

Concept Masterplan – A New Vision for Woolwich?

Speak Out Woolwich preliminary comments

Background

1. This submission by Speak Out Woolwich is made following a very successful community conference attended by 120 local people on 2nd February 2019. The full report of this conference will be submitted as our full response to this consultation. This submission therefore simply gives some headline responses in order to meet the arbitrary 25th February deadline set by the Council. The comments made are in no particular order of importance.
2. Community engagement and participation should be at the heart of this plan so that the local community has a sense of ownership in its own future. The plan to date has failed to engage the community in anything other than a tokenistic way. The introduction to this New Vision for Woolwich says that the Vision set out “has been carried out in conjunction with...community groups”. It has not; for example there has been no real engagement with Speak Out Woolwich, the only residents’ group that represents all of Woolwich.
3. Speak Out Woolwich has been trying since August 2018 to encourage the Council to engage in a meaningful way with the local community, but to no avail. The local community should have been brought in at the outset so they had a real opportunity to influence the draft strategy. External consultants have been working for over six months with little genuine community engagement.
4. The Council’s Planning Department refused to either attend the community conference organized by Speak Out Woolwich or provide any information for it. The Council consultation launched on 6th February was poorly advertised and very poorly executed, held in a disused, dirty, shabby building. The eight exhibition boards were of poor quality and difficult to understand, devoid as they were of clear maps and visuals. There were no workshops as promised for local people to engage in. This is in contrast to the two predominantly professional stakeholder workshops the Council held in September and November 2018 at which there were presentations and workshop discussions, though no evaluation.
5. The consultation period with a deadline for comments of 25th February is too short to be meaningful. There should be a minimum 4 weeks’ consultation, preferably 6 weeks, in line with the minimum meaningful consultation deadlines set out the Council’s Statement of Community Involvement (SCI, December 2016).

6. Speak Out Woolwich wrote both to the Council's Planning Department and to the Cabinet member for Growth and Strategic Development about this shabby process of consultation on 9th February, but has not had the courtesy of either an acknowledgement or reply, in breach of the Council's own standards.

The Vision

7. There are some welcome ideas in the Vision, especially in relation to the need to end the divide between the Town Centre and the Royal Arsenal, and to avoid gentrification.
8. A new Masterplan (SPD) for Woolwich is not simply about buildings and physical infrastructure; it must place at its heart a vision for a cohesive community, avoiding asymmetric development, bringing people together and encouraging neighbourliness.

What we like about the draft Vision.

9. There is recognition of the need to:
 - End the divide between the Royal Arsenal and the Town Centre.
 - Make better use of Woolwich's riverfront setting.
 - Do something about the South Circular and A206 road network.
 - Create better public and open spaces.
 - Create better pedestrian and cycle routes linking the different parts of Woolwich.
 - Create a more vibrant evening economy, which gives local people something to do and will make Woolwich feel safer.
 - Do something in the meantime ie not wait for money for large-scale new developments.

What is missing.

10. Many of the ideas are statements of the obvious and lack any real detail. In the end, a single Masterplan will only be meaningful if the issues are considered layer-by-layer, involving the community in each aspect (eg cycle network plan, green space plan, riverfront plan, community facilities plan etc) and coming up with solutions supported by the community and deliverable within agreed timeframes. The following need to be addressed.

Housing for local people

11. There is a lack of any vision for more genuinely affordable local housing, including family housing. There needs to be a commitment to deliver 50% social/genuinely affordable housing in any new

development in line with the London Mayor's strategy. To date the Royal Arsenal has delivered only 8% genuinely affordable housing (against a borough policy of a minimum 24.5%) and other major developments in Woolwich tell a similar tale. It is a tale of gentrification that excludes local people.

12. The plan does nothing to identify in-fill spaces, including small sites, that could be used to meet local housing need. The plan needs to identify what capacity there is for local house-building and identify who the landowners are. Where land is publicly owned it should be kept for local house-building using both the Council's resources (and borrowing) and that of Meridian Home Start.
13. As it is, the plan says nothing about Woolwich being a designated "Opportunity Area" in the London Plan and the opportunities this provides for real estate investors seeking to maximise shareholder profits. We need to identify the challenges and how they might best be overcome for the benefit of local people, especially those in housing need.

Culture, arts and leisure

14. There is no mention of the new Woolwich Creative Quarter on the Royal Arsenal. Whilst this provides an opportunity, it also has the very real potential of further dividing the Royal Arsenal from the Town Centre. There needs to be a parallel cultural offer in the Town Centre, perhaps focused around the Bathway area. The existing Tramshed, with a prime location on General Gordon Square, and with its long history of alternative comedy and music, should also be made more accessible to, and inclusive of, the local community. Links with the University of Greenwich, which has been active in engaging with the local community, should be further developed and supported.
15. There is no mention of the proposal to relocate the Leisure Centre from its existing waterfront setting to the Town Centre. We question the need to do this instead of redeveloping it where it is, making the best of its riverside setting and developing cafes etc within the vicinity. Why does the proposed Waterfront Plaza not incorporate this? It would be more environmentally sustainable and not lead to further demolition of existing assets.

A riverside town

16. Woolwich is special in being a Town Centre with a direct waterfront setting, and this needs to be optimised, whilst recognising the disadvantage of its north facing aspect. Currently the waterfront has been dominated by high-rise blocks (designated 'Waterfront Living') but it could be made a public attraction to both locals and visitors alike.

Woolwich needs to be connected along the riverfront both east and west, connecting riverside linear green and public spaces from Thamesmead to Woolwich and Charlton, and on to Greenwich.

17. The waterfront area should be the subject of a special plan, incorporating social, aesthetic and ecological aspects.

Heritage

18. Little mention is made of the need to preserve and enhance the existing heritage and history in line with the proposed new Conservation Area and/or locally listed buildings' status. This area should be extended to include the 'Spray Street Quarter' (as far as Burrage Road), the area around Love Lane and Tesco's (including the green space) extending up to the Woolwich Common Conservation area, and the roads around Anglesea Road.
19. There is no mention of areas such as Bathway and Mortgramit Square which could be developed in ways that are unique and reflect the history of the area.
20. Immediate consideration should be given to signage etc celebrating the town's fine architecture and the rich history of its cooperative and mutual movement, as well as its military history. The Town Centre has already seen the pointless and destructive loss of much Woolwich history, such as the Grand Theatre in Wellington Street, and this must be stopped.
21. Some of the vacant buildings in Hare Street and Powis Street have genuine historic appeal but the Council seems to be failing in its powers to have the landlords maintain them. This adds to the perception that the town centre is tired and dilapidated.

Good Design

22. No mention is made of the need for good quality design to be at the heart of any new developments so that we do not end up with yet more bland, soul-less blocks unsuited to community and family living. We need high quality, creative and futuristic design in keeping with the desired future dynamism of Woolwich.

Community facilities

23. No mention is made of the absence of high quality community owned facilities for use by the whole community, something that is desperately lacking in Woolwich. There is a dearth of facilities for the community, encompassing the age span from children through youth to families and elderly people, and including the very many diverse communities in Woolwich.

Safety and crime

24. Attention needs to be paid to the reasons why there is a relatively high incidence of crime and why people do not feel safe. The reasons for this will be multi-factorial but must be addressed, and need to include a wide range of agencies, but most notably the communities most susceptible to crime, both as victims and perpetrators. Models from elsewhere, notably the Glasgow example, should be learnt from.

Town Centre management and retail

25. No mention is made of the need for effective Town Centre management and the potential for a Woolwich Business Improvement District to pay for this and to improve the Town Centre.
26. There is no mention of the Future High Street Fund and how this might benefit Woolwich, though again the Council to date has not consulted local community groups about this.
27. Similarly, no mention is made of British Land who own approximately 56 retail units in Powis Street and have a vital role to play in the future development of the Town Centre.
28. Nor is there any reference to the need to retain local businesses and help them thrive, instead of potentially forcing their relocation/closure, as is the case with the proposed Spray Street Quarter, with the predicted loss of 173 permanent jobs, mainly from BME communities. Areas of current retail offer that could be improved are not even mentioned eg Thomas Street and Calderwood Street.
29. Recognition needs to be given to the crisis in high street retail. Pipe dreams of high-end brand retail shops (likely to remain empty) need to give way to a realistic vision of local, thriving independent shops serving the needs of the local community. Immediate action should be taken to offer local businesses affordable rents and rates and to improve existing shopfronts and signage.

What to do in the meantime

30. The so-called 'meanwhile' uses should be supported, but any activity/ideas must be rooted in local community needs and ideas, and not simply imported from a hackneyed Shoreditch model. No mention is made in this respect of the now grade 2 listed Covered Market and its potential for supporting local creative industries and local food businesses such as Rust Bucket Pizza or other local food outlets such

as Nepalese, Eritrean, Vietnamese, African and traditional local cafes, to name but a few.

The public realm and green spaces

31. Though reference is made to the public realm, there does not seem to be a clear vision as to how outdoor, community space can be maximised and enhanced.
32. To get good outdoor space, in addition to appointing consultant landscape architects, we need an in-house council landscape architect who will represent community interests to designers and planners, and will work as a volunteer organiser to involve local people in maintaining open spaces.
33. Money earmarked for "pocket parks" could be spent on improving and maintaining existing green spaces with better planting and landscaping, and planting of bright flowers etc. General Gordon Square has no flowers in it. Spaces for plants in Beresford Square are often empty. Boarding outside vacant lots and premises could be painted with murals or art, potentially involving local school children.
34. Woolwich needs a Friends of Woolwich Town Centre group to ensure community ownership of such spaces. We need an imaginative policy for the use of roofspaces, green roofs, living walls and green buildings.
35. Just having green space is not enough. It needs to be well planned, well designed and well managed. Woolwich needs public and communal space, space for activities, garden space, food growing space etc. We also need spacious balconies in flatted developments so that people can grow things. People don't just want to see green space. They want to use it and can be encouraged to help maintain it.

Transport and pollution

36. Crossrail is briefly mentioned as an opportunity which it is, but opportunity for whom? The fact that it will now be located on the Royal Arsenal side, under the influence of Berkeley Homes, means it has the very real potential of further widening the divide between the Royal Arsenal and the Town Centre (as does the Creative Quarter). Crossrail will mean that many Royal Arsenal residents who currently use the public transport system in the Town Centre will no longer have to do so.

37. Given its location in zone 4, Crossrail will remain unaffordable to many local income residents. At the very least there needs to be a very determined campaign to have Woolwich Arsenal rezoned to zone 3/4.
38. Whilst there is a section on transport, including some welcome proposals, no mention is made of the need to link the Woolwich Ferry to the Town Centre and integrate it with the local public transport system. The Woolwich Ferry as a free service is unique in London, has a unique history in Woolwich and should be celebrated as a major asset.
39. The plan needs to integrate its vision and ground it in what is already there. A good example of this is the vision for cycling (much welcomed). There is a long-established cycle shop in Woolwich (Harry Perry Cycles, established 1908) which could be better supported if cycle lanes were linked to it which would increase both the knowledge and use of this vital local business.
40. The plan makes no mention of the ULEZ (Ultra-Low Emission Zone) which will be introduced in 2021 and extends as far as the South Circular. This will have a major impact on Woolwich, with a likely increase in traffic and a concomitant increase in pollution.
41. The plan should therefore consider an air quality zone for the Town Centre. This can probably only work in line with a strategy to narrow the carriageway of Woolwich High Street and Plumstead Road as a means of encouraging pedestrian and cycling use, and enhancing road safety, a matter of major local concern.
42. Poor traffic management on the Plumstead Road is a massive barrier to any real cohesion between the Royal Arsenal and Woolwich Town Centre. The traffic moves through this area at dangerously high speeds, the timings at the pedestrian crossings (including the new super-crossing) favour the movement of vehicles, not people, and there are no speed cameras in the vicinity.

The elephant in the room (tall buildings).

43. The plan is not sufficiently clear on tall buildings. Tall towers such as the proposed Meyer Homes' skyscraper in front of Tesco's are simply not appropriate for a Town Centre setting and the plan needs to be more specific as to what is, and what is not, acceptable in particular areas of Woolwich. Tall buildings need to have character, sympathetic exteriors and not be monolithic if they are to add something positive to the town landscape.

Community assets and social impact

44. The plan has nothing to say about the unique demographic of this area, nor does it show any knowledge of what already exists in the community (in terms of existing community assets, skills etc) and how to capitalise on these.
45. Nor does it take any account of the social impact of any of the developments on existing communities and networks. This is a consequence of rigidly adopting a top-down approach rather than a bottom-up one as we have proposed. It shows both paternalism, a lack of imagination and a lack of faith in local people. This needs to change along with a step change in attitude, away from tokenistic consultation to genuine community participation and partnership.

End-note

46. Though late in the day, the Council now needs to seriously engage with the local community in a spirit of true partnership. Otherwise hundred/s of thousands of pounds will have been spent on drawing up a plan that has no community ownership. This is particularly disappointing given the London Mayor's recent commendation of the Council for the way it engaged the community in drawing up the Charlton Riverside Masterplan. What's good for Charlton must be good for Woolwich too.
47. Speak Out Woolwich will in due course submit a full conference report following its own successful community conference. This will incorporate a full range of community views.

Speak Out Woolwich
25th February 2019