

March 2019

PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

With Tim Mills

Tim, Director of Economy, Housing Strategy and Planning at Rushmoor Borough Council, stepped in at very short notice, when our scheduled speaker, Leo Docherty MP, was unavailable due to crucial Brexit votes in the Commons, to give an interesting and informative overview of the planning process and the important part the public can play in forming Farnborough's future.

He began by explaining the development of the newly adopted *Rushmoor Local Plan* and its implications, not least in keeping control of development local rather than in the hands of Government inspectors. Covering a wide range of issues including housing, employment, leisure, the airport, open space, town centres and heritage assets, the plan sets out what and where things should be built, as well as providing guidance on design.

The aim of the plan is the best possible quality of life for all Rushmoor's residents and its six-year development included three public consultations. Tim explained why RBC places great importance on such consultations, and why local residents should play their part:

- A greater focus on priorities identified by local communities
- More influence by the community over the provision of infrastructure (e.g. health facilities) to ensure that it meets local need
- A sense of ownership of the Plan by the community
- Better understanding of how policies are developed and linked to each other
- Cuts down on costly and unnecessary conflict

There are five consultation principles that RBC adheres to: equal opportunity; keeping the community informed, ensuring the community is actively involved, ensuring that community engagement is relevant; providing feedback.



Artist's Impression of The Meads Block 3

Tim went on to describe the planning process. The first step, for all applications, is for a site notice to be displayed and for neighbours to be advised by letter. Each week a list of recent applications appears on the RBC planning webpage. Anyone can comment, but comments must be relevant to planning matters, and all

relevant responses are taken into consideration.

Larger proposals require, before submission, community consultation by developers for: residential schemes over 100 units; employment and warehouse/distribution schemes over 10,000sq m; retail schemes over 5,000sq m; leisure schemes over 2,000sq m; all telecommunication development. This allows the views of the community to be considered early in the process and ensures that the community is fully involved in shaping and deciding development.

With regard to housing, national planning policy requires local planning authorities to have a clear understanding of housing need in their areas. The *Rushmoor Local Plan* identifies need for 7,850 new dwellings in Rushmoor between 2014 and 2032 (436 per annum), of which it is anticipated that 2,300 will be in Farnborough. The main development sites will be: the 'Civic Quarter' (700 homes); The Crescent (150 homes); Meudon House/117 Farnborough Road (380 homes).



The 'Civic Quarter'

The Local Plan includes policies on design, internal space standards and amenity space standards. It also lays down requirements for 'affordable' housing, though these targets are subject to the viability of the development. On sites of 11 dwellings or more, a minimum of 30% should be affordable. However, in the town centres this reduces to a minimum of 20%. RBC expects affordable homes to be accessible and adaptable to support the ageing

population and needs of residents with mobility problems. And a proportion of affordable homes should be built to accommodate wheelchair users, where local need is identified.

If a development is found to be unviable if it were to deliver its quota of affordable housing, as determined by the independent District Valuer, the developer may be granted permission to make a substantial financial contribution towards delivery of affordable housing elsewhere in the borough.

A big problem that confronts RBC with regard to planning is that the entire borough lies within the five-kilometre orbit of the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area, which means that all development must be mitigated with the provision of Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG). The idea is to deter people, especially dog-walkers, from visiting the Thames Basin Heaths SPA by providing high-quality parks locally, thus protecting the three ground-nesting birds that nest there, the Dartford warbler, the nightjar and the woodlark, that the SANG legislation aims to protect.



Artist's Impression of the Meudon House Development

It was the lack of SANG, and Natural England's refusal to support the Rushmoor Local Plan without it, that led the council to take the difficult decision to close the Southwood Golf Course for the creation of a county park. A planning application will go before the Development Management Committee shortly, to provide a car park in Kennels Lane and signage to explain the park's importance as SANG; the park will officially open in

March 2019

July or August 2019. The first phase will include a circular walking route at least 2.4k in length, which is a requisite of all SANG.

Long-term plans include releasing the Cove Brook from its concrete channel to create wetlands that will slow the flow and address the flooding problems the area occasionally experiences, improve water quality and increase diversity. A feasibility study is currently being undertaken with the Environment Agency to develop habitat creation.

Tim went on to give an overview of the redevelopment of Farnborough town centre, where the aim is to bring vitality through experiences in addition to housing, with a rich mix of retail, leisure, entertainment, cultural activity, tourism, restaurants and events. It is particularly important to create an evening economy.

Planning is very closely tied to the local economy, which is thriving. Farnborough's business



Farnborough International Exhibition and Conference Centre

park is so attractive to business that a new office building is being developed on spec, which demonstrates strong confidence in the town. The business park recently changed ownership and the new owners are developing plans to find community or tourist uses for their heritage buildings. Confidence is also seen in the successful new exhibition centre, built primarily for the biennial air show, but which is developing

strong non-air show business. The airport, too, goes from strength to strength, with work on the new Gulfstream maintenance facility underway, which will bring in excess of 400 new jobs to the area.

Tim ended his talk by telling us about the newly-formed Heart of Farnborough group, which will be working with RBC to help shape the future of the town. Its first meeting attracted some 70 local residents, and anyone interested in getting involved is welcome. Details can be found on the RBC website: www.rushmoor.gov.uk/heartoffarnborough.

Planning is probably the most important issue for any civic society and we hope that Tim's presentation has inspired members to get involved. Anyone interested in learning more should contact Len Amos: leonardamos57@yahoo.co.uk.