



# Leigh-on-Sea Town Council

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Chairman: Cllr Carole Mulroney  
Vice Chairman: Cllr Caroline Parker  
Town Clerk: Paul Beckerson



MINUTES OF AN EXTRAORDINARY MEETING OF THE LEIGH-ON-SEA TOWN COUNCIL HELD AT 7.30PM ON THURSDAY AT THE LEIGH COMMUNITY CENTRE, 71-73 ELM ROAD, LEIGH-ON-SEA TO CONSIDER THE ELM ROAD DEVELOPMENT BRIEF

Present: Cllrs Carole Mulroney (Chairman), Syrie Cox, Geoff Crawford (until Min 127, 8.25pm), Donald Fraser, Richard Herbert (until Min 127, 9pm) Jerry Holden, Pat Holden, Paul Lawrence, Cliff Passmore and David Stanley (until Min 127, 8.30pm).

***The meeting commenced at 7.30pm***

123. CHAIRMAN'S OPENING REMARKS

The Chairman welcomed members to the Extraordinary Council meeting.

124. DECLARATIONS OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS

All those present declared a personal interest in that the Town Council resides in the Community Centre.

125. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Cllrs Mark Bromfield, Margaret Cotgrove, Alex Coulson, Caroline Parker and Patsy Ryan

126. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the 10<sup>th</sup> April 2013 were agreed and signed by the Chairman.

127. ELM ROAD DEVELOPMENT BRIEF

All Councillors had received copies of the Brief and supporting documents and individual comments on the Brief had been circulated by Councillors Margaret Cotgrove, Richard Herbert, Carole Mulroney and Caroline Parker.

The Council would be responding to the various questions within the Brief in order, as soon as possible, to make its views known to the general public as an aid to their completion of the consultation. The consultation period ended on 13 May and all Councillors were asked to publicise its existence and the need for the public to respond as much as they were able.

The meeting debated each question raised in the Brief in depth. The views expressed below form the overwhelming majority decision of the Council and it was **RESOLVED** that these views form the Council's response to the consultation and that the press and public be apprised of this response.

QUESTION 1 – Have we identified the key issues in terms of land uses on the site? If not, what have we missed?

RESPONSE- The Town Council considers that the Brief and the Borough Council have completely placed the wrong emphasis on the status of the site and therefore their focus is based on a false premise. The Brief places the site in a south to north context in that it sees it as a transition area between the commercial and residential parts of the Town.

The Town Council is firmly of the view that the orientation should be north to south and that this site is not a transition area at all but a gateway to the Town and is therefore of much greater importance/significance than implied and should be treated as such. Due to this misconception the site is dealt with as a subsidiary area and not seen as a focal point in the town. It is interesting to note that the Community Centre is framed as a striking focal point at the west end of Pall Mall – good enough to feature on the cover of the Brief!

The civic nature of the site is played down, in the reference to it being ‘nominally’ public buildings when in fact it has been at the civic centre of the Town for over 100 years and was obviously planned as such by the development of the Town Council offices/ police station, former fire station site and community centre during the same period. The Borough itself used the offices on the site as an outpost (1933 Kelly’s Directory). The Town Council’s view is that it should be the civic centre of the Town again and the Brief fails to recognise the significance of the site to the Town and residents.

The buildings are not underused as is implied and the Town Council is fast turning the Centre into a thriving hub of the community. The Centre is not ‘tolerated’ it is actively supported by the Town, including existing neighbours.

In addition the Town Council has serious queries against the need or desirability of extra car parking in the Town. There are car parks which are underused – the issue is cost of parking, not availability.

The Town Council considers that the Brief has failed to add any vibrancy to the site in terms of the form and content of development it proposes. This has been lost by the perceived ‘need’ for more parking. There are other solutions to the parking issue which should be investigated and a site of this size and importance should not be focussed around car parking.

The Town Council notes the modest scale of the buildings in the area and this should not be breached in any proposed development. Also the Brief gives scant reference to planting. This is a very important element and needs to be considered sensitively especially with a dual use area. A tree here and there is not landscaping.

Significantly, the Brief fails to properly reference the Town Council’s occupancy of a major part of the site, the Community Centre. This is clearly reflected in the total misunderstanding in the Brief and generally by the Borough Council, of the reality of the use of the Centre. The studies which informed the Brief were done well before the Town Council took over the Centre and reflect a position which does not now exist. The Centre is now, and is increasingly, becoming the focal point of reference for Leigh and the Brief fails to address this – it is suggested that the Borough Council needs to review the Brief in the light of this so that it truly reflects the situation of the Community Centre into the future. The Town Council can supply full details to enable this to be done.

The people of Leigh value this site and buildings which give them a sense of place and all are concerned that the architecture and buildings should remain. There is reference to the retention only of the facade of the Community Centre. What the Brief and the Borough Council fail to recognise is the significance of the type and configuration of the space within the Centre. Nowhere in Leigh is this architectural form with high ceilings and expansive rooms available. The building is the facade and the space within it and this should be enhanced not demolished for a ‘bog standard’ form of development which offers neither what people want, nor enhancement of the character of the Town.

The Town Council is in favour of a more mixed use of the site of a limited and appropriate scale which could bring in more revenue than a sea of car parking.

The Town Council is concerned that there is no indication of the treatment of the western boundary which is left featureless and barren. Bearing in mind this backs on to residential properties this is an important omission. Carefully chosen trees/bushes could attenuate noise disturbance and provide screening.

In 2011 the Community Centre was a candidate for local listing which was supported by the professional officers and expert conservation officers of Essex County Council on whom the

Borough relied for conservation advice. It was described by the officers as a local landmark and making a positive contribution to the street-scene.

***Cllr Geoff Crawford left the meeting***

Due to inappropriate changes in the way the Borough then decided to assess local listings nothing further was achieved. It is therefore, disingenuous to imply the Community Centre was not locally listed because of the bricked up units at ground floor

***Cllr David Stanley left the meeting***

QUESTION 2 – Have the relevant issues for the site been identified through the community consultation events? If not, what have we missed?

RESPONSE - The answers to Question 1 go in part to answer this question and should be referred to.

The Town Council is deeply concerned at the Brief's failure to understand the nature of the use of the site which has moved on considerably in the last 6 months and which is set to improve dramatically in the next few years with the enhanced use of the Community Centre. It is not a conglomeration of old, dated buildings with back-land car parking. It is fast becoming the social, cultural and community hub of Leigh.

There is no recognition in the Brief of how important these buildings are to the Town despite the fact that the Borough has repeatedly been made aware of this. They are familiar to, and feature in the experiences of, most residents and, as such, provide a 'sense of place' considered so important by planners and psychologists.

The Borough is clearly seeing this site as the 'saviour' of its problems of finding a home for uses displaced from buildings it is disposing of.

The Community Centre is already well-subscribed to and the space often fully utilised. The organisation of the uses and space has evolved and developed since the Town Council has taken over, and is now effective but 'comfortable'.

The Town Council wish it to be known that it will resist vigorously any attempt by the Borough Council to centralise displaced uses within the Community Centre to the detriment of its operation and use.

What the Town Council would favour is a sympathetic extension of the Community Centre westwards to take in the site of the Connexions building as an adjunct to the Centre where displaced uses and similar could be housed without (administrative or structural) detriment to the Community Centre as an entity. This would be able to accommodate youth uses which have been lost and which are essential to the ever increasing young population of Leigh; it would increase the civic hub element of the area without loss of the vital services and space the Community Centre provides.

There is a lack of understanding in the Brief for the context of Leigh as a town. Property prices are high – people want to live here – part of the attraction is the lifestyle and the heritage, to which scant reference is made in the Brief.

The Town Council does not believe this site is suitable for housing as proposed – the layout proposed does not provide a suitable setting for housing – it is dead frontage and lacks any ambient variety and vibrancy to enhance the area. The Town Council would rather see the traditional features of Leigh in some suitable commercial small scale use with residential above on the south side. Any form of large scale retail/commercial development is totally inappropriate to Leigh and to this site.

The Town Council also opposes opening up the front of the Community Centre to retail uses.

Such a proposal would also lead to a loss of valuable community space within the Community Centre, which the Town Council will resist. Display cases where there are recesses in the brick work could have lively displays relevant to the Community uses, or of art.

QUESTION 3 – Do you consider that the preferred approach (refer to: Approach Two Diagram) reflects the challenges and opportunities the site offers? If not, what have we missed and why is this important to the site and land uses?

RESPONSE - The Town Council consider that the Brief projects a missed opportunity to provide a comprehensive and well thought out development of this major site within Leigh. As stated above, the focus of the Brief takes the wrong orientation for the site and the Brief, it is felt, is written and in such language as to deride the site, its uses and play down its importance to the Town.

There are massive advantages to both Leigh, and to the Borough, in enhancing this site. Leigh is a cultural hub in the Borough and the Borough is failing to capitalise on that history, culture and community awareness and spirit.

The development of the Elm Road site by the reorientation of the Community Centre entrance looking into the square, the extension of the building to accommodate more community uses, and the enhancement of the town square element flanked to the south by suitably designed properties, building on the cultural heritage and artistic community of Leigh, well landscaped and with good boundary treatments and access would be a great attraction to the Town and create a focal heart in the community. It would provide economic stimulus in the form of jobs and an enhancement to the quality of life of all the residents of Leigh. It would enhance the educational, leisure, cultural and youth facilities in Leigh and would truly be a development of, and for, all ages.

QUESTION 4 – Do you consider that the Development Brief Guidelines within Section 6 reflect those issues and opportunities identified within the Brief? If not what have we missed?

There is a presumption that development is always an improvement – this is not necessarily the case, it depends on need and quality. We have pointed out the error in the Brief in viewing the site from the wrong orientation and thus down playing its importance. Some of the comments in Section 6 are totally erroneous in their interpretations of buildings, particularly the Community Centre, and the whole tenor of the paragraphs referring to the Community Centre seem to be written from an intentionally demeaning and devaluing stance .

The Town Council takes great exception to, and refutes, the view given in paragraphs 70-72 and will encourage the residents of Leigh to respond that they will not accept the loss of or devaluation of the Community Centre. Indeed, it is the very non-conformity of the building that gives it the character and individuality which endears it to, and attracts, an ever-increasing number of users.

Option 5 (attached), being a suggestion layout submitted by Cllr Herbert, is adopted by the Council as its preferred option for the Community Centre and northern end of the site.

***Cllr Richard Herbert left the meeting***

QUESTION 5 – The Brief supports that continued provision of public car park on the site, with the number of spaces equal to or in slight excess of existing provision. Do you consider this approach to be appropriate? If not, what are the main issues for parking provision in the local area? Could the site contribute to this and how could this be achieved.

Despite repeated requests by the Town Council the car parks in the Town are poorly signed. This should be rectified before any idea of additional extensive car parking is considered.

See comments above about car parking. Alternative provision such as park and ride should be considered. It is difficult to see a net gain from the parking proposed when the surrounding development's parking needs will need to be factored in. The Council will not accept any form of underground or multi storey option.

QUESTION 6 – Do you consider the proposed Development Framework to be an appropriate guide for future development on the site? If not, what have we missed?

The simple answer to this question is NO – for all of the above reasons. What the Brief has missed is the essence and heart of Leigh – something perhaps only residents can explain.

Further comments – We think outside seating areas would enhance the ambience and setting of any development and a walkway to Rectory Grove would be an advantage if this could be provided in a safe and convenient manner.

We consider there is scope for the Police Station to house other uses as well which could refocus the activity of the building and negate the claims in the Brief of lack of activity on the Elm Road frontage.

We consider the Brief and the Borough Council have failed to acknowledge the success of the Community Centre and the place it plays in the life of Leigh, and that a great opportunity to provide a significant gateway to the Town is being missed.

***The meeting closed at 9.25pm***