
Orpington Car Park Row Blows Up



After two years of reporting on the proposed new Tesco development to replace the Orpington Station Road multi-storey car park, to little effect, the public finally seem to have woken up.

The picture above shows the planned development for which Tesco has submitted an Outline Planning Application. Residents in surrounding roads are now realising what a nightmare it could be. The main complaints are:

- It will overshadow homes in Orchard Grove (by up to 9 metres according to some reports).
- The resulting noise and disturbance from 24 hour opening will affect many residents in nearby roads.
- It will create enormous traffic congestion in an area already badly affected by rush hour jams.
- The size of the Tesco store will destroy the viability of other High Street shops, and lead to a degradation of the shopping environment.
- The parking provision for the public (which is typically used by shoppers and local businesses) will be totally inadequate.
- The shortage of parking spaces while the site is rebuilt will be a major problem.

A public meeting in January at the Liberal Hall saw over 70 people turn out to object, despite the difficult snowy weather. At a subsequent council Development Control Committee Meeting on the 10th February, councillors appeared to be almost unanimous in opposing the current proposals from Tesco. The proposal was deferred for a site visit and further consideration with calls for more public consultation.

How did the council get into this mess (after all they originally owned the site)? The history is as follows:

History of the Site

The multi-storey car park was built in 1968, and before that it was even a speedway racing track, so it has always been a problematic site. The development site, which is owned by the council, also covers the small wooded area to the west where there is a health facility.



I think everyone recognizes that the car park structure is not a beautiful building (see above), even though a variety of “paint jobs” had been tried over the years to try and reduce the apparent bulk. The car park is useful for many people but was difficult to make secure from car thieves, and was the scene of a number of suicides as it was easy to jump off the top level.

As far back as 1997, it was suggested in council documents that it was a potential site for redevelopment and has been described as “underutilised” for example in the draft Unitary Development Plans (more on that issue later).

It was also described as “nearing the end of it’s useful life” at the recent council meeting, although the author has never seen any suggestion that it was structurally defective. It has also relatively recently been refurbished with improved lighting, and the maintenance costs in future council budgets seem to be much less than the revenue obtained from the facility (charges have also recently been increased).

But it was clear that the site was potentially quite valuable. With council budgets always stretched, the fact that this site could be sold off at a substantial profit no doubt hung heavily on people’s minds.

Councillors from all parties seemed to support the proposal, and in fact the council has changed control during the length of this saga so it does not appear to have been a party political issue (at least not yet).

The Planning Brief

In December 2001 the council issued a "Planning Brief" for the site. This document covered the background to the site and some of the proposed uses. It was issued to potential developers who might wish to purchase the site and build on it. In summary it says the following about the proposed uses:

- The site is considered appropriate for a "mixed-use" development to complement the existing economic and social activity. It then has three headings of Retail, Leisure and Residential.
- Under Retail it says: Any proposed retail use should have no detrimental effect on the town as a whole. The use, therefore, should not only be one that attracts the general public but one that also complements the existing shopping facilities in the town. Retail uses could include small units associated with a larger leisure element.
- Under Leisure it says: Uses could include cinemas, and/or health & fitness club and restaurant(s).
- Under Residential it says: Any residential scheme should seek a high-quality sustainable, living environment. It also suggests it could be relatively high density.

The impression given is that any development will be of smaller facilities with a mix of retail, leisure and housing. What is now being proposed is a very large supermarket, with some "affordable" housing as a sop to the planners, a small medical centre to house the existing health facility, but no leisure facilities at all.

Parking Facilities

The Planning Brief again points out that the existing car park is "underused". Is this true? When challenged on this point by BBRAG, council staff claimed that it was unnecessary to provide more than 350 public spaces (the capacity is 833 spaces but two levels are leased to adjoining office users so the public capacity is about 580). The writer took several counts which proved that the usage often went as high as 390, and he has often seen the public section totally full in the past, typically in the weeks before Xmas. BBRAG therefore submitted objections to the Planning Brief, and the draft UDP, on this point in January 2002, but to no effect.

What do we have in the application from Tesco? They estimated the existing "demand" as 284 spaces, and, even worse, proposed to provide only 166 public spaces. Their "shortage" of 120 would be diverted to the Walnuts car park.

In reality of course the shortage will be over 220 public spaces, plus probably another 30 from loss of parking in Augustus Lane, meaning a total shortfall of over 250. This number cannot be accommodated at the Walnuts (even if that was suitable and affordable for the existing users which in most cases it is not).

This would clearly provide a major difficulty for the many people who work in the adjacent offices and retail stores in Orpington as there is hardly any long term parking provision elsewhere in the town. Your editor knows this area well and can advise that many employees of these businesses travel from long distances away in Kent, Essex and Sussex where public transport is not a practical alternative. The attractiveness of these offices would decline substantially if no parking facilities were available, leading to a further fall in the employment vitality of Bromley - this is already a depressed area with more people having to commute into the central London for work.

Note that there are also 439 "retail" spaces provided but it seems unlikely they will be available for public use and actually have a separate entrance.

Council Staff Attitude to Parking Provision

When reading the above, you have to bear in mind that the policy of Bromley Council planning staff has been to reduce workplace parking for some time. Of course this is government policy also to some extent, but Chief Planner Stuart Macmillan was wrong when he said at the recent council meeting that "central government says one must not provide capacity to meet demand". This might be his policy but it has never been put in such black and white terms by the government. Government policies on planning matters, and parking provision, are embodied in the Planning Policy Guidance (PPG) documents. These are rather like the bible in that one can pick out quotes that will support almost any case, but it is also clear that flexibility is necessary and possible when there are sound local reasons for variation or where there are economic criteria such as maintaining local employment and business vitality.

Of course Bromley is by its very nature different to many other London borough because it has very high car use and relatively poor public transport facilities.

There are also specific rules about the provision of parking facilities at new retail or office developments which must be adhered to, and Ken Livingstone is imposing even tighter rules on London in the "London Plan". As Councillor Jenkins said at the recent meeting, "Ken and the Government live in cloud cuckoo land" so far as he was concerned. These rules must apply to the new retail element of the development, but whether that is so to the rest is debatable as clearly many of the spaces simply replace previously existing ones which are linked to the nearby office developments and others are used by short-term shoppers in the general area.

Even the London Plan is more flexible than many people realise. For example Policy 3C.22 (Parking Strategy) says: "*The UDP policies and transport Local Implementation Plans should... adopt the maximum parking standards set out in the annex where appropriate, taking account of local circumstances and allowing for reduced car provision in areas of good transport accessibility*". Or consider this statement: "*Within the general policy it allows for additional public car parking within town centres, where this is appropriate and supports the locational advantages of town centres*". There is a lot more flexibility than may be apparent at a first glance.

BBRAG has opposed the policies of Bromley council staff which were embodied in the wording of the UDP. It was clear that the UDP went even further than government policy in restricting parking provision, much to the disadvantage and inconvenience of Bromley residents. A decision from the UDP Inquiry Inspector on these arguments is still awaited. To see our full arguments against the UDP go to:

http://www.bromleytransport.org.uk/UDP_Submissions_Transport.pdf

Traffic Issues

Many people have expressed concerns about the additional traffic load that the new store will generate, including the Orpington Town Centre Manager. Tesco did submit a travel assessment based on a computerised simulation of likely loads, but many people including independent consultants employed by Bromley Council have expressed concern about the proposed traffic light controlled turn off Station Road into the new store and that traffic might back up onto the war memorial roundabout, causing "gridlock" there.



Traffic Queuing on Sevenoaks Road to Enter the Orpington War Memorial Roundabout

This in fact already happens quite regularly when traffic is blocked from exiting the roundabout into the High St by congestion in that road (one resident has alleged this has been made much worse by the increased number of buses that stop on that stretch of road when there is now inadequate space for them). Long queues already form quite regularly on Spur Road and Sevenoaks Road entering the roundabout, and queues form both ways on Station Road (uphill traffic is blocked as well by congestion in the station area during rush hours).

Software simulations of traffic at junctions are known to be often misleading when junctions are closely spaced, because predicting the "interactions" is difficult. In this case there are junctions on Station Road with Orchard Grove, the new store and Augustus Lane all very close to the roundabout. Plus there is congestion on the High Street which also confuses the issue. This clearly requires a lot more study, but residents simply cannot see how more load can be added to this network without worse congestion.



Traffic on the Orpington War Memorial Roundabout

One of the issues when looking at the traffic problem is how many "linked trips" there will be, and how many existing shoppers will form part of the Tesco customer base. Poor estimation of those numbers, and of the total Tesco customer traffic, will clearly result in silly estimates.

Another traffic estimating problem is knowing how many people will use public transport to visit the Tesco store. It is on several bus routes, but is it really likely that many Bromley residents will do their supermarket shopping at such a large "destination" store other than via car? Again the assumptions in the traffic studies may be grossly wrong.

Was There Adequate Publicity?

One allegation that was raised at the council Development Control meeting was that there had been inadequate publicity about this development. Many residents and businesses in the locality have only just become aware of the impact this development is likely to have. The writer does not agree with those comments because there was quite wide publicity on the original Planning Brief. It was covered in the local newspapers several times and BBRAG prompted some additional coverage. We also circulated some of the local businesses about the parking issues.

Apparently the council also circulated residents and businesses and published notices. There was very little response as a result. Why was this? Probably because the implications were not at all clear.

Nobody realised the potential bulk of the likely replacement structure (mainly because the Planning Brief was misleading as noted above) and there was of course no picture to show people two years ago which makes newspaper articles somewhat boring. Only when the outline planning application was made by Tesco did people wake up to the facts.

What Went Wrong?

Subsequent to the approval of the Planning Brief, the site was put out to tender and subsequently sold to Tesco. No doubt council staff will argue that they had a legal obligation to maximise the sale value to the council, and unfortunately the commercial negotiations are no doubt confidential. However, it appears that few conditions have been imposed on the possible uses and scale of development of the site, with the result that we have this proposal for a very large supermarket.

With at most one level of the existing car park possibly surplus to requirements, in reality it should have been obvious that to fund redevelopment of the site and include all the proposed facilities meant that the new building was going to be much larger than the original car park. In essence the concept of getting a commercial developer to take on this site only made sense if it was going to be a very large development, but that was hardly made plain to the public or to councillors. The Planning Brief could be read without this becoming apparent at all. That is the essence of the problem.

How to Fix It?

Having got into this mess, how do we get out?

There is no simple solution but clearly if the parking, traffic and "size" issues are to be resolved, the development must be substantially smaller.

The original concept of a mixed development with a relatively small retail element must be re-instated if the interests of residents and businesses are not to be severely prejudiced.

BBRAG would also like to see an end to the anti-car mentality of council staff and the attempt to reduce car parking provision below the demand level. These policies in Bromley will not work and cause the kind of difficulties that are exemplified in this development, where that agenda was concealed from the public.

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