



St Martin's Centre Redevelopment –pre-application engagement

Comments from the Caversham and District Residents' Association May 2014

The association and its members welcome the intention to revitalise the 1960s development in Caversham, which has long been a widespread concern. From our discussions, we believe there is considerable support for revitalisation but there are reservations on the scale and appearance of the developments shown in the exhibitions 8 to 10 May 2014.

A Vision for Caversham Centre

The main concerns expressed to us, concern the Church Street frontage. During the presentations, reference was made to a High Street and to the larger centres owned and managed by Hermes. The popularity and commercial success of Caversham Centre owes much to the mix of independent traders and large chains and to the historic character and the much talked of 'village feel' which is highly valued by local people.

CADRA and the Caversham Traders have developed a Vision statement for Caversham which is receiving strong local support from both traders and residents (attached).

'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'

The joint consultation, in late 2013, showed strong support from all respondents for improvements in Caversham Centre. Our joint intention is to promote clear design ideas to reinforce and support the physical structure of the village centre. We hope to build upon its strengths as a historic Thames crossing, whilst recognising its weaknesses and identify specific opportunities for development and enhancement.

As a reference point for design, we suggest that local centres such as Didsbury, Manchester would be useful. Didsbury's growing commercial success as a local centre draws heavily from its historic character and from the balance of independents and larger chains. Like Caversham, it is a popular local centre and a 'destination'. There are also many parallels with the other Thames Crossing settlements including Marlow and Henley which, interestingly, have a population less than half that of Caversham. We would like to see enhancements to the whole of Caversham Centre which would improve the pedestrian experience for shoppers and leisure users and help to reinforce Caversham as a 'destination'.

The Church Street Frontage

The nearest listed building to St Martin's Centre is the iconic Caversham Library which is Grade II listed and Caversham's most distinguished public building. Built in 1907, in 'Free Renaissance Style' with a quirky mix of different elements, it presents many opportunities as a reference point for design. While the existing 1960's development detracts in many ways from the sense of local history, this is an opportunity to improve the relationship between old and new and to overcome some of the concerns about the 1960s precinct.

With that in mind, we would like to express concerns about the indicative design and the materials shown across the Church Street frontage. We are aware that the proposed use of timber and render has been widely criticised by those responding, partly due to its rapid deterioration in a heavily polluted area. We strongly support that concern.

We believe that the design of both the upward extension over Boots and Costa and the western end nearer to the telephone exchange needs a radical review of design, materials and roofline. The central building is very close to Caversham Library and the western end will be the first view of the centre after crossing Caversham Bridge. The impression given (while not being Neo-Victorian) should be one of a distinctive centre with character and obviously different from that of a town centre high street.

There is a need to define the frontage with different materials and planting which fit in with the vision for Caversham, including more use of brick and stone. The western area has some of the very few street trees in Caversham and their loss would be significant. We accept the need to remove and replace the trees inside the square. However, the trees near Costa at the front of the square are an important feature of the Church Street frontage and their loss would be significant.

We do not believe the bland monochrome brick finish of the main Waitrose building merits being a reference point for design. We would like to see a review of the proposed frontage for Superdrug. Quality materials would be more appropriate to Caversham.

The Car Park and 'back' of the buildings

We question whether an additional 52 public parking spaces will be sufficient. Parking pressures are already a factor in local people shopping elsewhere and new facilities will increase the demand for spaces. Cruising for spaces is one of the main reasons for queues of traffic out of Archway Road. It is disappointing that the opportunity has not been taken to improve the Archway Road entrance and the traffic in and out of the car park.

Even with the internal access through Waitrose, it is likely that there will be additional pedestrian traffic past the Waitrose loading area and through Archway Road. This is neither conducive nor safe for pedestrians, particularly when deliveries are being made and we believe improvements are necessary for pedestrians.

The designs for the Iceland and Leisure complex, both from the rear car park and from the redeveloped St Martins Square, look bleak, bland and large. We would like to see more

imaginative features there, to break up the scale and give a 'quality look' consistent with the aspirations to create a 'sense of arrival'.

We welcome the assurance that cycle and pedestrian routes, including those to the river, will be improved.

Important Detail

As detailed design progresses, we would like to see detailed planning for:

- A suitable location for the **bottle banks**.
- A new site for the **community notice** board in the existing square. This is an important community resource. We hope that the opportunity can be taken to identify an appropriate location for a replacement board, perhaps constructed with traditional materials and craftsmanship as a community project.
- Fixings and connections for **Christmas decorations** as requested by the Caversham Traders Association.
- Safe pedestrian routes across the car park, particularly for the lower level of the Waitrose car park, with very careful **lighting** to create a safe environment in the dark evenings. The adjacent Abbotsmead flats accommodate many older people and the car park is their pedestrian route to the shops.
- Generous **cycle parking** in areas which are well observed and therefore less prone to theft and vandalism.
- **Disabled parking** at ground level close to the Waitrose entrance.

Ongoing Management

The layout of the car park, with service deliveries across it, implies careful regular management and this should be factored in to the plans. Similarly, newly planted trees will need regular care and maintenance.

Caversham Centre benefits substantially from the work of the Caversham Traders Association, most of whose officers run independent businesses. We hope that Hermes will wish to continue their support of the association and encourage the larger businesses to do the same.

A prominent display about the role of Hermes as owner of the precinct would help to give a sense of involvement in the centre. This might be included with the replacement community notice board.

Thank you

We were grateful for the opportunity for our members to attend a presentation prior to the public exhibitions and to comment prior to the formal planning application. We are very interested to keep in touch as the project moves forward.

www.cadra.org.uk

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Vision statement attached.