

# **Tonbridge Civic Society**

*Initial response to proposals regarding redevelopment of the area to the east of the High Street*

March 12, 2024

## **SUMMARY**

In general, Tonbridge Civic Society supports development in the area east of the High Street.

The area around Sovereign Way and Avenue du Puy is bleak and unwelcoming, with car parking the main land use and not all of it particularly well used. Much could be done to make this part of town more attractive through sympathetic development, not least given its central position in a town with limited land, and the frontage onto the Botany Stream.

The Civic Society bemoaned such “open cast” parking and car dependency as far back as 1978 – particularly given the sports facilities that were being replaced – and we have not changed our position.

As we presented in our exhibition in December 2023, we note that as far back as the 1990s proposals have been brought forward to replace the Angel Centre and redevelop this area. Much of the analysis presented in the 2024 Mace report echoes what was said in similar reports over the decades since. These reports yielded detailed proposals that did not come to fruition. It is important that this time we do end up with something.

## **HOUSING DENSITY**

Given the context of the demands of the Local Plan across the borough, we understand and broadly support some further residential development in the centre of Tonbridge. The alternatives likely being further developments on greenfield / greenbelt land around the town.

But because of the central location of this development, it is crucial that it is a) in alignment with high quality design and b) supported by necessary infrastructure, notably around transportation though also schools, medical facilities, etc.

Design-wise, this is an opportunity for the council and its partners to deliver something special for the town, particularly given the market analysis pointing toward low rise, high density housing. For some time now the town has had a shortage of family homes. More flats are unlikely to solve this. And, as has been the Society’s longstanding position, any developments should be of appropriate height.

## **CAR PARKING & TRANSPORT**

The large volume of car parking on the site can be reduced, as shown by the evidence in the reports. That said, many residents in and around the town do need to drive to supermarkets and the town. Moreover, the council likely needs the revenue from car parking more than ever. Multistorey car parking appears to be an obvious way to help resolve this.

This would also appear to be the best moment to make possible alternatives to cars. Throughout the 60-year existence of the Civic Society and before, the town has struggled with ever-increasing car ownership and usage, and today it seems to take little more than a single temporary traffic light for near-gridlock to occur.

As such, any additional residential developments will need to consider additional transport pressures seriously and ideally be presented in the context of a holistic transportation plan that genuinely encourages active travel.

We agree that “connectivity, and waymarking needs to be improved in High Street East to integrate it to the rest of the town and capitalise on the town's assets”. This accurately pinpoints one of the area's current weaknesses, and one of the main potential benefits from redevelopment of the area.

The report does not specify how the site should engage with the areas to its east and south. To the east, the low-rise industrial estate is a valuable source of employment but appears to be ripe for a higher density solution of its own.

From the south, the railway car parks provide an ugly and messy entrance way to the town, and we note attempts have been made to engage with Network Rail. We would encourage this.

To the north and west, we broadly agree with the Mace report that much more should be done to link the site to the High Street and the Botany area.

### **ANGEL CENTRE**

All agree that something needs to be done about the Angel Centre. Even its most vociferous backers acknowledge that it is not what it once was. It is difficult to draw conclusions as to the best strategy for the Centre given that the options for it have yet to be published.

That said,

\* The Centre is very well used by groups from across town and it's difficult to see any other facilities that could step in if the Centre wasn't there

\* The town lacks (or is short of) facilities that the Angel Centre once provided in some form (notably a theatre, a cinema, flexible meeting rooms, function/party spaces, music performance space; also an art gallery space). It is important for the town that provision of these are priorities alongside the leisure/sports facilities we assume the Leisure Trust will focus on

Given the second point, it is somewhat concerning that the LEHS Viability Report appears to suggest a reduction in community rooms (Annex 2i).

### **LEISURE / HEALTH QUARTER**

It is encouraging to learn that a GP practice might be keen to expand into new premises within the development. More people mean more demand for medical facilities after all.

And while it seems somewhat faddish to label an area a health or wellbeing quarter, we do note that

the site's history was for sport (cricket, football), so if there is a way to echo that within the new development this might provide some historic resonance.

### **RETAIL OFFERING & TOWN SQUARE**

When Beales closed, the Civic Society made a bold proposal visualizing how the space could be better used as a market hall and public space. It is encouraging to see some of these ideas are mentioned in the Mace report. And it is important (and noted in the Viability Report) that any retail offering has a different character to that offered by the High Street. We do not want the new retail to cannibalize the existing.

As part of the Civic Society's vision for the area, we also proposed replacing the car parking to the west of the Sainsbury's site with a public space. Given the busy traffic that runs through the High Street this area is the obvious, and probably only, place that such a public space could be located.

Regarding the Sainsbury's development announced last week it is encouraging that further investment will come into the town, and specifically this area. We very much hope there can be better coordination between TMBC and Sainsbury's if and when a masterplan for the area is put together.

*Drafted by Tom Freke and Mark Ansdell on behalf of Tonbridge Civic Society.*