

Cabinet Report



**Vale
of White Horse**
District Council

REPORT NO 40/11

Report of Head of Planning

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To: CABINET

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Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) on Abbey Shopping Centre and Charter Area

Recommendations

Cabinet is requested to:

1. Recommend Council to agree the proposed responses to the key points of feedback from public consultation and proposed revisions to the Abbey Shopping Centre and Charter Area Draft Supplementary Planning Document, summarised at paragraphs 9 to 21 of the report, and set out in more detail at paragraphs 17 to 30 of the Consultation Statement at Annex A.
2. Recommend Council to adopt the Abbey Shopping Centre and Charter Area Supplementary Planning Document with the revisions referred to above.

Report purpose and structure

1. The purpose of this report is to inform Cabinet about public consultation feedback on the draft Abbey Shopping Centre and Charter Area Supplementary Planning Document (SPD), and to agree a council response to the main points raised and the arising changes recommended to the final SPD.
2. The first part of this report sets out the background to the SPD. The second part notes key consultation issues, recommends a council response including, where appropriate, changes to the draft SPD. The Consultation Statement at Annex A provides a more detailed summary.

Background

3. The redevelopment of Bury Street and the Charter Area has been a longstanding objective for Abingdon. These areas were developed in the 1960's and now look rather dated and do not meet present day needs. The challenge is to create a more attractive and vibrant town centre that helps retain more local expenditure.
4. The principle of redevelopment is established by policy S7 of the adopted Vale Local Plan. This was updated through the draft Core Strategy review, for example at sections 2.34, 3.4 and 5.4 of Preferred Options document (2009), and in the additional consultation leaflet produced in January 2010.
5. The latter consultation introduced proposals for an anchor store, and in February 2011 the Council appointed Tibbalds Planning and Urban Design to develop these proposals further by preparing a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) for the site. The draft SPD sets out planning and urban design principles to guide the design of high quality proposals for the site. Once adopted it will be material for the determination of planning applications for the site.

Summary of content and conclusions

6. There was a mixed response to the draft SPD, with slightly more people disagreeing with the principles and proposals than expressing support. Refurbishment of Bury Street Precinct was largely welcomed but concerns were raised over the need for a supermarket in Abingdon town centre and threat to independent retailers, traffic in the town centre, relocation of the health centre and library to first floor level, and removal of the canopies in Bury Street.
7. The recommended changes acknowledge these concerns and address points of detail where appropriate. However the consultation has not raised fundamental planning reasons to significantly amend either the SPD approach or the general type of development proposed.

Consultation

8. Consultation on the draft SPD took place for six weeks between 12 August and 23 September 2011. Three public exhibitions were held in a vacant unit in Bury Street Precinct on Thursday 18 and Friday 19 August, and Saturday 10 September, attended by approximately 670 people. Comments could be made in writing, via email, or via the council's website, and consultation questionnaires were also available online and in paper form. A total of 332 responses were received.

Consultation feedback and recommended responses

9. Generally there is mixed support for the SPD and development proposed with a slight majority opposing it. Approximately 40% of respondents generally agreed with the principles in the development brief and believed that it would improve Abingdon town centre (including Oxfordshire County Council, English Heritage, and Natural England), whilst 45% generally disagreed¹. Refurbishment of Bury Street Precinct was more widely welcomed.
10. More specific comments, the proposed council response and recommended changes to the SPD arising are summarised and grouped into the themes below. The Consultation Statement attached at Annex A provides a more detailed account.

Shopping

11. This topic generated the most comment (146 respondents), but no formal objections from statutory bodies. Most respondents were either objecting or proposing development alternatives. Many questioned the need for another supermarket in Abingdon, especially a very large one, and would prefer to see a department store or leisure facility. Tesco Ltd suggests a larger foodstore is contrary to previous policy and question the evidence justification. Many respondents were also concerned that a supermarket would have a negative impact on the independent shops in Abingdon (the majority view in an Abingdon Chamber of Commerce survey of its members).

12. Response: To deliver the vision for Abingdon as a vibrant and economically viable town centre, it is necessary to reduce 'expenditure leakage' to other towns and out-of-centre shopping parks. A large anchor store will help achieve this, and should encourage 'linked trips' to help maintain the viability of independent shops and the town centre area as a whole. Whilst some individual shops in the town centre may experience competition, this is something national planning policy actively promotes to encourage consumer choice, value and sustainable economic growth.

¹ Taking questionnaire and other responses together

13. Supermarkets are the only type of retailer interested in taking on an anchor store role in Abingdon. The Retail Study carried out alongside this SPD has shown that Abingdon town centre has the capacity for more convenience goods floorspace over the core strategy period. If that is not planned for in the town centre, there would likely be pressure for less sustainable and accessible out-of-town development that could further undermine town centre vitality and viability.

14. Recommended changes: That some text is added to the SPD explaining in more detail the justification for an additional supermarket and the reality of market interest for the anchor store in Abingdon town centre.

Traffic

15. Oxfordshire County Council raised holding objections relating to site access and parking provision given current traffic congestion and air quality issues in Abingdon. They have a preference to retain service and parking access from Broad Street, noting the risk of undermining work carried out previously in the Abingdon Integrated Transport Strategy (AbITS) to improve traffic flow and the pedestrian environment. Comments on this issue from other organisations and the general public broadly re-iterate county council concerns.

16. Response and recommended changes: The access points in the development scenarios are indicative only, and for indicative proposals the supporting parking assessment can only reach generalised conclusions. A detailed traffic assessment would always be required at planning application stage to assess the impact the specific development proposal would have on the surrounding road network and exactly how service and parking access would be satisfactorily achieved. We recommend adding text to this effect, including that developers will need to satisfy Oxfordshire County Council as highway authority through a detailed transport assessment at planning application stage; and that this may have implications for the scale and layout of development.

Health centre, library and day centre (accessibility)

17. Proposals to locate the health centre on the first floor provoked strong opposition from parts of the community with 76 respondents including the Malthouse Surgery raising concern over accessibility issues, particularly for the elderly and less mobile (the remaining 77% of respondents mainly did not comment on the issue rather than offer support). Similarly, 54 respondents objected to the library being relocated to a first floor level. Oxfordshire County Council welcomed the opportunity to re-provide an improved, expanded library, but added that it must have a prominent ground floor entrance. They also requested reference to re-providing the day centre on site.

18. Recommended response: There is no basis in planning policy to require that these facilities be provided at ground level. The Equality Act 2010 places a legal duty on those who provide services to the public to make reasonable adjustments to the physical environment of their premises to ensure that disabled people can access them. This is put into effect at design stage through the building regulations (Part M). The SPD already states that there

must be a generous ground floor entrance for any public facilities located at first floor level.

19. Proposed changes: We recommend that text be added to note the strong preference expressed by part of the community during consultations for a ground floor health centre, and that it is a legal requirement that access arrangements put in place are safe, reliable and accessible for the less mobile. In addition to note a preference for re-provision of the Day Centre within the development area. We recommend the SPD also promote inclusion of shop mobility initiatives to ensure the shopping centre as a whole is more accessible to older or less mobile shoppers.

Design, environmental and landscaping

20. English Heritage and some members of the public raised concern over the design challenge of incorporating a large foodstore into the historic town centre of Abingdon. Oxfordshire County Council raised the importance of sensitive archaeology underneath the town and recommended reference to green infrastructure within the development brief. More detailed comments were received from other organisations relating to sustainability requirements, minimising the opportunity for crime, and ensuring equal opportunities for all across the scheme. 57 respondents expressed a desire to maintain or replace the canopies on Bury Street as they provide shelter from adverse weather conditions and encourage window browsing and therefore retail expenditure.

21. Recommended response and changes: The SPD already sets out design principles to reduce the apparent bulk of a large store when viewed from street level. We recommend that some text be added to the SPD regarding archaeology, sustainability requirements, reducing opportunities for crime and providing equal opportunities for all. We also recommend that the SPD make reference to providing some form of shelter for shoppers, but there is no planning basis to make retention of the canopies a requirement.

22. The specific changes proposed to the SPD are listed in paragraph 32 of the Consultation Statement at Annex A.

Conclusion and Next Steps

23. Cabinet is recommended to agree the proposed responses to consultation feedback, and the changes to the SPD outlined above. The draft SPD will be amended accordingly and a final version reported to full council on 14 December 2011 to consider for formal adoption as a Supplementary Planning Document.

Other options

24. Cabinet may wish to vary or supplement the changes recommended.

Risks

25. If there are significant delays in finalising the SPD it may not be adopted in time to assist the determination of the submitted Phase One planning application to refurbish the Abbey Shopping Centre.

Financial Implications

26. The Council owns the freehold of the Abbey and Charter site, leased in 2010 to Scottish Widows.

Legal implications

27. None.

Background Papers

Abbey Shopping Centre and Charter Area draft development brief
Abbey Shopping Centre and Charter Area draft sustainability appraisal
Retail Capacity Analysis of Abingdon Town Centre

Abbey Shopping Centre and Charter Area - Consultation Statement (Annex A)