

ST HELENS GARDENS PROPOSED IMPROVEMENTS

RESPONSE TO RBKC CONSULTATION FROM ST HELENS RESIDENTS ASSOCIATION AND ST QUINTIN AND WOODLANDS NEIGHBOURHOOD FORUM

The residents association and neighbourhood forum share the same membership of 380 residents and businesses in the neighbourhood area designated by RBKC in 2013. Our 2016 neighbourhood plan (adopted 2018) suggested St Helens Gardens as an area where the streetscape could be improved.

The proposals published by RBKC in April 2021 followed initial discussions between RBKC officers, a couple of StQW committee members (including the Chair and the vicar of St Helens Church), and a couple of residents and businesses in St Helens Gardens. The area around St Helens Gardens was leafleted by RBKC and individual residents will have responded to the consultation.

SHRA/StQW held an open Zoom session for its members on June 10th. Attendance was 35 members, 80% of whom took part in the two Zoom polls used at the meeting. Some chose not to vote as they lived some distance from St Helens Gardens.

Slides were shown at the start of the session, showing the proposals and images included in the RBKC consultation. This was followed by discussion on how this section of street works at present, in terms of availability of parking, behaviour of drivers and traffic, where the street can most safely be crossed, and the merits of some of the improvements proposed by RBKC.

It was explained that the total cost of the Council's proposals was around £750,000. These funds would come from RBKC Parking Reserves, which can only be used for transport related expenditure and is not in competition with scarce revenue resources for e.g. social care.

Nevertheless the meeting saw this a very large sum of money parts of which might be better used for traffic management arrangements at Oxford Gardens Primary School, or for replacing the pavements in North Pole Road which are in a bad condition (especially outside the shopping parade on the northern side of the street).

The two Zoom polls were used as discussion continued. The first of these asked the audience to click on those statements with which they agreed. This established levels of support for different elements of the proposed improvement scheme, which varied from 76% to 57%.

A raised Zebra Crossing in St Quintin Avenue west of the junction with St Helens Gardens is a positive feature of these proposals

76% agreed

This crossing was seen as important for those visiting Memorial Park and as a means of slowing notorious speeding traffic (including HGVs with construction materials. There remain many cars and motorcycles ignoring the 20mph limit along St Quintin Avenue.

Bollards (well located) are essential to stop pavement parking

67% agreed

Parking by owners of business on the private forecourt areas on the western side of St Helens Gardens has been a long term problem. It was explained that RBKC cannot enforce for traffic offences other than at the moment when a vehicle mounts the public part of the pavement. Bollards (or some other means of preventing) pavement parking is therefore needed,

Additional cycle parking is worth installing

57% agreed

Additional cycle parking, on the side of the streets with the shops, was supported but not by a large majority.

Planted beds/rain gardens as shown on the map should be included

57% agreed

It was explained that these beds would be added to the RBKC contract for maintenance of similar features in other streetscape schemes. The relatively modest majority for this element of the scheme may reflect doubts on the adequacy of maintenance and concern that such planted areas can become filled with litter and/or dead plants.

The existing planters are worn out and should be replaced

62% agreed

The existing timber planters on the west side of the street outside the shops were installed many years ago. Their upkeep relies on voluntary input from building owners, shopkeepers and residents. At present they mark the divide between the private forecourts and the public pavement, although many people do not realise that land ownership is separate (see further below). Given their deteriorating condition, these planters are not seen as an asset to the street to the extent that they were when new.

The second Zoom poll went on to take soundings on those part of the proposals which had emerged as more contentious, in the weeks since the consultation started. Each was discussed before a vote was taken. The statements were listed in pairs and as alternative options.

A raised crossing opposite the entrance of the church should be included even if this results in the loss of parking spaces

25% agreed

In terms of loss of parking spaces to make room for the crossing, it was understood that this would involve two residents bays outside the church and two Pay and Display spaces outside the shops. A car club bay and a residents bay would be re-provided in St Quintin Avenue. Shop keepers were known to be opposed to any loss of parking bays, given the impact of business and a single deliver bay.

It was explained that proposals for this new crossing had not been the result of lobbying by Bassett House School. The corner of Kelfield Gardens, where the pavement is already built out and St Helens Gardens narrowed, was seen as a more natural crossing point for pedestrians approaching from the west, and as a location that would not result in loss of parking. This is the location currently used by Bassett House School whose management of children crossing the road is seen as exemplary.

Retaining parking bays is more important than a raised crossing

75% agreed

As above

Removal of the traffic island at the junction of St Quintin Avenue and installing buildouts will improve traffic safety

20% agreed

It was explained that RBKC traffic engineers had recommended this measure given that there had been accidents in the past at this junction, with vehicles turning right into St Helens Gardens at speed. The counter view came from several residents of the street who witness driver behaviour at peak hours (including the school run) and who believe that crossing St Helens Gardens at this location would be less safe without the present traffic island.

Maximising safety and avoiding accidents is obviously a very important issue, and StQW/SHRA would want to see the right outcome on this question. At present, residents closest to this location remain unconvinced by the proposed 'improvement'. We would be willing to look at further evidence.

The traffic island at this location should stay in place

75% agreed

As above

Parking bays in porphyry setts are worth installing

20% agreed

Parking bays in porphyry setts are not needed

70% agreed

This may seem a surprising result given that the use of these setts is considered by RBKC officers to improve the appearance of a street and make it more 'pedestrian friendly'. There were three reasons identified in the discussion which led to this outcome on the poll:

- Residents were familiar with the introduction of this street surface in Golborne Road, where the lack of a kerb is seen to have led to increased random pavement parking by cars and scooters – an increasing problem with growing numbers of delivery vehicles of all kinds which park short-term with little care or attention.
- The setts in Golborne Road have become discoloured and unattractive (recognised that this results partly from food stall use)
- The visual impact of expensive installation of setts and York paving in St Helens Gardens will inevitably be undermined by the fact that this will not extend to the private forecourt areas – some of which are not maintained or cleared of grass and weeds.

It would be good if a solution could be found on this last issue, and if building owners could be encouraged to match the quality of any works done to the public pavements on the west side of St Helens Gardens. But given that this involves a series of pieces of private land, it is hard to see how any universal outcome could be achieved.

Next steps

The meeting recognised that if the Council chose to go along with the removal of various elements of the improvements proposed in the consultation leaflet, there would be significant savings on a £750,000 budget. It was agreed that RBKC should be asked to consider allocating the balance of funds to other street and transport related measures in the neighbourhood, including pavement improvements in North Pole Road and traffic calming or pedestrian safety measures at Oxford Gardens Primary School.