

Focus on Farnborough

A Presentation by Andrew Lloyd, Chief Executive of Rushmoor Borough Council

Warmly welcomed by Chairman Ted Gardner, Andrew began by providing us with a comprehensive overview of Farnborough which was interesting, informative and thought-provoking. And, crucially, he confirmed what The Farnborough Society has always believed that Farnborough is a town with enormous potential, a town on the brink of great change.

Andrew began by explaining that Rushmoor is a constantly changing borough that is fairly prosperous, though there are pockets of deprivation, Cherrywood ward being Farnborough's most deprived area. He spoke of Aldershot and Farnborough as discrete towns, each with an international reputation, Aldershot at the home of the British Army and Farnborough as the birthplace of British aviation, and of the enormous advantage this gives each.

It is because of Farnborough's aviation heritage that the town has become a centre for innovation and engineering, and attracted prestigious companies in the high-tech sector. Moreover, its location in the affluent Blackwater Valley, with its excellent travel links, makes Farnborough a good place for business, evidenced by the inward investment being attracted in spite of difficult economic conditions.

Andrew went on to talk about the population of Rushmoor, exploring age, ethnicity, health, employment, housing, long-term sickness/disability and education. A borough with a relatively young profile and generally healthy, Rushmoor has a wide variation between wards. Cherrywood has the greatest density of Nepalese immigrants at 18%. Andrew pointed out that, contrary to public perception, very few Nepalese are in social housing. Rushmoor has developed a range of strategies to overcome the disadvantages associated with deprivation measures to tackle smoking, obesity and lack of educational qualifications, for example.

Next, Andrew itemised some of the key factors influencing Farnborough's future, beginning with the airport, which is currently operating around 25,000 movements per year, set to increase to 50,000. The premier business airport in Europe, with numerous award-winning design features, it is the focus of a good deal of prestigious development: the 'honey-pot effect'. Although the borough has a diversified employment base, aviation is paramount, especially training, flight safety and innovation.

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The Heritage Area is set to become an important attraction with the introduction of heritage trails and a new determination to find uses for the listed buildings. One proposal is an art exhibition project inside one of the historic buildings, featuring some of the most important contemporary artists.

The town centre is being transformed, with the first phase of the Meads development completed; Sainsbury's, the Tilly Shilling and the Travelodge are all very successful. Regrettably, the second and third phases are on hold, but with the renovation of Queensmead nearing completion and construction of the cinema and two initial restaurants underway, along with a refurbishment of the Kingsmead multi-story car park, there is optimism that work will resume before long. Andrew stressed the need for caution; further development will be contingent on realistic expectation of occupancy.

The Rushmoor Plan is to be updated to present a unified and coherent vision for the Civic Quarter, more good quality shops, improved streets and places, plus an evening economy. Pedestrian routes and connectivity will be a prime consideration. Some of the issues to be addressed in the prospectus are: consultation; use of assets; reaching a wide audience; vision; achievements; projects; focus on delivery and development of a Master Plan.

Andrew then addressed some important topical issues, explaining the situation regarding the Tumbledown Dick, due to go before the Development Control Committee on 9th October, and Firgrove Parade, which apparently has been earmarked for development for at least ten years. The Redrow development is beginning its next phase, with some 470 homes already completed. The huge success of the Costco opening is causing concern that the store may adversely affect the town centre and the situation is being closely monitored. To meet a need for more prestigious office space in Farnborough, a large campus of 4 units is being built on spec. TAG have acquired the former Autodesk building and will incorporate it into the airport, and BMW are going to move into the former Nokia campus, providing jobs for 1200. Pyramid House/PC World is to be redeveloped, and Princes Mead, now owned by Lancashire Pension Fund, is scheduled for expansion.

The Wellesley Development, formerly known as the Aldershot Urban Extension, will bring a total of 3850 homes, ranging from one- to four-bedroom houses, with 35% affordable'. It is scheduled for completion in 2028, and will bring significant benefits to both Farnborough and Aldershot. The first 500 homes should be completed by 2015.

Andrew then outlined the electoral arrangements in Rushmoor, explaining how the boundary changes in 2012 reduced the Council to 39 members, representing 13 wards. He briefly touched on the arrangements for both the local and European elections in 2014.

Next, he spoke of the financial challenges Rushmoor has faced and how they have addressed them by 'systems thinking', partnership working, sharing, and by commissioning models, including the third sector, i.e. utilising voluntary and charity organisations. As a result, Rushmoor has made savings while maintaining services and is recognised as one of the most efficient authorities in the country.

Looking to the future, Andrew said the Council's priorities were: regeneration; education; social cohesion; renewal of neighbourhoods; organisational sustainability and the embedding of service improvements. To achieve these aims, there is a channel shift underway, to utilised digital technology. Also, the police's Safer Neighbourhoods Team and Hampshire County Council's Children's Department will move into the Council offices.

The Localism Act provides opportunities for local partnerships, social enterprise and the potential to think and act locally. It has unfortunately raised unrealistic expectations, but it also offers greater public participation.

Even though he had already spoken at great length, Andrew stayed to answer a wide range of questions. Topics included closing the skills gap; tackling deprivation; the co-location project; pedestrian crossing of the A325; bus shelters; the impact of the AUE on Lynchford Road/A331; Sun Park; the Civic Quarter; parking charges; the Town Centre Prospectus.

Judging by the feedback received, this was a very popular topic and Andrew's presentation greatly admired. It confirmed our conviction that these are exciting times for Farnborough and its enormous potential is finally being appreciated.