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To Development Control

RESPONSE TO PLANNING APPLICATION No 172012: CARNIVAL PHASE 2

I am submitting this response on behalf of the Executive Committee of the Wokingham Society.

1. General

It is regrettable that the main documents contain so many simple errors in respect of place names, contradictions between texts and failure to identify developments that have already taken place. These mistakes have been highlighted in separate submissions by two of our members, Keith Malvern and Trevor Sleet, so we will not repeat them here, but just observe that the applicants would have given their material greater credibility had they taken the trouble to proof read it more thoroughly.

Overall we welcome the provision of swimming facilities, a multi-functional sports hall, health and fitness studies, rooms for community use, the café and space for exhibitions and other community purposes, and the enhanced visibility from Wellington Road. We have comments to make on some of these, and particular observations about the proposed Library relocation.

We would take issue with the claim that this development will promote growth of the town centre. The more tenable position is that taken by the previous Executive Member for the Environment, who announced that the combination of the Elms Field and Carnival developments would shift the town's centre of gravity to the south. This clearly means that these initiatives have abandoned the original justification that they will help to save the town centre by increasing footfall.

2. The site

We have commented in the past that the site seemed to be overcrowded and this impression is now exacerbated by the inclusion of a new Library. In our opinion this results in lack of balance between built form and open space, including green areas. A better equilibrium could be achieved by leaving out the Library building entirely and reducing the number of apartments on the northern side of the site. While the Design and Access Guide describes the individual contributions of proposed buildings and landscapes, it does not address the need for harmony between the two, and this is a major omission in the planning process.

3. Design

We are disappointed in the lack of ambition in the designs for the major buildings. They offer buildings of an uninspiringly rectangular form that one associates with business parks and trading estates, and miss the opportunity for providing interesting and perhaps striking shapes. Is there never a desire within the Council and by the architects to provide designs that will draw the attention and

admiration of the architectural community and press, and the pride of the local community in a development that has high aesthetic appeal?

4. Library

We remain unconvinced about the need to relocate the Library from its current position. The process for seeking the views of the local community was poorly planned and delivered, with little publicity for the drop-in session and virtually none in the media. No effective regard to the volume of opposition was paid in the business and social case made to the Executive Member following this brief period of engagement and the level of support could not therefore be properly gauged.

The arguments against this move are: a perfectly serviceable existing facility; a more central current location; better access for local people, especially those with restricted mobility; vertical separation between the lending library/café and the reference and study section, easily negotiated by a lift for those who need it; and the imbalance created by adding to an already congested site.

5. Swimming pools

The Regeneration Team originally argued against the need to provide a competition pool on the basis that this would be built at Arborfield Garrison. It transpires that the Arborfield pool will be no different from that proposed for the Carnival site and thus an opportunity will be lost to provide enhanced facilities as opposed to mere replacement. Other local Boroughs can do it, so why not here?

6. Sports Centre

We remain concerned about the loss of sports facilities when the multi-functional area is used for productions or community events. This could have been easily overcome by providing two more courts in place of the area proposed for the Library (but also liberating the remaining space for incorporation into the public realm).

7. Exhibition space

We have always welcomed the principle of devoting space, wherever located within the site, to exhibition and displays. Our support for a small permanent display about Wokingham's heritage was in response to this being suggested by the then Executive Member for Regeneration at a Stakeholders' Meeting. We therefore find the response in the Statement of Community Involvement that "it is expected that [the spaces] will be used by a range of groups / bodies rather than dedicated to use by a single society subject matter" a misrepresentation and a misunderstanding of what we wrote. Any such display would be the product of a number of organisations, including the Town Council, working together.

8. Residential

We are saddened to note that the reason given for the inclusion of so many apartments on this site is to achieve an income revue that will pay for the rest of the development. This has nothing to do with either meeting local housing needs (and indeed has given rise to a proposal for exemption from providing affordable housing on the grounds of alternative advantages); or balancing built and open space on the site.

We have supported the case for some residential provision to allow surveillance of the other parts of the development, but we would argue that this could be achieved with fewer apartments, and this in

turn would avoid the daunting length of what is essentially one building with long and cell-like corridors at each level.

Again, the design is minimal and could be of far greater architectural interest if less housing were to be provided. As they stand, the apartments offer colours and materials that conflict with, rather than complement, the leisure centre. A redesign of both could achieve much greater visual coherence across the site.

9. Landscaping

Compared with the earlier outline plan for this site, there is much less provision for open and green space. We appreciate the need to remove the trees and shrubs that block the view from Wellington Road, but the green triangle of space adjacent to the carnival roundabout has been lost, and with it an opportunity to retain or provide some landscaping which would mirror Carnival Corner on the opposite side of Finchampstead Road. This is a result of the overcrowding we refer to above and, to that extent, there is little that we can recommend by way of amelioration with the design of the site as it is.

Little mention is made, however, of the footpath on the north-west side which leads from Wellington Road to the railway line. The view taken in both the Design and Access Statement and the Environmental Statement is that the 'trees' along this boundary will be retained, but there is no mention of any further landscaping effort. This path is in reality bordered for much of its length by scrub and weeds, with only the section from Wellington Road to the side entrance to the present bowling alley having been planted with shrubs and flowers by the Horticultural Society. Since this footpath is now to be retained, it really should be the applicants' responsibility both to landscape the whole length of it and to maintain it thereafter. Failure to do so would damage the Town Council's considerable efforts to keep Wokingham in Bloom.

10. Roads, traffic, parking, cyclists and pedestrians

We appreciate the thought behind re-engineering Carnival roundabout, with its choice of materials to stress the extent of pedestrian presence and use in that vicinity, and the provision for greater visibility of the various entrance/exit points. We are less convinced about the traffic flow assumptions and of safety to both vehicles and pedestrians in this vicinity. We are not clear if there was agreement to our suggestion that these factors should be fully monitored in the early days after completion in order to see whether the assumptions of traffic volume and safety are borne out. We would repeat this request with a view to its inclusion in the Conditions of any approval.

The parking arrangements for the apartments are worrying, with over half of the residences being allocated spaces in the multi-storey car park. Presumably these will need to be on the ground floor in order to provide some measure of equality with those allocated spaces behind the apartments, but in the process reducing parking numbers in the MSCP both overall and for those who have reasons to seek parking at ground level (parents with toddlers; those with walking difficulties).

The access and egress arrangements, and the parking provision, for Blue Badge holders have already necessitated the fire door near the pool being turned into a regular door for their use. The configuration of their parking spaces still requires such users to cross main vehicle lanes in the MSCP. Thought should be given to reconfiguring these arrangements, and also to providing external disabled user bays near both the apartments and the leisure centre. And of course reducing the number of apartments would avoid the need for spaces being allocated in the MSCP.

We fear that the reconfigured Carnival roundabout and the more frequent turnings off Wellington Road will present a hazard to cyclists and we wonder if there is any possibility of providing safer facilities in that vicinity. We suggest that consideration be given to a split cycle- and path-way at the Finchampstead Road approach to Carnival Roundabout, then carrying on until the end of the Phase 2 development on the south side of Wellington Road. On the north side of Wellington Road could there be a split path from the mini-roundabout to the Carnival Roundabout?

While provision has been made for courtesy crossings at the various junctions on the roundabout this does not address the need for a formal crossing at the point that Langborough Road meets Denmark Street. It is not reasonable to expect pedestrians to make their way down to the roundabout in order to get from the south side of Langborough road to the west side of Denmark Street.

Yours sincerely



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