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27 January 2016

Dear Sir/Madam

ELMS FIELD PLANNING APPLICATION: No 153125

I am writing on behalf of the Executive Committee of the Wokingham Society in response to the planning application for the development of Elms Field and The Paddocks Car Park.

1. General

1.1 We thank the Town Centre Regeneration Team for meeting us as part of a stakeholders' group and as a Committee to present the emerging plans for Elms Field. We found these engagements very helpful in taking the dialogue forward.

1.2 Discussing the plans is not, however, the same as endorsing them, and we find ourselves disappointed with the outcome in a number of ways.

1.3 **Our prime objection is to the unrelenting height of most of the buildings.** This does scant service to a town which celebrates its eclectic mix of architecture and which rejoices overall in its horizontal landscape, while these plans conversely propose an overwhelmingly vertical form.

1.4 The design of the buildings is claimed (not necessarily with justification) to capture the vernacular style of nearby examples, but the size of the intended properties is referenced against the tallest structures. Buildings of four or five stories will tower over most other local properties and the element of alleged sympathetic design is made a parody in etiolated structures which in no way represent the heritage of the town, nor do they offer a proud blueprint for the future of Wokingham.

1.5 We shall return to this issue in the specific comments which follow, but will also take the opportunity of saying what aspects we welcome.

2. The Hotel

2.1 Although we are, in principle, receptive to a new hotel at the Elms Field site we believe that the design has to be in keeping with the Town's heritage, particularly at the southern access to the town on a busy highway. The *Design and Access Statement* (DAS) echoes the *Town Centre Masterplan* by calling this an "important gateway" (the "Southern Gateway").

2.2 As such it is essential that the hotel building and its environs accord with the overall landscape of Wokingham's heritage as a market town. The design presented does not sympathise with this definition, critical to the vista the town needs at this key junction.

Other than the brick colour, we can see no connection at all between the hotel design and the contextual features supposedly used in the elevational design, eg by using, gables, pitched roofs etc.

2.3 Section 7.2.1 of the DAS states that the Hotel design has been “guided by principles established within the streetscape analysis but with a contemporary language, providing a clear gateway whilst managing the transition into historic Wokingham.” The contemporary language is of a bland style found in many other places and, while it is clearly a gateway building, the primary design aim of “managing the transition into historic Wokingham” has clearly not been achieved.

2.4 The height of the building, at five stories, will dwarf the nearby residences, and provide an unwelcome template for further redevelopment in this area.

2.5 The proposed design and height of the hotel will do nothing to enhance historic quality or reflect the importance of providing an attractive, interesting or appealing vista to Wokingham’s southern Gateway. **We would suggest the Planners revisit the design evolution and design references** in order to present a more aesthetically, appealing hotel design, so as to give visitors the impact of the historic quality of Wokingham.

2.6 We commend the inclusion of solar photovoltaic panels on the roof.

3. Food Store and residences

3.1 **The overall view of the food store is that looks incongruous and featureless.** It does not blend well with surrounding buildings and it might be better to incorporate some of the adjacent detailing, even by decorating the roof edges, particularly facing the park. There is also a measure of scepticism about the benefit and feasibility of providing a sustainable green environment on the roof. Experience elsewhere suggests this can degenerate into a puddled mess, and the roof might better be given some shapes of interest to those residents who will overlook it.

3.2 We are concerned that shopping trolleys will not remain in the Food Store car park and will be dumped wherever the car is parked. There is a need to control this by having 'smart trolleys' on which the wheels lock if they are taken out of a specified area.

3.3 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. There is some scepticism that yet another smallish food store is needed, given the proximity of the My Local metro store and the increasing popularity of the Lidl store to the south.

3.4 While we welcome the addition of town houses fronting Denmark Street, we are, however, disappointed with their design, noting that they are in fact almost identical to the first iteration of the town houses in Rose Street in the 2013 application, and thus not thought through as being appropriate to this setting. Our suggestions for enhancing this terrace of town houses are:

- a. improve the terrace design with stone surrounds to the windows to add interest
- b. use the design palette proposed in the DAS on page 140 for 2.5 storey-high semi-detached houses in the street scene D.
- c. or follow the style of the existing infill buildings opposite between Norton Road and Kendrick Close.
- d. reduce the height of the second tall building to that of the rest of the terrace, while retaining the retail block on the corner of the new road entrance.

3.5 We thus believe it would be better if the town houses reflected the style of the houses on the other side of Denmark Street, including a reduction in height so that they are not overbearing for those local residents.

3.6 In respect of the proposed arrangements for deliveries and collections, we worry that the nearby flats and the above houses will be unduly disturbed by the noise of large vehicles both delivering and removing material. We would like to see evidence of how such disturbance can be mitigated to an acceptable level.

3.7 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?

4. Cinema and Retail Units

4.1 The idea of a three screen cinema is excellent, not only in its own right, but as a valuable addition to the leisure facilities for the town and also its position within the town as a focal point to attract footfall into the area.

4.2 The first floor of the cinema will have a cafe looking out over the park, and we find this an attractive facility.

4.3 We are happy with the concept of the retail provision, although we do wonder if the addition of further outlets will result in an unviable number of shops in the town as a whole and thus threaten the appearance of what needs to present itself as a thriving retail area.

4.4 Taken together with the rest of the Elms Field development the declared intention to facilitate an eighteen hour economy is a positive move, even if it may take some time and effort to achieve.

4.5 The planning statement covering the development bases its assessment of the retail viability on a number of professional surveys carried out from 2007 to 2014. Whether these surveys prove to be right in view of the growing preference for online shopping remains to be seen.

4.6 The type of new retail outlets will dictate how thriving the area will become and consequently the level of footfall. How or whether these new outlets will affect the existing town's retailers will materially influence their success in the longer term.

4.7 What will be needed is a means of connecting in pedestrian terms what may without care turn out to be a two-centre Wokingham. In an earlier submission to the Town Centre Regeneration team, we flagged up the hope that the Council would take the opportunity to persuade retailers to convene some sort of forum to pool ideas for attracting footfall into the park as well as a possible consensus on the type of shops which the town needs.

4.8 Architecturally the building design incorporating cinema, retail and residential, looks very featureless. The building height of 21m also seems out of proportion.

5. Residential Area

5.1 The road in front of the houses helps to provide an outlook across the park which gives a feeling of openness and spaciousness, enhanced by the provision of gaps between individual

buildings. Off-road and garage parking seem to be well-planned and convenient for residents with allowance for 1-3 cars, depending on the size of the accommodation. The arrangements for waste collection and the provision of bicycle shelters at the rear of the properties will help to keep the site tidy and uncluttered. Parking space alongside the park side of the road is welcomed, provided the parking restrictions and speed-limiting surfaces work as planned (but see Section 6 below in respect of visitor parking).

5.2 Considerable thought has gone into providing a variety of accommodation to meet differing needs of prospective residents with the emphasis on commuters. Accommodation will be as follows with indicative car and bicycle ownership:

- 1 or 2 bedroom apartments as starter homes for couples (1 car and 1 bicycle)
- 2 bedroom apartments or 3-bedroom houses for couples with 1 child (2 cars and 2 bicycles)
- 4 bedroom houses for larger families with flexibility for internal changes of use; they will have a roof terrace and a private balcony (2 cars and 4 bicycles or 3 cars and 4 bicycles)

5.3 The interior design of all the units is impressive and well-planned and should meet the needs of the occupants.

5.4 Our concerns lie with the external designs. At first sight the digital colour representation of the street and park scenes seem very attractive and relatively discreetly modern in appearance: a vast improvement on the Pavilions development facing the park from Wellington Road (although admittedly that is not difficult!). On closer inspection, however, we have become increasingly concerned about the appearance of some of the buildings. In general we think the attempts to create variety through the apparent geometrical use of render, generally white, is in fact rather haphazard and inconsistent. It is possible that the representation is purely indicative, but thought definitely needs to be given to the overall visual impact of the positioning of rendered surfaces.

5.5 We consider the *four-bedroom town houses* to be too tall because of the fourth storey and the gable, and the balconies detract from rather than add to the visual impact. While we understand the desire to allow some overlooking of the park for safety and security these buildings will look more like watch towers than friendly neighbours. All told these buildings seem strangely dated as a design concept.

5.6 The three-bedroom town houses located on the *New Elms Road* after turning the corner from what is called in the plans the *Secondary Road.*, although rather bland, do not cause concern.

5.7 The design and appearance of the apartment blocks A and C do, however, give rise to considerable anxiety.

5.8 Although there are definite attempts to make *block A* entirely symmetrical, it seems to us that the symmetry is spoilt by what looks like a strange add-on at the northern end of the building. There appear to be too many different materials used in the block as a whole and the impact of the many windows is overwhelming. The elevation is too high and the overall impression is of a large glass and brick box!

5.9 *Block C* is strangely unsymmetrical, notably because of the protrusion at the left-hand end of the block as seen in the diagrammatic representation. Its roofline is odd and the elevation is once again too high and dominating. The rendered surface adds nothing of value to the appearance. If anything it is even less appealing than Block A.

5.10 The provision of small front gardens is to be welcomed, but the individual boundary walls are too dominant and obtrusive in shape, presumably because of the intention to make the boundaries facing the public ‘robust for durability and longevity’. The house numbers as shown are too big (a minor point, but it is an example of a design weakness).

5.11 Our view is that there are too many different materials used throughout the residential area and, while we appreciate that an effort has been made to provide a varied and attractive visual experience, the different patterns and conflicting colours may create an effect opposite to the one intended.

5.12 Our abiding impression is that an opportunity has been missed to create a residential area of enduring attractiveness and modernity, which would reflect the heritage of the town while keeping residents firmly and proudly in the 21st century.

6. Parking

6.1 With the recent proposal to introduce a charge for overnight and Sunday parking it is probably fair to say that the overall strategy for parking, including the start of Civil Parking Enforcement and the timescale for opening the proposed multi-storey car park, is a little uncertain.

6.2 As to the intended parking provision on Elms Field, the proposed food store car park has 89 spaces, including six for users with a disability. **The number of spaces for disabled users is the minimum derived from a formula and we would urge that, having regard to the older age profile of the local community, more spaces should be allocated for this purpose.** The current intention, we understand, is that this car park should be available for any users for free for 90 minutes. **This principle needs to be enshrined so that there is neither a charge, nor a restriction on users.**

6.3 As for the residential elements, the Transport Statement indicates that WBC standards would imply 195 spaces are required but only 180 are being supplied. The comment is made that any excess demand by visitors can be met in the nearby public car parks, but these have daytime charges and may in future also require an overnight fee. This argument would not have been approved for other applications and should not be accepted here. **Either the required additional spaces should be provided or the number of residences should be reduced to be in proportion to the number of spaces proposed.**

6.4 The Elms Field multi-storey car park is both unsightly and considerably under-used. It will detract from the new designs at Elms Field if it is not refurbished and made attractive to motorists. We urge that the Council take such steps as are necessary to address this problem.

7. Transport and Roads

7.1 We are dismayed that, despite assurances given to us that the New Elms Road would not be promoted as a secondary route, and that the traffic control measures within the Road were intended to deter motorists from using it in this way, the Transport Assessment proposes that it should be “*an alternative route within the town, adding additional network resilience.*” It also says that the road “*should be designed to allow for bus access in the future*”. These proposals are further bolstered by referring to it as a ‘Link Road’, even though we understood that our argument against this because it would be seen to equate to the Station Link Road had been accepted.

We urge that these specific references be replaced by assurances that use of the Road for though traffic would be deterred.

7.2 It was originally planned that traffic exiting this Road at Shute End would turn only one way; this has been replaced by both left and right turning. **We urge that traffic be allowed only to turn left, thus reducing the reasons for driving from Wellington Road and also lessening the risk to drivers, cyclists and pedestrians of vehicles having to cross Shute End to join the north side of that road.**

7.3 The Carnival Pool roundabout, the Elms Field Link Road turning and the Wellington Road mini- roundabout will entail three significant junctions in a relatively short stretch of road. The traffic analysis of this area does not seem to have taken into account the secondary access to the proposed residences on the Carnival Pool site. When one adds in the potential delays occasioned by visitor parking in the two bays adjacent to and opposite the hotel, **we believe that the forecasts underestimate the likely traffic congestion in this vicinity at peak times and we urge that this aspect be revisited and further remedial measures be put in place.**

7.4 The Carnival Pool roundabout, as currently configured, presents problems of visibility, for those wanting to exit the Carnival Pool site, and at adjacent junctions. We urge that issues of line-of-sight be carefully addressed when the roundabout is redesigned.

7.5 With regard to the large delivery vehicles, particularly HGVs, that will service the food store and hotel from 6 am, we are concerned at the noise intrusion this will cause to the apartment occupants in this vicinity. **We urge that delivery drivers be instructed to reduce engine and unloading noise to the minimum, but also that those considering purchasing/renting these properties be advised of the potential sound disturbance.**

7.6 We are also not persuaded that large vehicles coming down Denmark Street will be able to negotiate the U-turn round the Langborough Road roundabout, even if it is enhanced. There is every possibility that they will need to back up in order to complete a turning manoeuvre and thus cause considerable blockage and even damage to nearby vehicles or property in the process.

7.7 We urge that delivery vehicles coming down Denmark Street should be required to turn round the Carnival Pool roundabout in order to return up to the entry point to the Food store and hotel.

7.8 In section 11.2 on page 82 of the Transport Assessment it is proposed that the middle and eastern steps on The Terrace should be removed and appropriate crossing facilities provided at the western side steps.

7.9 The Terrace and steps form an historic landmark within Wokingham's Conservation Area, where old photographs of the 1800s show the location of the steps and the nearby Listed Buildings. The oldest house on the Terrace is purported to date from the 14th Century and therefore this area is of great significance. Any attempt to remove the steps would be met with a great deal of opposition from the local population.

7.10 These steps are little used and, for safety, all pedestrians should be encouraged to use the central steps leading to the new staggered Reading Road crossing (we do not see the need for a further crossing in this vicinity). To discourage use of the additional steps these could have chains across the tops of the steps using the existing post links, possibly with 'no entry' signs attached.

7.11 It has been suggested that the future of these steps be considered at detailed design stage. We see no reason to delay the decision until then and urge that it be agreed at this stage that they should not be removed, but that safety measures be taken to discourage their use as unofficial crossing points.

8. Town Park

8.1. We understand that a public competition is to be held to choose a new name for this open space, and welcome this proposal.

8.2 Referring to the DAS:

Section 7.18.5 Events

We welcome the designation of specific areas of the Park for holding events, and we assume that, since it is not included, the south-east segment will not be allocated for events, so that it will remain free for other, everyday uses. If this is not the case, we very much urge that it should be.

Section 7.18.6 Play

The provision of dedicated play space is very appropriate, and we are glad to note that there will be public consultation about the type of equipment to be installed. We ask that this consultation should also consider how young children can safely use their dedicated play equipment without it being taken over by older children.

Section 7.18.7 Informal recreation

We note the encouragement given for the park to be used for exercise. We hope that group use such as Tai Chi will not be subject to any charges, even if it is found necessary to require booking.

Section 7.18.8 Circulation

It is pleasing to see that the number of internal footpaths have been kept to a minimum. Any further paths should be provided only if consistent usage indicated the need for a path that had not been anticipated.

Section 7.18.11 Sustainability

The introduction of a swale and 'rain gardens' to cope with surface water and run off is helpful, but should be monitored and perhaps even trialled in the early period to ensure they are appropriately placed and sufficient.

Section 7.18.12 Trees

While many will deprecate the loss of existing trees (as do we), we accept that the development cannot be delivered without some removal, and that a replacement strategy has been drawn up. While the *Arboricultural Impact Assessment and Method Statement* details how existing trees should be protected during the construction phase, we cannot find an equivalent statement about ensuring that new trees are suitably robust at installation, and protected during their early growing stage. We ask that a clear policy be identified to meet these concerns.

Section 7.18.13 Planting

We welcome the proposals for providing a range of shrubs, perennials, flower beds and meadow planting.

Peter Must
Chairman