



**MERANTUN DEVELOPMENT LIMITED**  
**Feedback on initial proposals**  
**September 2019**

1. Mitcham Cricket Green Community & Heritage takes an active interest in the future of the Cricket Green Conservation Area and its environs. We are the civic society for this part of Merton and part of the wider civic movement through membership of the national charity Civic Voice. We have been closely involved in the development of the Borough Character Studies, the Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Plan and numerous development proposals in the area. We have worked with the London Borough of Merton and our local councillors to produce the Cricket Green Charter which establishes our approach to development and change in the area and has been acknowledged in the Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Plan for Cricket Green (<http://mitchamcricketgreen.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/cricket-green-charter.pdf>). We have also contributed to production of the Merton Heritage Strategy as a member of the Merton Heritage Forum. We are members of The Canons Steering Group delivering a £5m Lottery funded project and also undertake practical projects, organise walks and run Mitcham Heritage Day and Community on the Green. We are celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Mitcham Cricket Green Conservation Area this year.

2. We welcome the establishment of Merantun Development Limited (Merantun) as Merton Council's property development company. This feedback addresses both its strategic role and approach and the first development plans which have emerged for both The Canons and Raleigh Gardens car park.

**The role of Merantun**

3. Merantun is a welcome addition to the range of ways in which Merton Council can serve its community. We welcome its establishment and believe it should play an important role in both improving the quality of development across the Borough and generating resources for investment in public services. Merantun has committed itself to being a "*good neighbour*". From the first two years of its operation we have identified the following issues to be addressed to develop and define its role.

4. Singular focus on generating income – Merantun presents itself as wishing to secure high quality, well designed development and to be both a good neighbour and an exemplar to other developers in the borough but its sole stated purpose is "*to generate income for the Council*". The evidence is already showing how this is leading to less than optimum outcomes for Merton Council's overall public service objectives in the developments coming forward. A more rounded approach is needed.

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5. Confused status – Merantun’s Board is Merton Council’s Cabinet and it promotes itself as being an important future source of income for Merton Council to provide public services. Its Board meets in public alongside the Cabinet’s regular meetings. It presents itself as Merton Council’s property development company and it employs Merton Council staff. Yet, it also chooses to be a “private company” when it comes to the transparency with which it conducts design review of its schemes. Merantun’s meeting with the Design Review Panel on its first developments were conducted in private despite Merton Council’s commitment to all pre-application discussions about its own developments being held in public. It could have met in public but chose not to do so, thereby missing an opportunity to demonstrate the value of openness and excluding the local community.

6. Poor practice community engagement – Merantun should be setting high standards for engaging the public which Merton Council serves. Instead, it offered to hold two public events on its plans held at less than 48 hours’ notice at the height of the holiday season and failed to make any of the materials available online. This is worst practice. It is worse than that we have experienced from private developers who share plans prior to a planning application being submitted. We welcome the attendance by the Design Director and the chosen architects at our August Open Meeting. This presented a final scheme and did not engage local people in its evolution. The quality of presentation from the architects and the lack of understanding of both the context and the detail of the two sites were shockingly bad and this is expanded on below.

7. Weak procurement – We welcomed the intention to support innovation and a diversity of thinking through initial procurement plans for a variety of architects to work across the first four sites. The eventual decision to let a single contract for all the sites may have had initial appeal and secured the services of one of the country’s largest practices but the downsides are clear. The quality of what is being delivered is poor and there is every impression that Merantun is not a significant enough client to warrant the attention from a large practice that these important sites deserve.

8. Our review of the Invitation to Tender documents also shows that there is no reference at all to either “community” or “consultation”. This has had inevitable consequences which are now becoming apparent. The chosen architects were unable to avoid using jargon or communicate their proposals in plain English at our August Open Meeting and displayed a limited understanding of the sites, including errors of fact.

9. Absence of design thinking – National planning policy establishes clear expectations for the quality of the design process and community engagement in delivering well designed schemes.

*"Design quality should be considered throughout the evolution and assessment of individual proposals. Early discussion between applicants, the local planning authority and local community about the design and style of emerging schemes is important for clarifying expectations and reconciling local and commercial interests. Applicants should work closely with those affected by their proposals to evolve designs that take account of the views of the community. Applications that can demonstrate early, proactive and effective engagement with the community should be looked on more favourably than those that cannot."*

*"Local planning authorities should ensure that they have access to, and make appropriate use of, tools and processes for assessing and improving the design of development. These include workshops to engage the local community, design advice and review arrangements, and assessment frameworks such as Building for Life. These are of most benefit if used as early as possible in the evolution of schemes, and are particularly important for significant projects such as large scale housing and mixed use developments."*

(NPPF, paragraphs 128-129)

10. Merantun should be helping to drive the change needed to ensure these approaches are adopted across the Borough. Instead, it has offered minimal opportunities for early discussion, excluded the public from Design Review, not engaged those affected in the evolution of the proposals, and failed to use the range of tools and processes available for securing quality design. It can be concluded that any Merantun planning application will be one that cannot be looked on more favourably when it is considered by the Planning Applications Committee.

11. Weak project management – We question the rigour of Merantun’s project management given the dramatically shifting development programme and the significant changes in the expected capacity of development sites. In 2017 it was expected that building would start on site in June 2018 and the first occupants would move in during summer 2019. In reality we are not yet at the stage of submitting a planning application. The first assessment of the capacity of the Raleigh Gardens car park was for 22 dwellings. The latest scheme is for 36 dwellings. These wild variations further add to levels of public mistrust.

12. High opportunity cost – Merantun’s lead staff also have important and high profile roles as Merton Council employees. As a result, the Future Merton team has lost senior resource at a time when important tasks are not being delivered. These include:

- Completion of Merton character studies
- Delivery of the annual local list review – with our proposals from December 2017 still outstanding and no proposals yet requested for 2019
- Delivery of the high profile public commitment to extend registration of Town Green in Mitcham town centre as part of the Rediscover Mitcham programme
- Provision of design briefs for key sites
- Delivery of public realm investments in Cricket Green

13. Viability – Merantun’s Design Director informed our August Open Meeting that the quantum of development planned for both The Canons and Raleigh Gardens sites is necessary to secure viability. We strongly question this and believe that other viable schemes can be developed without such a negative impact on the local area. Viability is dependent on myriad decisions over development costs, standards, affordable housing provision and the cost of land. A wide range of different development options is available from Merantun’s sites and as freeholder Merton Council has direct control over land costs.

14. Looking ahead - Merantun is now two years old. Its first schemes have been developed, tested and found wanting. We believe it is an appropriate point to take stock and learn lessons from the first phase of its existence. We ask:

- Merton Council to reimagine the potential and the opportunity of Merantun. It should be guided by a purpose to deliver on Merton Council’s Business Plan ambition to be a “*place-shaper*”. It should raise the bar for quality development and community engagement not only through its own sites but also through the impact it has on the standards expected from development across the borough. Working in tandem with Merton Council’s compulsory purchase powers it should also provide a means to act on difficult sites, such as the Burn Bullock, and help unlock key regeneration sites.
- Merantun to establish itself as an exemplar for the quality of its design processes and for community engagement. It should commit to early community collaboration and co-design, including from those it contracts for delivery. Merantun should judge success as much on the change in developer behaviour on other sites as on the quality of its own schemes. Its schemes should provide both inspiration for what can be achieved and respect for their context. They should look to be much more than simply policy compliant.

- Merantun to take an open book approach to viability that is built into the process of community collaboration and co-design from the beginning.
- Merantun to be resourced so that there is no net reduction in the capacity of Future Merton.
- Merantun pauses development of the current proposals and, in collaboration with the local community, reworks them with a renewed focus on the quality of their design and long term contribution to local character and sense of place.

## The Canons

15. We have reviewed the proposals for the former nursery located between The Canons and Park Place in the light of the Cricket Green Charter and development plan policies. There is only limited information available on the proposals. Our views are also informed by the scheme's presentation by the architects at our August Open Meeting.

16. This is a highly sensitive site in Mitcham Cricket Green Conservation Area, strategically located between two of Mitcham's listed mansion houses and with challenging access and sensitive boundaries. We reviewed its future as part of a community workshop exploring a number of key sites in 2013. The considerations raised included:

- *"discussion of the potential for small houses although the site was seen as very sensitive and its open aspect was valued"*
- *there is potential to reveal the site's historic identity and link it more coherently to the surrounding area*
- *make more of historic and physical relationship with Park Place*
- *the tree is very old and now a remnant which should be valued and its story as part of an historic landscape recognised*
- *strong cultural and economic case for it not being developed for housing linked to wider restoration of Canons house and grounds*
- *reinstate link to its surroundings – physically and historically"*

17. The relationship to the major investment in The Canons supported by the National Lottery which has since been secured should also be an important consideration.

18. As proposed, the plans still need significant work. They fail to preserve and enhance the Conservation Area through developing too much of the existing open space, threatening a prominent tree which makes a positive contribution to the area and failing to respect the setting of the listed buildings. The design treatment lack distinction. It has an everyday and everywhere character that owes little to the local context beyond a simplistic and derivative effort to respond to the proportions of Park Place's front elevation.

19. We welcome the central influence which retention and celebration of the striking Pagoda tree (*Styphnolobium japonicum*) has had on the plans. This is a much celebrated local asset and it has previously been awarded Merton Tree of the Year status. Given this, it was disturbing that the architects presenting at our August Open Meeting described this as both a Tree of Heaven and a Tree of Life. Neither is correct. The circulated plans also describe this as a Tree of Heaven. This is despite an expert tree survey being available. It undermines public trust in the rigour behind the plans. We were also assured that construction could be undertaken without damage to the tree or its roots but seriously question this. We also question whether the development on three sides and the circulation area around the tree leaves sufficient space to avoid future problems.

20. In developing the proposals we ask that:

- Key views are provided of the site from the first floor of both The Canons house and Park Place, The Canons east lawn, and the former News of the World Sports Ground which confirm no negative impact
- A right of 24/7 public access through the site is established as a fundamental requirement – which will require changes to the dead space leading into the site from The Canons car park and removal of the bin store which provides an inappropriate gateway at this location. The public realm within the site should be pedestrian priority with minimal need for access by car
- The scale, mass and height of the "*L shaped block of flats*" is reduced to respect the character of surrounding buildings and to be subservient to that of The Canons house and Park Place
- Detailed provisions are included for the protection and maintenance of the Pagoda tree both during construction and in the long term such that these can be considered during determination of the application and not left to the discharge of planning conditions
- Parking requirements respond to the reality of a major public car park being located adjacent to the site, including through bringing forward plans to introduce pay and display parking at The Canons
- Servicing arrangements that do not require use of the public car park in The Canons are provided
- The development is renamed to avoid confusion with Canons Place (as proposed in The Canons house and landscape project for the area outside the leisure centre) whilst also being aware of Canons Close (a recent development of houses off nearby Denham Crescent)
- A positive relationship between the development and the future use of The Canons house and landscape as a location attracting community and educational activity and as a business hub is demonstrated

## **Raleigh Gardens**

21. We have reviewed the proposals for the development of Raleigh Garden car park in the light of the Cricket Green Charter and development plan policies. There is only limited information available on the proposals. Our views are also informed by the scheme's presentation by the architects at our August Open Meeting.

22. This is a prominent site adjacent to Mitcham Cricket Green Conservation Area. The development has profound implications for Glebe Court which makes a significant and positive contribution to the Conservation Area.

23. As proposed, the plans need a fundamental rethink. They singularly fail to respect their context and introduce a massing and height that is alien to the area. The scheme damages the setting of the Conservation Area and damages Glebe Court as a heritage asset. The plans also fail to demonstrate the implications for Mitcham's parking strategy and the priority for developing this car park over the underused eyesore of Mitcham's multi-storey car park. The design treatment is poor and universal. Its simplistic references to a former workhouse and the materiality of the nearby two storey terraces suggest a superficial approach and a limited appreciation of the site. The proposed materials on such a large building will give it an overbearing presence.

24. We are particularly concerned by the lack of consideration for the impact on Glebe Court. The response from the architects at our Open Meeting that the scheme performs adequately on daylighting and sunlight and is sufficiently separated from Glebe Court is inadequate. It suggests a design approach based more on securing basic policy compliance than delivering the inspiration and respect for context we expect from Merantun schemes. The adjacent Glebe Court building is and should remain the primary building in the area. Its height and mass should be respected and any building in its environs should be subservient. Glebe Court is a much admired development that

provides ample sources of inspiration for what might be developed on Raleigh Gardens car park.

25. In conclusion, we ask that the issues raised in this feedback are addressed prior to bringing forward Merantun's first planning applications. We stand ready to engage further with all parties to bring about the best outcomes for these sites and for the strengthening of Merton's property development company.