

Report on a meeting organised by CPRE on “Localism.”

On Saturday, 24 March, CPRE organized a morning seminar on “Localism” or “Neighbourhood Planning.” There were 3 main speakers, Mr. Brian Lloyd, a senior planner in “Protect Kent,” Mrs Julia Dawe, an independent Planning Adviser, and Mr. Trevor Sokell, Chairman of “Bookham Vanguard.” Five members of the LRA committee attended.

Mr. Lloyd emphasized that all Local Plans and Core Strategies remained valid. He explained that these are, in fact, just a collection of reports looking at various angles of a particular part of the core plan. He said that it was at this stage, at the report stage, that local people need to be involved putting forward their own ideas and reactions. My personal reaction to this is that we already do this in conjunction with Mole Valley.

The next speaker, Mrs. Dawe, elaborated, saying that provided a plan drawn up by residents was consistent with National Policy, was justified, effective and positive, then it was perfectly legitimate and could be helped on its way by professional knowledge from the Local Authority.

The last speaker, Mr. Sokell, said that Bookham Vanguard had managed to recruit 50 active volunteers aged 35-70, initially to get Bookham Vision launched. By dint of much footwork and knocking on doors they arrived at a village “wish list.” At this point the Government allowed the group to be part of the Localism pilot project and they renamed themselves “Bookham Vanguard.” In a way, they are more like a Shadow Planning Department and will now have to submit their ideas to normal planning criteria and deal with legal compliance requirements. I did not see Leatherhead moving in this direction.

However, we also learned that if there already exists a Parish or Town Council, then it is they who are responsible for drawing up a Neighbourhood plan. No area can have “rival” groups operating!

However, on a much more positive note, news has just reached me of a slightly different Government initiative, that of the High Street Review, also known as the Mary Portas Review. In this, the Govt. wants to see hundreds of Town Teams working to promote good design in their own High Streets. They are even going to run a high profile campaign to get people involved in the development of High Street Neighbourhood plans. In a way, the “Town Team” would be our Chamber of Commerce, but in conjunction with other sorts of groups as well. There is a £1,000,000 available for bidding next year. Even if we, Leatherhead, do not bid for or even get chosen as a pilot project, there will be plenty of ideas to sift through for our own town.

Caroline Brown. (Planning Committee Chairman).