

ABOUT THE GROUP

The Oaks and Vale Farm Road Residents Group is an informal group which currently comprises around 60 residents, living in Oaks and Vale Farm Road and its immediate surrounding area. The Residents Group was formed to discuss areas of interest to our local area which soon turned out to be predominantly issues around the development. The Residents Group includes mostly residents that have lived in the area for many years.

Our Group greatly welcomes thoughtful, appropriate and sustainable development in the area and wholeheartedly agrees with the approach to build in the town centre in order to protect the green belt.

But based on our group members' personal experience of living and often raising families in the area, commuting to work from this area and using the local facilities such as shops, schools and GPs and so on, we strongly oppose mega developments that are not necessary in that size and don't meet the needs of the community or the planning standards of the Local Planning Authority.

Regarding the Goldsworth Road development proposal in question, we have been involved in the process if this planning proposal for a while and managed to fundraise in the local community to commission an expert report by the independent consultancy Chestnut Planning – which is part 2 of our proof of evidence.

This independent report identified a number of areas of concerns that are very congruent with the reasons why the planning committee rejected the application. So it's not only the planning committee who saw those issues but also the independent third-party report which we believe further underpins the validity of the reasons for rejection.

While we managed to hire some experts, we do not pretend to be technical experts ourselves and will leave the technical details to others who have that kind of expertise.

But while we might not be technical experts we are experts when it comes to living in this areas, local experts if you will. That is one thing that we can contribute that nobody else can and that is the experience of living in the area, going to work, taking our children to school, using the local facilities since years, sometimes for decades. Only we can provide that unique perspective.

That is why I will highlight in my opening statement six areas that are of particular concern from the point of view of local residents:

KEY CONCERNS

1) The previously granted scheme might have been acceptable but this is not

First up, I want to emphasise that this scheme was granted 15 years ago and one should consider that times and needs have changed since 2016. Since then many other lower schemes have been rejected for a variety of reasons, including height and density.

Not the least because of the COVID pandemic, we can really say we're living in different times now compared to 15 years ago.

Town Planning has always been a long-term process and is definitely not an easy process when the likes of Covid have necessitated a fundamental re-think of a system which we have generally had in place for many years.

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That's exactly why the Core strategy says in CS25 that allowances need to be made when the economic context changes. The core strategy basically says planning needs to go with the time and allow flexibility and these are definitely different times under a different council leadership which is a lot less trigger happy to green light skyscrapers and a lot more aware of their residents' views.

As mentioned, the Residents Group rejects the notion that the proposed development is sufficiently comparable with a scheme previously granted permission on part of the site (PLAN/2016/0742) and that this would present an additional argument in favour of the proposed development.

Key differences:

2016 SCHEME PLAN/2016/0742	2020 PROPOSAL PLAN/2020/0568	COMMENT
Only one side of Goldsworth Road	Both sides of Goldsworth Road	The new development is significantly larger, adding a 29 storey tower block and York Road premises at the other side.
3 tower blocks	5 tower blocks	That's nearly double the amount of towers
10 to 34 storeys high <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Block A = ground plus 34 storeys • Block B = ground plus 25 and 20 storeys • Block C = ground plus 17, 14 and 10 storeys 	9 to 37 (previously 41) storeys high <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • T1 = 12, 16 and 21 storeys • T2 = 20 and 29 storeys • T3 = 37 (prev 41) storeys • BA = 29 storeys • BB = 9 storeys 	The height of the highest tower might be the same as the previous scheme (as per Ecoworld's claim but the number of storeys is higher: ground plus 34 vs 37 storeys. Also, the second highest towers are still much higher than the towers in the previous scheme (two 29 storey towers vs one 25 storey)
560 dwellings	929 (previously 965) dwellings	The number was reduced by 36 dwellings which is still 369 dwellings more or 165% of the previous amount.
Separation distance was 32 and 35 metres	Separation distance between the blocks is between 26.17m and 20.2m (violating planning policy)	The Outlook, Amenity, Privacy and Daylight SPD makes it clear that there should be a separation distance of 30m between buildings three stories and higher. The previous scheme sticks to this rule, the new one doesn't. For comparison: at Victoria square they are between 30 and 40m.
Density: 746 dwellings per hectare (dph)	Density: 956 dph for same site (T1-3) = South of Goldsworth Road 807 dph (previously 839 dph) for entire development	This density is significantly higher than the previous scheme and still something more like an inner city development. Especially when looking only at the area that the previous scheme covers, i.e. tower T1 to T3, the density is nearly 1/3 higher.

So you can see that this is clearly not the same proposal.

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In fact, the height of the tallest towers is the only similarity and even there is a discrepancy between the number of storeys. The previous proposal has 34 storeys and this one has 37 storeys.

Yes, there was a scheme approved on *part* of the land. But EcoWorld is not suggesting to build the originally approved scheme. If that were the case then sure, the fact that it was previously approved is of material consideration.

It is not just a little bit bigger or a little bit denser. It is substantially different so unless EcoWorld proposes to change their proposal to actually match the previous scheme, we don't think this is an argument to greenlight this proposal.

2) This density represent overdevelopment that isn't suitable for a town like Woking

Again, let me emphasise how much we want this area to be developed and how much we wish this could happen in a way that benefits both the people who will move into that new development and the people who already live there.

As we outlined in our Proof of Evidence, we see many areas in this proposed development where planning policies are stretched, misinterpreted or indeed breached and while each taken in isolation can be explained away, taken together they add up to harmful overdevelopment. You have seen in the planning officers report that some of these stretches are deemed 'acceptable' but we believe – and the planning committee that takes this decision and not the planning officer (!) was also of that view – that they might be acceptable individually but they are not isolated incidents and in aggregation are harmful to present and future residents as well as the area.

But I will focus instead on one indicator, which we think is a good indicator whether a development is excessive or not: the density.

The 2020 scheme has an overall density of 807 dwellings per hectare (dph). Looking only at the site of the previously approved 2016 scheme, that area would have a density of 956dph – nearly 1,000!

We acknowledge that the LPA in its Core Strategy says that development in the town centre can but doesn't have to go beyond 200dph. But it stands to reason that the authors of this policy did not envisage this threshold to be overstepped four- or nearly fivefold.

For comparison, the density of the two residential towers in Victoria square is 660 dph.

Yes, the Site Allocation DPD earmarks this area for mixed use development but they think 180 dwellings is the to be expected amount – that's less than a fifth of the proposed development.

That level of density is excessive and harmful and simply not found in towns the size of Woking. At the end of the day this is Woking, not Manhattan.

3) This height is not suitable for the edge of a town centre (or anywhere else) in a town like Woking

The fact that the proposed development which would provide the highest point of the town centre is at the very edge of the town centre suggests it is not a positive contribution to the townscape.

Instead Victoria Way has a much more natural look and feel of a town centre edge makes for a good visual border for the townscape with Victoria Square as good visual focal point for townscape. However, this development would overshadow and outshine Victoria Square which was supposed to be the aesthetic focal point of the town centre and, as the council puts it, is the benchmark development.

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The proposed development emphasises the stepped down outline as a positive contribution to the townscape but let's be clear that only one other tall building in its vicinity would ruin what is allegedly rounded image and in the absence of a master plan for the town centre there is a good chance the rest of town centre planning doesn't go exactly like EcoWorld would like to see.

It would be ironic if another development would come along and do to the Goldsworth Road development what the Goldsworth Road development does with Victoria square.

Further, Guildford Borough Council commented negatively on an application in that area of the town centre which was much lower: "The cumulative impact of high-rise buildings to the east and west of Woking town centre result in a cluttering of skyline that would have a harmful impact on sensitive, long range strategic views from Guildford borough".

Further, the Residents Group has severe doubts about the claim that this is the only way to go, given that there are towns all over the country thriving and growing and meeting government targets without the need to build this type of tall buildings in their town centres. As Table 2 below shows, there aren't other towns of comparable size and only big cities have buildings taller than 100m. In fact, the town of Woking (ca 99K population) even already now outranks cities with more than twice its size like Brighton (ca. 230K pop.), Portsmouth (ca 238K pop.), and Swansea (ca 246K pop.) as well as Sheffield (ca 584K pop.) which has nearly 6 times the number of inhabitants. This feels like nonsense.

4) Not at all in keeping with the surrounding areas, especially the one where we live

We can tell you for sure that this is not in keeping with the area where we live – which is one street up from the proposed development so very close even though our area is often omitted in presentations of the appellant while other buildings further away are included because they help giving the impression there are lots of tall buildings in the area.

There are two sides of the site that have much lower buildings mostly between two and six storeys which would be completely dwarfed by this massive development. The residential roads in Oaks Road, Vale Farm Road, and adjacent roads below have only two storey residential buildings.

We take issue with the suggestion that the style of the proposed development is in keeping with the area because the area doesn't have any visual identity anyway. Oaks Road and Vale Farm Road which are quite literally 10 steps away from the site have very much a coherent visual identity of Victorian-style semis and terraced houses – we've shared pictures of the area and on a site visit you will be able to see for yourself. In fact, it's got that much of a visual identity that the house I live which was built in 1999 had to be built to exactly match the adjacent Victorian cottages to preserve the visual unity of our street.

It is also worth noting that our residential area which is very close to the site is already outside the town centre where very different planning rules apply. That is how close to the edge of town centre it is and that needs to be taken into account when considering what kind of development would be in keeping with its surroundings.

5) Residents are not in favour of more skyscrapers

You might be familiar with the credo in international development: nothing about us, without us meaning the people affected by decisions should have a say in those decisions. So we think it is really relevant to provide a sense where the general public in Woking stands on more skyscrapers:

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In a nutshell, the majority seems not in favour of any more skyscrapers in Woking. Earlier this year, Woking Borough Council installed its Residents Panel and part of the recruitment process was a survey that asked people what they thought about local development. The report analysing the survey responses includes the following quote to give a flavour of the responses “What an eyesore those tall buildings are in the Woking centre. They are a blot on the landscape for miles around”.

The response was so strong that the LPA decided to include as one of the four questions in the subsequent resident outreach sessions specifically about the towers. We haven't seen the results of this outreach session yet but we participated in the sessions and can tell you people didn't like the towers and if you just quickly go on social media you can easily see that residents don't like them and definitely don't want any more of them. The fact that nearly all of the 194 (nearly 200) objections from the public on this proposal mention the height as reason for objection is a further indication of that.

We believe it is fair to assume that a new development that is higher, bigger, wider and more massive than anything that exists in Woking and probably in all of Surrey will not be considered a welcome addition to the townscape. The views of residents on that seem to be that the towers are not an enhancement of the townscape.

6) Skyscrapers would undermine the regenerative impact that comes from shops, amenities and pedestrianisation, which doesn't need tall buildings

As residents, we have of course also contemplated the benefits that we might miss out on as a community. There is much talk about the regenerative impact of this development by bringing shops, coffee houses and a pedestrianised street into the area. We are shown nice pictures of sunny and airy spaces with trees and coffee tables and happy people. But it's worth noting that those are street scenes at street level.

What we haven't seen is any evidence that this presumed regenerative effect on the area is actually due to building tower blocks on this site and not in fact due to everything that happens at ground floor level. On the contrary evidence shows that high-rises have a negative impact on people's mental and physical health and even contributes to the spread of COVID. And given that those towers in question are so close together we also think that they would prevent the space from being sunny and airy.

We would very much welcome the regeneration of this area with new shops, new plants and maybe even a pedestrianised road. But that is very much possible without the addition of skyscrapers. In fact it is likely to be easier, quicker, cheaper and definitely sunnier without them.

Thanks for your attention.