

Making More of Morden

We are writing as members of Merton Park Ward Residents' Association (MPWRA), founded in 1990. MPWRA has over 430 members and sponsors three independent councillors on Merton Council. The ward itself has a growing population of nearly 9,500. As a group we comprise MPWRA members, including committee members, and have convened specifically to consider the outlook and implications of plans to regenerate Morden.

We are grateful for the opportunity to comment on the plans, having previously looked closely at the Planning Brief completed in early 2014 and the indications of likely developments as explained by Merton council officers to us at our meeting in October.

We welcome the intention to revitalize Morden Town Centre. Similarly, we welcome the questionnaire on 'Making More of Morden' and many of us have submitted our own replies. This note is a separate response to emphasise several underlying issues that need to be addressed and, we hope, resolved in the forthcoming Master Plan for Morden.

These comments are kept brief on purpose. We would, however, be keen to have further discussions with council officers to work on these issues and other points officers might wish to raise with us. We recognize that Merton Park is one of several wards adjacent to the Town Centre and would be pleased to form part of a wider contact group including people from those wards.

Massing Quality and Security

1. The **height, density and style** of buildings close to existing housing will be a particularly sensitive issue. We presume that undertakings to avoid excessive **massing** close to existing housing and to respect the character of the area will be incorporated in the Master Plan. We welcome previous statements from council officers that the architectural style of the development will be a critical feature on which its success and reputation will be judged. Along with the need for elegance, we would expect that **safety** and **security** will be designed into the plans. Morden currently has a few notorious locations where antisocial behaviour occurs frequently; we must avoid this in future.

Housing Needs

2. It is most important that the development builds on the diversity, including **age diversity**, that already exists in Morden.

3. Dwellings must provide sufficient **living and storage space**. While these considerations should be covered by housing design standards, every effort should

be made to design space into the scheme to facilitate good quality housing for older and younger households.

4. The council should take every possible step to prevent properties in the scheme being bought primarily as **investments**, including a requirement that new housing should be advertised for sale locally first.

Infrastructure – schools, medical, etc.

5. We have severe concerns about the need for infrastructure and services and believe this needs to be properly considered at an early stage. Although it is impossible to give accurate predictions about **future schooling and medical needs** it is clear that there will be an increased demand for services as well as other support. We understand that new schools are most unlikely to be located within a town centre but the plans should identify potential extra capacity. We do not believe that existing schools can be expanded indefinitely. We are aware that existing blocks of flats in central Morden already contain large numbers of children. It is to be expected that the new development will also house many children and the number may grow over time.

6. We welcome council officers' comments that all current **local green spaces** would be retained, Kendor Gardens would be improved and new developments will have some public open space. We believe that Morden Hall Park can provide outstanding green space. There is both opportunity and challenge to exploit it (as the National Trust are considering) but not in a way that would overwhelm the Park.

Parking and traffic flows

7. We recognise that parking provision will be critical to the public perception of whether the regeneration is a success. It is a concern shared by many Merton Park Ward Residents' Association members. In our group we have discussed at length the competing considerations. There is a clear need for balance between providing **sufficiently flexible mobility** for people who rely on their cars (in a Zone 4 location) and preventing the **area being dominated by vehicles**. We note that parking surveys conducted in Morden a few years ago which showed the town centre was significantly 'under-parked' are now out of date. Parking needs cannot be left to be sorted out once the development is completed. There has to be early agreement on what provision to make for the motor car.

We propose that the development should adopt the following guiding principles:

- It should be recognised that there will be a demand for parking for a proportion of the occupants of the new development; the proportion should be explicit in the Master Plan
- This parking should be in specific places for specified vehicles; spaces would be auctioned in the first instance and thereafter sold at the going market rate (we believe this practice is followed elsewhere)

- Sufficient (multi-storey) parking, in a convenient central location, should be provided for shoppers and others visiting the town centre
- No parking should be allowed for occupants of the new development on existing streets with controlled parking zones in the surrounding wards (consistent with current practice)
- Multi-storey car parking above the Northern Line tracks between Morden station and the sidings should be designed and costed
- Only council or other employees who are 'essential car users' should be provided with parking permits in the town centre; their 'essential' status should be checked on a regular basis.

8. On this last point, we understand there is a rational process currently in train to concentrate **council staff in the Civic Centre**. While this may be correct at present, as council responsibilities and staff roles evolve over time, critical masses of staff who could operate as effectively based outside the town centre should be relocated. Similarly, although council retrenchment into the Civic Centre may have been the best use of council resources in recent months, as the regeneration programme gets underway the Civic Centre is far and away the most effective resource to **accommodate displaced private sector businesses** temporarily so that they can remain in the locality with minimum disruption through the building process and provide a significant revenue stream to Merton.

9. We also seek assurances about **traffic** both during and after completion. We understand that the layout of roads in Morden can be reconfigured to improve traffic flows, enhance the pedestrian experience and make the town centre more congenial as a destination. This presents exciting possibilities. But it is imperative that traffic is not encouraged to intrude more than it does already onto residential roads. Merton Park ward suffers a growing **rat-running and speeding** problem and any road scheme which encouraged more vehicles to see them as a sensible alternative route is to be avoided.

Commercial Businesses

10. We would hope that the current diversity of **retail shops** and other premises in Morden would be expanded by the development. We believe that accommodation for this diversity can be designed into the range of retail outlet sizes specified in the Master Plan as well as including an anchor tenant.

11. The many businesses currently based in Morden should be given close attention to **avoid dislocation** of their business. Decant programmes should be prepared to enable them to operate as unhindered as possible during the redevelopment process. We presume that Future Merton will engage with these businesses at an early stage and certainly before the Master Plan is completed.

12. We welcome the intention to create a wide **range of office sizes** in the development, giving scope for innovative ideas and ways of working. We see the development as a golden opportunity for **innovative** retail and other commercial and service **spaces**. Affordable business units have an important role to play as well as affordable housing. Plans should accommodate start-ups, serviced offices and

spaces for community meeting rooms, etc. We know that council officers are familiar with these concepts and have seen them in practice but we would be keen to discuss them with Future Merton in more detail. We are aware that currently many exciting, aspirational businesses and other groups are finding space increasingly limited and expensive closer into London. Morden can take the initiative to accommodate them instead.

13. **Fast broadband** access should of course be a stipulation in the development.

Site Acquisition

14. As we raised at our meeting with council officers, we remain wary of the challenge to acquire the remaining **parcels of land** beyond LBM and TfL control. From personal experience of some of our group it is clear that there are numerous **separate and different tenures** in the area concerned. No doubt Future Merton are seeking legal opinion on this but we do hope that the groundwork is done now so that it does not present a significant impediment to cohesive development in the future. We are aware that fragmented ownership put paid to redevelopment plans in the 1990's as many owners named on the Land Registry titles could not be traced and tenants and occupiers were not forthcoming about to whom they paid their rent. The records of the survey conducted at that time should be with the Council and they should be examined and updated as soon as possible.

Development Objectives and Developer Selection

15. The regeneration scheme is exciting and substantial. But we believe it will need a clearer articulation to communicate the **key development objectives** – the USP, if you like – to residents, developers and the wider public. From discussions with council officers the headlines point, rightly, to Morden developing in a way that reflects its position as a transport hub and its proximity to a National Trust Park etc. The ability to express these points succinctly (allied with comments around retail, commercial and housing diversity) would give the scheme the powerful and compelling identity that it deserves. A strong focus on these elements would favour retail and commercial businesses in Morden away from the same high street shops available in every other town centre. There is a clear opportunity to promote a different retail offer, meeting the needs of an enlarged local population with the right day- and night-time economies.

16. This also highlights the need for careful **selection of the developer** to ensure alignment between what Merton wants and what the developer intends.

16.1 Commitment to a significant percentage of **affordable housing** and homes appropriate to local needs should be a key consideration in the selection of the developer. Beyond that simple, standard requirement, the development offers Merton, as a key landowner, the opportunity to establish a 'Merton Rule' for reasonably priced properties as it did so well for energy use - Merton should establish an **affordability measure** which would enable those whose incomes are reasonable, but for whom current property prices are

simply unaffordable, to live near their families. This should be a rule that cannot be overridden by a simple request of a developer as often happens currently with affordability provision.

16.2 Similarly Merton should be seeking a developer who sees the overall benefit in creating a **range of business premises** which can attract a big name anchor tenant as well as smaller independent stores through to affordable and start-up styles of enterprise

16.3 Bearing in mind the lengthy timescales involved in the current plans, the council should press for a development partner who is prepared to see through the entire regeneration scheme at a **sufficiently rapid pace**. It would be tragic if a few 'easy' sites were redeveloped, leaving much of the area incomplete for several years. It would not be in the council's or TfL's or the public's interest to face a repetition of the Colliers Wood Tower paralysis but over a much wider area.

We recognise that we have made several suggestions for further shaping of the regeneration scheme and, as we said at the outset, would welcome the opportunity to work through them with council officers in the near future.

MPWRA

10 November 2015