

Committee: Overview and Scrutiny Commission

Date: 16 February 2022

Wards: ALL

Subject: Repurposing the High Street Task Group Review – Draft Recommendations.

Recommendations:

- A. The Commission are asked to agree the draft recommendations arising from the Repurposing the high street task group review.
 - B. Agree for the recommendations to proceed to Cabinet in March 2022
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1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In September 2020 a task group was commissioned to review the High Streets in Merton. The membership of the task group is as follows:

Councillor Peter Southgate, Chair
Councillor Stephen Alambritis
Councillor Adam Bush
Councillor David Chung
Councillor Ed Gretton
Councillor Paul Kohler

A summary of the findings and draft recommendations are set out below.

2 DETAILS

- 2.1. The aim of the task group was to review the offer across five centres; Morden, Mitcham, Wimbledon, Raynes Park and South Wimbledon. Colliers Wood was not considered as part of this review as it has recently been the focus of improvement measures.
- 2.2. The task group sought to draw out opportunities from the high streets and consider ways to rebuild connectivity, using art and culture as one stream amongst others to broaden the offer in the town centre.
- 2.3. The review looked at entrepreneurship and how to encourage new businesses into the borough and to encourage “meanwhile” usage for vacant units.
Research undertaken by the task group
- 2.4. The Task Group held online meetings with representatives from Morden, Wimbledon and Raynes Park. These sessions brought together ward councillors, local business owners, residents’ associations and council officers.
- 2.5. Guided walkabout sessions took place in Mitcham and South Wimbledon high streets to discuss the issues and concerns as well as look at the range of business ownership.

- 2.6. The output from the stakeholder meetings led to the development of a SWOT analysis for each of the high streets. This set out comprehensive insight by those who live and work in the area.
- 2.7. 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 London Partnership
- 2.8. The task group considered the findings from the Your Merton consultation. This engagement work gathered the views and experiences of residents and businesses to help to the council develop a long term vision for the borough.

Findings of the Task Group

- 2.9. Merton is fortunate to have a substantial number of high quality, award winning parks. The task group heard that more could be done to link high streets to nearby green spaces.
- 2.10. The findings of the task group work corroborate with 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.
 - There are ongoing frustrations with traffic, pollution and litter and
 - the importance on installing more trees and plants on the high street
- 2.11. Merton's high streets each has a unique culture along with historical figures and events. This could be developed into engaging culture trails led by volunteers. It would create an opportunity to actively learn about local heritage, build local pride and attract new people to the area.
- 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. Some key issues emerged:
 - Some high streets have narrow paths making it incompatible with the infrastructure 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 exist.
 - 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 is a priority.
 - The availability of toilets is also important.
 - Traffic and the proliferation of cars which contributes to poor air quality, was seen to be a problem in all high streets. This undermines attempts to revitalize the areas as it leads to car domination and a poor pedestrian environment. Significant major restructuring will be required to address these issues.

- 2.13. The task group found leadership is required to help to realise the vision of those high streets where a Business Improvement District is not in place. A Central point of contact is needed for a wide of duties.
- 2.14. 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. It is important to promote local events. There also needs to be high quality Wi-Fi hotspots available. The High street needs to be easily accessible and convenient with services such as parking apps and click and collect.
- 2.15. Merton must be seen as 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 for spaces that have fallen out of use

3 RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE TASK GROUP

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 host tours.
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.

4 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

The Overview and Scrutiny Commission can select topics for scrutiny review and for other scrutiny work as it sees fit, taking into account views and suggestions from officers, partner organisations and the public.

5 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN OR PROPOSED

- 5.1. The Panel will be consulted at the meeting

6 TIMETABLE

- 6.1. None relating to this covering report

7 FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1. None relating to this covering report

8 LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1. None relating to this covering report. Scrutiny work involves consideration of the legal and statutory implications of the topic being scrutinised.

9 HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY COHESION IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1. It is a fundamental aim of the scrutiny process to ensure that there is full and equal access to the democratic process through public involvement and engaging with local partners in scrutiny reviews. Furthermore, the outcomes of reviews are intended to benefit all sections of the local community.

10 CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1. None relating to this covering report. Scrutiny work involves consideration of the crime and disorder implications of the topic being scrutinised.

11 RISK MANAGEMENT AND HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

11.1. None relating to this covering report

**12 APPENDICES – THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS ARE TO BE
PUBLISHED WITH THIS REPORT AND FORM PART OF THE REPORT**

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13 BACKGROUND PAPERS

13.1.