

Northumberland Heath 2014 development

Some background thoughts....

Introduction

The Bexley Council is proposing to help regenerate parts of Northumberland Heath this summer (2014). The Council's Regeneration Office's proposals were on display in the North Heath library early in April. The Northumberland Heath Community Forum held an Emergency Meeting (on 8th April) to discuss this and a response was submitted to Bexley's Regeneration Office. However because response documents tend to be specific and lacking the general background, a more elaborate document explaining some of the thinking behind the response sent by the Forum on behalf of the community might be helpful. This unofficial background document is what this document represents.

The Community and its Forum are extremely grateful to the Council, Councillors and political representatives, for ensuring that some of the borough's regeneration funding is being directed to Northumberland Heath. Recent years have seen considerable investment in improving Erith, to the north of Northumberland Heath and Bexleyheath Broadway to the south: the Heath has in the past missed out. This summer's (2014) investment proposed for the Heath, modest as it may be, is most welcome.

Notwithstanding, it is important – especially in times of austerity – that expenditure is effectively utilised. The response sent by the Forum was one that in budget terms did not seek 'additionality' (increased spend) *but* increased 'value for money' (cost effectiveness for the same, or less, spend).

There is much to be welcomed with the proposals of the Regeneration Office including:-

- Lamppost banners (provided they are legible)
- Information fingerposts
- Replacing lorry-damaged railings on the Mill Road/Bexley Road junction (provided they are protected)
- New waste bins (provided they are fire resistant)

However there are some issues of considerable local concern especially:-

- Replacing perfectly good paving
- Replacing perfectly good benches
- Replacing perfectly good planters
- The regeneration's focus is exclusively on the Bexley Rd junction with Mill Rd (failure to address infrastructure problems and provide benefit elsewhere)

These issues of concern are largely considered by the community as a waste of the rate-payers' money and also fail to address the regeneration needs of the broader community.

Paving

The paving around the junction is perfectly good. All that is required is a little weeding and pointing in addition to protection of the railings from passing lorries (using appropriate granite or trief kerbing): see 'Railings' below.



Paving is sound and the bricks intact. It just needs cleaning, weeding and re-pointing.

Railings

Replacement railings would be welcome, BUT *only* if they are protected from lorry impact. It is common knowledge from longstanding residents on the Heath that replacement railings are damaged within months of being installed. Protection of the railings is needed either with a pair of bollards on either side of the road, and/or granite/trief kerbs. Without protection replacement railings will soon be damaged making the exercise a complete waste of ratepayers' money.



It is commonly known that without protection replacement railings at this corner get damaged by tightly cornering lorries. Just ask the locals.

Benches

The current benches are fine and are regularly used, providing a rest area for the community (with minimal, if any, social problems especially as the area is covered by CCTV). All they require is a coat of enamel every two or three years.



Conversely, the proposed new stone benches are uncomfortable and have no backrest. This is particularly not welcome by the elderly: it should be remembered that the Heath's weekday population already has a high elderly component (working-age ratepayers typically work away from the Heath during the week day time).

In addition to the above, Northumberland Heath's population is itself as a whole ageing and so the previous point will be all the more germane in the future. Therefore, it is worth emphasising that benches without back support are far less preferable to the point of being undesirable for the elderly and the infirm. These benches are currently used as resting points when folks are shopping and when the queues are long in the post office: visit the Heath during the day and see for yourself. Middle-aged planners and Councillors may not appreciate the strength of this argument, but they are strongly urged to consider the genuine needs of the community.

Forum members are aware of the proposed stone bench blocks that have recently been introduced in some other parts of the borough, and so are very aware of the local reaction to these at those locations. True, the cost of maintaining these stone blocks is even lower than the already very low cost of maintaining the existing benches, but this means that the payback time in replacing these benches is extremely long. Therefore, economically, the change from the current bench facilities to a less useful design is neither cost-effective nor socially desirable. Replacement is not wanted.

As said, the current benches only need repainting. (This is not a huge cost.) Replacing them with new benches will not be desirable. *If* new benches already have been

engraved (a pity given this document was drafted only one week after the Bexley Regeneration Office display on the proposals in the library closed) then they can be used to provide additional benches elsewhere on the Heath (such as in the park or recreation ground).

Do not take away our existing benches at the Mill Road junction!

Planters

The existing planters are perfectly functional. Their removal means that the Heath will have lost an amenity. Replacing them with trees is risky: for example, the tree planted outside of what was the old library on Bexley Road a few years ago was vandalised by schoolchildren. The Heath has seen a steady erosion of trees and green amenity in recent decades. If the new trees are similarly lost, then the corner will have lost its green amenity and this would be scandalous. Conversely, the existing planters are secure and also have the potential for community involvement.



Existing planter vegetation is secure against a backdrop of street tree loss in recent decades.

True, the planting in the planters might be improved but as was pointed out to the Regeneration Office in response to their presentation at the November 2013 Community Forum meeting, they should consult with the community as to community assistance with maintenance. (Some members of the Northumberland Heath community are already involved in maintaining the plants on the Erith roundabout and a trader has in the past helped with maintaining greenery on the Heath. In current political terms, this would be a 'Big Society' measure.) It is possible to retain the planting and lower maintenance costs *without* the cost of having them removed.

Increasing cost effectiveness and benefit by using resources efficiently and spreading the regeneration: the Heath is not just Mill Road junction

Without having to replace the benches and the planters, there is simply no need to replace the paving at the Mill Road/Bexley Road junction. (Only barriers and barrier protection through a bollard and/or granite/rief kerbing needs be introduced.) This is very cost-effecting and frees up a considerable proportion of the proposed spend.

Conversely, repaving not only is it costly but will show up (contrast with) paving elsewhere on the central stretch of shops that runs along the Bexley Road from near Horsa Road to the junction with Brook Street.

Highly cost-effective measures (zero extra cost) could be undertaken to benefit this broader stretch (rather than just the area immediately around the Mill Road junction), for example by increasing the spacing between the banners. The position of the first banner at one end should be by the shops closest to Horsa Road/Avenue Road/Bexley Road junction and the other by the Brook Street/Colyer's Lane/Bexley Road junction to ensure that all the Heath's Bexley Road traders are covered. This would spread the benefit. (It would also allow more space between banners to ensure that they do not interfere with CCTV views.)

With some of the savings made by not needlessly replacing the planters and benches and not repaving the Mill Road junction, it should be possible to carry out repairs desperately needed elsewhere on the Heath.

Mill Road Car Park

For example, the Mill Road car park is fundamental to the local economy and the Northumberland Heath traders. Yet, though this car park generates revenue, and despite its economic importance to traders (who pay business rates), it has become dilapidated with substantial pot holes.



Unlike replacing planters, benches and new paving, Mill Rd car park needs attention. Its surface is in a disgraceful state of repair. The car park is key to the local trader economy.

Using just part of the savings identified above to top up the existing budget(s) used for Mill Road car park maintenance would bring the car park back into good condition.

Northumberland Heath Library

Another part of the heath that arguably needs a little investment is the he Northumberland Heath library (the *only* Council building and Council pay point on the Heath). It is heavily used by many sections of the community from primary school children through to pensioners. Consequently, with intense use comes wear and tear. Maintenance would be welcome. (Perhaps a new carpet.)

Bexley Road/Colyer's & Brook Street junction

Unlike the Mill Road/Bexley Road junction the Bexley Road/Colyer's & Brook Street junction is in a woeful condition. The bollards are not strong enough (embedded to a sufficient depth) to be knocked over by tightly cornering lorries, the unprotected kerbs have become eroded, and the northerly central Bexley Road traffic islands is too pronounced and so its edge often over-run by cornering lorries. Consequently, it has become heavily eroded.



One of the swiped bollards. Next big hit and the neighbouring road sign will go.



Badly eroded traffic isle. A candidate for spending part of the identified savings?

The above suggested improvements are needed and wanted. Conversely, the removal of existing benches and planters, and replacement of paving are simply neither wanted nor needed. Now, while such alternatives may not strictly (in purely administrative terms) come under '*public realm project*' funding, such nomenclature is purely a bureaucratic limitation. The Council could reallocate part of the proposed spend to ensure that the above cost-effective measures take place. It is possible for the Council to reallocate resources between budgets (in accountancy terms this is 'virement'). How the Council bureaucratically administers rate-payer's/tax payers funding is not a rate-payer/tax payer's concern provided that spending is cost effective and spent where it is actually needed. Rate-payers/tax payers want spending within budget as well as spending efficiency with added value wherever possible. Conversely what is

not wanted is wasted spend on replacement facilities that do not serve the community nearly as well!

The current Bexley Borough's regimen has determined that its term of office be characterised by the motto '*Listening to you, working for you*': this phrase is on much of Council documentation and stationery. It is hoped that the Council will listen to the logical, cost-effective, added-value, views presented by members of the community through the Forum's response.



Summary conclusions

No to:-

- Replacement Mill Road, paving, benches, planters.
- Replacement Mill Road barriers *without* protection
- Concentration of banners around Mill Road

Yes to:-

- Replacement of Mill Road barriers *with* protection
- Banners spread along the stretch of Bexley Road from Horsa Road – Brook Street
- Using the money saved (from not paving at Mill Road or replacing benches and planters) on actual regeneration needs such as the Mill Road car park, Northumberland Heath library and the Brook Street/Bexley Road junction as funds permit. (Transfer existing funding between budgets with virement if bureaucracy dictates.)

***North Heath rate payers
Listen to us. Work for us.***