

The Portsmouth Society Planning Group

If you're a member of the Portsmouth Society, you're welcome to join our Planning Group. We usually meet once a month to look at what's happening across the city—new developments, planning applications, changes to listed buildings, and more.

Our main focus is the steady stream of planning proposals. We aim to protect what's best about Portsmouth while encouraging thoughtful design in new builds and renovations. That means promoting projects that respect the city's character, meet community needs, and fit well within their surroundings.

Our group brings together people who care deeply about Portsmouth's future—residents passionate about their local area, those keen to improve the city's overall look and feel, and professionals like architects, historians, and archaeologists who value its heritage and built environment.

Portsmouth is an island city with the highest population density outside London. That puts huge pressure on land use, especially as we try to meet national housing targets while preserving green spaces. Because of this, we focus on planning applications involving listed buildings or conservation areas—but we also weigh in on major city-wide projects.

Starting with our maritime heritage: **Southsea Castle** the nationally funded sea defences protect and enhance the setting of the Henrician castle and provide a wonderful 'Theatre of the Sea' promenade, enhanced by poet laureate Simon Armitage's sonnet and John Maine's new Marker sculpture. Central funding for the sea defences at North Portsea will protect the nationally important **Hilsea Lines** which defended the island from a landward attack. Levelling Up funding has enabled PCC to refurbish **Hilsea Lido**. We wish the project every success and hope it generates a steady income to support future restoration work. Thanks to our involvement, we're especially pleased that the fountains will be kept—albeit in a purely decorative role.

In the **Naval Dockyard** we approved non-invasive modifications to improve access to Boathouse No 7 and supported the redevelopment of Boathouse No 6 to allow for a new home for the Royal Marines Museum which will feature a multimedia experience showcasing the history of the Royal Marines. Until recently the Royal Marines Museum was housed in the **Royal Marines Officer's Mess Eastney Barracks**.

There is an application to convert it to a 5* hotel. Listed grade II 1865 Officer's Mess is part of the last large defensible barracks in the country and part of the best and most complete barracks of the post-Crimean war period. We recognised that re-use of this outstanding building was highly desirable. The initial application was widely criticised for attaching a glass lift to the main façade and for an amenity building appended to the rear facade. A resubmitted application addressed these concerns

and was passed in May 2025. It is now on the market with additional possible uses including educational (school), - care or retirement-(residential). **Fraser Range** was built in WW2 without planning approval in an emergency and at the time as temporary structures. This application seeks to redevelop and convert three existing structures and construct new builds to create 116 apartments and 18 houses. The developer needs to construct and maintain the site flood defences, but their cost is delaying the start of the project. We would advocate open space between the end of the urban fabric of Southsea and Fort Cumberland.

Moving to Southsea, we agreed the importance of redeveloping the now redundant school site of **St John's College** situated within Thomas Ellis Owen's garden suburb. We felt strongly that this provided an opportunity to remove later accretions to the school and improve the setting of the Owen villas. We had no alternative but to oppose the scheme for its poor-quality design, inappropriate scale, and overdevelopment. For the team it represented a clear departure from the Council's own stated policies and design guidance. We presented a comprehensive and well-argued deputation to the planning committee. However apart from minor design and planning condition tweaks the application was approved and work is under way. As with another brownfield institutional conversion, **St James Hospital** in Milton, we felt the spectre of a legal challenge, (the LPA cannot demonstrate a 5-year housing supply), weighed heavy. Despite strong opposition the development as high end housing was approved on appeal.

On Southsea seafront we commented on the **Royal Beach Hotel** plans to convert to apartments which involved the addition of an extra storey and then replacing the ubiquitous mansard roof. We commented on the need to replace historic details such as reinstating the Juliette balconies. Planning permission was sought for a multiuse conversion for the **Knight & Lee** department store building. It was subsequently listed to protect the central staircase. A second application was granted permission in 2022. The detailed planning conditions have yet to be met and there has been visibly little progress on the site. There is a happier outcome on the opposite corner where the former Debenhams department **Handley's Corner** will soon complete and provide 98 apartments with 6 ground floor retail units.

In the city centre the **Debenhams** site along with smaller shops on the south side of Arundel Street sit empty. Together with the car park site on Station Street '**Jubilee Place**' will deliver 4 replacement buildings of 5, 16, 24 and up to 36 storeys with ground floor retail units delivering 569 apartments plus 3,600 sqm of commercial office space and gym and 300 sqm of community space. At this outline stage we critiqued the design against the city council's Tall Buildings SPD, focusing on the landmark tower block 145m tall. For the full application we would want to see the impact of the tower from various viewpoints. We felt for such an important landmark building it had no resonance with the city's maritime heritage. In response to **No 1 The Goods Yard on the Matalan site**, we were suitably impressed at pre-application by the office design for a four-story, 86,000 sq ft office building. The £45 million project was intended to house 1,250 HMRC employees.

It's disappointing that the government has cancelled the contract and the company are exploring alternative arrangements for the site. In **Somers Town, the former Horatio and Leamington Towers** were demolished. We were impressed by the inclusivity of the consultation. To meet the high expectations the low-rise development being funded by one tall tower is an interesting approach. We suggested that an extra floor on all the low-rise blocks and 6 or 8 less stories on the tower would make for a more cohesive and saleable design, and that the facings require more variety.

The Society would like the City to show real leadership in setting standards, and adding solar photo-voltaic panels later is not the example needed. As a planning condition the proposed public realm design which we commend should be delivered in its entirety. We also support PCC's plans to build a new **Leisure Centre** in Bransbury Park comprising a 4-lane pool, doctor's surgery, and fitness suite. We offered expert advice on the design and on the building's sustainability credentials. We were pleased to see that the re-submitted design achieved a BREAM 'excellent' rating.

Many of the buildings being converted or demolished were themselves only built in the aftermath of WW 2. Added to the list of losses the landmark **News Building** on the A3 into Portsmouth. We along with the Twentieth Century society and local residents objected to its demolition using the loophole in Permitted Development.

A last-minute plea to list was rejected and without statutory protection its fate was sealed and even its iconic façade was removed to make way for a bus depot. The University's Nuffield Building of the late 1940's was a casualty of their emerging master plan.

City planning can be enhanced by greater engagement with civic societies and greater involvement from their members – we encourage everyone to consider joining us.