

DESIGN REVIEW PANEL

NOTES OF MEETING Thursday 22nd March 2012

Agenda and notes (where appropriate) can be viewed at the Council's website at:

<http://www.merton.gov.uk/living/designandconservation/designreviewpanel.htm>

Panel Members Present:

- Marcus Beale
- Councillor John Bowcott (Chair)
- Paul Dodd
- Tim Long
- Tony Michael
- Andre Sutherland
- Sally Warren
- Tim Day

Apologies

- Nicholas Waring

Council Officers Present:

- Paul Garrett
- Ashley Heller (presenting Items 1 & 2)

Declarations of Interest:

- Tony Michael & John Bowcott made notes for Items 1 & 2 instead of Paul Garrett. These were written up as usual by Paul Garrett and subject to the usual checks by the chair and Panel members.
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Item 1: Destination Wimbledon

The Panel reviewed the outcome of the Destination Wimbledon public realm works currently nearing completion. It was seen as a project that grew out of local concerns about the quality of the town centre, reports on its business competitiveness and a walkability audit. A station access scheme for the forecourt was the initial focus of the official, funded element of the scheme, which expanded to include much of the central streets of the town, attracting Olympic funding. Further work is due on Queens Road after the Olympics.

Thus the Panel felt that the scheme was 'bottom-up' in its approach and response to local concerns.

Overall the Panel felt that the works were a great improvement to the town centre that seemed well established very quickly. The most notable elements were the effect of decluttering, the far superior paving and jointing and the widened footways and improved crossings. There were some concerns about the outlook from the station, but recent addition of lighting and trees partially address this, though there was no unanimous consensus that the proposed statue was the right thing in the right place. There was some question about whether the trees were right for the space and whether there should be a single landmark tree.

There was praise for the perch benches which provided seating without seeming to attract antisocial activity. There was support for the relocation of the 'fat ladies' statue outside CentreCourt, though some concern about the steepness of the new steps here and at the forecourt (note: these steps are compliant with DDA regulations for external spaces). Some Panel members were also disappointed there were not fully covered routes from the station entrances to the taxi rank and bus stops.

With regard to the future, the Panel felt that there was scope to improve the quality of the shop-fronts on the forecourt to match the improvements to the public space. This could include adding an upper floor to the single storey elements to give better enclosure. The increase in cycle parking was noted but more parking was probably needed. It was noted that the new high quality paving would only endure if the Council was vigilant with repairs and dealing with utility companies rigorously.

The Panel noted the difficulties with using the single flag bus stop outside CentreCourt and that this needed to be addressed to improve the situation. There was an interesting discussion on paving materials, their cost, appearance, maintenance, whole life costs, durability and 'stone miles' of some of the granite. No consensus came of this, other than there were pros and cons for different materials.

VERDICT: **GREEN**

Item 2: Majestic Mitcham

This was a presentation of issues and potential directions for solutions for public realm and accessibility enhancements in Mitcham Town Centre, the Panel being asked to contribute to the identification of issues and ideas prior to officers developing specific measures.

The Panel were clear that, despite the Council not being in a position to redevelop individual sites, it was imperative it set the proposals in an overall strategy for regenerating Mitcham as a whole. Firstly, the Council needed to assemble facts and evidence to give it direction in this. It needed to identify

what Mitcham is, and what it should be in the future, and that this should provide an overall guide and context for the public realm and access proposals about to be developed.

In assessing the current situation, the Panel likened Mitcham to a very ill patient – damaged by poor ‘quack’ or ill-conceived (however well-meaning) remedies from the past. It needed a proper and accurate diagnosis of its problems and a more sympathetic approach to remedying them. The Panel was unanimous in the view that Mitcham needed help – and fast. However, a ‘quick-fix’ was not the right approach - it had to be considered, evidence based and involve the local population buying into a longer term strategy of which this particular project is a part.

What sort of person lives in Mitcham? was a key question raised. This referred to issues such as whether the population was transient or long-standing, what their socio-economic profile is and whether it is changing. This led to a reference to major new housing and infrastructure projects such as Rowan Park, Brenley Park, the former gasworks and Eastfields railway station. It was an assessment of these issues that should also lead to deciding what the town centre should be in the future – it needed to serve the local population well, as well as improve itself.

On more specific matters the Panel agreed that the pedestrian environment was poor and that both the surrounding housing was not well connected to the centre as well as the Fair Green being cut off from the rest of the town centre by large road junctions. Also, some of the areas that had most shops were on busy roads, with a poor quality environment as a result. Pedestrian crossings needed to be significantly improved at key junctions. This would also help reduce vehicle speeds at off-peak times. Traffic domination needed to be reduced and pedestrian desire lines used to inform convenient, easier to use crossing points.

It was felt that the Fair Green was a key asset and should be developed as a ‘special experience’ landscape, suggestions were made regarding use of lavender in landscaping, introducing water (eg. a fountain) to address traffic noise, and bringing people (particularly families) into the centre by providing facilities for children’s play, as well as improving the existing cafe. This led to the suggestion that there should be more of a leisure emphasis in the town centre, rather than solely retail or trying to attract big name retailers. It was noted the town had lost community and leisure uses in the past, as well as retail uses, and was now essentially providing ‘subsistence’ retail uses.

It was noted that the town centre had a mix of some very good buildings as well as some very poor buildings – particularly ‘big-box’ monolithic buildings. This issue had to be addressed as part of the wider regeneration strategy, but the Council needed to resist any new poor quality building proposals. Morrisons, Lidl and Iceland were cited as particularly poor buildings, which contributed much to unattractive dead frontage in the town centre. Despite the proposal being debated being a public realm proposal, the Panel were keen, and often returned to, the need to address the issue of poor quality

buildings and the need to try and improve these areas wherever and whenever possible.

Further ideas were suggested for leisure such as outdoor cinema, drive-in cinema (on 3 Kings Piece), fireworks display and handing over the running and management of the market to a specialist company to give it more focus, quality and attract new traders. All this, the Panel felt should be done in conjunction with local residents, the Cricket Green Society being cited as a good example of who should be involved. It was felt that involvement of local groups and residents was important in the success of such initiatives.

Regarding pedestrianisation, the Panel were not wholly convinced in principle by the idea of re-opening London Road to buses simply as a means of getting people into the heart of the town centre, although it was acknowledged that it would obviously do this and provide good activity and surveillance. Comparisons were made with the lack of pedestrianisation in Wimbledon and concerns raised about the potential effect on the asset of the Fair Green itself – and that such ideas should be approached with caution. Loss of the pedestrianised area and vehicles on Fair Green should only be pursued after careful consideration of all the options.

Conversely, it was suggested that there was probably a case for providing some on-street or convenient short term parking in the town centre, even on the Fair Green – particularly if the retail offer is to be more local or leisure based (eg. flower stalls, cafes, market etc) and that reducing some of the space occupied by roads could accommodate this. However it was felt that local retailers desires needed to be treated with caution in this respect, as this may not always reflect need or have a significant effect on turnover. The recent changes to Leopold Road were cited as a good example.

Suggestions were also made regarding the gyratory and whether it could be partially or wholly removed. A discussion ensued with officers regarding some of the practical, cost and design issues relating to dealing with buses, traffic and accessibility.

The Panel appreciated the enormity of the regeneration task for Mitcham the Council faced. It also asked that when proposals were developed, that they have the opportunity of reviewing them as part of the consultation process.

VERDICT: **N.A.**

Item 3: Pre-Application, Singlegate Primary School

Pre-Application – Notes Confidential