

The Guildford Society

2018 Review

Julian Lyon

Society Chair

Not a Good Year

As we approach the end of 2018, we are looking back on a year that has been focused on the Solum development and the Local Plan. Has it been a good year for our town and borough? No it has not.

As we look ahead into 2019 we note that local elections are looming on 2nd May, and we wonder what changes that may bring. We look back at our manifesto call to Councillors at the last election and find ourselves distinctly underwhelmed. We need, again, to point out several matters that new Councillors will need to tackle.

Piecemeal Planning

For our town and borough, we have seen a continuation of dysfunctional and haphazard, piecemeal planning. As an example, the Town Centre has suffered from piecemeal planning for years, the North Street Site seems to be going nowhere, a bland and poorly-designed £3-£4 million 'bridge to nowhere' has been approved across the Wey, there is no coherent plan for Walnut Tree Close, there is still no sensible plan for traffic and transport in the town (we don't even know the future of the bus station), and we could go on.

The Solum (Rail Station) development should have been seen off by a strong, defensible set of reasons for refusal. There was, instead, a weak argument from the council based largely on sight lines (focused on an untested theory of a 'Coleman Bowl' which would protect the crown of Stag Hill – which is contradicted in the Council's own draft Local Plan). The council declined offers of support from both the Guildford Society and the Guildford Vision Group - it was really only those two groups who threatened to derail the Great Wall of Guildford, all of us failing to prevent Solum winning on appeal despite spending the entire appeal hearing arguing our corners

The Local Plan

The Plan has been something of a shambles, claimed as a (pyrrhic) victory by the Council because the inspector, (having commented about how uninspiring the plan was, its inability to tackle the town centre and urban areas and to put brownfield before free, its lack of coherence over housing numbers) suggested that the plan was substantially sound subject to some main modifications.

One of the main modifications was to have to have a policy for the town centre. Again, the Guildford Society, the Guildford Vision Group, the Guildford Residents Association and others, offered to help the Council draft a workable policy (S3). Again, we were rebuffed.

The Local Plan (at a current cost, we understand, exceeding £3m) does not begin to tackle infrastructure deficits in town, despite calls by so many groups and individuals. We are left relying on (incomplete) infrastructure proposals for a busway, with pedestrian and cycle routes, running through the town centre somehow between the proposed urban extensions into green belt of Blackwell Farm in the west and Gosden Hill Farm in the east.

The Local Plan Examination also brought into focus the Council's incoherent planning for the strategic sites (Wisley, Gosden Hill Farm, and Blackwell Farm). The council admits they need to have the A3 upgraded to make several of these workable; no substantive plans have been agreed with the Highways agency. It is only now that effort is being put into making the Strategic sites align with the rest of the borough and master planning. Several of these sites will provide housing for people who due to Infrastructure deficit will be attracted to working outside the borough e.g. Wisley, this will not support the sustainable communities and affordable housing the borough needs.

We also have a series of sites appended to existing settlements with little in the way of Infrastructure improvements (for example at Ash and Send).

Wasteful Projects

The Council, despite our objections, gave themselves planning permission for a "bridge to nowhere" replacing the existing footbridge between Bedford Road and the Walnut Tree

Close. This bridge will cost between £3 and £4 million, and we have argued (without success) that the rather dull design of the bridge and the downright dangerous design of the ramp and steps be reviewed, and the entire scheme deferred until the proposed master plan of the Bedford Wharf area is brought forward.

Also, this year we have seen the permanent closure of the temporary retail facility known as 'The Village' on a site which the Farmers Market has reported was completely dead when they had to temporarily relocate there during the High Street resurfacing works. That endeavour wasted £1m from beginning to end and exemplifies the piecemeal nature of these initiatives, and deflected attention from other matters such as advancing the regeneration of key parts of the town.]

We were initially pleased that the surface treatment of Tunsgate was being addressed. The end result falls well short of the high-quality public realm we had anticipated. Little thought was given to outdoor eating, seating and soft landscaping. The yard next to OKA should have been closed off to ensure a permanent vehicle-free environment. The process of doing the works was detrimental to traders in Tunsgate who were not offered any Business Rates reliefs by the Council during construction. Rainwater now courses down Tunsgate, missing most of the drains, and pours through the arch into the High Street. Having spent £800,000 on these works we expected better from the Council and improved oversight will be required as the Council looks to extend its resurfacing aspirations to Chapel Street, Castle Hill and Swan Lane.

Council Effectiveness

We do not dispute that many current councillors have put a lot of time and effort into their roles. We do question the effectiveness of and accountability for what has been done in our names.

The current council appears to lack the confidence to have proper discussion and engagement on planning issues, in recent times, we note some of the more questioning voices have been manoeuvred off key committees and, in several cases, have become independent councillors. This worries the Society as we need more and stronger voices on the Council. We

need to have Councillors with a greater courage of their convictions, who are not marginalised by decisions such as the reduction of the size of the Planning Committee - which we oppose.

May 2019

As we approach the elections, we would ask the good citizens of Guildford to challenge their candidates to make commitments about the town centre, infrastructure and planning, to express their clear views on democracy and scrutiny, and to say what they might have used the £7 - 8 million pounds on had they been on the Council in the current term.

We hope that more strong-minded people will put themselves forward, whether for parties or as independent candidates, to raise the level of debate and to lead our town and borough through that debate to regenerate our brownfield sites, to fix our failing infrastructure, preserve our precious countryside and to recalibrate our opaque local governance.

The Guildford Society will be asking all candidates their views on key planning issues as we approach the local election and will publish the results. We hope this will enable the electorate to carefully consider who deserves your vote next year, of whatever party or none. We, the Guildford Society, will need to work with whomever is elected to run the Council, and we look forward to brighter times ahead.

Julian Lyon

Chair, the Guildford Society