

# Great Langborough Residents' Association

Councillor Philip Mirfin, Executive Regeneration and Communities,  
Wokingham Borough Council

12 October 2014

Dear Councillor Mirfin

## Strategic Risks for Wokingham Town Regeneration

Wokingham Borough Council should avoid basing its regeneration plans too blindly on the conclusions of the latest NLP Retail Study. WBC needs to commission additional work to obtain reliable guidance.

Quite rightly, WBC seeks to regenerate the centre of Wokingham Town. Its ambition is to make it more effective in attracting the retail and leisure spend of both residents and non-residents – to increase its market share of local expenditure. The most recent regeneration plans were costed at nearly £100M – a major investment of public money.

The structure of retail expenditure is changing rapidly. The latest of several Retail Studies from Nathan Lichfield and Partners (NLP), dated April 2014, was published recently on the WBC web site, together with an Overview summary. On the positive side, the update uses the latest outlook for UK retail expenditure outside shops by Experian (Briefing Note 11, October 2013). This latest forecast increases the estimated percentage of non-shop purchases - or "Special Forms of Retailing: SFT". SFT includes internet shopping. The update lowers the previous forecast of demand for retail space.

**However, the NLP Retail Study still contains some significant assumptions and gaps that impact its reliability as a guide for the regeneration investment strategy.**

It uses the overall SFT forecasts for the **whole UK** to estimate the future non-shop revenue in Wokingham. It assumes that the distribution of shop and non-shop spend by Wokingham residents will be only at the same level as the average for the UK. This ignores the possibly major differences in demographics, income levels and technical savvy between Wokingham and the national averages. The main part of the population growth will be in the North and South Wokingham SDL housing developments. This could further change the factors affecting the mix of retail spend.

There is no acknowledgement of the potential effect of the major retail development in Bracknell on Wokingham's market share. Bracknell will be easily accessible by car from much of the SDL areas.

Other trends that the study mentions (but does not seem to take into account) include the following: structural trends towards fewer but larger retail stores (2.25); an increasing polarisation of activity into the larger regional and sub-regional centres (2.31); the preference of national multiples to locate in larger "higher order centres" (2.32 & 2.33). It expresses no opinion as to whether an expanded Wokingham will qualify as a "higher order centre" and how it will be affected by these trends.

Nevertheless, it recommends that Wokingham Town should provide more medium/large units for multiple retailers (2.35). Furthermore, it provides no evidence of substantial chain operator interest in establishing outlets in Wokingham. Past surveys of chain operators have indicated the opposite – perceived interest from this quarter has been very low. (Retail Study Refresh 02.2010: Appendix D.)

Confusingly, the Overview states: *"The plan is to complement Primary Regional Centres as Reading or Secondary Regional Centres such as Bracknell, Maidenhead, Windsor and Camberley by offering an alternative town centre experience based on its historic and compact qualities and its independent shops, supported by key anchors."* Presumably, these towns are "higher order centres". The "key anchor" seems less likely since the departure of Sainsbury as a potential Elms Field occupant.

**In summary, there is a lack of evidence of demand from either national multiple retailers or local independents for substantially increased retail space in Wokingham. The impact of large nearby centres seems to have been ignored. The SFT impact could well be under-called. These factors constitute a substantial risk that a "build it and they will come" plan could result in an extremely costly failure of a ratepayer investment of not far short of £100M.**

**We urge Wokingham Borough Council to seek more expert advice and better locally based data before going firm on the regeneration plan.**

Yours sincerely



David Nash, Secretary

For the Committee of Great Langborough RA

cc: Councillor Mark Ashwell, Deputy Executive Regeneration and Communities  
Councillor Anthony Pollock, Executive Member for Economic Development and Finance  
Graham Ebers, Director of Finance & Resources  
Keith McKenzie, Financial Lead Officer for the Regeneration  
Bernie Pich, Head of Town Centre Regeneration.