

Re-purposing the High Street

Final report and recommendations.

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All contributors and are listed in appendix one of this report

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Foreword by Councillor Peter Southgate, Task Group Chair

Our high streets were in decline long before the pandemic struck two years ago. The advent of online shopping had led to the demise of many well-known high-street names, and the allure of shopping as a weekend leisure activity was losing its appeal.

The pandemic accelerated the decline of the high street as all but essential shops were forced to close during the first lockdown. Some were never to reopen. This forced hiatus gave us pause to rethink the purpose of our high streets, and to decide what we wanted from them when they opened up again.

After the experience of the lockdown we knew we didn't want our high streets to go back exactly as they were before. We had come to value them more as our lives became more local, and we got used to working from home.

Our research produced plenty of ideas for change and improvement. More pedestrian friendly streets and spaces for people to socialise, town centre managers to support independent retailers, work spaces that could encourage entrepreneurs to start up and stay local, pop-up arts events and festivals – and accessible toilets.

But if these requests were common to all our five high streets, how were we to preserve and enhance the special characteristics that distinguish each of them?

Before bland shop fronts became the norm, the history of each high street could be read in the varied architecture of its buildings stretching back through the decades. It is this sense of history that makes each high street unique, and is to be celebrated even as it is repurposed for its new role as a community hub – less shopping, more socialising. We plan to do this by creating trails to link historic landmarks that will connect the high street to parks and open spaces nearby.

Because of the disruption caused by the pandemic, this review has taken a long time to complete, and I would like to thank Stella Akintan and Lysanne Eddy, our scrutiny team, for their support, patience and tenacity to see it through to completion. I hope you will judge our efforts to have been worthwhile.

Introduction

The London Borough of Merton is home to six established high streets but they have suffered over the last two years because of the pandemic, and before that the trend to online shopping; this is evident in the number of empty premises and/or high churn rates. Each one is a focal point within the local community, providing a range of retail, cultural and civic services and is a driver of local economic growth. However they will need support to achieve their full potential as they build back from the pandemic. This review will focus on Morden, Mitcham, Wimbledon, Raynes Park and South Wimbledon¹.

Merton's high streets, along with many others across the nation, are facing a number of challenges resulting in a decline in footfall and an increase in vacant shops. This is a consequence of changing consumer trends such as the rise in online shopping and competition from the larger out of town shopping centres. The vitality of the high street is also impacted by the strength of local spending power to sustain a mix of desirable shops. There also needs to be sufficient funding available to improve the public realm.

The council has made some response to these challenges including; providing professional advice to local businesses, improving some shop front parades and installing some street seating to allow for *alfresco* dining. This is alongside ambitious yet to be realised or funded long term regeneration plans. However to ensure our high streets are viable in the long term we need to ensure they are adaptable and resilient.

National research highlights that local people care about their high streets and wish to see them revived². This has also proven to be the case locally, with the recently published "Your Merton" study³ confirming the importance of their high streets to Merton residents. Councillors were very keen to participate in this review on behalf of their residents. Communities view the high street as a reflection of their local identity and want it to be a source of pride with opportunities for people to eat, drink, shop and enjoy entertainment. High streets should be a vibrant community hub with a diverse mix of shopping, cultural and social experiences. Pollution, excessive traffic, litter and an uninspiring retail offer are often cited as reasons which make our high streets unattractive to residents.

¹ Colliers Wood was not included in this review as it has recently been the focus of renovation

² Local Government Information Unit.

³ "Your Merton" report to Cabinet 17 January 2022

Impact of the pandemic

The challenges faced by high streets were exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. It had a huge economic and social impact, resulting in a reduction in footfall and many businesses collapsing in the face of lockdowns and restricted opening hours. Many businesses were forced to rely on government grants in order to survive.

Research from the South London Partnership found that 32,000 jobs were lost in South West London between 2020 and 2021. The corresponding rise in online shopping only benefitted those sole traders with a website and an online delivery offer.

The pandemic has also triggered debate about the future configuration of the high street. The task group considered questions about its potential impact throughout the review. If the trend towards homeworking continues, with corresponding change in work practices, the high street will need to adapt accordingly to new ways of living and working. There could be demand for office style shared workspaces. With an increase in residents working from home and/or not commuting and/or spending more time and money within the locality.

Why scrutiny chose this topic

In response to the pandemic, Merton launched a recovery plan to respond to its wide-ranging effects, look at the lessons learned and begin to rebuild. Overview and scrutiny enables non-executive councillors to lead and develop council policy, so when the future of the high street emerged as a key plank in the recovery, scrutiny councillors saw this as an opportunity to shape the vision for this policy area.

What did the task group do?

The task group set out to hold meetings with representatives from each of the five high streets under review. Sessions were held with Morden, Wimbledon and Raynes Park. Attendees to the meetings included ward councillors, local business owners, residents' associations and council officers. A full list of attendees is in Appendix one

These sessions brought together key stakeholders to discuss the challenges and potential solutions to re-purpose the high street and help it to adapt in the face of changing trends and current challenges.

The output from the stakeholder meetings led to the development of a SWOT analysis for each of the high streets. This set out comprehensive insights by those who live and work in each area. It formed the basis for the recommendations and will guide future work streams in this area. The SWOT analysis is listed in Appendix two.

Task Group members met with council officers to review all the various streams of work that have taken place in the high streets over the last few years. Consideration was given to the role of partners such as the South West London Partnership.

The task group considered the findings from the "Your Merton" consultation. This engagement work is the key theme within the recovery programme. It gathers the views and experiences of residents and businesses to help to develop a long-term vision for the borough.

Task Group Members joined residents' associations for a guided walkabout through Mitcham and South Wimbledon high streets to discuss their issues, concerns and ownership of individual businesses.

Key findings from the task group review

Meetings with stakeholders identified under exploited potential within all high streets. Each has strengths but much further scope to enhance the local offer. Many of the findings stated are not referenced with evidence but are anecdotal, based upon the knowledge and experience of people who have lived and worked in the area for many years.

Green Agenda

Merton is fortunate to have a number of high-quality, award-winning parks. The task group heard that more could be done to link high streets to nearby green spaces. This can be achieved through signage, but more importantly by installing additional greenery onto the high street such as planters and trees, thus creating a synergy from the high street to the park. This will help to mitigate pollution, improve the public realm, promote walking and support environmental goals. Linking Morden Park and Morden Hall Park with the high street was also put forward as a suggestion from task group members and within the Merton Character Study⁴. Councillors suggested opening up Morden Hall Park so it can be seen from the High Street in Morden.

“Your Merton” findings

The findings of the task group work corroborate the results of the “Your Merton” ambition with a number of shared themes including:

- The importance of the high street as a community hub, where people congregate and socialise.
- Ongoing frustrations with traffic, pollution and litter
- The importance of installing more trees and plants on the high street

⁴ <https://www.merton.gov.uk/planning-and-buildings/planning/supplementary-planning-documents/character-study2021>

Arts and culture offer

At a time when the high street is faced with competition it needs to define and hone its unique selling points. Research highlights that although the pandemic has forced more people to shop online, the high street still has a social appeal that has the capacity to bring people back into the public sphere⁵.

Merton is fortunate that each of its high streets has specific cultural links to historical figures and events, although this is currently under exploited. This could be developed into engagement through culture trails, self-guided or led by volunteers and modern day commercially run treasure hunts which are making a comeback via the use of social media/internet tools. These would create an opportunity to actively learn about local heritage, build local pride and attract new people to the area. A scheme similar to this was implemented in Sheffield and attracted national funding⁶.

Councillors reflected on the high profile film stars' annual garden party held in Morden Hall Park from 1947-1951. The event brought together 150 celebrities and attracted 25,000 fans. Insight into events such as these should feature in the arts and culture offer.

Most areas host a limited number of arts and cultural events, which are an essential element in a modern high street if it is to function as a community hub. Such live local events cannot be matched online or by large retail outlets, but they are not being fully exploited or developed at present.

Wimbledon has an established cultural offer through its theatres. The task group believes there are opportunities to promote these as more convenient alternatives to the West End. Raynes Park has a very popular festival and Mitcham has held some successful markets, with the scope to do more.

Opportunities to socialise

The high street as a 'place to dwell' was a frequent term used in task group discussions. Many of the conversations focused on how to create the environment for people to socialise in a safe, clean and attractive space. Some key issues emerged:

- Some high streets have narrow pavements which are incompatible with the infrastructure needed to support *al fresco* dining.
- A high street needs a central, self-evident meeting point - It is important to create one if it doesn't already exist.

⁵ Local Government Information Unit

⁶ Sheffield's walking app offers a heritage tour around the historic footballing hotspots that shaped not just Sheffield football, but football worldwide. [Build Back Better High Streets Report \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

- More needs to be done to boost the night-time economy in some high streets such as South Wimbledon which benefits from the Northern line station.
- To ensure high streets are accessible to all, parking for those with a disability must be a priority.
- The availability of toilets is also important to make the high street conducive for socialising.

Traffic and Pollution

Traffic and the proliferation of vehicles which contribute to poor air quality was seen as a major problem in all high streets. This undermines attempts to revitalize our high streets as it leads to car domination and a poor pedestrian environment. Significant major restructuring will be required to address these issues.

Furthermore, the position of a station, a railway line or one way system can create barriers and cause the high street to become disjointed with a poor layout. Again, suggestions to address these issues require significant investment and strong partnership working between the council, Transport for London and the railway companies.

Town Centre Managers

The task group found that leadership from Merton council is required to help realise the revitalisation of those high streets where a Business Improvement District is not appropriate. A town centre manager is needed for a wide range of duties including:

- Attract new businesses and entrepreneurs
- Attract external investment and advise on grants
- Co-ordinate the business community
- Create partnerships
- Promote arts and cultural events

Digital Offer

Improving digital technology will drive the future vibrancy of the high street. The rise in internet use makes this essential to keep our high streets competitive, given that online shopping, home delivery and dining apps have become the norm. Businesses need to have an online presence for their high street, to promote local events as well as marketing their goods and services. High quality Wi-Fi hotspots should be available. The high street needs to be easily accessible and convenient with services such as parking apps and click and collect. The FutureMerton team has recently received funding for an online platform called 'Shop Happy' which will map all the local independent shops.

Attracting innovation and entrepreneurs

Merton must be seen to offer a conducive environment for new innovative businesses. The task group considered ways to attract start-ups, creatives and entrepreneurs to the borough. This work has begun and pop-up shops have been made available from spaces that have fallen out of use.

In addition to pop-up shops, the council alongside partners must promote more 'meanwhile' use of vacant premises. This can be achieved by issuing licenses for short term business use rather than only leasehold and freehold tenancies.

Wimbletech CIC set up six years ago above Wimbledon Library and provides a digital and local hub and shared space for start-ups and entrepreneurs. The founder suggested that the council could facilitate a community driven initiative by hosting regular meetings with local entrepreneurs to generate ideas for the high street. The best ideas would then be matched to people with the right skills. The task group were fully in support of this idea. There are also great hopes that Romulus the new owners of Centre Court Shopping Centre will deliver on its promises to create a vibrant space for start-ups, pop ups and both business and social entrepreneurs.

Recommendations

Arts and Culture

1. Develop historical walking trails for each high street - link legacy sites around each high street to form a narrative trail to attract new visitors and promote the heritage of the area. This should be conducted with Merton Heritage Department and existing local volunteer groups could lead walks. Develop links with commercial treasure hunt providers to explore the business opportunities of such trails.
2. Develop a Sustainable Marketing Campaign for High Streets to promote arts and culture events using the Merton app and other online opportunities.

Opportunities to socialise

3. Look for opportunities to widen pavements and improve lighting on all high streets
4. Flexible pavement licensing – conduct a wholesale review of licensing to allow more outside use by businesses, improving opportunities to meet and socialise.
5. Reinstate the community toilet scheme, and also look at schemes like '20p for a pee' (exemplars in central London and the royal parks).

Digital offer

6. Enhance the digital offer on the high street with Wi-Fi hotspots
7. Develop an online platform for local businesses on the high street and use it to promote local events

Attracting Innovation and Entrepreneurs

8. Conduct research on individual high streets to develop bespoke models that will attract investment and support the business community, including:
 - Employing town centre managers
 - Work with Wimbletech CIC to facilitate meetings to brain storm new ideas for the high street.
 - Attract pop-ups/bars/micro businesses/start-up enterprises to the area

Green agenda

9. Develop a plan to connect high streets to local green spaces to enable safe and attractive walking and cycling routes and combat air pollution. This would involve greening the whole area including more trees, flower boxes and planters.

There are opportunities including:

- Morden Park to Morden Hall Park and better signposting from the Wandle Trail.
- South Wimbledon has attractions nearby such as Merton Abbey Mills, Merton Priory (chapter house), Deen City Farm and the Wandle Trail
- In Mitcham create connections/links to Beddington bird sanctuary via the Watermeads, the Wandle Trail and Mitcham Common
- Morden to Mitcham, via Morden Hall Park and Ravensbury Park

- Mitcham - Promotion of the green spaces (Figges Marsh, Cricket Green, London Road Playing Fields, Mitcham Common) and heritage (The Canons, Eagle House).
- Convert unused council land into community gardens

- More could be done to leverage the economic power and social reach of international and national Merton based sports organisations/brands including the AELTC and AFC Wimbledon in the revival of our high streets.

A summary of the findings from each High Street

A discussion on each of the high streets produced a rich narrative drawing on the experiences of residents and business owners who have lived and worked in the area for many years. Council officers and ward councillors also participated to provide context for each area. The summary that follows is a consensus of the views and ideas that emerged from the discussion. Many of the ideas corroborate the findings of the “Your Merton” consultation and recently published Merton Character Study. Thus, members of the task group were confident that meaningful recommendations could be drawn from these discussions.

Morden High Street

Parks and green spaces

The proximity of parks and green spaces presents one of the greatest opportunities for Morden high street. There are two major parks, Morden Hall Park and Morden Park; and two smaller ones, Mostyn Gardens and Kendor Gardens. They are greatly loved by locals. Morden Hall Park attracts visitors from further afield because it benefits from promotion as a National Trust property. The findings from the “Your Merton” borough wide consultation highlighted the value residents place on parks and open spaces for physical and mental wellbeing.

To maximise the opportunities presented by these green spaces, signage needs to be improved to make walking routes far more obvious from the station. This will enhance the concept of well-marked trails from the town centre to the countryside.

Traffic/ transport

Morden offers excellent transport links, with Northern line departures every 2-3 minutes for a 30-minute journey to central London. Before the pandemic 30,000 commuters a day arrived at Morden, generating demand for bus services and all-day parking spaces.

The front of the station is dominated by a bus services hub. The use of the forecourt in front of the station as a stop over and terminus precludes the use of

the space by people for socialising. For too many visitors, the image of Morden is not “a place to go to, but a place to go through”

Morden suffers from the density of through traffic, too often stationary, making it one of the most polluted High Streets in the borough. The gyratory system is intimidating for pedestrians, and would benefit from in-depth review to propose solutions. “Your Merton” found residents wanted pedestrians and cyclists prioritised over cars in their high streets if they were to become worthwhile destinations in which they could take pride.

Rerouting traffic away from the high street is a major restructuring that can only be undertaken in collaboration with Transport for London. This limits the scope for the council alone to rebalance the high street in favour of pedestrians. There is an opportunity to experiment with pedestrianising Abbotsbury Road and using the space for a street market, while encouraging the many cafes and restaurants to extend seating onto the pavement. Planters and parklets will encourage *al fresco* dining.

The retail offer

The regeneration of Morden has been under discussion for twenty years, but for a variety of reasons it has not happened. This has left business owners uncertain whether to commit to Morden for the longer term – many uses reflect short lease tenancies e.g. charity shops. However, this uncertainty also opens the door to “meanwhile” uses – pop up art galleries and exhibitions, community uses such as vaccination centres, and workspaces for start-ups.

Morden’s retail offer has been criticised for having too many fast-food outlets, betting shops and charity shops, but it also has many independent shops that ensure resilience in the face of the trend towards on line shopping. Many serve the BAME community; 33 are run by members of the Ahmadiyya community, catering to a distinct culture of daily personal shopping. These interests should be better represented in Morden’s business community in its interactions with the council.

There are concerns about the rise of financial exclusion due to the decline in face-to-face banking services. With the closure of the TSB under the station canopy, Morden’s last bank branch but one (Nationwide) has gone, joining Nat West, Santander and HSBC. The Post Office can provide some banking services and there are two ATMs remaining. Morden should be included if the banks agree on a shared branch arrangement.

Future opportunities for Morden High Street

The shock of the pandemic almost two years ago and enforced working from home may change Morden's role as a commuter hub forever. The emerging pattern is of commuting 2-3 days a week and working from home for the remainder. As the major employer in Morden, Merton council's policy on working from home will have a material impact on commuting patterns; commuter numbers through the Morden interchange could halve.

If home working leads to a significant reduction in commuters and requests to remove the bus hub are successful, this would free up space in front of the station to become the natural "meet and greet" place for the town centre, with seating, greenery, coffee and street food stalls. It is the locus from which routes to nearby attractions should radiate – Morden Hall Park, the library and the heritage centre, the Ahmadiyya Mosque, the Leisure Centre and Morden Park. Better signage and rebalancing pedestrian priority would improve the perceived accessibility of these attractions.

The Civic Centre could play a greater role in welcoming visitors and the community alike – it houses the library and heritage centre, provides a café and public toilets, and fronts a green area with seating; these facilities are currently under used.

Morden Heritage Trail opportunities

Morden's unique history and heritage can be traced back to Stane Street in Roman times, but for practical purposes it starts with the arrival of the Northern line in 1929. Merton Heritage has just been awarded funding for "There's More to Morden" a project that will bring its recent history to life with contemporary accounts and develop trails and guided walks around the town. These will provide walking routes from the station to nearby parks and open spaces, enhancing visitor perceptions of the area.

Mitcham

Unique selling point

Many Mitcham residents feel their town has the greatest sense of community within the borough. Taken in conjunction with its heritage, this provides the basis for building a unique sense of identity to differentiate it from other town centres in

Merton. Mitcham has a natural meeting point around the clock tower with seating and a popular café nearby.

Parks and green spaces

Mitcham is fortunate to have generous greenspaces within walking distance on three sides, Figges Marsh to the north, Mitcham Common to the east, the Canons and Cricket Green to the south. It also has buildings of architectural significance, including Eagle House (one of only two Grade I listed buildings in the borough), the Canons, the fire station and Mitcham parish church.

Traffic and transport

The pedestrianisation of Mitcham town centre has left Fair Green feeling stranded with traffic routed along Holborn Way. This can make it feel cut off from the north but heavy volumes of traffic at the interchange preclude a simple solution.

Retail offer

The market is close to the Clock Tower and more could be done to realise its full potential. Mitcham Town Centre feels run down and tired with too many budget shops, hairdressers and nail bars, betting shops and charity shops. While the planning system can do little to regulate the mix of retail outlets, a design code and targeted funding could improve their visual appearance. Pop up arts events e.g street theatre, could be staged in public spaces such as Fair Green.

Mitcham needs a town centre manager to:

- Revitalise the market and promote it to a more diverse audience.
- Inject confidence in the independent businesses that Mitcham is an up-and-coming town centre by promoting active shop frontages and improving the aesthetic values of the streetscape.
- Incentivise shop owners with grants so they do not opt for the cheapest fit outs when new businesses move in.
- Revitalise the community toilet scheme with relevant incentives for participating businesses.

Future opportunities

Themed markets could be run at weekends eg; farmers market or ethnic street food stalls. Fair Green Parade will benefit from a facelift as part of the redevelopment of this block.

Mitcham Heritage trail opportunities

The combination of greenspaces on the periphery and historic buildings offers the opportunity to create town trails that will link buildings and lead the pedestrian from the centre towards the open spaces beyond, encouraging their perceptions of what contributes to Mitcham and deepening their understanding of its history. Merton Heritage has the resources to inform the trail which could be developed in partnership with local interest groups such as the Mitcham Society and the Wandle Industrial Museum.

Wimbledon Town Centre

Unique selling point

Wimbledon is Merton's only major town centre and its most successful. It is essentially a brand in its own right being synonymous with international tennis and its famous common. Because of its size it also benefits from a Business Improvement District (Love Wimbledon) which has the funds to improve public spaces such as the piazza and run events like seasonal markets. These attract shoppers and visitors from an affluent residential catchment area and contribute to a vibrant, buzzy atmosphere.

Transport and traffic

As a major transport hub Wimbledon station generates footfall that leads naturally onto the Broadway, but the precincts fail to provide inviting spaces to meet or linger, so this role transfers to the piazza and nearby cafes.

The high street in Wimbledon is a long ribbon running down Wimbledon Hill Road into the Broadway with very little to draw footfall into the largely residential streets either side (the Pavement facing Elys in Worple Road is the only exception). This places some constraints on the development of the night-time economy.

Retail offer

The switch to online shopping had impacted Wimbledon, even before the pandemic struck. Debenhams has gone as the anchor store for Centre Court, and it is understood that Romulus, its new owners have no plans to replace it. They envisage a more experiential, less retail-oriented approach opening out the Queen's Road frontage to pavement cafes, and opening up the roof to bring daylight in, with flexible work spaces created in the upper area. "Meanwhile" uses such as a vaccination centre drive footfall to the upper level, and community uses should be encouraged on an interim basis.

Future opportunities

A new working from home culture could be beneficial to Wimbledon town centre in the medium term if it becomes embedded. Those who previously commuted to well paid jobs in the City and West End will be spending more time around during the day and looking to shop, eat and socialise and be entertained locally. They may have more time for childcare and to get involved with their communities. Independent businesses will benefit as local users drive loyalty.

Wimbletech CIC is located on the first floor of Wimbledon library and plays a unique role as a local incubator for start-ups and entrepreneurs. Wimbletech offers an opportunity to harness bright minds in brainstorming to come up with ideas to revitalise the high street and match talent with resources - possible synergies with Romulus in Centre Court?

Wimbledon has the most developed arts and cultural scene of the five town centres and the benefit of a theatre and entertainment quarter running from the New Wimbledon Theatre to the Polka taking in the Studio. More informal pop-up events could be fostered around this quarter eg. jazz and comedy nights in bars - although the Arts Space adjoining the library is the best venue for informal low key entertainment in Wimbledon.

Parks and green spaces

There is a notable lack of green space near the high street, South Park Gardens is some distance away. So greening opportunities have to be created in passages such as Hartfield Walk, or on the piazza. The high street itself is too narrow to allow for pavements to be widened or to accommodate parklets. However there is scope to increase greening of the two car parks on the P3 and P4 sites with planters.

Wimbledon Heritage trail opportunities

There is a walking trail leading visitors to the annual championships from the station to the AELTC; this could be the starting point for more walking trails leading to historic buildings and sites located on and off the Broadway such as the New Wimbledon Theatre and South Park Gardens. Merton Heritage can assist with resourcing materials to develop walking trails and organisations like the Wimbledon Society can advise on design.

Raynes Park High Street

Unique selling point

Raynes Park benefits from a strong civic association that brings local businesses and residents together to press for improvements to the public realm that can be funded from CIL. The Raynes Park Association runs the very successful Raynes Park Festival over 10 days in the summer and Christmas events. The Lantern Art Centre provides the cultural hub for Raynes Park.

Transport /traffic

The embankment supporting the main line splits Raynes Park town centre in two, connected by two foot tunnels and leaving the southern side as the poor relation. Despite attempts with murals, it is difficult to make the foot tunnels bright and welcoming, or to offset women's concerns for their personal safety.

As with other town centres in this review, the station entrance is the focus of pedestrian footfall and the self-evident meeting point for Raynes Park. It could be improved with seating and planters, subject to a collaborative relationship with SWR as the landowner. The forecourt of the Raynes Park Tavern opposite also has potential for better use as public space.

Flooding under Skew Arch is a particular problem for Raynes Park, and climate change means flooding incidents are becoming more frequent. The council should work with Thames Water to develop permanent engineering solutions.

Green spaces

There are no green spaces near the town centre, so greening opportunities have to be created. The south side offers more space for this, but the north side has more demand for *al fresco* dining which can be supported with parklets. The railway embankment is neglected and could contribute far more to the greening of the environment.

Retail offer

There are several voids on the High Street (Weatherspoon's has gone), and independent local businesses offer a more resilient alternative to national chains.

The residential hinterland around the station supports a relatively affluent population. As working from home becomes the norm, these residents will want

to shop and dine out locally, sustaining and increasing demand. The growing South Korean population is generating a specific demand for dining options that help to diversify the range that Raynes Park can offer.

Future opportunities

Independent shops and businesses would benefit from an online platform that maps their locations, and promotes arts and cultural events – funding is needed for this.

Raynes Park Heritage Opportunities

(Merton Heritage is invited to propose ideas for a Raynes Park trail)

SOUTH WIMBLEDON

Unique selling point

In many respects the least promising of the five high streets covered in this review because of the dominance of heavy traffic, South Wimbledon still has many hidden assets on or just off the High Street, including specialist shops, pubs, restaurants and theatres – both the award-winning Polka Theatre and the Colour House Theatre are close to the High Street.

Traffic and transport

South Wimbledon station (Northern line) is the focal point and draws heavy footfall, but the entrance lacks signage to welcome visitors and direct them to bus connections and local points of interest. The volume of traffic passing through South Wimbledon crossroads makes it intimidating for pedestrians and cyclists alike. A diagonal crossing in front of the station (cf. Wimbledon Hill Road/Alexandra Road/St. George's Road) would help to redress the balance. Pollution levels are high at this junction.

Retail offer

South Wimbledon lacks an obvious meeting place. A prime candidate is the space beside the "Horse and Groom", which is hidden from view of the station. Nevertheless, the Christmas tree is located here, and the site could be used more effectively.

The two retail units within the station curtilage (coffee shop and Hello Fresh) have been vacant for some time, and TfL as the landlord should be encouraged to consider “meanwhile” uses.

There are many independent shops in South Wimbledon, some catering for niche markets, but they need a coherent, collective voice. The centre may not carry the commercial weight to meet the criteria for a BID, but a town centre manager could help build relations with the council, and encourage independent businesses to do more to improve their frontages and take pride in their high street. Small steps such as planting flowers in the street tree pits, raising the aesthetic quality of signage and even putting out commercial waste at the right time would all improve the look of the high street.

Parks and green spaces

Nelson Gardens and Abbey Recreation Ground are a few minutes’ walk down Morden Road from South Wimbledon station. These function as green lungs to escape the congestion and pollution at the crossroads, and should be better signposted from the station.

We need to explore opportunities to create green space near the station. Building up from planting flowers in street trees pits, parklets could be sited at closed junctions on the north side of Merton High Street e.g. Hardy Road. The mature London Plane trees on the south side (and the open space they occupy) are an important green asset that should be retained as part of the regeneration of the High Path estate.

South Wimbledon Heritage Trail

South Wimbledon hosts a wide range of historical buildings which could form the nucleus of a heritage trail.

The current centre of South Wimbledon was once part of Admiral Lord Nelson’s “Paradise Merton” estate, and historic assets visible today include St John the Divine Church and Nelson Gardens which commemorate his death.

South Wimbledon underground station is a Grade II listed building

On Kingston Road to the west, the Grade II Manor house dates from the 1700s with weatherboarding to one side, and later brick Georgian façade. Merton Hall is a red/brown brick building from 1899 with stone detail clock tower. Also of note are the former council offices from 1900 in red brick with carved stone detail and Palladian windows.

Within a short walk of the High Street are reminders of Merton Abbey, the Arts and Crafts Movement, William Morris, Liberty and John Innes. The blue plaque marking the original site of the Nelson Hospital is on Merton Road

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