

## **Guildford Vision Group**

### **How it all started**

It's just over four years since a group of residents formed Guildford Vision Group (GVG) with GSoc's help. The founders of GVG were concerned that our town seemed rudderless and losing its appeal as a place in which to do business, work, visit and live.

Over the past 30 years or more there had been little or no substantial town centre development or infrastructure investment of any note. The infrastructure, especially the gyratory, was very poor while demands on it were steadily increasing.

### **Our town centre is at risk**

Cars and concrete hold sway rather than people. Buildings have turned their backs to the river. Where there is riverside space it has been given over to surface car parks. Pedestrians have a raw deal and cyclists have fared little better. The town centre remains dangerous for pedestrians, as recent fatal accidents have sadly confirmed. Air pollution in parts of the town centre is among the worst in the country.

The Council does not appear to have any coordinated plan to tackle this situation and its challenges. The town remains vulnerable to opportunistic, uncoordinated development that might frustrate broader ambitions to re-energise our town and to fashion a sustainable future for it.

### **Masterplan needed**

GVG lobbied for a comprehensive town centre Masterplan by consultants with the relevant skills and track record. Allies & Morrison were hired and in March of this year the Council formally approved their Masterplan but, crucially, did not adopt it. It's easy to understand why. Allies & Morrison worked to a Council brief. That brief, for example, did not include a comprehensive assessment of infrastructure needs. For example, there's recognition that the station might be usefully redeveloped to be more of an integrated transport hub (and the site of much needed housing, sympathetic to its setting) but no outline plan to achieve it.

### **Tackling the gyratory**

When it comes to the gyratory, the bane of our town, Allies & Morrison's two proposed options for re-organising it require respectively a 57% or 44% reduction in traffic through 'modal shift', ie to get us out of our cars. This would be achieved by more park & ride sites, better bus services and even, for example, shutting the Farnham Road Bridge, currently the only East/West link in the centre, to all but buses during the two rush hours each day. How about that!

We support modal shift in principal but we have to be realistic about its feasibility in a hilly gap town with little room to manoeuvre in terms of new routes.

### **GVG's six key goals**

From the outset GVG has set itself six key goals:

1. Wider pedestrianisation of the town centre
2. Exciting new public space and a reinvigorated riverside
3. Redirection of traffic away from the town centre

4. An integrated road and rail hub
5. More town centre housing
6. A new bridge for a better East-West link

These should be reflected in the adopted Masterplan for the town centre and, ideally, in the new Local Plan.

### **GVG's developing thinking**

Where have we got to? Well, we've got the Masterplan, we've certainly created a public discussion about many of the key issues associated with our six objectives, and we've developed our thinking on how the various elements of a reinvigorated town centre might fit together. You've helped with that by your feedback at our public meetings. We've commissioned reports from our own traffic and infrastructure consultants, as well as drawing extensively on our members' professional expertise and experience. Currently we've secured the help of a noted architecture practice to draw up plans to show how the town centre might look, with linking architecture and design detail.

### **Challenging the Council**

Why are we doing all this? It enables us to challenge the Council's own thinking and actions, where necessary. Much of what happens in Guildford remains uncoordinated, and more worryingly, unambitious.

Guildford is currently playing with a jigsaw comprised of pieces from different sets. The finished picture won't look pretty that way and, clearly, there will be great difficulty in making all the pieces fit together neatly.

All this should be out in the open but again, worryingly, the debate too often happens behind closed doors under the pretext of commercial confidence. Here Guildford makes something of a rod for its own back by being a dominant landowner in the centre as well as being the planning authority. Look at what's happening with the North St development. Have you been consulted on what you might like to see there and how it might fit with other development? We fear we'll be faced with a 'take it or leave it' choice, with tinkering only possible at the edges.

That's no way to approach major development these days. It has to be more collaborative if localism is to have any real meaning.

### **Push for a new East/West crossing**

Our big push at this time is to get support for a proper and comprehensive appraisal of a new East/West crossing linking York Road with Guildford Park Road. We are not trying to improve the lot for cars in the centre. We are simply trying to create the space for wider pedestrianisation of the town centre.

The key to success for the centre is to make the environment attractive for people. New and better public spaces. A better and more welcoming riverside experience alongside an improved retail offer that recognises the change in buying and browsing brought about by the advent of the digital age. This is what will encourage visitors and residents alike to dwell longer. It's the key to a successful centre.

### **How a new crossing will help**

So how does our new crossing across the river and railway help bring that about? It will move traffic

away from the centre. It will enable separation of cars from people. It will make Bridge Street and Onslow St safer and traffic-free, except for buses, taxis and mobility access. It will enable the lower ends of both North St and the High St to be linked together by great public space and amenities along the riverside (think Richmond).

The full economic benefits of the crossing need to be set down and modelled, as well as the bog standard traffic count and modelling. Interestingly, our crossing also only requires a 26% reduction in traffic when assessed using the criteria used for the Council's two scenarios. Again, the crossing is not just about cars and their routes, it's about people and their right to safe, pollution-free enjoyment of the centre. It's about creating the opportunity for imaginative and economically useful new development that will set Guildford down the path of a sustainable future.

### **Keeping in touch**

How can you keep in touch with what we're up to? Members of GSoc receive our newsletters and press releases as a matter of course. We've launched our revamped website at:

[www.guildfordvisiongroup.com](http://www.guildfordvisiongroup.com).

### **Our next public meeting**

Please look out for our next public meeting. It's likely to be in late January or early February 2017. It bodes well to be one of our more interesting events, with more detailed plans of how the town centre might look. We will be looking for your feedback so as to refine the plans. There may even be a model of how our crossing would work, providing we can find the funds from somewhere to get it produced (they're much cheaper now, thanks to 3D printing, but still a fair dollop of cash).

### **Do contact us**

We always like to hear from you, especially if you have relevant skills that could help us. And if you do want to set your thoughts down in an email, please send them to:

[action@guildfordvisiongroup.com](mailto:action@guildfordvisiongroup.com)