

Rushmoor Development Partnership Civic Quarter Consultation



Submission by The Farnborough Society

CREATE A COMMUNITY HEART

For TFS members, the keys to creating a community heart are a substantial multi-purpose green space and excellent access from all directions via all modes of transport. To successfully achieve the former, the green space should ideally be located adjacent to an indoor venue, to enable indoor/outdoor activities, not dependent on the weather. A rich, varied calendar of events should make this green heart of Farnborough an exciting destination, while thoughtful design should make it appeal to local residents for relaxation. To truly be the community heart, this area must become a popular meeting place and the natural venue for outdoor performance, celebrations and commemorations. A tiered green amphitheatre would add interest to the area.

The creation of a successful community heart will rely heavily on good access, by public transport, by bicycle, on foot, and especially for the disabled. Gateways into the development should be clearly defined and welcoming, especially for visitors arriving from further afield. This is particularly important with regard to the main gateway, for those arriving by public transport. Buses and taxis should be able to bring visitors as close as possible into an attractive hub area. Car parking should be convenient, with ample provision for families and the disabled.

Bus services need to improve dramatically, especially to service the evening economy. RBC should work closely with providers and HCC to make the case for more routes and more frequent timings, particularly in late evenings. A long-time strategy needs to be drawn up, so that services increase as development takes places.

Cycling and walking routes into and through the Civic Quarter should be convenient, attractive and safe, linking the Civic Quarter with the shopping areas. Ideally this would be shared space, generally pointing towards the green area, giving a sense of destination and purpose. Above all, the routes into and through the development must be safe and well-lit.

IMPROVE HEALTH & WELLBEING

Again, the green space is a key feature and hopefully it will prove possible to retain some of the mature trees both for their beauty and to attract birds. Plenty of seating should be provided so that visitors can enjoy this valuable piece of town centre green space, away from the traffic noise and pollution.

The arts play an important role in health and wellbeing, so exhibitions, street theatre, concerts, etc., should be central to planning the development.

It is vital that a new skate park is provided nearby because the current one is popular, well-used, and encourages children and young adults to exercise and socialise.

A water feature can either be soothing, for example a still reflection pond or canal, or stimulating, for example spouting water for children. Either contribute to health and wellbeing.

To encourage visitors to abandon their cars, walking and cycling must be privileged over driving, so all walking/cycling routes must be safe, attractive and convenient.

The new leisure centre provides an opportunity for fresh thinking about health and wellbeing. For example, U3A could offer exercise classes run by and for the elderly, to improve strength, balance and flexibility, invaluable for falls prevention. This might appeal to people who would never contemplate going to a gym or mixed ability class. Space could be made for a wide range of conventional and alternative therapies, for both able and disabled people, easing pressure on doctors' surgeries. An advice centre, perhaps manned by Citizens Advice Rushmoor, would be a valuable feature, together with a quiet room for confidential conversations and for anyone in distress. Since leisure centres are places where abused individuals can go without raising the suspicion of their abusers, this would be the ideal place to locate this service. Consideration should also be given to creating a dementia-friendly facility. Also, an indoor/outdoor café at the leisure centre would provide a valuable, and highly visible, meeting place, to create a vibrant street scene. Although the leisure centre is to be developed separately, it must be sympathetically incorporated into the whole scheme.

PROMOTE SUSTAINABILITY

The design and construction of the buildings should be of the highest quality, with inbuilt flexibility in the public areas to enable adaptation to changing needs. There should be a wide and changing range of reasons to visit, so effective town management will be especially important.

Indoor public spaces need to be designed so that they can easily be divided up to create a variety of different sized rooms, for different purposes. At the same time, consideration should be given to changing the retail policy laid out in the Local Plan, in light of the devastating effects on retail of Covid-19, to enable empty shops to be converted to community use, thus easing pressure to provide these facilities in the Civic Quarter.

To maintain strong community engagement, it is essential that affordable meeting rooms, with storage, are provided to replace those that were very well-used in the old community centre.

It is crucial that local residents play their part in creating and maintaining interesting and exciting activity. One way to guarantee engagement is to create events around local schools, colleges and established groups, to utilise their parents/caregivers, friends and supporters. Also, it would be useful to build a bank of volunteers, ready to step in whenever needed as marshals, setting up, cleaning-up, etc; RVS are well-placed to help with this.

A permanent entertainments license to cover all the key venues would make organising events much easier, particularly if the organisers are not RBC, as would a simplification of the health & safety procedures.

ENCOURAGE COMMUNITY

Rushmoor has a rich ethnic diversity which provides great scope for themed events. The Nepali community is already actively engaging in artistic and cultural events and are good organisers, so they are an obvious choice to bring life to the Civic Quarter. But what of our large Polish population, or residents from Zimbabwe, for example? Themed markets are one way of promoting our diversity but perhaps there's scope for films, music, dance, pop-up specialist shops and cafes.

A replacement library is essential, though not as a stand-alone facility as before. A library can be an anchor for a range of activities, such as cafés, craft studios, exhibitions and so on. Housing a charity for the disabled in the same building and sharing resources works particularly well, encouraging the mixing of disabled and non-disabled in a relaxed environment.

There is no war memorial in the town centre and providing one would facilitate regular commemoration services and parades in Farnborough, so that people begin to associate this area with coming together.

Thought should be given to making the area child-friendly, with water play, entertaining street art and interactive experiences, to encourage families to visit. Linkage of such activities to the library would be a good idea.

A landmark building would give the town centre a specific identity that residents can recognise and value.

CONNECT THE TOWN

The key to successful connectivity is a clear understanding of destinations and desire lines. Therefore, creating those destinations within the Civic Quarter is crucial. Strategically placed destinations will dictate how they should be connected. Linkage to the existing shopping areas, Queensmead, Kingsmead and Princes Mead needs a visual scheme of some sort to give a feel of continuity.

Special consideration is needed regarding connectivity at night when the malls are shut and visitors have to walk through unattractive and often poorly-lit service areas and car parks to get from one side of the town centre to the other. Approaching from Victoria Road is

particularly unsatisfactory in this regard. These matters need to be considered alongside plans for the Civic Quarter, so that attractive gateways are created.

Crossing Farnborough Road and Meudon Avenue needs careful thought. The tunnels beneath those roads are not popular, though they could be greatly improved with artwork. Generally, people prefer road crossings, but this might prove a challenge given the high volume of traffic, which of course will increase with the construction of the Civic Quarter housing. Realistically, we assume both tunnels and crossings will be included and hope that the entrances into the area at these crucial points is attractive and welcoming.

DEVELOP ARTS AND CULTURE

This development offers a unique opportunity to work with schools, colleges and community groups, which will give many local people a stake in it. One suggestion is to create an art project for schools and colleges to create mosaic panels telling the story of Farnborough, which could then be fitted into paving and onto walls, benches and planters. This would create a visible link between different parts of the town that is informative and fun.

The diversity of Rushmoor's population offers many opportunities for art and culture exhibitions and performances.

The proximity of Rushmoor Business Park, within easy walking distance, offers an opportunity for lunchtime events, such as mini-concerts and lectures. Farnborough Sixth Form College's music students regularly perform at lunchtime concerts at the Royal Garrison Church in Arborfield, as well as taking part in numerous public events, so precedents have already been established.

The town has a wealth of performers, from orchestra and brass band to rock band and soloist, who currently have nowhere to perform in the town centre. Following the closure of the Tumbledown Dick as a music venue, it is vital that a new music venue is included in this project. A bandstand would also be a welcome addition, providing a valuable focal point.

Rushmoor International offers opportunities to welcome guest participants from France, Germany, Poland, USA and Nepal to town centre events. Taking ideas from our twin towns, we could host festivals throughout the year if a supply of tables and benches were conveniently stored nearby, plus chalets for Christmas markets. Obereusel's annual wine festival, for example, provides an excellent model for successful town centre entertainment, drawing visitors from around the world.

Coming back to the need for flexible public spaces, one space should also be available from time to time for changing exhibitions. FAST and the BAE Heritage Collection might be interested in participating, as well as schools, collages, photographic groups and local artists. Different ethnic groups might also be interested in mounting exhibitions of their culture.

If space permits, the development should provide vistas with statues or other features of interest to draw visitors along.

FOOTFALL

To increase footfall, there must be compelling reasons for people to visit Farnborough town centre, not simply shopping but a wide range of experiences. Hence the repurposing of empty shop units needs to be considered seriously.

High quality markets of all kinds are popular and bring vibrancy to the town centre.

Footfall would increase significantly if Farnborough were to become known for something specific, a special day to celebrate Samuel Cody's first manned flight, for example, with contributions from FAST, schools and colleges. Aldershot has its Victoria Day and Farnborough needs something similar to increase civic pride.

Increased footfall will also depend on reliable and convenient bus service, secure parking for bicycles, and the provision of a 'changing places, lavatory for the disabled. Resumption of Shopmobility would also be beneficial. Above all, people need compelling reasons to visit the town centre. They are not there now so this scheme has to provide them. This calls for creative thinking, to make best use of resources while offering interesting and exciting experiences.

INCREASE PARTICIPATION

Key to increased participation is to generate a sense of ownership of the Civic Quarter. Its residents will hopefully provide a solid base of support but generating excitement should persuade others to help.

If events are to be organised by residents, the paperwork involved needs to be simplified as much as possible, licensing covered as stated earlier and H&S issues well supported.

A bank of volunteers should be compiled, perhaps with defined tasks such as marshalling, set-up and clean-up. Children should be encouraged to care for of their town centre, by helping with things like litter picks or planting. And when you get children involved, that brings parents in, too.

The same is true of events; if you lay on an exhibition or performance by children, you automatically bring in parents and grandparents. The Cabinet's work in developing strong links with local headteachers should prove useful in getting schools to participate.

Affordable rooms might make users kindly disposed towards helping with events, in addition to participation in exhibitions and performances.