

Response to Wimbledon Masterplan from the Liberal Democrats

OVERVIEW

1. We welcome the production of a Masterplan for Wimbledon though with so much of it depending on a Government decision about Crossrail 2 it is difficult for any plan to be definitive. If there is a decision not to proceed with Crossrail 2 then the Masterplan will need to be reviewed.
2. Like many other people who have commented on the Masterplan we have not found it a very easy document to review. It would have been far more helpful to have it set out as a series of questions with the main topics that the Masterplan needs to cover. It is also very challenging to consult on the Masterplan at the same time as the Local Plan. The former is subservient to the latter thus it would be logical to agree the Local Plan first.
3. The concern many local residents have is that Merton Council sees Wimbledon as a cash cow – to be exploited to generate money through cramming in as many office buildings as possible. We want to see a plan which views Wimbledon as a community - one which will certainly change over the next 20 years but one where the nature of those changes will be guided by community involvement and a clear vision of what makes our town special.
4. We do not understand why the Masterplan seeks to change Wimbledon's status to a Metropolitan status – this was not a feature of the consultation and has not, to our knowledge, been called for by any part of the community
5. We were disappointed not to see more about building new accommodation in central Wimbledon. There is a huge shortage of affordable housing in London and we believe that there is opportunity (particularly with new development above the railway lines) to increase the number of people living in Wimbledon. The Masterplan should not just be about office and retail space, but about ensuring that a balanced development includes residential building as well.

SPECIFIC COMMENTS

6. Wimbledon as a Cultural Centre Wimbledon has the potential to contribute to making Merton a major cultural centre building on the town's world-wide brand. Along the Broadway we already have leisure facilities that attract people to the town including bars & pubs, two cinemas (comprising 15 screens) and three exceptional theatres, namely, New Wimbledon Theatre, its adjoining Studio and the famous Polka Theatre. However despite Wimbledon's strong musical heritage and the promises of previous administrations no dedicated music venue exists to replace the old town hall and we would like to see more in the Masterplan detailing the council's attitude to the proposal to build an iconic concert hall on the Hatfield Road car park site. This is a proposal that we welcome provided it includes suitable facilities for local amateur groups and can be fully financed by the private sector. Such a development would be a major boost to making Wimbledon a leading cultural centre although the Council must ensure it makes no commitments that might saddle it and future administrations with a white elephant. In addition there also needs to be links to commercial cultural activities in the rest of Merton including ensuring a range of premises for start ups and artists studios that, with imagination, could play a vital role in the regeneration of Morden.

7. **Greening Wimbledon** The Masterplan makes routine references to *greening Wimbledon* – an admirable aim that we share. But it is short on specific proposals for making this a focus for developers. We need a basic definition of “greening” to be translated into a set of enforceable standards and accompanying guidance. There are some interesting examples and aspirations in the Masterplan but this is not enough.
8. **YMCA Site** The proposals for a 13 storey building on the YMCA site are problematic and very controversial. It is difficult to believe that anyone walking down the Broadway would think that a 13 storey building belongs there, some 50% taller than any other local building and dominating the residential accommodation within and outside the Trinity Gardens Conservation area. We are concerned at the process whereby the product of informal discussions between the YMCA and the planning team appear to have been slipped into the Masterplan as a seeming *fait accompli*. We believe this to be a misuse of the Masterplan that should not be used to pre-judge such a controversial issue. We strongly submit that no reference to any increase in the height of the building should be included in the Masterplan and that such issues should, on the contrary, be determined by the Planning Committee, in the normal way, when full details of any proposal can be reviewed along with input from local residents.
9. **Pedestrianisation** We are in favour of pedestrianisation, where feasible, which can increase the quality of life for visitors and residents. However we are not in favour of proposals from the Wimbledon Society to achieve this by building an additional road bridge across the railway from Alexandra Road into Queens Road.
10. **Air pollution** This is a major problem in Merton and there is little in the Masterplan which would reduce it. The plan for traffic modelling (p72) should include a study into the current patterns of travel to, from and within the area, including their environmental impact, before any options are considered. In addition to car, bus, tram and rail services more detail on other options, such as private group initiatives, pedestrian access and cycle routes, should also be included in the Masterplan.
11. **Building Height** The most controversial issue in the Masterplan is the proposal for 18 storey buildings in the centre of Wimbledon. These are not explicitly covered in the text of the document and are misleadingly described as ‘mid rise’. If the Masterplan is to be accepted by local residents, rather than imposed on them, there needs to be an explicit discussion about the maximum height. Little evidence has been presented of any current demand for 18 storey office buildings, and even less, given the changing nature of office work, that any such demand will arise in the future.
12. **Protecting the vision from fragmenting** We are concerned that the division of the town centre into 13 “neighbourhoods” could lead to a fragmentation of the central vision. The Masterplan shows that historically, Wimbledon grew as an organic whole and was never divided into 13 separate “neighbourhoods”. The Masterplan should make explicit reference to the planning process retaining a holistic approach to development across Wimbledon. This does not preclude different areas evolving different characteristics but would ensure the unity of the whole is not lost in the process.
13. **Quality which pays for itself** An attractive environment will be a major selling point for a world-class destination. High quality, mid-rise architecture in harmony with existing structures should be an essential feature of Wimbledon as in central Paris, This should be complemented by imaginatively designed green and public spaces and environmentally sensitive approach to traffic management and the transport interchange. We welcome the Masterplan’s vision to encourage independent retailers but note there is no mention of how this is going to be realised.

CONCLUSION

14. The Masterplan represents an opportunity to take the residents, visitors and businesses of Wimbledon forward together to truly realise the potential of a brand that is recognised across the world. Yet Wimbledon is not a brand, but a vibrant community, and the Masterplan will only succeed if it ensures that that truth is not lost in Merton's haste to realise the town's narrowly conceived economic worth. We welcome the establishment of the Masterplan but have strong reservations, as described above, about both its detail and vision. Unfortunately, as currently conceived, the Masterplan represents a missed opportunity to develop a scheme that could have garnered real community support. Instead of a vision for a developing, organic, residential and business community, we have a disparate set of ideas with no real coherence, no plan for what should happen if Crossrail 2 does not get built and an unhealthy interest in over developing office space and branded retail establishments.