

ANNEXE C (2)**Consideration of Responses to Consultation Question 23: Ideas for Investment in the Longer Term****Introduction**

When asked for ideas for Leatherhead that will help it to thrive, respondents chose to respond in different ways. Some focussed attention again on High Street and Church Street, some focussed on immediate needs and others took a more visionary approach. As with the responses to other questions, a wide variety of opinions are expressed, sometimes passionately and sometimes diametrically opposed. It is often difficult to see trends or points of agreement. What is a positive idea from one person is considered to be damaging by another.

Some respondents do not think there is very much wrong with Leatherhead that could not be put right by a little 'TLC' and there is a real affection for Leatherhead expressed in some comments.

I think these three aspects sum up where Leatherhead should be in its identity and character - It is a very relaxing town, it is clean and tidy and safe and is attractive too.

However, even allowing for the fact that people who are discontented tend to respond to questionnaires more than those who are not, there is an underlying discontent with the state of the town. Sometimes this is a result of unrealistic expectations of a small market town. Sometimes it is the result of what they see as inappropriate investment in the past. Sometimes it is caused by a lack of what they see as basic maintenance and housekeeping and sometimes it is a lack of understanding about what the local authorities can do to intervene. Sometimes it is the result of a feeling of lack of progress despite there having been consultations and schemes in the past. Several respondents felt that the consultation was pointless as the authorities would do what they wanted. Sometimes it is a result of the frustration of seeing defects and problems that seem to take an age to sort out.

Leatherhead town is an utter disgrace there are far, far too many cafe's and eating places and far too few proper shops. The paving, which was done some years ago is a mess now and was never done properly in the first place.

There is a desire for a greater clear-sightedness of vision and purpose without there being within the community a clear idea of what that vision should be. There is also a desire for a greater sense of working together to solve problems, but the community is still looking to its statutory bodies to take action on their behalf. Suggestions for better and continuing engagement were made and need to be considered alongside any physical improvements that come out of the consultation.

This is one comment that expresses the need for a vision:

What is needed FIRST and FOREMOST is a clear vision and fully developed plan for the town in it's entirety. Even if it can only be implemented a bit at a time. But then such a rolling implementation must itself be planned and scheduled to avoid

"undoing" earlier phases with later phases. That planning MUST include building work & appearance, signage, ALL street furniture, parking, unloading bays, paved surfaces etc etc. Can we please have a town that looks as if it has been thought about. Rather than cobbled together from a collection of off-casts, donations and the pet projects of local officials...

What are the key points?

Shops and Retailing

By far the most frequent complaint is the mix of shops. The loss of independent shops and the traditional type of retailer is a common issue, whilst others want to see 'big names'. There is considered to be too many restaurants and cafes. Charity shops also come under attack and, to a lesser degree, banks, building societies and other A2 businesses. There is a request to the authorities to take a more proactive stance in the promotion of particular types of shops. The following comment is typical of many:

I would like to see far fewer sandwich bars, cafes etc. which only cater for the passing lunchtime trade from local offices, and a return to the diverse range of (as far as possible, independent, family run) shops like we used to have in the town which contributed greatly to Leatherhead's identity and character.

A different retail vision is expressed as follows:

We should sell the town centre to developers with instructions to completely re-do our shopping centre. This could include high end apartments and we could have a modern shopping centre. The shops would cater for the people with the money.

There seem to be two streams of thought on the question of retailing. The first is as expressed above, that there is not enough of a mix of shops and businesses to retain an adequate draw for customers and to enable Leatherhead to compete with other centres (Dorking, Great Bookham, Ashted, Reigate and even Kingston and Epsom are mentioned). This is a widely held view if the responses to the questionnaire are to be taken as representative. Then there is the view that Leatherhead has adapted its business offer to play to its strengths, offering services to cater for the busy lunchtime period and restaurants to cater for the evening clientele. With this school of thought it might be pointed out that the evening economy is successful and has extended the length of the business day. Retailing is changing and Leatherhead cannot hope to compete with larger retail centres. The argument might be that to try to go back to a bygone age of retailing is to buck the trends and Leatherhead with its restaurants, cafes, sandwich bars and theatre offers something that is not offered in nearby centres.

The High Street

It would be possible to construct a vision of the High Street based on the number of comments made on different elements that make up its townscape. There is a general impression given of a High Street (and Church Street) that it is shabby and that there is more that could be done to make it attractive and customer-friendly. In the ideal world, and setting aside for the moment the issue of vehicular access, the

town and the High Street in particular would feature the following (in rough order of the number of times it is mentioned):

- It would have colourful planting and trees;
- Paving would be repaired; patched repairs and broken paving would be dealt with quickly;
- There would be more seating and street furniture that is consistent in style and of good quality;
- The ramp at the bottom end would be removed to create a more open vista into and out of the High Street across an uncluttered space with colourful planting to enhance its appearance;
- There would be outdoor seating, particularly in the evening, to cater for alfresco eating and drinking;
- The antisocial elements would have been eliminated;
- The High Street would be uncluttered and well lit;
- Shop fronts and buildings would be attractive, with good window displays, quality shop fronts and well maintained fabric.

All of these points are to do with basic maintenance and design. Although some respondents see nothing to redeem the town and would almost want to 'start again', the majority wish to see an enhancement and better management of what there is.

There are some, of course, whose vision would be different and based on opening up the vehicular link from Church Street to North Street, responding pragmatically to the need to increase visibility and footfall within the High Street and Church Street. The environmental concerns of de-cluttering, planting and outdoor seating for example would take second place to the needs of vehicular access and parking. Judging from the responses, if the vision based on improving the environmental quality of the High Street could be achieved in a way that would provide a good commercial environment, this would be the preferred way forward.

The following suggestion summed up one possible way forward:

Having restaurant seating outside in the High Street certainly gives the town a much livelier feel and if permanent seating areas could be achieved and without having to resort to moveable barriers that would be ideal. Having agreed that, parking areas could then be decided upon, and following that the surface of the High Street should then be replaced appropriately. The current thinking is that the less restrictions and notices there are on a street the safer it becomes because both drivers and pedestrians take care. If one side of the High Street is left clear of parking thus giving pedestrians a safe side to walk before 10.00 and after 4.30 a happy compromise could be achieved.

Having a raised kerb would make these type of arrangements easier, but at the expense of complete freedom of movement for wheelchair users. Arguably, the arrangement would be easier for the visually impaired and if sufficient crossovers could be introduced, a recessed carriage might be part of the long term vision.

The issue of the ramp at the end of High Street is not an easy one. Several people find it difficult to understand its purpose and would prefer not to see such a physical

and visual obstruction where the majority of pedestrians are funnelled into a small space on the route into the High Street. Suggestions were made to remove it and to enhance the area, allowing a much less cluttered view into the street. Such a revamp would be expensive and, in the meantime, ways were suggested to make the space 'work' for the town by using it for market stalls, floral displays and so on.

Several criticisms were made of street furniture: the lack of thought about its location, its ugliness in places, the lack of a common style and so on. A common approach developed when the High Street design was implemented had been eroded through a series of ad hoc arrangements relating to street furniture. This does need to be addressed.

Perhaps the most frustrating aspect of street management for the public is the apparent lack of repair and reinstatement of paving, especially in relation to high quality surfaces. There appeared to be no strong desire to replace all of the surfaces, although there were some comments on this, but a wish to deal with defects and to find a mechanism for dealing with this in an on-going way. Dealing with this issue alone would be a significant step forward.

Church Street

The townscape of Church Street was mentioned by a few respondents. Many comments are generic ones that refer to the whole of the High Street/Church Street area without being specific about Church Street. Nevertheless, there is some recognition that Church Street is not as appealing as it could be. There is nervousness about the loss of parking in any enhancement scheme and about the possible role of public art, but these comments suggested that the barrier arrangement could be made better and the clutter around the theatre entrance much improved.

If the vision is for a trafficked route then the solutions would be very different, but there would be issues to resolve associated with deliveries and pedestrian movement and the location of the market that would be difficult to resolve.

Public Art

The reputation of public art has suffered in Leatherhead, principally because of the problems associated with the statuettes in High Street. Only one person commented that they would like to see them retained. Quite a few people wanted them to be removed. Spending money on public art is sometimes seen as wasteful, although there were no adverse comments made about other public art works elsewhere. There is some concern about the role public art works might play in Church Street.

This underlines the need to explain how public art projects are funded and to find a functional, as well as decorative, use for public art funding.

Markets

Where the market is mentioned, it is generally to recognise its importance in the economy and even the character of the town, but to request that they are better. Improvements to the appearance, organisation and range of stalls are seen as important. Other, continental markets would be welcome.

The survey of businesses also underlines the positive role that the market can play. Shops at the top end of the High Street wanted the market to expand up the street, whilst those at the bottom end sometimes complained about practical issues such as blocking of windows and smells of cooked food.

Parking

In general terms parking is not the problem it was perceived to be several years ago. In response to question 12, 44% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that parking facilities were 'good'. By comparison 34% either disagreed or strongly disagreed. This is still a significant minority. There are still calls for free car parking, a greater ability to park in the pedestrian area during the day, more on-street parking and a better geographical distribution of off-street parking. Several suggestions were made to change the tariff system to achieve a variety of objectives, from encouraging short term shopping to allowing theatre goers longer to enjoy the performances. The car parking in the Swan centre was again criticised.

To counter some of these comments, there were other respondents who felt the town centre was quite well served by car parks. In the evening, for example, the Swan Centre car park was felt to be underused and the capacity of off-street car parks within a few minutes walk of the High Street was considered to negate the need for car parking on the High Street.

The Wider Picture

Although the focus of comments was very much on the central streets, there were also comments relating to the other parts of the town. One of the principal concerns is the ability of the road system to cope with congestion. There were complaints about how difficult it is as a stranger to navigate the one way system and concern about the usefulness of the network of signs. The riverside was mentioned as an asset and some felt there should be a stronger link between the town and the river.

There were several references to the need to improve public transport, particularly for those who wish to come into Leatherhead and return home at night.