

# GVG NEWSLETTER

July 2014



## Mission Impossible

Woe betide any Council carrying out a Green Belt review in its draft Local Plan to try to meet its Objective Assessment of Housing Need.

The battle lines are being drawn across England between a central government wanting to meet the clamour for homes and local people determined to protect their green and pleasant land.

## Getting hot over the Belt

No where is the battle hotter - and nastier? - than in Guildford. 89% of the borough is designated Green Belt, one of the highest proportions in the country, reflecting its location nestling in the stunning North Downs. Delivering growth in such an environment is a challenge for any political party, whatever its hue.

Not surprisingly, but nonetheless sadly, personal attacks and unseemly actions have entered the fray where residents feel their homes or amenity are under threat. Lead councillors and officers are in the line of fire. They do deserve some sympathy, caught as they are in a no-win situation, trying to manage government priorities and at the same time addressing the concerns of highly organised, occasionally aggressive, local resident groups.

So when it comes to a Green Belt revision, they're damned if they do and damned if they don't. And the politicians are only too aware of the looming 2015 local elections.

## Growth is good

GVG believes economic growth is not a bad thing. It is essential even, and healthy for the long term success of Guildford, both town and borough. GVG makes no apologies for its own

priority - a better, master planned town centre, desperately needed now to solve current problems but essential to allow future healthy growth to happen.

Thus GVG believes the Green Belt protagonists, Council and residents alike, should lift their eyes up from the greensward and focus on less attractive but no less valuable brownfield sites in the centre and consider how to make the best of what we have available.

With a proper master planned town centre and major new investment in infrastructure, including a bridge over the railway, a brownfield focus could deliver new residential quarters, well away from the precious Green Belt, of up to 4000 homes.

## Where there's a Wey

The first need is to masterplan, allocate land in the Draft Local Plan and re-zone areas as residential either side of the Wey corridor, but principally Walnut Tree Close to Ladymead. Secondly, major infrastructure investment must be undertaken to manage traffic and transportation in a really confined part of our town. GVG believes a bridge is necessary over the railway to relieve WTC and to free up the whole town centre for the bigger pedestrianisation and riverside wins this can generate (See the exciting and stimulating [Allies and Morrison Vision 2014-Guildford Town Centre Vision](#) )

This proposal is challenging for a Council that has principally relied on retrospective development control rather than more forward looking land allocation strategies and interventions to deliver development solutions.

Re-zoning and master planning can produce the land use, density and quality of architecture and space (without excessive high rise) to deliver the garden city the

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town really merits. Green corridors, riverside walks, cycle ways and sustainable development can and must be designed in a holistic way.

## **Time for change**

The Council has listened to us and is examining this option. The question is how to deliver new housing in a short time. Delivery within a 5-year timeframe needs major interventions, including CPO powers and relocations, and using the new Development Orders - a new fast track way for Councils to bring forward complex brownfield sites.

There's another bonus to be had by relocating business space elsewhere - more efficient land use, as urban housing will almost certainly use less. The alternative - putting residential on Slyfield - is much less efficient and less sustainable, given the difference between in and out of town residential densities. Out of town can consume up to five times more land than in town, whilst also producing less sustainable housing than alongside the station and town centre.

If this land switch is to happen in five years it may mean releasing some Green Belt at Slyfield for business we want to keep in the Borough.

## **The Council will need to man up**

And the Council will have to take up an unprecedented challenge in embarking on major intervention. It has never had to face the realities and complexities of an urban regeneration programme commonplace in much poorer areas of Britain. But we are sure the Council is up to it.

Our needs now are born of the conflict of growth with long term past inaction and

under investment in infrastructure. The pain of change through radical action is no less than that experienced in towns in the North. To that extent, delivery of this new housing in full may be more realistic in a 5-10 year time frame but whenever it happens it will relieve the pressure on the Green Belt.

It is a great shame the government has no task force to help a Council like ours who, through under resourcing and past efficiency drives, has to start from square one with few resources to tackle this major investment deficit.

## **Investing in a Leader**

The one asset we do appear to have is a Leader who really wants to try and address these issues. His task is not made easier when faced with an angry and understandably frustrated electorate. We should support him with good arguments, not hostility. We all need to pull together to deliver the best solutions we can in all the circumstances to enhance the future for this very special town and its citizens.

## **About Guildford Vision Group**

New to Guildford Vision Group? Go to [www.guildfordvisiongroup.com](http://www.guildfordvisiongroup.com) for background information about our two year campaign.