

Business and the Economy

Businesses in Guildford pump approximately £2 billion into the economy every year and forecasts suggest that the number of people working in the borough is set to rise from 71,300 to 85,100 by 2010. Unemployment is at 0.9 per cent. The services sector dominates the local economy, fuelled by the decision to locate the regional development agency and the Government Office for the South East in Guildford. There is also a growing technology sector. These are the positives.

The borough also currently has half a million square feet of empty office space and some businesses are downsizing. The global economy has an impact and constantly changing circumstances call for flexibility.



Consultation produced mixed views

Emerging strongly from the consultation process was the need for more information and further discussion to seek to reconcile polarised views and establish a way forward that is broadly acceptable to the Community Plan partners, the public and the business community.

Public and business consultation revealed a clear consensus over:

- The need for more affordable housing.
- The need to address the transport infrastructure problems of the town.
- The value attributed to the countryside around Guildford and the need to provide support for farmers and horticulturalists, who manage large areas of it.

But there was also a lack of agreement over a number of key issues:

- The current state of Guildford's economy.
- Guildford's role in the region.
- The importance of having a successful local economy and its role in sustaining a high quality environment and in community development.
- Future use of unoccupied office space in a market and policy framework that favours housing development at present.
- The potential impact of an expanded university on housing and transport.
- The provision of additional retail floorspace in Guildford town centre.

The public were also concerned about:

- The need to employ people from the local area to reduce commuting.
- The loss of small shops and post offices throughout the borough.
- The loss of the Wednesday market at Slyfield.
- Key workers' pay to be in line with the cost of living.
- The need for more hotels, preferably budget.

Businesses added:

- The cost and supply of labour: businesses struggle to recruit and retain staff.
- Lack of affordable parking.
- Lack of development land for expanding businesses.

The economy

Guildford is feeling the effects of the weakening national economy, with a number of businesses undergoing re-structuring; approximately 15 per cent of total office stock in the borough is now vacant and some staff are being laid off.

Businesses are concerned, however, that the public perception is that the economy is still overheating.

The effect of a vibrant local economy on the community

Businesses stress that a strong local economy means fuller employment, less deprivation and more money for the local community through significant contributions to charities, community projects, the arts and leisure, for example Disability Challengers, Chase and the Guildford Philharmonic.

There is also more money for environmental improvements such as sponsored roundabout landscaping and town centre hanging baskets.

The business community is worried that the public view of business is influenced by the negative issues of traffic congestion and development rather than appreciating how a strong economy enhances community life.

Guildford as regional centre

Businesses view Guildford as a regional centre and see it as an advantage, while some sections of the public are sceptical and concerned. The decision to make Guildford the home of regional government, however, was not made locally, though the physical growth of the town can be controlled through local planning policies.

The economy and the environment

The public's concern that development pressures threaten the green belt and local heritage and cause increased traffic congestion worried the business community, which sees good job opportunities as an important reason for people to live in the borough. Businesses also operate initiatives to relieve pressure on roads, housing and the environment.

Empty office space

This issue provoked a polarised response:

- It is empty, surplus to requirement and should therefore be re-developed for housing, rather than land being taken from the green belt.
- It is empty because there is a national economic

downturn, which has led to similar vacancy rates across the South East. Once the economy starts to pick up the offices will fill up again.

The University of Surrey

With its local, regional and global influence, the University of Surrey and the Research Park injects over £450 million a year into the local economy. The university also provides one of the borough's park and ride sites – a permanent site is planned for Manor Farm – and provides on-campus housing for students.

The rural economy

There is unanimous recognition of the importance of the countryside. Points raised include:

- The difficulty in making money from farming and the implications that a decline in farming has for the rural landscape.
- The non-availability of broadband in large parts of rural areas and the impact this is having on rural-based businesses.
- The importance of farm diversification to the survival of farms in the borough and the constraints of planning and highways policies.
- The increasing burden of EU regulations.

Shopping

Everyone misses the small independent shops and notices the lack of a food store at the bottom of the High Street. But while some residents oppose the Friary extension, retailers point to the potential for extra space to reduce rents and make shops more accessible for independents.

Corporate responsibility

Businesses play a full role in community affairs through donations to charity and sponsorship, much of which is anonymous and undocumented.

Transport and housing

There was almost unanimous agreement that transport infrastructure needed improving and more affordable housing provided. The business perspective is:

- Affordable housing is needed to ensure that there is a balanced community and workforce in Guildford. Many businesses have experienced difficulties in recruiting staff at the lower and mid end of the pay scale, due to the cost of housing.
- Road congestion is incredibly costly to business, particularly due to the 'just-in-time' delivery practices now widely operated.