

RESPONSE TO ELMS FIELD CONSULTATION- JANUARY 2016

Dear Sir/Madam

ELMS FIELD PLANNING APPLICATION: No 153125

Our committee is impressed by the level of attention to the detail of the designs for Elms field and that the council had clearly taken many of the community's comments and concerns into consideration in drawing up these plans.

We support the Council's Vision Statement and Key Principles as stated on p.12 para 2.2.1 and 2.2.2 though reiterate our view that we are disappointed it cannot be developed as a town park in its own right.

1.0. OVERALL VIEW

In general terms we welcome the changes in the plans with the limitation in the development allowing for a larger green space, a smaller supermarket and the inclusion of a cinema.

Also that while we feel it should be a more attractive building; the hotel is better placed and should present a landmark for the entry from the south.

Our major concerns however relate to

- the general size of all the buildings and particularly the residences to the west and north of the park;
- the transport issues around Elms walk where safety should dictate a pedestrian only zone; and
- the general blandness of the appearances which are inconsistent with the rest of Wokingham.

We also deplore the fact that no affordable housing is planned in this development.

We note that facilities for events on the field in terms of electricity and water do not seem to meet expectations and that there are no obvious toilet facilities.

We also feel there should be public art in and around the town centre.

(The following comments and references refer to the Design & Access Statement and other statements where identified)

2.0. DESIGN PRINCIPLES

The Design & Access Statement refers repeatedly to the reviews carried out relating to the appearance of the buildings around Wokingham town centre and the town

scape. Unfortunately these do not seem to have been applied to the retail and hotel sector nor do we feel there is sufficient variation in the residential sector.

2.1 Use of materials

The Material Palette is referred to on p.99 7.8.2 and p.137 para 7.11

Despite the options in the illustration, most of the retail and residential buildings contain large and bland expanses of red brick. More use should be made of different coloured bricks.

This is a feature of many buildings in Wokingham and nearby towns, including the glorious Wokingham Town hall, as illustrated by these examples (6 Langborough Road and 11-15 Fairview Road): -



2.2. Residential

Further to comments about appearance we feel that the residential units particularly on the west side of the park, which are 4 storeys, are too high. They impact adversely on the views around the park and from surrounding residences.

This adds to the intimidating look surrounding the park. We feel that they should not exceed 3 storeys to tie into the town buildings although we appreciate this will make them less attractive financially.

The residential units on top of the commercial units are also high, particularly at the entrance to Elms Walk (opposite Langborough Road).

2.3. Hotel/landmark building

We feel that the planned hotel lacks architectural distinction and needs to be more interesting if it is to be a 'landmark'. Use of varied materials and window and roof shapes as per the town might be better.

Colburn house in Denmark street or a more striking modern building, could be seen as good alternatives.

2.4. Commercial/retail

While the general effect is good the frontages are felt to be uninteresting with glass fronts up to the building line. Some variety should be included eg. Setting back windows and varying entrances, recessed or otherwise. It would also be beneficial to have glass covers over the walkways.

The big problem here is height. With residential accommodation being placed on top of the units, plus the high gable, these buildings are too tall for the park not to mention the houses in Denmark Street and will create an intimidating atmosphere. Is it possible to lose a storey?

At the corner of Elms Walk and Denmark Street there is a single shop between the residential elements which also means a tall building and while the architects may be trying to create an entrance to a shopping area we feel it could be better to keep this corner residential and move the shop further in.

Alternatively that corner building could become a real statement piece which is not the current case – it looks more like a fire station!

Recommendation

We would like further consideration be given to the general appearance of the retail areas and a shift toward the market town feel of the rest of Wokingham town centre.

2.5. Sustainability

“Solar orientation” and opportunities for “active and passive solar tools” are referred to in p.45 para 5.3.5 .

Disappointingly, these are specified only for the hotel roof (p.87 para 7.6.6).

It would seem sensible to try to provide solar panels for the supermarket which is also energy hungry and we wondered why this was not included. The flat roof could easily be used for this purpose but the panels would need disguising as is the case for the hotel.

Alternatively the supermarket could have a green roof as per Waitrose in Bracknell.

We note that toilet facilities are to be water use ‘efficient’, however there is no mention of the possibility of collecting rainwater around the site whether to feed toilets or to be used watering the plants in the park or on residential courtyards.

Recommendation

We are pleased to see use of sustainable energy source and water management on the park but feel this should be more extensive.

3.0. RETAIL PROVISION

Generally the retail provision appears sensible.

3.1 Retail strategy

The Planning Statement (a separate document) quotes the most recent Retail Study.

We agree that it supports a need for more Comparison Shopping capacity in Wokingham. However, the premises must be occupied by the businesses that meet the needs of the town.

Paragraph 5.17 of the Planning Statement refers to the letting strategy research by Strutt & Parker. Also p.79 para 7.4.4 says: "*Likely tenants include well-known high street names, with particular smaller spaces identified as being suitable for smaller independent retailers.*"

The success of the Comparison retail provisions in the plan will be judged as follows: -

- Does the amount and timing of rental revenue contribute the income necessary?
- Do the retail outlets and shopping experience meet sufficiently the desires of residents in Wokingham and the desired catchment area?

3.2. Inclusions

We would like to see small individual shops encouraged in this area. Achieving this will depend on the effectiveness of the Letting Strategy.

There has also to be a concern about the increase and need for more food and drink outlets in competition with retail given the number we already have.

#Comment

We have highlighted this issue to the Regeneration team and have expressed our wish to review this part of the plan, which does not appear in the list of documents. We await their response.

4.0. ELMS FIELD/PARK

The revised park while sadly 50% less green space than one would like, is a big improvement on the original layout.

4.1 The play area

This is in a better position though it seems to have reduced the proposed 'amphitheatre' to an area which may not be fit for purpose.

The play area itself will need to be divided to accommodate the different age groups. Safeguarding issues would suggest that the area, at least for young children will need to be fenced to prevent children wandering away or more importantly being enticed away.

This is also essential to avoid fouling by dogs and the inherent risk of infection.

Appropriate bins will need to be available to ensure dog owners collect faeces.

4.2 power and water

The council has lauded the scheme to make Elms field better for events but there appears to be only one power 'pillar' and no mention of water points. How does this meet the needs of all those using the site?

The swale and flower beds seem useful ways of avoiding water logged areas but there is no strategy for collecting and reusing rain water.

4.3 alternative recreation areas

The reduction in area is supposedly mitigated by other open park areas but these apart from Langborough Rec can hardly be said to be nearby.

That at Dinton pastures is now also compromised by the increased car park charge!

4.4 lighting

The environmental statement makes reference to the types of lighting which is to be subdued and downwards and using energy efficient bulbs, which is good in terms of light pollution and energy use.

4.5. Toilet Facilities – lack of

There are no toilet facilities mentioned in the plan. This must be rectified.

Recommendations

The play area especially for younger children should be fenced off.

Toilet facilities need to be provided.

Methods for Rain water collection and use should be considered.

5.0 TRANSPORT ISSUES

The new road layout may work well but there has to be concern about the volume of traffic using these roads and the risk that Elm's road will become a rat run. Of more concern are the safety issues for pedestrians.

We have identified a number of issues below.

5.1 Elms Link Road and Shute end junction

Transport Assessment:

Section 8.3 forecasts light volumes for the Elms Link Road. However, this will provide an attractive cut through for traffic approaching the town from Finchampstead Road intending to join London Road. Until the Southern Distributor Road is open, this assumption may be optimistic.

Also Section 3.1.1 para 66 (part) p.12 states

“The Shute End junction should be retained in its existing form i.e. a priority junction to reduce the attractiveness of the route for daily through movements;”

But if traffic is allowed to exit in both directions from Shute end this is likely to impact on the traffic flow and safety of pedestrians.

Recommendation

We recommend a review of the traffic forecasts and junction turning options.

5.2 Denmark Street / Langborough Road Junction

Transport Assessment:

p.56 and onwards

The ARCADY analysis shows that current traffic volumes are overloading this junction now and will also do so in 2019 and in 2026.

However, the forecast is that the Elms Field proposal will have little effect on the volumes and overload. This seems odd given the proposed access point to the multiuse block for delivery and collection vehicles and cars parking within it.

Comment

We have difficulty accepting this prediction and have concerns about the reality of this situation and issues regarding pedestrian safety as below

5.3. Pedestrian Facilities and Safety

The design and access statement refers to good pedestrian routes in the park area as illustrated on p.111, and pp.184,185 paras 8.3.2,8.3.3.

p.112 para 7.8.8 states that

“The Langborough Road and Denmark Street junction is an important pedestrian entrance into the scheme”.

This is undoubtedly true and is compromised by its proposed use also as access for GHVs and residential parking in the multiuse block to the north as noted in the Transport Assessment

Cf.p.18 para 104 and p.14 para 75

and particularly

p.16 3.5.3.1 paras 92 (part) 94/95

“The area has been designed to accommodate a 16.5m articulated vehicle as a worst case.

94. It is anticipated that there would be approximately two or three deliveries per week for units 10 to 15. It is expected that units 7, 8 and 9 only, would have one delivery per day.

*95. Deliveries to the retail units would be managed, and **where possible** planned to be outside the busiest times.”*

Comment

We feel very strongly that this is a major safety hazard.

Large vehicles will be driving into and reversing around what is a major pedestrian route to the park and down to the station. Someone WILL get hurt.

Also, lorries turning into Elms walk will of necessity block traffic in Denmark street. This may be less of an issue if they come from the South but that would also cause issues at the carnival pool roundabout as vehicles go down and come back up.

5.4 The Road Safety Audit identifies many issues including under;-

- Problem 4

Location – Denmark St., 4-arm mini-roundabout

Summary: Hazard to pedestrians

The existing roundabout and modifications appear to lack safety provision for pedestrians.

The developer's recommendations include a footway of minimum 2m width along the west side of Denmark Street and dropped kerbs and tactile paving across the access to the site (4th arm of the mini-roundabout). The uncontrolled crossing point would be located behind the give way line on the site access.

The pedestrian splitter island on Denmark Street will also be enlarged as this will be on a pedestrian desire line to the development.

comment

It is currently difficult especially for those with mobility issues to cross safely at this roundabout. There seems to be no provision to allow for this eg with pedestrian crossing other than with markings on the road. These at the least should be raised to slow the traffic.

Recommendation

We do not feel these measures are sufficient. They should be reviewed and include raised sections on the road and a controlled crossing, at the least of a zebra style.

5.5. Pavement widths / Wellington road

The transport assessment also refers to pavement widths in Denmark Street but does not appear to apply the same to Wellington road. (p.12 para 66 last sentence as part of the Elms Link Road description)

This minimum should apply to the whole of Wellington Road.

We are also concerned that the drop off points for the hotel are on both sides of Wellington Road at a busy roundabout

#Recommendation

There should be appropriate pavements on Wellington road and consideration given to re-siting the hotel drop off points.

OVERALL COMMENT ON TRANSPORT.

We have serious concerns about all of these issues including the lack of a specific pedestrian crossing around the Denmark St/Langborough Rd roundabout. The "where possible" HGV arrivals as quoted in the statement, will be difficult / if not impossible to manage.

We recommend a redesign to avoid long vehicles driving in Denmark Street.

Recommendation

The council should consider redesigning this area eg. so that all vehicular access is from the north side of the multiuse block even if that means losing some buildings on the north side.

6.0 Wokingham society review

We note the review by the WS and support the points they have made including those relating to parking which we have not included in our response.

However, we note that the council is increasing parking charges and that there is a real need to consider whether these and those at Dinton pastures are appropriate when the intention is to attract people into town facilities.

Pat Smith
Chairperson

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