



**Report for Stakeholder Interviews as  
part of Woking Town Centre  
Masterplan Consultation**

**On Behalf of Woking Borough Council**

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Note: All the quotes which appear in the boxes throughout the report are taken directly from the conversations with stakeholders. They may not be everyone’s view but are there to tell the story from the stakeholder’s perspective.

*“Woking has changed, and there is more change to come. It used to be so embarrassing walking through Woking as it was so poor, now I am quite proud to live in Woking  
It’s completely changed, much better”*

## Background

Woking Borough Council (WBC) commissioned Halo to conduct a consultation/engagement project around the development of a Masterplan for Woking Town Centre. The project will involve several stages utilising both qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

Before, engaging with local residents, WBC agreed with Halo’s recommendation to start by talking to stakeholders, and using their expertise drawn from both the public and private sector to articulate some ideas, thoughts and background about the future vision for Woking Town Centre. The output from this stage will be used to inform the design and writing of an initial draft Woking Town Centre Masterplan, at which point residents and stakeholders will be invited for their comments. These will then be used to inform and shape the final version of the Masterplan document.

This report sets out the main points discussed during each of the stakeholder interviews as well as the key themes highlighted from across all of the interviews. The stakeholders included significant landowners in Woking Town Centre, elected Councillors from most of the political parties, several statutory consultees, commercial interests such as developers, planning and design agencies and property agents as well as representatives from two local businesses.

To kick off the project, we held a virtual meeting with numerous people from across WBC to agree who the stakeholders should be, for contacting the organisation to identify the right person to talk to and to ascertain they were willing to take part. The process of identifying the right stakeholders, and at the same time ensuring we achieved a balance across both the commercial and public sector took much longer than had been envisaged and as a consequence the project timeline was extended.

The full listing of the eighteen stakeholders interviewed is:

<b>Political</b>	<b>Commercial Developers</b>
Leader of the Council	Eco World
Leader of the Liberal Democrats	Gateway 1
Leader of the Labour Party	
Independent Councillor	<b>Commercial Other</b>
Ward Councillors Mount Hermon	Curchod & Co
Ward Councillors Canalside	Motion Transport Consultants
	Surrey Developers Forum (Barton Willmore)
<b>Other Town Centre Landowners</b>	Design South East
Surrey County Council	
Network Rail	
<b>Statutory</b>	<b>Local Businesses</b>
Natural England	McLaren
Historic England	Petrofac
Enterprise M3	

## Key Findings

- Woking Council have reached a pivotal point in their decision making about the development of Woking Town Centre. The change of leadership at both the Executive and Councillor level, and to the political balance of the council, and the impact of COVID-19 **means that a new conversation is required** around what the future vision will look like for the town. All the respondents interviewed for this project could see this need and bought into the process of re-examining the vision and ideas around the town centre.
- **All of the stakeholders interviewed agreed that Woking Town Centre has changed**, and that this change has been for the better. The environment and atmosphere in the town square have been transformed and the council and its partners should take great pride in their achievements.
- However, with the exception of the property developers, the **new towers divide opinions amongst stakeholders**. Some stakeholders were accepting of the new skyline over Woking describing the towers as a practical solution to meet a significant housing needs challenge, however others were more critical of the direction that the council were taking suggesting that the scale of development was wrong and questioning whether these were the right for Woking.
- The **lack of context, the absence of any guidelines as to where the tall buildings should be positioned and the seemingly uncoordinated approach** to the proposed town centre development is a concern shared by all stakeholders. A Masterplan was seen as an essential pre-requisite for any local authority contemplating any significant development in a town centre environment.
- Many of the stakeholders had **serious doubts whether there is or will be sufficient demand** for the type of housing units being proposed in the town centre, and at the prices being considered. These doubts have been heightened by the pandemic and the greater desire for outside space.
- On a similar theme, the new leadership team at WBC have repeatedly said that they want to attract new people to live in the town, but also to retain them within the borough when they are looking to move up the property ladder. **Respondents questioned whether just building flats would achieve this objective**.
- The **developers are frustrated by the planning decision making process at Woking**. They felt they were doing everything right, only to find that they are then thwarted by the decisions of the planning committee. They will be patient as they have invested significantly to get to this stage, but only up to a point. The planning agents we spoke to could understand this frustration, the reputation of Woking within their industry had taken a hit, and they warned that at some point, if this doesn't get resolved soon, developers will just walk away and go elsewhere.

## Political Leaders of Conservatives, Liberal Democrats, Labour Party and Independent Councillor.

We interviewed each of the main political party’s leaders as well as the Independent Councillor. The interview with the Leader of the Labour Party who represents Canalside, the ward which covers much of the area representing Woking Town Centre, also included one of the two other Labour Councillors from this ward. All these interviews were very helpful, with positive, proactive and thoughtful insight.

<b>The Planning Process</b>	<b>Key Concerns</b>	<b>The Future</b>
<p>The Planning Committee have turned down a number of recent developments, despite the proposals being endorsed by Council Officers and the requirement to meet statutory housing targets. A number of different reasons has been given as to why, including the lack of affordable housing, insufficient parking provision or concerns about the height of the proposed development. The decisions have frustrated some Members of the Council as well as the developers involved.</p>	<p>The chief concerns are about the proposed heights of the new buildings, the type and quality of the housing units, and whether there is sufficient demand for one- or two-bedroom flats at the prices being proposed in Woking. There is a feeling that these properties may not be the right type that local people need or want. In the past, Woking was attracting commuters to/from London to live in the town, one leader questioned whether with the new ways of working this was still a sustainable model, and if they were not commuters who would be the future residents in Woking Town Centre.</p>	<p>There is broad agreement there is a need of an overarching document that provides the guidance and direction for future development in the town centre. Ideally, this will be a document that all parties can get behind and support, which gives clear direction to all stakeholders including residents. The other Labour Councillor from Canalside was insistent that any future development in the Town Centre must be sustainable.</p>

## Mount Hermon’s Councillors

Mount Hermon is the town centre ward and therefore much of the current and proposed development is taking place in this ward. All three ward Councillors took part in the interview.

<b>The Planning Process</b>	<b>Key Concerns</b>	<b>The Future</b>
<p>There is a level of planning fatigue in this group and perhaps a thought that the work they need to do needs to move on from “turning down planning permissions”. These Councillors had mixed views as to whether high rise developments were the solution for Woking.</p>	<p>The height of the current tallest building should be the extent of the height acceptable in the town centre. There is a concern about the strength of the property market for flats/apartments in the town centre.</p>	<p>These Councillors would like a clear set of principles put forward by the council which would allow them and the democratic process to vote on. The lack of this and any form of consensus is damaging to both the town, its reputation and the work of the councillors who feel they are being asked to make ad hoc decisions. Schemes going to appeal cost too much money for the council and results in losses of value from the schemes to the council. This needs to be resolved.</p> <p>Everyone wants to see a finished town rather than a half-finished town or one where there are large numbers of vacant flats that don’t contribute to the local economy. As and when the development takes place, they want to see more green spaces in the town, for example ‘pocket parks.</p>

## Developers

We interviewed two developers, CoPlan Estates (Gateway 1) and Eco World, the latter of whom have submitted plans to develop the land on and around Goldsworth Road. For both, the teams at the developers brought a number of people to the call, including architects, funders and those who have been involved since their inception.

<b>The Planning Process</b>	<b>Key Concerns</b>	<b>The Future</b>
<p>Both organisations have invested significantly in terms of their time, expertise as well as financially in developing their plans for Woking Town Centre. Only Eco World had to date formally submitted a planning application and they were very frustrated that despite complying with all the requirements and guidance set by the Council, including making changes to their original scheme, their application had been turned down by the Planning Committee.</p>	<p>There is a concern around the lack of alignment between the views of Council Officers towards future development and those of some of the Politicians at Woking. Trust is very important to the developers and there are issues around this from developers towards the council because of a lack of clear direction.</p>	<p>The developers would like to get on with developing. The stages before actual building has taken place has taken a long time. Both schemes feel they need the height and density planned to make the schemes viable. There is a concern that WBC is losing credibility among the developer community.</p>

## Local Businesses

The two organisations we interviewed were Petrofac, an energy consultancy business who are based right in the centre of the town in Dukes Court. The other organisation McLaren are located at a site outside of Woking town centre.

Current Situation	Key Concerns	The Future
<p>Both organisations appreciate the connectivity that Woking delivers, both to London using the rail network as well as to London Heathrow via the road or coach network. For McLaren, many of their current employees live in London or on the rail network and commute to Woking by train where a shuttle bus takes them to/from their site.</p> <p>Petrofac have been based in Woking for almost twenty years, and over this period they have seen many changes in the town, all for the better. The client especially liked the new café culture and the much-improved appearance as well as atmosphere that now existed in the town. Unlike in the past, they were now happy to walk around the town centre and to invite clients to join them.</p>	<p>The view of the Woking skyline from the McLaren technology centre has changed, and it is not considered to be for the better.</p> <p>For McLaren, local affordable housing is important, currently there is not enough and they see the need as houses with gardens not flats as their staff are typically looking for family homes. This is less of an issue for Petrofac as many of their technical contractors were considered to be well paid. As these people were often required to work on an interim basis from their Woking offices, having a potential larger supply of good quality short term 'affordable' rental accommodation in close proximity to their offices was seen as being a considerable benefit.</p>	<p>What both businesses agreed was that the full implications of the way people will work in the future post COVID are yet to be fully understood. If Woking is to be successful in creating a place where people can live and work, there needs to be more joined up thinking to help employers encourage people to come back to work in the town, For example, if people are expected to travel to work in the town centre by car, but only work a few days a week, they need more flexible parking options for employees.</p>



## Planning Experts and Retail Agents

There were four stakeholders included in this section These were:

- Curchod & Co
- Surrey Developers Forum (Motion Transport)
- Surrey Developers Forum (Barton Willmore)
- Design South-East Partnership

Current Situation	Key Concerns	The Future
<p>This group of stakeholders included several advocates of tall buildings describing them as an efficient use of land and if designed and built properly, they can make an area a good place to visit, work and live in. One stakeholder suggested that as online retail continues to grow, he saw building housing in the town centres as the key action councils and other authorities can take to get people back into the town centres to increase their vitality and viability.</p> <p>Whilst all of these ‘experts’ understood the challenge facing the council to meet their housing targets, they were uncomfortable by the lack of a coherent planning strategy, which could be used to guide future development. As one stakeholder put it, new development shouldn’t take place in a vacuum.</p>	<p>One stakeholder who was more critical of the tall buildings, told us that although he understood the politics of the action being taken to concentrate the new housing build in the town centre, he felt that there are many places in the town where the new towers were dominating your sense of place, and this is not good. In his view, the townscape and visual impact is wrong and the buildings were even dominating the skyline from other parts of Surrey. He also thought that twenty to thirty storeys is absolutely the highest that any buildings should be built</p> <p>Another stakeholder said that it reflected badly on them that their advice has had so little effect. Another has the view that “you can’t really build tall buildings without a Masterplan”.</p> <p>Another stakeholder advised that there needs to be a clear palate of materials, that are built to last. It must be quality and have longevity.</p>	<p>People we spoke to in this group were also concerned on a practical level, just how many people were wanting to live in high rise accommodation, and whether these were the right homes for people wanting to live in Woking. The absence of any outside living space, was also a major concern.</p> <p>The view is that people prefer a finished town than a half built one, where there are small areas that look good surrounded by areas that look dilapidated.</p> <p>When asked what a good Masterplan looks like, one stakeholder recommended that a good Masterplan doesn’t look too far ahead, or goes into too much detail. A high-level approach is best. A bad Masterplan evolves if too much over thinking takes place and it tries to focus on the minutiae. His advice was that what is considered an issue now sorts itself over time so don’t over plan.</p>

## Network Rail

Network Rail are a significant landowners within Woking Town Centre. One of these sites is currently occupied by Days Aggregates.

There were three people from Network Rail on this call.

<b>Current Situation</b>	<b>Key Concerns</b>	<b>The Future</b>
<p>Network Rail are very interested in this consultation, because like WBC, they have statutory housing targets set by the Department of Transport to deliver across the UK, including a provision to supply affordable homes.</p> <p>When asked to describe Woking, the consensus was that the town was well connected, but appeared “a bit rough and ready around the edges”. The town lacked cohesiveness and appeared disjointed, and even the railway station did not naturally link in with the town centre. They also described the road layout as not very user friendly as it forced traffic to go through residential areas.</p>	<p>The initial response from Network Rail to the building of the new tower blocks in Woking Town Centre was fairly positive, however they were uncertain that the current ground level infrastructure and place would be able to support the proposed large numbers of people living in ‘expensive’ flats.</p>	<p>They were cautious that given Woking’s very close proximity to London by train, the town would ever be able to position itself as a separate hub, where people could live and work. They also questioned whether there would be a significant enough variation in the cost of the new housing between Woking and London to make this a point of difference for Woking. Network Rail are taking a “wait and see” approach to development in Woking. One respondent had been present in meetings where the aspiration to build numerous tall buildings was expressed but this is not something Network Rail do, so it was interesting but not engaging.</p>

## Surrey County Council (SCC)

This interview was exceptionally well attended with six people from SCC taking part in the call.

Current Situation	Key Concerns	The Future
<p>Whilst SCC are a land owner, key stakeholder and service provider in the town their engagement in this project was very much one of observers rather than active participants</p> <p>The ability of those on the call to discuss Woking Town Centre, it's plans and needs was very limited, despite some of the people on the call nominally working in the town.</p>	<p>Each person on the call had their own area of interest and this was their focus for any responses to our questions. For example, the lead from the Library service talked only about the high-level plans across Surrey for the service, rather than focussing on the Woking library. This approach applied to most of the other respondents on the call who had the same very meta view of their role with no specific, Woking examples.</p>	<p>SCC say they will approach the requirements of WBC when required to do so once the new buildings are complete. There are some concerns about early years places if many young families move in and the library may expand but beyond this the County suggested it is for WBC to decide what they build.</p>

## Statutory Consultees

The three organisations interviewed as part of this group of stakeholders were:

- Natural England
- Historic England
- Enterprise M3

Current Situation	Key Concerns	The Future
<p>For Historic England, Woking is not one of their high-profile towns, a place where they tend to focus their attention, as there are no Grade One listed buildings or Monuments of Specific Interest in the area defined as Woking Town Centre. Grade two buildings are less of a priority, of which only the Church and War Memorial are in the Town Centre. They are more interested in tangible, physical heritage assets of</p>	<p>The one building that is of prime interest to Historic England in Woking is the Mosque, but this is outside of the Town Centre. What does concern them is ensuring that the setting, approach and environment of either the Grade One or Grade Two buildings is respected. This respondent's view is that so much development has already taking place, the 'horse has bolted' and there was 'not much more they could do in terms of harm'</p> <p>Enterprise M3 are very aware of the housing targets set for Woking Town Centre, but was sceptical that there was sufficient requirement for the amount of high-rise accommodation being proposed for Woking. His view was that the council first need to prove there is the demand out there for this type of</p>	<p>Whilst there are no immediate needs/issues, Historic England are keen that the character, physical attributes and historic elements are protected and that access to any of these buildings is promoted and wherever possible enhanced through development and If there are positives to accentuate these. One thought for this respondent was as a major railway hub, should Woking be celebrating this aspect of their heritage?</p> <p>Natural England, who were not completely against building on the 'green belt', also commented that they thought WBC had been 'brave to go high'. When it comes to town centre redevelopment, they are</p>

Current Situation	Key Concerns	The Future
<p>which there are very few in Woking Borough. Brookwood Cemetery was one that was mentioned as being of national importance.</p>	<p>accommodation, before committing further to these plans.</p> <p>Another point raised by Enterprise M3 was that he doubted there would be the same amount of money available in the future to spend on infrastructure, particularly if this revolved around the use of the car. His view was that the aspirations of the council need to change, rather than relatively high-cost housing, perhaps the council need to be looking at providing lower cost housing for those who already work in Woking, or to help them attract people into the area in the first place.</p>	<p>realistic that town centres cannot be completely green, however by planting trees, having small areas of green space, it can make a town centre a better place, both for ecological reasons and for mental health and well-being and they would expect the Woking Masterplan to reflect these ideas.</p> <p>Enterprise M3 are also concerned that the council were now in a difficult place, where any decision they take was likely to have negative repercussions for one group or another and did not envy their position.</p> <p>Enterprise M3's vision for Woking was to lower the cost of any future housing and to pull back on the level of intensity of housing being considered. At the same time , he felt Woking needed to differentiate it from other towns, one way they could do this was make it low carbon, an attractive place to live and work in, with and were moving around on foot or by cycling was the norm rather than the exception.</p> <p>It was apparent Natural England already feel that WBC are very supportive of the green agenda, and their environmental responsibilities and they are confident this will continue as Woking develops.</p>