



Minutes of Emergency Meeting in respect of Planning Application No. MO/2025/02695

re Bull Hill & Swan Centre, Leatherhead

Wednesday 17th December 2025 at 7.30pm at the Methodist Church, Church Road, Leatherhead

1. Present: Members and guests = 74, Local Councillors = 2, Total = 76.

2. Apologies received from: None recorded.

3. Agenda: Planning Application number MO/2025/02695 only

4. Chairmans Introduction

Chairman Timothy Caffell welcomed all to the meeting and introduced LRA Director Martyn Williams who would conduct the meeting.

5. Introduction

Martyn Williams (MW) confirmed that this meeting would deal with nothing other than the 'Transform Leatherhead' Planning Application in respect of Bull Hill and the Swan Centre. This application comprises some 200 documents (some more than 50 pages in length) so it will be impossible to deal with anything other than broad principles.

MW stated that he will describe each proposal in outline terms. He will also explain his understanding of the logic behind many of the Applicant's (Leret) decisions and his own views on those decisions. Attendees are encouraged to ask questions as they occur with the objective that each leaves the meeting with a clearer idea of the pros and cons of each project and the LRA leave with a clear understanding of Members views.

The Planning Application was lodged by the Leret Partnership (a joint venture vehicle comprising Mole Valley District Council (MVDC) and national property developer Kier) to cover the proposed remodelling of the Swan Centre and the complete development of the 'island' site within the Town's ring-road, known as Bull Hill.

The Application was published on the 2nd December 2025, with an initial cut-off date for representations of 6th January 2026. However following complaints about this period straddling the Christmas/New Year holiday, this has been **extended to 14th January 2026**.

6.Process

MW said his first comment on the Application relates to two issues of "process".

Firstly, that this very significant application, that fundamentally changes the nature of the Town itself, is in respect of two properties that are both owned by MVDC and have been promoted for development by MVDC for many years. Yet the Application is to be assessed by the MVDC Planning Department, and the decision as to whether or not to grant consent is to be made by the MVDC Development Management Committee. The MVDC Head of Planning has stated that the entire consideration of, and decision in respect of, the Application will be scrupulously impartial. However, MW questioned whether the clear conflicts of interest do not demand consideration by a third party?

The second concern is that this Application was lodged at a time which both parties involved should have known would not permit publication until early December. Therefore, one of the biggest planning applications in Leatherhead's history is published in the run-up to the Christmas / New Year holiday. MW said his view is that the application should have been delayed until after the holiday period, to give the public a realistic and uninterrupted period to assess this most complex matter.

Q&A 1-is it not relatively common for council's to grant themselves consent on land they own, for example locally this was done at Claire and James House .MW responded that that is true and may mean that while the argument is valid, in practice the process may not be able to be contested.

Q&A 2-if consent is granted could it be contested by judicial review. An attendee replied yes, but such a review is extremely expensive to carry out.

Q&A 3-some felt that having to review extensive documents and make Representations on-line puts those without IT skills at a disadvantage. MW replied that it is thought that hard-copy documents are likely to be available for review and Representations can be made by letter.

Q&A 4-is it essential that Representations are made by 14/01? MW replied this is not essential as they will apparently be considered up to the time that a report is being prepared for the Development Management Committee. However, delay in submitting representations may lead to overlooking to do so, and if attendees have views it is essential that they are submitted timeously (we suggest within a week or two of January 14th).

7. The Swan Centre

MW said that under the remodelling proposals within the Application, much of the Centre changes little. The principal works involve the demolition of the first-floor offices, known as Leret House, the roof over the main entrance is cut back to create a small open square and the shops either side are rebuilt to provide new units with first floor accommodation, which it is anticipated will be let to bar/restaurant operators. A new 3-screen cinema with 239 seats is built on the first-floor deck, with new lift access from the mall, plus improvements are made to the rear entrance from Leret Way. Cosmetic improvements are made to shop fronts and other internal finishes. MW's assessment of the pros and cons are:

Con's: there is no increase in retail units (which is what many want) but there are new restaurants (which many say Leatherhead has enough of already)! The financial viability of cinemas in general is questionable, plus the cinema might adversely impact the viability of the Theatre. Construction is likely to be very disruptive to both the Centre and the High Street and the cost of £12m necessitates increased subsidy from and hence development on the Bull Hill site.

Pro's: The cinema and restaurants may add vitality to the Town Centre, particularly in evenings and the overall appearance of the Town should be relatively unaffected.

Verdict: it is not the retail that residents wanted, it is expensive and adds development pressure on Bull Hill and it will be disruptive in the short term. However, once completed it may add vitality without despoiling the Town.

Q&A 1- It was noted that all 150 dwellings were now removed from this part of the application. MW replied that he had been advised that Leret had concluded that building these on top of the existing structure and providing access and service facilities all presented very considerable problems. MW thought

this was probably true and in his opinion the drawings he had seen of alternative ways of providing housing units above the Swan Centre were all extremely unattractive.

Q&A 2-A view was given that the lack of Leatherhead town centre vitality in the evenings is due to limited parking facilities. MW replied that in his experience it was always relatively easy to park in the Swan Centre multi-storey in the evenings.

Q&A 3- A comment was made that providing a new cinema is pointless, when a cinema already exists within the Theatre. MW responded that this is certainly arguable, but it is true that the Theatre is not an ideal cinema as it comprises a very large single auditorium and does not apparently have the ability to show the very latest releases. A small multi-screen cinema with associated food and beverage units, both of which will appeal to younger audiences, is an accepted property industry alternative to new shops, for which there is little retailer demand.

Q&A 4-Why are Leret not making the remodelled Swan Centre fully enclosed with doors and a fully enclosing roof? MW responded that he believes one reason at least may be because so doing would considerably increase the required fire precautions including self-activating smoke extract systems, which would add substantially to costs.

Q&A 5-The newly created square at the entrance to the Centre will be pleasant enough in summer, but in winter wont it be subject to whatever adverse weather conditions may exist at the time? MW responded that in his view yes it would. He said there had been a suggestion that it be partly covered by some form of canopy, but this would undoubtedly create fire risk and other complications and so had clearly not been pursued by Leret.

8. Bull Hill

MW stated that this part of the Application is, in his opinion, far more controversial than the Swan Centre part. Referring to the plan of the proposal he pointed out that it encompasses the entire "island" site between Bull Hill and the railway line and between Station Road and Randalls Road. Therefore, the Town's central area park (including some existing buildings and surface parking) is fully developed, albeit to include a smaller replacement park. The development includes 480 residential units, ancillary and commercial space, circa 10,000 sq. m. of offices and a 519-space multi-storey car park. To accommodate this much floor area, building heights range between 6 and 12 storeys, significantly greater than the town's existing average of between 3 and 4 storeys.

There was then a selection of slides showing artists impressions from various viewpoints including looking up Bull Hill, along Waterway Road, the proposed Station Square and a high-level view looking west across the site. These all showed that the over-riding issues are the volume of proposed floor space and the resultant height of the proposed buildings compared to the prevailing heights in the Town.

MW said that the excessive building heights are primarily caused by the 150-dwelling allocation to the Swan Centre that is not now proposed, being cross-posted to Bull Hill. MVDC claim this is permitted on the basis that both sites are owned by the same party and are included in the same planning application. But MW queried if this can really be the case. Supposing the Swan Centre had an allocation of 500 units? Could all these be cross-posted using the same logic? Surely not! Leret have also chosen to include a proposed office building of 10,000 sq. m. when one of say half that size is just as likely to attract a tenant.

Building heights on Bull Hill are specifically addressed in the Local Plan where it states that the developer of this site shall "create a built form which is notable, but which integrates well into the character and existing townscape of Leatherhead. Development that is proposed to be above the existing prevailing storey height will need to be justified by a taller buildings study". This precaution was deemed necessary by the Planning Inspector during the Local Plan Public Inquiry when only 300 units of up to circa 7 storeys was being

considered for Bull Hill. Yet the “taller buildings study” produced by Leret’s expert now finds that 480 units in buildings ranging from 6-12 storeys are acceptable! The conclusions reached appear to prioritise scheme justification over a balanced assessment of whether the proposed heights integrate appropriately with the established Townscape of Leatherhead.

MW said that in his view the slides robustly demonstrate that the proposals do not remotely “integrate well into the character and existing townscape of Leatherhead” and therefore do not meet the test explicitly set out in the Local Plan that any development proposals must meet.

MW said his assessment of the Pro’s and Con’s of the Bull Hill proposals are as follows:-

Con’s: Loss of the existing park. The height and scale of the replacement development is completely out of character with the existing townscape of Leatherhead and there is likely to be considerable disruption during the phased construction period of 8 years (2027-2035). Despite official assurances to the contrary, it seems likely that the already congested one-way system and associated feeder roads around the site will become significantly more congested.

Pro’s: It provides the subsidy to finance work on the Swan Centre. It provides a significant volume of new housing and it may attract a major office employer, which could result in an up-lift in town centre consumer expenditure and vitality.

Verdict: Whilst the land was included as a development site in the Local Plan, **the major concern as regards the current proposals is the incompatibility of this proposal in relation to the existing nature of the Town. There is just too much floor space in buildings that are too tall. A more restrained scheme could meet the objectives of development, yet blend into the existing town-scape much more harmoniously than does the current proposal.**

Q&A 1- The amount of car parking to be provided for the residential element was raised, with 288 allocated to dwellings being considered unlikely to be enough. MW replied that this is in accordance with the Council’s standard of 0.6 spaces per unit. Whether this is adequate or not is debateable.

Q&A 2- A view was expressed from the floor that MW was behaving in an almost apologetic and supportive manner towards this Application. MW replied that, as originally indicated, he was attempting to provide information on every aspect of each issue, thereby allowing the attendees to reach their own conclusions.

Q&A 3- Of the 480 domestic dwellings, how much is apportioned to affordable housing? *MW said he thought the number is about 80.*

Q&A 4- What community facilities are included within this application (i.e. additional Doctors; Dentists; etc.)? MW said the principal facility currently being discussed is a possible new doctor’s surgery.

Q&A 5- If the office block doesn’t get built, could this be used for additional dwellings? MW replied that in his opinion the office block would only be built if it was subject to all or most being let off plan. If not built its site might be converted to residential use, but this would probably require a new planning consent.

Q&A 6-the view was expressed from the floor that the new Park surrounded by blocks of flats could become an unwelcoming route to/from the station when it is dark Also many do not like using multi-storey car parks after dark. A number of attendees agreed.

Q&A 7- the view was expressed that MVDC are ‘Dorking-centric’ and clearly using Leatherhead to fund improvements to Dorking e.g the £18m to be spent refurbishing Dorking Halls. Attendees were advised to include this in their Representations.

Q&A 8- A further point was made to the effect that multiple sites were considered across Mole Valley for house building, yet a very high proportion of the total housing target had been concentrated in Leatherhead. Another example of our Dorking-centric Council! There was significant support for this assertion.

Q&A 9- It was additionally pointed out that 6 MVDC Councillors represent the different Wards of Leatherhead and it was suggested to attendees that all 6 are copied into Representations. A question was asked as to what the Councillors addresses are and it was advised that this information is available on the MVDC website.

Q&A 10- Has consideration been given to employing a dedicated planning barrister to present objections to the Application? A Representative of Save Bull Hill replied that they have commissioned legal advice and await an initial report. The Representative also sought support for Save Bull Hill from those of the attendees who had not already offered their support.

Q&A 11- Concerns were raised in respect of increased traffic congestion and its adverse impact on air quality in the Bull Hill area, particularly in light of the passage of a new law on the subject through Parliament (Ella's Law). MW replied that like many subjects this issue had been addressed by a specialist report which had concluded that any adverse impact is likely to be minor. It was suggested that writing to our MP on the subject should be considered (email address: helen.maguire.mp@parliament.uk)

9. Conclusion: MW suggested to attendees that it is now for each to consider their views on the Application and if they wish to lodge any comments, do so by writing to the Planning Department, ideally before the cut-off date of 14th January, but otherwise within a week or two thereafter. Please ensure you quote the Application number of MO/2025/02695 . This is the last chance for Residents to exert any influence before a decision on the Application is made !!

Finally, MW announced as a post-script to the evening that a letter from Surrey Council has just been put on the Application document schedule saying that the Application cannot be supported at present as there is insufficient information as to the proposed solutions to surface water flooding. Official recognition for all those residents who have for so long complained about this serious issue on Randalls Road !

10.The Chairman closed the meeting at 9.55 p.m.by thanking all for their excellent input and participation.

For Information-

Address Representations to
Ms S. Munnis
The Planning Department
Mole Valley District Council
9 Reigate Road
Dorking RH4 1SJ

Email-sherelle.munnis@molevalley.gov.uk

Leatherhead Councillor email addresses-

The email convention is Councillor.surname@molevalley.gov.uk

The Councillors are Ben Wall, Benjamin Wear, Keira Vyvyan-Robinson, Bridget Kendrick, Gareth Parsons and Joanna Slater.