



Response of the LRA to MV's draft of its long term economic vision.

6 March 2018

Q1-Do you agree with the long-term economic vision ?

A-Only to a degree !

As your document states, Mole Valley is a happy combination of an extremely attractive place to live, (ranked 15th in England) and a highly productive economy, (ranked 7th in England). It is attractive because it comprises affluent commuter villages (Ashted, Bookham and Fetcham), small market towns (Leatherhead and Dorking) and small villages in protected countryside (largely the area to the south of Dorking). It is attractive because it does NOT contain very much in the way of business parks, industrial estates, hundreds of high-rise flats and numerous in-town office developments. Many of the District's residents may have to commute substantial distances to work in areas that have all these, but they choose not to live in such areas!

Notwithstanding the obvious connection between the District's relatively un-commercialised nature and its attractiveness as a place to live, you, as a council are proposing to pursue a growth policy that is so radical that it would result in a fundamental change to the character of the District: e.g. that Leatherhead should have a Science & Research park, that the District's towns should accommodate new central area office developments and even that part of the District should be designated as an Enterprise Zone. Hopefully, the chance of the Government agreeing to forego rates and corporation tax income and relax planning controls in one of the most affluent districts in the Country is remote, but that you should suggest it makes clear the extent of the change you wish to bring about.

Of course most of the objectives outlined in your document are laudable to some degree and we would be wholly supportive of them. However it is the extent to which you seem intent on pursuing them that causes us concern. We do not think the District's residents want Mole Valley to end up as just another motorway business park location like Slough, Reading or Crawley.

The irony of the situation is that, by contrast with the grandiose plans contained in the document, the Council's day to day management of the District's economy appears, in many regards, to hinder, not help, economic well-being. If the Council can think of helping incoming businesses that it favours with rate relief, as is mooted in the report, why not help existing businesses that have been crying out for similar treatment for years? If all agree that car parking is the key to the success of our towns, why has provision not increased for

years and why has the Council recently decided to put charges up, rather than down. If everyone agrees that the road systems of Dorking and Leatherhead have not been fit for purpose for years, why has something not been done about them before now (we know that highways are a County responsibility, but the District Council could have helped more to bring change about)?

Q2-Do you agree with the 6 strategic priorities ?

A-Only to a degree.

It must be right to retain existing businesses, where this is practical. But it must be that this is not always the case. It must be right that a good business environment is created, but not if that is to the detriment of the rest of the environment. Attracting “skilled people” can be useful, but inward migration imposes considerable strains on local housing and services provision. At a time when these cannot cope with the existing population, importing more people seems a rash policy. Improving the area’s infrastructure has been necessary for some long time, (see reference above to inadequate parking provision and road networks), and clearly the area has potential for improvement as regards its rural/visitor/tourist economies.

However, as stated before, all these policies have to be judged and implemented against the over-riding concern that in so doing you do not spoil the entity you are trying to improve.

Q3-Do you agree with the first year’s projects ?

A-Yes

Q4-Any other comments?

A-At various points in your document and in your consultants’ back-up research, we wonder whether it is Mole Valley that is being considered at all? Where, in Leatherhead, Ashted. Bookham, Fetcham or Dorking (the District’s only significant population centres) is it proposed that in-town offices should be built? And what is the relevance of a comparison between the Towns of Mole Valley with centres such as Reading and Milton Keynes? If there is a shortage of commercial premises that is inhibiting enterprise, why is it that in Leatherhead alone there is over 140,000 sq ft of high-grade office space in units from 7500 sq ft to 40,000 sq ft that have been on the market for years rather than months? Is it an accident of history that the nearest higher education facilities are in the nearby, much bigger, centres of Epsom, Kingston and Guildford ? We could go on, but hope the point is made that sometimes it appears that these documents bear no relation to the area about which they purport to relate!

The Forward Planning Group of the Leatherhead Residents’ Association hope that the above comments will prove useful in evaluating future ideas and suggestions.