



Love Wimbledon
5th Floor Tuition House
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Dear Sir or Madam,

Response to the Merton Local Plan 2024

On behalf of Love Wimbledon, the Business Improvement District for Wimbledon Town Centre, please find herewith our thoughts on the revised Merton Local Plan. Please note given we operate exclusively within Wimbledon Town Centre, we have reserved our comments exclusively to our geographic area of responsibility.

Wimbledon Town Centre Context

Footfall and expenditure data for Wimbledon Town Centre is currently hugely encouraging, with footfall above pre-pandemic levels, and expenditure rising to 33% higher than the weighted 6-year average (Source: GLA High Streets Data). This reaffirms the town centre's resilience post-pandemic and continuing success as a place offering retail, culture, hospitality, leisure and work opportunities. Many newer developers are now actively engaged with local communities too, creating thoughtful and human-centric designs for the future, such as the proposed Gather hotel in Worple Road, recently submitted to Merton's Planning Committee.

We have developed an overview of areas which we believe require particular attention in the new Local Plan. We have witnessed a change in post-pandemic needs, particularly regarding office space, and it is important that we manage developments' heights and sizes to suit the area's evolving requirements. This area deserves its own vernacular based on local surrounding including the low-rise residential streets, and should not be the destination for buildings which could be designed for any city in the world. There needs to be a strong balance between development and occupancy for now and in the future, ensuring over-development does not damage Wimbledon's identity.

01 Offices / CBD

- We are supportive of a thriving central business district, clustered around St George's Road, to support Wimbledon's continuing success as Merton's primary economic engine. We welcome new office developments or retrofitted office spaces that are energy efficient, attractive and in keeping with the local architectural vernacular, to retain existing and attract new employers to Wimbledon. The development at 247 The Broadway is an excellent example of the progress being made with this, and follows a similarly successful development in Wellington House, on Wimbledon Hill.
- We have concerns about some of the proposed scaling within the CBD outlined within the draft Plan, and also the location of the proposed 42m zone within clearly residential roads. We are not opposed to tall buildings, but right now we are acutely aware that most of our largest employers in the town centre are looking to relocate or sublet floors within their premises, to reduce their office allocation levels.

- Given many businesses are reporting significantly lower office occupancy post-pandemic, we are concerned that new buildings at 49m scale could have significant non-occupancy, which would have a negative impact on the perception of the town centre. Work has still not commenced on the St George’s East building approved by Merton planning in 2022, presumably because of both construction costs and ongoing uncertainty in the office sector. We should request that the developers now provide a coherent plan for occupancy before any new building work commences.
- With new schemes locally, our view is it would be better to scale down proposed new developments to the existing height of the major commercial premises on St George’s Road, and develop plans to attract businesses to relocate to Wimbledon in first-class new offices. Our priority should also not only be to build new premises on unworkable current sites, it is equally important that we be retrofit currently neglected buildings such as One Francis Grove, to make them marketable again for attracting new businesses into Wimbledon.

02 Transport / Air Quality / Sustainability / Greening

- We remain concerned about traffic and air quality within the town centre, the overall experience for pedestrians and cyclists navigating the town centre and the lack of public spaces. The proposed pedestrianisation of St Mark’s Square, identified as a priority public realm project in the Wimbledon Masterplan, would be a welcome addition to the town centre to address this.
- It is imperative that a person-first methodology is considered for long term public realm works (widening footpaths, reducing traffic lanes) and creating greener corridors to encourage walking. We are also concerned that often ‘greening’ referenced in planning schemes is not then put into action, e.g. outside Premier Inn and outside New Wimbledon Theatre, whereby planning applications were different to actual delivered changes with less or no greening. These sites should be revisited, and there is still considerable local frustration that these schemes have not delivered what was promised.
- Wimbledon Town Centre has suffered from a lack of investment into Cycle Lanes and improved connectivity for bikes, this needs to be a confirmed part of the long-term plan. We are also seeing increasing number of e-bike hires being left in awkward places around the town centre, creating obstacles for the visually impaired, and users of wheelchairs and pushchairs. The current parking bay solution on Wimbledon Bridge has not worked, this should be moved to nearer the station (emphasising bikes over cars) and appropriate signage / edging added. A long-term solution to bike parking would be welcomed.
- Delivery Bikes – we have increased issues (like much of the country) with delivery bike parking. As Deliveroo and Uber take no accountability of their self-employed workforce, we see anti-social behaviour, dangerous driving, and no facilities provided for the drivers. This needs to be tackled on both a national and local level. On a local level a better solution to where mopeds are idling needs to be found, as the solution at Wimbledon Bridge has not worked, and the issue has just been displaced to other areas in the town centre.



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- We agree that the safeguarding strategy to create more bridges for cars should be removed unless they can demonstrate they reduce traffic for the town centre and the surrounding neighbourhood. There is evidence that more roads just bring more cars. However, we would be supportive of pedestrian / cycling bridges that improve town centre connectivity for these groups.
- We anticipate a surge in visitors over the next few years, drawn to Wimbledon by ongoing sporting excellence and everything it offers to visitors looking to seek a different aspect of London – very much the strategy for international inbound visitors being developed by London & Partners. To support this, the station needs to have a clear investment strategy to make it attractive, practical to use and to ensure it reflects how Wimbledon should be perceived on an international platform – a green and inspiring place to visit, and London's only train / tube / tram / bus interface. The current platforms and general visitor experience should be considerably upgraded to enhance their experience.
- Similarly, any future development in the Wimbledon Park area for AELTC (assuming their proposed scheme is approved) must give special consideration to a clear sustainable transport solution from the main station in Wimbledon to the new site, as it will significantly increase the number of users of the station over a longer period of time than our current 2-week surge around the Championships.

03 Conservation

- Conservation of our heritage including the improvement of historical buildings, spaces and places of architectural merit should always be invested in and considered in both strategic decisions and everyday decisions. At the moment, the word 'conservation' does not give any legislative outline to maintain and improve buildings in these areas and we often see shop frontages and signage which do not merit the buildings they reside in, with conservation guidelines often ignored for ungainly signage. To create a better-quality environment, the conservation regulations in Wimbledon Town Centre should be changed to be mandatory in highlighted areas.

04 Place for Business

- We believe it would be beneficial to have a business strategy to attract sectors in which we have excellence, much in the same way that some areas are looking at Life Sciences (e.g. SC1, in SE1), or cancer research (Sutton). We believe the Borough should become a hub for sports business (include tech and communication), together with associated sectors around health, fitness and wellbeing. We already have several world-leading businesses operating in this space, and it would further endorse Merton's strategy to be recognised as the Borough of Sport.
- A good example of this occurred this week, when Mountain Warehouse announced its closure in June. Love Wimbledon contacted the landowner to discuss specific known shortages in our current town centre offering, but they had already arranged for a Popeye's Chicken to open on the site. While we welcome retail units not being vacant, we are concerned that this will only make our over-dependency on convenience food outlets ever more unsustainable, and lead to further unhappiness from consumers regarding the lack of retail within Wimbledon now.



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- In light of successful new commercial developments, such as 247 The Broadway and Wellington House, the successful transition of Centre Court Shopping into Wimbledon Quarter, and the forthcoming arrival of a major new boutique hotel for Wimbledon when Gather hopefully opens in 2027, we ask Merton Council to work with us and invest more in creating a placemaking strategy for Wimbledon that celebrates its heritage, culture, green spaces, retail and hospitality choices, and connectivity. This will drive new business and further footfall into Wimbledon and future-proof its ongoing success.
- The Local Plan discusses the desire to activate empty retail units as pop-ups for businesses or cultural experiences. We welcome this, but it requires much greater enforcement with property owners who are not local – e.g. investment and pension fund portfolios. We do not have many empty retail units in the town centre currently, but those we do have, such as the former Auntie Ann's and San Lorenzo units, are operated under complex ownership arrangements in which there appears to be no time pressure to provide a solution. We want to see a legal commitment to getting changes in place to bring in short-term pop-up activations that provide more affordable spaces for smaller and newer businesses, or at minimum to dress the vacant frontage to an acceptable standard. The long-standing eyesore at the former O'Neills Pub on the Broadway is a good example of this.

05 Street Level Design

- The Pavement, a colonnade of independent shops and services located on Worple Road, is not highlighted as a Neighbourhood Parade strategy for investment. These shops are in a conservation area, in stunning Edwardian buildings, and provide local and essential services for residents and businesses. They are located opposite Wimbledon Library and the Alexandra pub (both of similar strength architectural merit, as highlighted in the consultation). These buildings should be brought up to the same standards as the surrounding buildings on Wimbledon Hill. Previous bids for funding via Neighbourhood Community Infrastructure Levy (NCIL) to make this investment has proven unsuccessful, but investing in refurbishing the shop fronts of the Pavement would be a significant enhancement to the town centre and a celebration of independent retail continuing to thrive.

Thank you for taking the time to consider our response. Please let me know if you require any further information.

Chief Executive, Love Wimbledon Ltd
26 March 2024