

# **Merton Council**

## **Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel**

**26 June 2023**

### **Supplementary agenda**

7 Community Toilet Scheme

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MITCHAM SOCIETY

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## Response to Merton Council Scrutiny Review of public toilet provision

March 2023

1. Mitcham Society welcomes this review of public toilet provision in the borough.
2. The call for submissions and online survey responses had this preamble:

*The provision of public toilets meets a fundamental need, yet the subject is hardly ever discussed. This survey aims to find out how the provision of public toilets in Merton affects people in their daily lives, especially older people and those with health conditions requiring more frequent visits to the toilet. The results will be used to review and improve the provision of public toilets in Merton.*

3. Our response specifically relates to public toilet provision in Mitcham Village. We include recent history on this matter in the form of the Rediscover Mitcham public consultations in 2012 and 2013, and our 2021 walkabout with the Overview and Scrutiny Commission's Repurposing the High Street Task Group and its recommendations to council.
4. Mitcham Society continues to be deeply disappointed in the lack of public toilet provision in Mitcham Village. Public toilets are a vital part of any thriving hub. If people are to be encouraged to use the village for shopping, socialising, enjoying our green spaces and more, then access to public toilets is a necessity. Not having public toilets is a deterrent. This is particularly the case for people whose need for toilet facilities is greatest, including some older people, those with young children and some people with disabilities. However anyone can find themselves in need of a public toilet. It is unconscionable to work to promote anywhere as a shopping, cultural and community centre while at the same time ignoring this fundamental fact. A report from the Royal Society for Public Health, [Taking the P\\*\\*\\*](#) explores this in detail. Please read it.

5. A community toilet scheme has operated with varying degrees of success in Mitcham Village, and we do not view such a scheme as a viable alternative to dedicated public toilets. Reasons include:
  - a. We are aware of participating businesses failing to publicise that they are in the scheme, leaving people unaware that toilet facilities are available.
  - b. A community toilet scheme by default only operates when a participating business is open, not when it is closed. Therefore availability is not 24 hours a day, seven days a week.
  - c. Pubs, which are open into the evening, are often cited as viable for community toilet provision. They can provide partial provision, but they do not serve the whole community. Many people find pubs intimidating places to enter, and some will not enter on the grounds of not wanting to enter establishments selling alcohol. Nor are they suitable for people with young children.
6. Merton Council is fully aware of the need for freestanding toilets in Mitcham Village. Ten years ago it came up with a costed plan to introduce public toilets here. This was an outcome of the “Rediscover Mitcham” public consultation in which members of the public were asked to comment on various proposals. The public identified public toilets as needed. Merton Council agreed and costed their provision at £50,000. They were then deemed unaffordable and removed from plans. We believe this scragpage to have been a false economy. It is a barrier to achieving a thriving and vibrant Mitcham Village.
7. The fact that, ten years on, Mitcham Village still lacks public toilets is more than upsetting. The review creates an opportunity which should be grasped, and acted upon. Public toilet provision should be made a priority for Mitcham Village.
8. The new public toilets for Mitcham Village should:
  - a. Be free to use. Earlier suggestions from Merton Council have been for a charged public toilet. We strongly object to charging. It is exclusive and creates minimal revenue. Moreover current national trend is for public toilets to be free – to give just one example, Network Rail’s toilets are now free to use.
  - b. Be open and accessible for as many hours as possible with absolutely minimal time closed to the public.
  - c. Incorporate a radar key for disabled use at times when the toilets are closed to the public.

- d. Include full disabled access facilities.
- e. Include baby changing facilities.
- f. Be subject to a rigorous and regular cleaning regime so that they are kept pleasant for people to use.
- g. Not feature a separate urinal open 24 hours a day seven days a week – if the toilet cubicle facility / accessible toilet / baby changing facility is not open for the same period. We do not support a toilet facility which is discriminatory.

### Additional information

- 9. For context we present two instances in the recent past where the importance of public toilets in Mitcham Village has been recognised but not acted upon. One from 2021/22 and one from 2012/13. We ask that the opportunity to address this necessity is not missed a third time in a little over ten years. Mitcham’s residents and visitors to the village deserve more than to be crossing their legs and crossing their fingers in the hope of being third time lucky.

### The failure of Rediscover Mitcham to deliver its promise - 2012/13

- 10. In November / December 2012 a public consultation took place relating to a range of proposed interventions in Mitcham Village and its surroundings. A second consultation took place in June and July 2013 building on results from the first. In this second consultation document, the following text and image appears on the same page. The text to the left of the toilet image reads:

*“This free standing coin operated facility can offer some toilet provision in the town centre”*

#### Toilets

Unfortunately it is not realistic to re-open the toilets in Sibthorpe Road car park nor to provide a new toilet facility on a similar scale. However we recognise that an additional facility, to compliment the existing community toilet scheme, will benefit the town centre and encourage people to stay longer. As such we are proposing a small coin operated toilet with urinal in a central location close to the Fair Green and Market.

1. This free standing coin operated facility can offer some toilet provision in the town centre



- 11. A [report](#) went to the [Street Management Advisory Committee](#) on 18 September 2013. Our Chair made a representation to this committee. Section 3 of this report contains the Rediscover Mitcham consultation outcomes. Para 3.46, (p21) extract “The earlier consultation in 2012 identified some demand for a toilet facility. This would also correlate with the view that toilet provision can make the town centre a more practically attractive location and also address specific anti-social behaviour

issues such as street urination. The location of the toilet, adjacent to the market and main shopping areas, reflects its role not only as a public convenience but also as a contributing factor to the wider regeneration objectives”

12. Section 5 of this report contains proposals, including:

- a. Para 5.15 (p39) “Provide a self-cleaning toilet cubicle with coin operated (20p charge) and radar key access (for disabled people) adjacent to Market Square. It is proposed that initially this facility is open from 08.00 to 18.00 to prevent anti-social behaviour and misuse”
- b. Alongside a photo of the following text:



“In response to concerns regarding the aesthetic appeal of the toilet cubicle building, officers would work with the manufacturers to identify a method for “softening” its appearance that best suits the character of the Fair Green”

13. Section 7.3 of this report contains costings. The public toilet costing is reported at £50,000 (p53).

### **Overview and Scrutiny Commission Repurposing the High Street Task Group 2021/22**

14. In July 2021 we hosted a walkabout in Mitcham Village to support Cllr Peter Southgate in his work on the Overview and Scrutiny Commission’s Repurposing the High Street Task Group exercise. We invited the members of this task group and other local ward councillors. Along with Cllr Southgate we were joined by Cllrs Alambritis, Macauley and Akyigyina for the entirety of the walkabout. Cllr Owen Pritchard joined briefly. We had a wide-ranging discussion about Mitcham Village and actions which could be taken to make it a more attractive place to visitors. The issue of public toilets inevitably came up, and our visit fed into the final report and recommendations.

15. A [paper](#) went to the [Overview and Scrutiny Commission on 16 February 2022](#). The paper notes in para 2.12 “The high street as a ‘place to dwell’ was a frequent term used in task group deliberations. Many of the conversations focused on how to create the environment for people to socialise in a safe, clean and attractive space.”

One of the key points made in this paragraph: “The availability of toilets is also important.”

16. Sadly the recommendations failed to go far enough. Recommendation 5 simply states, “Reinstate the community toilet scheme, and also look at schemes like ‘20p for a pee’ (exemplars in central London and the royal parks).” We have stated elsewhere that a community toilet scheme is not the solution for Mitcham Village.

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