

ALTRINCHAM TOWN CENTRE NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN FORUM WORKING GROUP RESPONSE TO THE REPRESENTATIONS MADE UNDER REGULATION 16

Sixteen representations were received to the Council's Regulation 16 public consultation and these, along with the Forum Working Group response, are set out below.

1. John Gibson – The comments in the Plan regarding Convenience Stores reflects the national shift away from the use of major supermarkets to more locally based convenience stores. It is resulting in a better balance between local shops and supermarkets and reflects the public's desire to focus more on locally based outlets as explained in section 4.3, para 4.3.1

The comments about the use of the car parks are relevant to the proposed Integrated Car Parking Strategy which the Council is to promote – see Section 4.5, para 4.5.3.

The reference to Waitrose and up market retailers are essentially matters for the landlords and their letting agents, particularly the Stamford Quarter and do not impact on the proposed Planning Policies. The importance of utilising the social media is noted and the proposed Digital Infrastructure Strategy is meant to ensure that the town centre has appropriate infrastructure to enable it to respond to the opportunities which rapidly developing modern technology offers.

The proposals for Oxford Road as a mixed use area (including residential) reflect the public's views and is regarded as a realistic way forward.

RECOMMENDATION – that no change be made to the submitted Plan.

2. Rebecca Pemberton – noted. It is assumed that the Council will maintain its close working relationship with United Utilities.

RECOMMENDATION – that no change be made to the submitted Plan.

3. Stephen Birchall - the Forum notes his general support for the Plan. Point one is well taken and should be taken into account in the development of the Integrated Car Parking Strategy. Point 2 should also be considered as part of that Strategy.

Plan 5 is not an attempt to allocate or designate land uses. It relates solely to the main characteristics of the various areas of the town centre which are used to describe the distinct character of each of them. In this case the character is dominated by the supermarkets and leisure notwithstanding that there are a number of recently built residential apartments on Denmark Street.

Finally, the Plan provides for a relatively small increase in the residential population of the town centre in addition to that defined in the Core Strategy (up from 250 to 550 additional dwellings). This small increase is contained within the overall housing need defined in the Core Strategy which refers to the need for over 12,000 new dwellings over the Core Strategy plan period. This overall level of increase has been taken into account by the Council in assessing the need for school places.

RECOMMENDATION – that no change be made to the submitted Plan.

4. Amstone Developments – we responded to this representation via the Chairman of the Forum but received no response. Another attempt at making contact has been made and the company have indicated now that they do not wish to meet. Should the company change its mind then a meeting will be arranged.

5. Laila Smith – the Environment Agency had no comments on the submitted Plan.

6. Helen Wright – the support for more residential in the town centre is noted. The comments on proposed more flexible use of supermarket car parks should be considered as part of the preparation of the Integrated Car Parking Strategy.

RECOMMENDATION – that no change be made to the submitted Plan.

7. Bowdon Downs Residents Association.

(a) Plan Title and Boundary – the title was widely used at Stages 2 and 3 of the public consultation and again at the Regulation 16 consultation. No other comments on the title have been made. The Forum was set up specifically to address the problems associated with the decline of the town centre and for no other purpose. The boundary of the Plan was originally drawn tight to the town centre itself but in response to some comments that some immediately adjoining residential areas which might be impacted should be included, the boundary was widened to respond to that. The boundary was Designated by the Council in July 2014. Having responded positively to the comments (including from the author of this representation) about the boundary, it is disappointing to see that the changes made are now being used as a basis for objection because some businesses and pubs now within the Plan Boundary (but not the Town Centre Boundary) are not strictly part of the town centre. The Plan only seeks to define the land use planning context for the future development of the town centre itself as well as earmarking 3 further areas for future residential which lie adjacent to the town centre between the two boundaries. In the Forum's view, both the title and the boundaries remain appropriate and we would object to any change being made.

The representation on these matters fails to properly distinguish between the Plan and Town Centre Boundaries which are quite distinct. There will be no resultant risk of town centre uses being permitted outside the town centre boundary, regardless of either the title or the definition of the Plan Boundary.

(b) Business Plan – the Forum debated the issue of whether to proceed with a Business Neighbourhood Plan or not at great length and on several occasions. A distinct minority of the Forum were not in favour as they wanted the Plan to cover the wider Altrincham area. The Forum firmly determined that it was concerned ONLY with the future of the town centre and that a Business Neighbourhood Plan was entirely appropriate for an area which is 'predominantly business in nature'. It also, importantly, gives the businesses a vote, an issue which the Forum wished to encourage.

(c) Other Boundary points – the final decision on the boundary was agreed by the Forum with very little comment and was designated by the Council unchanged. So far as the Forum is concerned it would be inappropriate and unnecessary to seek to change it after the three stages of public consultation which didn't raise this as an issue. Changes to the Plan boundary could result in a case being made for consultation being repeated and the whole process delayed unnecessarily. It is important that the Plan is put to the referenda as soon as possible and if passed then adopted so that it can directly influence the future development of the town centre. The position of the boundary to the rear of part of New Street is not considered to be an issue in that context.

(d) Exclusion of key features- there is no case made in the representation relevant to the issue of the future of the town centre – just a list of features (all acknowledged) which do not impact on the role of the town centre. Individual community facilities exist across the entire catchment area of the town centre but that is no reason in itself for their inclusion in a Plan dealing solely with the future of the town centre, as defined by the Town Centre Boundary itself.

(e) Minor Extension – If the Plan is studied closely the yellow strip along each mixed use frontage is in fact present alongside the buildings in question along the east side of the Market Place. The yellow strip is however partially covered by the thick Town Centre Boundary. Some adjustment to the Plan presentation here to make the position clearer would make sense and would be supported by the Forum.

RECOMMENDATION – that no changes be made to either the title or the Boundary of the Plan but that the allocation of the properties on the east side of the Market Place as Mixed Use be made clearer.

8. Fran McArthur – the important comments concerning the projected growth in electrically powered vehicles and the consequential need for more charging facilities should be considered as part of the development of the Integrated Car Parking Strategy.

RECOMMENDATION – that no change be made to the submitted Plan.

9. Natural England – no comments.

10. Marcus Naylor – welcome his general support for the Plan and his specific support for the redevelopment of the builders merchants sites, the digital strategy and the leisure centre redevelopment. The open space comments are reflected in the Annex.

RECOMMENDATION – that no change be made to the submitted Plan.

11. The Emerson Group (Orbit Investments (Properties) Ltd) – this representation relates to Charter House on Woodlands Road. It is contended that the submitted Plan is not in general conformity with Trafford Council's strategic policies or with national planning policy.

Before responding to these representations, it would be helpful to repeat the comments in the report to the forum in May 2016 in response to the somewhat briefer representations made by Orbit at that time and which led to the final definition of the TCB and the Main (Primary) Shopping Frontage:

“This letter raises two important issues, both of which have been the subject of several discussions at the Forum. The issue of the Town Centre Boundary (TCB) has been an important one for the Forum, given the significance attached to the need to focus the retail provision more tightly than hitherto and to deter the possibility of any new retail securing consent outside of the areas designated as Main (Primary) Shopping and Mixed Use with Ground Floor Active Frontages.

The existing northern boundary of the town centre as defined in the Core Strategy runs along Victoria Road and excludes Charter House. The only change now proposed to that northern boundary relates to embracing the existing Mixed Use area north of Victoria Street along the eastern side of the A56.

The importance of the office areas to the north of the TCB are emphasised on several occasions in the Plan (see section 4.8 in Chapter 4) and support for the continued development of the office market is very clear. Nothing in the Plan is aimed at throwing any doubt on the long term importance of the office areas and the office market. It is not clear what the nature of the concern is over Charter House (and the rest of the main office area north of Victoria Street) continuing to be excluded from the TCB or what the ‘greater protection under the NPPF’ actually means for this property. The site clearly has the support of the Plan to remain in office use and the recently amended Use Classes Order gives permitted development rights for conversion to residential use were that to be proposed by the Emerson Group. Continued exclusion of this site and the rest of the office area to the north of Victoria Street, would result in there being a clear presumption against retail development, strengthened by Policy R1. The Government definition of a town centre as quoted in the letter refers to main town centre uses ‘within or adjacent’ to the Primary Shopping Centre. The Primary Shopping Centre in Altrincham is designated as ‘Main Shopping’ (retaining the description used in the UDP for clarity) and the main office areas north of Victoria Street (including Charter House) are neither within the Main (Primary) Shopping area or adjacent to it (adjacent being defined in the Oxford dictionary as ‘next to or adjoining’). The proposed situation for Charter House in terms of the TCB is unchanged from the UDP/Core Strategy.

On balance therefore, it is considered that the TCB should remain as defined on Plan 6. The main (Primary) Shopping area is now clearly defined in the Plan as ‘Main (Primary) Shopping’ and delineated on Plan 6 so the issue raised regarding the Primary Shopping Area is in practice dealt with. No other change to the draft Final Plan is therefore required.”

The Forum maintains that Charter House was never within the Town Centre Boundary defined by Trafford Council in their earlier Development Plan Documentation. In a draft of the Neighbourhood Business Plan the possibility of extending the boundary northwards was considered but after due reflection, for the reasons set out above, it was decided not to proceed with that proposal and to revert to the original TCB with a minor adjustment to reflect an existing mixed use frontage. This sort of process is an integral part of what public consultation is all about.

Turning to the issue of ‘evidence’, the Plan does not seek to “prevent new development” (retail) rather to ensure that any such development is focussed within the Primary Shopping Area illustrated by the Main (Primary) Frontage clearly defined on Plan 6.

N.B. Para 23 of the NPPF indicates that LAs should: define the extent of town centres and Primary Shopping Areas based on a clear definition of Primary and Secondary shopping frontages in designated areas and set policies which make clear which uses will be permitted in such areas.

The Core Strategy makes provision for additional new retail to be provided in Altrincham Town Centre and indeed there is an extant consent for Altair to develop some additional new retail (along with other uses) which the Neighbourhood Business Plan acknowledges. The Plan also acknowledges the Core Strategy position but importantly also expresses serious doubts as to the current realism of such a policy, which was defined pre-the bank crisis/recession/austerity/etc and when internet based retailing accounted for only c. 5% of the total retail market, being realised. Recent research indicates that it is now highly likely that by 2020 c. 40% of all non-food retailing will take place via the internet and that pace of increase has not stopped. To ignore the reality of this dramatic change in shopping habits which is widely regarded as the principle reason for the decline in retail on many High Streets across the country, would be not only irresponsible but would negate the whole purpose of preparing this Neighbourhood Business Plan which is aimed at properly reflecting the current realities. The widespread public support for contracting the primary shopping frontage/area, which underpins the Plan's whole approach which seeks to reflect the real situation in which the town centre must evolve in the future, is properly reflected in the approach adopted in the Plan. To argue that the TCB should be extended from that defined previously by Trafford flies in the face of the fundamental need to focus the retail offer and to ensure that opportunities to promote retailing outside the defined TCB are strongly resisted.

The representation continues by questioning whether the Plan is in conformity with national planning guidance. The proposed TCB in the Neighbourhood Business Plan embraces an area which meets the NPPF definition in Annex 2. It does not include the extensive office areas (and a large hotel) to the north, an area that has never been embraced in the defined TCB in the UDP/Core Strategy. Within a defined TCB, a wide range of uses are permissible subject to any controlling policies which may apply. Outside the TCB there is no presumption in favour of utilising existing land or buildings for town centre uses. In the case of the area north of Victoria Street the Plan clearly recognises and supports the existing office users which predominate. What the Plan also does however, is expressly exclude the development of any of this area for retail uses which would normally be expected to be located within the Main (Primary) Shopping Frontages or the Mixed Use Frontages This an essential part of the wider policy to focus retail activity more effectively. Widening the TCB in the way suggested by Orbit would directly conflict with this policy which, as indicated earlier, commands widespread public support.

The extent of the Main (Primary) Shopping Frontage is very clearly defined on Plan 6. The 'area' involved comprise all those buildings which support those frontages. If the Examiner were to decide that defining those buildings is required, then so long as the frontage involved is not extended eg along any parts or all of Stamford New Road, Cross Street, Shaw's Road, Market Street, Kingsway or the balance of George Street south of Cross Street/Shaw's Road, then the Forum would not object to that confined

area being so expressly defined. It is the Forum's view however, that by clearly defining the frontages of the buildings that provide the Main (Primary) Shopping facilities in the town centre, that the requirements of the NPPF have been met.

The observation that the decisions taken by the Forum are not sufficiently evidence based has been covered earlier in this response. Appendix 1 to the submitted Plan lists the various research papers and reports which were considered by the Forum and which taken together provide a considerable weight of evidence (in addition to the hugely important weight of public opinion which ought to drive the development of a Neighbourhood Plan) to support the proposals in the submitted Plan.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

(a) That the Town Centre Boundary remain as currently proposed and delineated on Plan 6 in the submitted Plan, and

(b) That the Main (Primary) Shopping Frontage adequately delineates the area of the town centre involved but if the Examiner decides that the buildings supporting those frontages should also be delineated, then that should not extend (or potentially extend) the Main (Primary) Shopping Frontage as defined on Plan 6.

12. Damian Cross – the general support for the Plan, including the retail and residential policies is welcomed. The only reservation relates to the provision of further short stay parking. This proposed modest increase follows a significant reduction in available car parking spaces following the development of the previously vacant land used for car parking and now occupied by two supermarkets, the cinema and adjoining further smaller developments. The modest increase provided for in the Plan has widespread public support and will only partially offset this major reduction. The issue of emissions was addressed in the Strategic Environmental Assessment. The need for additional charging facilities should be included in the proposed Integrated Car Parking Strategy.

RECOMMENDATION – that no change be made to the submitted Plan.

13. Kevin Kitt – the funding for the public realm work is paid for through S106 payments to the Council specifically for such works in Altrincham town centre and does not, we understand, impact at all on the Council's normal budgets which have indeed been the subject of reduced government funding resulting in requiring the Council to reduce its budget. The general comments in this representation do not impact on the proposed policies in the submitted Plan.

RECOMMENDATION – that no change be made to the submitted Plan.

14. Kevin West – the support for the Plan is welcomed. The estimate of lost spaces resulting from the Altair development constitutes the actual difference between the number of spaces currently available less the spaces provided for in that development. The final point is for the Council to deal with.

RECOMMENDATION – that no change be made to the submitted Plan.

15. Historic England – the generally supportive comments are welcomed as is the advice. The comments on the SEA are noted. The densities used in the Plan reflect the densities used by the Council in their Strategic Land Availability Assessment.

RECOMMENDATION – that no change be made to the submitted Plan.

16. Trafford Council – the Forum would agree that a positive working relationship was maintained during the entire plan preparation process. The Council have indicated that in their opinion, the Plan meets the required Basic Conditions. Turning to the Plan Specific Comments:

Policy D4 – supported by the Council.

Policy CF1 – supported by the Council.

Integrated Car Parking and Digital Infrastructure Strategies – the Council supports the approach adopted in the Plan.

Land Allocations: Sites A and B – the Council confirms that both are identified in the Council’s SLAA and that the densities/yield also reflect the SLAA. **Site C** – the Forum acknowledges and accepts the comments made. **Site D** – the Forum acknowledges and accepts the comments made. **Site E** – the proposals are supported by the Council.

Site F – this is the only site where there is any difference of opinion between the Council and the Forum and that relates not to the mix of uses proposed but to the manner in which the area should be planned. It is a key and complicated site impacting not only on the car park area and the Regent Road frontage but also the pedestrian access to Kings Court; the relationship to housing association flats; potential development opportunities at the rear of properties on the Downs and Railway Street and the impact on the opportunities to enhance pedestrian flows in a number of directions; cater in an integrated way with the access demands of the various development opportunities around the area and recognise the important history of Chapel Street and the future role of Lloyd Square. All of this points to the need to secure the provision of an appropriate planning context document which the Council supports following public consultation. It is a classic case requiring the development of a comprehensive development scheme/masterplan (whatever term is used) which will provide an effective co-ordinated context within which individual proposals can be developed successfully without prejudicing other legitimate development opportunities. As the principle landowner and planning authority it is reasonable to propose that the Council should take the lead in securing the production of such a comprehensive development framework, without seeking to be prescriptive about how this should best be achieved. The suggested amended wording indicating that “.....an overall ‘master plan’ could be prepared to provide an integrated context.....” is not considered to be a decisive way forward and would not be driven forward positively as no one is given the responsibility for taking action. The Examiner is urged to consider this very important

matter carefully and to produce wording which will result in the timely production of the necessary framework along with appropriate public consultation.

Referendum area boundary – there is a fundamental difference of opinion on this matter which is of real significance to the whole Business Neighbourhood Planning (BNP) process. Attached to this submission is a copy of the case the Forum put together and submitted to the Council in May 2015. It is predicated on the simple fact that a BNP for Altrincham Town Centre concerns two very distinct constituencies:

First there is the wide range of businesses which together provide/offer the services which the town centre makes available to its catchment population and visitors. By definition, these various businesses are confined to the town centre so it follows logically that the Business referendum should be confined to the Plan boundary which contains all those businesses.

Second, there is the catchment population which the town centre serves containing all (or the vast majority) of those people who wish to make use of the services which the town centre businesses offer. By definition these people (by and large) do not live within the Plan Boundary and therefore a Referendum boundary to allow this constituency to vote must be drawn to embrace as many of these members of the community (which have been engaged in the process of preparing the Plan through the three stages of public consultation), as the Inspector deems appropriate. To that end, the Forum has collected post code information on those people who have been engaged in the public consultation process, to help inform the Examiner in this matter. The Forum would argue that as many of these people as possible should be embraced in the General Public Referendum boundary.

The legislation, insofar as we have been able to interpret it, is silent on the issue of two boundaries being used in circumstances such as these. The reference to such an approach being ‘inequitable’ is not understood. The two constituencies involved (the providers of services on the one hand and the users of those services on the other) are totally different so the concept of inequality is not seen to be relevant. The two boundaries should, logically, fairly reflect each of the two different constituencies involved and therefore be demonstrably equitable in relation to each of those constituencies.

If the outcome of the Examination does not support the Forum’s logical approach, then it is considered that only a wider boundary should be utilised otherwise the 3 to 4,000 respondents during the 3 stages of consultation would be largely effectively disenfranchised which is not what the Neighbourhood Plan legislation envisages. The cost implications (which are acknowledged) should not be allowed to interfere with the application of local democracy which is fundamental to the Neighbourhood Plan preparation process.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

(a) That in respect of Site F, the need for a comprehensive development scheme/masterplan be recognised and that the Council take the lead in securing its production.

(b) That in relation to the two referenda involved, appropriate boundaries be defined for each, based on the role each constituency plays in the operation of the town centre and the geographical coverage of each of those constituencies.

ATTACHMENT.

THE CASE FOR DEFINING SEPARATE BOUNDARIES FOR THE BUSINESS AND GENERAL PUBLIC REFERENDA.

- 1. It is important to recognise at the outset that the Neighbourhood Business Plan (NBP) impacts on two different constituencies (communities of interest) in very different ways and this lies at the root of the case for the boundaries of the referenda being drawn to reflect the specific nature of each of those constituencies.**
- 2. The first constituency, the businesses which make up the town centre, all lie within the NBP boundary. They are the businesses which provide the services which collectively go to make up what Altrincham Town Centre (ATC) offers. It is those businesses, along with any others who join the town centre during the plan period (2015 to 2030), which will invest, develop, adapt and evolve as market demands change. Collectively, they make up the character of the place, in terms of the range, nature and quality of the services which the town centre offers. The views of those businesses have been taken into account as the plan has been prepared, and their opinion on the final plan is of key importance. The Business Referendum must ensure that it is these businesses which have the opportunity to vote on whether or not they support the final Plan.**
- 3. The second constituency are all those people served by the town centre, all those members of the general public who look to ATC to provide them with some or all of the services they require. The resultant catchment is, as a consequence, much wider than the NBP boundary, focussed mainly on the WA14 and WA15 post codes. This catchment population will also be served by other centres, ranging from local centres such as Hale, Hale Barns and Timperley, to larger centres such as Manchester City Centre and the Trafford Centre. The issue however is whether that catchment population supports the ATC NBPlan and its proposals and policies, as providing the appropriate context for the town centre to develop and evolve so that it can deliver the services those people require.**
- 4. These two quite different constituencies are inevitably inter-twined as is any relationship between the provider of services and the consumer of those services. It is in both their interests that they are both supportive of the Plan. The Referenda therefore must provide both the opportunity for all the businesses providing the services to express their views on the Plan in the Business Referendum and all those served by those businesses to express their views in the General Public Referendum. It follows that as these constituencies are essentially different, and as their geographical coverage is also different, that the boundaries of the two referenda need to reflect those facts.**

5. If the boundary determined for the General Public Referendum were then to be used for the Business Referendum that would necessarily distort the whole process. The consultation stages have encouraged those businesses in ATC to get involved and provide their views. If the Business Referendum boundary were drawn wider than the NBP boundary, then a whole range of other businesses who are not part of ATC, not involved in providing town centre services and have no current direct role in contributing to the development and evolution of the town centre, would have opportunity to influence the outcome of the referendum. The use of such a boundary therefore would inevitably distort the whole process and cast doubt on the relevance and legitimacy of the outcome of the Business Referendum. This possibility should not be countenanced. It is of fundamental importance that the businesses making up the town centre are the ones who determine the outcome of the Business Referendum as it is those businesses which carry the responsibility for the ongoing development and evolution of the town centre and for ensuring that it meets the requirements of its catchment population. It should also be remembered that anyone who owns or works in a business outside the ATC but within the General Public Referendum boundary and who lives in that boundary, will have the opportunity to vote as a member of the public.
6. There is one other aspect of this matter which should be taken into account. Both referenda will ask the same simple question as to whether or not the plan is supported. In practice however, that question means two totally different things to the two constituencies. For the businesses in ATC the question is really asking whether the plan provides an appropriate context within which the ATC business community can respond effectively to the inevitable changes in market demand which will take place over the plan period. For the general public, the question is really asking whether the plan will result in the development of a town centre which will meet their requirements as consumers of the services it offers. Both questions are legitimate but each relates to a particular constituency each of which has a particular (and different) geographical representation. It is imperative that those different geographical representations are fairly reflected in the referenda boundaries.
7. Finally, it needs to be borne in mind that the Core Strategy provides the existing policy context within which the relative and respective roles of all the centres in Trafford operate, whether they are local centres such as Hale and Timperley, or main centres such as Altrincham and Sale and the Trafford Centre. As the ATC NBPlan is in general conformity with the Core Strategy, none of the policies and proposals in the Plan seek to change those relative and respective roles. As a consequence, there is no legitimacy in the argument that businesses outside ATC should be able to vote as the Plan seeks to change the balance between centres as formalised in the Core Strategy. The Plan quite clearly does not seek to change those relative and respective roles.

Mike Shields, Chairman, ATC NBP Working Group. 14/5/15