

Northumberland Heath Regeneration 2014

The Northumberland Heath Community's response to proposals

Summary

1. The community is grateful for the proposed development and thankful that Bexley's regeneration office has come up with some proposals tabled and discussed at an emergency community meeting held on 8th April 2014, following the Council depositing the proposals at the local library and subsequently inviting comments from local residents and businesses on the regeneration options proposed. Local residents and traders are intimately connected with the area and so are ideally placed to comment on the proposals. In budget terms, these comments are not seeking 'additionality' *but* increased 'value for money': this ratepayer view is important especially in times of austerity. In functional terms, the below comments' theme is one urging the Council to use the regeneration to provide additional facilities and amenities rather than the replacement of existing facilities and amenities.

Preamble

2. In November the Northumberland Heath Community Forum welcomed members of Bexley's regeneration office to its meeting where they gave an initial outline of their proposals. The Forum was informed that a consultation would take place and that there would be a display of the proposal in the Northumberland Heath library. This display was mounted at the end of March through to early April 2014. The Forum held a special meeting on 8th April 2014 to discuss the proposals and formulate a view, following local requests after the proposals were displayed in the library. In addition, the meeting was open to written comments from those that could not attend and these were taken into account. This document is a report of the meeting deliberations. The views presented at that meeting were remarkably coherent and uniform, lending weight to the validity of the comments herein. The Forum and the community are grateful for the Northumberland Heath's Councillors' endeavours to ensure that regeneration resources were made available to The Heath, and now looks forward to helping to ensure that the views herein are considered and adopted. The Forum appreciates the Bexley Council's mission statement of 'Listening to you, working for you' and similarly looks forward to Bexley's regeneration office taking into account and forward, the perspectives of the local community.

Comment on the Bexley Council's leaflet 'Northumberland Heath Improvements'

3. Copies of the leaflet 'Northumberland Heath Improvements' were delivered to households on The Heath and a further supply of leaflets were made available at the Northumberland Heath library. It is noted that some aspects of the leaflet are not clear and it could have been more informative. For example, it would have been helpful if existing facilities to be removed or retained were clearly shown and labelled on the proposed plan in a lighter or different shade for completeness. Furthermore, the markings on the leaflet for the proposed railings are not clear and this is being confused

with another dashed line running along the middle of the pavement on the northern corner of the Mill Road junction with Bexley Road (we are still unsure as to what this dashed line signifies). Additionally, we note that the map depicts the road markings for Northumberland Park as a two-way road when in fact Northumberland Park is one-way road. (The Community Forum's Chairman pointed this out when the road was last resurfaced and the markings were subsequently painted over with black paint which is now beginning to wear off, revealing the old incorrect street markings underneath. Ideally the old street markings need to be burnt off.) Finally, we presume that the lettering 'RNLI' on the photograph of the proposed new benches is illustrative and would like to know what wording would be used.

Comment on the proposals

Benches

4. There was both a unanimous and strongly held view that the proposed new stone benches are far from ideal for community use. There is a real ergonomic problem: they seem to be designed for individuals' short-term use, such as at railway stations where lengthy use is actively discouraged, rather than for community use. We remind the regeneration office that community seating is primarily to facilitate socialising and that the local community population is becoming increasingly elderly. More comfortable seating is needed: the proposed benches are hard, have no back support, and are flat (inhibiting drainage following precipitation). We note that the existing seating is perfectly functional and their basic state of condition is sound. All they need is re-enamelling.
5. To this end we strongly desire that the existing benches remain and only be re-enamelled.
6. The community would however welcome *additional* benches. Given that the proposals focus on just the Mill Road - Bexley Road junction, we remind the regeneration office that there are other foci to Northumberland Heath and suggest that an additional bench might instead be provided on the large paving area outside the green on the corner of Bexley Rd and Colyers Lane/Barnehurst Avenue. Overall, one additional bench instead of several replacement benches would be an efficient use of regeneration resources in these times of austerity.
7. Any new additional benches should *not* have any engraving on the top flat surface. Engraving simply provides space for water to accumulate and so delays the benches' drying following precipitation.

Banners

8. There was a request for the font size on the proposed banners to be legible enough.
9. There is concern that the banners and banner mountings must be strong enough to withstand extreme wind conditions such as were experienced in January 2014. We remind the regeneration office that unlike other parts of the borough – where the main streets through communities are topographically sheltered or sheltered by tall multi-

story buildings – the Bexley Road through Northumberland Heath is exposed being at the top of a hill and has lengthy straight stretches facilitating occasional high wind speeds.

10. Accordingly, the banners should *not* be solely concentrated around the junction of Mill Rd with Bexley Road but should be spaced along the stretch of the Heath from the Bexley Road junction with Avenue Road through to the junction with Colyers Lane / Barnehurst Avenue.
11. It must be *ensured* that the positioning of any banner should not impede the view of CCTV. (The community has, both through the Community Forum and the Safer Neighbourhood Panel, previously lobbied hard for CCTV due to previous social problems on the Heath and so this facility must not be undermined.)

Fingerposts and interpretation signs

12. These are welcome. An additional fingerpost on the corner of Bexley Road with Brook Street indicating the car park or another attraction as appropriate would also be welcome.

Street railings

13. There is concern that the new design of the proposed railings will not prevent or impede toddlers and young children from clambering into the street despite being perceived by adults (parents) as providing a safety barrier between the pavement and street.
14. Every local person is acutely aware that railings at the corners of Mill Road/Bexley Road and Bexley Road/Brook Street are damaged by Lorries unless protected by bollards and/or very pronounced suitable kerb such as flat granite kerbs or trief kerbs. Failing to ensure that railings are protected would be a waste of limited resources!

Paving

15. If we must have new paving then it is very much preferable that it runs the length of the Heath along the entire length of the shopping/traders area or zone.
16. However, other than cleaning, some minor weeding and minor pointing, the existing paving is quite sound and indeed not that old: elsewhere along the stretch of shops just a few paving slabs are cracked and these could be replaced in the existing style. If we cannot have new paving along the length of the shopping/traders zone we have to ask why have new paving at all? New paving in just a few locales brings into contrast the rest of the street landscape. As with the proposed replacement of existing benches (with additional benches being preferable instead) we remind the regeneration office that replacing paving is less preferable to providing other new facilities and amenities. This is a particularly germane view in times of austerity.
17. We strongly recommend instead lower-cost maintenance of existing paving (cleaning, weeding and re-pointing) *unless* new style paving along the entire length of the trader/shopping area is possible. If new style paving along the length of the

trader/shopping area is not possible then replacement of the few broken paving slabs along this stretch should undertaken using slabs in the same style as the existing paving.

Greenery

18. The existing planters outside the post office are perfectly functional and provide a very welcoming green amenity. The fear is that removing planters and planting stand-alone trees will see the trees vandalised (as happened to the tree planted in 2006 outside the site of the former library on Bexley Road). Should this happen then we would be without any greenery on this corner and this is *unacceptable*.
19. We strongly urge the *retention* of the existing planters. We welcome *additional* planters and new trees elsewhere on the corner as proposed, where there is space. These new trees *must* be adequately protected by iron protectors as used to protect the young trees in Bexleyheath centre and also as were used protecting the original avenue of trees through Northumberland Heath when originally planted at the beginning of the 20th century. (This did not happen with the subsequently vandalised tree planted in 2006.)
20. We want *additional* greenery on the Heath and *not* replacement greenery.

Bins

21. The proposals for the bins are generally welcome. There is though fire risk concerns and we ask that due attention be given to fire resistance of the bin material.

Additional facilities and amenities through proposal savings

22. Given that we do not see that all the new benches will be required, old planters need not be dismantled and removed, and new paving is not required unless the entire stretch of shops can be paved. This should result in considerable savings on the proposed regeneration budget. Even taking into account a bench on the junction of Bexley Road and Colyers Lane, a finger post and stronger bollards or use of trief kerbs on the junction of Bexley Road with Brook Street., and the replacement of the few broken slabs on the Heath should result in considerable savings. We therefore ask that these savings be spent on other improvements in Northumberland Heath.
23. Key improvements required include the maintenance of the Mill Road car park. This car park is a fundamental aspect of the Heath and its economy; it is important for trading and is much used for recycling. The car park's markings are fading and the surface has numerous potholes. These need urgent attention.
24. Another key improvement required is the library. The Northumberland Heath library is heavily used and is the only Council building on the Heath. Overall, it is amongst the best use facilities other than the Central Library. While it is very good that the library sees much use, the downside is that the carpet, which is several years old, does need replacing. We urge that this be considered.

Acknowledgement and appreciation

25. Again, the Northumberland Heath Community Forum wishes to acknowledge the contributions of The Heath's Councillors in ensuring that regeneration funding is being made available to The Heath and is very appreciative. We understand that they are supportive of the 'Big Society' concept and to that end we look forward to them ensuring that our views are adopted. The Forum also thanks Bexley Council staff for their proposals and notes the Council's stated aim of 'Listening to you, working for you' and so looks forward to their consideration and adaptation of these comments and views.
26. For further information and clarification, please contact:-
chair@northumberlandheath-forum.org.uk

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