



Our Ref: SLK/ 2015/15129
Your Ref:
Email: skarat@firstplan.co.uk
Date: 19th October 2015

Ms Susan Wright
Planning Department
London Borough of Merton
Civic Centre
London Road
Morden
SM4 5DX

Dear Ms Wright

VARIATION OF CONDITION (3) ON PLANNING PERMISSION 09/P2385 TO PERMIT AN AREA IN THE STORE FOR USE AS AN ANCILLARY CAFÉ - WAITROSE ALEXANDRA ROAD, WIMBLEDON SW19 7J

I write following your telephone conversation with Stephen Wright at the John Lewis Partnership, to discuss the objections received to the above application. You suggested to Stephen that it would be helpful if we provided a response to the concerns that have been raised.

Essentially the objections made to the application cover the following areas:

1. The perception that Waitrose is going back on its word

Waitrose secured planning permission in 2009 to operate a supermarket from the run-down former B&Q unit on Alexandra Road. There was a number of objections to the application at the time, from local residents and businesses, concerned that the new foodstore would have an unacceptable impact on local shops, and concerns from the Council that the proposals would adversely affect Wimbledon town centre.

Following substantial consultation and conversation with the Council and local residents, Waitrose offered and agreed to a package of planning conditions and obligations to seek to mitigate those concerns. Condition 3 was part of that package. Condition 3 sought to control various elements of the shop, including a restriction on “use for A3 cafe/restaurant purposes”. The reason for this particular condition was expressed to be the protection of “...the vitality and viability of Wimbledon town centre...”.

It has been suggested that the current application represents a renegeing by Waitrose on this previous position. On behalf of Waitrose, I make the following points in response:

- a. It is 6 years since that original planning application was submitted and 5 years since it was granted, during which time the nature of retailing has changed substantially. With greater take-up of internet shopping and changing shopping patterns, it has become increasingly

important that retailers continue to innovate and invest in their stores, in order to provide a pleasurable and attractive retail environment for customers who will otherwise not visit physical shops or will take their custom to those stores which do provide the services and environment they're seeking.

- b. It is Waitrose's experience that a customer hospitality offer is a key element in creating that attractive retail environment. As a result, customer hospitality is being rolled out nationally across the Waitrose core store estate. Waitrose is very keen that its Wimbledon branch does not get left behind in that roll-out.
- c. The hospitality offer proposed for Wimbledon is actually very modest in its scale. It is not intended as a significant generator of revenue. Rather, its presence and inclusion within the store contributes to the wider sense of appeal of the store – even to customers who don't use it. In other words, the hospitality offer contributes to the vitality and breadth of offer of the shop rather than being a key footfall driver per se.
- d. Waitrose is not proposing a cafeteria in the usual sense of that term. The scale of offer and the type of products available to customers will not compete directly with local cafes and restaurants. The offer is small and caters to customers already shopping in-store who want to grab a bite to eat or a quick drink as part of their grocery shopping mission.
- e. Waitrose knows that it has to keep investing in its stores if they are to remain successful in this dynamic, rapidly changing retail world. Waitrose wants to bring its Wimbledon store up to this current offer and standard, and hopes that the Council will welcome this investment, and the confidence it expresses in the Borough and in Wimbledon as a place to do business in the years to come.

It is nearly 6 years since Waitrose accepted the condition. Retailing is a dynamic business and it has changed significantly over this time. It is a very competitive business and the company needs to ensure it responds to customers' needs to ensure it remains competitive. But it is about more than simply responding to needs: it is about creating a sense of experience, enjoyment and leisure for customers – contributing to an offer and an atmosphere in-store that is compelling to those who visit. Waitrose needs to continue to invest in its stores and engage with its customers, or those customers will shop elsewhere, in competing supermarkets where these facilities are provided, or stay at home and order on-line.

2. Impact of the café on local facilities

A number of objections consider that the proposal will have an unacceptable impact on cafes in the local shopping centre of Leopold Road. In fact, as explained above, the proposal is **not** for a café in the traditional sense of that word, where the objective of customers is solely or principally to enjoy a meal, or to spend time relaxing and meeting friends to enjoy a drink or eat food.

The proposal is for just 12 seats in an area adjoining the bakery, where customers can take a break from their shopping to enjoy a coffee and pastry from the nearby counter, as part of their shopping trip. Waitrose has defined the concept as '*a grazing area*' rather than café.

However there is no such definition in planning terms, so it has been described on the planning application form as a café. In reality, it is a totally different concept, much more of a '*splash and dash*' experience than that offered in a more traditional café, such as those in Leopold Road. It is not designed to compete with such facilities, in terms of the food offer or the environment. It is just an ancillary facility to improve and enhance customer's shopping experience.

Waitrose introduced the free hot drink for myWaitrose members over three years ago, as their way of giving something back to their customers, during which time the two cafes in the local area have continued to trade. Prior to the store opening there was the perception that a number of local traders in Leopold Road would close when the store opened, but there still appears to be a wide

range of local shops open, including a butchers, florist, newsagents, bakery and two convenience shops.

Any condition should only be retained, if its removal would result in unacceptable harm to interests of acknowledged importance. In this case, the proposal will not have any impact on any cafes in the local shopping area.

3. Town centre use contrary to the Sequential Test

Objectors have suggested that the current proposal is for a 'town centre' use and should be assessed against the sequential test. As indicated above, this proposal is not for a separate standalone café. The café cannot be operated separately from the rest of the store and therefore in our view the sequential test does not apply.

Indeed, the wording of the original condition restricts use as an "A3 cafe/restaurant". As is perhaps evident from the summary above, the proposed hospitality offer here will not be an A3 use. It is very much an ancillary and inherent part of the site's A1 retail offer, modest in offer and arguable de minimis in size and scale.

Summary

Waitrose offered to accept the condition preventing the store from including a café over 6 years ago. Retailing has changed significantly since then. Waitrose needs to continually review its business and invest in its shops to remain competitive. If they are prevented from doing so, customers will migrate away from the store, choosing to shop elsewhere or online, which would be undesirable in terms of the local economy and the long term sustainable future of the shop at Alexandra Road.

Since opening, Waitrose has made a positive contribution to shopping in the area, not only through the 140 people employed at the branch and the community –giving programmes, but by providing customers with a service that encourages people to visit the area.

The proposal is not for a café in the traditional sense as explained above. The facilities are not intended to compete with local cafes in the area but provide an ancillary facility to improve the shopping experience of Waitrose customers. The proposal is therefore very unlikely to have any impact on local cafés, which provide a very different experience and offer.

We hope that the above helps the Council understand the rationale behind the application more fully and reassures you that the proposal is acceptable and should be supported.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Shirley Karat".

SHIRLEY KARAT
Director

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