
Dear Sirs,

Here is my response to the consultation: Merton Character Study. My comments primarily concern the Merton Park/Morden area covered by the consultation.

Boundaries: I understand the point about “fuzzy boundaries” (p176) but consider that that is an approach that has far more validity in considering the northern boundary of Merton Park rather than the South/Eastern one. The Morden end of Dorset Road, Sandbourne Avenue, Kenley and Daybrook Roads are all characterised by low-density, low-rise semi-detached and terraced 1920s/1930s housing with fair sized gardens and with a distinctly sub-urban, green setting, and they are all clearly part of, and consistent with, the grid and pattern of streets centring on Circle Gardens. There is a distinct boundary line along London Road and Morden Road. It is therefore wholly inappropriate to draw any kind of boundary that cuts the whole or part of Dorset/ Sandbourne/Kenley/Daybrook etc off from the rest of Merton Park Circle Gardens area, and in particular to suggest that that area should be part of the Merton Opportunity Area (p137 and 178), which is claimed suitable for taking maximum advantage for high rise development and intensification of use of all types.

Intensification of use: the consultation suggests that Merton Park generally could be used for intensification of housing (p106), because of garden size and allegedly underused “former” garages. I disagree entirely. The low density, green and sub-urban feel of Merton Park is one of its main defining characteristics and is one of the main reasons why people enjoy living here: it is more spacious and calmer than in central Wimbledon/ the Victorian streets area of Wimbledon and residents in Merton Park value that space, green and relative calm above proximity to the main shopping, entertainment and transport hub of Wimbledon. To suggest that garages could be redeveloped into separate accommodation fails to understand the value to the community of living in a lower density area. To do so would also be wholly inconsistent with the heritage of the area: if you read the title deeds/Land Registry entries for many properties in this area you will see that they carry a covenant that the properties were clearly intended only as single household dwellings precisely to maintain the feel of the area.

Amenities/impact of increase of population density: the consultation seems to have remarkably little on the impact on the already stretched amenities in the area of an increase in population density. In “normal” (non Covid) times, there is too much traffic on the roads, much of it going too fast, reducing air quality, increasing noise pollution and posing safety risks in particular to the many children in the area. It is difficult to get a place for your child in a decent primary school or an appointment with a GP. There are various public transport options, but these are routinely packed, particularly in the rush hour. When it rains heavily, the drains flood, in particular along Dorset Road and areas where front gardens have been paved over so that there is no soakaway drainage and all the run-off water goes into the storm drains. All of these issues will only be magnified by an intensification of population and built on space, but the consultation does not give any clear indication as to what will be done to address any of the existing issues let alone mitigate against a worsening situation due to housing intensification.

High rise buildings: I disagree with the assertion that high rise buildings can improve the appearance of an area like Merton. Merton Civil Centre in Morden is a case in point. It is an eye-sore visible for a considerable distance around. It interrupts the peaceful and well-being enhancing views from Morden Hall Park. Building further high rise buildings in the area will not improve the situation.

Future living patterns/rebalancing the economy: the emphasis in the consultation on intensification of housing in the area seems not to take account – or even acknowledge – the fundamental shift in working and therefore living patterns that are universally acknowledged to be a likely long term impact of the Covid 19 pandemic. A very high proportion of those who move to Merton Park are white-collar/office workers. Huge numbers have worked from home throughout the pandemic and, anecdotally, I understand that many, many employers (including my employer and my husband’s) are looking at return to work models that would see most staff working remotely a lot more. If that is the case, then logically living in commuting-to-the-City areas like Merton Park will be less attractive as the possibility for living further afield opens up. In my own experience (civil servant) 2 colleagues in a team of about a dozen have already re-located out of London (one to Wales and one to Chichester) as a result of the pandemic and a sense that working from home will become much more routine even after the pandemic. This is also consistent with the government’s agenda of promoting growth outside the South East. Given that the government is actively talking about encouraging and incentivising working outside of the London area, and given the likely long-term shift in location desirability, why is Merton Council contemplating intensification of housing now? I think that the emphasis of the future development of the area should focus on enhancing the area for the residents and addressing pre-existing area challenges, rather than trying to fit more people in.

What I think would improve the area, and that has been suggested (or touched on/suggested in parts) at points in the consultation, is:

- Regeneration of Morden town centre, to make it a more pleasant place to be and work (cleaner streets, traffic calming, pedestrian zones/scope for outside seating, more trees/flower beds – ideally the demolition of the hideous civic centre)
- Enhancement of Wimbledon Town Centre – same points as for Morden. the “Piazza” outside Morrisons is a great community space but is blighted by traffic; would suggest tree planting/middle height bushes/planting to provide some screening from the traffic on the Broadway, to muffle traffic noise, create a quieter oasis and improve air quality. I would also add resistance to Crossrail 2 above ground at Wimbledon, as it will destroy the town centre for a decade. It makes much more sense to adopt the South West Earlsfield option suggested in the response to the Crossrail 2 consultation of running the line underground for longer/from A3 and routing the London fast trains along that underground route, freeing up – and making safer - Platform 6 at Wimbledon station which could then be used for the multi-stop trains;
- More cycle paths and lanes, to encourage more eco/health friendly and safe transport options;
- an opening up of and improvement of access to the Wandle (as in Ravensbury Park and Watersmead Park) creating “soft” banks along the edges to encourage wildlife, and a green area for the public to enjoy.

What I also think would improve the safety in the area for all would be:

- a longer pedestrian light crossing at the top of Dorset Road /Kingston Road /Tramline junction – 7 seconds is barely enough time for an able bodied adult, let alone a child, elderly person or anyone with restricted mobility, particularly when traffic often jumps the lights out of Hartfield Road
- requirements to factor in measures to mitigate against drain flooding when residents build over front gardens (on-property soak-aways/run offs/prohibition on complete hard-standing). When the drains flood, the pavements flood which makes them unsafe in particular for the elderly or those with mobility challenges (you cannot see curb edges or uneven paving stones, so the risk of injury is increased)

On a wider, environmental-impact level, I would like to see the council supporting and installing Terracycle (or similar) recycling points put strategically around the borough and advertised, so that residents can be encouraged and will be easily able to recycle hard-to-recycle everyday use products such as toothpaste tubes, pens, sweet-wrappers and crisp packets.

Observations on the approach to consultation: this consultation was not well advertised by the Council at all. I heard about it only from local interest groups that I belong to. Also, the format of the consultation was extremely difficult to read, being a digital document set out in a double page format with a navigation pane at the side. Text and diagrams/maps were very small; when you enlarged them you lost both the context of what was being said and the picture quality, the latter being so poor so that it was very difficult to see what was being portrayed in the maps. There was no way of accessing it in a meaningful way through a smart phone, so you need to have access to a good sized laptop to view it. I think that all these factors mean that those who are economically disadvantaged, digitally disabled, or who have even small sight impairment will be excluded from accessing this consultation in a meaningful way.

Kind regards,