



DRAFT MERTON HERITAGE STRATEGY 2020-2025 A response to Merton Council

June 2020

1. Mitcham Cricket Green Community & Heritage takes an active interest in the future of the Cricket Green Conservation Area and its environs. We are the civic society for this part of Merton and part of the wider civic movement through membership of the national charity Civic Voice. We have been closely involved in the development of the Merton Local Plan, Borough Character Studies, the Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Plan and numerous development proposals in the area. Our approach to development and change in the area is established in the Cricket Green Charter which was refreshed in 2019 with the support of London Borough of Merton and local councillors (<https://mitchamcricketgreen.org.uk/cricket-green-charter/>). The Charter has been acknowledged in the Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Plan for Cricket Green. We are members of The Canons Steering Group delivering a £5m Lottery funded project and also undertake practical projects, including the delivery of our own £20k Lottery project [Know Your Cricket Green](#), organise walks and run [Mitcham Heritage Day](#) and Community on the Green. We were active members of Merton Heritage Forum until its sudden disbandment and have participated at Merton Heritage Discovery Day since it began through providing both a stall and illustrated talk.

2. We have sought to inform and influence previous version of the Heritage Strategy, including in 2010 and 2015, and made a significant contribution to the activities and projects in the current Work Plan. Our role is widely recognised in the draft Merton Heritage Strategy to 2025.

3. We welcome renewal of the Heritage Strategy to 2025. It should play an important role in:

- demonstrating Merton Council's strong commitment to the benefits of protecting, managing and celebrating heritage across all its corporate responsibilities
- bringing more organisations and enthusiasts together to collaborate around heritage initiatives
- engaging larger and more diverse audiences in heritage and supporting the broadest active participation in its future
- providing the basis for future funding investment from both external (e.g. grants, Lottery) and internal (e.g. Community Infrastructure Levy, capital programme, transport, education, green spaces, arts) sources.

4. In its current form the renewed Heritage Strategy cannot support these roles. It is a largely descriptive document and lacks the means to deliver meaningful change. It

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should be informed by a review of the current Strategy's track record of delivery. Our own experience suggests there are significant lessons to learn before embarking on a new Heritage Strategy, including:

Corporate commitment

5. The evidence of Merton Council's actions during the period of the current Strategy demonstrates it needs a stronger corporate commitment to heritage. Merton Heritage Strategy is invisible when it comes to our discussions with any part of Merton Council outside the Heritage and Local Studies Centre. The Strategy is not mentioned by others and there is no evidence of it having any influence on decisions. This has been exacerbated by the withdrawal of FutureMerton's core functions around design and planning when Merton Heritage Forum was established. A prime example is the failure by Merton Council to exercise its right to take back ownership of the former Mitcham fire station when it was closed, despite the commitment in the Merton Heritage Strategy to "*find a new use for the former Mitcham fire station which advances its role as a community & heritage asset*". It was apparent that the Property Services team was entirely oblivious to this commitment. Furthermore, delivery of the Strategy will not be secured by the proposed annual report from Heritage Services which has responsibility for only some of Merton Council's roles in protecting and celebrating our heritage.

6. The lack of Merton Council's corporate commitment is evident in a review of progress with the current Strategy's Work Plan. This includes 10 commitments by Merton Council beyond those of the Heritage and Local Studies Centre. Just 2 have been delivered – restoration of Mitcham's clock tower (albeit still not keeping time) and a review of the Local List (which has taken nearly three years). Commitments on The Canons, former Mitcham fire station, Merton Priory Wall, Borough Character Studies, incorporation of Merton Heritage Strategy into the Local Plan, and Wandle Industrial Museum have either been ignored or not delivered even years after their scheduled completion date. Commitments to the role of Merton Heritage Forum and ambitions for its participation to be widened have been abandoned as a result of it being disbanded. Without recognising these failures, and understanding and addressing the reasons for their failure it is impossible to develop a new, realistic, workable Heritage Strategy.

Collaboration mechanism

7. The move in the current Merton Heritage Strategy towards a more collaborative approach with local organisations is a welcome one. It has rarely been achieved. It is positive that the renewed Strategy's intention is that it "*provides a framework for further collaboration between the Council and the wider community*" and that it will be accompanied by a Delivery Plan. The current Strategy is based on a similar intention and, regrettably, collaboration over its accompanying Work Plan has been almost non-existent.

8. The renewed Strategy needs to demonstrate what will now be different. The challenge has been made worse by the myopic manner in which Merton Council disbanded the key collaboration mechanism – Merton Heritage Forum – which was available during the period of the current Strategy. The grounds for disbanding Merton Heritage Forum have never been made clear. We were more than surprised by the statement in response to Public Questions for the 8 July 2020 Council meeting that "*the Heritage Forum has not been disbanded*" given that the 5th February 2020 Council meeting resolved to "*dissolve*" Merton Heritage Forum and amended the Constitution to remove it. The July response also confirmed that "*there is no direct costs saving*" from disbanding Merton Heritage Forum. This representation of events adds to the disquiet over the manner of the decision to disband Merton Heritage Forum which was based on the false claim that the Forum had itself made a decision to wind itself up. No such decision to dissolve the Forum was made. The meeting was recorded, and that recording is [available](#) even today for anyone to watch and see the discussion for themselves. The whole affair has served only to further undermine trust in the relationship between

Merton Council and the network of voluntary organisations and community groups with a concern for heritage. This makes collaboration over delivery of the renewed Strategy even more difficult.

Partnership ability

9. The Heritage and Local Studies Centre is a shining example of positive work and we have also welcomed FutureMerton's support for refurbishing the Conservation Area road signs throughout Cricket Green in response to our 50th anniversary initiative. These are exceptions which serve to demonstrate what can be achieved but they are all too rare. Our general experience is one of a top down, uncommunicative organisation which offers little respect for local knowledge and is often absent from the heritage scene. One example is that it is harder to secure participation of Merton Council owned buildings in Mitcham Heritage Day every year than working with any other partner. The experience of trying to partner on The Canons project funded by the National Lottery has been head-bangingly frustrating over nearly 10 years, to the point of turning volunteers away.

Progressing the draft Merton Heritage Strategy

10. We ask that renewal of Merton Heritage Strategy is only progressed once there is a clear corporate commitment to heritage, practical mechanisms for collaboration are available and Merton Council has addressed its partnership limitations. Without these in place the renewed Strategy will be a paper exercise.

11. More generally the draft document lacks ambition and needs a thorough edit and fact check. It should also be scrupulous in recognising the contribution of local voluntary organisations and community groups in the delivery of the large majority of heritage initiatives which it describes. We believe a much briefer document supported by principles, a delivery plan and success measures, along with clear mechanisms for delivery and review and a visibly enhanced corporate commitment is most likely to be successful.

12. The draft list of desired outcomes is aspirational to the point of being meaningless without a much stronger framework and clear priorities. The list of Key Actions is misleadingly selective and seemingly based on very limited feedback prior to publishing the draft Strategy. The Key Actions bear very little relationship to the events and activities described in the rest of the draft Strategy. Moreover, some of the Key Actions are misleading, such as that "*To commence building / refurbishment work at The Canons to form a heritage and cultural hub for the community*" when the primary use of The Canons will be as rented office space.

13. It is important to reflect on why the feedback ahead of publishing the draft was more limited than with the current Strategy before progressing.

14. We would also emphasise the need for a far more convincing approach to the relationship with Merton's planning responsibilities. The draft document fails to reference the current Local Plan review and those references it does make to planning policy documents are too often confused, out of date, or wrong. The document also fails to recognise the role of Community Infrastructure Levy as a source of heritage funding.

15. We look forward to a Merton Heritage Strategy which can deliver what is needed to protect, manage and celebrate local heritage and the contribution it makes.