



Preserving and enhancing Guildford's residential heritage – a position paper by The Guildford Society

Overview

Guildford is a historical commercial centre and major commuter hub. Its housing stock comprises a blend of dwellings from medieval to contemporary which when combined with its proximity to London makes it a highly desirable location in which to live. With continued inward immigration to the South East and ambitious plans by the University and GBC to make the Borough a technological hub, Guildford faces a significant challenge to balance increased demand for residential accommodation with the need to conserve the character that makes it an attractive place to live.

Preserving the character of The Town by retaining its existing housing stock

A significant proportion of Guildford's historical housing stock has already been lost through poorly planned or insensitive development. The housing stock that remains makes a significant contribution to the character of The Town and includes what is regarded by some as a garden city (Onslow village), Edwardian mansions and Victorian terraces. The Society is committed to conserving The Town's existing housing stock and retaining this intrinsic part of Guildford's character.

A number of Guildford's districts already enjoy some protection through the more onerous planning regime that accompanies designation as a conservation area. However, there are a significant number of other residential areas of Guildford which the Society considers to be of community or architectural value but which do not enjoy this same level of protection.

To prevent isolated out of character development, the Society is generally against demolition of existing single dwellings, instead preferring developers to focus on modernisation or conversion within the existing fabric of a building in order to preserve its exterior and interior architecture and provide it with new life. Such development should ensure that architectural styles and materials match those of existing contemporary buildings with materials selected and construction performed in accordance with the principles of sustainable construction¹ and so as to ensure the new development achieves an Energy Performance Setting A rating. Further information is contained in the Society's position paper on Good Design.

An alternative development strategy of which there have been numerous examples is the practice of –sub-dividing existing residential plots and development of additional dwellings, increasing densities. This has an adverse impact on local community by increasing plot densities, introducing new and often clashing architectural styles and compromising access. The Society considers the green spaces provided by gardens to be an important part of the character of a site which are also to be conserved. The Society considers that owners have a duty to the society in which they live to retain the character of their area. The Society will oppose sub-division where it considers the resultant development will cause aesthetic harm to the locality.

Strengthening communities through high quality development

The Society is however supportive of new development that enables the Town to continue to thrive and flourish in the 21st century. The requirements for such new properties would

¹ Strategy for Sustainable Construction published by HM Government, June 2008.

ordinarily be set out in a comprehensive master plan for Guildford. But in the absence of such a plan, we would expect the characteristics of such developments to include:

- ▶ Being of a size and nature that meets the changing needs of The Town's demographics;
 - ▶ Being sensitive to and complimenting existing architectural styles prevalent in their locations;
 - ▶ Built at a plot density in keeping with other contemporary local developments;
 - ▶ Built according to best practice in sustainable construction; and
 - ▶ Creating a quality architectural legacy of benefit to current and future generations and that is of equal or greater architectural merit than any existing building being replaced.
- Further information can be found in the Society's position paper on Good Design.

To avoid unnecessary development of greenfield sites or the greenbelt, the Society believes new development should be sited within The Town whenever possible. This will rebuild a vital community in the heart of The Town, prevent destruction of other sites of value to residents and enable regeneration of existing industrial sites.

Further there has been a recent trend to convert retail premises for residential space. Providing such development takes place in accordance with the principles set out in this paper, the Society would be in favour providing that such conversion does not remove essential services from communities. With regard to Guildford's historic High Street, the Society is in favour of bringing space above shops into residential use as this helps conserve the fabric of these historic buildings. However the Society is opposed to conversion of street-level retail premises for residential accommodation as this would damage the character of this Guildford landmark.

Where residential development does take place, it is important that this is well planned and makes provision for the necessary infrastructure to create thriving, accessible and sustainable new communities. This includes good transportation links, schools, retail leisure and open spaces, the cost of which should be met by the developer. The Society does not consider "gated communities" where security fences and gates seek to isolate and separate specific developments from the communities in which they are located to be consistent with the creation of strong, sustainable communities. The Society is similarly opposed to the creation of gated environments around existing dwellings or groups of houses.

Importantly, the Society has a presumption that where existing residential sites are developed, due regard should be given to the character and utility of the urban environment in which the new development is sited. This will enable green spaces (including gardens) to be retained. Equally, this should not be seen as encouraging high-rise development as this would also change the character of The Town and damage views of its surrounding countryside and existing skyline.

While this paper is focused on The Town, the Society would apply similar criteria when considering proposed residential development in the surrounding villages.

September 2014