



Peter Must
Chairman
8 Albert Road
Wokingham
Berkshire
RG40 2AL
Tel: 0118 9781671

The Wokingham Society

Registered as a Charity (No. 274988)

Website; www.wokinghamsociety.org.uk

email: chairman@wokinghamsociety.org.uk

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[DRAFT]

Dear Sirs

ELMS FIELD CONSULTATION

I am writing on behalf of the Executive Committee of the Wokingham Society to offer this response to the consultation on plans for Elms Field.

1. General

May we first of all thank the Town Centre Regeneration Team for meeting us as a Committee to explain the thinking behind the plans and to answer our questions about them? We have found this engagement very positive and look forward to further discussions as the more detailed proposals and designs take shape. Some of our comments below have already been made to the Team in previous meetings, and may indeed have been taken on board, but we need to report them here both for the record and for the benefit of others who will be reading our submission.

Although we are anxious to address the plans as presented, we have nonetheless revisited our response to the previous planning application and, where we find our comments at that time still to be relevant, we will restate them here.

Like many other members of the local community, we have in the past been unconvinced about the need to build on Elms Field, and would ideally like to see as little development as possible, with the maximum amount of green open space being retained and indeed enhanced. However, we recognise the need to engage positively and, we hope, fruitfully with the plans now emerging.

2. Overview of all proposed town centre developments

We would urge that, as a matter of urgency, the Team seek a way of presenting to the local community how these plans fit into all other existing and emerging proposals for regenerating the town centre and for developing the surrounding area. These include Peach Place, Carnival Pool, the Market Place, the North and South Wokingham Strategic Development Locations (including the two Distributor Roads) and all other roads, car parks and other open spaces (ie the Public Realm). This should also include an indicative timetable for any future consultations, planning applications, and commencement and completion of construction, together with intentions for the local infrastructure, especially roads, and the likely effect of such works during the relevant periods.

3. Retail development

We will comment below about specific buildings but want to express some concern about the potential overcrowding of that part of the site which will contain the hotel, food store, cinema and shops. These will all be quite large buildings and we see a risk of them being over-dominant in their heritage setting adjacent to Denmark Street and to the park. Given that they will together represent the southern gateway to the town, it is important that they look like a part of our market town rather than a retail park. Both size and sympathetic design will be a vital factor in achieving integration into the locality.

4. The hotel

We are pleased that the hotel will now be side on to Wellington Road and that, despite its omission from the brochure, there will be an area of green landscaping between it and Wellington Road to avoid overshadowing the road. We understand that a restaurant is likely to be provided on the north side of the hotel and assume this will be lower than the other nearby buildings and thus not adding to the sense of oppressive mass.

Since this building will be what travellers from the south first encounter, it really needs to be a statement about Wokingham and its heritage and we are glad to note that the design of the building will be for the developers and not the hotel company to determine.

5. Food store and residences

We are not persuaded of the need for a food store on this site, given the difficulties of access and the danger of it attracting short visits to use the store and not go elsewhere. There are opportunities for smaller food outlets in the various parts of the North and South Wokingham SDLs and these might be a better way of serving the local community. Nonetheless, it is to be welcomed that the food store will be smaller than previously intended (although some still require persuasion that there is any such need in this location) and this will aid design that suits the environment. Given continuing changes in the pattern of food shopping, the sustainability and appropriateness of the chosen food company will be important, as will the capacity of the building to vary its use should this location not work for food retailing, given that in the end this will be determined by market forces and shopping choices. We gather that it is intended to set a limit on the amount of non-food space in the store and this would probably be welcomed by other local retailers.

It is encouraging to note the intention to adjoin town houses to this building fronting Denmark Street. We believe that it is essential to design these houses to fit into the surrounding street scene. The flats above the food store should enjoy looking out onto either the street or the park.

Can thought be given to how hand deliveries can be made to the front doors (or to communal drop-off points) of the first-floor apartments if they are otherwise to be gated?

6. Cinema and retail units

We very much applaud the idea of a boutique cinema, this being identified as a strong preference in a recent survey of desired leisure provision. We understand that any likely provider may well want a café as part of the offering and this seems entirely appropriate.

We are cautious in suggesting specific types of shops, given that in the end the market decides what will work, as we say in Section 5 above.. We do hope, however, that the rental terms will be affordable to local and niche outlets and not just to national chains. If we had any preferences, we would like to see more clothes stores for men, women and children, both here and in the Peach Place/Peach Street redevelopment.

We do hope that the opportunity is taken (through the Town Team?) of persuading the retailers to have their own forum where they can pool ideas for attracting customers, not only through sales events but also by helping to encourage activities within the park and in the rest of the town.

7. Residential area

The reduction in housing is welcome, even though some still query the need for as many as 80 dwellings in order to provide a measure of surveillance over the park. The design of these residences is important, given that they will fringe the green space of the park and will need to be seen as belonging to that environment, rather than mirroring the disappointing appearance of the dwellings on the Pavilions across the road. Height and mass will be a particular concern.

We would also reiterate the need to avoid encroachment on Nos 9 and 14 Albert Road, which are directly adjacent to the site boundary. The previous design dominated and overlooked the gardens of both properties and infringed the minimum distance in the *Borough Design Guide*. We trust that the new layouts will respect the needs of these immediate neighbours.

8. Parking

We are glad that the car parks will now be at surface level only. The one alongside the retail units will need to be carefully and attractively screened so that it does not detract from the adjacent green space or look mundane from Wellington Road. Laying mesh under grass in the parking area might provide both an attractive and a durable surface. Indeed, this solution might be used with advantage in other areas which will be heavily used. We understand that the spaces here will be used primarily by visitors to the park and the retail facilities and not by hotel guests, who will be directed to other car parks, including the multi-storey car park on the carnival Pool site.

The retention of part of the Paddocks car park is likely to be beneficial, especially if it is accessible to those coming from the north or the west. It would be unfortunate if these spaces were dedicated solely to council employees.

In theory, an enhancement of the existing multi-storey Elms Field Car Park should provide further usable parking spaces, but it is at present under-utilised and it is thus highly desirable that the Council takes such steps as it can to secure refurbishment to make the car park attractive to users. If this proves impossible to deliver, and the car park cannot pay its way whoever owns it, it might be useful to think how that space could best be used (including surface level parking).

We note and are glad that that provision has been made for parking spaces for those in the flats above the retail units, including additional land acquired from behind the former Dom Beni's restaurant.

9. New Elms Road

The less convoluted route taken by the current design for the new Elms Road will avoid it winding through the housing area, but care will be needed to ensure that means for speed restrictions are applied, as had been proposed with the earlier design. The Transport Assessment for that application stated that the road will attract ‘some vehicular activity but is intended to become a main town centre pedestrian and cycle route’. It is therefore important that it is primarily designed to achieve that objective and to deter its use as a ‘rat run’. It would not help to label it as a ‘Link Road’ as is still sometimes the case, because this implies the same through-route purpose as the Station Link Road. ‘Elms Road or, if necessary, ‘New Elms Road’ will suffice.

The means of access and egress at the northern end were not fully determined last time and they need careful thought since they will be adding to a tight road system at that point.

10. Town Park

We have been told that the area now being allocated for green open space to form the Town Park represents about three-quarters of all current green space, or approximately 100% of the green space to the west of the existing Elms Road. If so this is to be welcomed, as is the intention that this area should be managed by the Town Council.

(a) Plants

This re-design will enable the retention of many more trees than originally intended, although we recognised that those on the planned footprint of the retail units will have to be removed. We would very much appreciate an indicative replanting strategy, to go with new plantings around the new buildings in the east and the west of the site. Thought should be given to both the height and longevity of new trees, and to the most suitable kind shrubs that will circle and infill the Town Park.

For the record, we have seen, and very much support, the submission from the Wokingham District Veteran Tree Association in respect of both tree retention and tree replacement.

Flower and shrub beds would be attractive in theory, but only if proper maintenance can be guaranteed. It might be best not to be over-ambitious initially and to take a low-maintenance approach to see whether planting schemes of greater complexity could be sustained.

(b) Events

Last time we said ‘The reduction in size of the open space at Elms Field means that, when events are held on the designated area, the space left for other recreational activities becomes very squeezed’. The area is now larger but we remain concerned that some events might impinge unduly on the area left for other recreational activities and urge that some limit be defined for the space allocated to events.

(c) Play

The most important views on provision for play in the park should be from children and we hope every method to consult them has been explored. The little opportunity we have had to hear such

opinions has produced a strong demand from younger children for their play facilities to be secured against use by older children, who then deny them access to the equipment expressly designed for them.

(d) Open space

May we repeat from last time our plea for the town park to be as undivided as possible, with path being provided only where desire-lines indicate or transit requires? The concept of providing segmented areas or ‘rooms’ was rejected by respondents last time and, indeed in earlier consultations and we do hope these voices will be heard in the new design.

Given the number of nearby café outlets, including the one planned for the cinema, we see no need for a cafe or refreshment kiosk in the Park itself, or for a bandstand, which would otherwise interrupt the openness of the space.

In our earlier submission we responded to the proposal in the application that that the passive realm (the open space not otherwise allocated) could be used for walkers and joggers, by asking ‘why not provide some circuit-style exercise equipment at the perimeter of the park for health and well-being’?

This is still a suggestion we offer.

(e) Preservation of open space at Elms Field

This is what we said last time, and still wish to put forward: “When we asked, in response to the Masterplan, that some measure be imposed to preserve the long-term future of the open space to be provided when Elms Field is developed, we were told that this issue would be addressed in the Managing Development Delivery Development Plan Document. It was not, and the only discussion about future preservation was at a meeting of the Borough Council Executive which agreed that this space should be managed by Wokingham Town Council under an initial contract for a probable term of seven years. Given the volume of concern expressed about the loss of open space at Elms Field, we feel strongly that a long-term covenant or other order should be created to preserve the open space for say 50 years”.

The National Trust has just announced a plan to fund the preservation of parks and other open spaces and we hope that the Council will investigate this opportunity as soon as possible.

11. Access and accessibility

At present Elms Field is not visible from either Broad Street or Denmark Street. There needs to be greater permeability from both streets, and especially through Erfstadt Court and the Plaza, both of which, will require refurbishment and being made part of the experience of transition to and from Denmark Street if the plans for Elms Field are to be fully delivered. Signage is also important and we hope that there will be a chance to discuss how best to represent our town’s heritage through appropriate finger-posts and signs.

The route from the Station to the town into and through Elms Field is currently quite scruffy along the first stretch of Wellington Road. Last time, despite a walking analysis being reported in the application, we were told that this part of Wellington Road was not included in the plans. This makes no sense and we urge that every attempt be made to render this pedestrian journey both safer and tidier in order to attract custom to the Park and the town.

Last time we reported the following: “It was written in to the Section 106 agreement between Taylor Wimpey and the Borough Council in respect of the Pavilions development on Wellington Road, that part of the money was to be used to provide a signalised crossing in the vicinity of the new housing. This crossing was to have been installed by Taylor Wimpey in the original draft agreement with the Council, but this was changed to Section 106 at appeal and we were told that implementation would be delayed until plans for Elms Field had been determined. We are told by the Highways Department that a signalised crossing will be installed but does not form part of the application. We are perplexed as to why it does not”. We urge that the provision and location of a signalised crossing on Wellington Road should be included in the current proposals.

There needs to be a signalised crossing between Carnival Pool and Elms Field, and some form of safe crossing across Denmark Street between Langborough Road and the Carnival Pool roundabout.

The road systems down Denmark Street, around the Carnival Pool roundabout and along Wellington Road, and the various access points into Elms Field and the Carnival Pool leisure hub, with particular regard to traffic volumes from the new SDR and the redesigned roundabout on Finchampstead Road, pose severe problems of design and traffic management and the proposed solutions need to be an early part of the detailed plans that are to follow.

12. Conclusion

We thank you for the opportunity to express these ideas and look forward to discussing the emerging plans and designs with the Town Centre Regeneration team.

Yours sincerely

Regeneration



Peter Must
Chairman

RG1 4SA

FREEPOST RSKJ-KRAH-YJRZ
Wokingham Town Centre

c/o Instinctif Partners
4th Floor, Dukesbridge Chambers
Duke Street
Reading