

GLRA and Wescott Ward Councillor meeting 30th May 2019

Members of the GLRA Committee (GLRAC) met with Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) Members for Wescott Ward: Councillor Maria Gee (MG) & Councillor Oliver Whittle (OW).

Introductions

Maria Gee had been elected on 2nd May as a WBC Member for Wescott Ward. She introduced herself and summarised her background. She also identified some of the key resident issues that she had discussed on resident doorsteps in a number of wards whilst canvassing for the election.

Representing Resident Issues to WBC

Both OW and MG expressed a willingness to work together across party lines to represent the interests of Wescott residents. They believed strongly that their collaboration would be effective.

Peach Place, Market Place and Elms Field

GLRAC expressed concerns about the impact of the premature ending of the Dawnus work at Peach Place. This had occurred when they were forced into administration. GLRAC had observed some obvious quality problems. During the late stages of the Dawnus involvement, there was some evidence that payments might have been made by WBC ahead of certified completions, which had subsequently not been delivered. It had already been announced that major town centre projects would be subject to reviews of cost against budget and delivery on time. OW believed that the review was still in progress. GLRAC recommended that the reviews should extend to an examination of the robustness of the process for appointing major works contractors. GLRAC requested some information on the planned completion date of the review and publication intentions.

About half the Peach Place premises were now occupied by a variety of retail and hospitality businesses and more tenants had been announced. More announcements would follow as lease agreements were completed.

There were a few outstanding work items in the Market Place, including road markings to clarify the roadside parking areas.

Progress in Elms Field appeared to be good. The children's play area was complete and attractive but not yet accessible. The new Aldi store and hotel were approaching completion. GLRAC pointed out that Elms Field would add at least another 15 retail units for which tenants had still to be found.

Local Plan, South Wokingham SDL/SDR & Traffic

GLRAC expressed concerns that the Local Plan Update process had been delayed. (*Note: the date for adoption is currently published as spring 2022*). Pressure should be maintained to resolve issues surrounding the propositions for Grazeley, Barkham Square & Ruscombe. Central Government had agreed to fund an in depth study of the Grazeley option.

The last South Wokingham SDR/SDL Forum had received strong criticism. It had not clarified when the options for the "Western Gateway" would be resolved – and a proposed completion date for this phase was not clear. A Forum was apparently planned for 20th June. However, no official announcement had been made. (*Note: since the meeting the arrangement has been confirmed.*)

We discussed the ongoing and growing issue of town centre traffic congestion. A few years ago WBC had estimated a 70% reduction in peak volumes from the traffic taking the alternative SDR route. The current view is that the contribution of the SDR will be significant, but the reduction forecast is less specific.

Public Art in Wokingham

Robin Cops updated the meeting on progress in establishing a stronger WBC commitment to the provision of public art in the town centre. GLRAC continued to stress the positive contribution that it would make to the attractiveness of Wokingham as a destination in competition with other nearby towns.

Other Matters

OW alerted the meeting to a planned overnight closure of Wellington Road on 4th, 5th & 6th June. David Nash agreed to publicise this.