

Blot on Epsom Downs horizon to grow no more?

11 February 2023



Ever wondered where are those tower-blocks on the west horizon from Epsom Downs? Our LDRS journalist reports on Woking Council’s consideration of the height of its buildings:

Plans to limit high-rise development in Woking is akin to slamming the stable door shut after the horse has bolted, Surrey County Council’s ex-head of planning has said. On Thursday February 2, Woking Borough Council’s executive committee agreed to press ahead with its goal to create a masterplan that would “provide a long-term vision” for the town centre’s skyline.

It continues work that began in 2021 that included a six-month consultation which garnered more than 850 responses from about 450 individuals and organisations. According to council documents, though, there remain several legal issues the borough must overcome before it adopts the full masterplan, including the fallout of the Planning Inspectorate decision on the Crown Place from December 3 2022 that granted planning permission three towers of 23, 25 and 28 storeys respectively.

The appeal decision has had a “clear implication” for the Masterplan, the report read, “in that it has changed the nature of the townscape” and that “as a minimum, the design principles for this site, including what prospective heights may be appropriate, will need reconsidering.”

Furthermore, the report states, during the public consultation phase, Woking Borough Council received representations from developers regarding the possibility of legal challenges if it were to be adopted. There is also the financial risk with officers identifying “significant” cost implications and suggesting the only way to “avoid unnecessary additional expense to the taxpayers purse” is not to proceed to adopt the Town Centre Masterplan in its current draft form.

This has caused the council to seek legal advice on how to proceed. Whether the masterplan can ever have the impact the council desires – fewer high rises in the town centre is debated.

Catriona Riddell is a former head of planning at Surrey County Council and current director at Catriona Riddell & Associates. She said: “Woking is a very tiny, very constrained borough with a lot of debate about how high up the developments go. Anywhere from Surrey you can see Woking. Some love it, some hate it. It’s very much Marmite.

“The Government is trying to help local authorities restrict the number of high rises but with Woking, it is going to be difficult as it already has so many. The local plan is in place in Woking and is up to date – that’s what developers will look at. Any supplementary planning won’t have the same status. Developers are used to playing this game. It’s going to be difficult for the council to change this.”

According to council papers, the masterplan will establish an “overarching vision for the town centre to enable designed, sustainable development, such as building new homes, cultivating a thriving retail and business environment and strengthening Woking’s cultural and leisure offer”.

The report said that the “ambition and need for a clear and robust plan to guide development in the town centre, to give certainty to developers wishing to invest, and provide officers with an effective tool to assess planning applications and defend decisions on appeal remains”.

This, Ms Riddell says, may be the best way for the authority to move forward. She added: ‘It will be about how to make the area a good place to live and work and the only way is through a masterplan so they are right to go ahead with it but it will be difficult with developers looking to build highrises. It will be very difficult for the council to argue its out of character. Woking has changed massively over the years, that horse has bolted.”

Will Cathedral repairs threaten Canadian WW1 memorial?

11 February 2023



Plans to build 124 homes on undeveloped woodland next to **Guildford Cathedral** will threaten a memorial to Canada’s First World War military sacrifice, a preservation society has warned. Guildford Cathedral needs to carry out an estimated £3.2million in repairs, but unlike other cathedrals in the UK, it says, has “never possessed endowments of any significance and has always struggled to fund repairs to the Grade II* listed building”.

Image: Grahame Larter

To solve the issue, the cathedral sold a parcel of land to developers which, it says, will “enable the endowment to be secured for the cathedral which is vital for its survival” and secure its long-term maintenance.

The issue, says the **Vimy Foundation**, which oversees the public historical resources and modern perspectives on Canada’s participation in the First World War, is that land is a memorial to the 650,000 Canadians and Newfoundlanders who fought in Europe during the First World War, 66,000 of whom lost their lives.

Writing to **Guildford Borough Council’s** planning committee, the foundation said: “This undeveloped wooded area was created on the initiative of **R.B. Bennet**, prime minister of Canada from 1930 to 1935, who lived near Guildford, to provide a place for reflection and remembrance of Canada’s contribution during the conflicts that shook the first half of the 20th century.”

They added: “While understanding the needs of the Guildford community, The Vimy Foundation wishes to reaffirm its commitment to the preservation of memorial sites honouring Canada’s fallen soldiers. In recognition of the bravery and sacrifice of these men and women, their memory must continue to be honoured. The Vimy Foundation calls on decision-makers, Guildford Cathedral, Guildford Borough Council and developers, to preserve the commemorative and memorial dimension of this site and will support initiatives in this direction.”

There are currently seven homes on the site and used by staff cathedral staff. It is designated as open space as part of the Cathedral land but earmarked for 100 homes within the council’s local plan.

A previous planning application to build 134 homes on the slopes of the cathedral was turned down, despite officer recommendations, by Guildford’s planning committee. Background papers to the application said it was due to the plans being “poor quality and out of character with the surrounding area”.

This led to the cathedral working with developers **Vivid** to carry out what it described as a “comprehensive review” that included “extensive work to address the reasons for refusal in the 2015 scheme”. The new plans would demolish the existing staff buildings to create 124 homes, 44 of which would be affordable. Cathedral staff would have use of 13 dwellings, with the remaining 111 consisting of 19 one bed units, 61 two-beds, 28 three-beds and three four-bed homes.

Matt O’Grady, chief operating officer at Guildford Cathedral, said: “The Charity Commission, the regulatory body responsible for these matters, was given the full details of the gift of land, including all associated historical correspondence. After a thorough assessment the commission approved schemes allowing the cathedral to sell the relevant land – allocated in Guildford’s Local Plan – for development. R Bennet will always be acknowledged as the generous donor who enabled land to be purchased from the Earl of Onslow.

“His contribution is commemorated in a ledger stone on the south elevation of the Cathedral and the protection of this is encapsulated in the Cathedral’s Grade II* listing and in the Care of Cathedrals Measure 2011. The Grade II* listed Guildford Cathedral doesn’t benefit from a large income in the same way as many English cathedrals; because it is relatively new, it doesn’t have any historic endowments. The sale of land to Vivid for new homes will safeguard the long-term future of the building.

“The income generated will be used to create an annual endowment that will provide for the long-term repair, maintenance, and improvement of the cathedral. The cathedral is proud of its community links and believes very strongly that it should play a part in contributing to new homes in Guildford.”

The latest neighbourhood consultation expired in January. A date has yet to be set for the matter to appear before committee.