

Within the last few months a major activity of The Guildford Society Exec Committee and its sub-committees has been to review future plans for Guildford and whether or not the town is being well served. From recent events considerable concern has been expressed both within The Guildford Society's membership and outside about the lack of a vision for the town and the absence of public engagement with the residents and other stakeholders to address congestion or make real progress towards a town we can all be proud of.

*In response to the GBC (draft) Masterplan a new group encouraged by The Guildford Society has formed to really explore and consider the current plan process which will have such a big impact on the town and daily life over forthcoming decades. This separate group has been formed to engage with a larger cross section of the town including where possible the university, business, community groups and in fact all parties with an interest in achieving the best possible built environment for our future. It includes many experienced professionals, both in law and property with one common purpose; these people are passionate about the town and want to see more progress addressing issues than they have seen in the last two or three decades. Newsletter went to see John Rigg the Chairman of the newly formed **Guildford Vision Group**.*

Guildford Vision Group (GVG)



Newsletter: John, it's a good title but what exactly is GVG?

John Rigg: GVG has been set up recognising the importance of a clear vision for the town including delivering a successful transportation hub which is so important to the success of any centre. Guildford has real problems due to it being a gap town where traffic from all points of the compass are forced through a narrow river valley in the centre of the town despite often having no reason for being in Guildford other than that they are passing through. The effect of this is that a gyratory has been created which dominates the town; it creates an incredibly unpleasant traffic corridor separating the town from the river, the station and the university. The town desperately needs some really creative design to reconnect the river to the town, to create pleasant walkways and cycle paths, particularly to the station, university and cathedral, but also to open up for sustainable development a multitude of sites which have lain dormant or are merely large expanses of tarmac. Large areas of surface car parking cannot be the best use of our town. Furthermore, whilst we all really value the High Street and the castle and the views, the Friary extension site has lain dormant for more than two decades now. We still don't have a town square and we fear fundamental mistakes are being made on proposed land use for the town. All of this makes the next one or two years crucially important. We need to know we are doing everything possible to identify what solutions might be out there and what is the best for Guildford and our local economy.

The Planning legislation requires the council to produce local plans. These can either be good imaginative plans which really set out a vision or, sadly, ones that don't. The local plan cycle may not be long enough to fix long term problems – but it is certainly long enough to make it worse! What is required is a longer-term overarching idea of what Guildford should be like in 20 or 30 years; this should then inform each successive local plan and ensure that everything that can be done is done to achieve the overall objectives for the town. Due to the topographical issues in Guildford, there may well be a need for really creative or radical solutions. However, whilst traffic and transportation is fundamental, it is not the responsibility of GBC. Nonetheless, we have to take ownership of this problem and even appoint Guildford's own traffic engineers to bring state of the art ideas which can really deliver new solutions. Our impression is that GBC takes the view that even strategic traffic planning is a matter for Surrey County Council, who have the whole of Surrey to look after and who are not generally tasked with creative thinking to provide master-planning to match a town's future aspirations. The Guildford Vision Group believes that, however well these officers conduct the general business of Development Control and Highways Maintenance, they are not (and probably should not be) resourced for the kind of once-in-a-generation exercise that is required to redesign the town in a holistic way. That is exactly why and when Guildford should bring in the best experts from the private sector. We believe that, as with hundreds of other councils across Britain with really challenging development plans and transportation issues, the best external experts need to be appointed - people who are confronted by such issues every day up and down the United Kingdom. Traffic is not a problem unique to Guildford. Equally, the best solutions may not be found or invented in Guildford.

Newsletter: So how did GVG come about?

John Rigg: The council produced its Masterplan at the end of 2011 and demanded virtually immediate response. This document was viewed as a poor effort by many leading professionals. It had no visionary dimension of any substance. In January The Guildford Society responded to the Masterplan by convening a meeting (attended by c.90 people) and commissioning, from its own financial resources, Allies & Morrison, who are a specialist firm of urban practitioners and masterplanners with an outstanding CV, to help prepare a response to the plan. Their report is available through our website.

Newsletter: Who are you?

John Rigg: GVG has a steering group made up of several members of The Guildford Society, some from local Residents Associations and professionals in town planning and the built environment. I am Chairman. You can see all the names on the GVG website. So we are predominantly local people with experience and a voice in this specialist field. I am a Fellow of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors with 40 years' experience in property investment and development and I see what has been achieved elsewhere in towns with really serious problems. I just feel we could do better. Of course, this opinion is not always welcome for obvious reasons, and undoubtedly it does not make us popular in some quarters; but what choice is there if you can see that Guildford is going to grind to a halt and the quality of decision making on development is so disappointing.

Newsletter: So what's the problem you're addressing? What do you want to achieve? Or, if you like, what's so wrong with what we've got?

John Rigg: We think that Guildford fails to deliver on its true potential; it needs a solution to its traffic issues, affordable homes and proper connections from the town to the station and the university, cathedral and hospital. It should make good use of assets now ignored: the river frontage (which is not linked to the High Street), and spaces that could provide squares and new vistas. We must avoid squandering the few sites remaining by piecemeal development. I recommend anyone to listen to a blog by the architect Terry Farrell (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/podcasts/series/fourththought>) where he talks about the importance of spaces between buildings which really set the right agenda. It is a really important issue in making a success of a town to have town squares, walkways and long views. But you simply cannot deliver a wonderful built environment if you do not at least engage the best masterplanners and designers to look at what can be achieved in a holistic way, which is what other towns have done.

Clearly a group against the idea will argue cost in commissioning the work or the cost in implementing any plans. In terms of the cost of masterplanning, which might be half a million or a million pounds, it pales into insignificance when one considers that to-day Guildford produces added value of goods and services of about £3.8 billion a year, and that the value of residential and commercial property in Guildford may be in hundreds of billions, which *can rise or fall depending on sustainable transportation*. Equally, if the proper masterplanning of the town brings in further investment, we could see Business Rate revenues increase by enough to cover the masterplanning costs in a matter of a few days. If we get it right, it only needs to improve property values by a modest amount to produce a fantastic return.

We also believe that Guildford is not contributing as much as it could to its own local economy: companies are discouraged from staying in the town because of the traffic, and relatively expensive housing. And we believe the university, which, directly or indirectly, makes up about a third of the local economy, should be embraced more in our vision, and we in their long-term plans.

In terms of delivering the vision, it may take years or decades for the private sector and the public sector to deliver the plan but at least if you have a plan, you can take small steps every year towards its ultimate delivery. Unfortunately, the current view seems to us to be that planning is a process to meet government deadlines, and at as low a cost as possible. It is also to help the council to sell off sites along the way, having allocated uses to them that they cannot demonstrate are sustainable without the fundamental infrastructure improvement which they fail to address.

Newsletter: Does GVG have a view on the current sites which are likely to come before the council in the near future?

John Rigg: GVG actually would prefer not to get involved with individual sites. We are really formed to encourage the right *process* for securing a plan for the town at a

strategic level. However, our case is well illustrated by the treatment being applied to individual sites. For example, if you take a holistic view to planning you don't sell off key sites on the basis of a quick deal e.g. Waitrose. Or to take another example: Solum could put 350 apartments, two hotels, a supermarket and other property on top of the station thus feeding into the already congested gyratory. It would generate profits for Solum but it will not produce the best outcome for the town. This is particularly so if one of the few radical ideas for carrying traffic from the town centre may involve bridging the railway: then Solum's proposed building could preclude this for another 100 years, if not forever.

GVG is absolutely pro-growth and is not NIMBY in approach but equally, we are against short term 'quick buck' planning which can move Guildford from the 9th worst-congested town the wrong way on the league table. Equally, if one of the town's major problems is lack of homes that the average workers can afford, why is Guildford selling a superb residential site to Waitrose to put the wrong project on the wrong site with yet more surface parking? If we want the main town centre site to be developed, and viability has been the problem, surely Waitrose needs to be encouraged by GBC to work with Hermes (the owners of the Friary) to help the Friary extension to materialise? Also, wouldn't a Waitrose fronting North Street be a better solution? We try to keep an open mind on Waitrose but when the traffic engineers point out the loss of an underpass for school children to get to their school which will be replaced by a Waitrose pedestrian crossing which will lead to more accidents - all so that shoppers can access yet another surface car park at the cost of considerable congestion on York Road - it is clear to us that land-use planning in the town is going badly wrong. Waitrose traffic engineers seem able to produce evidence showing the supermarket won't cause traffic carnage only by assuming the town centre Friary site will never be developed. If this assumption has been encouraged or allowed by GBC, or SCC, you have to wonder.

Newsletter: So what have you achieved so far? How far have you got?

John Rigg: Please note we are not coming up with a masterplan ourselves. If solutions were so easy to identify, GBC would have done so already and we would not be advocating engaging specialist masterplanners to do a thorough job. Because the problems are so deep-seated and complex we need the very best experts we can appoint to help us all; and this should be through proper community engagement, to agree on a set of priorities and objectives and solutions; and then to come up with an implementation plan that all these major developments can help deliver.

We want the council to come on board with us and set about the task from a different angle.

Newsletter: How do the councillors and planning officers take to your initiative?

John Rigg: On 6 July we met Tony Rooth, the Leader of the Council, along with Anne Milton, our MP. The response was disappointing. Without wishing to be critical, there is a risk that they are likely to judge our ideas as too much out of their comfort zone. I can fully understand that. Councillors feel perhaps they only have a short time to make their mark. A 30-40 year timeline means that they may believe they cannot be seen to

have achieved enough. This is a problem everywhere. The same was probably true at the other places I have mentioned. But we cannot, of course, afford to allow an inadequate plan to go forward as *the* masterplan; inappropriate changes on the ground made now will remain for our lifetime, and could completely spoil the future townscape. Unfortunately, nothing we have seen so far inspires me with confidence, which is why we need the community in Guildford to get behind our campaign and support this ambition for a real plan. Whether you want traffic to be addressed, or you want a better, more accountable town, or you want a town square, or to open the river to the High Street, or better connections with the university, or a safer route to the station, or better parking, or better employment opportunities for the next generation, so do we. But to deliver these things we believe we need a new approach, part of which involves real engagement with the community. We would like to think that the Councillors will recognise that it is not closed-door control, but engagement which empowers them to act for all of us.

We heard one recent report of a councillor criticising GVG as ‘they think only they can plan Guildford’. This is disappointing disinformation. We are the only group that think exactly the opposite and that we cannot plan Guildford. Has GBC the resources and sophisticated engineering expertise to claim exclusive ownership of any plan? We hope they will engage with us and the debate, and we have invited councillors to our GVG meetings with only very limited success so far. I can assure you: you could not hope to meet a more passionate and committed group of professionals trying to do the best for the town, in addition to all their other commitments. We are encountering disappointing tactics but nonetheless, we will continue to campaign for a better Guildford.

We have sensed that if you try to engage with new ideas, you do risk criticism from those who wish to ridicule. For instance, an idea of one of our supporters has been for a tunnel and a bridge. We can not advocate these solutions which would need masterplanning and costing, but we do applaud someone looking for new ideas to improve our town. The most vital issue for Guildford is a traffic plan, so if you hear criticism of GVG, ask the critic what their solution is after 20 years. If their response is to put a Waitrose and large surface car park on a town centre residential site disrupting York Road, ask how that will help exactly.

The whole nature of retailing is changing due to the internet, with real contraction of the space required, particularly for comparison goods retailing. This, along with the recession, is increasing the number of vacant shops throughout the country, so is GBC working on growth numbers for retailing and is the need for expansion now outdated, and what might their plan do for the town and traffic? We agree Guildford must remain a retailing and community hub, but without a transportation plan for traffic movement, without ready access, to parking, to walkways or cycle ways, it can be a disaster. The new development on the Friary site and on the station must be sustainable.

Newsletter: *What about Localism? Does this offer a solution?*

John Rigg: Both we and the government support Localism. We want to see much better engagement by our Council with the community and interest groups; something government policy suggests has been widely inadequate in the past. Remember, some of

Britain's greatest towns and most impressive planning were put in place decades if not centuries before the Town and Country Planning Acts existed. Cities such as Edinburgh, Bath, Oxford and Cambridge are wonderful thanks to committed, passionate residents who wanted the best civic design and planning for their community.

And as an aside, I understand that those Councils that have already allowed Neighbourhood Forums to be set up, have supported what the Forums are doing and recognize that better outcomes are being achieved as a result. Win, win for all. These Forums are definitely not threatening to Councils: they are extra resources and very focused.

GVG website is at <http://www.guildfordvisiongroup.com> I urge you spend some time looking it up, and answer our questionnaire and write in.

David Smith, with thanks to John Rigg, Vision for Guildford Limited