RINGWOOD TOWN CENTRE STEERING GROUP – 15TH NOVEMBER 2007

POSSIBLE DEVELOPMENT ON THE FURLONG CAR PARK, RINGWOOD

(A) RESULTS OF PUBLIC CONSULTATION EXCERCISE
(B) THE WAY AHEAD

1. Introduction

1.1 On 26th April 2007 the Ringwood Town Centre Steering Group recommended that:-

- a consultation based on the Design Engine work should be carried out in Ringwood;

- the District Council should lead the consultation, although it should be co-ordinated with the Ringwood Town Plan consultation if possible;

- the consultation should start in June and should put forward 4 potential options:-

  - mixed use
  - retail use only
  - offices, leisure and community facilities
  - replace/renovate existing buildings only

- the consultation exercise should be based upon leaflets being widely available in Ringwood, and a manned exhibition in the town centre;

- the outcome should be reported to the Cabinet in the Autumn.

1.2 Following further consideration leaflets were distributed to about 6,000 houses in the Ringwood area in September and an unmanned exhibition was set up in the Meeting House Centre. Information was also included on the Council's website with an e-mail response form and letters were written to organisations and groups in the Ringwood area. Because of the difficulties with the household distribution of consultation leaflets the closing date for responses was extended from the middle to the end of October.

2. Results of Consultation Exercise

2.1 At the date of preparing this report 1420 response forms had been analysed. 144 of these were received by e-mail with the others being returned in the post. In addition, 26 groups or individuals had sent in the written comments by either letter or e-mail.

2.2 The response forms results are set out below:-

1. Do you think it important that the economic viability of Ringwood Town centre is maintained and enhanced by planning for new shopping development?

Very Important	Moderately Important	Neutral	Of Little Importance	Not Very Important
368	212	146	159	386

2. Do you think a new theatre/community venue in the town centre would benefit the town?

Yes	No	Don't Know
712	551	107

3. Do you think it is a good idea to provide for an overall increase in car parking provision in the town centre?

Yes	No	Don't Know
604	708	64

4. If you have ticked yes to questions 2) or 3) above do you understand that new retail provision would be necessary for this scheme to be funded by New Forest?

Yes	No
698	145

5. Do you think it is a good idea to provide better public information services and new public conveniences in the town centre?

Yes	No	Don't Know
1107	215	50

6. If you had to make a choice from the options below which would you choose? (Please tick just one box).

Option 1 ***A mixed use development on the Furlong car park including all of the facilities described on the plan.***	534
Option 2 ***A new shopping development only, supported by the extra car parking but not the public facilities.***	90
Option 3 ***The public facilities only, without the shopping development to help fund them.***	157
Option 4 ***No new development in the Furlong area at all.***	588
Total number of consultations returned	1420

2.3 The same information has been set out in pie charts which are set out in Appendix 1. Colour copies of these charts will be sent to Steering Group members before the meeting.

2.4 The 26 letters of response come from a number of bodies, organisations and individuals. The organisations comments are summarised below:-

2.4.1 Ringwood Town Council support Option 1 following a special meeting to discuss the consultation held on 5th September 2007. They also issued a newsletter explaining their views on the proposal.

2.4.2 The Ringwood Society have submitted a balanced analysis of the proposals and highlighted many issues which need to be considered. They consider that Option 1 should be retained but may well be premature at the present time. They refer to the relationships with proposals for the old cinema site and the need to work more comprehensively on other issues in the town.

2.4.3 The Crow Hill Residents Association support Option 1 but are unhappy about a number of issues including multi-decked car parking, the link between the Furlong and the High Street and the loss of trees. They support the need for a community centre.

2.4.4 The Ringwood Carnival are very worried that Options 1 and 2 would severely affect their procession route.

2.4.5 Agents on behalf of Sainsbury's Supermarkets Ltd support Options 1 and 2.

2.5 Many of the letters of representation raise objections to any proposed development on the Furlong Car Park, except for the replacement of existing public facilities. There are many common grounds of objection which include:-

- Ringwood should not try to compete with other shopping centres. Leave it as it is and encourage local specialist shops.
- A major development, including multi-storey car parking, will damage or destroy the market town historic character of Ringwood.
- Concerns about the future of shops in Southampton Road, High Street and Market Square.
- Don't create a new market square which will compete with the historic one.
- Concerns about traffic and highway congestion back onto the A31.

- The priority should be the redevelopment/enhancing of the old cinema site if more shopping is needed.
- No need to relocate the existing public offices.

2.6 It is acknowledged that there were difficulties with the distribution of the leaflet to the households in the Ringwood area. However, there was also the website survey, the unmanned exhibition and the letters of consultations to groups and societies. The whole process received quite a lot of media publicity. Overall, given the level of response received, it is believed that the results represent an accurate picture of the views of the population as a whole.

3. Assessment

3.1 Policy RW-2 of the adopted District Local Plan has for many years enabled a mixed used development to take place on the south-western corner of the Furlong car park. The policy suggests that such a mixed use development should include retail, leisure and community uses.

3.2 As part of its work on the Local Development Framework, in 2005 New Forest District Council commissioned Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners (NLP) to undertake work on a town centres strategy for New Forest District (including that part within the National Park) and further detailed work on Lymington, New Milton, Ringwood and Totton town centres. The Consultant's study has assessed the future retail floorspace requirements in the District up to 2018. The tables below summarise the study's findings relating to 'comparison' (non-food) retail floorspace in the Ringwood/Fordingbridge area.

Table 1: COMPARISON FLOORSPACE – BASED ON EXISTING SHOPPING PATTERNS

Area	**Floorspace Sq M Gross**	
	2005-2012	**2005-2018**
Ringwood/Fordingbridge	2,000	4,000

3.3 The consultants have assumed that most of this additional comparison floorspace will be provided in Ringwood rather than Fordingbridge. Table 1 sets out the additional retail floorspace needed to maintain and enhance Ringwood town centre, but without significantly altering existing shopping patterns.

Table 2: COMPARISON FLOORSPACE – BASED ON IMPROVING MARKET SHARE (To be regarded as maximum estimates)

	Floorspace Sq M Gross	
	2005-2012	**2005-2018**
Ringwood/Fordingbridge	2,700	4,400

3.4 Table 2 sets out the additional floorspace that could be provided to try to increase the town's share of expenditure.

3.5 Based on existing market shares there is no projected requirement for additional convenience goods floorspace in the Ringwood/ Fordingbridge area. However, a reduction in 'expenditure leakage' to Bournemouth could support small scale improvements within Ringwood town centre.

3.6 In early 2007 a study commissioned from Design Engine produced some ideas on how the shopping consultants' recommendations could be incorporated into the area covered by planning policy RW-2. The consultation exercise was based in part (options 1 and 2) on this work.

3.7 The results of the consultation exercise show that in broad terms the people of Ringwood are split fairly evenly between the view that more development should not take place on the Furlong car park and those who would support a mixed use development based loosely on Option 1.

3.8 The provision of a new theatre/community venue attracted a clear but not overwhelming majority of support in the town. Interestingly the proposal for extra car parking attracted a slightly higher level of opposition that support in the survey. There was a clear understanding amongst participants that either of these two enhancements would need to be funded by new retail provision and strong support for better public information services and public conveniences in the town centre.

3.9 Overall it is to be concluded that the results of the survey are not clear cut that there are two reasonably balanced views about a major development on the south-western corner of the Furlong car park. Your officer's view, however, is strongly influenced by the professional advice that Ringwood does need to develop additional shopping floor space over the next 10 years if it is to maintain its current position as a thriving market town. If it does not then new shopping expenditure will be attracted elsewhere and this would be detrimental to the longer term prospects of the town. It is not the case of trying to compete with Southampton and Bournemouth but to maintain its existing vitality and viability by retaining its current market share when shopping expenditure is growing.

3.10 When these commercial arguments are combined with the community benefits, which could be funded on the back of a retail development and an attractive entrance feature to the town could be created, the conclusion that a scheme based upon option 1 should be pursued, is reinforced.

4. The Way Ahead – if a mixed use development scheme is to be pursued

4.1 There are many detailed issues which would need to be addressed if a recommendation to progress with a mixed use scheme were to be agreed. Thee will include many of the issues raised in the consultation responses such as:-

- the relationship and timing of any development on council land with another shopping and residential proposal being developed on a adjacent site
- how the development would be linked into the older High Street, Market Square and Southampton Road shops
- highway access into the car parking areas from the adjoining road network
- a construction programme which minimises impacts on existing traders
- the details of the community facility, what it would include and how it could be managed
- the detailed design and layout of any proposed scheme to fit in with the historic, conservation area, character of Ringwood

4.2 It will also be necessary to fully understand the legal and financial issues which would accompany a development of this scale. New Forest District Council does not have a history of facilitating schemes of this nature and hence would need to engage expert advisers, particularly specialists with experience in retail property development, if a scheme is to be progressed.

4.3 One of the first tasks they might be asked to undertake is a review of the financial assumptions made to date in what is now a changing economic climate. They could the4n advise on the options for securing a development partner and the financial and environmental implications of different approaches. A substantial level of expert consultancy assistance will be necessary to get a scheme to the stage where a development partner can be selected and contractually committed to a scheme.

4.4 The timing of the progressing of this work will be determined by a number of factors including the progress of the other proposed scheme nearby and the state of the retail property market. It could take a number of years to see any scheme delivered on the ground. Notwithstanding this if the decision in principle is that the scheme should be progressed it is your officers view that further work should not be delayed by more than a few months. If it is then the current momentum would be lost and there may be calls for a new survey to be undertaken.

5. Financial Implications

5.1 All of the work to date has been contained within existing budgets. If a mixed used development is to be pursued this will not longer be possible and a supplementary estimate or bid will be necessary to procure the property consultancy advice set out in Section 4.

5.2 To progress a mixed use option to the state where a development partner has been contracted and then takes the lead is likely to cost up to £100,000. This outlay could be recouped at a later stage when the scheme is developed but is likely to be lost if the scheme is aborted at some point in the future.

5.3 A considerable amount of officer time will also need to be committed to progressing a scheme. It is assumed that this can be achieved within existing budgets.

6. Environmental Implications

6.1 There are two fundamentally different approaches which can be taken to this assessment although one might still reach the same conclusion. On one hand there is clearly a widespread concern from the largest number of the survey's respondents that any large new development could detract from the historic character of Ringwood and what makes it special and unique.

6.2 On the other hand one could take the view that a scheme based upon Option 1 has the potential to offer significant environmental gains through the creation of a new public space and making the environment of the town centre function better in social/community terms. A very large number of respondents would appear to support this approach from their response to the survey which was to favour Option 1.

6.3 The prospect of charge will often give rise to apprehension and a preference to retain the status quo. An example of this was the proposal for the existing Furlong Shopping Centre which generated a great deal of opposition at the planning stage, but now, in most people's view, is a successful and attractive part of the town centre development on the Furlong Car Park would have to be of a very high quality as befits its historic market town, conservation area location. This would have to be ensured both through powers the Council could exert as landowner and assessment through the regulatory planning process. Nothing short of a very high quality would be acceptable.

7. Crime and Disorder Implications

7.1 None arise directly from a decision in principle to go ahead. However, the detailed design of any scheme must take these up into account and the community facilities could be a positive benefit if they provide for a wider range of activities particularly for young people.

8. Recommendations

8.1 That the results of the public consultation exercise be noted;

8.2 That it be a recommendation for Cabinet that, in principle, the further development of a mixed scheme based broadly on the content of Option 1 should be preferred; and

8.3 (if 8.2 is agreed) that the Cabinet be requested to approve a supplementary estimate or expenditure plan bid for £100,000 to engage the specialist consultancy advice necessary to progress the scheme to the stage of the appointment of a development partner.

For further information please contact:-

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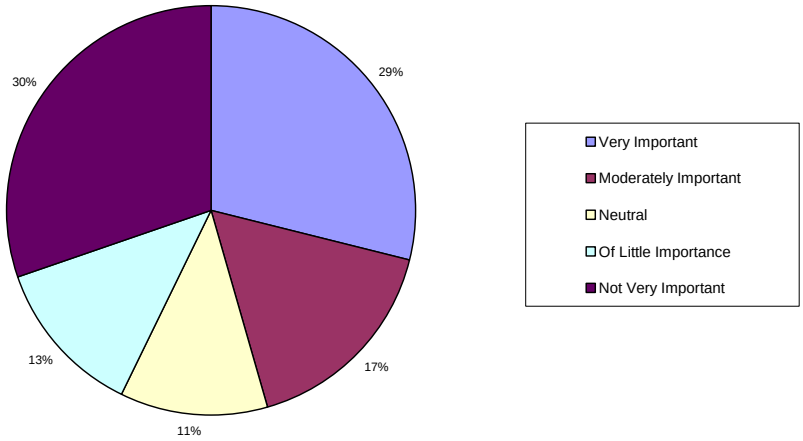
Background Papers

(1) Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners report on Shopping Development in the New Forest District.

(2) Returned consultation response and letters received in reply to the Consultation leaflet.

Appendix 1

1. ***Do you think it important that the economic viability of Ringwood Town Centre is maintained and enhanced by planning for new shopping development?***



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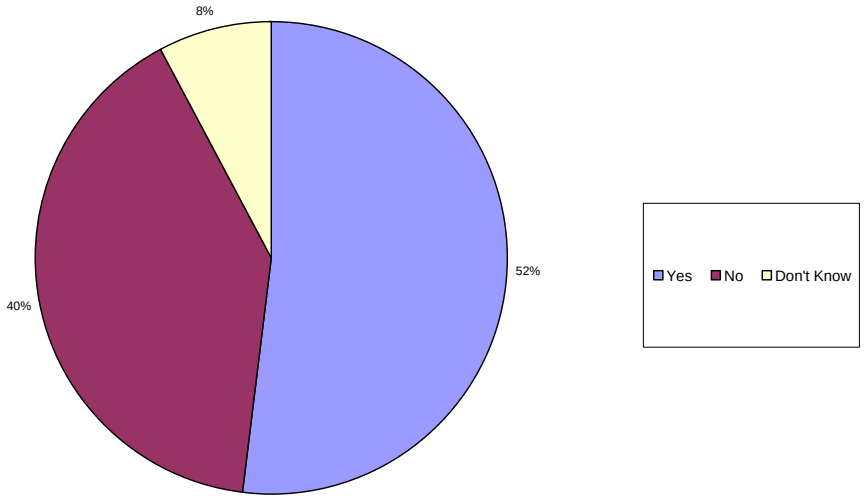

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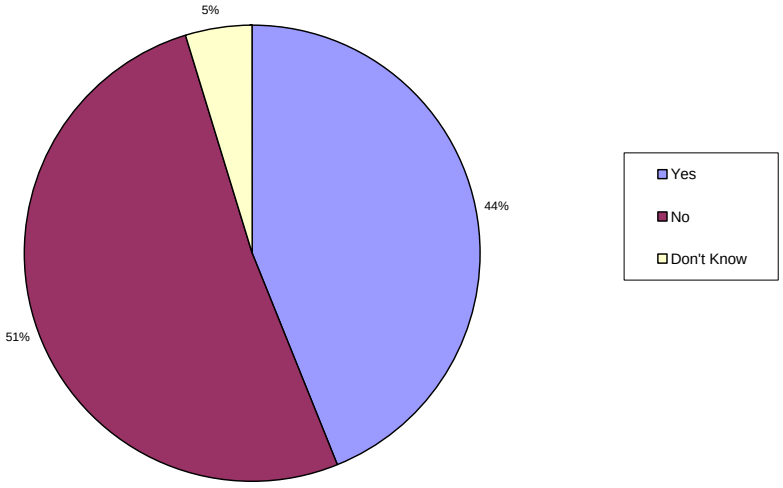

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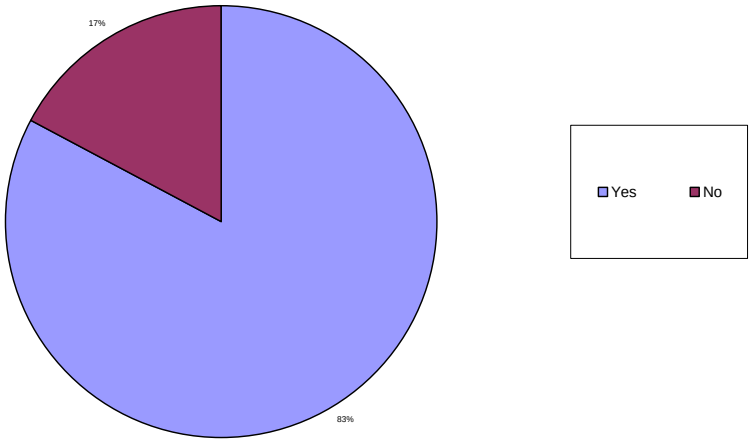

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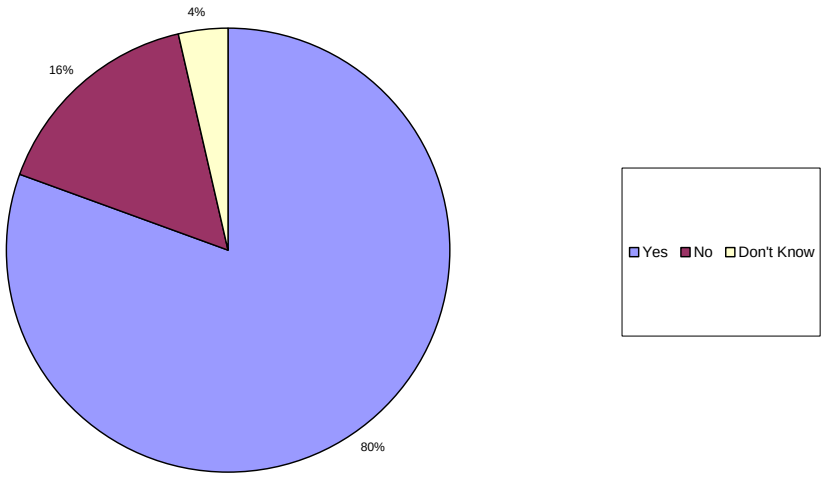
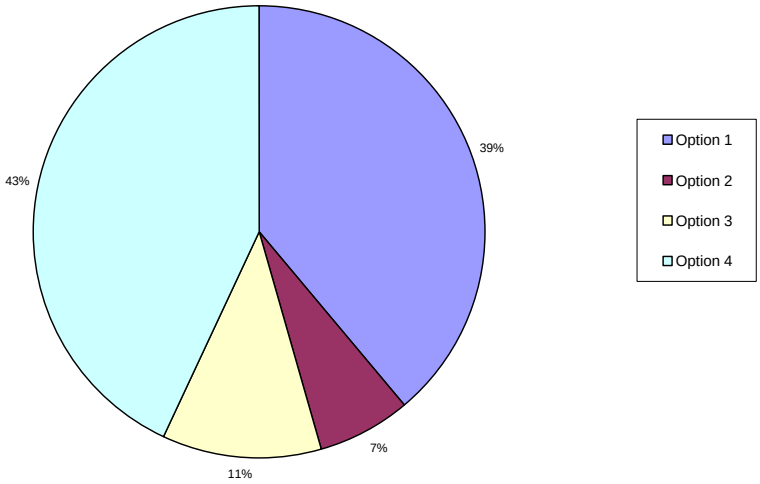
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