WOLVERTON AGORA REGENERATION WORKING GROUP

Tuesday 23rd Sept 2025
17:00 – 18:00
Town Hall, Creed St, Wolverton, Milton Keynes MK12 5LY

Meeting Notes

Attendees
Adrian Moss, Andy Forbes, Jacky Hart, Karen Parisi, Margaret Newens, Matt Bennett, Taj Raja
Kath Cook (MKCC), Laura Wadsworth (MKCC), Neil Murphy (TOWN), Guy Rochez (TOWN)

Apologies
Received from Marie Osborne, David Beattie, Gill Barrow-Jones and Cllr Lauren Townsend

Notes

1. *Progress update*

- GR noted that a written update had been shared in advance of the meeting in the interests of transparency.
- The previously chosen contractor, Willmott Dixon, had been unable to achieve a price at a level to make the Agora scheme viable and the painful decision had been taken to approach the underbidder, Graham, which is also currently constructing The Lakes regeneration scheme in Bletchley.
- Graham had produced an initial costing below that offered by the previous contractor, and a process is now under way to bring that down further to an acceptable and proceedable level.
- The project team is working through options for reducing cost including rationalising the structural strategy, which could reduce build programme by eight to ten weeks as well as direct costs, reducing glazing to stairwells and circulation areas, and using less expensive materials in some areas.
- This work is taking place wholly cognisant of the parameters of the planning permission that have to be complied with, there will be no changes to the fundaments of the scheme and its positive impact on the town centre, but minor material amendments will likely have to be applied for (via a Section 73 application).
- MKCC are very clear that a decision has to be made on further funding for and delivery of the scheme by the end of 2025, with activity on site then taking place before the end of Q1 2026.
- GR concluded that it has been a difficult process but there is light at the end of the tunnel. He invited questions from the Group.

2. *Questions on the progress update*

- Will the quality of the scheme be maintained with the changes under consideration (AF)? NM replied that the basic form, volume, scale, massing, layout, and proportioning system of the buildings will remain unchanged and these are what embody its impact. “Value engineering” is often a euphemism for cost-cutting but here the focus is on judicious changes that get 90% of the effect at 60% of the cost. Some of the changes will probably improve the scheme e.g. less heavy stonework. And options like reducing glazing doesn’t mean less good-quality housing – it’s focused on communal areas like stairwells (rather than to dwellings) where it’s currently arguably overspecified.
- Is the timetable for Graham completing its work and fixing a price, a Council decision on funding and possible planning changes, then a start on site in early 2026 credible after previous slippages/delays (AF)? KC explained that a funding decision would not be held up pending approval of any planning changes, and that there will be engagement with planning officers to discuss potential changes and reduce the risk of surprises. GR said that Graham is considered enthusiastic, committed to the project and has been given a clear target price to hit. He emphasised the importance of community support in making planning amendments easier to approve. AF said that he would be happy to meet planners or write in support of changes/progress, and others in the Group echoed this.
- KP noted that this is another instance of a decision on funding being promised in coming months, and that this has happened before, so there is scepticism that it won’t be delayed again. NM said that it has been a complex and difficult process and MKCC has been transparent about the challenges. Had MKCC been asked to take a decision on funding before now the decision might well have been not to fund the project because the costs wouldn’t justify the benefits. Everyone wants the scheme to happen and the MKCC/TOWN teams are very conscious of the delays and challenges in communicating when there is still work to do, but it has to pass a business case test, show a positive benefit-to-cost ratio and Officers have been prudent in not seeking further funding until the scheme is demonstrably affordable and deliverable.

3. *Retail and local economy*

- GR noted that concerns had been expressed about the future retail units in the Agora scheme being empty, given voids in existing retail units nearby. He emphasised that these would be new, modern units meeting market requirements and, despite delays, there remains strong interest.
- NM said that the logic of the retail strategy within the regeneration scheme is that new retail complements existing services, lifts the offer overall, helps attract residents to the new homes who in turn bolster demand locally, and ultimately increase demand for space in existing areas. Marketing and engagement with potential occupiers is in abeyance while reaching a viable construction sum is resolved but the team is looking forward to getting back to this soon.
- AF emphasised the value of the scheme in reinstating missing frontage to Church Street and the Square and creating new walkable routes for shoppers.

4. *Hoarding*

- GR provided an update on the current state of the site hoarding, which is not in great shape but will be repaired and revamped by the new contractor. The plan is to revamp the hoarding and with the Contractor conduct activities (possibly including local arts) to make it look nice and be company-branded.
- KC said that the lights in the alleyway have been replaced, and any issues with the lights should be reported to TOWN/MKCC for maintenance.

5. *Other matters*

- MN provided an update on Still Green Cohousing. She said that 18 of 25 for-sale homes are currently reserved, which remains encouraging given the delays and that some people have had to withdraw owing to age and/or the need to resolve their housing situations. Active marketing continues including via events such as MK CAN and there remains active interest from MK and around the country and the world.
- KC reported that the Council will be demolishing Orchard House but that there are no current plans for the redevelopment of this or the neighbouring Gables site. AF said that it would be good for this to be coordinated with and reinforce the impact of the Agora scheme.

6. *Next steps and future meetings*

- GR outlined the next steps, including the Council decision later this year and planned activity from February next year if approved.
- AF asked if proceeding is conditional on external funding. NM said that it is not currently seen as dependent, but that discussions would be ongoing over specific grant funding to support affordable housing delivery and assist with abnormal costs.
- MB stated the importance of regular community updates; people remained supportive of the scheme but there was frustration that the new household waste recycling centre was advancing much more quickly.
- GR suggested scheduling future meetings once the Council decision date is locked in, likely towards the end of the year.
- AF asked if Working Group minutes could be issued more quickly, preferably within two weeks of the meeting, and GR undertook to do this.