

Chairman's Address to the Leatherhead Residents' Association

21st October 2024 AGM

-

Welcome to all of you at the LRA's 2024 AGM. I should just remind you that this AGM is in respect of the LRA's financial year January- December 2023. However so as not to dwell on matters which may have since been overtaken by events, I shall include some commentary on progress within 2024 .

Dealing firstly with Planning matters, there were two big issues affecting our Town, one being the Draft Local Plan and one being Transform Leatherhead.

As regards the Draft Local Plan, 2023 started on an optimistic note with the announcement by Mr Gove that he intended to consult on a revision to housing targets for each District that would afford more flexibility as to actual provision, where local limitations prevented target achievement. In light of this our Council asked the Inspector to pause her consideration of our Draft Plan and she was not asked to start again until early this year. We have now heard that the Inspector has approved the plan, subject to some minor modifications. . Our Council considers whether to adopt the Plan on the 15th October. Unfortunately, the matter does not end there, as the new Government is consulting on revised Policies, which might mean that the housing targets for our District need to be revised upwards to as much as double those set in the new Plan.

As regards Transform Leatherhead, our Council appointed Kier as their development partner in 2022 and during 2023 contractual negotiations were concluded and Kier started work on formulating their proposals. The result of these deliberations was made public earlier this year, when outline proposals for both The Swan Centre and Bull Hill were published and made the subject of a major public consultation exercise. It has been announced that over 1900 representations were received, and it would appear that the majority were ambivalent as to the proposals for the Swan Centre, but strongly against those for Bull Hill. How the Development Partnership proceeds from here remains to be seen.

Lesser, but still important because using a Green Belt site on Headley Road, just east of its junction with the By-pass . Local residents and the LRA spoke against the proposal at an Inspector's Inquiry that took place in September 2023 and the refusal was issued in December.

Turning now to the general state of our Town there were some positives and negatives. On the negative side the Town saw the closure of most of its bank branches, with only the Nationwide remaining, albeit now with a newly approved ATM. The old Building Supplies shop at the top of the High Street remained unoccupied and looking very unloved. Despite the best efforts of Cllr Vyvyan-Robinson and the LRA the Plough Roundabout planting scheme proved too complicated a nut to crack, although a revised scheme is now under consideration. By contrast there were a number of positives with the ex Santander unit at the bottom of the High Street being refurbished and apparently to be occupied. The Community Hub on the Kingston Road had a major refresh and two of their leadership team (Eddie Mcardle and Bill Donnelly) continue to push for better training opportunities for many of the young people of North Leatherhead. Our Library was provided with a wider range of services and following vigorous opposition to closure, the Station ticket office will remain. Finally, and perhaps either positive or negative depending on your personal tastes, the planters in the High Street were renewed!

On the social front, Arts Alive had a very successful programme in 2023, which I was very pleased to support. A similar programme is on hand for 2024. However, the most spectacular event of last year was, of course, the Coronation on 6 May. So, the time period just before was spent trying to organise fun activities for Mole Valley residents to celebrate this. There was dancing and music in the High Street, plus a really amusing Dog Show – amusing because of the categories their owners chose for them! E.g. “Most like the Owner,” or “Best Treat Catcher.” The LRA did offer to help in these events, but I seem to remember that the most useful thing we did was to offer to help clear up afterwards! The event was shown on a large screen in the Abraham Dixon Hall and this coupled with refreshments, drinks and conversation with neighbours made for a very memorable day.

During the AGM last year four more volunteers came forward to help with the running of our LRA: Tony Russell and Hilary Porter offered their services as Directors and very grateful we have all been for their input. Tony is good at spotting problems with the roads and keeps an eye on any future plans for our Doctors’ surgeries, while Hilary picks up the latest regarding any changes for our Town and is particularly vigilant over aspects which are likely to make life very difficult for the disabled.

Of our other two volunteers, Carol Webster has kindly taken over the management of our website. Our other volunteer is Anna Graham and she it was who alerted me to the Planning Application from McDonalds which did not appear in a recognizable format. Having been made aware of it we did object, but sadly permission was granted.

In conclusion I feel that both the Town and the LRA are at something of a crossroads. Having finally got a valid Local Plan with a housing element

that whilst not to everyone's liking ,is at least manageable ,what will the Governments review mean for that Plan ? And if public consultation is to mean anything ,having had their proposals so comprehensively rejected by Leatherhead Residents , where do the Leret Partnership go now with Transform Leatherhead ? Finally ,and admittedly after a number of cries of "Wolf" , I will be resigning as Chairman in April 2025 and if the LRA is to continue and prosper a new Chairman must be found.