

From the Lookout Post – July 2014

CADRA AGM and Local Planning

Over seventy people attended the CADRA AGM and presentation on Local Planning. It came at a busy time, just as the first presentations were being made on plans for St Martin's Centre and arrangements for construction access across Christchurch Meadows for the new Pedestrian/Cycle Bridge. A summary of CADRA's activities over the past year highlighted work on the 'Sharing our Streets' project. Copies were available of the draft Vision Statement, which is the first step towards establishing an agreed plan to improve traffic measures through the centre of Caversham.

'To enhance Caversham centre as a high quality place for shopping, working, living and leisure and to promote an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable village centre for the 21st Century'

A show of hands confirmed support for the Vision, which was also circulated for comment to CADRA members and Caversham Traders. More detail of the 'Sharing our Streets' project is available at www.cadra.org.uk.

Professor Gavin Parker, Chair of Planning Studies at Reading University then talked about the UK planning system in relation to other countries across the world and the changes brought in by the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) in 2012. The 'assumption in favour of sustainable development', which is central to the NPPF, is defined locally by the Reading Local Plan. This is highly significant as, without an approved Local Plan, applications are decided on the very broad policies of the NPPF.

Professor Parker went on to talk about Neighbourhood Planning. This is designed to provide local empowerment as part of Localism but also to achieve growth. Where there is no Parish Council, a Neighbourhood Forum would be set up and one of the early decisions would be to decide on the Neighbourhood Boundary. In both Woodcote and Sonning Common, local people have recognised that their village will expand and have chosen to proceed with Neighbourhood Planning in order to shape and direct development. Professor Parker kindly made his presentation available and there is a link from www.cadra.org.uk



Professor Parker responds to questions

Lynette Baker, Area Planning Officer at the Council, talked about the process to develop the Local Plan and the different policy levels within it. A Housing Needs Assessment is in progress for Reading and its conclusions will be significant in determining housing plans for the Borough. Responding to a question on building in the flood plane, she highlighted the importance of the report by Sir Michael Pitt in 2007.

In determining individual planning applications, officers must consider whether the plan constitutes 'Permitted Development'. Among other issues, they consider 'unneighbourliness' which includes the question of safeguarding the amenity of neighbouring properties. In Reading, 94% of applications are delegated to officers to decide but Ward Councillors may decide to 'call in' an application to be decided by the Planning Application Committee. Enforcement of planning conditions is largely a reactive process following complaints made to the Council.

The evening came to a close with a retiring collection for the Alzheimer's Society. Many people stayed to discuss local issues and put individual questions to the visiting speakers. Daniel Pagella from the team at The Heights Primary School was available to explain progress and respond to questions.

The Pedestrian Cycle Bridge

A planning application was submitted for the detailed construction programming of the new bridge and is likely to be decided at the June Planning Application Committee, before this paper appears. Access for construction vehicles will be from George Street, just past the laundry site. Seven poplar trees will be removed to create the temporary entrance. Work on the bridge is scheduled to start autumn 2014 for completion Spring 2015. Work to relocate some of the children's' play area is scheduled to be completed before the 2014 summer holiday.



The exhibition in Caversham Library

During last winter's storms, three of the poplar trees fell across George Street and were found to be suffering from internal white rot. This has led to concern about the stability of the rest of the avenue of Lombardy Poplars which is such a delight to see, when you arrive in Caversham over Reading Bridge. The Council is discussing a complete replacement of the avenue of trees.



Arriving in Caversham over Reading Bridge

St Martin's Centre

The state of the 1960s St Martin's Precinct has been a common complaint for many years. Hermes, who bought the property in 2007, has made a number of improvements including refurbishment of

the upper floor flats on Church Street and extensive repairs to drainage. Late in 2013, there was an informal indication that more ambitious plans were being developed.

In May, representatives from Hermes and the design team at Barton Willmore organised a series of presentations on outline plans and public sessions were held on 9 and 10 May. In total, over 500 people attended. The plans were then made available on a new website, www.stmartinscentre-caversham.co.uk/



CADRA committee members Paul Matthews and Helen Lambert at the exhibition on St Martin's Centre

A major change will be the expansion of Waitrose, across the passage and into the space now occupied by Superdrug. The expanded store will have new entrances on Church Street and onto the car park and new public toilets (replacing the current toilet block) will be provided inside Waitrose. The QS store will close and Superdrug will move into that space.

At the end of the precinct, nearest the Telephone Exchange, a new building will include a Pizza Express restaurant on the ground floor and new residential accommodation above. Residential accommodation will also be added above Boots and Costa. The Iceland building will be extended upwards and it is hoped to provide a small cinema with associated bar and restaurant.

The layout of the car park will be changed and an open deck built over the Waitrose car park with ramps for cars and a lift for pedestrians. The outer walls will be timber clad with planting and there will be a net increase of 52 spaces. The upper deck will provide level access to Reflex. While footpaths across the car park are to be reviewed, the entrance and exit to the car park and the Waitrose delivery area will remain unchanged. A new service area for other businesses will be created which will be gated during the day and deliveries restricted to the evening. A new square,

Caversham Square, will be created around the new trees at the back of the butcher's and this may be suitable for small local events.

The roots of the trees in the St Martin's Square have been causing many problems, damaging drains and lifting the paving. These are to be removed and new trees will be planted with root barriers to prevent further damage. It is not yet entirely clear whether the trees at the front of St Martin's are Square or the street trees near the Telephone Exchange are to be retained. New trees along the back are shown on the drawings, lining the edge of the car park.

The individual shop fronts along Church Street will be replaced to bring more light into the shops and the shop signs will be brought forward to the front of the awnings.

During the consultation, people were asked to say what they liked about the plans and to make comments - specifically on the type of building materials shown. At the end of this process, Barton Willmore indicated that there had been a strong reaction against the timber and render finish shown for the new block by the Telephone Exchange and for the upward extension over Boots and Costa.

The Caversham Traders Association and CADRA (Caversham and District Residents' Association) have kept in close touch since the proposals were first announced. The proportion of independent traders is part of the essential local character and it is important that the independents can continue to thrive. The sense of village, which comes partly from the remaining Victorian buildings, is also precious to many people. For years, we have all been asking for a regeneration of the old 1960s precinct. This should be an opportunity to improve the 1960s buildings, to improve the relationship between old and new and to resolve some existing problems. The scheme has great potential for Caversham. Structurally and architecturally, it has to fit around much of the existing building. Has it yet arrived at a design which retains a distinctive centre with character?

Comments prior to the formal planning application have now closed. There will be the usual opportunity to comment through the planning process. Once the application is decided, Hermes hopes to start work in March 2015. The first stage would be the Waitrose expansion and car park. Phasing is designed to allow all businesses to remain open with intended completion March 2016.