

GVG Update

GVG 2018 ROUND UP December 2018



New Houses - Town Before Green Belt

The main focus of attention in 2018 has been the Local Plan. We think it is still unsound. As we pointed out in our last Update, our main contention is that the council has not made enough effort to find new housing sites in the town centre. By its own rules it has to look for sites in the centre before moving out further. We think it has made the leap to the Green Belt sites too quickly.

At first glance these sites, as virgin territory, might seem the easiest on which to build the required number of homes to meet the government's five year supply target. But when you look closely, the arguments against the Green Belt sites, apart from the obvious loss of amenity, begin to stack up.

Green Belt Sites Infrastructure Challenges

Guildford has problems when it comes to sewage and electricity, for example, certainly when it gets to the Slyfield and Gosden Hill Farm sites. Wisley, another site, presents considerable road infrastructure challenges, as does Blackwell Farm. These latter challenges all rely on major improvements to the A3 through Guildford, improvements that have yet to be fully scoped and finally timetabled, let alone funded.

None of these issues, including the sewage and sparks, is ever going to be sorted in under five years and probably not under ten years.

Town Centre Housing More Sustainable

So back to the town centre. GVG has consistently maintained that building new homes in the town centre is a much more sustainable approach. Yes, such development will bring its own infrastructure challenges. But such housing is unlikely to create as many car journeys, for example, as the strategic sites on the edges of town or further away.

Town centre housing will mean people can walk to the rail and bus stations, and to the shops, restaurants and cinema. They will be able to cycle along the towpath to the attractions alongside the river.

Town Centre Capacity Exists

If the council is prepared to use its compulsory purchase powers, decent housing sites can be assembled more quickly and brought into development more quickly than the precious Green Belt sites. These are just some of the arguments for a proper plan and design envelope for the town centre. It would mitigate the impact of the current opportunistic development we are seeing, for example, along Walnut Tree Close and its environs.

Here we are seeing unnecessary building heights of ten storeys or more. Curiously, this land is not identified as available for housing in the Local Plan. Assuming more permissions are granted, ie the council has inadequate policies to refuse them, it just shows the considerable capacity of the town to accommodate new housing not included in the council's Local Plan calculations.

Examine Town Centre Policy At Next Hearings

Which brings us back to the next public hearings for the Local Plan – scheduled for 12-13 February 2019. At the moment, the inspector only intends to look again at the housing numbers in the light of the recent downward revision by the ONS of the population projections.

We want the inspector to look also at the town centre policy, S3, which he himself called for as a 'Main Modification'. In particular, Inspector Bore asked the council questions about the town centre which have yet to be adequately answered. He also invited the council to cooperate with resident groups on the new draft town centre policy. The council chose to disregard the invitation. We believe that, to create a sound Plan, adequate policies related to the Town Centre must be included in the February hearings. The allocated town centre regeneration area should also be subject to the Place Shaping requirements of Policy D1.

Solum Solutions

The other topic that has occupied our time during 2018 is the impact of the Solum development. As you may recall, Solum was granted permission on appeal to build its ten storey monster stretching

for 300 metres alongside the tracks on the eastern side of the station (the Walnut Tree Close side). What has temporarily halted us in our tracks is that the northernmost element of the scheme blocks the route for our new crossing proposal.

Rather than sticking to 'there is no alternative', we are looking, Brexit-like, at a range of options. We remain determined to find a solution. We will leave no stone unturned to find a way to move the traffic away from the centre, reduce pollution and serious accidents, and to free up the bottom of town for pedestrianisation down to the river.

Staying On The Rails

Another line of work has been the railway system. We want to see better facilities at the station than those incorporated in the Solum scheme. There are a lot of behind the scenes studies underway or recently completed by Network Rail and others to shape rail services, both existing and new. What's needed to link better to Heathrow? How might Crossrail 2 impact services to Guildford? What track and platform changes are required to enable more trains to run through Guildford? How might the railway system help take more cars off the road, linked to new and revitalised local stations?

Remain Regional Hub

All these matter if we are to remain the regional hub, remain economically vibrant and able to manage the integration of the 25,000+ new people coming to live in and around our lovely town. All this while ensuring Guildford and its surroundings retains its unique character and becomes an even more attractive location in which to live and work.

Leave Land For Infrastructure

The development of land on the west side of the station is a key part of GVG's own masterplan for the town. If used wisely it can help overcome some of the infrastructure challenges facing the town, not least the constriction of the inadequate and ailing Farnham Road Bridge.

If our infrastructure is to become more resilient in the face of the new housing on the edges of town, then logic suggests we need another east/west rail and river crossing. The forthcoming strengthening project for the Farnham Road Bridge will inevitably show up the frailty and fragility of routeing options in our town.

No Bad Deals

This year saw another prime example of the need

for a town centre masterplan. The council, fresh from the experience of losing £1.2mill on the ill-fated pop-up Village, has managed to spend £1mill on a new bridge project without any metal being cut or concrete poured.

The costly £3.7mill cycle and pedestrian project, replacing the current serviceable bridge linking Walnut Tree Close to Bedford Square, is going ahead (with an apparently dangerous design) before there are any settled plans to develop the Bedford Square area. At the station end, the new, wider pedestrian & cycle bridge will feature a light-controlled toucan crossing, not many metres from the existing pelican crossing.

There Must Be Better Ways

If the justification is increased footfall and cycle trips, how can any meaningful supporting 'traffic' data be gathered before the Bedford Square scheme is drawn up, plus new schemes further into town – not least the long-awaited North Street redevelopment? The argument for pressing on is that (LEP) funding has been secured and must be spent within a certain timeframe.

Surely, in the 21st century, we can organise things better than that? Incidentally, one of our engineering contacts reckons they can design, build and erect a perfectly suitable bridge for £500,000. A makeover of the existing bridge would cost even less.

Our Letter To Santa

What goodies is GVG hoping for in 2019? Better relations with the council is number one. There are signs that matters are improving. We are, after all, a group of concerned residents. And we are all ratepayers.

We take comfort from the fact that at our last public meeting, 150 of you turned up and shared your concerns about aspects of planning and the soundness of the new Local Plan – not the most enticing topic, yet you came. Again, nearly 10,000 clicked on the link to the webcast that recorded the proceedings, almost matching the response we achieved when we launched our masterplan in February 2017.

We are very grateful for your support and we look forward to the challenges that 2019 will bring.

A Merry Christmas & Happy New Year to all our supporters!