

UCKFIELD TOWN COUNCIL



Meeting of the Uckfield Town Forum held in the Weald Hall, Uckfield Civic Centre on Tuesday 10th July 2007

Chairman Kathy Fordham

Presenters Helen Wren, RIBA South East Region
Sean Albuquerque and David Cowan, Architects
Malcolm Buchanan-Dick, Installation Artist
Dorothy Sparks, Ian Smith and Mick Harker, Town Councillors
Margaret Kiloh, Chairman, Local Development Framework Working
Group

Welcome

The Chairman, Kathy Fordham welcomed everyone, and explained that the Forum was to give residents an opportunity to see the results of the questionnaire circulated to every household in December 2006. In addition some of the ideas from the 'Vision for Uckfield' design day would also be discussed and there would be an opportunity to see the macquettes by Malcolm Buchanan-Dick an installation artist which could be incorporated into any development.

Attendees were advised that they would be able to ask questions after the various presentations and to make known their views on how they would like to see Uckfield and the surrounding area develop.

Presentation of the results of the 'Vision for Uckfield Day'

Helen Wren introduced the two architects, Sean Albuquerque and David Cowan who together with their team produced the winning design on the design day. She advised that the day was presented in the form of a competition with the idea of creating a master plan for the Town. All the participating teams were aware of some of the results of the questionnaire but they were asked to draw on their own ideas without design constraints and to be free thinking when creating their plan.

The two architects briefly outlined the design ideas and advised that the main findings from the questionnaire were not so diverse and fell into broad categories, some of which were shared by all the schemes put forward.

The most important issue was to maintain the rail bed and therefore the rail link to Lewes and to improve the traffic movement through and around the Town. It was generally considered that the best way would be to maintain the traffic flow by way of north/south route and to link up the High Street with Framfield Road. This could be done by running a road from the Tesco roundabout on the by-pass link road, crossing the river by way of a flyover and passing along the side of the river moving the traffic away from the main High Street.

A pedestrian crossing/walkway would pass over the railway line where the road currently crosses, and make the whole area including the river an open area accessible to the public. With regard to the river and possible flooding it was suggested that flood control measures and river management could be looked at differently. Such measures could be incorporated into the landscape to provide activity for users with a river walk for pedestrians with some street art and the provision of public space.

Suggestions were made to create a focal point within the Town by developing Luxford Field and the school playing fields as more exciting open spaces with an improved play area, a new development with underground car parking between the High Street and Luxfords Field and by introducing a piazza with specialist shops. Casual parking could be removed from the High Street and part of the High Street pedestrianised.

The architects suggested that the ideas put forward were realistic and there were great possibilities to make subtle changes to the Town centre and improve the outlook. The general consensus was that the next step would be to create a master plan to allow different ideas to form. This was a concept which could be developed in a realistic time spans of 2 years, 10 years or 50 years. The suggested ideas and proposals would allow the Town Council and relevant planning authorities to match future planning applications to the proposed development of the Town in order that any development did not jeopardise the master plan. E.g. the re-opening of the railway line or flood management for the river.

A number of questions were asked seeking clarification on the suggested traffic system, if information on traffic flow had been obtained, and whether there was really traffic congestion in the Town?

The architects explained that East Sussex County Council had obtained some figures and there were peak times for congestion, e.g. school time and between 5.00pm - 6.00pm during the week.

It was queried that if there was to be only 4 trains an hour on the re-opened line was it really necessary to provide an alternative road scheme and could the extra costs be justified. It was also asked from where would the cash be generated?

In response it was felt that to ensure the line was an economic success and a viable option it would be necessary to operate with an increased number of trains.

It was generally agreed that parking was a problem and difficulties would increase if the rail line to Lewes was to become a reality. It was felt that an underground car park under Luxford Field was a suitable suggestion especially if the development was not too intrusive and charges not expensive.

The Chairman thanked the architects and Helen Wren for all the ideas generated which would be useful to spark discussion and move plans forward.

Exhibition of macquettes by Malcolm Buchanan-Dick

Mr. Buchanan-Dick provided a brief personal history and stated that he had been invited to attend the 'Vision for Uckfield' day to design and create some pieces of art inspired by the ideas being put forward by the participating teams.

He showed three pieces of preliminary work, one which incorporated organ pipes and could be connected to a computer to generate various movements and sounds. The second piece was a sculpture of three figures depicting energy and flow. A larger piece from this sculpture showed that the intention would be to cover the figures with keys which would create an interesting effect.

It was suggested a sculpture trail could be created leading from the centre of the Town down to the river. It was proposed to put all the suggested designs on to a new web site together with designs already installed in other towns to allow residents to vote on their preferred choices.

Questions were asked if a site for the sculptures had been decided upon, what size would the large sculpture be, how would these designs be protected from graffiti or damage and who would fund the costs of installing the sculptures?

Mr. Buchanan-Dick advised that a suitable open air site would be decided upon by the Town Council and planners. He envisaged the larger piece to be at least 10 metres high, very tactile, crafted in metals and recycled materials would be used where possible. A good source of keys was the local police who have a collection of keys and who are often willing give to a charity or worthy cause. With regard to graffiti and damage it was agreed that this can be a problem but this was always considered at the very early stages of design and development and there were ways to limit both.

The costing for the sculptures were not available, but should the Town Council decide to go ahead with any design there were various options to raise monies through sponsorship. Many large companies are often willing to sponsor art. It was also possible to secure grants from the Arts Council and it was noted that this particular part of the design day had actually been sponsored by the Arts Council.

A number of additional questions were asked and there was general support for including artwork into any proposals.

The Chairman thanked Mr. Buchanan-Dick for his contribution to the design day and for presenting his designs to the Forum.

Presentation of questionnaire results

It was advised that in December 2006 questionnaires were sent to all 5697 households in Uckfield and 2339 were completed and returned. It was noted that young people were under-represented as the questionnaires went to households where the parents would have replied rather than their children and it was also noted that there was over-representation of those aged 65 and above.

The comments and answers were to be discussed and would be taken in to consideration by the Local Development Forum when formulating the future plans on how the Town could develop.

Environment

The results showed that two thirds of the respondents were concerned about protecting and preserving the environment with the following specific areas being given highest priority:-

- Countryside and open spaces 81%
- Conservation areas 77%
- Wildlife habitats 74%
- Endangered species 72%

In addition there was support for protecting and conserving archaeological and historical sites.

There was concern by 63% over the design of new buildings and street lighting and 50% of respondents would like traffic free areas.

Respondents also felt that the local authority should promote or support:-

- Protection against flooding 82%
- Extend recycling schemes 73%
- Water conservation 72%
- Alternative energy sources 57%

Only 33% felt that local authorities should discourage the use of cars but 57% were in favor of the promotion of alternative transport.

Enhancement of the environment was well supported by over half of the respondents with specific areas being:-

- Removal of graffiti 81%
- Control of the siting of mobile masts 75%
- Improvements to pavements, footpaths and signage 75%
- Plant trees and flowering shrubs 74%
- Improve street cleaning 73%
- Control the design of new buildings 72%

Other well supported areas included the preservation of buildings and areas of architectural interest, control of overhanging vegetation, control of street clutter and the designation of more Local Nature Reserves.

However, it was also noted that two thirds of respondents did not wish to pay more council tax for the improvements they wanted.

Of the one third that said that they would pay more for improvements, the priorities given were slightly different:-

- Removal of graffiti 86%
- Plant trees and flowering shrubs 83%
- Control the design of new buildings 80%
- Control of the siting of mobile masts 79%
- Preserve buildings or architectural Interest 79%
- Improvements to pavements, footpaths and signage 79%

It was noted that a number of respondents asked the question “how much”, but these were not included in the ‘yes’ result.

Following the presentation no questions were forthcoming from the floor.

Housing

From the questionnaires it appeared that the most important factors for selecting new housing sites were:-

- Access to and impact on the existing road network 77%
- Flooding 76%
- protection of the green belt between the Town and the villages 73%
- Minimising the visual impact on the landscape. 69%

High scores were also given to access to the Town centre, access to public transport access to schools and the preservation of endangered species.

The preference for specific types of housing were as follows:-

- Homes for first time buyers 65%
- Houses for young people 50%
- Houses for families 48%

Affordable housing, housing for the elderly and developments with mixed housing were also mentioned and it was noted that several respondents commented that they did not want any more development. A number of others also said that all new developments must be linked to increased infrastructure capacities such as roads, schools, doctors etc.

Most respondents wanted builders to incorporate a number of features in all new development including:-

- Water efficiency 95%
- Energy efficiency 94%
- Two car parking spaces 66%

Some respondents correlated the number of parking spaces per household to the number of rooms/bedrooms per house. In addition it was noted that almost two thirds wanted traffic calming measures to be incorporated into new residential streets.

It was advised that the new consultation process for future housing had now started and that residents had the opportunity for comments at a presentation in the Civic Centre on Saturday 28th July 2007 when Wealden District Planners would be in attendance.

Questions from the floor included:-

- Whether consideration had been given to asking the occupiers of shops and businesses for their views on rates, rents etc. and where they would like to see new development?
- What was happening to the land by the railway?
- People did not want to see Uckfield spoilt like some of the surrounding towns and did any future development of Luxfords Field include maintaining the playground?
- Would the results of the questionnaire be published?

In response it was noted that the business and commercial sector are and would continue to be involved in the consultations.

The land on the railway site belonged to the British Rail Board (Residual) and discussions are ongoing with the Board regarding future development as there was overwhelming support for the reinstatement of the rail line.

The Town Council was committed to maintaining a play area on Luxford Field and is currently looking at ways to improve the area for the future.

It was intended that a précised version of the results would be placed on the Council's website at the end of July with hard copies being available in the Town Council offices. It was also hoped that the results of the 'Vision of Uckfield' day would go on display in the library together with the maquettes shown earlier.

Those attending were again reminded that they would have an opportunity to put their individual comments on the future of housing development within Uckfield to the Wealden Planners at the Civic Centre on Saturday 28th July 2007.

Town centre development, economic activity and employment

The responses under this section indicated a number of areas that respondents liked and which they wished the Council to retain:-

- Luxford Field as a green space 90%
- Provision of free car parking 77%

However it was noted that in respect of Luxford Field a large number of people would like to see the area improved by including more seats, tree and shrubs. In addition the idea of an underground car park was supported by almost two thirds (64%) of respondents.

The level of awareness amongst the respondents of the conservation area at the top end of the High Street was relatively low. Those who replied indicated that the preservation and improvement of the area should include better signage and shop facades.

Primarily the Town centre was seen as the area where the community undertakes most of its commercial and consumer activity and most respondents want more shops. Of the 71% in favour of more shops the following specific suggestions were given:-

- More chain stores 57%
- More independent stores 37%
- A new supermarket 31%

It was noted that 19% wanted expansion of existing supermarkets.

In response to where the shops should be the following responses were received:-

- Industrial estate 77%
- Town centre 27%

In considering pedestrianised shopping areas 45% stated they would like a pedestrianised shopping area but almost equally 46% did not.

Respondents also stated that they would like to see the enforcement of parking restrictions and no charity shops or estate agents in the conservation area. Only 31% wanted more eating places and 71% did not want any more drinking places. It was also evident that the introduction of parking charges would not be welcome.

Economic activity

One section of the questionnaire looked briefly at the economic well being of the community. The expansion of employment activities was supported by 57% of respondents. The opportunity for developing tourism in Uckfield was split 50/50.

Traffic and transport

Over a third of respondents claimed they would use public transport if it were more integrated, more frequent and more affordable, 84% were in favor of the reinstatement of the Uckfield - Lewes rail link and 79% would use it if it was reinstated.

Responses indicated that 87% felt traffic congestion was a problem in particular in the area of the High Street from Framfield Road to Church Street and back to Tesco. 60% saw it as a peak time problem 7.00am – 9.00am and 3.00pm – 6.00pm and at school times.

With regard to solutions to traffic congestion, the following responses were given:-

- 'No to a gyratory system 46%
- Improvements to public transport 61%
- Dualling the by-pass 50%
- More cycle paths and footpaths 36%

Although dualling the by-pass was given as a solution without additional exits off it, it was difficult to see what the direct effect would be on the problem areas.

There was a mixed response to the question of speeding split 50/50 although the problem areas were seen as the High Street, Eastbourne Road and Framfield Road.

Questions from the floor included:-

- Was the rail line going to be viable and was it going to be just single units run between Uckfield – Lewes like on the continent?
- Had the possibility of running a mono-rail between Uckfield – Lewes been considered?
- Why was there no community transport for the elderly and housebound and could some traffic calming be introduced into Church Street as the pavements are very narrow and elderly pedestrians have difficulty walking on path?
- Was the Council concerned that there did not appear to be anybody under the age of 30 at the Forum? Should there not be more representation and consultation with the youth of Uckfield, were representatives from Uckfield Community Technology College invited to participate?
- Had consideration been given to moving the railway station away from the centre of Town e.g. nearer to the bypass, would this improve the traffic flow within the Town?

The questions regarding the railway and mono-rail could not be answered as they fell outside of the scope of those attending.

In response it was advised that the concerns regarding Church Street would be passed to East Sussex County Council, the highway authority.

With regard to community transport, it was advised that the Town Council had been in contact with 'Easylink' in Maresfield to try and extend the scheme to Uckfield and the Town Council would continue to move the idea forward.

It was also advised that representatives from Uckfield Community Technology College had been consulted as part of the focus groups and the Council was encouraged with the students' enthusiasm and their ideas. This was especially notable when the Council was putting together the business plan and proposals to acquire the Adult Learning Centre.

It was noted that at the design day, one plan did suggest moving the station further down the line but this idea had been dismissed at that time. It was envisaged that the station would stay in its current position with a multi storey car park and flyover on the old station car park.

Social and Cultural Development

The questionnaire asked if there were sufficient leisure and entertainment opportunities in the Town and there was a mixed response with 47% responding 'yes' and 41% saying 'no'

The perceived shortcomings were:-

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| • Theatre | 30% |
| • Music | 23% |
| • Indoor sports | 23% |

Some respondents felt that community support facilities were lacking, with the following given as priorities:-

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| • Youth | 30% |
| • Services for older people | 22% |
| • Community transport | 18% |
| • People with disabilities | 18% |

It was noted that the results supported the Town Council's own independent findings and was the reason behind the bid for the redundant Adult Learning Centre from East Sussex County Council.

Existing events within the Town e.g. Bonfire and Carnival parade, Festival week and late night Christmas shopping were well supported.

Other responses to this section indicated that the most liked aspects of living in Uckfield are:-

- That people are nice, gentle and friendly.
- The village atmosphere of the Town centre, with has a good range of shops and free parking.
- Access to the beautiful countryside.
- Community spirit
- Good access to London and the coast.

The least liked aspects are:-

- Traffic congestion, bottlenecks, constant delays and hold-ups, too busy.
- Anti-social behavior.

High priority improvements suggested included:-

- The elimination of traffic congestion.
- Improved rail links.
- A stop to more housing development.
- Improved litter collection.
- More visible policing.

Presentation of the focus group findings

Traffic management

Margaret Kiloh advised that there was a division of opinion on some issues and agreement on others. It was agreed that there is traffic congestion at peak times but what was not agreed was what to do about it. Everybody agreed that there was a need for improvements to public transport and to the by-pass with better access to the by-pass from residential areas.

Various other measures such as the reinstatement of the railway line, the re-phasing of the school and office day, provision of Town mini-buses, encouragement of walking and cycling and peak hour traffic restrictions were also suggested. Some people thought that these would be enough to reduce congestion significantly and that there would be no need for new roads. Others thought a major new traffic management scheme involving new roads was inevitable.

Both groups agreed that should a new traffic management scheme go ahead the Uckfield - Lewes line should not be put at risk. E.g. any gyratory system with a level crossing and any new road or scheme should be linked to new residential and retail developments.

Town centre development

It was advised that unlike some of the anti-development respondents to the housing section of the questionnaire the focus group participants recognised that Uckfield had changed and would continue to change and that the important thing was how to influence what kind of change takes place.

For this reason it was felt that the Town Council should support Town centre development and take an active part in ensuring that:-

- Development should be for a mixture of retail, commercial, community and residential use.
- Luxford's Field should be preserved as a green open space for community use.
- A new station should be built including further retail and commercial development.
- Free parking should be kept if possible.

Housing development

The focus group felt that protecting the rural character of Uckfield was a priority and any new housing development should be sensitive to this and be of a scale that would enable the integration of new residents without changing the character of the Town.

The visual gap between Uckfield and surrounding villages should be kept so that each retains its own identity.

There should also be a mix of housing including affordable housing available for rent or on a shared ownership basis so that the Town remains a real community and does not become the preserve of commuters and 'oldies'.

The other major issue raised by the focus group is the urgent need of improvement before any development begins to both the physical and the social infrastructure of the Town. Developers and landowners who profit from any development should be required to contribute.

The environment

Within the focus group there was general agreement that the environment makes an important contribution to the quality of life in Uckfield. People like living here because of the quality of the environment and they are afraid that it is being threatened by increased traffic congestion, noise pollution and litter. For this reason they think that the Town Council should be pro-active in taking measures to improve the local environment by promoting public transport, providing more footpaths and cycle paths, greening the Town centre and campaigning to remove some of the architectural monstrosities that mar the High Street. They also wanted all new developments to incorporate environmental protection measures.

In conclusion it was noted that both the people who answered the questionnaire and the focus group participants were unanimous - people liked living in Uckfield and the quality of life is important and needs to be protected not by building a barrier against change but by making sure that the changes that come preserve the best of the present and are an improvement on the worst.

Questions from the floor included:-

- The information from the presentation and questionnaire had been interesting but what was the mechanism for moving the proposals forward?
- Is Luxford Field owned by the Town Council and will it be kept?
- How were the representatives on the focus groups chosen?

In response those attending were again reminded that they had an opportunity to put forward their views and ideas to Wealden District Council at the open meeting at the U Civic Centre on Saturday 28th July 2007 in the morning from 10.00am to 1.00pm.

It was confirmed that Uckfield Town Council did have a role in the process and would be pro-active in formulating a master plan from all the ideas and proposals put forward. Where possible the Town Council will use some Town Council land and other authority land for development. It was confirmed that Luxford Field was owned by the Town Council and that it would be kept. This was supported by the responses from the questionnaire.

With regard to private land it was stated that although it might be a good idea to include private land in the master plan the land could not be easily acquired by compulsory purchase.

The make up of the focus groups was through invitations sent to local organisations and the community college and an open invitation was placed in the local newspaper inviting any interested individuals to participate.

Further general comments made from attendees at the Forum included:-

- Traffic congestion may not be so bad if the traffic restrictions that are already in place were enforced by the Police.
- Infrastructure must be in place before any new development but it was hoped that the improvements would not cost too much.
- If the proposed housing for the next 20 years goes ahead the pleasant lifestyle in Uckfield and the surrounding villages will be destroyed.
- It was hoped that the Town Council would continually reinforce the need to keep the 'green corridor' between the Town and villages.

Members confirmed that the whole point of the consultation and the Forum was to keep the public informed and to receive residents' comments in order that a master plan could be formed and presented to Wealden District Council.

It was generally agreed that Uckfield is at a turning point and progress cannot be stopped but that Uckfield Town Council would certainly exercise as much influence as it could for the benefit of the Town on any proposed changes.

There being no further questions the Chairman thanked everybody for their interest and for attending the Forum and reminded them of the date and time of Wealden's consultation on 28th July 2007 in the Civic Centre at 10.00am.

The meeting closed at 8.50pm.