

# RIVERSIDE GARDENS, ERITH

## LB OF BEXLEY

### OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS APPRAISAL

AUGUST 2019



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Community consultation report and appendices

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Introduction

Groundwork London were commissioned June 2019 to develop an opportunities and constraints appraisal of Riverside Gardens, Erith, henceforth known as the Site.

The appraisal has been carried out with cognisance of the Site's wider strategic and policy context, including relevant character appraisals.

The site is within the district of LB of Bexley.

## 1.2 Aims and objectives

Sections 1 and 2 of the appraisal seek to summarise Site's spatial and policy context and present our understanding of the Site's key characteristics, further to site visits in February and May 2019.

In section 3 we summarise and present our findings, further to extensive community consultation.

Having established the community's current thinking on the condition, use and form of the Site, and the Site's physical and spatial qualities, Section 4 outlines opportunities and constraints.

## 1.3 Policy context

The Core Strategy, 2012, sets out the borough's spatial strategy and contains the following policies that are relevant to this study:

- CS04: Erith geographic region
- CS17: Green infrastructure
- CS19: Heritage and archaeology

CS04 sets how the vision for the wider Erith geographic region will be delivered, which includes optimising

*"access to all open spaces, the waterside and marshlands...and maximise the use of the River Thames for leisure, recreation and transport uses, including the enhancement of Erith Pier and the safeguarding of wharves."*

CS17 provides for: *"protecting and enhancing the biodiversity, heritage and archaeological values of open spaces, including the Rivers Thames" as well as "seeking opportunities to increase connectivity between the network of green spaces and habitats."*

Land to the south of the Site is categorised as a District Centre with the

CS19: Heritage and archaeology sets out that the council will promote:

*"conserving and enhancing the significance of heritage assets, their setting, and the wider historic environment, including statutorily listed buildings; locally listed buildings of architectural or historic interest, conservation areas, registered parks and gardens, and archaeological sites"*

The Site is within the Erith Riverside Conservation Area. The Local Plan describes the designation as including:

*"the last remaining undeveloped section of Erith High Street with a number of prominent buildings of local architectural and historic interest. The curving High Street leads down to the riverside area where the Riverside Gardens provide a fine, spacious setting to more substantial 20th Century buildings facing the River Thames... Trees and landscaped gardens give this area a special character."*

Erith comprises a part of LB of Bexley's "Growth Strategy" (December 2017). The vision for Erith includes the development of 6000 new homes and 2000 new jobs, including the provision of shared working and innovation facilities.



Westward view of Riverside Gardens



Riverside Gardens in Context, 2010



Elevated view northwards



## 2. THE SITE AND SITE CONTEXT

### 2.1 Site Context: Erith

Erith is located south-east of central London (approximately 21.4 km east of Charing Cross) and is on the south bank of the river Thames.

Until the early 20th century Erith comprised a small settlement in the county of Kent. In the 20th century the growth of Erith was focussed around the engineering sector, including armaments and cables.

The town was subject to major re-planning and redevelopment in the 1960s, including the removal of riverside houses and industrial buildings.

The Site is located north-west of Erith town centre with the River Thames to the north / north-east; the William Cory Promenade envelopes the Site on three sides. To the south-west the Site is bounded by Erith High Street. Neighbouring land uses are predominantly residential to the north and west, including the recently completed Riverside Baths development that, with the Running Horses pub, provides strong enclosure to the west of the Gardens. To the south-east there are civic uses including the town hall, Playhouse and Post Office.

### 2.2 Green Infrastructure

The Site comprises one of the two principal green spaces in the town centre. South of the town centre is Erith Recreation Ground, to the west of Erith Leisure Centre. The Recreation Ground comprises a roughly square, open, expanse of amenity grass. To the south-west is Lesney Farm Allotments, an equipped play area and ball court.

Both the Site (51) and Recreation Ground (62) are classified as "Parks and gardens" (Draft Bexley Green Infrastructure Study, 2019); the only two in the town centre. Small areas of "Natural and semi-natural urban green spaces" and "Amenity green spaces" are located north and west of the Site, including West Street Open Space (50), Railway land near Erith Station (49) and Land off Fraser Road (47).

The Site is therefore one of the most important strategic open spaces. The Bexley Green Infrastructure Study illustrates that whilst the Site forms part of a strategic network of sites these are typically not well connected, albeit this may be offset to some degree by small areas of private residential amenity space.

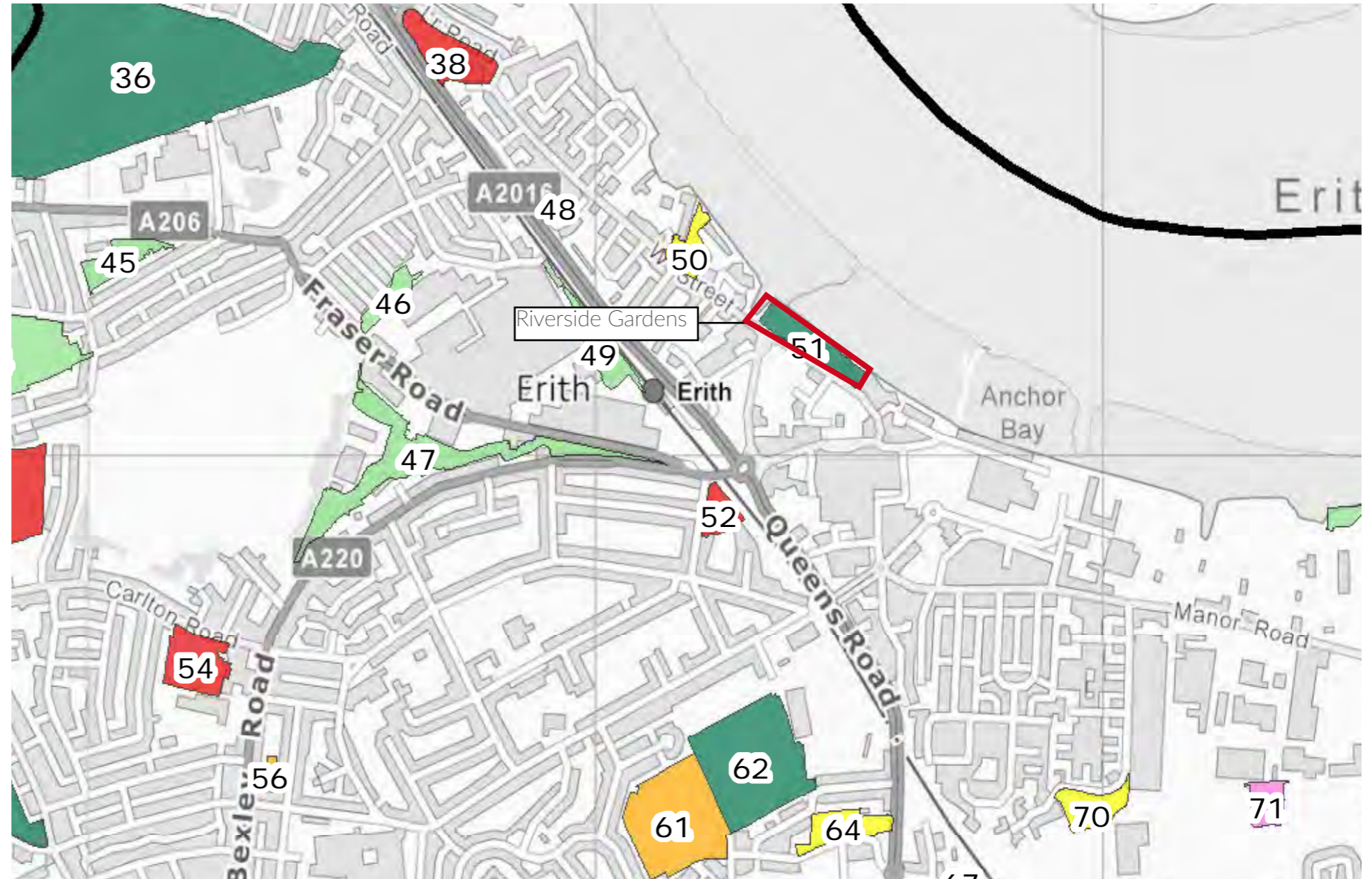


Figure 1: "Open space primary typology", Draft Bexley Green Infrastructure Study (LUC, 2019)



The Running Horses pub, south of Riverside Gardens



Recently completed Riverside Baths



Existing heritage sign



### 2.3 Photographic survey

The Site is approximately 0.82 hectares and is urban in character, albeit defined by its riverside location. The flood defense wall to the north of the gardens exerts a strong influence on the character of the open space, giving it a strong sense of enclosure.

At the northern end of the Gardens are raised planting beds, part maintained by the Friends of Riverside Gardens Erith. At the South-east of the Gardens is the Arriva bus cabin, which comprises the only built structure in the space.

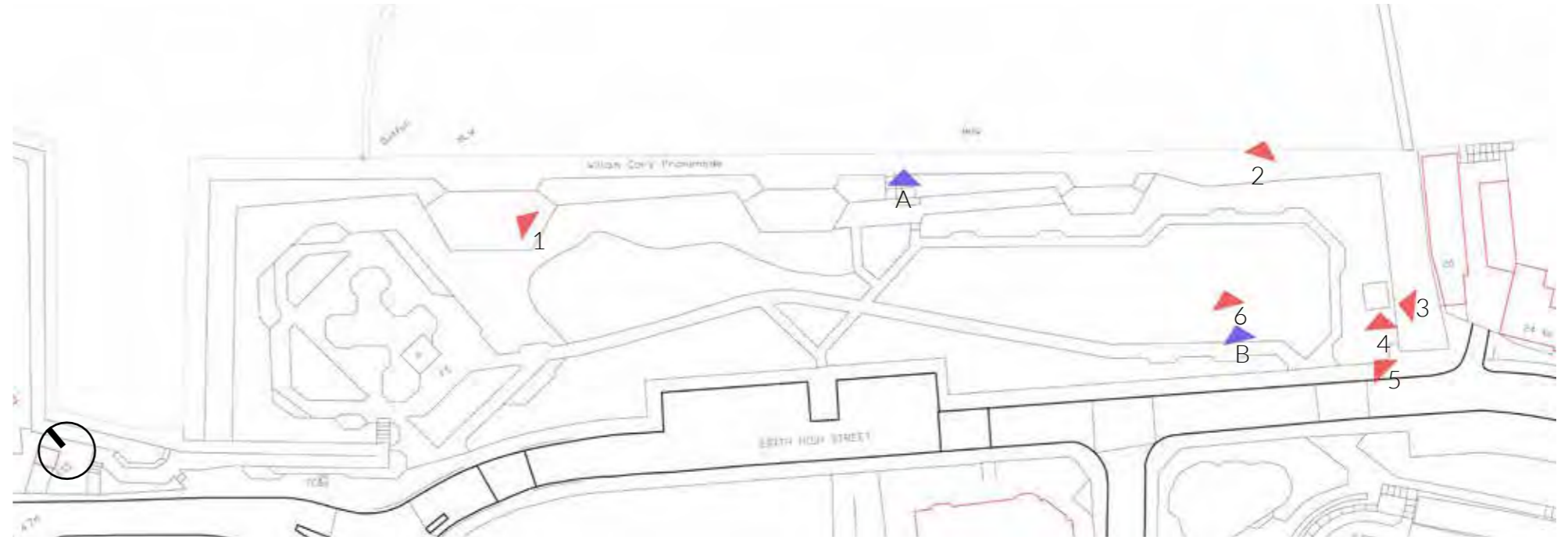


Figure 2: Photo viewpoint locations



1. View north towards Chichester Wharf and mud flats



2. View north-east towards Rainham, Essex and pier



3. Arriva bus cabin



4. Embankment to south-east boundary



5. View north-west from Erith High Street



6. View north-east and flood defence wall



Panorama A. View north-east from William Cory Promenade



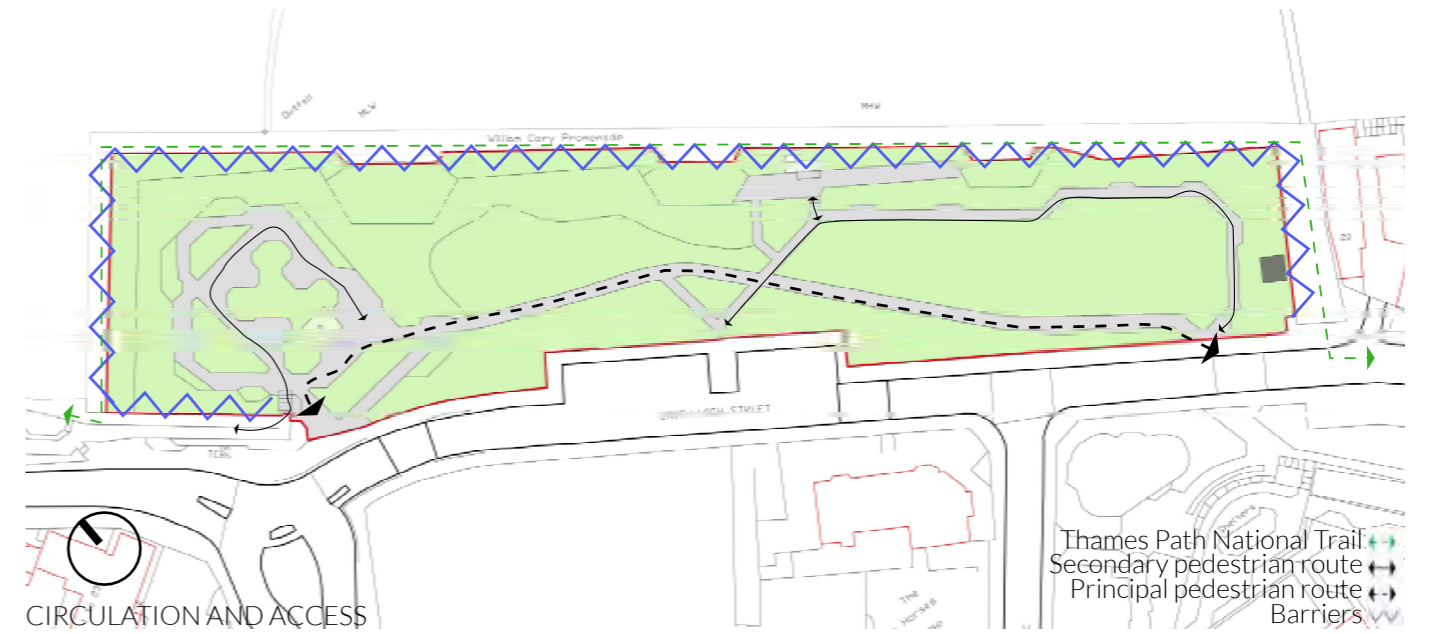
Panorama B. View north from southern corner of Riverside Gardens



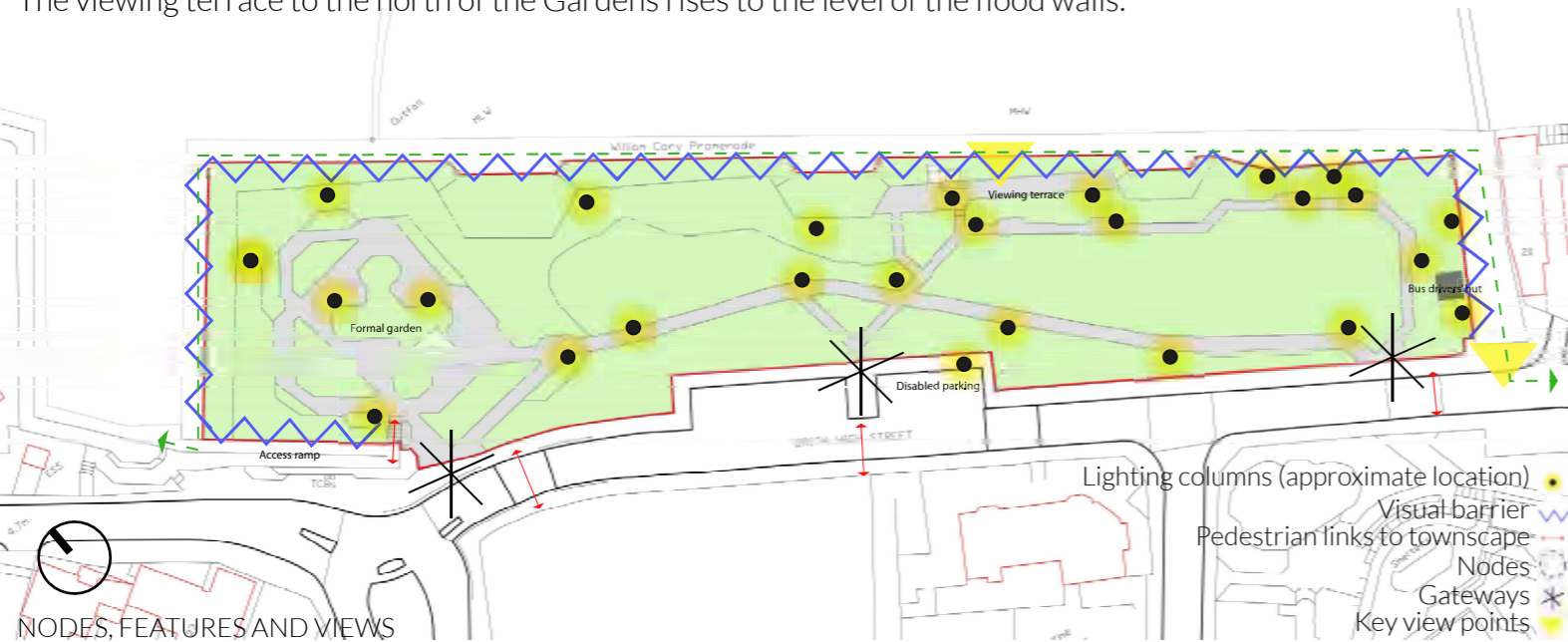
## 2.4 Site Analysis



The Gardens are broadly level through the centre of the Site (approximately 5m Above Ordnance Datum (AOD)), rising to the north, east and south-east where border planting, raised by retaining walls, climbs to meet the flood defences (Approximately 6-7m AOD). Beyond the flood defences, including William Cory Promenade, the level falls to approximately 4m AOD. To the west of the Gardens, Erith High Street is at the same (approximate) 5m AOD level. The viewing terrace to the north of the Gardens rises to the level of the flood walls.



The Gardens are circumnavigated by the Thames Path (National Trail). It runs to the north, east and south-east of the Gardens, separated from them by the flood defense walls. Internally, the principal pedestrian flow runs between the north-west and south-east corners of the Gardens, via the centre of the Site. Secondary pedestrian loops circumnavigate the formal gardens to the north and lawn to the south but do not follow logical desire lines. The Gardens are notable for providing only a single through-route, from the viewing platform to the promenade, via steps.



The existing path network has three 'gateways' from the High Street, all on the west boundary. To the north-west and south-east corners the gateways are enhanced by traffic-calming tables. The viewing platform provides stair access over the flood defense wall, linking to the Thames Path; the wall is a marked physical and visual barrier that separates the Site from the River Thames. There are no destinations at the key node points. There is only a single key view to the River from within the site, via the raised viewing platform. Within the Site there are three key nodes that provide directional choices within the path network. Lighting columns are numerous and also serve the promenade.



The Gardens are predominantly characterised by perimeter planting, comprising a variety of canopy trees and shrub underplanting. The formal gardens are not planted to capacity, albeit some parts are well-maintained by the Friends of Riverside Gardens Erith as ornamental planting. Two large areas of amenity grass are located within the centre of the Gardens, with isolated 'islands' of grass created by the path network.





1769



1907



1895

The Site was in use as the Canon and Gaze Flour Mill (Photographs right) from the late 19th century until the early-mid twentieth century, demolished 1937. The use made use of the river for moving raw materials and products. The Erith riverside was previously used by the Royal Navy for a short period, for shipbuilding and then latterly for fitting and refitting ships, the most famous being the 'Great Harry'; the first ship to be fitted with cannon and gunports. It is not clear to what extent the Site was itself associated with this use. The Site is allegedly associated with the return of Alexander Selkirk, a buccaneer said to be the inspiration for Daniel Defoe's novel *"The Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe"*.



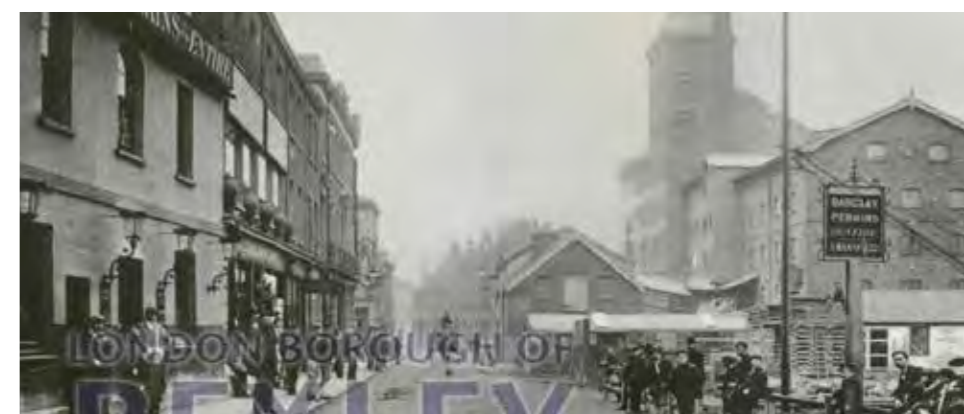
1938-40



The 'Great Harry' ship and cannon



Alexander Selkirk



Former Canon and Gaze Flour Mill



## 3. COMMUNITY CONSULTATION

### 3.1 Introduction

The first stage of the co-design and engagement process was carried out between April and July 2019, with a variety of workshops, pop-up events, and email consultation to ensure successful engagement with a wide cross-section of the community.

16 Stakeholder groups were involved, including:

- Friends of Riverside Gardens
- the Exchange
- Erith Think Tank
- Erith Town Forum

### 3.2 Emerging themes

Through the various engagement events and activities a number of key themes were identified. These themes are summarised as follows:

- Connection to riverside frontage
- Improving facilities
- Play provision
- Destination and identity
- History & Heritage

Themes identified from the initial stages of the consultation process were then used to develop a series of questions which were posed to stakeholders. A summary of questions and responses were as follows:

#### **How can we make the river and park more connected and make the most of the riverside position?**

- Improvements to footpaths
- Improvements to viewing platform
- Better signage to river & viewing platform
- Improve visual connections between river walk and gardens

#### **What stops you using Riverside gardens?**

- Lack of facilities
- Lack of activities
- Poor appearance/unattractiveness of space
- Concerns over safety (crime, ASB)
- Access issues/accessibility

#### **What new facilities would benefit people and help draw more people to the park?**

- community events and festivals
- play facilities
- artwork
- creative design interventions (eg benches, sculptural furniture)
- new views of river

#### **How can we encourage more young people to use the gardens? What different kinds of play can we introduce?**

- Improve play facilities
- Design opportunities for play (especially informal and natural play) into layout of gardens
- Create a safer environment through design and layout of space

#### **Other issues highlighted by consultation**

- Safety: prevalence of drug and alcohol use (as perceived)
- access & mobility (poor wheelchair/pram access)
- Poor quality entrance/exit points
- negative reactions to cafe from small number of stakeholder groups

*Refer to "Riverside Gardens Stage - 1 Co-Design and Engagement Report" (July 2019) for full details.*



## 4.0 OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS

### 4.1 Opportunities and constraints

#### Opportunities

- Continue to provide space for "FORGE" (Friends of Riverside Gardens)
- Views of, and proximity to, the River Thames;
- The Thames Path National Trail;
- Existing connections to the surrounding townscape;
- Proximity to Erith town centre;
- Car parking
- Adequate scale of space to develop different character areas and introduce new uses / activities;
- Adequate scale of space to strengthen Green Infrastructure and biodiversity;
- Conservation area;
- Links to historic people and events;
- Some good canopy trees that provide shade and a well established character; and
- New residential development adjacent to the open space.

#### Constraints

- Poor visual / physical connections to the river;
- Poor through-flow connections to the townscape / riverscape;
- Dated lighting infrastructure;
- Flood defence wall;
- Level change from open space to promenade;
- Fixed planters limit how the space is currently used;
- Siting and condition of some canopy trees;
- No 'draw' / destination activity;
- Exposed viewing platform;
- Incoherent planting strategy;
- Neutral contribution to the significance of the conservation area;
- Topography: visually restrictive and of limited interest;
- Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) / perception of ASB;
- Lack of play provision;
- Existing path network and poor desire lines; and
- Bus drivers' hut.

#### Character Areas

The opportunities and constraints set out left represent a combination of public consultation responses and our own site analysis. This is set out spatially below (Figure 3). Whilst character area boundaries would remain fluid these could comprise the following:

1. Wildflower and rain garden
2. Play
3. Focal point / programmable space / events
4. Active
5. Pavilion
6. Promenade
7. Green Links

Corresponding precedent images for each character area are set out in section 4.2.

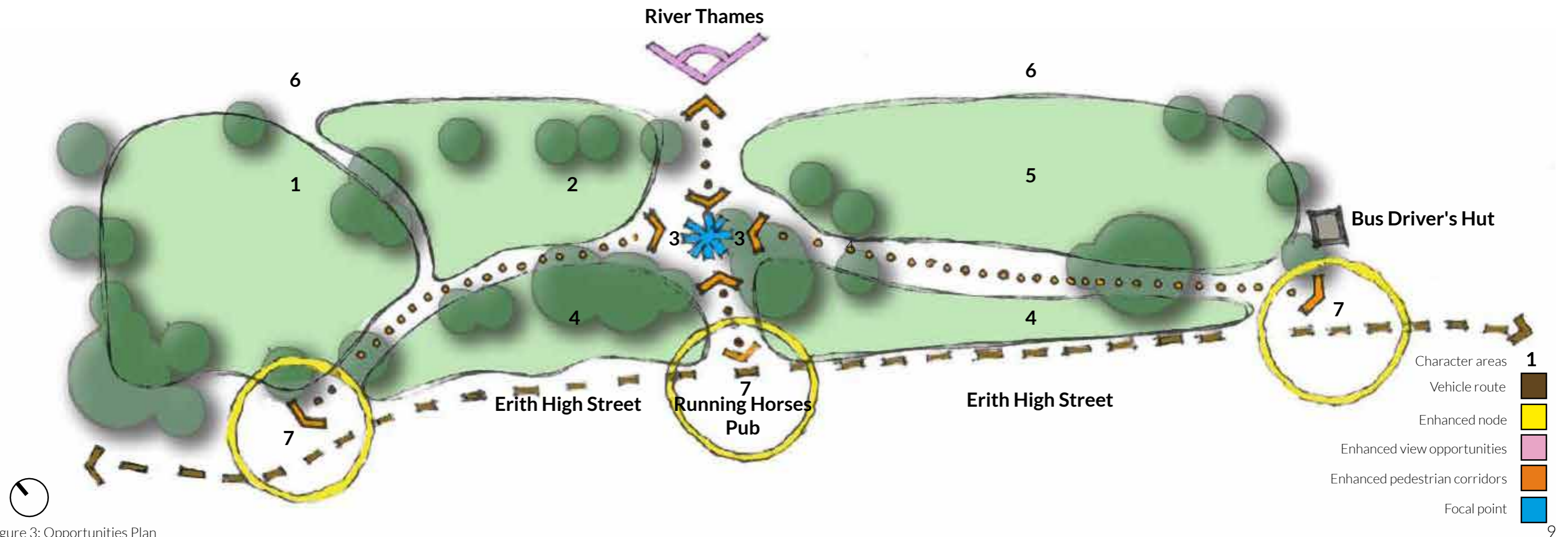


Figure 3: Opportunities Plan



# 5.0 PRECEDENTS

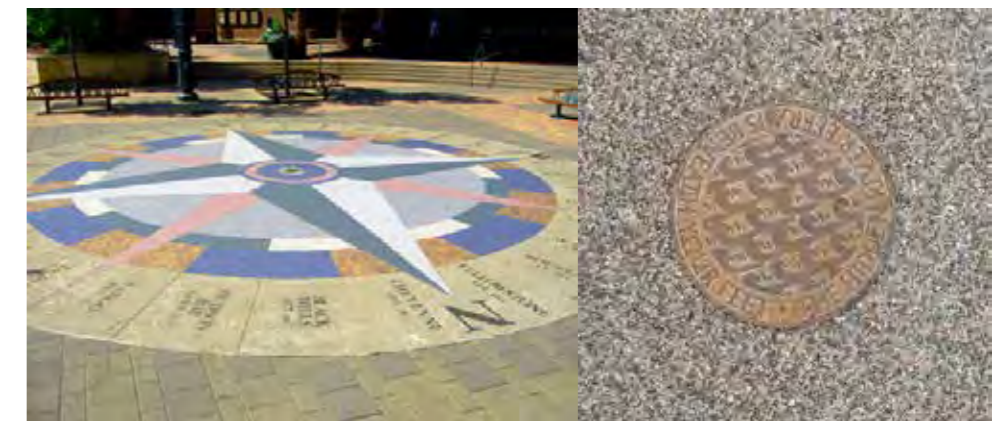
1. Wildflower meadow / rain garden



2. Play



3. Focal point / programmable space / events





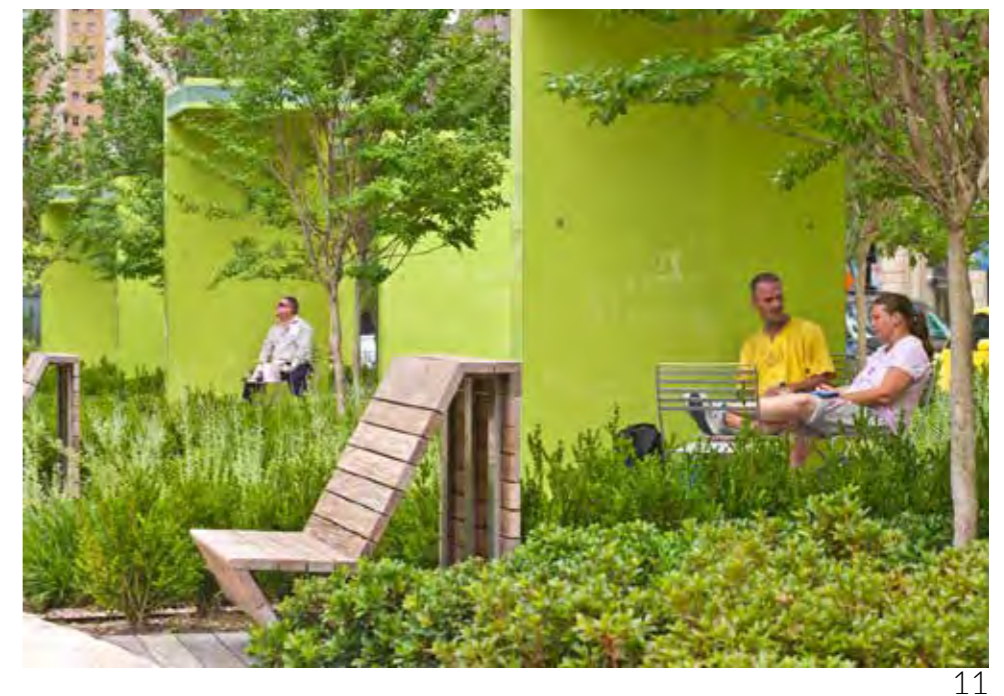
3. Focal point / programmable space / events



4. Active



5. Pavilion





## 6. Promenade



## 7. Green links



### 1. Wildflower and rain garden

The character area could be an informal recreation area with a simple wildflower meadow and mown paths around a dry swale or rain garden that suggests water and is temporarily wet. This could improve the Garden's visual relationship with the river and provide informal play opportunities. The reduced hardscape could increase the garden's capacity to manage rain water and reduce maintenance.

### 2. Play

Play can take many forms and play provision should allow for a variety of different types play at all ages. This can range from informal play that takes advantage of natural feature such as boulders, landforms and planting to play equipment. Equipment can also double as sculpture that spans equipped play and natural play as well as making the character area feel less like a child only space.

### 3. Focal point / programmable space / events

A new 'heart' could be created at the centre of Riverside Gardens, to provide a focus and 'centre of gravity'. This could provide space for informal and formal, programmed, recreation such as pop-up activities. There are opportunities to play with landform and topography and improve the relationship with the river and existing viewing platform.

### 4. Active

The character area could provide for new activities, such as outdoor gym, BBQ pits and picnic areas, trim trails and games like table tennis or chess. This would be an additional draw to the Gardens and activate the space when there is no programmed activity.

### 5. Pavilion

Further interest could be added to the Gardens by introducing a new pavillion, building on the success of the Erith Lighthouse. This could add structure, shelter, height, colour and opportunities for WCs, refreshment and to echo the former flour mills in a contemporary way. A pavillion could draw those on the Thames Path into the Gardens and help reinforce the perception of Erith as a place to stop and dwell.

### 5. Promenade

There is an opportunity to improve connections to William Cory Promenade and enhance the planting to the riverside of the flood defences. Freestanding sitting steps to the riverside of the wall could help to draw people into the Gardens from the Thames Path.

### 7. Green Links

There is an opportunity to strengthen green infrastructure and improve connections to surrounding public green spaces with 'green fingers' that extend beyond, and blur, the Site's red line boundary.



Potential deliverables

- Improve connections to the river: physical, visual, wayfinding;
- Enhance the conservation area;
- Explore the scope for a programmable space and improved user services;
- Develop facilities and spaces for activities: coffee shop, cafe, BBQ, games etc;
- Improve connections with the townscape;
- Incorporate proposed highway improvements on Erith High Street;
- Develop a strong planting concept and strategy for wayfinding and identity;
- Better reveal the Site's history and develop its narrative;
- Explore the scope for enhancing and using topography;
- Explore the use of water;
- Develop a clear hierarchy of pedestrian and cycle routes, including dog walking and cycle parking;
- Encourage users of the Thames Path to stop and stay;
- Develop play strategy;
- Provide space for "FORGE" (Friends of Riverside Gardens);
- Develop lighting strategy; and
- Targetted spend at key "gateways".

Further research / work

- Arboricultural survey;
- Review physical / perceived causes of ASB;
- Work with Environment Agency to better understand the flood wall;
- Work with Arriva to review the siting of the bus drivers' hut; and
- Review the success of Erith Meanwhile and explore the scope for a new "pavillion".
- Explore the use of new technologies in parks: apps etc.



"Traverse the wall": freestanding structure, such as sitting steps



Joined up design: proposed highway improvements to Erith High Street and Green Infrastructure



"Programmable space": Create a landscape where events can happen



A strong planting scheme that reinforces identity and wayfinding



Lighting strategy



"Activities": Coffee, BBQ, chess and games etc.



Explore sustainable transport options



## 6.0 SUMMARY

There has been a hugely positive response to the proposed investment in, and improvement of, Riverside Gardens. Whilst most of this is anecdotal, the overwhelmingly positive response to the possibility of future improvements to open space is generally quite rare in projects of this nature.

Riverside Gardens is clearly of significance to the local area, conservation area and its residents; the proposed redevelopment of the space represents an opportunity to greatly improve this important resource, creating a truly beneficial place for the community. Emerging themes from the Site analysis and community consultation provide a steer for the future site and have inspired the precedent images and proposed character areas for the Gardens.

Site analysis has revealed that the Gardens are strongly influenced by its unique Riverside location and management of the river, most notably the flood defence wall. This combines with the access ramp, topography planting and surrounding built form to provide a strong sense of enclosure.

Built forms within the Site include the Arriva bus garage, a number of raised planters and the flood defence wall, as well as the access ramp and formal gardens. These structures combine to restrict circulation and through-flow, limiting the Garden's appeal. It is therefore necessary to make the space more of a destination, given that opportunities to enhance links by making structural changes to existing structures, are extremely limited.

Notwithstanding the site's strong enclosure there are opportunities to strengthen the green infrastructure links into the surrounding townscape and so expand the influence of the Gardens beyond its existing boundaries to the west.

The Gardens has some good canopy trees, however, lacks a coherent planting strategy. This could be re-assessed to improve legibility and usability across the Gardens.

The Site has a strong industrial history and there are opportunities to enhance the identity of the Gardens by revealing some of this past activity, through both information and inherent in the design of the space. Opportunities can be summarised as:

### CONNECTIVITY & ACCESS

- Improve connections to the river: physical, visual, wayfinding;
- Improve green infrastructure links with the wider town and riverscape;
- Develop enhanced gateways into the Gardens;
- Develop a clear hierarchy of pedestrian and cycle routes, including a secondary network for dog walking; and
- Cycle parking to encourage stopping on Thames Path.

### IDENTITY & APPEARANCE

- Develop planting concept and strategy, to assist with wayfinding;
- Better reveal the Site's history and develop its identity / narrative;
- Explore the scope for enhancing and using topography;
- Bring water back into the Site;
- Develop a furniture strategy;
- Improve wayfinding and signage;
- Develop lighting strategy; and
- Review physical / perceived causes of ASB.

### ACTIVITIES AND FACILITIES

- Explore the scope for a programmable space and improved user services: coffee shop, WCs, BBQ, games etc;
- Develop play strategy;
- Explore opportunities for healthy activity: trim trails, outdoor gym;
- Review success of Erith Meanwhile and explore scope for permanent pavillion





