

LOCAL DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK ADVISORY GROUP

6 SEPTEMBER 2006

WOLVERTON AREA ACTION PLAN: ISSUES REGARDING REDEVELOPMENT OF THE AGORA

Accountable Cabinet Member: Councillor Chris Williams

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1. Purpose

- 1.1 To highlight issues and options regarding the redevelopment of the Agora site and it's adjoining car park within Wolverton.
- 1.2 To seek the views of the Panel on a suggestion from Milton Keynes Partnerships that the Council's owned car park in Church Street be disposed of and developed in order to facilitate viable redevelopment of the Agora site.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 The Panel recommends to Cabinet: -
 - a) That the Council's owned car park in Church Street should/should not be disposed of to facilitate redevelopment of the Agora site.

3. Background

- 3.1 The Agora building, see attached plan, is located between Church Street to the north and the Town Square to the south, bisecting Radcliffe Street at the heart of Wolverton town centre. It was constructed in 1979 with support from the Milton Keynes Development Corporation. According to the Wolverton Regeneration Strategy, 'historically, the building has supported a mix of uses including a market as well as leisure, commercial and other retail uses at various times. Over the past 25 years this mix has declined and the main ground floor of the building is now given over to store holders who trade on license agreements, mostly selling discount quality household goods.'
- 3.2 The Wolverton Regeneration Strategy acknowledged that the current use of the property for discount retailing contributed to the overall mix of retailing within the town but that the Agora's appeal is limited and local in nature and the current use does not attract demand from a wider catchment area. Community consultation on the Regeneration Strategy identified widespread concern and criticism of the Agora's design and the detrimental impact that this has upon the character of the town. The Regeneration Strategy said that 'In its current form the building relates very badly to its surroundings and is perceived as being wholly unsympathetic to the rest of the town centre. The

structure also provides an impermeable barrier between the Town Square area and the rest of the Town Centre/Church Street.’ The Council’s adopted Local Plan (2005) currently defines the primary shopping area of Wolverton as including retail units within the Agora with frontages onto Church Street, including the car park.

- 3.3 Recent public consultation on the Wolverton Area Action Plan Issues and Options reported to the previous meeting of the Panel on 10th July indicated that around 90% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that a building(s) more in keeping with the town should replace the Agora.

4. Proposals in the Wolverton Regeneration Strategy

4.1 The Wolverton Regeneration Strategy adopted by the Council as Supplementary Planning Guidance in 2004 made the following proposals: -

- To demolish the Agora and adjoining structures/constructions and redevelop the site (see attached indicative plan for further details).
- To replace the existing Agora building by a central market hall to include a new unit for the existing retail uses, the Co-op food store and the Post Office.
- To reconnect Radcliffe Street (as it was originally) to allow vehicular and pedestrian movement between the Square and Stratford road.
- Development should seek to enhance connectivity within the town centre to Church Street and Stratford road from the Square.
- The building height of new development within the site area to range from 2–3 storeys with key landmark buildings adjacent to the new Market Hall at 4 storeys where appropriate. However, the technicality of this was to be determined at the detailed design stage.

5. Implications

Policy

5.1 To achieve the form of development envisaged in the Wolverton Regeneration Strategy (putting to one side the added complication that the building is not in public ownership) some form of subsidy or ‘gap funding’ will be required to facilitate the redevelopment of the existing Agora site. This is because the value of replacement development on the existing Agora building site is worth less than the current value of the existing Agora building. Officers have been working with Milton Keynes Partnerships about how this funding gap can be narrowed.

5.2 There are three main mechanisms to narrowing the funding gap: -

- Increasing the size of the developable area in this respect work with MKP has focused on redeveloping the Council owned car park adjacent to the Agora between St George’s Church and Church Street (more on this later).

- Permitting a denser form of development on the existing Agora site and its adjacent car park.
- Seeking a grant or subsidy from another source

Preliminary work has suggested that even if the Agora and its adjacent Council car park are developed with a denser form of mixed-use development for retail and residential development, a funding gap of £2-4 million still exists, which will have to be obtained from another source. Officer discussions with MKP have focused on whether the Council is prepared to dispose of its car park for development at nil cost with the remaining gap funding being obtained by MKP. An interesting finding of this work is that in assessing a mixed-use development scheme incorporating retail and residential floorspace at current land values, in order to minimise the amount of subsidy required, the amount of residential development should be maximised.

Resources- Property issues

- 5.3 The Council owns the car park adjoining the Agora Centre, which extends to approximately 0.56 hectares (1.39 acres). The car park is leased to the Centre's owners, Arcadia Promotions, for a period until May 2087. MKC's ownership is affected also by claw back to EP regarding any development of the land. The proposal from MKP suggests that MKC will incorporate/sell the freehold of the car park into the scheme at nil cost. There are no current indications that the Centre owners, or EP are making a similar gesture although discussions are at an early stage. While the car park is intended to serve the Agora, it may act as a more general car park for the locality. This issue will need to be investigated further. A parking and transport study for Wolverton is currently under way and expected to report next month.
- 5.4 The Council's land does have development potential. However, the Council's ability to develop its land is dependant upon the lease coming to an end, or negotiations to terminate this early. Allowing the Council's land to be developed at nil value will mean that the Council is progressing a sale at under value. The general Disposal Consent permits the Council to sell land below market value for social, economic or environmental well being purposes, up to a maximum of £2M. More detailed investigations into the requirements for this will be needed, particularly regarding E.U. state aid rules.

Legal

- 5.5 As a Development Plan Document (DPD) when adopted the Wolverton Area Action Plan will be a material consideration in determining planning applications within Wolverton.

E-Government

- 5.6 This report and other Area Action Plan documents will be available on line.

Local Development Scheme

- 5.7 The production of any Area Action Plan for Wolverton features in the Council's Local Development Scheme (LDS) for 2006-2009, which is the subject of a separate report on this agenda. The LDS will be considered by the Cabinet and subsequently forwarded to the Government Office of the South East (GOSE) for consideration.

Other Issues

- 5.8 Among the issues for Panel Members to consider and discuss are: -
- (a) Subject to further discussions with MKP and any necessary caveats to safeguard the Council's interests, are members agreeable in principle to dispose of and redevelop the Council owned car park on Church Street with the proceeds being used to facilitate development of the Agora site?
 - (b) In order to make that development viable, would members be comfortable in seeking limited S106 contributions from any development on the car park site?
 - (c) How important do members consider the retention of a retail frontage along Church Street as minimising retail development on a redeveloped Agora site and its car park increases the financial viability of any development scheme and reduces the public sector contribution required? This could also assist in refocusing the town centre to hopefully make the area more attractive, accessible and successful.
 - (d) There could be a potential conflict between denser development on the Agora site and its car park and the effect on the conservation area and the setting of listed buildings such as St George's church. Do members have any views on how any development should be designed to minimise these conflicts?
 - (e) If the Agora car park is redeveloped should replacement car parking provision be provided within Wolverton and where?

Members of the Panel are invited to discuss the issues involved with redeveloping the Agora and adjoining land highlighted above. If members wish to recommend that the car park should be disposed of to help facilitate development of the Agora site, then this request will need to be referred to Cabinet for a decision.

Background Papers:

1. Adopted Wolverton Regeneration Strategy, Supplementary Planning Guidance (September 2004).
2. Adopted Replacement Milton Keynes Local Plan (December 2005).

Final version 24.8.2006