

Residents Panel Masterplan Meetings: Combined Notes

August - September 2021

Positive Points:

In approximate order of frequency, panel members said that they:

- Like Woking's good connectivity, in particular: by rail; access to London; proximity to airports; proximity to motorways; access to Guildford. (However, some panel members said these factors felt less or no longer relevant to them due to working from home and not flying so much).
- Like the green/natural spaces in and around the town. Specific ones mentioned include Horsell Common, Basingstoke Canal (positive references made to recent developments there), Woking Park, green walls/landscaping in the Town Centre, Heather Farm, Chobham Common, Surrey Hills. Other people just referred to Woking's proximity to the countryside / Green Belt as a positive feature.
- Like Jubilee Square and the activities that take place there, and various other town centre events.
- Like the town centre cultural / social facilities; specific ones mentioned include the Lightbox; Victoria Theatre and Cinema; the library; choirs and orchestras.
- Like the cafés and restaurants in the town centre, and the atmosphere they create; like the pedestrianised areas / public realm; the town centre is much improved from the past.
- Like the multicultural nature / diversity of Woking, especially compared to other parts of Surrey.
- Like the availability of shops in the town centre; the shopping centres (and being able to walk between them without getting wet). Looking forward to the opening of shops in Victoria Square.
- Various panel members live within walking distance of the town centre and like that fact.
- Support was widespread for the general principle of residential development in the town centre.
- Like the community spirit / village atmosphere / facilities in their local area.
- Like that the council is ambitious, willing to innovate and redevelop, but need to ensure things are thought through. Appreciate the Council's work in providing affordable housing and on climate change.
- Like living in a leafy / low density area
- Woking is very entrepreneurial.
- Woking is a great place for families.
- Like that the town centre is compact, flat and easy to navigate
- Good schools
- A small minority of people actively liked Victoria Square; others had grown accustomed to it. A much more frequently expressed sentiment was along the lines of: "I reluctantly accept the towers as the lesser of two evils compared to Green Belt development."

Negative Points:

Infrastructure and economy

- The most commonly expressed concern related to stretched/inadequate community infrastructure (in particular education, healthcare and the road network, and to a lesser extent flood prevention, road/pavement maintenance, railway capacity and emergency services). For example, roads are congested, and it is difficult to get a doctor's appointment. Concern was expressed about the impact of new housing on the capacity of this infrastructure, and on whether the proposals for new housing are accompanied to a sufficient degree by proposals to expand that capacity.
- Many people considered the retail, entertainment and cultural provision in the town centre to be insufficient or were worried about its decline. Also: "Why live in a flat in Woking, when you can live in one in London and reap the benefits of having the London offerings on your doorstep".
- Concern about pressure on utilities in the Town Centre arising from a large volume of development there (especially in the context of climate change).
- Concern that the pavements are not suitable for disabled people.
- Perception that the bus network is very poor, that should be bringing people into the centre. Very few 'proper' i.e. frequent bus services.
- Air pollution is a big problem, so we need to get people out of their car.
- Concern for the provision of parking spaces for flats, and the cost of parking permits. Some people were sceptical about the idea of car free development, while others were keen to promote the concept (but noting that it required improvements in public transport).
- Opposition to the proposals to re-route the access to Day Aggregates
- Several people mentioned that they rarely visit the town centre, due to congestion/parking costs/lack of desired shops.

Housing issues

- Many people were worried about the high cost of housing in Woking, and in particular the implications for their children and key workers being able to live here.
- Many people were concerned about dwelling mix, i.e. that recent proposals for new flats are largely considered not to provide family dwellings, but to be aimed at young people. Some participants thought that developers should be required to provide more flats suitable for families, e.g. with more bedrooms and balcony space, while others thought that flats were in principle not suitable for families. There is a lot of concern about where young residents of the proposed flats will go if they later decide to start a family; and the implications for Woking as a community if those residents do not see the town as a place to settle for the long term.
- Concern that there is too much focus on delivering rented accommodation.
- Concern that the type of new housing provision was being tailored to the demands of incomers from London/international property investors, rather than to needs generated within Woking borough.

- Concern about the impacts of high density living on mental health and anti-social behaviour. A resident of the town centre described a very negative experience of being confined in their flat during Covid lockdowns and suffering from noise and anti-social behaviour.
- Concern that there will not be enough demand for flats to fill the proposed tall buildings. In particular changes to working patterns caused by Covid mean that the previous plans are no longer relevant, there will no longer be the demand for such buildings.
- Concern that a low proportion of the proposed new dwellings will be Affordable Housing; that Affordable Housing as officially defined is not actually affordable; that the Council's target of 35% is too low, or that it is unlikely to be met. If affordable housing was not viable on Victoria Square, why should it be viable on other town centre sites?
- Perception that high-rise flats are not suitable for many disabled people, and for older people.

Design issues

- Many people dislike the appearance of Victoria Square, saying that it is too high, or 'like 1960s blocks'.
- Some respondents expressed dislike for the sight of tall buildings in principle; some said they were depressing, reminded them of Croydon or Singapore, or even put them off living in Woking.
- Concern that climate change has not been given enough consideration.
- Many people were concerned about a perceived lack of balcony and/or communal amenity space for residents of new flats more generally. Some expressed this in terms of a 'two tier society', with town centre residents having worse living conditions than other Woking residents.
- Worries about fire safety in relation to tall buildings, and the potential for 'another Grenfell Tower'.
- Some people said that Woking is less characterful than other Surrey towns (e.g. Guildford). Others said that Woking did have character and heritage but that it was insufficiently acknowledged and capitalised upon.
- Dislike that old buildings are being lost, and replaced by buildings that will never be as distinctive. One panel member felt that she was being 'eliminated'.

Broader concerns

- Discontent with the process of the HIF bid, in particular around a lack of consultation and concerns that it is focussed on residential development to an unbalanced degree. A view that WBC should be putting up more resistance to Government demands on housebuilding.
- Concern about the Council getting into debt to support town centre development.
- Some people were also sceptical if there is a need for Woking to grow at all, saying they and people they knew were happy with the town as it is. Others accepted some growth but considered that the Council was encouraging too much growth, or taking a 'free-for-all' approach. Covid and its effects were also cited by some of these panel members.
- People in outlying areas are often not aware what is happening in the town centre; the town centre should sell itself more. Sad that the information centre has been lost.
- Basingstoke Canal is a valuable asset; however, it is underutilised.
- A popular view was that development should be focussed on regenerating brownfield sites elsewhere in the town, local centres, or the more deprived areas of the Borough, rather than

on the town centre. We should not be forced to choose between town centre high-rises and green belt loss.

- The various communities around Woking are too cut off from one another, and facilities in the local centres are declining.

Aspirations for the Town Centre:

Comments included that:

Infrastructure and economy

- Infrastructure provision should be increased in parallel with the growth of housing in the town centre.
- We should shift the balance of town centre development from housing to a mix of uses, especially services to bring people into the centre.
- The council should promote and assist local/small/independent businesses and grassroots community facilities /groups to stay in/come to the town centre, to give Woking a distinctive character; this will also be attractive for new residents.
- The council should support existing Town Centre businesses in general.
- We need more town centre housing to increase footfall in the town centre and protect businesses there.
- There should be more flexible office space.
- Growth is inevitable but need to ensure that it produces a characterful town. Look at specific schemes in Preston and in Stratford (London) to ensure that benefits go into the local community, and more broadly at the kind of local character that will make us competitive with central London. Another comment urged us, ‘do not lose the pleasant small town feel’.
- Transport infrastructure is not up to scratch, and as Woking becomes effectively a suburb of London, the Council needs to look more to London style approaches to the issue, focussing more on improving cycling, walking and public transport investment, not on car parking and roads. Improving bus connections was mentioned several times; this should be both around the town and with neighbouring towns.
- A rail connection should be built with Heathrow.
- Make provision for car ownership.

Housing issues

- Developers should be required to provide more flats suitable for families, e.g. with more bedrooms (3/4) and balcony space, or more houses with gardens rather than flats.
- Make sure that “affordable housing” is truly affordable, and encourage longer tenancy periods to help people feel settled in the area. Greater scrutiny of developer claims that affordable housing is unviable.

Design issues

- Would like to see a proper masterplan / tall buildings strategy, not just a statement that ‘tall buildings are allowed in the town centre’ or a case-by-case approach.
- There should be a height limit of: 25 / 20 storeys / ‘how high the fire service ladder can reach’
- We need light in the town centre.

- Tall buildings should be better / more sensitively / interestingly designed, with care for materials; use a design review panel.
- Victoria Square should remain the tallest / the only tall building in the town centre.
- The carbon emissions / environmental standards of new buildings should be given greater consideration. There should be stronger policies on sustainability. Has Thameswey got a plan to use zero carbon?
- Tall buildings should use renewable energy (e.g. rooftop solar panels, and rain/waste water mitigation systems. Learn from the WWF building).
- Refurbishing and retrofitting existing buildings would be better for the environment than redevelopment. One person suggested adding a few storeys to existing properties.
- Medium rise buildings are better for the environment than high or low rise; should focus more on medium rise.
- Support more living walls, including on tall buildings.
- More green / community spaces should be provided; an area like Sparrow Park used to be, with trees and seats; more child friendly spaces in the public realm, including pocket parks with decent play elements.
- Provide communal areas within high rise developments, where people can (and want to) spend time and get to know each other.
- Woking should become a cleaner and more accessible place for disabled people. Involve people from all communities and with all types of physical and mental disability.

Location specific suggestions

- Keep the characterful areas like Chertsey Road.
- Could redevelop Woking station with a tall building above it.
- Better connectivity is needed across the canal, railway and Victoria Way.
- Bring the canal into the town centre more.
- Need a height limit; but also to avoid a huge raft of 15-storey blocks in the town centre. How about more 4/5 storey buildings in the village centres, which currently look tired and outdated. Or 'growth should be low and wide instead of tall and confined to the town centre'.
- Protect green areas around the town.