

Promoting Improvements for Church Street Neighbourhood

An Executive Summary of the Environmental Masterplan Framework Study commissioned by the Church Street Neighbourhood Forum

The Story So Far.....

The Church Street Neighbourhood Forum (CSNF) has been actively campaigning to improve the local environment for residents, visitors and businesses located in Church Street ward. Whilst there have been some notable success stories in recent months – such as the appointment of the City Guardians - it is widely acknowledged that more needs to be done to address on-going concerns in the area.

Led by its own Environmental Task Group, the Forum therefore agreed to progress an “*Environmental Masterplan*” for the neighbourhood. This document aims to provide both a vision and a framework to guide improvements in the future.

In December 2002, the Forum appointed an independent team¹ to produce the first phase of the Masterplan. Working over a period of three months, planners, economists, landscape architects and policy analysts came together with local stakeholders to analyse the problems facing Church Street and its environs. In particular the team focused on:

- **An overview of all relevant public consultation which has taken place in the area, alongside a detailed analysis of all related public policy.**
- **An independent physical audit of the area.**
- **An assessment of the current economic role and function of the neighbourhood.**

The emphasis in terms of this first phase of work was a review and analysis of over 40 different existing reports. However, the team also spoke with local people including: Forum Members; representatives from local Tenants’ and Residents’ Associations; the Market Traders’ Association; the City Guardians; local Councillors; and, a number of different officers from public, private and voluntary sector agencies active within the neighbourhood. The team also undertook a number of site visits throughout the three month study period as part of the physical audit of the area.

The final full report setting out the conclusions and recommendations from the study was published by the Forum in April 2003. Further copies of this summary or a copy of the full report can be obtained by contacting:

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What are the Challenges?

¹ The team led by Urbancanda (www.urbancanda.co.uk) included specialist support from Strategic Planning Advice Ltd; Whitelaw Turkington Landscape Architects; and, the University of Westminster.



Church Street neighbourhood is home to over 4,200 households, 500-plus businesses and over 80 voluntary and community groups. The ward boasts one of London's largest street markets, and an internationally acclaimed in-door antiques market. Despite obvious strengths, Church Street faces some very real problems. It remains one of the most deprived areas in the country and local people suffer disproportionately from high unemployment, low educational attainment, heightened fear of crime and poor health. In terms of the physical environment, this study has identified the following challenges:

- (i) **Church Street - an isolated "island" site.** On plan the neighbourhood is close to major destinations including: Paddington Basin; London's West End; and near by visitor attractions such as Madame Tussaud's and Regent's Park. In reality, however, the ward *feels* isolated and cut off from the rest of the borough. Connections into and out of the neighbourhood are severely hindered by major arterial routes including: Edgware Road to the west; Marylebone Road to the south; the railway line to the east; and the canal to the north. These serve to create an "island site" disconnected from its immediate neighbours.
- (ii) **Barriers to movement in the neighbourhood.** There are also a number of restrictions to movement within the neighbourhood itself. In particular, changes of level along Lisson Grove and Luton Street create a visual and physical separation from two potential community assets – namely, the play area and the canal. There are also a number of streets where traffic speeds and traffic flows serve to restrict the free movement of pedestrians.
- (iii) **Confused public spaces.** Much of the public and communal space in and around Church Street has been termed by the team as "*confused*". There are many areas which feel as if they are a "no man's land" and which lack any clear sense of ownership – i.e. no signs, no clear demarcation with fences or barriers, and, no link to nearby buildings. A number of these public areas also suffer from difficult or unclear access arrangements.
- (iv) **A faltering heart.** The commercial heart of the area suffers from low grade retail development which has been poorly maintained. The market itself is criticised by visitors and residents alike because of the rubbish and noise which it generates. Traders are also highly critical of current parking and storage arrangements. There is general agreement that much more needs to be done to create an attractive, safe and diverse commercial centre in the ward. This includes the need for adequate start-up and incubator premises to support the growing number of small and medium size businesses which characterise the Church Street economy.
- (v) **More work needed to meet residents' aspirations.** Research on the various estates highlights concerns around: noise; graffiti; vandalism; on-street rubbish; and a lack of local facilities for young people. Crime and fear of crime are also identified as a key concern.

In general, there is also a strong sense that the neighbourhood is failing to capitalise on its assets. In particular, more needs to be done to:

- Celebrate the local architectural heritage;
- Connect and capitalise upon the rich concentration of community and public facilities including: schools; youth clubs; community halls; pocket parks; the library; and the health centre;
- Develop local assets such as the canal;
- Develop and promote the commercial heart of the area – and in particular improve Church Street market itself.

Ideas for Improvement.



Priorities for change include the need to:

- (i) **Improve pedestrian links into surrounding areas.** Improved linkage will encourage local people to access the facilities and employment opportunities on offer in nearby areas such as Paddington Basin. It will also encourage residents, businesses and visitors based in the immediate vicinity to patronise the shops and market stalls in Church Street itself.
- (ii) **Introduce a series of features or “announcements” at key locations on the perimeter of the study area** (e.g. signs and gateways) which will serve to promote and advertise the neighbourhood and its main attractions. This is particularly important for the market, which is virtually invisible from both Edgware Road and the surrounding approach roads.
- (iii) **Improve pedestrian links *within* the area** and in particular address some of the real and perceived barriers identified by the audit. These should be linked into existing “Safe Routes” which are already being developed by Westminster City Council.
- (iv) **Explore options to address “confused” communal space** by progressing a public open space strategy which promotes linked spaces, “green lanes”, and “urban lungs”. There may also be the potential to promote a Play Strategy for the area which would identify a series of new and upgraded play areas for children.
- (v) **Develop specific tailored solutions for recognised “problem areas”** including: the library; Church Street itself²; and, the canal. These should build upon work already underway such as the canal side improvements currently being progressed by Groundwork.
- (vi) **Explore the potential for creating additional community spaces and business start-up spaces in the area.**

In addition plans to improve the area must take into account:

- The need for co-ordinated and targeted marketing and promotional campaigns to promote neighbourhood based attractions such as the canal, the market and the antiques trade.
- The projected growth in the tourism sector and in particular the importance of capitalising on surrounding attractions including Madame Tussaud’s, Regent’s Park Zoo, and nearby hotels.
- The West End Green development and, its potential impact on: the current retail / market along Church Street; the availability and use of community space in the locality; and changes to traffic and parking in the area.
- The opportunities to integrate environmental schemes already taking place as part of existing regeneration programmes such as the canal side improvements and the estate action programmes progressed by Registered Social Landlords in the area.
- Recommendations emerging from recent studies including the *Church Street Amendments* study recently completed by Parkman Ltd.
- Any emergent best practice from the nearby Business Improvement District (BID) at Praed Street in terms of: the implementation of public realm improvements; management of these improvements; and, involvement of the Business community.
- The outcome of the Secondary Schools review and potential disposal of the North Westminster Community School site.

From Vision to Reality.

² A separate supplementary report detailing recommendations for Church Street and Bell Street markets is now being progressed by the study team. This will be published in May 2003.

This study represents the first phase of constructing an environmental masterplan for the Church Street neighbourhood. As such, it sets out an overarching framework for improvements with a number of specific suggestions for change. To translate these ideas into reality will require:

Funds. There are a number of different national, regional and local funding opportunities which can be explored. Further detailed investigations will be required with potential funding partners during the next stage of the masterplan. In particular, the team has highlighted funding sources including: The Neighbourhood Management Fund; possible support from the London Development Agency; as well as a number of local programmes.

Making the most of planning obligations. These conditions, which are imposed upon developers (also known as Section 106 agreements) can be used to promote environmental improvements. There is a clear opportunity to suggest relevant projects in respect of the planning obligations on the West End Green scheme as well as the developments underway in Paddington Basin. Opportunities to approach developers should be explored in relation to the North Westminster Community School site.

Develop the capacity of the Church Street Neighbourhood Forum. Westminster's Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy identifies the Forum as key in progressing positive change in the neighbourhood. The Forum currently has an active membership of over 80 organisations. However, it is the Action Group which must drive forward the renewal objectives. This Forum is one of over 76 different partnership groups operating in Westminster. This means that the Forum and its Action Group will need to work much harder in the future to establish a "voice" on other more strategic partnerships – such as the Local Strategic Partnership - and indeed with the Council itself.

Engaging partners in delivery. The Council as well as other key public, private and voluntary sector partners must engage more effectively in the Forum's agenda if key objectives around neighbourhood renewal are to be achieved in Church Street.

More effective community engagement. More needs to be done to consult with residents, businesses and visitors to the area. This will present challenges since the local population is characterised by a predominance of so called "hard to reach" groups – namely under 25s; elderly people living alone; large concentrations of ethnic minorities including self defined refugee communities; and, a significant proportion of individuals who do not have a good grasp of written or spoken English. Initiating and sustaining some form of dialogue will require out-reach work which extends beyond established community networks. A well planned and adequately resourced communication strategy and community engagement programme needs to be at the heart of any future masterplanning process in Church Street.

Next Steps

Results of the study will be launched in May with the specific aim of generating discussion around the recommendations.

A Steering Group will be established to secure funds for Phase 2. This stage will involve more detailed consultation, as well as costed options for improvement. Phase 2 will be progressed in Autumn 2003.

The intention is then to progress the prioritised improvements over the next 2 – 3 years.