

M&G Real Estate North Street Stakeholder Workshops

Thank you for your participation in the North Street stakeholder workshops so far. We thought it would be helpful to get a sense of the opinions of the group after three workshops, through written feedback. We would be very grateful for your views.

The following comments are based on discussion with the Guildford Residents Association. As you will be aware, I contacted you prior to setting this down because we want to encourage positive dialogue about rethinking the direction this project currently seems to be taking. We would very much value a meeting to explore what we are proposing.

1. Do you have any general feedback based on what you have seen so far?

Yes, we warmly welcome the opportunity for involvement and encourage you to be more confident in allowing suggestions to be made.

As we have endeavoured to indicate to you in a very constructive and considerate way, we are deeply concerned by the way the project is developing. We would really like to encourage reconsideration of various elements before designs are worked up any further. There is a real risk of seeking to shoe horn a shopping centre (with a few adjustments to the mix of uses) into a hillside, during the dying days of the shopping centre, rather than creating something very viable and exciting that will be sustainable for the future. There is both an “opportunity cost” and the prospect of harm to Guildford from getting this wrong.

The analogy we would use is that it is as if you are trying to produce a large format copy of the Yellow Pages in 2017 even though it has not only reduced in size dramatically but is also being withdrawn from 2018.

The North Street site is the perfect site for you to launch something based on future need and that makes a virtue of the site characteristics rather than a high-cost (due to excavation) version of something that is a dying concept. You and your funders will be aware of the fate of the shopping centre.

2. Do you have a preference about whether the proposed new retail areas are fully open-air or covered?

Open with sufficient width to routes through. Also, it will be important to avoid creating narrow oppressive passages with tall buildings either side. Six storeys is too high along North Street and would be far too high along a narrow route through the development.

The current concept, which we do not support, of a big open “access hole” in the centre is an issue in an open development because of rain entering lower levels. We encourage you to reconsider.

The gradient across the site and importance of views onto the site and on North Street mean that covering the site would increase the perception of bulk and massing and make it harder to reflect the natural incline.

The design should embrace and reflect the gradient rather than excavate the hillside to make a vast level block.

3. Do you have any comments on connectivity to or through the proposed development?

We suggest a “stepped”, string of retail frontages along North Street, designed to celebrate and make a virtue of the gradient, with a number of routes through to high tech (eg 5G businesses), residential and leisure buildings behind. Routes should be accessible 24/7. Entry to these routes should be evident (ie not necessarily directly opposite) as you approach the site from all the adjoining access routes.

Attractive routes through that connect to the railway station and to the bus facilities should be a feature.

Access from the York Road direction should not be neglected and should be well designed to ensure the development does not “turn its back” to, and instead integrates with, adjoining residential areas.

The site should have links to the High Street at the top and bottom, and also at several other points in between, to ensure strong connectivity.

4. What architectural approach would you like to see taken to the new buildings? (e.g. traditional, contemporary) N.B. This topic will be discussed at a future workshop.

Place-based materials and design. Rich in variety and interest. Regardless of whether modern or traditional, the buildings and public realm should age gracefully (rather than become shabby) and be designed to stand the test of time. Choice of paving material matters in Guildford.

A cavernous hole as a prominent feature risks making this scheme look more like an airport retail/café area than an attractive heart to what we want to be a thriving character town centre. It also looks reminiscent of some developments on the outskirts of Paris that have not aged well.

5. Are there any examples, in terms of architecture or comparable schemes, you would suggest as inspiration?

Not Bath or Nottingham. Canterbury has some attractive traits.

The architecture and design should take their lead from the sweep of the land. There is no reason why the North Street frontage should not be listed in the future due to its attractive contemporary architecture affording views onto the downs, just as people value the High Street today.

6. What materials would you like to see used?

Materials that age well. Some stone, some brick.

Avoid fashion gimmicks like boxes and fins which, in most cases, will be seen as dated carbuncles in the future. Look at old photos of North Street, not to replicate old buildings but to open everyone’s eyes to what can be achieved by varied shape and form along North Street.

7. Do you have any suggested leisure options that you would like us to consider?

Go for 5G and Artificial Intelligence as themes plus some artisan restaurants and cafes and a gourmet restaurant. We have sites for theatre, cinema, night clubs, sport etc close by and it is not a priority to replicate these uses here. 5G is being developed at the University of Surrey yet the roll out is currently earmarked for other towns. We suggest using part of North Street site for high added value 5G and taking advantage of the nearby telephone exchange to house and conceal the infrastructure to support this.

8. Do you have any examples of town or city centres that you feel work well and should be used as inspiration?

We caution against using places that lend themselves to the approach of a “ring road around a pedestrianised core” as role models. Guildford needs a unique approach because it is a gap town and crossing point. We suggest embracing the fact the North Street is a site where routes converge. Design in a transport interchange for clean buses (small electric vehicles), provide strong links to trains. Recognise that extensive pedestrianisation is not realistic without disproportionate harm to nearby areas and plan for sustainable transport options.

9. Do you think that we should provide space for public art, and if so, in what form?

Yes, but this is a detail. The priority should be to get the design concept right first. Please note that if there was a choice between a budget for public art or putting that money towards the quality of architecture and materials used in buildings and street surfaces, we would choose the latter. Incorporate green features.

You could consider a plinth to showcase local art with an expectation that the installation changes each year.

10. Please leave any other comments that you wish to make.

We would be very troubled by an approach of sticking large residential areas on top making the development an excessively bulky, intrusive mass that bears little relationship to the fall of the land. Residential use should be fully integrated in a number of buildings that are arranged across the site in a layout that reflects the natural gradient of North Street. Residential access points should be attractive and a clearly identifiable feature at street level.

All our comments are intended to support a successful viable scheme. We would welcome a meeting to discuss our thinking further.