

OPEN SESSION: There were no members of public present.

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF RINGWOOD TOWN COUNCIL

Held on Wednesday 5th September 2007 at 7.00pm

Prior to the commencement of the meeting, District Cllr Treleaven said that he hoped the District Council's consultation document on the Furlong Car Park reflected the wishes of those members of the Town Council who had been part of the Ringwood Town Centre Steering Group. He said that this would be a public-led consultation, with four options being presented for consideration, of which the District Council did not have a preferred view.

Apologies

The Town Clerk reported that apologies for absence had been received from Cllr D Cole.

Declarations of Interest

Cllrs Ford, Cracknell, Heron and B Terry declared a personal but not prejudicial interest as they were, or had been, members of the District Council's Ringwood Town Centre Steering Group.

PRESENT: Cllr B H Terry (Town Mayor)
Cllr N J Chard
Cllr N R G Clarke
Cllr D Cracknell
Cllr M Daly
Cllr L C Ford
Cllr J D Heron
Cllr M A Steele
Cllr Mrs J Terry
Cllr M J Urwin
Cllr A C Wiseman

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr T Simpson, Town Clerk
Mrs J Stannard, Deputy Town Clerk

C/4738

MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the Meeting held on 25th July 2007, having been circulated, were approved and signed as a correct record.

C/4739

EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS

RESOLVED: That in view of the confidential nature of the business about to be transacted, it was advisable in the public interest that the press and public be temporarily excluded and they were instructed to withdraw.

C/4740

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

RESOLVED: That Standing Orders be suspended to allow members to speak more than once and allow a free and open debate.

POSSIBLE DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH WEST CORNER OF THE FURLONG

The Town Clerk explained that the reason for this meeting was to enable Members to review the four options contained in the District Council's consultation document on the Furlong Car Park, which was due to be distributed to all households in the next two weeks, and to determine whether or not the Council should express a view on all or any of those options.

He said that, under government guidelines contained in Planning Policy Statement 6 (PPS6), the District Council was required to actively promote and develop town centres and this was the reason for commissioning shopping consultants to look at the future economic viability of the town.

Cllr Heron, who had previously been the Chairman of the Ringwood Town Centre Steering Group, explained that over the years a number of developers had come forward with various schemes for development in the town, over which the public had no influence. However, as the Furlong Car Park was in the District Council's ownership and this area was identified for development in the Local Plan, there was now a chance for the District Council to take the lead and deliver appropriate development that was right for the town and would benefit the whole town. Prior to public consultation, architects had been appointed to produce a draft study of how development could take place in this area and to look into the financial viability of various options. He said that the public consultation document produced by the District Council was very concise and did not convey the overriding issues, such as whether all options were viable and how any development would be implemented. However, there was a need to get a clear direction from the public before proceeding any further. He concluded by saying that this was a one-off opportunity for the town to take a major leap forward and to address issues that have failed to be looked at for a number of years.

Cllr Cracknell believed that the people of the town would support Option 1. However, he said that the consultation document was not clear and felt that the public needed to be more informed about the cost of all the options. He added that he would not want to see the proposed public square detract from the Market Square.

Cllr Ford said that she had originally been opposed to any development on the Furlong Car Park. However, as a member of the Ringwood Town Centre Steering Group, she had met the architects, who were used to working in heritage areas and had a real feeling for the ambience of the town. She would like to see Option 1 delivered and explained that the different elements within that option were flexible.

Cllr Clarke was concerned that the proposal in Option 1 did not address the long term viability of High Street, Southampton Road and Market Place. He said that the success of the Furlong Shopping Centre had captured visitors who would have historically visited High Street, and by building more shops on the Furlong Car Park, this would enhance the shopping magnet of the Furlong area, and may well kill off the historic town. Although the District Council's shopping consultants had identified the need to plan for an extra 4,400 square metres of retail floorspace by 2018, he did not believe that this reflected demand, particularly as internet shopping was becoming more popular. In addition, he felt that, if planning permission was granted for the proposed extension of the Furlong Shopping Centre through to the High Street, this development should be tested before any new retail development was considered. He felt that the Council should respond to the results of the Town Plan consultation and promote pedestrianisation of the High Street to create a unique small market town.

Cllr Chard was concerned that any new development would require additional parking, which in turn would generate more traffic. He said that the current infrastructure was not adequate and shoppers may be driven away if traffic movement in the town deteriorated.

Cllr Mrs Wiseman was concerned that Option 1 appeared to split the town. She was concerned that there was not sufficient detail to show how big or high the proposed buildings would be, whether it would overshadow the Meeting House or block the view of the Parish Church. There was also no indication of how the proposed community hall would be operated or funded.

Other members felt strongly that the town could not stand still and there was a need to develop and attract more people into the town to enhance the viability of its long term future. However, it was accepted that any development would have to be carefully designed and managed to avoid major disruption.

Cllr Heron responded to some of the concerns raised. He said that there was no detail of design as the District Council needed to determine whether the volume of development would be acceptable to the people of the town. If the public responded favourably, there would then be a whole new discussion on the design and implementation. Initial ideas from the architects showed a design that enhanced the setting of historic buildings, such as the Meeting House, and demonstrated ways to open up access to the rest of the town. With regard to the High Street, he said that the historic buildings were not suitable for modern high volume retailers and felt that this historic part of the town would only survive if it continued to offer a specialist market. The best way to ensure its survival was to make Ringwood a really good shopping experience to draw people into the town and to improve the links from the Furlong area to the High Street. On the subject of traffic, he did not believe that congestion would turn people away from the town. However, he said that there was a need to look at the road layout and supported the need for a relief road. He did not believe that pedestrianisation of the High Street could be achieved as independent shops could not determine delivery times and loading/unloading could not therefore be restricted to specific times. However, he hoped that a solution could be found to dissuade excessive through traffic. Lastly, he was of the opinion that the proposed extension of the Furlong Shopping Centre could not go ahead without a decision being taken on the Furlong Car Park as there was a need to address the need for increased parking and deliveries.

Cllr Cracknell left the meeting at 7.45pm.

The Town Clerk stated that the second priority to come out of the Town Plan consultation was a community hall/cinema. However, the cost of providing such a facility would increase the Council's precept by 50%. He said that the only feasible way to provide a community facility was to proceed with Option 1, which would have no capital financial implications to either the District or Town Council.

Cllr Clarke said that residents may decide they do not want a community hall if the only way to get it was going to completely change the look of the town. He also did not believe that a community hall of the size proposed could be sustained. However, Cllr Heron said that it could be sustained if the design was dynamic and tailored to demand.

Cllr Terry said that the future of the town was in the hands of the community. The Town Council had had opportunities to do things in the past and had sat on the fence. He said that now was the time to show leadership.

Cllr Heron proposed that the Council support Option 1 in principle. This was seconded by Cllr Ford. Members voted on this proposal resulting in 8 in favour, 1 abstention and 1 against. Cllr Mrs Wiseman asked that her objection be recorded.

Cllr Clarke asked if a larger retail impact assessment could be commissioned to show the impact of such a development on the viability of the rest of the town. However, it was noted that this issued would be addressed in any planning application.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the Council expresses its support for Option 1;
- 2) That the Council issue a newsletter explaining its views by taking advertising space in the Ringwood and Fordingbridge News;
- 3) That Ringwood School and other schools be provided with sufficient copies of the newsletter for distribution to pupils; and
- 4) That the Newsletter Editorial Panel be authorised to approve the content of the newsletter.

There being no further business, the Town Mayor closed the meeting at 8.20pm.