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12<sup>th</sup> April 2025

## **Mole Valley District Council's Master Plan for Bookham - A potentially Wasted Opportunity that misrepresents Residents' Views**

**The Bookhams Residents' Association recommends that Mole Valley District Council does not approve the Bookham Masterplan without further discussion.**

On 16<sup>th</sup> April Mole Valley District Council's (MVDC) Cabinet will consider for approval the Bookham Masterplan, which MVDC's recent press-release makes look like a mere formality. This despite Councillors and Officers having received a detailed report from the BRA setting out significant failings in both the Masterplan process and its report. MVDC's report misrepresents residents' views leading to a claim of stronger support for potential projects than is the case.

The failings were reported to MVDC Officers during the development of the Masterplan but brushed aside by them at every instance and are not included in the papers going before Cabinet next week. We have reported the same concerns also to Councillors before their meetings, so there should be no excuse for ignoring residents' concerns. As there is no opportunity for the BRA to speak at Cabinet, we can only assume that the BRA's concerns will not be registered properly in their discussions.

The Masterplan should be a great opportunity for Bookham to develop a blueprint for future projects that could be realised if and when funding becomes available. That opportunity may be squandered, depending on the vote on the 16<sup>th</sup>. A summary of the failings of the Masterplan is set out below followed by further detail.

### **Our Last Residents Update - November 2024 Newsletter**

We reported that the BRA was working with MVDC as part of a 'Steering Group' and to help raise awareness of the Masterplan. We emphasised that the Masterplan had to: balance ambition with deliverability; be properly co-ordinated with other delivery partners, primarily Surrey County Council; and bring forward projects that were equitable, beneficial, affordable and deliverable for the community.

### **The Situation Now**

The BRA remains very concerned that the Masterplan's presentation of results from the online Consultation Survey misrepresents the level of support in the community for its proposed projects. We believe that the majority of projects in the Masterplan do not meet the test of being ambitious yet equitable, beneficial, affordable and deliverable.

Much more detailed work and further constructive consultation with residents is required to validate any implementation of projects that may be under consideration. However, approval of the Masterplan at Cabinet on the 16<sup>th</sup> will be taken as an approval to seek further funding to start the implementation of projects in the Masterplan, irrespective of the depth of support. Indeed, the paper before Cabinet states "should members be minded to approve the masterplans, then delivery can commence" before setting out options for funding or applying for funding.

If approved by Cabinet, the Masterplan as drafted must not be accepted as a mandate for change in the Village without further consultation, analysis and validation of the true level of public support.

## The Bookham Masterplan's Key Failings - Summary

1. **Minimal Public Engagement.** Only 225, or 2% of residents, responded to the online Consultation Survey. The feedback cannot be judged as representative of the community and the sample is not big enough to be statistically relevant. Whilst 164 people attended the launch event, many attempted to respond via the survey or in writing, a further 43 responses. Any claim that these 164 are in addition to the Online Survey or the written responses is manifestly false, inflating numbers. MVDC's claim of an engagement level of 443 for Bookham includes double-counting.
2. **Biased Towards Change.** The survey was inherently skewed towards change wherever there was no 'Do Nothing' option.
3. **One Size Does Not Fit All.** The survey results do not differentiate between the views of residents and local businesses.
4. **MVDC's Approach Misrepresents the Survey Results.** Not all respondents answered all questions so MVDC reporting the strength of responses on each survey question, only in terms of the number of responses to each individual question, is flawed and significantly misrepresents community support for various projects. For example: only 76 people, out of the 225, responded to the question on having a Regular Artisan Market. Of the 76, 46 were in favour. MVDC reports this as 61% in favour whereas the correct percentage is 20%.
5. **Constraints Ignored.** There was at best limited consultation with SCC despite many proposed projects falling under SCC's Highways and Property remits. Key physical constraints were not factored into the recommendations, e.g. land ownership and property lines. This suggests that projects can be delivered even when aspects such as land ownership may prevent it. Proposals for pedestrianising the High Street do not consider car parking charges or relating car parking spaces to demand. Forcing more shoppers to pay for parking could be a deterrent to shopping in the Village, potentially leading to the loss of retailers.
6. **Response from MVDC Officers.** Officers denied, then tried to diminish the BRA's concerns, dismissing them as a "divergence of views". Factual accuracy is not a matter opinion. Burying these views is not democratic.
7. **The Democratic Process.** The normal scrutiny route from Scrutiny Committee to Cabinet, was changed to scrutiny being done by a "Working Group" behind closed doors with no public involvement. Decisions affecting thousands of residents should not be made in a way that undermines trust in MVDC. The papers going now to Cabinet suggest that there were no interventions by the Working Group.

Given the fundamental impact of our concerns on the integrity of the mandate for the Masterplan and MVDC's refusal to date to address those concerns, the BRA has no alternative than to publicise the views expressed here for transparency when the Cabinet meets on 16<sup>th</sup> April.

## Why are the Bookham Masterplan's Key Failings Important?

**Minimal Public Engagement.** Bookham has a population of *circa* 11,400 people aged 16 and above (based on 2011 counts). However, only 225 or 2% of residents responded online to the Masterplan's Consultation Survey. Contrast that with the 4,929 who voted on a Parish Council and 4,839 on the Neighbourhood Planning Referendum in May 2017, representing 43.2% and 42.4% of the population respectively. Whilst there were an additional 43 written responses, these were not counted within the quantitative analysis but the comments simply assigned to an appendix.

Furthermore, although the Masterplan claimed to have had 6,571 visits to the MVDC website during the process, these could not be differentiated between those looking at the Dorking or Bookham plans, nor repeat visits; hence the actual number of Bookham residents visiting is much lower than this number. The feedback cannot be judged as representative of the community as a whole and the sample of the online survey is not big enough to be considered statistically relevant.

**No 'Do Nothing Option'.** Many questions lacked a 'leave things as they are' option, preventing the analysis from 'scoring' options against 'do nothing'. By presenting only proposals for change, the results of the survey are inherently skewed towards change.

**One Size Does Not Fit All.** The survey and its results provide no differentiation between the views of residents and local businesses. The two might agree, they might not, and any differences might or might not be significant to the overall health of the Village. The survey did not ask, so MVDC simply does not know. From speaking to the local retailers, the BRA discovered that many were unaware of the survey or its importance to them.

**Not All Respondents Answered All Questions.** Residents could skip questions that they did not want to answer, could not or were floored by seeing no option with which they agreed. The online survey was clunky and difficult to navigate, and many residents said they simply gave up. However, the Masterplan reports the strength of responses on each survey question in terms of the number of responses to each individual question. This approach is flawed as those not responding to a question could be incorrectly interpreted as being 'neutral' on the issue when they may actually have been 'against' all options offered or were otherwise unable to register their views.

Furthermore, as the written responses were not counted into the analysis, a resident disagreeing with all options and then submitting in writing is discounted. MVDC's Project Manager even suggested that not responding can be interpreted as 'content' – clearly an unsafe and unacceptable assumption.

**MVDC's Approach Misrepresents the Survey Results.** To accurately assess the strength of opinion represented by responses within the online survey, the responses need to be considered at minimum in terms of the total i.e. the 225 online respondents. The impact of presenting the figures correctly is significant. For example:

Proposal Examples	Respondents to question	Those in Favour		
		Number	As a % of those answering the question	As a % of the Online Survey
Lower Road footway changes, cycle route + traffic calming	92	58	63%	26%
A246 – similar changes	96	58	63%	26%
Regular artisan markets	76	46	61%	20%
20 MPH – Lower Road, High Street & Church Road	76	49	65%	22%

**Note:** Bookham Population C 11,400 aged 16 and above; Survey population 225 responses

On a proposal that may have significant impact on the High Street, MVDC claims there is strong support for pedestrianisation based on the 49.3% of the 209 people that answered this question. However, put another way, only 103 individuals supported pedestrianisation of the High St which is just under 1% of

Bookham's population; and retailers were not specifically surveyed to get their views on the impact or benefits. That is not evidence of strong support as claimed by MVDC's Officers.

Thus, the analysis of the online Consultation Survey misrepresents the extent and depth of support in the community for the various proposed projects in the Masterplan.

**Other Influences Ignored.** The proposal for pedestrianisation of the High Street is not made in the context of car parking charges or relating car parking spaces to demand. The BRA had proposed during the consultation that there should be up to 2 hours' free parking, yet car parking charges have been ignored. If more shoppers are forced to pay for parking the cost could be a deterrent to shopping in the Village. Paying a basic charge of £1.30 would add £202.80 to the cost of shopping over a year based on 3 trips per week.

**Constraints Ignored.** Despite many of the proposals falling within the remit of SCC Highways or Property Teams, there was at best limited consultation with SCC and key physical constraints were ignored, such as land ownership or where property lines lie. This means that:

- A proposed cycle path along the A246 Guildford Road would disappear in places and change sides of the A246. Not good for cyclist safety.
- Similar issues would arise along the Dorking Road and the Lower Road, unless the footway was to be removed where required to facilitate.
- Proposals to widen the pavement at some bus stops, such as on Church Road where there is no pavement in places on account of property lines.
- Proposed developments at Eastwick which do not take account of the ownership of the land.

None of the above would have been hard to check. Bookham's Surrey County Council Councillor was also a member of the Masterplan Steering Group, and has commented:

*"I agree that a plan of this nature could have offered a rare opportunity to identify imaginative projects to enhance and improve life in our village and it is a shame that there is no apparent link to the Local Plan; it's not a planning policy document and does not appear to inform any revision of the Bookham Neighbourhood Development Plan. It seems to have no link with any strategic infrastructure plan or to be linked to the use, for example, of CIL [Community Infrastructure Levy] money either.*

*You know my disappointment that MVDC did not take opportunities to engage more closely with SCC as either landowner or highway authority. As a result, there are no obvious plans or deliverables in the BMP and it is not clear whether either authority will assume ownership of it at the end of the day. Without establishing a responsible body for delivery, how will anything be driven through, even if funding were identified or available?"*

### Response from MVDC's Officers

MVDC's Officers attempted to deny the BRA's concerns, then to diminish them by calling them "a divergence of views which Councillors could consider when making a decision." Yet the BRA's comments on the Masterplan are not included in the papers for Cabinet on the 16<sup>th</sup>, so the Councillors will not have an opportunity to consider them.

### The Democratic Process

The BRA was told that the Masterplan would follow the normal democratic process route of being reviewed by the Scrutiny Committee (on 4<sup>th</sup> March) and then the Cabinet (on 18<sup>th</sup> March). However, we were later informed that:

*"the delay to the March Cabinet cycle means that it is possible for the masterplans to first be considered by the Planning Policy Working Group (PPWG), rather than the Scrutiny Committee, on their way to Cabinet for a decision." And that "the Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee considers that to be a more appropriate route."*

The BRA strongly disagrees with that statement. Working Groups are internal to MVDC – the public cannot attend nor are meetings live-streamed for residents to watch, and minutes of proceedings are not published for the public record. Not being able to witness the process "in action" is a significant weakening of the democratic process. Decisions affecting thousands of residents being made behind closed doors undermines trust in MVDC. To paraphrase the old saying: *"Democracy must not simply be done, it must be seen to be done"*.

MVDC is not listening. Despite claiming to be *"welcoming of comments"*, MVDC's Officers, the PPWG and Cabinet's responses to the BRA's concerns have been quite the opposite. Given the fundamental impact of our concerns on the integrity of the mandate for the Masterplan and MVDC's refusal to date to address those concerns, the BRA has no alternative than to publicise these views expressed here for transparency when the Cabinet meets on 16<sup>th</sup> April.

**Note:** The BRA's report was sent to the following Councillors:

**On 22 March 2025**, to members of the **Planning Policy Working Group**: Cllrs: Cooksey (Margaret), Farrar-Astrop, Hammond, Haque, Magesh, Malcomson, Matthews, Slater, Smith, Budd, Hunt, and Parsons.

**On 17 February 2025**, to members of the **Scrutiny Cttee**: Cllrs: Draper, Farrar-Astrop, Joseph, Magesh, Potter, Wall, Matthews, Watson, Wear, Slater, Budd, Sevenoaks, Stansfield, Wiltshire, Smith, Cooksey (S), Cooksey (M), Hobbs, Kennedy, Malcomson, Vyvyan-Robinson, Keay, Wright, and Kendrick.

**End.**