

Future Merton

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protecting our amenities... enhancing our quality of life

4 December 2018

Dear Sir,

Wimbledon Town Centre Masterplan

The Wimbledon Society wishes to take the opportunity to comment on the Wimbledon Town Centre Masterplan (the Plan) provided by Merton Council's consultation period.

Introduction

In general, we are pleased that an attempt is being made to set out a vision for the future of the town and that public consultation is part of the process of constructing it.

Before moving onto the areas of the Plan that the Society would like to see changed or reviewed, we set out below some of the things that we do see as favourable:

- That the Plan has been produced and has been produced with early public consultation
- That the Plan does not include any tall towers – although some building heights are an issue (see below)
- A better transport hub
- New crossings over the railway
- The new concert hall. We believe that a firmer commitment should be made to this, although the 8 storey building shown on the Plan is unacceptably high.
- The inclusion of small units and niche shops, particularly in conservation areas.

However, we do consider there are serious shortcomings in the proposals.

The Plan involves a significant increase in the commercial space in the town centre; the size of buildings envisaged is way beyond those currently in our town centre. Consultation has clearly demonstrated that this is not wanted by residents – why is this not being heeded?

We do not believe that the focus of the plan is on making the town centre an attractive place for residents and others to spend time. If the town is not an attractive place, people will not choose it for their shopping, entertainment, food and drink or any other purposes except passing through when they have to. The key objective of this Plan seems to be maximising development space; we believe that it should be enhancing the quality of life for the residents of the area, not profits for developers.

The Plan does not tackle the simple fact that much of Wimbledon Town Centre is a 'High Street'. It is widely understood that the typical high street is under pressure and losing relevance. The Plan envisages an increasing space for the public but provides no clear strategy to attract them or high street businesses to it. Without such a strategy, we are in danger of having a masterplan that succeeds only in creating new offices.

General Comments

Many of the features of the Plan are heavily influenced by Cross Rail 2 (CR2). The ability to fund e.g. new railway bridges is perhaps heavily dependent on CR2. It is not clear how the buildings over the tracks are impacted by CR2. The worst case scenario is that CR2 is postponed or 'shelved' delaying until an unknown day CR2 development and making other developments almost impossible as they would interfere with CR2 plans. Given the strong possibilities of cancellation or deferral of CR2, we believe a stronger indication of what would be done then should be given. We need a plan that has no CR2 in it, and that can then be adapted if/when CR2 is given the go ahead.

The Plan provides no options. For example an option to remain as a major town centre should be considered. This may be a better way of discovering the public's opinion on key issues.

The Plan shows no numbers. We appreciate that any numbers would be highly provisional, but in consultation, a view of how much new office, shop, and other commercial space would be created, as well as how many new dwellings, would be helpful.

The Plan makes reference to ensuring the architectural quality of new buildings in the town centre. The authors must be aware that existing planning controls make this impossible to achieve and should not include such assertions in their consultations.

Commercial Expansion and Metropolitan Centre Status

The Plan envisages considerable expansion of the commercial development of the town centre, taking the area from Major Town Centre to Metropolitan Centre status. It makes no case for this change and it is not at all clear what benefits it would bring. There is no indication that public consultation favoured large scale commercial development. Whilst agreeing that modest expansion may be desirable, we believe that the proposed extent of commercial development in Wimbledon is excessive and certainly did not gain consensus during the consultation.

We would also point out that metropolitan centres are defined as having catchments that extend over several boroughs. It is by no means clear that Wimbledon can achieve this, particularly in the area of retail for which the Plan states that the catchment is largely local.

Building Heights

The Plan notes the emphasis given to the question of building heights in the public workshops. It then sets out proposed 'appropriate' building heights for the town centre. We are concerned about the use of the word 'appropriate' here; the public might well interpret it as a maximum whereas developers might treat it as the least they might expect to be allowed.

The proposed building heights in many parts of the town centre are considerably higher than those currently there. The Society is particularly concerned about the very tall buildings in the heart of the town centre and the height of the buildings on and close to the existing YMCA site. Wimbledon residents have consistently expressed dislike of tall buildings and this Plan seems to take no account of this. We believe that such building heights would seriously jeopardise the character of the town.

Tall buildings close to busy roads must be avoided. The canyonisation effect of tall buildings near busy roads traps pollution which is at dangerous levels in the centre of Wimbledon as it is. This Plan will make it worse and is unacceptable.

Traffic and parking

Little mention is made of parking in the Plan. There is a tension in provision of car parks in town centres: on the one hand restricting parking encourages access to the town using public transport; on the other, too little parking reduces use of the town centre, and potentially increases general pollution by encouraging use of out of town facilities. The Plan needs to be clearer on parking proposals for the town centre so that adequate consultation can take place.

Addressing one specific point made regarding parking, we favour the retention of Hartfield Road car park as an underground facility.

The most significant proposed improvements to traffic management, new crossings over the railway, are dependent on CR2. There is a clear risk that CR2 will not happen and it is not clear from the Plan what alternative improvements might be made. As stated above, we believe that greater indication should be given to the implications of cancellation or deferral of CR2.

We note that pedestrianisation of the Broadway is not proposed in the Plan despite its support in workshops. Perhaps the precise details of traffic flow through the town centre are not the essential consideration but we believe that:

- The town centre is overly dominated by traffic with its attendant danger, poor air quality and increased stress. We note that air pollution results in between 29,000 and 40,000 premature deaths annually in the UK¹
- Separation of pedestrians from traffic would make for a more attractive and healthy town centre

We do not believe that the Plan addresses these priorities adequately and is too resigned to the status quo. It leaves heavy traffic on the main pedestrian thoroughfares, increasing exposure to pollution, noise, inconvenience and actual and feared traffic danger. We believe that making the town centre more pedestrian friendly is essential to its future success.

The Society believes that a great improvement in the pedestrian environment can be achieved by making Hartfield Road two way and constructing the proposed new bridge in such a manner as to avoid the double bend currently in front of the Prince of Wales public house. This would enable pedestrianisation of the Broadway as well as generally improving traffic flow. We appreciate that this proposal is not without technical difficulty but we believe that it can be achieved and would be a considerable improvement on the status quo.

We also note that, while workshop feedback highlighted the need to improve facilities for cyclists, there are no proposals in the Plan to achieve this.

¹ Prof H Barton WHO 9/18 as reported in the RTPJ Journal 9/18

Sustainability and Environment

The Plan makes no reference to such important items as energy efficiency, local energy generation, and carbon neutral development. Possibilities such as combined heat and power (CHP) are not mentioned. The vision is a once in a generation opportunity to improve the sustainability of the buildings in the town centre and the Plan completely ignores it. It should be a priority.

Air quality in our town centres is a clear issue for the public. The only proposals in the Plan to address the issue is 'greening'. Whilst appreciating that greening is a good step, it will not counteract the effects of increased building heights and more intensive activity in the town centre. The Plan needs to explicitly deal with the 'canyonisation' of the Broadway and other roads, such as Worple Road, by the proposals.

Character and Architectural Quality

As stated elsewhere the proposed heights of the larger buildings are too high to retain or enhance the character of the town centre.

The Plan does indeed have commercial, mostly office, space at its heart, and given this much greater imagination will be required to produce a Plan with character. This needs to go further than merely conserving some of the better buildings in the town centre. The Plan must include imaginative buildings on a human scale and include useful open spaces. We believe more work is required on these aspects.

Retail Offering and Street Frontages

The Plan, rightly in our view, seeks to include 'active frontages' to all buildings in the town centre. It also increases the amount of frontages available: the use of mews off the Broadway and St. Marks Place, the 'Lanes' around Worple Road and new developments around the station inevitably mean that there are more frontages available.

It is not clear what activities the frontages will present. There are several mentions of independent retail, and many illustrations show pavement cafes. Removing some supermarkets was suggested – we would certainly oppose an intervention of this kind, supermarkets are essential to some residents and bring people into the town centre. Retaining Ely's is explicitly included.

The key question here is what activities should be brought into the town centre and how are we going to attract them. Simply loading in more office space will make for a very dull town. There is acknowledgement that town centres (particularly retail) are suffering a number of issues but there is no attempt to address them. The Plan should provide some initiative and proposals in this vital aspect of our town's development.

Open and Public Space

A number of new or enhanced open spaces are identified in the Plan; examples are provided on page 84. We welcome these developments, but they do not go far enough.

We consider that more open and public space can and should be achieved within the town. We emphasise that the objective of the Plan should be to provide an attractive and useful environment for the activities of residents and visitors. We would like to see:

- A town square. This could be located in front of the old town hall, or if the station entrance were set back, between the station and the road bridge
- Pedestrianised areas. We have already commented above that the Broadway should be pedestrianised.
- A wide walkway between the current Piazza, which should be retained, and the proposed concert hall would provide an ideal pedestrianised area and, if glazed over would be useful for markets and other activities.
- As well as more open public space, additional covered public space should be included in the Plan, this should provide space for suitable activities (e.g. markets, entertainment, screening of events)

Phasing

The phasing of the developments is not set out in the document, although some indication is given where, for example, building is intended to take place during or after the CR2 construction. We understand that detailed phasing is not possible at this stage, but some indication of which developments are seen as early, middle or late developments is essential: we do not want a Plan that leaves improvements for residents until its closing phases. They may never happen.

As a general point we would like to see some quick wins within the Plan. In this regard we mean developments that improve the character and amenity in the area. These might include enhancement of St. Marks Place and areas such as Broadway Mews. A market area could be included.

The Hartfield and Victoria neighbourhood is obviously an area that is not impacted by CR2 and might be considered as an early start from a scheduling perspective. We would like to see enhancement of local amenities as part of this development. This should include retention of existing cinemas and fitness facilities, enhancement of the Piazza and open spaces as well as the proposed new concert hall. As such, it would enhance the amenity and attractiveness of the area rather than simply providing extra office space.

The most significant open space proposed in the Plan is in Dundonald Yards. This will clearly not happen until after CR2 is complete. That is to say it is a long way off and may not happen at all. It is essential that new open space is part of the development process – developers will not come back to construct open space once developments are complete. We also believe that residents should gain the benefits of open space earlier than the Plan implies. Additional open space is also created when roads are pedestrianised.

Conclusions

The plans vision and key strategy is set out on page 81 of the document:

“to maintain and build on [Wimbledon’s] current vitality and viability as one of London’s major town centre, improving the transport interchange, with more business and professional services and quality shops, balanced with community, leisure, arts, culture and associated facilities including tourism, achieving a noticeable uplift in the quality of the centre.”

Core strategy CS 6 (quoted in the document) expands on this, proposing to enhance the retail core, provide active street frontages, provide leisure and cultural facilities to attract visitors, improve the public realm especially traffic management, etc.

For the reasons set out above, we believe that the Plan falls woefully short of these ambitions. In particular,

1. The proposed increase in commercial development and trebling of building heights, at a time when business requirements for office space are starting to change radically (e.g. agile working) cannot be seen as *'an uplift in the quality of the centre'*.
2. There is no scheme to significantly alter the flow of traffic through the town centre, and in particular, no plan to pedestrianise part of the centre, to make it a safer and attractive space for visitors. The Plan is vague on concrete proposals for *"improving the public realm to make the centre ... easier to get around for both pedestrians and traffic"*.
3. There is no concrete proposal to build an arts venue/concert hall for which local people have been clamouring for so long and which would be consistent with the Council's professed aim to *"attract visitors to the area all year round"*. We would regard this as essential if Wimbledon is to become a Metropolitan Centre.

We have prepared our own plan – "Vision 2040" – which suggests an alternative future for the town and this is enclosed as our contribution to the consultation.

We look forward to further discussions.

Yours sincerely

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