the number of units are important only in so far as we need to provide the right size units to attract an improved range of retailers which will give the right mix of retailers, meet supplier demand and draw in enough daily footfall to make resident's aspirations for more niche and independent traders viable within the town centre.

We have shown indicative sizes and number of units within our applications, based on our current view of the market but we have made sure the designs are flexible enough to ensure that they continue to adapt to meet needs from retailers, businesses and the community should these potentially change in future years.

The actual requirement is for an increase in retail floor space which our project helps to meet. In terms of space, the town currently has c 19,000 m² of food and non-food retail space excluding service and leisure. Our proposals demonstrate an additional c10,500m² which is an increase of c55%, which will impact favourably upon the attractiveness of our town to the retail market and continue to allow for other growth within the town centre and the new Strategic Development Location developments to the north and south of the town centre.

Supplementary Question

Obviously, you are taking into account the new Peach Place development within your figures, but do you not agree that your plans for the new supermarket are based upon an out of date retail study and with the continued growth of online shopping, there is no need for it?

Supplementary Answer

That it is a very good question, if we did not have potentially, 40,000 additional residents coming up from all four Strategic Development Locations between now and 2026. In fact within Wokingham, we are going to have potentially 10,000 new residents that will need food stores. The service need from the stores will not be sufficient to meet that demand.

67.27 Question

Andrea McNeil had asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question, but in her absence the following written answer was provided:

The Council have been under-investing in Elms Field for years, yet the park is still used heavily by families; young children; local office workers and for community events. As the town continues to expand, with massive increases in local housing and therefore numbers

of people using the open space in the town centre, what were the incentives presented to the Council to encourage them to change the use of Elms Field from open parkland to commercial premises?

Answer

I accept that the play area is used heavily by members of the public. That is why we are proposing an improved play area within our proposals. The remainder of the area is poorly used and is of poor quality, our plans greatly improve what is there by diverting the road around the park so connecting it with the town, a bigger and better events area and framing it to improve safety and security

The incentive to which you refer is simply the need to improve our town. We could have taken a traditional approach and sold off the land to a developer – we would have received a greater return from the land without any risk – though we would be limited in our control of what was built – we have taken this route not for financial reasons but because it is best for the town and its residents

The Town Centre Masterplan, which this Council adopted in June 2010, is part of a much wider plan to allow for growth within our borough and to ensure the right infra-structure is in place. Included within those wider plans is an increase of some 160 ha of public open space for our residents to enjoy, much of which will be within a short distance of the town

This is an increase of 143 times that which is lost at Elms Field

67.28 Question

Richard Sleator asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question which was answered by the Deputy Leader of the Council.

While a number of people agree on the necessity to regenerate the town centre, potentially including buildings to offer more shops and apartments, there is a vast number of people that question the necessity to specifically include a supermarket when there is already a town centre supermarket (Waitrose) and a larger supermarket within a mile (Tesco) as well as a number of convenience food outlets (the latest addition being the Local Morrisons); Why does the Council insist on the inclusion of a supermarket and can we understand fully the financial opportunity presented by the inclusion of a supermarket and is the Council's plan solely based on this money?

Answer

The inclusion of a food store within the scheme is primarily based on need, not finance. The Nathaniel Lichfield Study identifies the need across Wokingham going forward in line with the Core Strategy, which is the adopted policy of the Council, the need for food retail is not in doubt. The real question is 'where should it be located?'

It has been asked as to why we do not locate the food store out of town and I did cover that earlier. The answer to this is that we know town and high streets up and down the country are in decline and one of the key reasons for this is the increase in out of town retail parks which has drawn footfall out of our towns. So, if we truly want to regenerate our town, it is imperative that the food store be included within the town to bring footfall back into the town and help support other retailers including the many local retailers whom we cherish within Wokingham.

67.29 Question

David Wilson had asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question, but in his absence the following written answer was provided:

Can you please explain whether a biodiversity survey has been done on the proposal. How in view of the area of green space and trees being destroyed and other developments in the area does the Council intend to mitigate the loss of flora and fauna, particularly in the short term?

Answer

As can be seen from the suite of documents accompanying the planning applications, the Council has undertaken extensive ecological surveys of this site since moving forward with this project, including assessing any impact on local wildlife which will be tested through the planning process and any conditions set by the Planning Authority, including those arising through discussions with statutory consultation bodies such as Natural England, would be complied with.

Our proposals include many improvements to the site to make it more biodiverse than it currently is and to ensure wildlife can be better supported in the future. Much of the existing planting is of poor quality and was never chosen with local ecology in mind.

We will be offering a much greater variety of planting and an increased number of trees on what is there now, with decisions around the varieties proposed made not just for aesthetic reasons but with biodiversity and animal habitat very much in mind.

The planting approach has also been considered carefully to ensure, that in addition to a much improved long term future for the space, there is immediate visual and ecological impact within the park. This will be achieved through selecting the right specimens for the site including many large semi-mature trees rather than simply planting small saplings as seen on many other developments.

In addition to the improvements being made at Elms Field the Council is also undertaking a programme which will see over 160 hectares of new natural green spaces and parks made available to local residents.

This includes several within Wokingham town such as the new 30 acre Buckhurst Meadow park, which as you will have read in the latest edition of the Borough News, is already under construction and includes many features to encourage wildlife such as orchards and woodland.

Improvements such as this will help secure the future of a natural green Wokingham to balance out with the level of development which has to be delivered locally to meet a growing and changing population.

67.30 Question

Oscar Roberts asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question:

As a 15 year old teenager I would like to know what have the Council done to canvass the views of local schoolchildren and how have they reacted to the regeneration plans?

Answer

We have carried out numerous presentations and discussion with local schools.

At the time of each of the main consultation events in mid-2011 and mid-2012, we targeted each of the 4 secondary schools within the town, presenting and talking to students across all ages 11 to 18. In addition to this, we continue to talk to other schools including primary and junior, often as part of their curriculum.

The overwhelming view from our younger people is that they clearly want a town centre that caters for their needs and they find little that would attract them to use the existing centre. Their requests include a much improved retail offer, café outlets together with leisure facilities including places to hang out and relax.

I strongly believe that younger people are the future and the main beneficiaries of the regeneration of our town. Over 25% of our population within Wokingham Borough are young people under 19 years old. I also believe that on many wider issues we should communicate more regularly with the young people within our society and give more credit to their views.

Supplementary Question

Were the children presented with both side of the debate, so they could make their own independent judgements?

Supplementary Answer

Yes. It was a full and frank conversation and the Wokingham Society went to go and speak to them.

67.31 Question

Ben Roberts asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question:

At the recent Redevelopment market stall exhibitions in the town centre, how much did the Council think the public engaged in the process and what was the level of support for the plans?

Answer

The Council recently held four pop-up information events on Friday 25 October, Saturday 26 October, Friday 1 November and Saturday 2 November 2013.

The aim of the events was to deal with a lot of recent misinformation about the scheme, show residents what was actually planned and answer people's questions about the proposals.

We were very pleased by the good turnout at these events as several hundred people came to look at the plans and talk to us on each of the days. Some people came along specifically to see the plans and ask questions whilst others were in the town for other purposes and came over to see what was happening.

Comments and responses from those who came along were very varied with many people being highly supportive and excited by what they saw, and others having concerns primarily around loss of open space and need for a food store.

Supplementary Question

Based upon the fact that I was also there for a number of hours that weekend, is it not true that a large percentage of people raised objections to the level of development at Elms

Field and indicated that the loss of a major park is too high a price to pay to regenerate Wokingham town?

Supplementary Answer

It is true that people said that and I mentioned that in one of my earlier answers.

67.32 Question

Ken Rowlands has asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question:

Why did the W.B.C. give out a census of opinions form out before they carried out their own "Proposals". At a recent meeting I chaired with W.B.C and Town Councillors one the main concerns was for OUR Shop owners and with the proposal of taking "One of the Towns Car Parks Away" this can only cause more harm. Also at present the Elms Field is used by a large part of the Community.

Answer

The Council has never issued a 'census of opinions form' but has carried out extensive public consultation at each stage of developing the current proposals through the Core Strategy, the Town Centre Masterplan, and the current regeneration project. At each stage changes have been made in response to public consultation and details of these are a matter of public record.

One of the important reasons for regenerating our town centre is to support our existing retailers who are suffering from a lack of footfall within the town. Our project aims to address many of the issues such as:

- improving the mix of retail within the town to better meet residents' needs;
- creating the right size units to encourage niche and independent retailers and make our town stand out as something different to neighbours like Bracknell and Reading;
- create more space for extended markets and a larger stage;
- bringing the food store back to the town instead of allowing it to be delivered out of town where it will draw more footfall away;
- increase the amount of short stay, shopper, car parking available in the town centre.

Failure to regenerate our town centre and deliver the infrastructure necessary to support a rapidly growing Wokingham will simply compound the issues currently felt by the high street and allow the continued decline of our town

Supplementary Question

If the main car park is going to be taken away and the proposal for a new car park is that it would be underground on the proposed Sainsbury site, what is going to happen to the rest of the cars for the area? At the present time all of the car parks are extremely busy and you cannot get a place at all.

Supplementary Answer which was provided by the Executive Member for Strategic Planning and Highways.

There are two ways of satisfying the demand for the spaces that have been taken away. The first one is utilising existing capacity that we have which is not being used. For instance, the multi-storey car park in Elms Field itself is currently running at an occupancy rate of about 19%. So that is the first short term step.

The second step is to put a decking onto the Carnival Pool car park which again is right by Elms Field and we have been very successful in getting some forward funding from the Local Enterprise Partnership to fund that double decking so that we can actually get on with it a lot sooner than we expected. That will be the medium to long term solution and that will actually end up with more car parking spaces than we have today.

67.33 Question

Andy Slay has asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question which was answered by the Executive Member for Environment:

I am a member of the Wokingham Lions Club who organise the annual May Fayre which is one of the major charity and community events that take place on the Elms Field each year. We have regularly faced the last minute question as to whether to close the Elms Field due to poor conditions created by wet ground rendering the area unusable.

Can the Council confirm that the new plans will provide sufficient hard standing to accommodate 50 stalls in poor conditions, and likewise that there will be sufficient space for the same number on the grassland without creating congestion that could be considered a Health and Safety concern?

Answer

Clearly this is a very important issue for the continued life of the town. The Council is happy that there is plenty of space, both within the new park and within the areas of hard standing, to meet the May Fayre's requirements as discussed. In addition to the stalls this also includes elements such as the larger marquees and stages which are regularly used at these great community events.

From our consultation with yourself and other key organisers we are very aware of the limitations of the existing space to run events and this is why we are investing a large amount of money into getting the spaces right to ensure even more community events can come forward.

The public areas, both hard standing and open space, at both the Elms and Peach Place developments, have been specially designed to be as flexible as possible to ensure things like events and regular markets can be run with even greater ease regardless of conditions.

In addition to there being sufficient hard standing, the improvements being made with general landscaping, reinforcement and drainage on the new park should also help alleviate many of the issues found with poor conditions and extend the period the space can be used during the year.

The provision of all the necessary services on site and easily accessible, such as power, water and drainage should also help our local event organisers greatly, increasing flexibility and reducing costs for those involved.

67.34 Question

Roger Chalke asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question which was answered by the Executive Member for Finance.

How much money has been spent on promoting this scheme? I refer particularly to the 2 page insert in the Wokingham Times on 28 November and the 32 page brochure 'Wokingham Borough News' dated Autumn 2013

Answer

In total the Council has spent £99,847 on communications relating to the regeneration project over the past three years.

However the bulk of this cost, circa £80,000 has been the cost of carrying out the two public consultation exercises, including things such as venues, artwork, and consultant/technical staff time to attend. However much of this cost is actually contained within the general agreed contracts so is not 'additional' cost'.

Although the Council was only required to carry out one such formal consultation event to meet the requirements of the Local Planning Authority Statement of Community Involvement, we felt that the additional spend of having a second public consultation on the detail of the scheme was an important part to getting the project right for the town and stand by this decision.

The other £20,000 has been spent on a range of things to promote awareness of the scheme and what is happening in the town. This includes a range of adverts and the infographics in the paper, signage around the town, and the regular regeneration newsletter update.

We have a duty to communicate with our residents. The Borough News is part of the Council's overall communications approach and is not specific to the regeneration project.

Wokingham Borough News is issued in hard copy to every household in the Borough three times a year (spring, summer and autumn) and the annual budget is £43,370. We think this is the most efficient way to keep our residents informed about the vital services we deliver on their behalf, all the major council projects going on in the area, as well as how we are changing.

Supplementary Question

When you were planning to spend our money on your scheme, did you consider building a correctly scaled model of this development and then using photographs of the model rather than these ludicrously biased artistic impressions?

Supplementary Answer

I am told that people rather liked the information that was put into the paper and therefore that is a suitable way to communicate with the public.

67.35 Question

Imogen Shepherd-DuBey asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question which was answered by the Deputy Leader of the Council.

On Friday 29 November 2013 the Distressed Town Centre Property Task Force published a report about Britain's town centres which said that they need a radical overhaul because the squeeze on households and the rise of internet shopping have led to there being too many retail units. This is just the latest in a series of reports which suggest that the Council's approach to regenerating Wokingham town centre is wrong and out of date.

Why are you so determined to push through your plans for Elms Field without pausing to consider the implications of how retail has changed in the past 10 years?

Answer

We would disagree with your comments around reports as the majority of those on the future of the high street which have come out in the past few years very much support and promote the approach being taken by the Council.

The Distressed Town Centres research that you single out highlights a range of things as critical for survival of town centres. Things such as:

- recognising the importance of the Town Centre as an essential part of national infrastructure and ensuring the planning strategy is there to support it. That is what we are doing;
- reducing multiple land ownerships for increased control and improved management. That is what we have done;
- encouraging Local Authorities to invest their own money in commercial regeneration schemes. That is what we propose;
- encouraging alternative uses for empty shops and offices and we have been rather good at that as well.

We are glad that they listed things like these as they are exactly the things that the Council is already doing in the town centre, through things such as the Core Strategy and the adopted Masterplan Planning policies, and especially through the Town Centre Regeneration project which picks up on every point mentioned above.

National research over the past few years continually singles Wokingham out as a town centre with great potential, often quoted as the best place in England to live in. But only if we can address the issues which currently beset many town centres such as the move to out of town retail and the loss of town centre living which may have driven away footfall.

Wokingham has failed to change over recent decades and it is this which is leading to the current decline. Failure to do anything will simply compound this issue. Actually, I undertook an exercise myself last night and looked at some pictures a hundred and indeed fifty years ago and I can tell you there has been a lot of change even if we do not recognise it happening every day.

The face of the high street is completely changing and it has to adapt in order to survive as do we.

Supplementary Question

Whilst it is obvious that Wokingham needs to adapt it is never going to compete with the neighbouring town with regards to shopping. Wokingham needs to find a niche. Why are we not emphasising our market area and old town feel?

Supplementary Answer

We will absolutely protect that, this is the magic of Wokingham it is a market town. If you drive into this town off the London Road it says 'This is a historic market town'. We treasure that and we want to enhance that. I assure you we will do just that.

End of Time Period for Public Questions

At this point, the time available to consider public questions had expired and in accordance with the Council's agreed Rules of Procedure for public questions, it was indicated that the remaining questioners would receive written answers as set out below:

67.36 Question

David Morris had asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question. The written response to this is set out below:

With all the new housing developments that are taking place in Wokingham in the near future, has anyone at the Council undertaken a cost analysis on the amount of extra revenue that will be generated from council tax from these new builds over the next 10 years and could not those extra monies be used to save the last central green space in its entirety?

Answer

The Council Tax income on all new properties is factored into our Long Term Financial Forecasts.

Unfortunately this additional income is only a small part of our financial picture. Our Government grant is falling by approximately £3m to £4m per annum, we face unavoidable statutory growth pressures such as Adult Social Care that generates additional spending pressures of over £2m year on year and we face inflationary pressures (e.g. energy) if almost £2m per annum.

In addition we have significant demands for investment in our community, particularly the infrastructure requirement of the new Strategic Development Locations. It is important we also maximise our capital income in the context of minimising our net investment in the Town Centre Regeneration and maximise our ability to fund the needed investment in our community

67.37 Question

Trevor Sleet had asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question. The written response to this is set out below:

There used to be 6 public tennis courts on Elms Field, by removing them Wokingham Borough Council have reduced the total number across the Borough to 14. Do you think that by building on Elms Field the Council are walking away from the Borough's contribution to the Olympic legacy?

Answer

There are currently 4 tennis courts at Elms Field not the 6 as mentioned in your question.

These will no longer be provided on the Elms field site but S106 contributions from the scheme will be used to mitigate this loss and will fully fund the provision of 3 new higher specification, tennis courts on the Cantley Park site.

Although there will be a reduction of one court overall the inclusion of floodlighting on the new courts will allow for much longer hours of use by the community than was possible at Elms Field.

The Council is fully committed to securing Wokingham's Olympic legacy and the recently adopted Open Space, Sports and Leisure strategy continues to build upon this by seeing the creation of many new opportunities for sport and leisure throughout the Borough.

67.38 Question

Amanda Kirby had asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question. The written response to this is set out below:

Given the refusal to grant tree preservation orders and pay usual developer social housing contributions, as Wokingham Borough Council are the landowner, developer and applying for the planning permission to their own planning authority what guarantees can the Council make that this is an independently verified and just process for developing our town's essential green space and how do they guarantee the viability of these plans are worth the risk to residents both financially and socially?

Answer

The requirement for regeneration and growth within Wokingham Town Centre has been carefully established through Planning Policy in the Core Strategy. This policy document was subject to consultation and assessment at Inquiry by an independent Planning Inspector. The redevelopment of the Town Centre has also been established by the Town Centre Masterplan SPD which was also subject to public consultation.

The proposed redevelopment of the Town Centre has been adopted in policy as the risk of doing nothing to the town has a significant detrimental social and economic impact for Wokingham as it forms part of the infrastructure needs of a growing and socially changing population. Failure to deliver it will impact upon the residents of the town as it will continue to decline and fail to meet their needs

Wokingham Borough Council has a policy not to place Tree Protection Orders (TPOs) on trees on its own land and this is common practice for councils nationally. TPOs are usually placed on trees where the Council becomes aware of a threat to trees on privately owned sites such as when the site is identified for development. This ensures that the trees are retained to allow them to be considered through any planning application process. In this case, the trees on Elms Field will be fully assessed as part of the planning application. The existence of a TPO does not prevent the trees being removed if planning permission is granted for this.

Before the planning application for the Town Centre was submitted, a full viability assessment was undertaken. This identified the scheme is unable to sustain affordable housing as well as the delivery of essential infrastructure such as improvements to the highway network and improvements to the town centre as a whole.

Legally, the Council must make planning applications in the same way as any other person and they must follow the same procedures as would apply to applications made by anyone else. The Council assesses its own applications acting in the regulatory capacity as the Local Planning Authority. These must be independently assessed against planning policy and all other material planning considerations that are set out by legislation and guidance.

While local authorities may grant themselves planning permission for their own development this is subject to several important safeguards. In particular the proposals must be advertised and decided in public by a committee, members of which are subject to a Code of Conduct to ensure that that application is judged on its own merits and that

planning decisions are taken openly, impartially, with sound judgement and for justifiable reasons.

Although not assessed as part of the planning application process the Council's approach to managing the scheme has also been designed with the intent of de-risking their investment and they have imposed several conditions on themselves to ensure the scheme is financially viable, self-supporting and does not become a burden on the tax payer.

67.39 Question

Peter Must had asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question. The written response to this is set out below:

For over a year now, we have been told that the name of the retailer which would occupy the proposed food store on Elms Field was imminent. Is it not now time to acknowledge that this has become a hugely difficult concept to sell to retailers, who are pulling back from new large stores in favour of smaller express units and online shopping, and that actually leaving this prime area of open space undeveloped would better represent our market town as a gateway to those approaching it from the south?

Answer

The proposals for Elms Field are based upon a need for retail floor space infrastructure to support local growth and as such doing nothing on this site and leaving the town to decline further would mean we were failing to meet our resident's needs, both existing and future.

Delays in signing contracts have not been due to any lack of interest from tenants and negotiations with the provider are progressing well to our revised timetables.

Conversations with the market and with our Lettings Agents, Strutt and Parker have shown great interest in a regenerated Wokingham as a location and we are confident that we will be able to secure the right tenants for our properties, both the larger anchor units and the smaller niche stores.

The private development scheme for the old Fireserve building on the corner of Peach Street and Cross Street, and the recent rumour that Sports Direct are taking on the old Blockbuster unit again shows that interest in the town remains strong as a location for investment and trade. The reason many retailers are not coming to town at the moment is that they cannot find suitable units and this is something that the regeneration seeks to address.

Our proposals have been produced to ensure that a proportion of the necessary retail growth can occur in Wokingham; that we creating the right gateways to the town and that we are creating the right, overall town centre experience, to differentiate ourselves from larger neighbours like Reading and Bracknell. We are doing this by strengthening our niche, independent and Market offer which we know is crucial to getting people back into Wokingham town centre.

67.40 Question

Clive Jones had asked the Executive Member for Environment the following question. The written response to this is set out below:

A new Open Space, Sports and Recreation Strategy was adopted at the Executive meeting on 28 November 2013. The report stated that as a result of new housing development in the Strategic Development Locations there will be a need for an extra 48 hectares of parks, gardens and amenity greenspace. In this context, how do you justify removing green space at Elms Field?

Answer

The Open Space, Sports and Recreation Strategy will require the Strategic Development Location development to deliver 48 hectares of parks, gardens and amenity greenspace to serve those new communities

As it is within the town centre and at some distance from the proposed SDL developments Elms Field is not considered a suitable location to adequately serve these new communities. All SDL's will include new open space provision and the Council has already started work on delivering over 260 hectares of new parks, open spaces, play areas, sports pitches and SANGs across the borough. This will be available to new and existing residents alike.

The regeneration will also provide for new tennis courts at Cantley Park and a brand new much improved children's play area. In addition improvements in quality of the retained amenity greenspace at Elms Field site will mitigate for the reduction in the overall size of the amenity greenspace on the site.

67.41 Question

Marc Maynard had asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question. The written response to this is set out below:

We understand that the Council will make a loss on the development of Peach Place and that the Council have maintained that the regeneration plans therefore hinge on the development of Elms Field to cover this loss; given the Council has already accounted for, and paid, 10M for Peach Place, the fact that the regeneration plans are due to make an estimated profit of 20M, plus the considerable cash reserves the council has of some 60M, why are 157 dwellings on Elms Field, resulting in further loss of many mature trees and further impact on the green space, required to fund the regeneration?

Answer

The scheme at Elms Field is being developed, not to pay for the development of Peach Place, but because it is a critical part of the infrastructure requirements to support our growing town. Regardless of whether Peach Place was redeveloped we would still be proceeding with our plans for Elms Field.

It is common knowledge that Peach Place is non-viable as a stand alone site. The original private scheme for the site proposed 142 residential units on the same red lined site that we are using and still could not get the scheme to move forward. To us at the Council, 142 homes at this site, added to the private proposals of between 259 and 300 homes at the Elms Field site was too much overdevelopment for the town. It is another reason that we wanted to step in to take over both schemes and ensure the level of development was right for Wokingham rather than the developer. We feel that our 157 residential units across both sites is a far more appropriate level than the proposed 401-442 that private development would have seen built on the same land.

As you suggest the Council could have made the decision to fund the entire scheme from our reserves, but we stand by our decision to ensure that this project remains self-funding and does not become a burden on the local tax payer. If we were to use up all the reserves then the Council would not be in a position to fund other critical and non-profit making, projects within the Borough. This would have a detrimental impact on our residents and communities and such a decision would be irresponsible of us.

Knowing that the necessary infrastructure development at Elms Field must be delivered we feel the Council approach of tackling these as a single cross funding project is the right one and it has helped us create a balanced scheme with many benefits for our local residents.

- we can ensure the scheme aligns closely with the Town Centre Masterplan and other planning guidance;
- we can deliver the appropriate level of development without being constrained by the need to maximise profit for shareholders;
- we can create a viable scheme which funds itself, does not become a burden on tax payers and allows local spend to benefit all residents with residual profits coming back to the Council to fund other projects and services within the Borough;
- we can place as much importance on 'social capital' as the financial pound when making decisions over profit and invest more back into non-profit elements of the scheme;
- we can ensure that what is developed is of the highest quality, appropriate for the town and that corners are not cut to increase profit at the risk of quality;
- as owners of both sites we can make decisions on lettings to ensure the two developments work together rather than being competing developments;
- we can ensure that selection of tenants is carried out with local aspirations to become a town which stands out for the quality and mix of independent and niche retailers in mind;
- we can support the extension of the Market offer and create more opportunities for events to make our town stand out as the best community location.

For the Council it is not a case of whether this growth will happen or not within the town centre, as infrastructure delivery is necessary to support all the local development going on in the borough. For us it was a decision around who was best placed to oversee delivery and benefit from the scheme and we feel our decision to deliver it ourselves using the route we have chosen is the best possible solution for Wokingham.

67.42 Question

John Ibbotson had asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question. The written response to this is set out below:

Why do we have to have another supermarket, hotel and more homes in place of playing fields? Although the government have requested more houses to be built it was not at the expense of playing fields.

Answer

Wokingham is facing significant housing growth in the years to 2026, including approximately 4000 homes on the edge of the town.

The delivery of housing on this scale must be supported by the provision of infrastructure to ensure that development is sustainable and provides the services required by existing and new residents.

The new supermarket will help to meet the retail needs of future residents within the town, which cannot be met by existing supermarket provision and the hotel, will contribute to the economic development of Wokingham town as it grows to address future needs.

Government policy (the National Planning Policy Framework) allows for the development of areas of green space/playing fields if the loss of green space resulting from the proposed development would be replaced by equivalent or better provision in terms of quantity and quality in a suitable location. The development proposals for Elms Field provide a high quality green space in the centre of the town which will meet the needs of both current and future residents. In addition the development is contributing financially to the provision of additional tennis courts at Cantley.

67.43 Question

Fiona Cross had asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question. The written response to this is set out below:

How much money does the Council anticipate raising from selling off a section of Elms Field for houses? (NB I am only asking about the section of Elms Field that is being sold off for houses NOT The Paddocks Car Park.)

Answer

The financial details in regards to the joint venture agreement between Wilson Bowden, David Wilson Homes and the Council are deemed commercially sensitive and cannot be shared at the current time.

This agreement is still very much a living document and will be used actively as we move forward with a range of detailed transactions such as the appointment of the build contractors and the final sale negotiations to owners.

67.44 Question

Clare Odds had asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question. The written response to this is set out below:

Question

In view of Wokingham Borough Council's responsibility for the health and wellbeing of its community and the high level of depression and anxiety prevalent in the Borough, is it not essential to maintain Elms Field as an open area, no housing, no hotel and no supermarket so that the community can continue to relax and enjoy the open space, of which there is so little in the centre of Wokingham?

Answer

The Council recognises the importance of the health and wellbeing of our residents. This is why a large amount of open space will remain at Elms Field with our plans to create a high quality town park.

Despite its location the existing space is not highly used apart from the play area and the annual events, both of which will be provided for within the regeneration proposals, with a much better play area and a specially designed and serviced events space for the town.

The improved park will be much more attractive and accessible to a wider range of people than currently use it, including things such as more trees, attractive areas of planting and more seating for relaxation and enjoyment of the space. Our proposals respond directly to the kinds of facilities local people told us they wanted to see in a park at our public consultations.

In addition to the improved facilities which will be available at Elms Field the Council is also committed to making sure that all our residents have access to high quality open spaces. We have already started on delivering over 160 hectares of new natural green spaces within the Borough, including several parks in Wokingham itself. All of this will help us support a healthier and happier population for Wokingham.

67.45 Question

David Tinker had asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question. The written response to this is set out below:

The Council has always said it will not build the retail units on Elms Field unless it can pre-let them. However, there is nothing to stop the construction of the residential units on Elms Field going ahead immediately if planning permission is granted. It is unclear what will happen if the Council is ready to start construction, but no or insufficient retail units have been pre-let. Given the increasing use of on-line shopping, for example, we could find the take up lacking, whereby insufficient retail units get built but the residential units do. This would mean The Paddocks car park would be destroyed with NO replacement built. The larger area of the open, green space on Elms is much reduced, but the brownfield site of Wellington House and council staff car parks, would be left untouched. This would be total disaster. Will you guarantee that the Council will NOT start work on the residential units before you know with absolute certainty that this food store (occupants as yet unidentified) and other retail units WILL be built on the east side of Elms Field?

Answer

We agree that there is nothing legally obliging us to deliver every element of the scheme and should we receive planning approval we would be in a position to deliver some elements whilst ignoring others, but please be reassured that this is not our intent.

We knew from our conversations over the years with the private developers interested in developing the site that this 'cherry picking' of more profitable elements was a real possibility. This was especially apparent with the need to get an appropriate scheme for Peach Place which was never going to be financially viable on its own without chronic overdevelopment.

The risk of these private developers only part delivering the scheme was identified early on and formed part of the supporting case when the decision was made by the Council to proceed with ownership, management and delivery of the scheme ourselves.

If this scheme was purely about money making then perhaps the Council might have been tempted to do the same thing ourselves. However this scheme is not about the money but about the need to deliver the right retail and leisure for our growing town. The Council has a duty to ensure the necessary infrastructure is in place over the coming years, and without it Wokingham will continue to decline, benefiting neither the residents nor the Council.

In regards to the risk of not letting our commercial units, we know from our conversations with the market and our lettings agents, that securing sufficient interest in the scheme to meet our self-imposed pre-let condition is unlikely to be a problem. There is great interest in coming to Wokingham but there simply are not the units to accommodate the right quality of retailers to the town

Because of the nature of our design, much of the supporting commercial work needs to be done to deliver the housing anyway so the risk of delivering one without the other is unlikely. Our application commits us to supporting the Council's Car Parking Strategy; so again, it is unlikely we could remove the car park without securing the appropriate replacement spaces elsewhere.

However, within the development agreement between WBC, Wilson Bowden and David Wilson Homes, the pre-let condition requiring the food store and hotel to be let prior to starting construction relates to construction of the whole and therefore includes the residential units at Elms Field.

Through the planning permission the Local Planning Authority can also set conditions relating to the phasing of delivery and these will be decided upon through the application process.

67.46 Question

Roger Kirby had asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question. The written response to this is set out below:

As the justification for another supermarket adjacent to the town centre, to supplement the existing Waitrose store, is based on the anticipated increase in population of the town envisaged as a result of the large number of houses being built on the periphery of Wokingham, why not sanction any new supermarket nearer to those new houses and maintain green space in the centre of town as it is being lost at the edges?

Answer

The Nathaniel Lichfield Study identifies the need for additional food retail floor space to support the local growth set out in the Core Strategy.

It has been asked as to why we do not locate the food store out of town.

The answer to this is that we know town and high streets up and down the country are in decline and one of the key reasons for this is the increase in out of town retail parks which has drawn footfall out of our towns. So, if we truly want to regenerate our town, it is imperative that the food store be included within the town to bring footfall back into the town and help support other retailers

Provision of another food store out of town would compound the issues and draw more people away from the town centre thus speeding up the current decline of our high street.

In regards to the loss of green space at the edges of town the Council has embarked upon a programme which will see the creation of over 160 hectares of new natural green spaces which will be available for local residents to enjoy. This includes several new parks and open spaces around Wokingham itself so the total amount of open space available to residents will substantially increase, not decrease in the coming years.

67.47 Question

Peter Odds had asked the Leader of the Council the following question. The written response to this is set out below:

Question

Bearing in mind the thousands of dwellings being built across in Wokingham town centre and the Borough, why is it necessary to build a further 157 houses directly on Elms Field and the Paddock car park?

Answer

The proposals being put forward for regeneration are directly in line with the Town Centre Masterplan Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) which was adopted following public consultation in June 2010.

The Masterplan identifies this area for a mixed use scheme which includes commercial and residential development.

There are over 13,000 new homes being delivered within the borough to 2026. The majority of these homes (approximately 10,000) are within the four Strategic Development Locations developments. The remaining 3000 homes are to be delivered on sites across the Borough, including within Wokingham town centre, and are allocated for housing within the Council's Managing Development Delivery Plan (MDD). The MDD Plan includes an allocation for residential uses at Elms Field.

Town centres are an ideal location for the delivery of these remaining homes as they offer a sustainable way of living and are surrounded by the facilities that residents need. In addition bringing people back to live in town centres helps creating additional footfall and increased safety of spaces helping make the town centre more viable in the long term.

Wilson Bowden has been appointed as the Development Managers for the scheme whilst David Wilson Homes are the Council's Joint Venture Partners for residential elements only. Although both are part of the Barratt group these are very different roles.

The Council entered this agreement after several years of a competitive dialogue process to identify the best partners to move forward and believe we have selected the correct team for this project. Indeed through this process the Council could have chosen to reject David Wilson Homes as the residential partner and remained with Wilson Bowden on the commercial side only, however we chose to enter the agreement with them because of the strength of the overall scheme they were proposing for both the commercial and residential elements and the quality of their experience and skills.

67.48 Question

Stan Hetherington had asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question. The written response to this is set out below:

Wokingham Borough Council approved the Wokingham Town Centre Masterplan SPD in June 2010 which established the Council's design, transport, public realm, urban design, land use and sustainability requirements for the Town Centre for the period up to 2026, in particular it set out the size of the new Town Park.

Does that decision by the Council make this meeting at best 3 years late and at worst a waste of time?

Answer

The Council welcomes opportunities, such as this meeting and the recent exhibitions in the Market Place, to be able to respond to public comments and concerns on the scheme proposals.

As highlighted by Mr. Hetherington, the adopted Town Centre Masterplan Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) establishes the principles for the development of Wokingham town centre up to 2026. The SPD was developed to be in line with the Wokingham Core Strategy (adopted in 2009) which identifies the opportunities for the growth and renaissance of Wokingham town centre.

The SPD identifies the opportunity for the development of the Elms Field area for retail, residential uses, enhanced open space and community and cultural facilities. This opportunity was identified through significant public consultation and input from local residents and businesses during the preparation of the SPD in 2009/10. In particular the planning for real workshop, the formal and informal consultations stages with their associated public exhibitions which were held to gather public opinion and to inform the content of the plan.

As required by planning law, the applications have been prepared in accordance with the principles for development established in the Core Strategy and the SPD and therefore are in line with the adopted planning policy for the town centre. Whilst the principles for development are established within the Core Strategy and SPD, the Council welcomes further comments on the specific proposals within the planning application.

However, what I would add is that contrary to some comments we have undergone an enormous amount of consultation with members of the public and stakeholders both for the planning policies and the regeneration scheme

67.49 Question

Christopher O'Donnell had asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question. The written response to this is set out below:

The Distressed Retail Property Taskforce is the latest organisation to call for an overhaul of Britain's high streets. Their most recent report clearly recognises that in the last few years, high street retailers have battled against cheaper online competition and a fall in consumer confidence amid rising pressure on household income. They have reported that town centre shops closed at a rate of 18 a day in the first half of this year (figures by the Local Data Company).

The taskforce, set up following the Portas review into the future of high streets, suggests that an 'unprecedented' scale of change and remodelling is required in our town centres. It calls for greater use of CPOs. This was being stated in the context of the taskforce Chair's statement, in the report, that high streets had changed dramatically in the past five years, due to the recession and the increased use of online shopping. There were now too many shops.

I repeat – there are too many shops. Will it become a reality that there will be more empty shops in Peach Street and that so many of the existing 1960s buildings will continue to be ugly and eventually abandoned or derelict. Why cannot we create the situation where the existing retail footprint is better used?

Answer

There has been a huge amount of research and reports on the future of the high street which have come out in the past few years and these very much support and promote the approach being taken by the Council.

The Distressed Town Centres research that you single out highlights a range of things as critical for survival of town centres. Things such as

- Recognising the importance of the Town centre as an essential part of national infrastructure and ensuring the planning strategy is there to support it
- Reducing multiple land ownerships for increased control and improved management
- Encouraging Local Authorities to invest their own money in commercial regeneration schemes
- Encouraging alternative uses for empty shops and offices.

We are glad that they listed things like these as they are exactly the things that the Council is already doing in the town centre, through things such as the Core Strategy and the adopted Masterplan Planning policies, and especially through the Town Centre Regeneration project which picks up on every point mentioned above.

The report does identify that many town centres suffer from too many shops and it is evident in many town centres where shops remain empty and tenants cannot be found for them. However this is not the situation in Wokingham where our discussion with potential tenants and our lettings agent Strutt and Parker shows that interest in the town remains high.

Wokingham has an incredibly low vacancy rate of less than 3% against a national average of over 14%. We only have a handful of empty shops and many of the existing units that are 'vacant' remain so for specific reasons, such as those which are part of buildings due to be redeveloped

Although many retailers are interested in coming to the town centre they cannot as suitable units are not available for them. Little can be done to adapt many of our existing units as they are very much part of the historic fabric of Wokingham and, in several cases, are listed buildings, and limited changes can occur.

This is why we are also demolishing the poor 1960's building at Peach Place so we can replace it with improved units which meet modern retailing needs and are also designed with greater flexibility to adapt to any future changes to retailing. The same 'future proofing' approach has been used in the design of the units at Elms Field.

We are confident that we will find the tenants to fill our units and that our proposed mix, which aims to promote more niche and independent shopping and strengthen the market offer, will help us create a town centre which attracts more footfall and offers something different from neighbours such as Bracknell and Reading.

67.50 Question

Rosemary O'Donnell had asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question. The written response to this is set out below:

As somebody who lives in the middle of Wokingham and needs, daily, to travel in and out of Wokingham by car, the traffic is already bad. Increasing the local population by many thousands will make matters significantly worse.

There is a very real danger that the increased pressure on Wokingham's infrastructure will kill the very things that made Wokingham such a desirable place to live in. I am aware of the planned estate road through the housing development alongside the London Road and the connection route from the railway station to the Reading Road. What specific plans does the Council have to improve the local infrastructure beyond these limited measures to cope with the increased traffic?

Answer

The Council has carried out extensive traffic modelling of the Borough and town centre to determine the likely impact of the proposed development across the town. As a consequence of this, significant major road schemes are proposed around the south and north of the town. These schemes are already coming forward as a part of the development sites already underway and the Council is committed to deliver these roads over the term of the current core strategy.

These new roads will reduce the need for through traffic to use the town centre. In addition to this the Council continues to look at the best steps it can take to address residents' concerns about traffic congestion. Current initiatives include investing in new roads, an improved railway station, extending and improving park and ride, better cycling and walking facilities and improved technology to increase capacity at existing junctions.

67.51 Question

David Roland had asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question. The written response to this is set out below:

To quote from BCIS on <http://www.rics.org/uk/knowledge/bcis/>

"Our data is used by consultants, and contractors to produce specific estimates for option appraisals, early cost advice, cost planning and benchmarking" This service is in the public realm and is used to give initial costing to building projects, so that different options can be considered. Why is the Council claiming that there is commercial confidentiality when this is not so?

Answer

The Council are aware of the BCIS tool and it is useful for calculating costs, especially at early stages of projects when a rough costing is required to help with decision making. However the BCIS Tool purely relates to construction costs and does not take into account any of the wider costs associated with projects like the regeneration. These include things such as procurement, consultation, professional teams and site assembly. For the costs it does calculate, such as bricks and roof tiles, it only provides an estimated figure.

Given the level of complexity and detail involved in the Regeneration project, and the stage we are now at with the planning applications being submitted, it would not be appropriate for the Council to use a tool like this to assess the cost of regenerating the town.

With the Council funding the commercial elements of the scheme we need to ensure that decisions are made based upon the most accurate data available rather than simple

estimates. As such we have appointed Faithful & Gould who are leading cost consultants to advise us on the detailed costs of delivering the scheme.

At this stage the information contained within these cost plans, along with other financial information remains commercially sensitive. There are real reasons as to why we are not in a position to release this information in detail at this current time.

It is for the very need to protect the investment being made by the Council and ensure that we get the best deal for local tax payers that leads us to withhold this information.

These plans are still very much living documents and will be used actively as we move forward with a range of detailed transactions such as the appointment of the build contractors, selection of tenants and the final land negotiations.

Should these detailed figures become public knowledge then the Council and our partners will lose ability to negotiate the best deals on the project for the very people who are concerned about these investments.

As an example if you were buying a house you would not tell the vendor your absolute upper limit but would go in with an offer below this and work up to an agreed price.

However, we have made every effort to release information where we can to show the good financial benefits of this scheme for the local residents and have also been very careful to show how we are de-risking this investment through things such as the pre-let clause where we will not be building this scheme until we have secured enough guaranteed pre-let tenants to ensure the costs of the scheme can be met from scheme income rather than from taxpayers pockets.

67.52 Question

Wayne Barron had asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question. The written response to this is set out below:

The Council have said that the money generated from the sale of the land at Elms Field will be used to fund developments in other areas of the Borough. What other projects will this be funding?

Answer

Throughout the scheme the Council have been determined that the regeneration proposals must be self-funding and not rely on tax payer money to pay for the scheme.

This is why the Council has put in place a pre-let condition where work will only begin when sufficient income is secured to cover the cost of the development.

Income from rents will be used to pay the borrowing costs which fund the development and the residual income above this will be returned to the Council to fund other schemes and services. At this stage no decisions have been made as to what will be done with such income although the scope is wide and it is hoped that it will help deliver benefits across the borough as well as in Wokingham town.

Pressure has been placed on existing Council budgets with ongoing cuts to the funding we receive and the increased demands placed on services due to a rapidly changing and growing population. It is schemes such as the regeneration, which generate sources of

income for the Council which are not dependent upon our tax payers which will become increasingly critical in order to provide the level of service our local people deserve.

67.53 Question

Sarah Lawman had asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question. The written response to this is set out below:

The present plans involve the destruction of too many old and valued trees that would ultimately increase the pollution in that area and therefore make the living quality of the proposed new residences very poor. I would therefore like to ask the Council why they cannot design a much smaller development of Elms Field around the existing old trees, thereby maintaining as much of the existing green space as possible?

Answer

The proposals for Elms Field have been designed in line with the Masterplan Supplementary Planning Document and key design principles, including “placing the new Park at the heart of the scheme, retaining trees where possible” and “integrating high quality public realm with landscaping and tree planting”. In applying these principles, the design proposals have sought to utilise the most appropriate areas for development, whilst retaining the most significant and quality trees and providing a high quality green space. A smaller scale development in this area would not provide the extent of benefits brought forward by the proposals, such as increased retail provision, improved public realm and improved quality of green space.

The Council recognises that the proposals for the redevelopment of Elms Field will result in the loss of existing trees on the site. The impact of the loss of these trees has been fully assessed through arboricultural method and impact statements. These impacts have been addressed through the design proposals, resulting in a high quality living environment for new residents.

67.54 Question

Nick Percival had asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question. The written response to this is set out below:

Please can you tell us what contractual liabilities and contingent liabilities the Council has committed to so far on the Elms Field development proposal?

Answer

In regards to the regeneration project the Council has committed to the following

- Development Agreement between WBC and Wilson Bowden Developments Ltd and BDW Trading Ltd (t/a David Wilson Homes) dated July 2012 relating to the delivery of the Town Centre Regeneration Scheme including the Elms Field development proposals;
- Conditional Pre-Let Agreement between WBC and Premier Inn Hotels Ltd dated April 2013 relating to the development and subsequent letting of a new 80 bedroom Hotel on a site fronting onto Denmark Street and Wellington Road forming part of the Elms Field development proposals;
- Construction Contract between WBC and Dawnus Construction Ltd value £1.676m (start date July 2013) in respect of the refurbishment and reconstruction of the

buildings on the corner of Market Place and Rose Street forming a key part of the Town Centre Regeneration Scheme linked to the Elms Field development proposals.

67.55 Question

Christine Artus had asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question. The written response to this is set out below:

Retail patterns are changing rapidly. Recent studies have shown that internet shopping for food and drink is increasing year on year, and people are spending less time in supermarkets. It would add insult to injury to build a supermarket on Elms Field to be used to fulfil internet orders, with its attendant lorry and van arrivals and departures. The best access to the proposed supermarket is from the south where there are already Tesco and Lidl supermarkets. New residents living in Montague Park or North Wokingham have an easy drive to Bracknell and can park outside Safeway for food shopping. It would be better for Wokingham to have supermarkets in the new housing developments rather than on Elms Field

On what basis does the Council believe that having a supermarket on Elms Field will be good for the future of Wokingham and for its residents?

Answer

The Nathaniel Lichfield Study identifies the need for additional food retail floor space to support the local growth set out in the Core Strategy. The retail study takes into account the increased trend for internet shopping and has reduced the required capacity downwards accordingly and as such the amount of floor space proposed is appropriate to meet resident's needs.

At the moment there is no plan or expectation for the food store to become a hub for internet shopping but this would be for the food store, in discussion with the Council as landlord, to decide should they wish to take this approach. The designs have been tested to ensure that delivery arrivals/departures can be successfully managed within the road networks based upon numbers above those which will actually occur.

It has been asked as to why we do not locate the food store out of town. The answer to this is that we know town and high streets up and down the country are in decline and one of the key reasons for this is the increase in out of town retail parks which has drawn footfall out of our towns. So, if we truly want to regenerate our town, it is imperative that the food store be included within the town to bring footfall back into the town and help support other retailers.

Provision of another food store on the edges of town would compound the issues and draw more people away from the town centre thus speeding up the current decline of our high street.

67.56 Question

Ann Stainton had asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question. The written response to this is set out below:

Given that Elms Fields is precious to the townspeople, can WBC explain why they are flying in the face of predicted retail trends to build a supermarket which will draw custom away from the heart of the town?

I am reminded of Cllr David Lee's closing remarks to the meeting held on 22nd October - *"nothing is signed or sealed till we start ripping up our precious Elms Field"*

Answer

Far from flying in the face of predicted retail trends our regeneration proposals respond directly to the large quantity of research on the future of the high street and look to address many of the problems which have led to the decline of town centres such as Wokingham. This includes things such as the decline in footfall due to the move of shops such as food stores to out of town locations.

The Nathaniel Lichfield Study identifies the need for additional food retail floor space to support the local growth set out in the Core Strategy. The retail studies take into account the increased trend for internet shopping and have reduced the required capacity downwards accordingly and as such the amount of floor space proposed is appropriate to meet resident's needs.

The need for the additional food store is clearly established but the critical factor remains where it should be located.

Provision of another food store out of town would compound the issues and draw more people away from the town centre thus speeding up the current decline of our high street.

This is why our proposals place our new food store firmly in the heart of the town centre where it will help bring back the daily footfall required to help support a sustainable town.

67.57 Question

Will Tyler had asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question. The written response to this is set out below:

Why should we wish to be like other towns, thereby losing our advantage and uniqueness, instead of retaining what is beautiful and historic in Wokingham?

Answer

We understand Wokingham is unique and we wish to strengthen its individuality.

One of the main reasons for the Council to step in and take over the regeneration of the town from private development companies was to ensure Wokingham could continue to offer something very different from neighbours such as Bracknell and Reading.

These types of large shopping destinations are not something Wokingham could, or even should, aspire to emulate as they do not reflect the community led, market town strength of Wokingham.

The designs for the regeneration have been specifically produced to ensure we can grow the Market offer, bring back more of the daily footfall and concentrate on increasing the smaller independent and niche retail experience that will set us apart and offer a real alternative to larger towns that meets our local resident's needs.

67.58 Question

Larissa Kirby had asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question. The written response to this is set out below:

Why are we losing more green space and trees, where are the children meant to run around that is free from dogs?

Answer

Whilst acknowledging that the proposals result in the loss of trees on the site and a reduction in the quantity of open space, the new park proposed at Elms Field will be of a very high quality and in particular will provide a better, safer and more attractive area for children to play.

The management arrangements for the new park, including any exclusion areas for dogs, have yet to be decided upon and will be confirmed during implementation of the scheme, and through discussions with the Town Council whom, it is proposed, take on management of the park on a long lease following completion.

67.59 Question

Jason Smith had asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question. The written response to this is set out below:

With so many local people strongly against the plans it is difficult to see why the Councillors are forcing the development through regardless. Do any of the Councillors (or their companies) personally benefit from the development going through, monetary or otherwise, through any form of commission or payment from developers or land owners?

Answer

The primary driver for the Regeneration project remains the need to deliver the necessary infrastructure to support the significant level of local growth which will occur with the delivery of over 4,000 new homes to the edges of the town.

Failure to deliver this will accelerate the decline of the town centre which currently does not meet resident's needs.

Although we know there are many who have concerns about the scheme we also know that there are many who support the proposals and would be just as concerned should the Council fail to deliver a sustainable future for Wokingham.

Those who stand to benefit from the regeneration are local residents who will reap the advantages of an improved town centre with the right facilities and infrastructure to meet their needs. They will also benefit financially with the residual income generated by the scheme coming back to the Council to fund other schemes and services within the borough at no cost to the tax payer.

No Councillors, or their companies, stand to benefit financially from the scheme.

In line with the Council's Constitution any such interests would need to be declared throughout the process.

67.60 Question

David Leiper had asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question. The written response to this is set out below:

I understand that there are a number of key projects either in planning or approved that are required to provide capacity in our services and infrastructure to support the increase in population from the new housing to the North and South of the town;

- The Multi Year Plan
- The North relief road
- The Southern relief road
- Peach Place redevelopment

Aside from the Peach Place redevelopment, if the Elms Field development was rejected at planning and did not go ahead, which, if any of these projects would be affected and what would the impact be?

Answer

The Council's Core Strategy and adopted Supplementary Planning Documents for North and South Wokingham and Wokingham Town Centre are based upon extensive public consultation and envision the development of the town which is currently in hand through the planning process. The decision to deliver these initiatives has been long established through policy and public participation.

Peach Place is an integral part of the package to regenerate the Town Centre, we have seen private sector regeneration schemes planned but these have failed because they weren't viable. To make it viable, the value of the development has to increase and the only way to do this is to have high rise development at Peach Place or include Elms Field. The regeneration proposals for the town are to do with fulfilling a need for retail growth in the town centre. This additional retail forms part of the infrastructure supporting the wider area in the same manner as things such as the new roads.

The regeneration project does not directly impact upon the delivery of some infrastructure projects as these need to be provided regardless of whether change happens in the town centre. The regeneration project will however indirectly impact on infrastructure delivery in that it will be making S106 contributions towards the delivery of other infrastructure within the Borough and should it not occur this money will need to be found elsewhere.

However the real impact of the regeneration failing will be on the new and existing residents of Wokingham. Should the town not deliver the necessary facilities to meet residents needs it will continue to decline, with greater leakage of footfall leading to a cycle of shops closing and leaving the town. Should Wokingham cease to deliver a quality experience it is likely we will also lose our attractiveness as a location for business and investment which is critical to successfully support a Wokingham as a great place to live and even better place to do business.

67.61 Question

Gerald de la Pascua had asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question. The written response to this is set out below:

The current plans are to build on Elms Field, in order to fund the town centre redevelopment include a supermarket with underground carpark, a 5 storey hotel, additional retail, and over 150 houses/flats. This is in addition to building 9 new retail units and some more housing on the Rose Street car park all of which should generate revenue. This is a vast development compared to the size of the town centre being redeveloped. Common sense suggests that the Council is getting a really bad deal from the developers

or that much more development than is required to fund the redevelopment of the town centre is taking place. Could somebody tell us which it is please?

Answer

Our plans are directly in line with the level of development and the requirements set out in planning policy such as the Core Strategy and Town Centre Masterplan SPD.

Yes it is a significant increase, but Wokingham has failed to grow over the past decade to reflect the changing area, and is also set to grow even more.

Our plans only deliver a proportion of the retail floor space identified in the Nathaniel Litchfield retail capacity study and required by a growing Wokingham. Even beyond our proposals there is still scope for further retail growth both within the town centre and the SDLs.

One of the key factors leading the Council to step in to deliver the regeneration project ourselves, as opposed to leaving it to the private sector as originally planned, was to deliberately prevent overdevelopment within the town centre.

Should we have continued with the original approach and simply sold off the site, allowing the private schemes to be delivered Wokingham would have been looking at much denser and much more intense development than our the current proposals.

As a reminder these are the original housing numbers put forward by the private schemes

- The Peach Place private scheme proposed 142 residential units;
- Elms Field/Paddocks private schemes (three separate proposals) brought forward in the Key to the Gateway original 'sell off' approach included up to 300 homes.

That would have meant up to 442 new homes in the town centre. Our scheme delivers 157 homes across the same area as those above. That's less than 50% of the smallest private proposal for the town.

Compared to such private schemes the Council regeneration also delivers a larger area of open space with much higher level of investment in facilities such as the play area and planting, more units suitable for independent and niche retailers, architecture which references directly back to Wokingham's existing buildings rather than generic copy books, a much higher level of investment in new public spaces and the events area and a new community space to name just a few of the things we can deliver by placing as much value on social gain as financial gain.

Our approach to funding and managing the regeneration ourselves also allows us to reap the financial benefits of the development. We have been adamant the scheme must be self-funding and not rely on tax payer for funding, and in addition any residual income from the scheme will come directly back to the tax payer to fund other schemes and services for the community in the borough.

So far from getting a bad deal from a developer and being forced into development we are deliberately controlling this scheme to ensure it is the right solution for Wokingham and not the most profitable for the developer.