

An Open Meeting on the Regeneration of Wokingham Town Centre held in Wokingham Town Hall on Wednesday June 15 2016

Members of the Wokingham Society and local residents gathered in the Town Hall to listen to a presentation by members of the Wokingham Town Centre Regeneration Team and representatives of Wokingham Town Council. On behalf of the Town Council Mayor Gwynneth Hewetson welcomed the visitors and speakers to what she hoped would be an informative and mutually beneficial occasion and she introduced the first speaker, Borough Councillor Mark Ashwell, Borough Council Executive Member for Planning and Regeneration.

The Overall Picture

Councillor Ashwell began by thanking the Society for inviting him and his colleagues to talk about the regeneration plans and he described the Society as a key partner and a highly-valued 'critical friend'. He said the Society had been helping to shape the development and he hoped it would continue to work with the Regeneration Team by acting as an 'early warning system.' He believed that Wokingham needed to adapt to survive, not least because of the extra 4,00 houses which were being built in stages, some within a mile of the Town Centre. Changes in shopping habits and the different ways in which town centres were developing meant that it was essential that both Wokingham Councils should aim to create facilities suitable for an 18 hour economy.

Since Wokingham Borough Council had bought back the town centre from developers, major changes had been brought about. There were currently fewer empty units and vacancies in the town centre compared to other towns and there were already bidding wars for the units which were to be part of the redevelopment sites. *Premier Inn*, *Everyman Cinemas* and *Superbowl* had already signed contracts and *Aldi* were deep in discussion about acquiring a prime site. Discussions were being held with 10 other businesses and there had been numerous enquiries about leases for retail units. The Team was aiming for 50% pre-lettings to national companies and 50% to local independent niche businesses. Confidence, he said, was growing and the era of procrastination was over. Co-ordination had been improved by the establishment of a Co-ordination Board involving Borough and Town Councils, the Police and other organizations.

Timing and Planning

Councillor Ashwell then handed over to Bernie Pich, the Borough Council's Officer responsible for Regeneration. Mr Pich started by saying that Balfour Beatty had been appointed as the developers for the Carnival pool site. He noted that the building of the new multi-storey car park was already underway and the aim was to complete it by March 2017. It would be fully operational by April 2017 with *Superbowl* operating from its new premises in the Car Park. Phase 2, the extension of the Swimming Pool, would start in April 2019, following the start of work on Elms Field and Peach Place, for which there were currently 50 conditions to discharge. They were going to tender in the week beginning June 20th with a view to expecting returns by August 2016 and making a decision by November 2016. Work would start on Peach Place on January 9th 2017 and building would take 22 months.

The Market Place Refurbishment

The next topic was introduced by Jan Nowecki, Clerk to the Town Council, who spoke about the refurbishment of the Market Place. She pointed out that the Council had been working with Access Groups in order to ensure that the Market Place would be an all-inclusive key space at the heart of the town. There had been significant problems caused by the complexity of the services under the surface of the Market Place and a number of issues had been encountered affecting the need to provide a level surface throughout the area. However, careful research and planning involving 80 drawings had ensured that, following enabling and archaeological work, the refurbishment could start in January 2017 with a completion date in late March 2017. The paved area would be of natural stone and there would be appropriately-sized trees at different places in the area. There would be minimal clutter and good facilities for the market traders with a better balance between pedestrians and traffic. The first phase of uplifting the Town Hall would be achieved at the 1st floor level initially.

Councillor Hewetson then explained that she wished to ensure that public art would be included in the refurbishment through the provision of illustrated mosaics in the paving stones at strategic points in the development with designs reflecting the town's history. A local artist had made some preliminary designs and they were on display in the Annex next to the main Hall, together with details of the designs and materials to be used for the overall Regeneration project.

Elms Field

Bernie Pich then moved onto the subject of Elms Field and the first point he made was that there would be a meeting in the near future about the Park and the Play Area, to which stakeholders would be invited. The development of the Field would be in four stages covering four different areas. The tendering process would start in August 2016 with developers being appointed in February-March 2017 ready for a start to the work in May 2017. The cost of the building would be according to what the market projected. The Council would hold all rental income from retail lettings and a venture partner would fund the residential buildings. He provided an appraisal of the costing of all the schemes. He concluded by saying that 100% of income would be reinvested into the community and the infrastructure within the town centre would be greatly improved and safeguarded. Once the work was complete residents and visitors would have a better retail experience with an improved variety of choice.

Questions

There were many questions and observations from the audience notably about:

- Parking on Elms Field in the residential areas and outside the food store; Bernie Pich offered to talk to individuals after the meeting and also by appointment later.
- The absence of affordable housing: several members of the audience expressed dissatisfaction with the answers they received on the subject; again the team agreed to discuss the issue later.
- The length of the lease to the Town Council of Elms Field; a 50 year lease was sought.
- The absence in the plans of a roundabout at the corner of Langborough Road and Denmark Street; the team would look at the situation.
- Traffic flow in Rose Street
- Public toilets: there would be toilets in Peach Place and on Elms Field.

Conclusion

Peter Must thanked the speakers for providing a very interesting and informative presentation and the audience responded very positively. Everybody was invited to take refreshments and to view the exhibition. All members of the Regeneration Team agreed to answer questions on an individual basis and much animated discussion ensued. Although some questions remained unanswered and not everybody agreed with some of the

issues raised, it was clear that the evening had been a success and the Society was pleased that it would continue to be involved in the programme in future.