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Suzanne Grocott
Chair, Plan Wimbledon

By e-mail

30th April 2021

Dear Suzanne

Thank-you for your letter of the 21st April. We would welcome a further meeting and have a number of thoughts on how we might work together on town centre spatial issues including resolving a number of apparent misunderstandings between us.

In response to specific points in your letter we have the following comments:

Firstly, we are not objecting to the Forum being designated as the lead body for neighbourhood planning purposes. We are, however, as you know very concerned about the inclusion of the CBD area within your designation application. This relates to a lack of detail in terms of your aims and aspirations with regard to the Town Centre, not understanding your approach towards the existing SPD adopted in November 2020 and the degree of business involvement and say in terms of your governance structure. We can elaborate on these points in our meeting, but also go into more detail below.

With regard to your point 1) in your letter. Whilst there is no theoretical limit to the size of a neighbourhood planning area, with over 100 Forums now established in the GLA area, we note that most are in the 10-20,000 population bracket. There are exceptions such as Mill Hill (27,000), Finsbury Park and Stroud Green (30,000), Isle of Dogs (28,000), but these do not include centres of the same planning status as Wimbledon.

We note therefore that your proposed physical boundary and resulting population is of a large 'town' rather than a 'neighbourhood' size & larger than any other neighbourhood area we are aware of. Whilst populations of 40,000 are more common outside of metropolitan areas – for example in market towns, these are mostly led by Town Councils with a long track record of engagement and delivery.

We welcome and support your view that the centre is vital for accessing local services, shops, workplaces, hospitality, transport and hubs. Over the last 9 years Love Wimbledon BID has invested significant effort to widely consult and influence the development of the masterplan and subsequent SPD.



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We are not quite sure the point you are making in point 2. of your letter, however, if you are suggesting addressing the CBD area distinctly and, developing a specific set of planning policies for the centre, this is an option we are proposing to undertake as a business-led Forum.

In relation to the above, whilst we don't consider the masterplan perfect, we understand the SPD guidance, together with the Local Plan policy framework for the centre, namely policies CS.6, CS.7, CS14 and CS18-20 are all *strategic* policies and therefore provide a strong statutory basis for planning purposes, which any neighbourhood plan would have to be in conformity with.

In addition, Wimbledon Town Centre is designated as a Major Centre in the London Plan and indeed is Merton's only Major Centre. It is also designated as a GLA Opportunity Area with Colliers Wood and South Wimbledon in the emerging London Plan. Its role therefore is significant beyond Wimbledon, even without Cross Rail 2. There are a number of London Forums that have had such areas excluded by Councils on designation. However, our main point is that having invested in so much time and effort relating to the centre's strategic as well as local role, we want to build on what is already there in terms of the SPD Guidance and Local Plan Policies. Whilst we accept that COVID has and will continue to be a factor in the High Street recovery & future, to date the impact has been small in Wimbledon and we are already seeing the CBD bouncing back.

We are determined therefore, working with Merton, landowners, businesses, service providers and residents to maximise our influence over the future spatial development of the CBD area (i.e. Love Wimbledon BID's agreed boundary) and how the existing 2020 masterplan develops out. Hence our interest in a neighbourhood planning approach which reflects business as well as residential issues.

You suggest a business led Neighbourhood Forum would be divisive. We disagree, since a business Neighbourhood Plan would need support from both residents and businesses in a referendum and would therefore need to be acceptable to both. Your plan would not, and businesses could only have, a say via their employees if they lived locally and would not incorporate the views of the property owners. Many existing business led Forums have a balance of business and resident representation on their steering groups (e.g. Hyde Park and Paddington, Central Ealing, Mayfair, Spitalfields). We also feel, as an existing community organisation, and through our extensive business network, that we are very well placed to facilitate a dynamic dialogue between residents, businesses, and real estate interests. We are currently in the process of surveying key sectors we work with to explore this further.

In order to overcome the current difficulty in our relations it might be helpful for you to pause the designation for Plan Wimbledon whilst we work through our different starting points, work through key governance issues and establish the degree of collaboration that could work. This particularly relates to point 3 in your letter. In terms of your constitution, whilst businesses can join they do not appear to have a vote on the plan as businesses as a sector, and there appears to be no recognition of property owners or asset managers. We find this surprising given that you propose to include a major metropolitan centre.

We have given more thought to how we can work positively & collaboratively with you, as well as Merton Council, in line with your suggestion that all interested parties collaborate together and suggest there are a couple of options we should discuss:

1. We form an MP or Councillor chaired working group with LB of Merton consisting of representatives from the proposed Forum, the BID and Merton to progress the detail behind the SPD and the emerging new Local Plan. This could draw on the work & evidence being developed by Plan Wimbledon to ensure maximum synergies.

2. The BID forms a business led Neighbourhood Forum for the CBD with one third of places for residents (which could come via the proposed Forum), one third for businesses and one third for Merton Council & other community interests. We understand an examiner can direct the extent of the resident population who would be eligible to vote on any submitted plan.

We do consider some of the current tensions and mistrust relates to the fact that we are only having these conversations now and your earlier committee and meeting discussions appeared anti-BID and anti-business. We don't appreciate the consultation time pressure just as businesses are emerging from lockdown, but as mentioned above, we are currently polling a cross section of businesses to get their views on the options. Early indications are that 90% of businesses from a range of commercial interests do not support a resident led neighbourhood plan covering the CBD area and verbal feedback from a Strategic Leaders Forum yesterday also supported this evidence, with statements such as:-

"There is adequate planning control exercised by LB Merton. Further layers of control will add to an already lengthy process and will make Wimbledon a less attractive place in which to invest."

"There is already in place a planning framework, it may not be perfect but it is fair and provides the local neighbourhood an opportunity to put forward their concerns."

You will be aware we would all be able to access the significant technical support from the Locality-Aecom national support programme & we would be happy to agree joint briefs for any consultants used and to share the advice given.

We have also sought advice on the non-strategic policies design, transport, environment and social policies any neighbourhood plan might be able to bring forward in relation to the CBD area to further develop our thinking on this.

Finally, your point about the BID's future. Obviously, the BID does not lead on planning matters and the interpretation of policy and SPD guidance in relation to applications. However as previously stated we are an established community organisation with a defined border and extensive relationships. To reiterate, we have already invested significant time and resources working through the complex issues with CBD stakeholders relating to the spatial future of the CBD. We see ample evidence of successful business led Forums some of which have BIDs and others which don't. Just like a Neighbourhood Forum we have a 5 year term and are in the process of renewing this mandate.

In conclusion, we would like to suggest we agree an agenda and set up a meeting date as soon as possible to identify areas of agreement which could then be written up into a 'Statement of Common Aims'. We can offer the following times:-

5th May - 5pm

6th May - 9am

7th May 11 am or 5pm

10th May 9.30am or 4.30pm.

Please let me know which would be suitable.

Kind Regards,

Paul Harvey
Chair, Love Wimbledon BID