

8<sup>th</sup> August 2012

Mr D Hill  
Chief Executive  
Guildford Borough Council  
Millmead House  
Millmead  
Guildford GU2 4BB

Dear Mr Hill

On behalf of Guildford Vision Group I thought I should write to you recording recent history as trying to make progress with GBC is proving anything other than easy.

I am mindful of your email of 8<sup>th</sup> May and subsequent one of 12<sup>th</sup> May 2012 regarding GVG's open letter expressing concern to our supporters and others about failed attempts to engage with the Council.

We received your email of 8<sup>th</sup> May and responded quickly with an offer to withdraw our letter (where you took exception to one sentence) in the hope of facilitating a constructive dialogue with the Council.

We were pleased that a meeting could take place between GBC and GVC which you attended on 6<sup>th</sup> July although concerned at the insistence of Chatham House Rules. This is rather strange and I wondered if it is normal for GBC when meeting amenity groups? Perhaps you could confirm.

It seems that I should now provide a bit more background to our attempts to engage as it is difficult to recognise much progress in the conventional sense of local authorities engaging with their interest groups.

As you know, our main concern between January and May 2012 was the perceived lack of Council response, which, as citizens and a newly formed pressure group, and considering the Localism Act, we hoped GBC might engage with us. It may be that you were unaware of our efforts to engage with you, and GBC, and for that we can express regret as we made an open invitation at a public meeting on the subject and we emphasised there, to officers and councillors who attended, that we wished to engage with GBC of which you are CEO.

In fact, this followed a long sequence of events recorded below. When I comment below, "no response" was received, I mean no meaningful or substantive response addressing policy. I may be wrong in the following assessment and please feel free to correct my perception.

The sequence of events I believe were as follows:

1. A meeting in 2011 with John Rigg and Tony Rooth at Millmead with a simple request to review the (in my view flawed) Guildford masterplan process – no response.
2. Meeting 10<sup>th</sup> January 2012 between GBC planners and Allies and Morrison, appointed to review the plan. Later letter 15<sup>th</sup> February, John Rigg to Tony Rooth on Guildford town centre masterplan – no response to either.
3. Subsequent meeting Michael Jeffrey, John Rigg with Tony Rooth, requesting a different approach to the masterplan – no response.
4. Emails to your office from Gerald Bland and telephone calls from John Rigg (6<sup>th</sup> / 7<sup>th</sup> March) requesting a meeting with you and explaining the reasons – no substantive response. I acknowledge that you considered none was required.

[www.guildfordvisiongroup.com](http://www.guildfordvisiongroup.com)

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5. Meeting at your offices, 21<sup>st</sup> March a.m – GBC, A&M with your officers and the Leader and Deputy Leader inviting a different approach to be taken to the masterplan – no response from the meeting.
6. Public meeting 21<sup>st</sup> March p.m – attended by between 100-200 of the general public, the Leader and, we believe, some officers and elected members present. A public invitation was made to those present for GBC to engage with Guildford Vision Group on the subject of masterplanning. No response to the meeting received from the leader or officers.
7. 20<sup>th</sup> April at the GVG weekly meeting attended by Anne Milton, it was decided to write to GBC, then decided to delay and invite Tony Rooth to attend our next meeting. The invitation was accepted but Mr Rooth then decided the evening before to withdraw due to other commitments, so no further progress could be made to improve communication with GBC. I believe that further invitations were made and declined.
8. Individual meetings with Council members to explain our objectives and invite engagement from the Council.
9. 5<sup>th</sup> May, open letter issued to Tony Rooth, then withdrawn at your request, in the hope of constructive dialogue.

As at 5<sup>th</sup> May we could say that in terms of engagement or a clear message from leading Council members or officers on policy we certainly did not feel we had received any meaningful response. Certainly no correspondence, or calls or significant emails on policy or addressing our arguments have been received as far as we are aware, this is after considerable public debate, press coverage and many individual meetings with councillors.

However, because it may not have been clear to you that we did want to meet and engage from our actions and in the interests of being fair, we met your request “to withdraw this allegation” (of your not responding) by withdrawing the letter which of course covered a multitude of other points which still stand on ‘process’ and which of course received no comment from you or others subsequently.

We removed the 5<sup>th</sup> letter from our website as our sole objective as you and any reader knows is to secure a better plan for Guildford and through engagement with elected representatives and GBC.

We have now met with you and the leader, Anne Milton and others. The insistence by GBC on the ‘gagging’ Chatham House Rules is curious to say the least. We hope it is not to prohibit us communicating with our supporters. We responded by accepting on the assumption it would allow concessions to be offered or advance or secret information to be shared i.e. the normal reason for Chatham House Rules. We would agree subject to minutes being prepared for agreement by both parties if appropriate.

The meeting on 6<sup>th</sup> July merely rehearsed both our positions. No new information featured and we wish to report this to our supporters. However, the Council have not responded to the draft anodyne minutes (sent 11<sup>th</sup> July) or to reminders (sent 25<sup>th</sup> July) until 30<sup>th</sup> July when Mr Rooth confirmed a reply would be forthcoming. Forgive us but we are left wondering if this is the speed and way the Council wish to conduct this important debate.

Vision for Guildford Limited operating as Guildford Vision Group is a group comprising established professionals who are also passionate about Guildford. I am sure you would agree that if anyone seeks to undermine this group by means other than addressing the real issues raised then they fail to operate in the interests of our community.

We will continue to hope for a better relationship with the Council officers and elected officials but equally will continue to press for the best expertise to be brought to bear in planning Guildford’s future and in addressing the town’s current problems.

Separately, I am also concerned to discover that the draft Town Centre Masterplan published last December will be adopted by the Council next month in its new guise as the Town Centre Interim Framework Document. We are advised that following criticism this document will be materially different and takes into account the responses from public consultation yet we may only be given four working days to absorb the differences in the two documents and no opportunity for the community to be consulted again before the executive meeting adopt the document.

We are concerned generally about the way the Council are approaching Guildford's town planning. This is in respect of Waitrose, North Street Design and Development Brief, the Interim Framework Document and assuming this approach indicates a general direction then also Solum and the Railway Station development. These sites are central to the success of Guildford town centre and with the Hermes Friary 2 site make this a crucial period for the future of Guildford. An absence of a holistic approach to traffic modelling or proper consultation or engagement and your piecemeal approach without any masterplanning or up to date extensive transport studies or regard to adjoining sites would not be allowed by most Councils dealing with private sector applications let alone promoted as an approach.

Guildford is too important to NOT bring in the very best masterplanners and traffic engineers to create a real vision and attempt to deliver some of the many aspirations of its citizens as part of the process. I am unsure if this is a few officers or elected councillors being so adamant that only they have the property skills for such a challenging 'gap town' when in previous decades so little progress is evident. If so, we do not understand this absolute confidence. GVG for our part, as professionals, are convinced WE DO NOT have the skills but as with countless Councils across Britain we know that periodically to turn to experts is absolutely necessary in masterplanning, as in all walks of life. Why GBC think a project here or there pushed through the planning system in the way it is doing (and must be aware it is so doing) assume this can remotely address the issues is uncertain. What we do know is Waitrose, JLP, Solum, Friary 2 can all easily make things worse for the next 30 years if not masterplanned in a holistic way whilst also missing other major wins for the citizens of Guildford in the process.

The financial cost to any community of bad planning is immense. We will continue to hope and campaign for a truly professional masterplanning exercise for Guildford.

I look forward to your response and sincerely hope that our interpretation of events is mistaken.

Yours sincerely

**John Rigg**  
**Director**  
**Vision for Guildford Limited**

cc. Tony Rooth  
Anne Milton – MP