



St Martin's Centre Redevelopment –Planning Application 140997

Comments from the Caversham and District Residents' Association July 2014

Dear Mr Vigar

As discussed, I set out below the preliminary comments of the Caversham and District Residents' Association (CADRA). We request that this should be viewed alongside our comments of May 2014, on the pre-application plans, including a Vision for Caversham. We may wish to submit further comments at a later date.

CADRA has attended four large community events with details of the proposed scheme. A steady flow of people came past the CADRA stall, primarily to see and discuss the proposals for St Martin's Centre. Fifty people left written comments and over the four events, we spoke to several hundred local people. Since then, we are continuing to receive emails from local people.

While there is considerable enthusiasm for, "something to be done about the precinct", there is also a substantial body of opinion that the scheme is, "not in keeping with the village atmosphere of Caversham."

Comments include:

- More traditional buildings in keeping with the library
- Looks industrial
- Should ensure local identity
- Not sympathetic with historical development
- Keep design in line with historic look and feel of Caversham
- Awful!!
- Hope to keep some 'village' atmosphere
- A tasteful refurbishment please – not decimation
- Not in keeping with village atmosphere of Caversham
- A revamp is necessary but not to the extent proposed
- Am all for improvements but think this development would take away from the charm of the village – sorry, just not really in favour
- The design should be in keeping with the architectural elegance of Caversham. New design looks like Bracknell!
- I like the idea of regenerating the area however, I feel the plans lack charm
- Looks too blocky and characterless. Would want something in keeping with the small scale of the area
- Designs aren't in keeping with the feel of the area
- More character – less Malls
- Plans look vulgar with no architectural merit whatsoever
- Idea good for local residents but worry we are just becoming a clone

- Although St Martin's needs improving, I hope that plans the Council passes will improve the area not detract from it. Plans do not enhance Church Street at all. Why don't the architects take some inspiration from the lovely library building and produce something in keeping with that.
- The main feature of the high street is the Library which is an attractive historic building. I feel that the new development will dwarf it and not be in keeping with the character of the street
- Would like the facades to fit more in with the ambience of Caversham. Superdrug should have bay windows upstairs
- Building design seems to be stuck in the 1960s. The new buildings should be in the style of the current Waitrose store.
- Ruination of a village. Not in keeping.
- Development should not be allowed to be too big or too high
- Building over Pizza Express is too tall and 'Cell Block H' in appearance. Not in keeping. Too dominant – ugly
- Ugly – change the design of building over Pizza Express. This is a village.
- More green space required. Development is not in keeping with a local village feel. Seems more 60s inspired. Not a good look!
- Too much.
- Proposed plans have no character. Taking the soul out of Caversham.
- Design of building above Costa and Pizza Express not in local character – should be revised
- The Waitrose is out of scale with Caversham which has a village feel to it. The height of the buildings is too high and out of scale with the rest of Caversham
- Unimaginative architecture – v basic. Residential building over Pizza Express too high
- Need to keep 'village feel' with scale and visual details
- Part of the charm of Church Street resides in the variety of the roof lines and shapes, none of which are intrusive on the side of the road opposite Waitrose but in the mock-up, the proposed new facade of Waitrose and its neighbours looks dominating, flat and uncompromising.
- I am a Caversham resident of many years and generally am glad attention is now being paid to the scheme. The main objection I have though is the "massing" of the proposed Block A which is too excessive and too imposing on the general street scene. That part of the scheme should be reduced in height. It should also be set back somewhat to improve the sight lines for vehicles using the service road between that and the telephone exchange.
- I value the 'villagey' feel and do not relish the thought of higher-rise buildings and the new block which I fear may result in a claustrophobic atmosphere both in Church Street and in the car park area.
- The overall design is very square, with lots of grey metal/cladding. It's not at all in keeping with a Victorian village / town centre. It is also not very current, and will date quickly. These issues were raised in the consultation quite widely (based on the quotes), but I can't see that they have been addressed.
- The general impressions make the street scene imposing and set to an age. Set to an age; meaning it will not weather well and it is more dependent on architecture since the trees in the arcade will be less of an influence on overall impact. Imposing means it will overbear on the classical library/cinema (COG), and the terrace.
- The current building is out of place, the new one even more - so this should be seen as an opportunity to right that wrong.

Church Street Frontage

The design of the new upward extension above Boots and Costa and the new block including Pizza Express appear as standard designs which could go anywhere. They do not reflect the character of the centre of Caversham, and would not enhance the street scene. The new 5 storey block would appear very massive and out of scale as you approach from Caversham Bridge. It protrudes on to Church Street and may obscure sight lines for vehicles. The existing street scene does not contain buildings of height and this is a fundamental part of the 'village' character. The bright blue door for Pizza Express is too dominant. The flat roofs are inconsistent with the existing character and appear very unsympathetic.

The proposed materials are bland. They are used in a very 'blocky' and unimaginative way. Bricks are described just as 'red' - it is important that the bricks chosen have colour and texture which can give any building 'life' - must be approved by the planning officer to blend with the character of Reading red brick. The aim should be to select quality materials that will age and weather well so that whatever is built will mature rather than deteriorate over time.

The existing Waitrose design is very flat, without articulation or detail in the design of the frontage and the bricks used are monotonous and a dull colour. This makes it especially important that the new blocks have character, particularly as they are opposite the library.

The Waitrose atrium is out of place in a village centre. It would be out of scale and out of place in terms of style and materials.

Heritage Statement

We note that the Heritage Statement produced by Peter Cross PGDipCHE FRICS MAPM reports that:

"The Library is a striking and highly individual building in Church Street and its central tower, cupola, copper clad ball and weathervane with its swan motif creates a notable landmark in the town. It has elevations of Reading red brickwork, with cream stone banding and numerous ornate stone embellishments including the figure of Old Father Time supporting the projecting clock on the front elevation."

He also states that old and new should "together form a harmonious group" (121 PPS5 Practice Guide). The Statement goes on to suggest that the impact on the Heritage assets is neutral. It fails to consider the impact of the listed cottages on Church Street or the St Peter's Conservation Area around Church Road.

We do not consider that the impact on the Heritage Assets and street scene is neutral or that old and new "together form a harmonious group."

Comments received include:

- They conclude that - "10.3 We have demonstrated that the Applicant's proposals will not cause harm to any of the nearby heritage assets and that the impact will be Neutral. Consequently the proposals entirely fulfil the objectives of the NPPF by "sustaining and enhancing" the affected heritage assets." The usual definition of sustain is "support or enhance". Neutral does not do it. This statement appears to be a wilful misinterpretation of the NPPF objectives. We have a once in a generation opportunity to rebalance the centre and make it attractive.

Signage

We welcome the principle of unified signage for the businesses in the centre, provided this is well balanced and not out of place with local character. The signage shown for the Superdrug store is unnecessarily large and

out of place with other signage. We suggest it should be shown smaller and lower which would allow for some features above, on an otherwise blank and uninteresting wall.

Planting

The retention of the Holm Oak on Church Street is very welcome and strict controls should be put in place to protect this very valuable tree. Without it, the extension above Boots and Costa would be still more strident.

It would appear that neither the street trees in front of the current Waitrose store, nor the trees in front of the proposed Block A are to be either retained or replaced. This would leave Church Street with no street trees except the Holm Oak – a highly regrettable change which will detract further from the street scene. More planting is needed on the frontage.

Comments noted include:

- More trees on Church Street
- Trees (at back) are good. Need some trees on Church Street
- More trees at the front please
- Leave the trees alone
- More trees please
- Keep it green with trees
- Please keep trees +green in front on street view
- More green space required
- would urge that a band of trees should be created between the access road and the Abbotsmead Place parking area if the development goes ahead

The planting on the edge of the Iceland building and the decked car park is welcome. Regular maintenance will be required if it is to stay attractive.

Traffic and Parking

There is significant concern about the entrance to Archway Road and its ability to serve increasing levels of traffic. There are safety concerns about deliveries to the Service Area by Caversham Square, particularly the turning circle.

The increase in parking spaces is modest and parking is already difficult at busy times. There is no nearby available public parking, so the pressure on the car park is substantial and increasing.

Comments noted include:

- Make sure the parking and roads are OK
- Traffic needs looking at first
- Keep free parking
- Level up the pavements
- Concerned about delivery lorries and access too and fro causing problems
- A multiple storey car park is not appropriate in a 'village.' Too much traffic as it is, this will encourage more
- Worried about traffic disruption

Pedestrian and Cycle Access

Pedestrian access from the car park to other parts of Caversham will be more difficult – particularly outside Waitrose opening hours. This will cause additional pedestrian flows through Archway Road which is already unsatisfactory for pedestrians, so it is disappointing no improvements are shown.

Pedestrian access across the car park from the flats on Abbotsmead Place requires careful consideration, including careful lighting. There is a significant retired and elderly population in the flats and their access to Caversham Centre takes them across the car park.

20 cycle parking spaces in the covered part of the car park is an inadequate provision and poorly located. It will not encourage cycle use. Cycle parking is needed close to the shops and in an area with pedestrian flows and well observed, to discourage theft and vandalism. Without this there will be inappropriate cycle parking on railings and against shop fronts.

Comments received include:

- Cycle facilities and routes into, and through, the Centre should be improved. They are poor at present and opportunities to enhance them have been overlooked in the transport statement. In particular, the redevelopment offers the chance to provide a safer cycle route from the centre of Caversham to the new river bridge. Indeed the developers' brochure puts first in its list of opportunities: 'improve links to the river, including the new Thames cycle/pedestrian bridge'. The present proposals neglect this opportunity as far as cyclists are concerned.
- Very surprised that the developers' proposals offer nothing for cyclists at all (and precious little for pedestrians for that matter).
- Is there enough pedestrian access from the car park to Church Street?
- I would regret losing the facility of the passageway by Waitrose - does the community not have a right of way here? Having to go through the store, and then only during opening hours, is not an adequate substitute for the ease of going through the passageway at any time of day or night
- Cycle route (R40/NCR5) is entirely unlinked to the new development.
- Cycle parking is marked in the furthest possible corner of the car park. Dark under the ramp, and not connected in any way to the cycle paths. Access appears to require a lengthy circuitous route through poorly lit car park - both dangerous and unnecessary. The cycle parking is much further away than at present (between Iceland and Waitrose).
- Recognise that people on bikes are more often 'popping down' for a short errand (not a trolley load), so there is a greater emphasis on being quick. To separate cycles from the actual car park (as someone who both cycles and drives, mixing bikes with lots of reversing cars is a bad idea).

Public Toilets

We have received concerns about the availability of public toilets outside Waitrose opening hours and suggest this should be considered further. If the toilets were provided instead of a kiosk, they could be accessed from the outside but serviced from within.

Planning Documents

It is unfortunate that the accompanying reports are unnecessarily long and wordy. It is also notable that no plans show the visual relationship with other buildings. For example, the relationship between the two sides of Church Street is not shown, nor the height of Block A in relation to other buildings. It is also disappointing that the Transport Assessment includes inaccuracies on junction changes in the past few years and in the conclusions on traffic capacity. It would be useful to see the traffic survey results as the TA Appendices don't appear to be on the RBC website.

Comments received included:

- I have to say that it is extremely difficult to penetrate the verbiage and to grasp the detail of what is proposed

Yours sincerely

Helen Lambert
CADRA Chair

30 July 2014