

High Streets Task Force Case Study: Transform Leatherhead

October 2020

Transform Leatherhead

Basic Facts about the high street and local area

Leatherhead is one of Mole Valley's two main market towns, occupying a strategic position at Junction 9 of the M25, approximately 20 miles south west of Central London, 19 miles north-west of Gatwick Airport and 24 miles south-east of Heathrow Airport.

The town provides a range of facilities including retail, services, leisure/fitness, entertainment, and cultural activities. It is the home of the Grade II listed Leatherhead Theatre (formerly the Thorndike Theatre, designed by architect Richard Ham and opened in 1969). Just a few minutes' walk south of the town centre is the River Mole and Leatherhead's Leisure Quarter, which includes a Leisure Centre, Football Club (the 'Tanners'), Cricket Club, and Gymnastics Club. The riverside path connects Leatherhead to Dorking (via the Mole Gap trail) and beyond to the Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

The present town plan dates from the 12th or 13th Century and has as its focus the junction of High Street, Church Street (north end), Bridge Street, and North Street and is a conservation area and features many historic buildings. The pedestrianised High Street, The Swan Centre and Church Street are considered to be the core town area, traditionally a focus for retail.

Leatherhead has a population of approximately 12,900, nearly 18% of District's population. It serves its immediate shopper catchment of 17,045, and with the adjoining communities of Ashted, Fetcham and Bookham, a combined population of 44,850.

It has a catchment of 369,459 within a 20 minute drive time. The shopper population is generally prosperous with an age profile centred on the middle age demographic. By 2027, the percentage of population over 45 is modelled to increase from 45.7% to 47.8%, with the 75+ bracket predicted to rise from 9.1% to 11.4% by 2027.

Key opportunities/challenges

The challenges facing Leatherhead go back to the 1980s, when the Swan Shopping Centre was built, the High Street was part-pedestrianised, and a new road system introduced. Before then, Leatherhead was described as 'bustling' and it then lost its identity. In 2002, Leatherhead High Street was nominated as one of Britain's top five worst High Streets.

This prompted a huge drive from the local community to revive it, which led to launch of the Leatherhead Drama Festival, the formation of the Leatherhead Area Partnership Limited, a company set up to co-ordinate town centre regeneration projects which emerged from a community group, Leatherhead Tomorrow, who undertook a health check on Leatherhead. By 2007, Surrey Life reported that Leatherhead town centre was thriving, with an abundance of shops and restaurants, a wonderful theatre, and its very own drama festival.

However, the financial crisis and the rapid rise in online shopping have contributed to a further period of decline. This is despite its location, the socio-demographic profile of its catchment, and all the hard work of the local community and business stakeholders through markets, events and other cultural and leisure activities to generate footfall.

The Transform Leatherhead Masterplan (2016) concluded that Leatherhead is 'failing to punch its weight as a significant town' and 'that the town centre has lost its way and needs to promote a vision that establishes [its] Unique Selling Points'.

Some of the key challenges identified by the Masterplan are summarised as follows:-

- Catchment leakage - a poor town centre offer means that the town retains only 6.75% of the available expenditure.
- Vacancy Rates - increased and persistent vacancy rates with tired shopfronts
- Imbalance of occupiers with an undersupply of convenience shops, and an oversupply of charity shops and service retail
- Decline in footfall with uneven distribution across the town centre
- Traffic congestion and town centre parking that does not adequately support the needs of shoppers, workers and visitors
- Lack of quality and affordable town centre housing
- Despite the affluence, localised deprivation in Leatherhead North
- Poor quality high street public realm with cluttered streets, poor connectivity and accessibility

Covid-19 brought new challenges with the majority of town centre businesses closing during lockdown. However, there was a core group of essential retailers that remained open and others who adapted their business model by moving on-line or offering take-away.

Goals/objectives

The Transform Leatherhead Masterplan sets out a strategic approach to regenerating Leatherhead. Its vision, confirmed through extensive public consultation, is:

'Leatherhead Town Centre will be re-invented, expanded and transformed to fully realise its potential as a distinctive, enterprising highly regarded market town. The town centre's character, history and environmental setting will be celebrated and complemented by new and revitalised uses'.

The Masterplan included the following:

- Provide high quality living within the town centre – residential development may underpin town centre viability.
- Enhancing and expanding the town centre – develop the critical mass* of the town centre with the High Street remaining as the heart of the retail core.
- Transformational additions through refurbishment or redevelopment of the Swan Centre.

The Masterplan identified the opportunity to improve the Swan Centre as a catalyst to revitalise the High Street. The Swan Centre is a dated 1980s part covered mall, which makes up much of the town centre retail.

This would meet the following Masterplan objectives:

- A distinct and sustainable role – by addressing the retail and car parking offer of the Centre.
- More than the 'Sum of the Parts' – development and new uses for the Centre to integrate more fully with Leatherhead town centre.
- Improve the retail offer – complement surrounding villages through a focus on larger high street names* interspersed with independents and a strong food and drink offer. The configuration and accessibility of the Centre need to be addressed to unlock latent demand.
- Enhancing the leisure, entertainment and cultural offer – as spending habits change, the opportunity to attract a major commercial leisure use to the town to anchor the food and beverage offer.
- Improve accessibility – improving the car parking offer of the Centre.
- Working with businesses – create directly complementary development – such as additional hotel bed spaces, local housing and an expanded retail offer* and high-quality restaurants.
- Deliver high quality public realm – gateways to the town centre, including the High Street.

* Since the Masterplan, further project specific studies have been undertaken. As a result the above objectives have been adapted to respond to the changing trends in retailing and the effects on town-centres. This is outlined in more detail in the next section.

Description of the project/initiative

MVDC made capital investments to purchase the key sites within three 'quarters' identified by the Transform Leatherhead Masterplan. This meant that MVDC would be able to bring forward redevelopment proposals of individual projects in each quarter.

This included the following:-

- Acquiring the controlling leasehold interest of the Swan Centre, central to delivery of the improved Retail & Leisure Quarter.
- Purchase of Claire House and James House overlooking the River Mole. Redevelopment of this site is a key project in bringing forward the Riverside Quarter.
- Purchase of sites at Bull Hill, which completes MVDC's ownership of the Urban Quarter, which improves the links between the town centre and Business Quarter / Leatherhead Station.

The first stage of the Retail & Leisure Quarter was improvements to the public realm at the southern gateway at Church Street. This was undertaken by MVDC in partnership with Surrey County Council (SCC) funded through developer contributions, a grant from SCC and a grant from the Coast to Capital Local Growth Fund (LGF).

MVDC recognised that the implementation of these key projects required the involvement of development partners. However, it identified that it would be necessary to undertake various feasibility, viability studies and surveys to help de-risk them before bringing them forward as opportunities.

The initiative that is most directly relevant to the High Street is a Development Study for the Swan Centre. This has identified a costed Masterplan for the site, designed to RIBA Stage 1.

Before identifying redevelopment potential, an occupier study was undertaken. This considered the evolving function of town centres as a result of changes to shopping habits and how Leatherhead should best serve the needs of its catchment. This adapted the original Masterplan recommendations, which had been to expand the retail offer and focus on larger units for high street names (as detailed in the previous section).

The study recommended repositioning the retail offer to cater for the fundamental shop and creating smaller, more affordable units to attract more local businesses and independent retailers. It recommended re-purposing the Swan Centre by reducing the retail content and introducing a greater variety of uses. This would be supplemented by increased open spaces for markets and events to create a more varied offer, meaning more reasons to visit the town. This would lead to more footfall which would fulfil the objective of revitalising the High Street.

The proposed master plan for the Swan Centre as follows:-

- Flexible retail - reduced from 4,400m² to 3,700m²
- A boutique cinema
- Up to 4 food and beverage units
- 1,100m² of flexible employment space
- Approx. 50 residential units
- 70 bed hotel

- A rooftop garden/vineyard
- Improved public realm and increased open space
- Increased car parking

In the short-term, MVDC has initiated a pro-active Asset Management approach. This is also essential to ensure that the Centre remains occupied and continues to attract footfall ahead of redevelopment.

MVDC needed to quickly respond to the impact of Covid-19 by instigating a number of town centre recovery initiatives to support businesses to re-open and encourage visitors to return to the town which included:-

- Early discussions with all tenants to identify cash flow difficulties and agree rent payment plans or lease re-gears where appropriate
- Administration of business grants and signposting businesses to further support
- Increased Covid-19 compliant cleaning regime
- Installation of signage to promote social distancing
- Early re-opening of street markets
- Public engagement to highlight safety measures and encourage visitors to return to a safe environment funded through the ERDF Reopening High Streets Safely Fund
- Events and promotions targeted to support and engage the community in a virtual way, then linking to physical activities as restrictions evolved

The team involved in the project/initiative

MVDC established a dedicated multi-disciplinary Regeneration Team to deliver Transform Leatherhead.

MVDC's Regeneration and Communications Teams have undertaken extensive consultation and communication with residents and stakeholders. The first stage was establish the evidence base to support the development of the Transform Leatherhead Masterplan. Communication has remained a key priority to ensure that the vision and projects remain relevant to the community and still have support.

The teams have run a regular programme of live public engagement including events, forums and workshops. These were live-streamed and further virtual communications include video updates, newsletters, web updates and social media.

In addition, MVDC has formed a number of reference groups which meet regularly.

- A member reference group - attended by local ward members for Leatherhead, Ashted, Bookham, Fetcham, and Boxhill & Headley, and the Surrey County Councillor.
- A community reference group - attended by representatives of the residents' associations for Ashted, Bookham, Fetcham and Leatherhead, the Federation of Small Businesses, Mole Valley Chamber of Commerce, the Leatherhead Area Partnership Limited, Leatherhead Community Association, Leatherhead & District Countryside Protection Society and B@titude, a charity in North Leatherhead.

- A business reference group - the wider business community, key local landowners and employers.
- Workshops and presentations with local schools.

To deliver some of the initiatives to date MVDC allocated revenue funding in the form of a Regeneration Reserve. It used capital funding to facilitate property purchases and used developer contributions to fund public realm improvements. Many of these initiatives have been in partnership with the Coast to Capital Local Growth Fund (LGF), and Surrey County Council (SCC).

MVDC's Regeneration Team has appointed external multi-disciplinary teams to bring forward project specific studies such as those highlighted above.

MVDC's Regeneration and Property teams have initiated an asset management programme for the Swan Centre. This included an interim programme of improvements to improve the public areas, car park and public WCs. New external managing agents and marketing consultants have been appointed to pro-actively manage the Swan Centre by supporting tenants and delivering a programme of marketing and events.

There have been many wider initiatives which include:-

- Close liaison with Leatherhead Residents Association: Specifically LRA organised commemorative stars within the public realm outside Leatherhead Theatre to pay tribute to well-known artists with connections to the Theatre as part of its 50th birthday celebrations.
- MVDC's sponsorship of community events like the Leatherhead Duck Race, Halloween and Christmas, with the close involvement of Leatherhead Rotary Club and Leatherhead Parish Church
- In May 2019 local businesses and residents ran Leatherhead's first carnival and established Love Leatherhead and the Carnival Group. This event increased footfall by 95% on the previous year.
- In June 2019, MVDC Regeneration piloted the delivery of digital business skills training to businesses in Leatherhead by a specialist place making consultants, Clockwork City. This was so successful it was rolled out more widely and equipped participants to access customers digitally even when their business premises were closed during lockdown 1.0 at the start of the pandemic.
- In March 2020, MVDC publicised details of businesses who were still operating through the pandemic (even with an adapted business model).

Post Covid-19, these initiatives have been adapted to accelerate recovery of the town centre:-

- MVDC and SCC collaborated with local businesses, residents and the Mole Valley Chamber of Commerce to progress a temporary extension to Leatherhead's pedestrian zone. This is part of the Department for Transport's Active Travel initiative to support the Covid-19 recovery initiatives and enabled the implementation of some of the key recommendations arising from a 2019 High Street public realm improvement study seeking to drive footfall and dwell time
- MVDC's Economic Development, Benefits and Communications teams worked with the wider business community to signpost and deliver business support and guidance on how to reopen safely as well as on running online seminars on business recovery

- MVDC’s Economic Development team worked with the Chamber of Commerce to safely re-open various street-markets, including relaunching a monthly Artisan market.
- The Property team have worked with the managing agents and marketing consultants to adapt the asset management and marketing programmes.

Impact or outcomes

Short-term outputs/achievements

The post recovery initiatives and associated marketing of the Swan Centre have been key to encouraging visitors back and footfall to increase.

The adaptation of the marketing to include virtual events during lockdown has resulted in increased engagement with the Swan Centre social media (Facebook + 200%, Twitter + 900%, Instagram + 300%).

Further details of all these initiatives are included in Appendix 1.

MVDC launched a communications campaign in July, under the brand “Mole Valley Together”. Phase 1 had as a key objective building residents confidence in returning to town centres through showcasing and promoting all the positive steps taken by businesses to enable a covid-secure town centre experience, funded through the ERDF Reopening High Streets Safely Fund. We were delighted to see this comment from the High Streets Task Force on Twitter @HighStreetsTG “We keep seeing great examples – like this one – of communicates and businesses working together to welcome visitors back to the high street” (August 2020).

Drawing on the HSTF report “Review of High Street Footfall July 2019-June 2020”, a footfall analysis has been undertaken (Appendix 2). This analysis has demonstrated that Leatherhead’s classification is a small, multifunctional town with a steady weekly footfall and all day economy. This is relevant to the evidence base of Mole Valley’s draft local plan.

Post Covid-19 analysis shows that from the 23rd March to 30th June, Leatherhead’s footfall fell by 39.1%. This indicates that Leatherhead has out-performed multifunctional towns (down 74.1%), regional centres (down 64.96%) and towns (down 52.87%). It has performed more like a district centre (down 34.55%).

Leatherhead has sustained a continuing trend of increasing footfall as it recovers from the impacts of Covid-19. Detailed analysis has indicated that footfall fell by 69.4% on 28th March 2020, increased by 20% when non-essential retail opened, and by a further 27% when pubs reopened.

The study has shown that the towns that effectively serve their local catchment have been the ones that have recovered the fastest. A review of the HSTF findings suggests that one of the reasons that that Leatherhead has achieved this is because of the provision of essential retail and services in an open environment. Building on the successful marketing initiatives and engaging with the local community is key to ensuring this continues.

The Active Travel plan has resulted in the temporary installation of planters to provide more space for pedestrians to socially distance at times when the High Street is open to traffic and supports businesses by providing dedicated spaces for external seating to increase covers making use of the new pavement licencing regime.

It is too early to quantify the results of this, but public feedback has been good, and it has been encouraging to see the creation of more outdoor seating by businesses.

Long-term outputs/achievements

The Swan Centre master plan had already recommended repositioning the retail offer to cater for the fundamental shop rather than extending it. It also identified the opportunity to introduce additional uses and smaller units to attract independent businesses. It also highlighted the importance of better public realm to accommodate events and markets.

As a result, there was a good understanding of the redevelopment potential for the Swan Centre and how this could be the catalyst for revitalising the town centre.

The footfall analysis has reinforced this finding by confirming Leatherhead's status as a small multifunctional town. This means that in order to thrive, Leatherhead should not be retail dominant and needs to provide a number of other functions to serve its community.

As a result of Covid-19, the importance of public open spaces has been highlighted further. It is clear that running events and catchment-relevant street markets are a key driver of footfall. Improved open spaces will provide more opportunities for Mole Valley's extensive local businesses to showcase locally made crafts and produce in the town centre.

The implementation of the active travel plan gives an immediate opportunity to improve the use of the High Street as a pedestrian friendly space to support the town's businesses. If successful, this is likely to generate an increased awareness of the benefits of improved public realm and an understanding of how effective pedestrian spaces can be used in a modern way to enable Leatherhead to serve the community in the long-term.

The HSTF analysis highlights how both essential retail and green spaces have been the nation's lifelines during lockdown. The Transform Leatherhead master plan already included proposals to improve the Riverside – as maximising natural assets is another place-making tool to increase dwell time. The progression of the Riverside park will make best use of the River Mole as an improved community space and another reason to visit the town.

Similarly, the Swan Centre masterplan not only caters for the fundamental shop, it includes green walls, and a rooftop vineyard garden. This, together with the retention of green open spaces at Bull Hill are important considerations going forward, and can make a significant contribution to the physical and mental wellbeing of the community.

It has been reassuring to see how the ingredients for success are being addressed by Transform Leatherhead's projects. Collectively, it is clear that these outputs will enable Leatherhead to fully realise its potential and fulfil its purpose as a small, multifunctional town.

Advice for High Streets Task Force users

The Transform Leatherhead Masterplan was approved in 2016 following extensive public consultation. At this time MVDC purchased key property assets with re-development potential to enable delivery of the vision.

MVDC has provided pump priming funding to initiate projects and worked with partners and stakeholders to implement improvements. This is key to unlocking grant funding and de-risking projects for the private sector. However, it requires the local authority to have the financial resources to do so and for it to be recognised as a political priority.

Further studies have been carried out to develop the vision into deliverable projects which are capable of attracting private sector investment.

The process to take these projects to market and identify private sector development partners will be starting in early 2021.

Prior to developing the Masterplan, it was key to understand the catchment population and why it will visit and spend within the town centre.

Whilst there was overwhelming support for the Masterplan, it has been important to continue community and stakeholder engagement. This includes being honest about timescales for delivery, and adopting a flexible approach. As project proposals develop a willingness to adapt and refresh is key as both the market and the needs of residents evolve.

However, no matter how much you engage/consult, you will not get consensus. Building relationships takes time and cross-party support is key.

A 'one-size fits all' approach does not work. Data and evidence bases are key to developing a long-term solution that is unique, authentic and relevant to the immediate population. For Leatherhead, this means spaces for essential shopping and services together with open spaces to create more opportunities for local businesses showcase locally made produce and crafts.

Given that timescales are long, it has been important to include short-term initiatives to enable the area to evolve and retain footfall. This includes pro-active asset management of property assets by understanding and supporting occupiers. It also includes running interesting events and street markets. This needs to be supported by innovative marketing and engagement. The Covid-19 marketing approach has demonstrated how the community can continue to engage virtually. This is now evolving to blend the virtual with the physical, which is also ongoing way of responding to the changing habits of consumers, and the effect on our town centres.

Contact for Task Force queries

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Further details

Appendices

1. Swan Centre marketing & events
2. [Footfall analysis](#)
3. Active Travel Plan

References

www.transformleatherhead.com

<https://theswancentre.co.uk/>

www.futuremolevalley.co.uk

www.molevalleytogether.co.uk