



Newbury Town Council: Evidence in Chief on Planning Balance

Introduction

The final area of the enquiry, Planning Balance, somewhat invites a return to those items that we have previously considered, as indeed we saw last Friday, and so I make just a marginal apology for doing just that. I need to re-iterate the issues that continue to concern the Town Council and align us with the members of WBC's District Planning Committee when they refused the application.

Heritage & Design

Notwithstanding all that has been presented, we believe there would be significant harm to the historic character of Newbury Town Centre, a designated Conservation Area, and a place of recognised local distinctiveness. I will draw attention again to key statements in the Newbury Town Design Statement, the Newbury Town Centre Master Plan 2019–2036 and WBC's Policy CS14.

1. Newbury Town Design Statement

The NTDS is a formally adopted material consideration by the Local Planning Authority. It highlights the compact, human-scale nature of the town centre and its variety of historic styles, stating: "Newbury town centre is compact, human in scale and enriched by the variety of historic styles."

The key characteristics identified in the Design Statement include:

- 19th-century buildings defining key streetscapes.
- Coherent three-storey built form.
- An open, legible street network.
- Valuable amenity space in the form of the canal and Victoria Park.

Design principles clearly state that:

- Development should preserve and enhance the historic fabric of the town centre.
- Heights must be sympathetic to their surroundings.



2. Newbury Town Centre Master Plan 2019–2036

The Master Plan describes Newbury as a town with a “strong sense of its own cultural, social, and historic identity, with a pleasing diversity of styles and periods...”. It coins the term “Newburyness” to emphasise this.

Key statements relevant to this appeal include:

- A height limit of 6 storeys is proposed as a general rule... subject to due respect for the height of buildings in the town centre (p20).
- Any proposals must accord with the Newbury Town Centre Conservation Area Appraisal... sensitivity of the area to change must be recognised (p21).
- Upward extensions of buildings will be discouraged, particularly where they would adversely impact the height and setting of existing buildings (p26).
- Highlights concern over the increasing monoculture of apartments (p42) and the need for affordable, starter, and student housing (p10).
- Kennet Centre: Consideration will need to be given to the massing and heights of replacement buildings (p48).

3. West Berkshire Core Strategy (CS14)

Policy CS14 of the West Berkshire Core Strategy requires that: “New development must demonstrate high quality and sustainable design that respects and enhances the character and appearance of the area.” Supporting paragraph 5.93 further adds: “The quality and local distinctiveness of the built environment of West Berkshire is an important asset... new development must complement and relate to its surroundings.”

It remains our view that the proposed development fails to accord with both the letter and spirit of the local planning framework. This is particularly true in relation to building height, scale and massing, and the preservation of key heritage views. The planning balance must therefore reflect the weight that national and local policy gives to heritage conservation and the proper planning of change in sensitive town centre environments.



The proposal for the Eagle Quarter fails to provide a balance on several counts:

- Height: At eight storeys, it exceeds the maximum recommended limit (six storeys).
- Scale and Massing: The bulk of the development overwhelms abutting two- and three-storey listed buildings in the conservation area.
- Visual Impact: The scheme detracts from landmark heritage assets such as the Town Hall clock tower and St Nicolas Church, altering the historic skyline irreversibly.
- Heritage Harm: It offers insufficient regard to the visual harmony and alignment principles.

There have been some significant conversations during this appeal on the, almost guilty, knowledge that all of us have about the alternative proposal to replace the Kennet Centre that goes by the name of "Old Town". We appreciate the difficulties that this might pose and are grateful that at least limited weight has been allowed in influencing conclusions on the Eagle Quarter. Perhaps we might ask for that weight to increase a little on heritage and design matters because it is a matter of record that four key bodies are broadly in favour of the heritage aspects of the new scheme: ourselves, as previously declared, our fellow Rule 6 body, the Newbury Society, WBC's Conservation Officer and Historic England.

Housing & Retail need

We spent considerable time on Friday discussing the numbers of houses likely to be required as a result of tonight's consideration of the Local Plan by WB Council. This isn't directly a NTC responsibility, but I offer a couple of comments that the Inspector may wish to ponder, noting of course, that the housing resulting from the Kennet Centre development is considered a windfall in the Local Plan.

The Eagle Quarter will provide the following housing sizes: 9.9% studio apartments, 42.5% 1 bed apartments, 44.1% 2 bed apartments, 3.5% 3 bed apartments. By the appellant's own statement, this accommodation is not primarily for families, but the 2021 Census shows that 67.9% of the population of West Berks are in family households. As Cllr Abbs mentioned during his



contribution, and as many of us locally have highlighted, there is a current oversupply of apartments and flats in Newbury with more to become available. Perhaps that is why the Old Town proposal changes the offering considerably and includes over 100 houses.

Perhaps as significant, is the provision of retail units within the scheme. Again within Cllr Abbs' evidence, there is no lack of retail provision in this town, as in many others. It is significant that Old Town has a very reduced retail offering.

It feels that the Eagle Quarter scheme is offering the wrong accommodation in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Parking

I thank the Inspector for allowing me to mention our concerns about parking arrangements, albeit that there was no round-table discussion. Our concerns remain, and they focus on behaviour as much as numbers of parking spaces, although I note, in passing, that the 2021 Census shows that 87.9% of West Berkshire's households own at least one car. Research on parking and shopper behaviour shows that proximity and convenience of parking strongly affect footfall. In complex town-centre systems, "the availability of spaces and the convenience of parking in relation to where people want to go" are key factors in retail performance. Now it might be argued that retail in the town centre is already largely north of the river (part of the reason for my earlier observations about retail provision in the alternative schemes). Given the road system, those of us living to the south might opt to use the Kennet Centre car park even if going on over the bridge on foot. Furthermore, what applies to retail equally affects the more experiential side of the town centre offering – restaurants, pubs and the Corn Exchange – and these are very largely south of the river. We still argue that provision of parking that has to be paid for by residents and is in contention with town-centre users is a recipe for conflict that the Council and Councillors will be wrestling with over many years.



Amenity Space

The valuable discussion on amenity space also needs to play into the planning balance. Again, we remain of the view that the provision within the scheme is inadequate; that New Street cannot both be an important thoroughfare – with shopping – and an amenity space for Eagle Quarter residents. As the body responsible for much of the public amenity space in the town centre, especially Victoria Park, if the scheme were to go ahead, we would be seeking a much better offer from the developer to help us maintain that provision to its current high standard.

Conclusion

The suggested benefits of the scheme focus on housing provision – not required by the Local Plan and of the wrong type - and economic uplift, although the extra shops may not be necessary. Even without their issues, these do not outweigh the substantial and demonstrable harm caused to:

- The character and appearance of Newbury Town Centre,
- Designated and non-designated heritage assets,
- Key townscape views and skyline elements,

Furthermore, parking arrangements and amenity space provision have negative weighting in the equation.

Accordingly, in our view, the planning balance weighs decisively against the development.