

Hello everyone,

## **The last stretch? From Stakeholders Reference Group to planning application**

We last wrote to you regarding the Twickenham Riverside project in May.

You may also have seen the letter we wrote to the Editor of the *Twickenham and Richmond Tribune*, published [in the 21st May edition \(on page 10\)](#), in which we agreed with a previous contributor (Shona Lyons, in her letter in the 7<sup>th</sup> May edition) that the desired goal must be an attractive open space within the redeveloped site where 'the local community and visitors would come to enjoy the scenery' at 'a beautiful riverside' - with as much green as possible and without the current parking on the embankment.

Since then the Council has held a meeting of the Stakeholders Reference Group (SRG) on 16<sup>th</sup> June - the first since December (and likely to have been the last – see below). This is to inform you of what was presented at that (again it was an on-line meeting, on Zoom). This is a longer newsletter than before, reflecting that it comes at a very important stage.

The Council began with an update on the project calendar. It announced its intention to submit a planning application for the redevelopment by the end of June, with a view to a planning decision in September/October, so as to start construction in early 2022.

Then, a representative of Hopkins architects was asked to present the latest design – which he did via a series of visuals on screen. We asked for a walk-through video of the site, for a greater sense of how the proposed scheme is intended to look, but that was not forthcoming. The Leader of the Council had prefaced this presentation with a statement that the visuals which were shown at the SRG meeting should not be copied or shared by those attending the SRG. We do *not* have, therefore, any images of the proposed development to show you today. They will presumably be part of the planning application.

### **Here, in words, are key aspects of the proposed design - before we offer a summary on behalf of RAG:-**

- There has been little change in the massing of the buildings. The shape of the new building on Water Lane (towards the north east of the site) is as previously proposed with just some detailed changes to the design (the façade facing into the development broken up more, with larger windows for the retail units, a second entrance between the row of retail units and the café building; and the gable end on King St adjusted, twin gable ends at Embankment end retained). When you see the plans, you will be able to judge how it is intended to look.
- As for the Wharf Lane building (on the south west corner of the site), the heights and massing are unchanged. This is presented as a 'destination' building. On behalf of RAG, we reiterated our concern that it would be six storeys high when viewed from the front on the embankment and because of the flood-wall plinth on which the building sits – a total of 18.9 metres according to the latest plans. We wonder whether the visual shown by Hopkins at the SRG accurately communicates how the building will look from the (new) embankment. The impression was that the image portrays the building as if from a position further away (i.e. some metres back) and in so doing downplays the height as seen from the river. There are similar concerns in regard to the entrance into the site from the top of Wharf Lane.
- With extensions also planned by the new owners to the back of the existing buildings on King Street (the height expected to be four storeys), as we stated in our previous newsletter, the effect of the Wharf Lane and Water Lane buildings would be to create an area enclosed on three sides. It seems to us that the space offered by the proposed plan would feel substantially more overlooked and confined than the

current park/green space of the existing Diamond Jubilee Gardens, even with the planned narrow terraced grassed area leading down to the riverside at the bottom of Water Lane. Again we ask: is this the best that can be done? The original Hopkins design which won the design competition in November 2019 proposed the Wharf Lane building with a 'winter garden' which gave it a lighter look/feel. That concept has gone - which makes it more important, we think, for the positioning and configuration of the Wharf Lane building to be carefully considered.

- In answer to a specific question posed by RAG, the architect confirmed that the brick to be used in both buildings is real brick (the original wood/glass has gone), not fake brick cladding of the kind used in reconstruction of Twickenham railway station.
- The Council's plan for the use of the two buildings is as follows, quoting from a Council document. The Wharf Lane Building will 'deliver 24 units which will be proposed for private sale'. The Water Lane building is 'anticipated to comprise 21 units to be sold for affordable housing'. 'The scheme will deliver 5 accessible housing units'. The tenure mix of the affordable units - i.e.: ownership/rental - is 'to be confirmed'. 'The affordable housing units comprise approximately 46% of the overall scheme'. However, 'when expressed or calculated based on habitable rooms, the affordable units comprise 50% with associated amenity space including gardens, balconies, and terraces'. RAG's understanding, based on the same Council documents, is that there will in total be '1 commercial unit providing 429 square metres of office/retail and 5 retail units providing 359 sqm of retail space, plus two food and beverage units (café and a pub/restaurant) covering 637 sqm'.
- A local architect who was formerly member of the design panel expressed his disappointment that, overall, the design of the scheme has changed substantially and as now proposed lacks the attractiveness of the original Hopkins design which won the architects' competition.
- The Diamond Jubilee Gardens will have a play area for families with children, pétanque courts relocated, mostly more open access and views across the site. Pedestrian access and paths for through movement were displayed on the Hopkins visuals. The stated objective is for the Gardens to be 're-provisioned', but the design as currently proposed would seem to entail an overall loss of public space as well as the loss of a 'feel' of the park/green space provided by the existing DJG, owing primarily to the impact of the proposed Wharf Lane building. A representative of the Twickenham Riverside Trust reported that the Trust had commissioned an independent survey of the replacement space, to assist Charity Commission approval.
- The proposed cycle route through the centre of the site was queried. After some confusion, assurance was given that the through path is *not* an active cycle route. The main routes will be along the Embankment and using Wharf and Water Lanes. Cycles on the upper riverside would be 'managed' - that has since been confirmed as no cycling, only the ability to push bikes through a pedestrian priority area.
- The Wharf Lane is to include a pub at upper-embankment level, facing the river. Why - it was asked - is it thought necessary to add a new pub to those which *already exist*, in King Street, Church Lane and on the embankment? RAG posed a question as to the new pub's seating capacity and a possible outflow of customers, to which the Hopkins representative replied that this would be 'managed'. It is not clear how: the bar manager would presumably be keen to pull as many pints as possible, and the outflow of his/her customers would surely result in pub customers sitting on the nearby steps leading down to the embankment. In some interactions of the design this pub has been described as a 'pub/restaurant'. Which is it? If the desire is *not* to create an open-air drinking zone on the steps, it would be better to licence the premises as a restaurant (seating only).

- An attractive potential feature of the Wharf Lane end of the site is a 'riverside activity zone' in the south-west corner of the building, with a 'pontoon' and 'boathouses' for paddle boards and kayaks. Questions were raised by SRG members as to the practical organisation and management of that area. Will it be behind a barrier? What will be the administrative burden, etc? The existing steps down to the water are watermen's steps, rather than an access intended for public use. Could the Council not consider a more graduated arrangement of steps down which would enable easier launching of boards and kayaks, rather than a pontoon? These are important practical details to be considered.
- Concern was expressed as to the prioritisation of movement on the Embankment. According to the Council's scheme, it has always been intended, with the removal of the parking, that priority would be given to pedestrians, but there was a question from a participant in the SRG meeting as to its use as a highway. What about the need for access for some larger delivery lorries in order to ensure servicing of the Eel Pie Island boathouses/businesses? How is that to be compatible with the intended events space on the Embankment?

At the end of the meeting, the Council announced that this was the last SRG meeting to be convened by the Council. The engagement with local stakeholders, at least via the SRG, has in other words finished. The focus now moves to the planning application. Local residents will have an opportunity to review the Council's plans.

### **What next?**

We would be interested to hear thoughts and comments from as many of you as have the time to study the future planning proposals (which we expect to be very close to what we saw via the SRG), including communicating which elements of the scheme as presented by the Council you consider will work well, alongside any other aspects that will not. The planning application process allows for the possibility of changes which means that the proposed design does not have to be taken in its entirety. The active involvement of residents at this point is going to be important to ensure that local views are expressed.

That is especially so since the Leader of the Council and the Council officers have made it clear that they are looking to drive those proposals through. In that connection, 2 days after the SRG meeting (but not during), the Council announced its intention to seek and apply compulsory purchase powers to acquire the land of the Diamond Jubilee Gardens and other parts of the site in case of any opposition from the owners to its proposals.

In a recent communication to RAG, the Leader referred to the 'vision' that the plans represent. A vision set out in a drawing/visual representation on Zoom or on paper is one thing, while the reality of what that will result in on the ground may well be another.

The 'flexible' future 'space' of which the Hopkins representative made great play in his interventions at the SRG will need to be workable in practice, especially since the DJG will be more open than it is currently. As we have sought to bring to your attention above, there are questions as to the mix of uses, e.g. general and family leisure use *versus* pub? Will best use be made of all or individual parts of the riverside zone? Is all the building necessary? Will the space work in its own right rather than merely as a connection between buildings? Is it that, behind the scenes, financial considerations - about which the Council talks little in public - are actually driving the plan for the redevelopment more than the prominently advertised future benefits?

We at RAG consider that the design has changed massively since the original Hopkins winning design, and substantially even since the design on which the January consultation was based. On this and other aspects, the Council and Councillors have not adequately engaged in discussion with local residents. The 'consultation' of local stakeholders has been patchy and in many respects tokenistic.

The prospect of removal of the derelict area after so long is good, but for Twickenham riverside to be a desirable 'destination', the detail of the redevelopment needs to be right, to ensure the future practicality

and attractiveness of this important site. Not only will we all be judging the development when it is first opened to the public, but every time we visit it in the following years. The chosen design will have to stand the test of time.

As ever, we welcome your comments.

Best wishes,

Peter, Marion and Mark