



Frome Society for Local Study

**Frome
and District
Civic
Society**

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Saxonvale Development team
Mendip District Council
Council Offices
Cannards Grave Road
Shepton Mallet, Somerset BA4 5BT

Dear Sirs,

Development of Saxonvale Masterplan

Thank you for consulting Frome & District Civic Society as a stake holder in the Saxonvale development. Members of Frome Civic Society have engaged with the District Council and potential developers for many years and made a major contribution to the Gillespies Development Brief for the area in 2003. We have extensive and detailed knowledge of the site and context, professional expertise in urban development and design, and public engagement on this site over many years. We hold a significant amount of documentation on Saxonvale and a scale model of the site in context. We understand the District Council's aims for a highly ambitious timescale for public consultation on the masterplan, and therefore would like to facilitate a meeting between members of our planning panel and relevant members of the design team at the earliest opportunity to assist in it's development.

In response to the published developing 'masterplan' for Saxonvale, we offer the following initial observations:

1. The published 'masterplan' is understood to be an initial sketch rather than a thorough, robust masterplan. At the meeting with stakeholders on November 9th, a number of computer 'views' of the development had been generated but no time was spent in the Architect's presentation on a meaningful analysis of the site or context. There appears to be no analytical rigour or clear generating logic to the published plan. As a result it appears more of a marketing 'vision' than an assessment of the needs of the site, local environment, residents or visitors to the town.
2. The plan lacks key information necessary to understand it, such as key analytical site sections, proposed density, building/ storey heights, extent/ mix/ nature of commercial/ residential/ community use, lack of definition of public v private space, no clear vehicular/ pedestrian/ cycle flow strategy, car parking strategy is unclear. No identification of key existing landscape features such as the historic retaining walls, TPO tree groups, existing historic river meander, river bank features, no ecology or biodiversity analysis or strategy. There is no indication where key views will be preserved or created to St John's spire, the Blue House or Silk Mill. We would not expect these studies to be

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completed at this stage, but the absence of this information is of concern, it is an essential precursor to inform any complex development site.

3. The plan doesn't convey the feeling of spaces, surfaces, or landscaping, ie. the urban design qualities needed to create a human environment. The emphasis in the diagram is on road alignments, building footprints and property boundaries. The major contribution of the riverside park is not conveyed in the plan, this is a great shortcoming of the visual presentation of the scheme.
4. Much more emphasis is needed on creating a strong and more dense landscape structure, within which the buildings, roads and spaces are located. Clearer depiction of what are paved squares, pedestrian routes, soft recreational spaces, 'wild' green spaces and avenues of trees is needed, particularly linking the existing TPOs to new soft areas.
5. The suggestion in the seventh un-numbered bullet point of the plan to 'consider making a link to Garsdale via road alongside the riverside park for deliveries' is not reflected clearly in the plan, it shows a duplication of roads through the development that are also assumed to be the primary pedestrian routes. This would introduce heavy goods deliveries and access traffic along the southern edge of the riverside park impacting on the tranquility and attractiveness of the park as a place of relaxation and recreation. We recognise that both routes indicated would impact the environments and therefore it is important to indicate how these proposed routes would relate to buildings, landscape and pedestrian areas. Extending the indicated service road (near bullet point 5) could be considered as an alternative that would minimise impact on pedestrians. An alternative route extending through the adjacent Town Council land might also be considered should this be a possibility.
6. The size of the public square is much too small as a significant urban space. Its proximity to decked car parking (bullet point 13) raises questions of compatibility, and also the issue of from what direction will the parking be accessed. We presume Vicarage Street will not be used to service any part of the development but the plan is not clear.
7. The 'industrial building' mentioned in bullet point 12 is essential and must be retained as an important physical feature and link to Frome's industrial past, and because of its location, preferably relating directly to the public square, renovated and re-used for some public use. It is not considered a barrier to east-west movement, as it lies between two key historic east-west routes that should be respected and retained. This building was identified by SWRDA as the location to permanently house the Somerset Skills and Learning Centre, currently located in temporary accommodation on the former SWRDA land in Saxonvale.
8. There seems to be a suggestion to recreate the Saxonvale road as a north-south shopping/commercial frontage. This is a steeply sloping hill with a service yard and , currently, the dead frontage of the side of Marks and Spencers on the west. It is very unlikely to be a pleasant or attractive street unless new frontages can be created on the west side of the road, as partially proposed in the Terramond scheme, but even then, the steepness of the hill would be difficult for shopping. In Bullet Point 1, it is suggested that Saxonvale will be a strong pedestrian route to the river, but people wanting to go to the riverside park will mostly approach from other directions. The major pedestrian desire lines through the Saxonvale area are principally along a east-west axis.
9. The shopping/commercial buildings to the west of the public square don't suggest a convincingly attractive shopping environment/extension to the town centre.

10. The stepped approach to the Silk Mill, continuing the axis of Kingsway is a good idea, but it is not clear how the Silk Mill will receive vehicle servicing.
11. The proposal in bullet point 4 for a café/restaurant to be linked to the riverside park is unrealistic, as the building appears to be isolated, flanked by two roads, isolated from the park by the suggested service and car park feeder road.
12. The riverside park needs a landscape strategy that works with the retained trees, laid out with new planting, new formal and informal paths, a playground and more to make it an integral part of the scheme, not just an adjoining green space.
13. The inclusion of a new pedestrian/cycle bridge over the river is very welcome and should be carefully considered as an essential part of the strategy for cycle and pedestrian routes through the site rather than just an accessory feature of the park.
14. The layout of the housing in the eastern part of the site is much more fragmentary than the original comprehensive Terramond scheme, which was based on terraces of housing, more in character with Frome's terraces, and also a more sustainable type of housing design. The use of continuous perimeter developments of terraces or large industrial blocks such as the existing mill buildings should be the norm for this central location. The plan seems to indicate perhaps 100 or so dwellings which is far from the aspiration by MDC for 'at least 250 dwellings' and Policy FR1 in the Local Plan Part II. A rival bid for the site that proposed 230 dwellings was much denser, predominantly 4 stories. It is not clear how the proposed density will be achieved with the current layout.
15. The developing masterplan needs to show how analytical studies inform the resulting strategic layouts and sections. It will be crucial to reveal details of what happens in the spaces between and behind buildings, in providing adequate car parking, in tackling the steep slope of parts of the site and most importantly, the overall quality of the urban design. Lots of sections through the scheme will be needed and a physical model, and a virtual fly through would be helpful in explaining and promoting the scheme.
16. The declared timescale for the development of proposals for public consultation appears premature as it currently lacks the rigour of a masterplan. For such an important and complex town centre site, the Council should pay particular attention to Chapter 12 of the NPPF and in particular, should seek advice on the masterplan through the South West Design Review Panel, as recommended in paragraph 129 of NPPF. This advice should be obtained before the masterplan is finalised and could be re-iterative as the scheme is developed.

We look forward to further discussions with the design team. Please contact me on 01373 831256 to arrange a meeting.

Yours faithfully

Richard Swann (Chair)
BSc(Hons) BArch(Hons) RIBA
for and on behalf of
Frome & District Civic Society

cc J.Peverley FCS, P.Wheelhouse FTC, Neil Howlett FCC