

**Walworth Society – Walworth Town Hall Deputation to Southwark Council
Cabinet on 18th July 2017**

We would like to thank you for accepting this deputation and to thank Cllr Williams for coming along to the recent Walworth Society meeting.

Our comments are based on the issues raised at that meeting and in the survey that we have been running with the Walworth Councillors which has had a total of 265 responses.

Our starting point is the future of the Walworth area and the Walworth Road in the light of developments at the Elephant & Castle and at Elephant Park. As the nature of retail changes with the rise of online shopping, a significant body of research points to the importance of components such as libraries and other civic drivers of footfall for successful and vibrant town centres and high streets.

Our own research around the Walworth Road Conservation Area identified the Walworth Town Hall and Newington Library along with East Street market and individual shops such as Oli Stores and Morrisons as the principal drivers of footfall along the Walworth Road. We fear in particular that the proposed re-providing of the Newington Library which was described in the recent Cabinet report as occurring “in the local area” may in fact happen to the north of Wansey St.

The Library.

The loss of the library into Elephant Park or the Elephant & Castle Town Centre would be an enormous blow for Walworth, as footfall would be driven away from the Walworth area. Conversely a new library facility in Walworth would draw people south from the Elephant and introduce its new residents, workers, students and other visitors to its shops and character.

We are proposing, therefore, that Southwark investigates whether the new library facility can be built to the south of Wansey St and thus close to the heart of the Walworth area. Potentially it could be included in one of the development sites such as in Chatelaine House or Morrisons.

Southwark now has an excellent track record with its libraries and we envisage a facility which combines a lending and reference library with community space, informal workspace and the café facilities which are making the John Harvard Library such a vibrant success.

The Cuming Collection.

In our recent survey and at the public meeting, what comes across very strongly is the significance of the Cuming collection. There is also a hunger to create a hub that can celebrate the rich history and heritage of Southwark which is a major absence from the borough's overall offer at present.

We feel that there is strong support for maintaining the Cuming collection in one place where it can be displayed effectively. Of course, we would like that to occur in the Town Hall buildings but, if that is not possible, we suggest that space is created that is additional to the new library which can still be managed efficiently and which can act as a permanent home for a museum for the history of Southwark and is also home to the Cuming collection, the Southwark Art collection and the local archive.

Future Uses of the Town Hall and Newington Library buildings.

For these buildings, people could not be clearer that it is vital to retain public access to the historically significant parts of the buildings and to develop usages which invite local people to visit them. Support exists for an Arts and Cultural use. There are, however, concerns about Southwark's capacity to identify a suitable partner or consortium on its own and, in the light of the success that Southwark has had with attractions such as Tate Modern and the new Bridge Theatre, we suggest close engagement with other bodies such as the GLA, the Arts Council and to draw in expertise from cultural institutions to create a credible package for the redevelopment and then running of a successful cultural and arts attraction.

We would also encourage Southwark to be open in the tender process to other more local development options ranging from a community asset transfer to external partners working with local community groups on a plan for the buildings that includes raising capital and creating a viable business model. The process might also include plans for the NHS property next door and taking that into consideration as part of the redevelopment of the town hall.

The Overall Opportunity

We see the issues that are faced over the future of the Town Hall buildings, the location of a new library and how Southwark tells the story of its heritage as difficult but also as tremendous opportunities for the Walworth area. Done well we have the ability to establish a gateway into Walworth, connecting the new development at the Elephant & Castle with Walworth very much as the SPD from 2012 envisaged with its opportunity area genuinely extending south into Walworth. By working together, listening to local people, developing an ambitious vision and partnerships we can create a new destination valued by local people and visitors and secure the future of these important cultural assets for the generations to come. Thank you.