

GVG NEWSLETTER

August 2013



Guildford Vision Group's Mission Unchanged!

The mission of Guildford Vision Group (GVG) remains intact and resolute! We want to see:

- A professional Town Master Plan with a vision that works
- Traffic blight tackled
- Routes that connect & don't divide
- Better space for people
- A revamped riverside for relaxation and recreation
- Guildford's great history accessible & celebrated

We Get Flak – That Fair or Not?

Our action over Waitrose, of which more later, is getting us flak. We're holding up something people want, our critics say. In fact it was GBC who let lapse in 2010 a much earlier planning consent on Bellerby, which it owns, for 75 much-needed houses granted way back in 2007.

We're holding up a foodstore and car park that shouldn't be on a designated housing site. * And we've only been 'holding it up' since March this year, which is when we formally launched our Judicial Review (JR) request (see below).

How Long Have We Been Holding Things Up?

You've have thought we'd been holding up the progress of Guildford since the 1990s, or even earlier. Hang on! GVG was only launched in March 2012, ie just under 18 months ago – plenty of time for GBC to have got a Master Plan in place!

Our first real impact was apparent in September last year, ie less than a year ago, when we challenged two woeful GBC planning documents as being unlawful. They were; and they were then ditched by the new Leader and his Executive.

We Have Support, Thanks to You

Our public meetings, thanks to you, our supporters, have drawn over 300+ people on occasions. There's always been a good exchange of views. Yes, we're unelected. But we are Guildford residents and council tax payers, just like you, and we want to continue to live in a Guildford that works very well on all levels. We need our elected representatives to represent our views, not impose their own.

Articulating the Angst

We think we are articulating, in broad terms, what many of you think and feel. Something must be done about congestion. Where are the houses for workers and growing families? No more quick fixes, please.

We must challenge the piecemeal planning of the past 20-30 years. Let's get some great architecture in the centre of our town. How about a town square? Let's make the riverside lovely public space. Let's see better connections with the University, Research Park, Hospital and Cathedral.

Bad Decisions Not Good for Guildford

We should challenge our elected representatives when we think they have made misguided or unlawful decisions, as we

proved over the Interim Town Centre Framework document and the North St Development & Design Brief.

Drawing a Line in the Sand

We think it is time to draw a line in the sand. We want to see a Masterplan for Guildford that will help shape its development over the next 30 years, tackle the key infrastructure issues and plan for sufficient housing to support growth. It goes without saying that we want to see growth that respects our heritage, our glorious setting and the Green Belt that surrounds us. That's not Nimbyism, that's common sense. We want a proud and lively county town.

GVG Wants Growth in Guildford

GVG is pro-growth, it supports Cllr Mansbridge's vision for Guildford – indeed we might have put a few thoughts in his head along those lines. But if he and his Executive colleagues are going to let events continue such as those that have surrounded the Bellerby saga, what else can we do? We appreciate he inherited this problem from his predecessors so his hands may be tied but ours are not.

MasterPlan and Local Plan

Since the last Newsletter in February this year, we've continued to make the case for the MasterPlan. We've concentrated on the North Street story in particular, and the need to have a broader infrastructure appreciation of its impact, amongst other things.

A MasterPlan would fit neatly with the emerging Local Plan and indeed would support key planning strategies ahead of formal adoption of the Local Plan, a more long-winded exercise. This would help protect Guildford from unwanted development in the interim.

Choice Language from Councillors

Relations with the Council have been good on the personal level but there's been some unfortunate language used in the Council Chamber. There, at a recent Executive meeting, the impact of our activities was likened to that of Irish terrorists.

That seems defamatory to us and we've yet to receive a proper apology. There's probably a better analogy to employ but the message is that a small group can have an impact if it's well supported, well-informed, organised and experienced.

Freedom Fighting on your Behalf

Just after our last Newsletter was published, we disagreed with the process leading to planning consent being granted to Waitrose for a foodstore and 168-space carpark on the Bellerby site and thus sought a JR.

Through the process of a JR it is possible to ask for an examination of the validity of the process adopted by GBC in arriving at its decision. Did it follow all the relevant policies, rules and regulations? Were the councillors suitably objective in arriving at their decision? In fact we can only challenge on very limited grounds, but so be it.

It's not a challenge about the shape, scope or design of a development. Sadly, that's not possible once consent is granted.

Judicial Review - the Only Option Available

Since we believe the planning consent is flawed, it's important to understand that JR is the only option available to us. If, say, a development company is not granted planning permission, it has the right to appeal. If a council tax payer believes a planning permission should not have been granted on procedural/policy grounds, then he/she can only ask for a JR. Given what's involved, it's easy to see why that doesn't happen every day. It's not risk-free, either.

Mixed Support for Foodstore and Car Park at Bellerby

To the question: 'Would you like to see Waitrose in Guildford?' comes the almost inevitable answer 'Yes!'

To the question: 'Would you like to see a foodstore with a car park feeding into and off the gyratory, a 90 car queue up York Rd at peak times, another set of traffic lights in York Rd, lose the subway used by mums and young kids from Sandfield Primary School, have delivery HGVs manoeuvring in Leapale Rd and North St and, of course, sacrifice 200 or so homes for families and eat into green belt instead?' then comes a more measured response.

More People Objected than Supported

Despite claims to the contrary by one councillor, there were 120 separate objectors to the plan from the three wards closest to the site, vs 52 in support. Overall, there were 159 objectors vs 109 supporting. Those are the facts, taken from GBC's own planning files.

An Institutional Muddle

Our JR application has inevitably become entwined with the Hermes situation. Hermes, while still owners of the Friary and adjoining North Street property, submitted a JR request regarding the Bellerby consent just ahead of GVG. It clearly saw an adverse impact on its property interests in North St.

Hermes Sells to M&G Real Estate

Hermes, tiring of the difficulties in dealing with GBC over North St, then sold its Guildford property interests to the property arm of the Prudential - formerly known as PRUPIM, now M&G Real Estate (M&G).

M&G thus came to 'own' the JR application. At the end of last month M&G withdrew the JR application, almost certainly as a result of concluding a landowners' agreement with GBC over the land involved in the proposed North St development.

GVG Lobbying Saves Time & Money

There's an irony here. GVG has lobbied consistently for GBC to conclude such a deal with M&G. Otherwise GBC would have had to rely on Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs) to acquire the land for development involving considerable delays.

Judge Allows Oral Hearing of our Judicial Review Request

In July, at the same time as M&G withdrew, a Judge was not willing to allow our JR to go straight to full trial but he has allowed an oral hearing of our remaining ground, as the process allows. Two of the three grounds we set out have been 'cured' by GBC since we asked for the JR but were valid at the time. The third, and most significant, remains. The oral hearing takes place in December, when our QC will be able to make our case directly to a planning judge for a full hearing (which would happen some months later). It's also an expensive route, we know.

We Say GBC Did Not Apply Key Planning Test Properly

We believe there are sites, working out from the designated town centre retail area that should be selected ahead of Bellerby for a 2000 sq m foodstore. The 60,000 sq m North St scheme would be one. The Bellerby site is outside the designated retail area. Under national planning rules, we say this 'sequential' test was incorrectly applied by GBC planners and that attractions such as Waitrose should be in the High Street or North Street to help protect prime retailing and fill vacant shops. *

What Our Critics Should Know

We're accused of arrogance, harbouring vested interests, being funded by dark forces; we could go on.

What we can reveal is that since our formation last May we have had regular informal discussions with leading Council figures, the institutional investors, the shortlisted developers and a range of other interested parties. We have kept to the issues at all times in the interests of a better Guildford.

Steering Towards Compromise

Our Friday morning Steering Group meetings (when can I have my Friday mornings back, please? – Ed) are open and there's a standing invitation for councillors to attend. Barely one or two have taken the opportunity to discover that our discussions are serious, thoughtful and combine a wealth of industry and other relevant experience.

Cllr Mansbridge has been along and we think he 'gets' us. We are not far apart in our thinking. We have made more than one attempt at official compromise but we get little back by way of official response. The public language from councillors is unhelpful and borders on the aggressive.

GVG Needs Your Support

We continue to seek support. Our campaign has inevitably incurred costs (QCs don't come cheap!).

If you are able to contribute anything, be it £10 or £1,000, please get in touch with Yvanka at action@guildfordvisiongroup.com.

Our website www.guildfordvisiongroup.com has a host of material about our campaign and the issues involved. **Please do send us your comments** – we welcome all contributions.

*** "sustainable development... should be seen as a golden thread running through... decision-taking" NPPF 2012**