

Sicilian Avenue Planning Strategy Note

April 2011

Background

Holborn Links Limited owns and manages the four acre Holborn Links Estate bounded by High Holborn to the South, Vernon Place to the North, Bloomsbury Court to the West and Southampton Row to the east. It includes Sicilian Avenue which has junctions with Southampton Row and Vernon Place.

Sicilian Avenue was designed by R.J. Worley for the Duke of Bedford and completed in 1910. It was designed as a pedestrianised shopping street with office accommodation above the outlets. Nos. 1-29 and nos. 2-20 Sicilian Avenue are Grade II listed. Today the street continues to provide a variety of shops and restaurants with office accommodation above and a small amount (four units) of residential accommodation.

The architecture of the Avenue is very striking with its lively mix of contrasting red brick and white 'Carrara' faience which will be complimented by the new white granite paving scheme due for completion in May 2011. When the name was changed from Vernon Arcade to Sicilian Avenue during the course of construction, the branding opportunities were embraced in details including the free standing stone screens at each end of the avenue and the bracketry to the signage and logo.

The diagonal cut through the site provides a respite from the neighbouring street activity. The freestanding screens at either end mark it as a different and special place and creates a sense of enclosure.

The avenue is ideally located on the 'Museum Mile' and is only a short distance away from the West End theatres and nearby hotels but for some time has not been able to take advantage of the opportunities presented by its location.

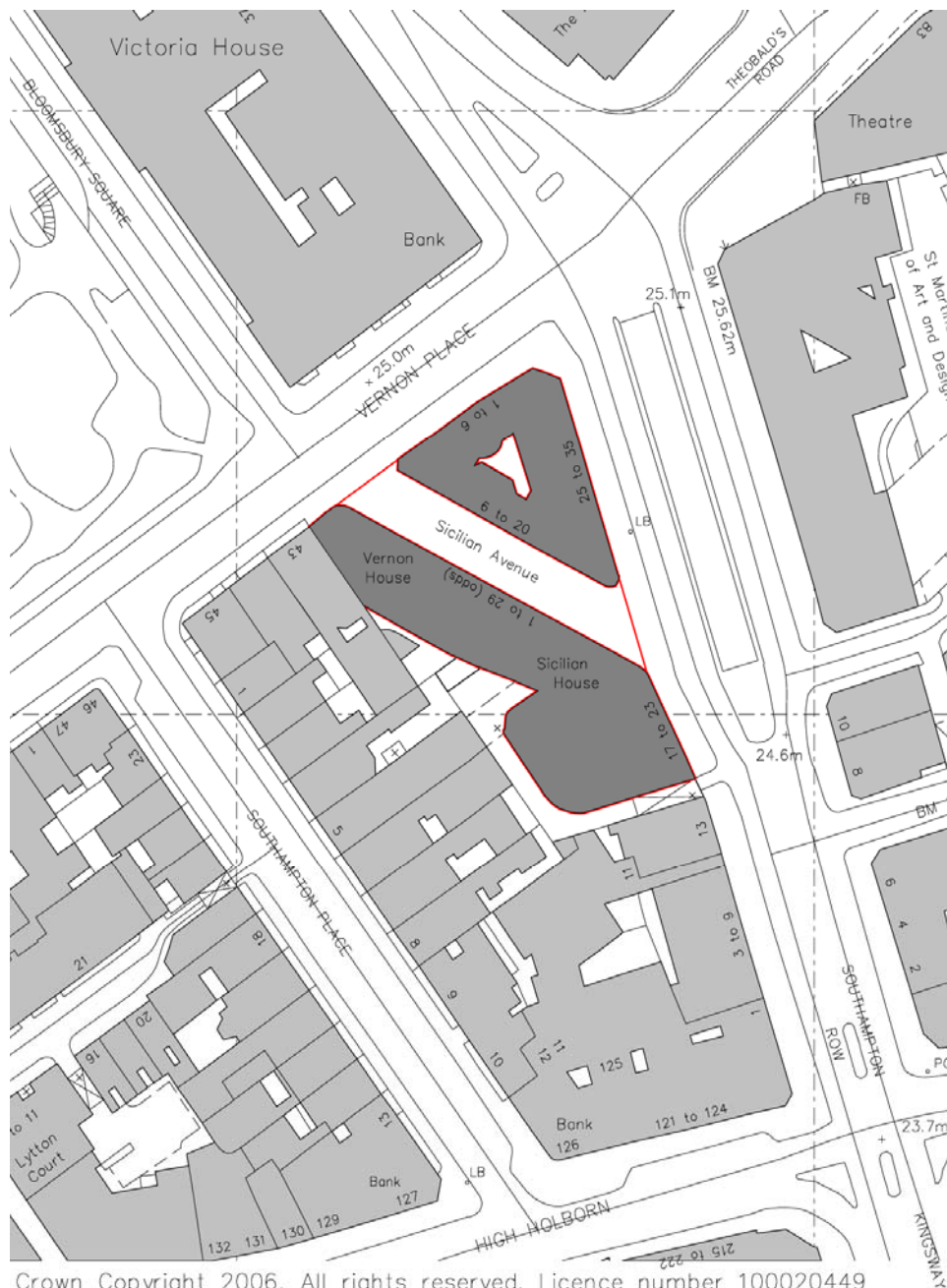
The area as a whole has seen a major redevelopment of office space in recent years with more developments in the pipeline which will result in more people based in this area. Whilst the Avenue has not enjoyed the critical mass of some of the larger arcades and pedestrian streets in London, it has always had a presence associated with local independent businesses.

A lack of investment over many years has seen this jewel in Camden's crown tarnished.

Holborn Links Strategy and Stewardship

The Holborn Links Estate provides a wide range of land uses including retail, residential and offices and Holborn Links' primary land use management objective for the Estate is to continue to support residential, commercial and other land use functions. Holborn Links seeks the realisation of the full potential and development of those areas within the Estate where changes are necessary or desirable, and the enhancement of the character of the Estate by ensuring that only buildings and alterations of high architectural quality are constructed or undertaken.

Holborn Links' pursuit of quality, both in terms of the overall ambience and environment of its Estate is a significant element of its Estate Management Strategy. Emphasis for stewardship is placed on achieving quality and is therefore an important long term aspiration, which is managed through the careful change of land uses and the opportunity to 'add value' to the visual, physical, social and cultural environment.



Sicilian Avenue Strategy

As set out above, Sicilian Avenue is located at the north eastern corner of the Estate, and forms a diagonal connection between Southampton Row and Vernon Place. The street is pedestrianised and is characterised by retail and restaurant uses at ground and basement levels with offices above.

It is located within the Bloomsbury Conservation Area and all buildings along the avenue are listed (Grade II).

Currently there are 13 retail units which face onto Sicilian Avenue containing a mix of retail and café/restaurant uses. Nos. 17, 21-23, 29, 33 and 35 Southampton Row and No. 29 and Spaghetti House, Vernon Place are also considered to be part of Sicilian Avenue although do not face directly onto the Avenue.

Until relatively recently, Sicilian Avenue was characterised by poor quality retail and restaurant operators which led to a deterioration of the historic building fabric, causing harm to the character and appearance of the Conservation Area and the immediate environment. This led to falls in trade as visitor footfall and dwell time reduced significantly.

The Holborn Links Estate envisages that the character and function of Sicilian Avenue as an individual centre should be as a vibrant and unique shopping and restaurant enclave where people can meet and relax in pleasant and attractive surroundings. Its role is as an oasis of calm for shoppers and restaurant customers away from the surrounding busy main roads.

Over the past year and continuing over the next few years, the Holborn Links Estate is targeting strategic investment towards Sicilian Avenue to improve both the building fabric and the quality of the retail offer to fulfil the Estate's stewardship objectives and to create a high quality shopping and restaurant enclave for people to enjoy.

The strategic intention to enhance both the quality of the external environment of Sicilian Avenue and undertake significant enhancements through repair and refurbishment has been developed to ensure that the Avenue attracts quality operators who can maintain their repairing liabilities to secure the future of the listed buildings and to attract customers to the street.

To achieve this vision, a Strategy has been developed which is focused on enhancing the retail character and function of the Avenue through an active Estate tenant mix policy and enhancing its environment quality through the natural and organic displacement of the poorer quality retailers, the substantial refurbishment of the retail units once the individual property leases are not renewed or returned by existing retailers to Holborn Links and external works such as cleaning the buildings, new lighting and re-paving schemes.

Tenant mix policy – the Holborn Links Estate is actively managing the mix of uses within the Avenue to ensure that pedestrians are attracted to the Avenue and encouraged to spend time. This aim of the strategy is to ensure a mix of different restaurant operators occupy the anchor units at either end of the Avenue.

Two of the four intended anchor units are currently in place. ‘Spaghetti House’ restaurant, a long standing tenant, at the Vernon Place end of the avenue and ‘Patisserie Valerie’, a relatively recent arrival, at the Southampton Row end.

This long term strategy aims to see the establishment of two further ‘gateway’ or ‘anchor’ units at each end of the avenue. The purpose of this is to attract customers away from the main roads surrounding the Avenue. Between the anchors at either end of the Avenue, we envisage the smaller units being occupied by a mix of non-food comparison goods retail type operators.

In support of this the Holborn Links Estate actively sought Class A1 retail operators for its larger units around the Avenue including letting Units 1 and 2 in the new 1 Southampton Row development to TM Lewin (mens and ladies shirts and formal wear) and Cards Galore (stationary and gifts). This was to ensure that the Estate as a whole supports the proposed mix of retail and restaurant uses to attract customers and visitors to the area.

The Strategy has been formulated having regard to the Council’s planning policies set out within both the Core Strategy and the Development Policies Document and the Mayor’s London Plan.

Local planning policy seeks to promote successful and vibrant centres to ensure that the character and role of each Centre is protected.

Local policy also seeks to ensure that the impact of food, drink and entertainment uses on residents is minimised.

It is essential that good quality operators are attracted to the Avenue to make it a desirable destination and retail centre for this part of Camden and there are a number of significant components of the Strategy required to achieve this aim. These include:-

- Creating quality “anchor” or “gateway” units at both ends of the Avenue to encourage pedestrian footfall towards the Avenue;
- Protecting and enhancing those individual retailers which are trading well and contributing to the retail character and function of the Avenue.
- Substantially repair and reinstate vacant units to attract good quality retailers.
- Overall refurbishment and renovation of individual retail units.
- Ensuring an appropriate mix of both retail and restaurant operators to enhance the function and dwell time in the Avenue.
- Refurbishment of the external fabric of Sicilian Avenue, Vernon Place and Southampton Row.
- Providing uniform tenancy guidelines in respect of outside seating areas and signage to all retailers to ensure a high quality appearance and to maintain a “Sicilian Avenue” brand.

Signage Strategy

The Sicilian Avenue Signage Strategy has been developed in line with the overall strategy for the Avenue by Holborn Links to help establish and maintain a 'Sicilian Avenue' brand. It is a means of ensuring that the various signage elements within Sicilian Avenue work together to help reinforce the 'Sicilian Avenue' brand and promote individual retail units in a cohesive manner.

The signage strategy defines signage types, locations, sizes and specification of materials in order to maintain a consistent and impressive level of aesthetic quality across the site. The strategy caters for different shop front types providing signage options to suit both curved and straight shop fronts. A number of signage elements will be standard across the site, while others will provide a framework for the inclusion of the particular graphic identity of individual tenants.

Applications

A number of applications for planning permission and listed building consent have already been and will continue to be submitted to the Council to advance the strategy as set out above.

These include the grant of planning permission for the avenue to be repaved. This scheme includes in-ground lighting and electrical supplies which have been laid to accommodate seven large scale umbrellas centrally throughout the avenue, encouraging the use of the avenue as an open air arcade. These outdoor seating areas are for the primary use of the 'anchor' tenants and create opportunity for increased dwell times and footfall for the smaller operators located within Sicilian Avenue.

The implementation of outdoor seating areas, new paving, lighting and signage. Together the on-going refurbishment of shop units should see improved trading opportunities for existing tenants and help to draw new desirable operators into the avenue.

Summary

Overall, the Holborn Links Estate is seeking to actively promote and enhance the retail and environmental quality of Sicilian Avenue as one element of its Estate Management Strategy. In the past, Sicilian Avenue has suffered from a lack of quality operators who suffered falls in trade due to a significant reduction in pedestrian footfall and dwell time. This subsequently led to substantial investment being required to protect and enhance the fabric of the buildings.

Holborn Links wishes to significantly improve the retail offer and environmental quality of the Avenue through its active tenant land use mix policy to ensure an appropriate mix of retailers and restaurant/café operators.

Increasing pedestrian footfall and dwell time is essential to the success of the Avenue as a retail centre and the Estate's key objectives which underpin its Strategy for the Avenue seek to achieve this.

The Strategy will ensure that the quality of the environment, character and appearance of the Avenue is significantly enhanced as well as maintaining the original fabric of the Avenue's buildings .