

ROYAL LEAMINGTON SPA CREATIVE QUARTER – CONSULTATION ON DRAFT MASTERPLAN

Royal Leamington Spa Town Council welcomes the opportunity afforded by this consultation exercise to contribute to the regeneration of that part of Leamington referred to as “Old Town.” The Council has long supported measures that seek to revitalise this area which is of great historic significance and present day vitality. The Council is presently engaged in the preparation of a Neighbourhood Development Plan for Royal Leamington Spa and will endeavour to ensure that the planning policies relevant to Old Town contained therein are complementary to the objective of creating and sustaining a vibrant and successful Old Town for all who live and work there. It is also important that the objectives within the Masterplan are sensitive to priorities within the emerging Neighbourhood Plan.

The Town Council is also a sitting tenant at Leamington Town Hall. It has long been associated with this building and wishes to see it continue to be used a focal point for civic events and maintained as a publicly accessible asset. The Town Council has indicated its aspirations for this building to Warwick District Council and a copy of the policy statement agreed in June 2018 is appended to this response.

1. GENERAL PRINCIPLES

The Masterplan is an aspirational document which sets out a series of proposals that can be assessed both collectively and individually. The intent of the Masterplan to regenerate the area of Old Town and make better use of several redundant assets is supported and welcomed. The Town Council recognises that the Masterplan is the first stage in a process that will take many years to deliver the outcomes envisaged.

The process of engagement set out in the introduction to the Masterplan rightly reinforces the importance of early consultation with key stakeholders. It is disappointing therefore that as the Masterplan has evolved the Town Council has been excluded from opportunities to contribute to these proposals. The Town Council as an elected body representative of Leamington Spa is uniquely placed to facilitate dialogue with the local community upon whom these proposals will have direct impact. As clear proposals emerge it will be important to engage with those sections of the community that will be most closely affected by them. It is hoped that this consultation will therefore be the first of several.

One of the key priorities of the Masterplan is to provide the right opportunities for gaming and digital businesses as a means of nurturing creative talent and supporting new and existing pathways into creative careers. This is translated into a number of the proposals for re-use of existing buildings. It is therefore important to establish the extent to which this provision meets both current and anticipated demand for this use so that the right balance is achieved with other potential uses.

Many of the areas which are subject to the proposed re-purposing are in private ownership; this may entail lengthy delays and significant costs. The Masterplan does not identify a programme of actions which may be delivered in the short term in order to “kick start” the development that the Old Town requires. Following the presentations attended by Members of the Council, it is appreciated that each of the sites contained within the Masterplan display

differing characteristics, challenges and limitations. The view of the Town Council, therefore, is that a targeted approach to developing one key site, possibly Spencer Yard and the former United Reform Church, would generate the impetus needed for the wider regeneration of the area.

The desirability of attracting new investment into Old Town needs to be balanced with the aspirations of the local community. A mix of uses may therefore be preferable to a single use focus.

Some of the proposals, though of merit in their own right, threaten other established uses and the consequences for these current uses are not clearly specified.

The desire to repurpose many of the key assets identified within the masterplan implies physical regeneration. This must however be tempered with a realisation that regeneration is not synonymous with demolition of existing buildings which, particularly in a Conservation Area, are of merit in their own right and are capable, with imagination, of adaptation and conversion.

The Masterplan could be strengthened by developing clear linkages between the various sites. At present it predominates on the redevelopment of individual sites which, though contributing to the wider objective of regenerating Old Town, neglect the potential for uses that support and complement each other across the study area.

2. SPECIFIC SITE PROPOSALS

(A) SPENCER YARD/UNITED REFORM CHURCH

This site is pivotal to opening up access to the Town Centre from South Leamington and creating a vibrant centre for performing arts and the creative industries. However, the recent grant of planning permission for residential use of the privately owned buildings comprising Victoria Colonnade brings into question the viability of the proposal to develop the frontage along the river bank to promote the creative quarter and digital businesses and create a new gateway to Spencer Yard. The central position of the Loft Theatre is also a potential stumbling block to the wider development of this area.

The indicative plans for a contemporary film production and studio complex or an indoor food market/event space at the redundant Church represent an imaginative alternative use for this long neglected building. The commercial viability of the indoor market concept does however need further careful analysis as general market initiatives in Leamington have not proved to be viable in the past.

(B) ROYAL PUMP ROOMS

The proposals to open up access to this building, including the provision of a route along the southern elevation giving access along the River, are very worthy and in general supported.

In view of the potential restrictions in relation to Victoria Colonnade, the possibility of linking Spencer Yard directly to the Pump Room Gardens via a new footbridge across the River Leam could be explored.

There is concern that the longer term proposals for the repurposing of the interior of the Pump Rooms, including the relocation of the current Library is not accompanied by suggestions as to where this important community facility will be accommodated in the future. The Library is a pivotal community asset; whilst it could function at an alternative venue this needs to be a central consideration. The storage requirements associated with the Library are significant and identifying alternative accommodation will therefore be a challenging exercise that must precede any repurposing proposal. If this proposal is to be progressed, early dialogue with Warwickshire County Council will be a prerequisite. (see also comments under (C) below.

(C) TOWN HALL

The objective of ensuring the financial viability of the Town Hall is supported but the proposals for this key civic building appear to be poorly developed and justified. It is not clear to what extent there is demand for additional Restaurants or a Members Club and both these concepts sit uneasily with the stated re-purposing of the building to a creative enterprise and educational facility. It is not clear to what extent these proposals have been explored with the University of Warwick. Some of the proposed competing uses for this building could reduce its attractiveness as a lettable venue for external events which is a significant revenue driver at present. The suggested relocation of the Library from the Royal Pump Rooms, raises the possibility of unifying the research resource with the facilities currently provided at the University Learning Grid within the Town Hall.

The Town Council has indicated as a policy decision that it wishes to remain a tenant of the Town Hall and to play a role in determining the future use of this important civic building. Warwick District Council will need to consider the Town Council's status as a sitting tenant independently of the proposals now being brought forward.

The Town Council wishes to be consulted at each stage of the process in relation to this important civic building.

(D) BATH STREET CAR PARK

The creation of an "artists" yard utilising the railway arches represents an imaginative use of this asset. There is concern however that the longer term proposal to develop into the existing Car Park will be detrimental to the objective of driving increased footfall to Spencer Yard and other uses in this area.

(E) COURT STREET CAR PARK

It is recognised that this is a key site and fundamental to the wider regeneration of the Old Town Area. The opportunity to encourage new workshop space and an artist trail is welcome but the impact of a multi-storey car park needs careful consideration

in view of the existing problems in this area associated with peak traffic congestion and poor levels of air quality. The Council is disappointed that the initial proposal for this site appears to exclude provision for residential accommodation as envisaged in the District Local Plan. As traditional Town Centres evolve, there is a growing consensus that these areas can thrive with a mix of residential and commercial uses and this will need to be evaluated within any proposals for this site. The opportunity for live/work units would be a relevant option for this site, subject to further analysis.

(F) BATH STREET CREATIVE QUARTER WAYFINDING

The proposals to improve directional linkages around Leamington and waymark key attractions are supported. However there is no mention of High Street or Clemens Street which would benefit equally from the sorts of improvements set out specifically for Bath Street.

(G) ALTHORPE STREET AREA

This is a sensitive area that will require careful planning to maximise both opportunities for alternative uses, including access to the Canal frontage, whilst recognising the industrial nature of the area and the current uses that exist here. The District Local Plan designates this as a protected employment area where the introduction of new uses must positively contribute to the wider regeneration of the area. It is not clear how the obstacle of private ownership of much of this area will be overcome and what alternatives could be pursued if the ownership issues are unresolved. Any proposal will need to take account of the difficulties faced by small local businesses that will be forced to relocate.

(H) ADELAIDE BRIDGE RIVERSIDE AREA

The rationale for inclusion of this area within the development brief is not clear since the site is some distance from the other primary development locations. The complex nature of the site, its association with many other established community uses and the planning restrictions arising from its proximity to the River Leam, suggest that this will be a very difficult option for future development. Many of the small community organisations that are based here would welcome certainty over their future tenancy arrangements.

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