

WICKFORD TOWN CENTRE MASTER PLAN:

Report by the Cabinet Member for Development and Regeneration
Enquiries to Ian Syers, Assistant Chief Planner on 01268 294150

PURPOSE OF REPORT AND DECISION AREAS

To consider the updated Wickford Town Centre Master Plan, which has been revised taking account of, inter alia, the responses from the public consultation exercise. A copy of the revised Plan is attached at **Enclosure No. 1**.

RECOMMENDED:

That the Wickford Town Centre Master Plan be approved on the basis of its being a material consideration in the determination of planning applications relating to Wickford Town Centre.

BACKGROUND

Preparation of the Master Plan started in November 2004 and progressed through five consultation exercises between November 2004 and April 2005.

This latest, more formal, consultation followed the requirements of Regulation 17 of the Town and Country Planning (Local Development) (England) Regulations 2004. The consultation period extended from 18 November 2005 to 16 December 2005.

The consultation process is set out in **Enclosure No. 2**.

RESULTS OF CONSULTATION EXERCISE

The results of the consultation exercise are set out in **Enclosure No. 3**. In summary, the issues raised related to:

Overall, 684 completed questionnaires were received. The objectives and vision set out in the Wickford Town Centre Master Plan were supported by 63% of respondents (excluding statutory consultees), and the following recurring themes emerged during the analysis of the consultation questionnaires:

- Too much residential development is proposed
- Impact on services from increased population
- Crime and Disorder Concerns
- Environmental Issues
- Retain the identity of Wickford
- Design Issues
- Parking provision
- Resistance to Multi-Storey developments

Comments were received in respect of the Plan from 7 statutory consultees (Network Rail, Anglian Water, Essex Police, Sport England, Environment Agency, ECC Schools Service and English Nature) and their views are also summarised in **Enclosure No. 3**.

RESPONSES TO PRINCIPAL COMMENTS EMERGING FROM THE
CONSULTATION EXERCISE

Town Centre wide topics

• Too much residential

Wickford, together with Billericay and Basildon, has to play its part in meeting the housing targets set by the Regional Spatial Strategy. The Council has been preparing its local planning documents on the basis (pro-rata) of the targets set out in the draft East of England RSS, namely, 10,700 units between 2001 and 2021. The issue for Wickford, is not so much whether, or, how much, residential development should take place, but where. If the residential development does not take place in the Town Centre, it would have to be located in the Green Belt, on the edge of Wickford. This would increase substantially vehicle movements into the Town Centre, whereas residential development in the Town Centre, would mean that future residents would not need to use cars to access shops and other Town Centre facilities.

The policy of making the most use of Town Centre land for residential accommodation would help to boost the general economy and encourage the development of a night time economy in the Town Centre and is very much in line with Government planning guidelines, regarding sustainable development. In addition, it helps to protect Green Belt land around Wickford from development.

The problems associated with residential development, i.e. pressure on infrastructure and services, would take place whether the development took place in a peripheral location or in the Town Centre, but the advantage of Town Centre development, is that a significantly reduced amount of traffic would be generated.

• Impact on Services

Inevitably, an increased population in Wickford would need an expansion in the services available in terms of health, education etc. It is intended that funding from the growth area sources administered by the ODPM be sought, as well as from developers, to enhance the level of services provided for Wickford residents.

• Crime and Disorder

Investment in the Town Centre must take this factor into account, by ensuring, through appropriate design in respect of development schemes, that the potential for crime and disorder is minimised. The addition of a significant residential element into the Town Centre, it is reasonable to suggest, would reduce the potential for crime and disorder.

- Improving the Environment

This is an important consideration that will form part of all development schemes within the Town Centre, including those comprising public investment. The River Crouch, referred to by many respondents, at present forms a harsh urban feature, as a result of its heavily engineered river channel. Proposals to soften the Crouch and make it appear more natural will be brought forward for evaluation. It is intended that these will not only improve the appearance of the river, but also provide scope for the creation of wildlife habitats.

- Retention of Wickford's Identity

It must be recognised that Wickford Town Centre does not, generally speaking, provide an attractive townscape. It has very few historic buildings and the quality of many of the buildings erected during the last century leaves something to be desired.

The Town Centre needs to change in response to the large amount of residential development that has taken place in Wickford over the past 30 years or so. Whilst large residential areas have been built, the Town Centre has remained almost unchanged.

The relative sparsity of historic buildings in the Town Centre, combined with the complete lack of any conservation areas, means that there is potential for radical change. The development of relatively high rise buildings would provide more of a sense of place and identity than that currently existing, and act as a focus for the whole of the town.

The Town Centre, at present, does not reflect the scale of Wickford/Runwell, and the redevelopment of currently under used sites there, would provide a more attractive environment, one that is in tune with the town's rapidly growing population.

- Design

The main thrust of the plan is to intensify the scale of development in the Town Centre and, in doing so, any buildings erected will, inevitably, by virtue of their height, be highly visible. It is essential, therefore, that design of these buildings is made as attractive as reasonably possible, and that high quality materials are used. It is the intention of the local planning authority that the design of all schemes submitted in the form of planning applications, is scrutinised with a view to securing the best possible design in the circumstances.

- Parking Provision

The need for additional car parking in the Town Centre is recognised in the proposals in order to make the best use of available Town Centre land and it is for this reason that two multi-storey car parks are proposed. Surface car parking will only remain available to a relatively small degree. Car parking,

therefore, will have to be provided by use of decking. It is intended that the two new decked car parks be of an attractive design and built of materials appropriate in a town centre. In this fashion the Town Centre car parks will actually be made more attractive than the current surface car parking.

Scope for anti-social activities exists in many locations, and in addition to design, it is a management responsibility issue to ensure that this is minimised as far as possible.

- Resistance to Multi-Storey Development

Whilst it may be understandable that high rise development is viewed with some misgivings, developments five to six storeys in height would be reasonable in the Town Centre. In this way, the image and profile of the town would be raised, reflecting better the importance of this rapidly growing town, well located in relation to major road and rail routes.

Development of a relatively high density, would provide more opportunities to meet local housing and employment needs.

Area Related Issues

- High Street:

Pedestrianisation:

A substantial number of respondents have requested that the High Street be pedestrianised. At this stage it is not possible to give a firm commitment on this question, as further studies need to be conducted to ensure that the Town Centre could continue to operate successfully.

A range of options need to be considered, from full to partial closure (i.e. closure to all vehicles during daytime period, or closure of High Street to certain types of vehicles). A further option, is narrowing the carriageway, so that traffic passes in one direction only.

This is an issue that requires in-depth consideration, and is not possible within the time frame for preparation of the Master Plan, to determine this question definitively at this time. Any further study of the potential for pedestrianisation will include a comprehensive traffic study and review of parking provision both on and off street.

Diverse Range of Shops:

Small shop units would be encouraged to be provided as part of any retail development schemes, and in disposing of the market, the Council can stipulate, in relation to the ground units, that they each be of small floor space only, thereby discouraging more chain stores in the Town Centre.

- Station Gateway

Improvement of the Facilities for Accessing the Station:

The Council will ensure, in relation to any development schemes in the vicinity of the station, that access, be it by road or on foot, is optimised.

- Public and Health Focus

A strong body of opinion felt that more extensive and better public/social facilities were needed in the town. It is intended that the integrated service centre will provide a wider range and larger capacity of medical services than that currently existing, and that the library and swimming pool be improved significantly on redevelopment. In enhancing these facilities, continuity of operation cannot, however, be guaranteed.

- Eastern Extension

Many people expressed the view that they did not wish to see a multi-storey car park on the existing Council car park behind Somerfields. However, a well designed structure, built in good materials, would enable a quality, mixed residential and business development to take place on the remainder of the site. The sum effect of this development on the existing car park would be to improve considerably the appearance of this part of the Town Centre. At present this large surface car park detracts considerably from the amenity value of the Town Centre.

Development of a significant volume of the open space to the east of Golden Jubilee Way has given rise to concern. This has been acknowledged, in part, by reducing substantially the scale of the residential development proposed in this location. Any development would be set well back from the Radwinter Drive/Golden Jubilee Way junction, and, by this means, many of the trees on the site would be retained.

Development would be restricted largely to the open grassed area having less amenity value. Carefully designed residential development, would help to police the footpath heavily used by residents of the Wick walking to the Town Centre.

- Southern Gateway

Many respondents have asked that restaurants and quality retail units be provided in this part of the Town Centre. To ensure that this happens, it is essential that any development in this area is well designed, and it is intended that the Council will use its development control powers to ensure that only development of high quality is built here.

Affordable leisure facilities are requested by a significant number of respondents and whilst the Council cannot guarantee this, it is likely, in view of the area's location in the Town Centre, that leisure facilities would be provided of a type to attract a wide range and number of people, making it likely that they would be affordable.

- Riverside Living

Many have commented that environmental enhancements are needed in this part of the town. It is recognised that in order to provide attractive living conditions for new residents, the area adjoining the River Crouch needs to be improved considerably.

Many of these environmental improvements would be undertaken by the developers themselves. However, consideration should be given to improving the appearance of the harsh urban concrete channel through which the River Crouch flows. Whilst the appearance of the channel is not critical in many parts of the Town Centre, in this quarter, where a significant new residential element is proposed, it is crucial that the river is made as attractive as possible. The Council will consider a range of schemes, with a view to carrying out the most appropriate one.

Flood risk has been identified as a potential hazard by a significant number of residents, in the event of the channel in which the River Crouch flows being changed in any way, or water level being kept artificially high. No works would be carried out without the approval of the Environment Agency, and, naturally the Council would not promote any works that might result in a significant increase in the flood risk potential of the river in the Town Centre.

PRINCIPAL AMENDMENTS TO THE PLAN

The Plan has been changed from the document considered during the recent public consultation exercise, in the following ways:

- It has been updated in the light of changed circumstances
- Errors of fact have been corrected
- Wording and style have been made more appropriate
- Public and Health – the proposed community centre has been included in the Integrated Service Centre, thereby freeing up the current library/community centre site for a mixed retail/residential development. The number of residential units on site E has been increased, accordingly, from 24 to 36 in table 4.1. By including the community centre use into the Integrated Service Centre, the existing somewhat undistinguished 1960s single storey structure would be removed.
- Eastern Extension – The number of units on the open space (H1/2) adjoining the railway line has been reduced from 66 to 30. It is acknowledged that a residential development on the scale originally proposed, would appear overdominant and obtrusive at this important gateway into the Town Centre. A supporting text in respect of this proposal has been introduced.

- Riverside Living – to reflect the Development Control Committee’s resolution to grant planning permission for 173 flats on the north side of Lower Southend Road, the A1 figure in table 4.1 has been increased from 86 to 173. In the light of the current application for 84 flats on the car sales site in Runwell Road, the B figure has increased from 35 to 80.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Financial Implications

Any financial implications for the Council arising from the provisions of the Plan, are not relevant to the determination of the Plan’s content.

Risk Management Implications

Whilst the Plan identifies opportunities for new development in Wickford Town Centre, land is not, per se, allocated for development in the Plan. It is only in respect of any subsequent planning applications that risk issues, such as flooding and highway safety, would be fully considered.

Call In Status

This decision is not eligible for call in under the Council’s Procedure Rules.

Enclosures

- Enclosure No. 1 - Wickford Town Centre Master Plan
- Enclosure No. 2 - Consultation Process
- Enclosure No. 3 - Consultation Results

Background Papers

1. Basildon District Local Plan 1998.
2. Basildon District Replacement Local Plan – Re-deposit 2005.
3. Representations and completed questionnaires in respect of draft Wickford Town Centre Master Plan.
4. Comments of statutory consultees in respect of draft Wickford Town Centre Master Plan.

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