

Focus on Farnborough with Andrew Lloyd

As we've come to expect from our annual update from Rushmoor Borough Council's Chief Executive, this was an extremely stimulating and informative evening. We were especially grateful to Andrew for providing such a comprehensive presentation so soon after undergoing surgery; the blood-soaked dressings certainly added interest.

Andrew began with an overview of the national situation, to give some context in which to understand Rushmoor's position, focussing on the referendum and the possible impact of Brexit on the British economy.

He moved on to discuss the picture in the South East, second only to London as an economic powerhouse, where growth till 2020 is predicted to be 2.9%, exceeding the national average, but where issues such as an ageing population and high house prices are putting enormous pressure on resources.

Against this background, Rushmoor's priorities centre on protecting frontline services, reducing costs, keeping down council tax and investing in the future. However, uncertainty about the New Homes Bonus, business rates retention, Government grants and interest rates make budget planning very challenging.

The new Leadership of the Council has embarked on an ambitious programme of property acquisition, taking advantage of very low borrowing rates, both to raise income and to take a more proactive role in town centre regeneration. A number of key properties have recently been purchased in Aldershot that will give RBC much more flexibility to drive regeneration, and an urban planner is being commissioned to draw up a master plan for Aldershot town centre.

Andrew went on to explain RBC's financial position, drawing attention to the tiny amount of the total funds collected locally that is actually retained by the Council after the Government, Hampshire County Council, Hampshire Fire and Rescue and the Police have all taken their share, just £3.9m. He then gave a breakdown of RBC's total income against expenditure for 2016/17, which will necessitate further cuts of £3million over the next three years. This graphically illustrated an urgent need to generate more income.

With this very much in mind, the new Cabinet has agreed some key areas of focus:

- To devise a list of priorities
- To progress regeneration of both Aldershot and Farnborough town centres
- Encouraging community action and civic pride
- Improving educational attainment and skills
- Addressing the housing crisis, notably by improving private rental housing
- Improving the quality of the living environment, addressing especially parking problems

Next, Andrew turned to the vexed question of devolution, explaining the sequence of events which has led to the current difficult situation which has set formerly friendly local authorities against each other. The Solent proposal may be decided in the Autumn Statement, due at the end of November, but the Government could decide to set it aside for the time being in order to focus on Brexit. The Heart of Hampshire grouping has commissioned a survey to give a more comprehensive analysis of the various options available than was provided by HCC's survey, which focussed entirely on cost reduction.

One significant change that is on the way is to Rushmoor's biggest contract, which is up for renewal. At present, one company, Veolia, is contracted to cover refuse collection, street cleansing, grounds maintenance and toilet cleansing. However, these functions could be carried out by separate contractors, making the tendering process complex. Even so, the new contract will commence in 2017.



Focussing specifically on Farnborough, Andrew painted quite a positive picture, citing a strong determination by the new Cabinet to drive regeneration; high private sector confidence and good inward investment; strong business and community partnership; infrastructure improvements being planned; and Master Planners for the Civic Quarter redevelopment to be appointed shortly.



Change is already happening, with plenty more on the way:

- The Cabinet recently agreed a 2-year extension to RBC's 'step-in' rights to enable KPI to develop the next phase of Queensmead/The Meads development.
- The Vue cinema is trading satisfactorily, as is Prezzo, and two further restaurants are expected soon.
- Planning permission has been granted to re-clad the upper floors of the properties in Queensmead and replace to the canopies. A new owner recently acquired these properties, with a willingness to invest in improvement.
- The Council is working to improve the markets by reducing pitch rates and changing the Sunday market to either Friday or Saturday.
- The extension to Princes Mead, to accommodate Decathlon and Smyth's Toys, will open early in 2017.
- The first phase of the Firgrove Parade redevelopment is complete with the new Premier Inn and Beefeater Restaurant trading well.
- Following the controversial decision, at appeal, to grant planning permission for 62 flats at the Ham and Blackbird site, the developer has now sold it on.
- Similarly, the former Thompson building, for which planning permission was granted to provide 145 flats, has been sold on.
- Work is well under way at the Pyramid House/PC World site, to construct five units for the sale of bulky goods, with improved connectivity to the town centre.



- A speculative HQ building at Farnborough Business Park is now largely occupied by Time Inc and Fluor, both of whom hope to expand.
- A new commercial unit plus 12 residential units is under construction adjacent to RBS in Victoria Road.
- Abbey House has been refurbished to a very high standard by St Michael's Abbey, offering short-term office accommodation.

- Developers are in pre-application talks with the Planning Department about a substantial scheme redevelop Meudon House, the IBM offices, for residential use.
- A large new exhibition centre is to be built on the airfield, in time for the 2018 Air Show

Overall, the future looks promising, with every possibility of improvement to the prosperity of the borough. It is a time of innovation and creativity, with effective partnership working and collaboration across the borough and a real sense of excitement about what we can achieve together.

Although we didn't know it at the time, this was to be Andrew's final talk to The Farnborough Society; he has since announced his retirement. Right from its inception, Andrew has been a strong supporter of the society and we will certainly miss him.

We wish him a long and happy retirement.