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Night Surgery Merton



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Night Surgery: Merton

In October, Amy Lamé conducted a night surgery in the London Borough of Merton, visiting Mitcham and Wimbledon town centres. The night surgery provided an opportunity to speak to councillors, businesses and stakeholders about their aspirations for the two town centres at night.

On 11 October, I visited Mitcham and Wimbledon in the London Borough of Merton. It was a fascinating visit to two very different town centres, but common to both was a renewed emphasis on the importance of evening and night time activity to placemaking and a recognition of the central role that cultural venues play in revitalising the local economy. It was great to be joined by six local councillors, demonstrating the political commitment to community and culture-led evening and night time activity in both town centres.

Mitcham Fair Green

We met by the Jubilee Clocktower, gathering in a recently redesigned public square marking the heart of Mitcham town centre. The scheme was delivered through the Outer London Fund and includes new lighting and electrical outlets, creating a flexible, paved open space that has hosted markets and festive celebrations. The scheme also introduced changes to local bus routes and stops to bring more visitors and activity into the town centre throughout the day.

Tag Elezz Café provides a welcoming pocket of activity which extends into the square, but is one of just a few premises animating the space in the evening. Many of the surrounding businesses, including betting shops, retailers and pawn brokers, don't contribute to visible activity on the square and create a blank backdrop with a lack of natural surveillance. Councillors, officers and business owners described problems with street drinking and intimidating behaviour in the square, which impacts perceptions of safety and the attractiveness of it as a social space.

The square is surrounded by residential areas, popular with young families. The council want to attract these residents into the town centre by programming regular, family-friendly evening activities. Everyone present expressed a real desire to see the space active and reclaimed for community uses in the evenings. It's a fantastic asset, but is missing a regular programme of events and active uses around its perimeter to realise its full potential in the evenings.

The council expressed their aspiration to change the reputation of the town centre, which currently struggles to compete with nearby destinations such as Tooting and Wimbledon. A single restaurant remains in the town centre following the recent closure of a business that had been there for over 60 years. The owner of Tag Elezz told me that there was an urgent need to attract restaurants, market traders and other food businesses to help increase visits and dwell times in the town centre.

Licensing officers explained that new businesses struggled to survive and that business owners sometimes found it confusing to navigate licensing policies and applications, so they have introduced a pre-application service to better support those wanting to trade at night.



Tag Elezz Café in the public square



Night Czar Amy Lamé speaking to local councillors and Merton's Night Time Borough Champion Cllr Eleanor Stringer

Vestry Hall

We walked to Vestry Hall, Mitcham's former civic centre turned grassroots art venue. The Victorian building hosts everything from dance classes to bingo nights and film screenings, but a lack of awareness about the venue means it's an under-used resource.

Outside, we discussed the appearance of the building, which is a local landmark during the daytime. While the clock faces of the clocktower are backlit after dark, there is little else to suggest the building's openness and creative uses. Adjusting the quality of the interior lighting to a warmer, more welcoming tone and introducing sensitive architectural illumination to the facade and clocktower would help create a landmark for the area after dark, signal it as a public building and invite visitors inside.



Discussion inside Vestry Hall



View of Vestry Hall from London Road

London Road

On our way to Mitcham tram stop we passed two vacant pubs; the Burn Bullock by Mitcham cricket club and the White Hart, both beautiful Grade II listed buildings. Officers explained that the pubs had been vacant for years and the landlords were considering converting them into residential. As GLA data highlights, this happens all too often, with 26% of pubs in London lost between 2001 and 2021. That figure is 33% for Merton and I urged officers to liaise with our Culture and Community Spaces at Risk Office to bring these valuable assets back into use in an area that is lacking an ecosystem of evening and night time uses.

Waiting for a tram to Wimbledon, we discussed the rising cost of electricity and the potential of new lighting technologies to provide better, more sustainable illumination. I heard that the council had received feedback about newer, whiter LED lighting creating some issues. We discussed the benefits of warmer lighting, illumination to architecture and features and strategies to reduce energy use. Good examples can be found in the City of London and Brent, where local authorities have made capital investments in centralised lighting control systems. This allows them to dim and rebalance light levels to save energy, while improving the character and accessibility of public spaces.



The vacant White Hart pub



The vacant Burn Bullock pub

New Wimbledon Theatre

New Wimbledon Theatre is a 1,600 capacity Grade II listed venue with a 110 year history (it had just hosted a ghost tour when we arrived!). In the early 2000s, financial difficulties almost saw the theatre converted into a bingo hall or housing before local campaigners rallied to save it. The venue is owned by the council and run by a commercial operator, Ambassador Theatre Group, in what I was told is a great partnership!

It's active for around nine and a half months of the year and is one of the ten biggest theatres in London, attracting a large proportion of its audience from outside of London to the south. Alongside its reputation for hosting musicals, the theatre also serves as a community hub, hosting talent shows, children's shows, Wimbledon BookFest events, fundraisers and concerts from the Merton Music Foundation. There is also a smaller studio space to stage fringe events and premieres for up-and-coming writers.

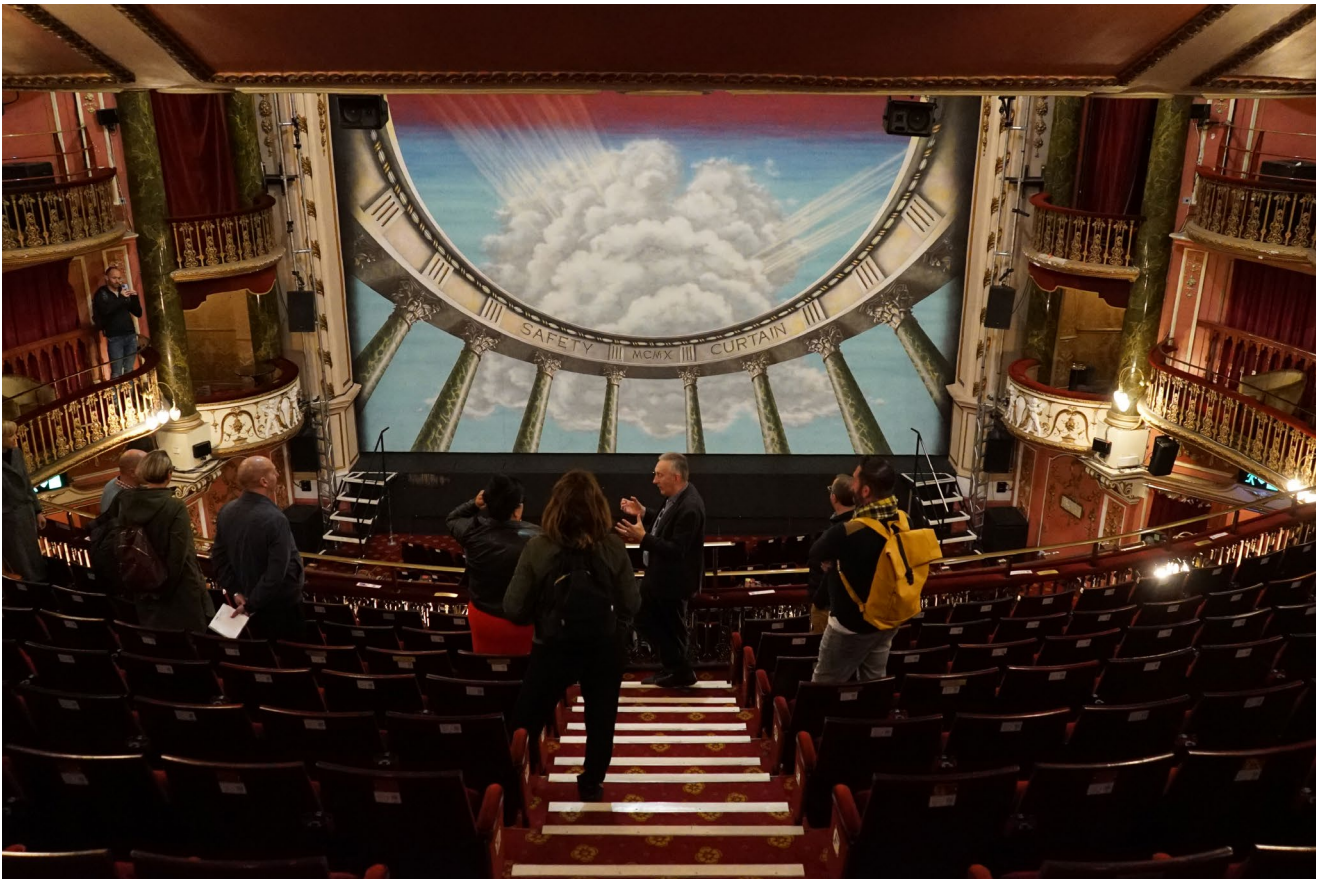
The operators are still feeling the effects of 504 days of closure over successive lockdowns and October 2022 has been unusually quiet. The theatre is, however, well known for its panto productions and expects to be very busy towards the end of the year. Historically, it makes about 30% of its revenue during panto season.

Since reopening in August 2021, staffing has been another big challenge due to many technicians and specialists leaving the industry. The director also described changing audience behaviours since reopening, echoing what I've heard across London about poor behaviour of some visitors since lockdown.

The theatre is a major attraction in the town centre and we heard how much local bars, pubs and restaurants benefit from and rely on the footfall it attracts. It was a reminder of the importance of creating clusters of complementary uses at night, with hospitality businesses and cultural venues benefitting from being within walking distance from one another.



The New Wimbledon Theatre



Inside the New Wimbledon Theatre with its director, Nick Parr

Wimbledon Broadway

We visited Tequila Mockingbird across the road, part of a popular chain of cocktail bars. Despite the current economic crisis, the business was doing well and looking to open more venues. The Wimbledon branch is licensed until 2:30am - one of the only places open late in the town centre.

Council staff and the BID told me about plans for the Centre Court Shopping Centre. The owner plans to radically repurpose the space to include workspaces, climbing walls, virtual golf and a rooftop urban farm. The proposals include public realm upgrades, which will create space for outdoor seating for restaurants and bars.

Outside Wimbledon Station I spoke to two police officers who told me that street drinking and rough sleeping are two of the biggest issues they deal with in the area, working closely with healthcare professionals and the voluntary sector to address this. I heard that police had noted an increase in noise complaints since lockdown but rarely found businesses to be at fault. They speculated that people had instead become used to a quieter town centre at night.



The Prince of Wales pub



Amy Lamé speaking to local police officers outside Wimbledon Station

The Alexandra

We finished the night at the iconic Alexandra pub, which has stood on the site for over 200 years. It regularly wins awards for its community outreach, particularly around the festive period when it works to combat loneliness and social isolation.

Like other venues across London, staffing has become one of the pub's biggest challenges, as experienced people have left the hospitality industry. Despite the harsh economic climate, it still regularly packs out the impressive 500-capacity space, which includes a beautiful, covered roof terrace.

Wimbledon Library is next door and hosts the Merton Arts Space, which has developed a regular programme of evening and night time events, including live music and theatre. The public space between the pub and library is already active with outdoor seating and feature lighting and I was excited to hear about aspirations to redesign the space to support more evening activities and events.



The roof terrace of the Alexandra pub



Outdoor seating and festoon lighting on St Mark's Place outside the Alexandra pub

HARTFIELD WALK

→
Coffee Hart
i-Thai
Indian Takeaway
Biryani House
King Falafel
The Angelic
Juice Company

←
Coffee Hart
i-Thai
Indian Takeaway
Biryani House
King Falafel
The Angelic
Juice Company

Final thoughts

The night surgery was striking for the contrast between the two town centres I visited.

Wimbledon benefits from excellent transport connections and has a wide catchment area extending across southwest London and beyond the Greater London boundary. It has developed an ecosystem of uses, with landmark cultural and hospitality venues as anchors and catalysts for the area at night.

Mitcham was much more local in scale and character but struggles to attract and retain residents in the evening, with many opting to visit nearby town centres instead. Mitcham town centre already has fantastic infrastructure in place – a well-equipped town square, a community space in a large Victorian building and two beautiful old pubs – all of which are waiting for entrepreneurs and creatives to bring them to life. It reinforced the importance of developing strategies at a town centre scale to increase participation.

I look forward to working with councillors and officers to test new ideas and develop place-specific plans for Merton's town centres after 6pm.

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