

# MERTON DESIGN REVIEW PANEL

## NOTES OF MEETING

24 March 2021



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### Panel Members Present:

- Councillor Stephen Crowe (Chair)
- Marcus Beale
- Dipa Joshi
- Gesine Junker
- Clare Murray
- Isabella Percy
- Michael Whitwell
- Beatrix Young

### Apologies

- Alistair Huggett

### Council Officers Present:

- Paul Garrett: Note Taker
- Paul McGarry: Zoom Meeting Manager
- Katharine Fox, Placemaking & Regeneration Officer

### Councillors Present:

- David Dean
- Stephen Alambritis

### Notes:

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#### **Item 1: Borough Character Study**

The Panel described this as a 'weighty tome' but also acknowledged that it was difficult to make it shorter and the balance was about right in this respect. It had the potential to be a long-term document to raise the principles and quality of design, and should not become a 'style-guide'. Although it was a long document the amount of character description devoted to each area seemed quite brief. There seemed to be similar ideas in different areas which led to the question how are they different? And whether their actual character had been missed.

Whilst the panel noted that the character descriptions were urban design based, describing building types streets etc., it was light on defining other elements of

character based on architecture, historical development, height, form, materials etc. Green spaces were also less well covered. Although the Panel agreed it should be urban design based, it did feel the balance was not quite right yet. As people were likely to use the document by 'dipping in' to specific parts rather than reading the whole, it was felt there was scope for more detail in the character descriptions.

The community-led nature of the document was praised, although it was noted the response rate in some areas was very low and thus should not be solely relied on in developing the guidance. The panel suggested more might be done on reaching out to harder to reach groups. There was also some concern about the fuzziness of the character area boundaries and their transition was not explored well – lines down the middle of the street – how did one deal with this. It was suggested that if the centre of each character area was strong and clearly described, the edges would take care of themselves

The Panel praised the document for being well illustrated with good case studies such as SolidSpace. It was noted however, that the maps were not very readable. More case studies of greening and public realm subject would be welcomed. The definition of mid-rise development was welcomed but it was vague as to where it was to be applied. It was suggested that the document would benefit from practical advice on implementing proposals, particularly in 're-imagining' areas such as Colliers Wood and in developing public realm projects.

It was agreed that a strong sustainability theme should run through the document, but that the issue of retro-fitting buildings needed to be dealt with sensitively regarding heritage assets and where buildings and their appearance were strong definers of an areas' character. Other elements of character that it was felt could be explored in further related to social and non-residential character and the demographic character of an area.

Particular areas singled out where more exploration would be worthy included the east-west A238-A298-A24 route through Merton High Street and the effect of heavy traffic, the assumption that Merantun Way would always permanently cover up the remains of Merton Abbey and having more substance to the section on Wimbledon Town Centre. The issue of how to deal with roads in general was raised and the removal of one-way systems such as in Raynes Park.

As the document was so long, the Panel suggested there was scope for an 'executive summary' document to accompany the main document. This could also explore the character of green spaces and more high-level urban design issues such as permeability, wayfinding and safe movement routes at the borough scale.

Overall the Panel were very impressed with the scope and content of the document and felt it was well put together and illustrated. Words like exceptional, informative and helpful were used by the Panel to describe the document.

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## **Item 2: Small Sites Toolkit**

The Panel were very positive about this document. They felt it was a great document and a good idea to have – just what Merton needs. It was well set out, easy to use, with clear compact sections, not too long, with good text/image balance and a good structure. There was a broad spread of information from high level to detailed guidance. Whilst the extensive use of hyperlinks was really liked, as these could fail over time, a bibliography was suggested to supplement this.

There was a feeling that if someone used this document, then their development would be the better for it. The document was about demanding good quality from smaller and less experienced developers. There was some discussion about whether the document would benefit from being more prescriptive, but it was felt that this balance was about right, though it could be bolder in its aspirations, eg. replacing ‘adequately sized’ with ‘generously sized’.

The document is clearly about residential-led development and does not give advice on small sites not suitable for residential development. This needs to be acknowledged and guidance provided, or another document is needed for this subject area. This included community uses, open space, and non-standard residential development, including accessible housing, design for rent, design for seniors and modular design (MMC), all which have different design requirements. It was felt that the document could also include guidance on extensions to existing buildings as well as new ones.

The Panel gave a range of positive ideas and suggestions for the fine tuning of the document which lend themselves to setting out in bullet point format:

- Use links to the Passivhaus Trust rather than the BRE. If considered early in the scheme this could be achievable at low cost and without mitigation.
- Reference needed to be made of the embodied carbon in historic buildings.
- The case studies were helpful and well set out, but it would be good to include a highly sustainable example such as Goldsmith Street.
- The ‘form factor’ (relationship of floorspace to external area) of buildings affects energy efficiency and more was needed on dealing with this.
- The Panel welcomed reference to LETI (London Energy Transformation Initiative).
  
- The guidance could suggest that studies often undertaken later in the process could be demanded much earlier to evolve a better design. This included embodied carbon, overheating analysis, planting plans etc.
- The Guidance on writing a DAS was good, but needed finishing off and the blank boxes looked a bit odd.
- Pages 10-11 needed to reference the Design Review Panel.
  
- It was great to see guidance on internal layouts, though an example layout would be good as would clear references to standards and layouts in Part M of the Building Regulations. Links to the National Technical Standards were also needed. Internal layouts should also encourage provision for homeworking.

- Single–aspect units were discussed and felt to exhibit problems in most orientations, and the guidance should reflect these issues. It was currently a bit contradictory in its advice.
- There needed to be guidance on what plans should be submitted, including showing clear interface with the public realm and neighbouring sites
- There needed to be clarity on recommended ceiling heights and the spaces in between i.e. space under 1.5m and the space between this and the full ceiling height.
- All plans in the document needed to be in proportion and include a scale bar.
- The heritage reference on p23 needs more consistency, with reference to Historic England, the NPPF and using the correct phrasing and terminology relating to definition of harm and the weighting of this against public benefits.
- The references to SUDS and tree planting needed to be realistic and acknowledge that there needed to be focus on what is in control of the applicant.
- There needed to be full an accurate references for the guidance on daylight, sunlight and rights to light.
- References to active travel needed to include public transport, using and referencing the correct TfL terminology.
- References to specific funding streams (eg. Neighbourhood Fund for open space) need to be carefully worded as these often change over time.

Overall the Panel were very impressed with the quality of the document and felt that it could be an important tool in raising the standard of design in Merton.