

## **Guildford Society Response to First consultation St Mary's Wharf (Debenhams Site)**

This is a vital site for the town and must be got right for future generations. It is a complex site being subject to flooding, near key heritage assets (Guildford Castle -Scheduled Monument, St Marys Church Grade-1, and St Nicholas Church Grade-11\*) and currently poorly linked to the rest of the town centre.

### **Q1 - Do you Support our Vision to create new places to live, shop, eat, and relax together with new open spaces to enjoy the riverside.**

The Society strongly endorses the creation of a new quarter for the town that respects the River Wey. The site is the most important site as you approach the town from the south and should be a key signifier for the town entrance.

### **Q2 - Do you agree that the opportunity to provide increased access to and connectivity by the creation of new through routes from the High Street and Millbrook should be prioritised**

The Society strongly agrees with providing proper access to the site and the Town Bridge to relink the high street to the west of the town. We support an examination of re-opening the pedestrian underpass, ideally in a widened form, to improve connectivity.

An opportunity might be to connect the underpass into a sunken public area by the river with steps leading out to the new development and Town Bridge.

The need to provide flood access may provide opportunities to integrate new paths into the site. – See Q11.2

### **Q3 - Do you support our ambition to create a new stretch of publicly accessible riverside walkway along with enhanced cycleway provision?**

The Society supports a riverside walk, but this must be done in the context of a proper strategy on Pedestrianisation and Cycleways across the town. A mixture of Cyclists and Pedestrians beside the waterside is not optimal and if cycling is to be encouraged it may be best to place the cycleway on Millbrook.

### **Q4 - Do you agree with our approach to carefully consider environmental sustainability as our proposals develop?**

We strongly support this and believe that the development should be an exemplar for Guildford and the surrounding area. There are a number of innovations that could be considered e.g. Use the Wey for heating and cooling.

It should be accepted that technology may evolve rapidly so there is a case for using centralised facilities to facilitate swapping of technology. Technologies such as air source heat pumps can be noisy and visually intrusive and maybe better as a centralised facility..

The development could build on sustainability to have an 'alternative energy centre' as part of its public realm to provide an educational attraction for the town.

We have argued that repurposing the existing building is an option. Although Native Land are proposing to rebuild, we hope that every effort is made to re-use material. The canal may also be an opportunity to transport bulk materials

**Q5 - Do you welcome our ambition to support and promote Guildford's existing arts and cultural destinations, and to seek to enhance community wellbeing?**

Strongly Support as we have previously proposed making part of the site a cultural centre [Debenhams is closing \(guildfordsociety.org.uk\)](http://guildfordsociety.org.uk).

We believe the site could be part of a cultural corridor running from the Museum via the Yvonne Arnaud up to the Academy of Music. We would encourage examination of:

- Building a bridge across to the Yvonne Arnaud – this could be a feature of the site and improve the River Wey Walk
- The new building(s) on the site could provide a setting for an external performance space
- Although Native Land are proposing retail on the ground floor there is a case to have areas devoted to the Arts maybe a gallery, rehearsal rooms (these are in short supply) etc. See Q11.3

**Q6 - Do you agree that a mix of new homes within a high-quality environment, including shops, restaurants and community spaces at lower levels would be appropriate for St Mary's Wharf?**

The Society supports the provision of a mixed-use site. We would also propose that the site should be designed to flexible for changing requirements over the years. Environmental considerations increasingly point to the repurposing of buildings rather than large scale redevelopment, the working life of buildings is likely to rise in future.

The design should consider that the ground floor is configured to be very flexible, to accommodate exhibition, performance, retail and food and beverage use in proportions that may vary over time. The Society also considers that part of the 1<sup>st</sup> Floor might be considered as a flexible space for commercial and/or dwelling space. If the ground floor is subject to flooding, there is also a case for having space on the 1<sup>st</sup> floor to hold critical facilities to allow the site to resume operation quickly

**Q7 - To what extent do you agree with the principle of redeveloping this important town centre site?**

Maybe in an ideal world Guildford would have taken the approach being adopted by Stockton on Tees [A different approach to Town planning \(guildfordsociety.org.uk\)](http://guildfordsociety.org.uk) and used the site as green space.

Land values preclude this approach so we are supportive of redevelopment, but it must be of the highest quality. See are comments on Q1

**Q8 - The existing Debenhams store is a large, single building which dominates the entire site. Do you support the idea of varying the number and height of new buildings to create better views through the site, more open space and greater public accessibility?**

The Society supports the concept of more open space and having greater public accessibility.

The Society is extremely concerned that Mass and the Height of any new development is appropriate.

Native Land need to show the options on height, numbers of buildings etc before agreeing to any statement on varying number of buildings and height.

We are aware that there is a complex trade-off between many factors including:

- Area of Site Developed
- Height
- Mass
- Flood Access Costs (More buildings will require more mitigation measures)
- Foundation Changes (We note Native Land would like to keep the existing Ground Floor Slab and Basement)
- Affordable Homes.

The proposals shown to date do not appear to have explored all the potential options.

The Council have now installed [Vu.City](#) which, as an organisation, you should be familiar with from your work in London. We request that options are modelled using this platform so Guildford Residents can fully understand the various options particularly how proposals will appear from:

- Street level key viewpoints in the town centre
- Viewed from key viewpoints around the town.
- Shading caused by the Building
- Architectural design in relation to existing buildings
- Flooding Impact

The view along the River is important, the view east west through the site may be less important, as it depends on the views opened up. Replicating the Guildford Gates through the site east west may provide a more interesting solution and allows for a lower height.

Options need to be fully explored to create the correct balance of Height and Mass

**Q9 - The extent of open space, access to the river and views through the site could be increased by building taller on part of the site. Would you support this if it was sensitive to the local context?**

Our answer to Q8 also refers to this issue.

The development must show respect to two of Guildford's key heritage buildings St Mary's Church, and The Castle. The ability to open up the site is therefore constrained by the need to limit the height in order to conserve the setting.

The Society currently believes any building taller than the current height would have to be of exceptional quality to respect the setting.

Building high may also lead to issues if it is desired to reuse the current foundations, with minimal changes.

**Q10 – Do you agree that the High Street would benefit from the creation of a newly invigorated destination on the Debenhams site, attracting more visitors to this part of the site.**

There needs to be a properly developed spatial strategy for the Town Centre. The Town Centre Masterplan is key to this.

How the St Marys Wharf is positioned vs. the North Street Redevelopment Site which are both planned to have an element of Retail and Public Space is vital. The Town Centre Master Plan also needs to consider how North Street – not the redeveloped site – fits.

Using St Marys Wharf to anchor a new quarter and area for Guildford could be more appropriate than straight retail, one to discuss with the council.

#### **Q11 – Further Comments**

1. We look forward to commenting on your proposals for meeting affordable housing obligations when they are published.
2. Flooding is a critical issue. There is an opportunity to provide some exciting options using bridges across Millbrook and the Wey to preserve access at times of flooding and enhance pedestrian access in this part of Guildford.
3. There are several facilities in Guildford that might be moved into the St Mary's Wharf site to provide a focal point and supplement Retail and Food and Beverage.
4. Car parking on site – there is the current Debenhams car park plus a basement area that was used for retail – you used to enter it by the Millbrook pedestrian underpass. It is not clear that the Basement can be joined to the existing Car Park without major structural work.