



Maidenhead Civic Society

Making Maidenhead A Better Place



November 2021

Maidenhead Civic Society

Maidenhead Civic Society has been a respected voice on planning issues since 1960. We aim to improve those features and facilities which together make Maidenhead a pleasing place to live and work, and to stimulate public interest in its future. To this end we liaise with local stakeholder groups, other civic societies and Civic Voice (the national charity for the civic movement).

Introduction

Since the first settlement in the 13th Century, Maidenhead has benefitted from its location and accessibility as a key Thames crossing point on the main road and rail routes to Bath, Bristol and beyond. The town has seen continuous and rapid change. Alongside residential growth its facilities, services and amenities have grown consequentially, without any overall plan or coherence. Increases in air, rail and road travel impacted directly on the development of the town. Since the 1960s, car ownership has perhaps had the biggest effect, with the construction of the M4, the ring-road and the pedestrianisation of the A4 in Maidenhead High Street.

Over the years several schemes were drafted for the town centre but they met with varying degrees of popularity and were shelved. Then in 2007 the Partnership for the Rejuvenation of Maidenhead (PRoM) set about drawing up the Town Centre Area Action Plan (AAP). This aimed to transform Maidenhead into the beating heart of the community and the plan was formally adopted by the Royal Borough in 2011. PRoM, a joint council/community group, comprised a representative range of stakeholders including Maidenhead Civic Society. Regrettably, it was disbanded 2019. It was also decided that their AAP should be superseded by a controversial Borough Local Plan (BLP), largely driven by housing targets imposed by central government. This threatened to leave us, once more, without a specific plan for the town centre. In this hiatus we've seen a return to uncoordinated, piecemeal development on an unprecedented scale with a plethora of flats of ever increasing height.

Latterly, however, in one of a number of significant modifications to the BLP, the government planning inspector has decreed that the Local Plan should be supplemented by a Town Plan, drawn up in partnership with the community. If properly underpinned by a commitment to sustainability, this should provide a more detailed framework to guide new development in the town centre. In the meantime much of the town centre is going to be a building site and mitigating that will be no small challenge.

We hope, therefore, that this, our second revision of *Making Maidenhead A Better Place*, will stimulate and inform considered debate as part of the prescribed masterplanning process and help to identify long and short-term objectives for making Maidenhead a better, more attractive place that we are proud to call home.

Bob Dulson, Civic Society Chairman

Martin McNamee, Planning Group Chairman

Making Maidenhead a Better Place

(2021)

Key Points

- **Planning & Development** – put residents and the interests of the community first. New buildings and redevelopment should enhance an area’s character. High standards of design should be insisted upon and inappropriate densities resisted.
- **The Town Centre** – should be the distinctive heart of the community. It should more properly reflect Maidenhead’s location and success, and include an attractive and engaging mix of leisure and cultural opportunities as well as shops and flats.
- **Travel & Transport** – ensure that Maidenhead is easily accessible and welcoming to people, however they travel. Create an integrated transport hub at the railway station, improve pedestrian links to and through the town centre and encourage the use of sustainable transport.
- **Environment & Ambience** – The Thames Valley setting lends much to the image and perception of Maidenhead and is an asset that deserves protection and investment. The restored waterways in the town centre and the creation of Battlemead Common are two examples.
- **Leisure & Culture** – revive the sense of Maidenhead as a “place to go” and explore opportunities for putting us on the cultural map.

Planning

Nationally, standards of architectural design have generally improved in recent years and it is encouraging to see government guidelines insisting on “building beautiful”. However, there is still much that is mediocre. Planning rules, after all, are minimum requirements.

Maidenhead occupies an enviable location and in its heyday was dubbed “the jewel of the Thames”. Though still blessed with an amazing setting, today that reputation is tarnished and in need of urgent but carefully considered restoration. The emerging Borough Local Plan (BLP) sets the tone but its primary focus is housing numbers. A more holistic approach is called for.

We have to look a lot harder at what our community needs and demand the best possible in facilities, infrastructure and urban design, to ensure Maidenhead is fit for the future generations.

We’d like to see the following ground rules put in place:

- **New development should always be seen in the context of its neighbours** and the surrounding area and contribute positively to local character
- **Buildings and the spaces that surround them should demonstrably benefit the community** and be of the highest quality and design. Aesthetics must be part of the criteria.
- **Enforce policies for dealing effectively with run-down buildings**
- **Demand adherence to the policy for ‘green’ provision** in every new development
- **Focus on the use of derelict and ‘brownfield’ sites** for redevelopment
- **Extend the use of the ‘gateway’ idea to local areas** to create a distinctive sense of place and purpose in local communities
- **Balance town centre retail with local shopping enclaves**
- **Establish a system of ongoing, objective stakeholder engagement** with the local community on planning issues
- **Support Maidenhead Neighbourhood Forum in delivering a Neighbourhood Plan** for the seven unparished wards of Maidenhead



Housing

Current housing targets will seriously affect Maidenhead town centre's character and lifestyle and increase the population by an estimated 44%. But there is no *proven* need. Permissions are being driven by political imperatives and commercial considerations.

Ambitious housing targets handed down by central government (712 units per annum) presented a real challenge. The council responded with a pledge to protect the Green Belt and by increasing density in the town centre. So, although an Area Action Plan and a Tall Buildings Strategy were in place to curb excesses, more than 4,000 flats in high rise blocks are destined to be our legacy. Some are of a high standard with parking. Too many, however, are small and have little or no parking or amenity space. Where is the justification for so much flatted development rather than family houses?

Some growth is both necessary and desirable but we believe that the sheer number and lack of variety of homes proposed is inappropriate and unsustainable. Family houses are scarce and overpriced and the shortage of truly affordable accommodation is at risk of becoming a crisis.

Government surveys and opinion polls repeatedly indicate that almost everyone would prefer to live in a house in a street rather than a flat; in seven controlled surveys people living in high-rise dwellings were the least satisfied with their homes. And most people would always avoid multi-storey blocks, particularly since lockdown. In a recent MORI survey of 1,056 respondents, not one wanted to live in a tower block.

The Civic Society is a staunch supporter of the Green Belt, its principle and purpose, but a much greater effort is needed, including an uncomfortable debate on the use of some green field sites, to reach a satisfactory, realistic and sustainable strategy for the future of our town. To resist the pressure of inappropriate densities and manage the impact, we also suggest:

- **Clarify the demand for housing**, type, size, etc. with regular demographic reviews to achieve a proper balance between existing and future needs
- **The use of 'planning briefs' to ensure a development is appropriate** for its location
- **Synchronicity between housing and supporting infrastructure** – services, schools, transport, amenities, etc.
- **Measures to ensure that the targets for 'affordable' homes are met**, including starter homes as part of the mix.
- **Ensure that all new housing is fit for most users**, mindful of our ageing population, and has adequate amenity space.

In addition, we would like to see:

- Strict adherence to floodplain policies and the curtailment of permitted development in those areas.
- A strategy for relocating industrial estates in residential areas to more appropriate designated zones over time

Town Centre

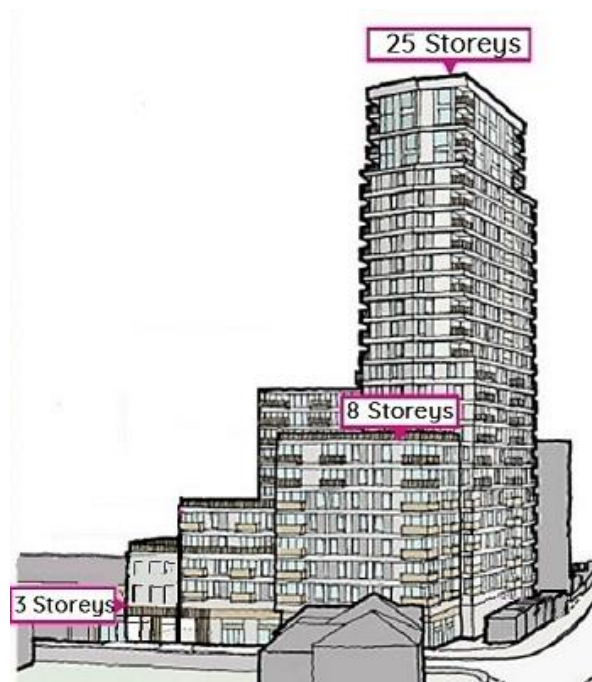
The Berkshire volume of *Buildings of England* notes: “Modern Maidenhead is not immediately attractive. There is no church, market place or square for a focal point and precious little is left from before 1840.”

With a few exceptions, like the remarkable improvements at Chapel Arches and York Stream, this is true. It is the legacy of years of speculative piecemeal planning in the absence of a town plan. But it begs the question: What kind of town do we want Maidenhead to be?

The Town Centre Area Action Plan (AAP) provided some detailed answers in 2011 but those have been erased by a broad-brush borough-wide BLP. Other areas in the Borough already have a Neighbourhood Plan or are working on one, but Maidenhead doesn't; and also, while a well-meaning town centre “vision” has been in gestation for almost two years, it is still to appear.

And it was in this ‘policy limbo’ earlier this year that a panel of councillors, restricted in numbers during the pandemic, effectively nodded through plans for the biggest redevelopment our small town centre has ever seen – the replacement of the Nicholson Shopping Centre with a massive mixed use scheme featuring a 25-storey tower block.

Just a few weeks later, as part of a series of modifications to the Borough Local Plan, the examining inspector decreed that ‘tall buildings’ were inappropriate in our town centre, where the norm is 3 or 4-storeys, and in future should generally not exceed seven storeys. Unfortunately, this ruling cannot be retrospective, so the approved plans are still set to go ahead for 10 storeys in Moorbridge Road by the Forlease Road roundabout, 17 on The Landing site and 25 at Nicholsons.



However, in another amendment the Inspector has stipulated the need for a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) as part of the BLP to guide future development in the Town Centre. This ‘masterplan’, which the council will draw up in partnership with stakeholders and the local community, is something the Society has been calling for since the demise of the AAP and PRoM. We regret it may be too little too late but it puts the importance of ‘placemaking’ firmly back on the agenda; and the Council’s recent appointment of a new Director of Place would appear to underline that.

For the town centre, in our view, that means devising a plan that not only looks and flows well but that creates a unique identity in the combination of facilities and amenities required to make Maidenhead ‘the place to go’ for residents and visitors.

From a planning viewpoint, a holistic and coordinated vision for the town centre should set out:

- **A distinctive identity** that reflects Maidenhead’s past and present success and its envied Thames Valley setting
- **Plans to restore the centre as a ‘destination’** with mixed-use developments, of exemplar design, character and compatible scale
- **A range of facilities in identifiable areas** to meet community needs:
 - A Civic Quarter, professional services, business and employment
 - Residential accommodation, in a variety of tenures and styles
 - Retail services, shops, eating and drinking venues
 - Entertainment, leisure and cultural opportunities, including a major communal building – arts/conference centre or a hotel
 - Attractive public spaces and connecting routes
 - A town square or market place as a focal point
 - Space for performance or events, places to sit ... and public toilets
 - Green areas, green buildings, landscaping, trees and shrubs
- **A strategy for ‘eyesores’** to improve the appearance and ambience of streets not included in the redevelopment programme, e.g. a shopfronts policy.



Essential to all will be an adequate infrastructure and a genuine commitment to sustainability, recognising for example that tall buildings impose a heavier carbon footprint and that trees do much more than make a place more attractive.

There should also commitments to:

- **Complete the waterway restoration** linking the town centre to The Thames
- **Improvements to movement and accessibility**, including:
 - Welcoming 'gateways' creating a sense of arrival
 - An integrated public transport centre
 - Inviting links between places of interest, especially the station and the river
 - Easy and convenient pedestrian and vehicular access

For at least the next five years, however, much of the town centre will be undergoing redevelopment. The Landing is scheduled for completion in 2025, Nicholson's Quarter a year later. Planning permission is pending on the Magnet / St Cloud Way scheme and further down the line is the West Street Opportunity Area. Hopefully, the various schemes will be phased to minimise disruption. The demolition of Nicholson's means many retail businesses will have to relocate. Shoppers meanwhile are likely to need more than the promise of better things to come to continue using the town during redevelopment.

Then, from around 2027 the challenge will be to encourage shoppers and other visitors to return to the town centre.

Fortunately, with the delivery of more than 4,000 residential units in town, there will be a new incumbent on-site population needing shops and services. However, statistics have shown that Maidenhead suffers as much as 90% 'retail leakage' meaning that, nine times out of ten, existing residents are more likely to go elsewhere. For the town centre to become the heart of the community, that statistic has to change.

A concerted effort is required to attract new business and investment to improve the retail offer and, for example, boost the level of new local start-ups which we've seen in recent years. While this has been encouraging, at the same time Maidenhead has lost some major employers, like 3G, who brought prestige to Maidenhead by selecting it as their national HQ as well as boosting the local economy with their footfall.

Travel & Transport

Mindful that accessibility is Maidenhead's *raison d'être*, serious improvements in its travel and transport arrangements are required for its continued success.

The Local Transport Plan accompanying the emerging Borough Local Plan was produced nine years ago, in 2012, to accord with some of the objectives of the Town Centre AAP, which is now defunct. Meanwhile, planning permissions have been granted which have totally changed the playing field in Maidenhead.

The AAP envisaged 810 new dwellings in the town centre. Today we're looking at up to 5,000; mostly flats with inadequate parking. That's a sizeable increase in people, cars and traffic. The current strategy seems to be to encourage cycling and walking instead. That may be fine for the new town centre flat-dwellers – until they want to explore the Chilterns – but is unlikely to encourage the return of existing residents who currently choose to go elsewhere.

And what about access to schools, health care and other emergency services that we all need? We're told a new Transport Study is currently being undertaken. This should take account of the effects of growth, i.e. increased housing and more commuters, to provide for the contented coexistence of residents, workers and visitors whether on foot, bike, car, bus or train.

Funding has been found to revamp Station Approach and construct a new car park at Vicus Way. This is meant to cope with Crossrail's predicted 25% increase in rail passengers in Maidenhead; but much more is required.



New layout at Station Approach

Admirable efforts are being made on 'active travel', encouraging cycling, walking and alternative transport but these will only engage a minority. Bus travel could become a more acceptable alternative with improved services and a recognisable terminus, but,

because of the topography, it is never likely to be a serious or viable option without major modifications to the road system.

As with housing, one has to consider the demographics. For the majority of Maidonians, the car will remain the preferred option for the foreseeable future, particularly with the advent of alternative power units. And while high-density homes in the town centre may bring a sufficient level of footfall to satisfy some, easy access for *all* our residents, including families with children, is paramount for the town centre's future success and for the community.

Ways need to be found to breach the barriers imposed by the ring-road and the railway line and to ensure ample, convenient parking. In our view: *If it's not easy, people won't come.*

Anticipating a change in movement patterns post-Covid, considerations should include:

- **The impact of Crossrail and other rail link proposals** on vehicular and pedestrian traffic
- Residents' needs to **access schools, health care and other services** and the ability of emergency services to access them
- **Further enhancement of the railway station** into a fully integrated transport hub
 - a bus terminal, a taxi rank, easy access pick-up and drop-off points, ample attractive parking nearby and cycle racks
- **Restoring a rail service from High Wycombe**, perhaps a monorail
- **Encourage more bus travel** with a recognisable terminus and service improvements.
- **And more walking** by making pedestrian routes attractive, convenient and safe
- **Find** imaginative, practical and attractive **ways of linking the town centre to the river**
- **Continued improvement to facilities for cyclists** in and around town, and
- A commitment to the **provision of adequate parking, both public and private**
 - New builds must incorporate self-sufficient parking, underground in the town centre
 - Adequate road widths on new-built housing estates
 - Ample public parking which is convenient, easily accessible and safe
 - Parking incentives in the town centre for residents and/or visitors
 - Adequate provision of disabled and short-stay on-street parking, especially in the civic and retail quarters

Environment

The natural environment essentially defines the character of Maidenhead and most of its appeal.

Our proximity to The Thames, with one of its most scenic stretches at Cliveden Reach, and the acres of countryside at our doorstep lend much to the image and perception of the town, making it a popular place to visit and a desirable place to live.



The Thames near Boulters Lock, just 1.4 miles from the town centre

These are vital assets requiring our constant scrutiny, protection and management. We are fortunate that the council has a dedicated team of experts, supported by a clutch of voluntary organisations locally who do this. The Society itself was instrumental in helping to devise a policy for The Thames through Maidenhead and supports the local authority in its stated intention of preserving the Green Belt. We also like people to enjoy their surroundings and have been involved in a number of projects over the years, including the creation of the Green Way, Guards Club Park, the Millennium Walk and Battlemead Common.

The Society applauds the local authority for its bio-diversity, climate change and recycling initiatives and supports its campaign to improve the understanding that every one of us contributes to these issues. The delivery of high quality green and blue infrastructure also has an important role in the placemaking agenda as set out in the

BLP. Latterly we've been pleased to note that the Waterway in the town centre, thanks to volunteer effort, is now healthier and supports more wildlife than upstream at Widbrook. However, more could be done to reduce our CO₂ footprint with Renewable Energy sources by exploring the use of:

- Combined Heat & Power units and district heating systems
- Hydro, solar & wind power sources

Much, much more should be done too in the built environment to reflect our cherished Thames Valley setting, to add to the sense of place and wellbeing.

Conservation Areas play their part in this of course and they should continue to be regularly reviewed with a view to extending them and their number, if appropriate. But areas and sites in need of improvement should be formally identified too. A Shopfronts Policy, mentioned above, could greatly enhance the appearance and appeal in some quarters but owners of business and retail premises, particularly absentee landlords, should also be aware of their obligation to the community for ensuring their properties present the best possible face to the public.



*Perhaps the best known example of urban greening – the 'bosco verticale' in Milan (2014)
(Photo credit: www.stefano boeri architetti.net/en/project/vertical-forest)*

Much of urban Maidenhead is well-foliaged but an effort needs to be made for the 'greening' of those areas which are not and it's encouraging to see the commitment in the Local Plan in this respect. In addition to the other suggestions above, we suggest:

- **Aim to make all roads in Maidenhead tree-lined**, where practicable.

Leisure & Culture

When considering the scale of the population explosion which Maidenhead is facing, we found ourselves asking: “What are all these people going to do?”

The council opened its new £36m leisure centre at Braywick in 2020 and though doubts were expressed about its out-of-town location after the town centre convenience of the Magnet, it seems to be well-used. Certainly appreciated and well-used by residents and visitors are Maidenhead’s natural amenities, with the river and the Thames Path remaining the main attractions. And much has been done to improve amenities in the town centre, particularly in terms of events in recent years. But continued imagination and effort is required to revive Maidenhead’s reputation as a destination.

We sincerely hope that those involved in drawing up the town centre plan will include this in their deliberations.

Maidenhead deserves a venue of distinction – a place in the centre of town for major events. You would also expect a town with such an affinity with the River Thames to have more river-related facilities.

The wealth of talent and level of interest in the arts locally suggests that ways should be found of putting Maidenhead on the cultural map. This has never been seriously researched. We suggest:

- **Formally explore the appeal and viability of a multi-purpose arts/conference centre**, capable of hosting concerts, exhibitions, stage shows and events

The Civic Society was influential in the sympathetic redevelopment of the former Taplow paper mill site on the South Bucks bank, particularly in the amount of public access and the construction of the footbridge at Boulters that has created a welcome link between the Thames Path and associated paths along the Jubilee River. The success of this transformation has



benefitted the ambience of Maidenhead Riverside but it also highlights the huge potential on our side of the river to enhance and extend facilities for residents and visitors.

We would like to see:

- **A Leisure Strategy for Riverside** which might include:
 - Imaginative ways of linking riverside and town centre, be it by buggy or a bridleway
 - A landscape strategy to conserve the River Thames environment
 - Ideas for attracting investment for river-related businesses
 - Opportunities for occasional events
 - Options for improving the walkers' experience
 - Improved embarkation points and walkways for trip boats
 - A public slipway and better managed moorings

NB: With the prospect of several years' disruption in the town centre during regeneration, Riverside offers an alternative venue for events during this time.

There should also be commitments to:

- **Continue to enhance the town's parks, gardens and open spaces** and find new opportunities to add to their number, if possible
- **Build on the success of events** in parks / spaces at weekends
- **Maintain a proper network of local paths & cycleways** to uniform standard
 - Promote their use with easily read maps which detail wildlife and heritage interests in the area, and
- **Ensure the quality of the York Stream** environment, to:
 - maintain the continuation of clean, substantial flows of water throughout the Stream's length
 - enable small boats to travel to/from the Thames into Maidenhead

In light of the Waterways Group's achievement, the Society would like to see consideration given to linking the Green Way at Bray with new paths recently created at Bray Pit.

Conclusion

From a planning perspective, we'd like to see a town that better reflects the requirements and aspirations of its residents, across all demographics, from the young and underprivileged to the affluent and the elderly. The focus must be on what constitutes an attractive and welcoming town with a sense of place. This is particularly true in the town centre but any new development should contribute positively to the enviable setting and accessibility, which constitute Maidenhead's USP.

Then, mindful that the town's population is set to increase considerably by 2033, we have to consider what it has to offer. Currently, the vast majority of our own residents rarely visit the town, if at all. Regeneration provides a unique opportunity to incorporate the kind of facilities to attract those people back and, with its excellent transport links, to revive Maidenhead's reputation as a destination for visitors too.

Achieving all this, we believe, has to involve meaningful community engagement if we are to restore a smidgen of public pride about Making Maidenhead a Better Place.

The Society's "Making Maidenhead A Better Place" is a living vision. First published in 2004 as a spur for regeneration and to stimulate debate, it will be modified as the community evolves and new requirements are identified.

Maidenhead
Civic Society
Estd. 1960

Preserving the best, improving the rest

www.maidenheadcivicsoc.org.uk