

Living Streets' views on the future of London's town centres

Who we are

We are the national charity that stands up for pedestrians. With our supporters we work to create safe, attractive and enjoyable streets, where people want to walk. We work with professionals and politicians to make sure every community can enjoy vibrant streets and public spaces. We started life in 1929 as the Pedestrians Association and have been the national voice for pedestrians throughout our history. In the early years, our campaigning led to the introduction of the driving test, pedestrian crossings and 30mph speed limits. Since then our ambition has grown. Today we influence decision makers nationally and locally, run successful projects to encourage people to walk and provide specialist consultancy services to help reduce congestion and carbon emissions, improve public health, and make sure every community can enjoy vibrant streets and public spaces.

In addition to a strong London presence amongst our supporters and a track record of working with London authorities, Living Streets is represented on the Specialist Assistance Team for the Outer London Fund.

Introduction

Living Streets welcomes this opportunity to contribute to a long term vision for the role of London's town centres and ways in which planning policy can support this. Indeed, the last couple of years have seen a welcome focus on high streets and town centres after years of gradual decline as market forces have taken investment and people elsewhere. At Living Streets, we are committed to turning this tide from boarded up shopping fronts, fast food takeaways and cloned streets towards reinvigorating town centres as places that people of all ages and abilities can access and enjoy.

In exploring the future role of London's town centres, the London Assembly's Planning Committee poses the following questions:

- Can they remain centres for retail and employment in light of the rise of supermarkets, internet sales and growth in 'm-commerce' which provide robust competition to the traditional high street offer?
- Could town centre locations be more successful in focussing on culture, entertainment and services? Or
- Do policy makers, planners and businesses have to fundamentally re-evaluate the purpose and appearance of London's town centres?

Our answer to each of these questions is a resounding 'Yes!' However, it is a mistake to simply look at town centres in terms of their separate functions (e.g. retail, services, culture and entertainment) or to reinvent them as 'multi-functional' spaces. Town centres and high streets are places that have always been used for multiple purposes by the communities they serve. Since community is at the heart of healthy and sustainable town centres, policy makers, planners and businesses alike should re-evaluate how best London's towns can best serve people as places to live, as well as visit to work and shop.

Towns centres as places to live

High streets are not just about retail, but about the communities in which we live: where we socialise, access civic infrastructure, enjoy heritage and participate in the world. Walking is the obvious way to experience centres and increasing footfall can only benefit shops, which is why Living Streets is involved in several campaigns to promote better high streets and delivering projects that make them better places – for example, Step out in London below. However, the bigger picture we would like the Planning Committee to address is how to encourage more people – young people,

families and older people, across all income brackets – to live in London’s high streets. These lifetime neighbourhoods would automatically generate demand for a range of services that can be provided conveniently in their locality. Reducing people’s need to travel encourages walking with the added benefits of improving health, increasing social interaction (and perceptions of safety), as well as benefiting the environment. And with local services on their doorstep, there is more incentive for communities to ‘own them’ and get involved in partnership with local authorities and businesses to ensure their upkeep.

Town centres as places to visit

Despite the move towards out of town outlets, internet shopping and now ‘m’ commerce, people still like to get together, socialise and be part of a community. This is why physical improvements to the public realm matter. Too many high streets are currently treated as corridors for cars rather than places for people. Pedestrians have insufficient space, despite often making up the majority of the ‘traffic’ on the street, and are put off by poor air quality and the speed and density of motor traffic. Street management – including litter collection, street cleaning, maintenance and road works, managing temporary clutter such as A-boards and more – is often uncoordinated and impedes pedestrians. **This is despite the evidence that pedestrians visit more shops and spend more money than people travelling by other modes.**

Living Streets’ [Making the Case](http://www.livingstreets.org.uk/makingthecase) report (<http://www.livingstreets.org.uk/makingthecase>) highlights a study in Bristol which found that retailers on a local high street overestimated the proportion of shoppers arriving by car by almost double at 41%, compared with the actual proportion of 22%. In fact, over half of the shoppers had arrived there by foot, and greater proportions had arrived by bus and cycle than estimated by retailers. Pedestrians also tended to visit more shops than those arriving by car. Similarly, Transport for London’s Town Centres Survey 2003-4 found that people walking to a town centre spent an average of £91 per week in the area, as compared to £64 for car drivers or passengers, while bus users spent just £1 less per week than those arriving by car. Living Streets’ own experience in carrying out community street audits and surveying shoppers on Sydenham High Street, South East London (see http://www.livingstreets.org.uk/index.php/download_file/-/view/889/) discovered very similar results.

A Community Street Audit is one of Living Streets’ key approaches to community engagement and street assessment. Small groups of local residents, traders, councillors and council officers, including vulnerable street users, are brought together to assess a route on foot and identify barriers to walking and potential improvements. Improvement activity varies widely between projects according to the key needs identified by communities. They tend to fall into three main categories: community-led improvements such as litter picking, clean ups and planting; more in-depth improvements such as resurfacing or lighting improvements led by the local authority, and; awareness-raising activities such as led walks, the design of maps and street parties.

This suggests that a focus on local schemes to improve the walking environment is the way forward. Taking this a step further, Living Streets’ Step Out in London (SOL) project promotes a range of activities to complement and publicise public realm schemes, by encouraging people to spend more time (and money) walking in their local town centre. We worked with local people to use this better environment as a catalyst for making other things happen in the area – activities that get people out and about enjoying their streets. For example, in Chippenham Gardens in Kilburn, Brent, we supported local residents and shopkeepers to work together to set up street parties, and outdoor Zumba and Tai Chi in a shopping precinct known as much for dealing and drinking as doing the weekly shop. The turnaround in fortunes has been noticeable, with more people shopping and spending time.

In Herne Hill, we worked with the Herne Hill Forum to support the creation of a new market in the semi-pedestrianised space that is now the heart of the community. There has been a fantastic transformation! Not only do people flock to visit on a Sunday for the market, but they just enjoy spending more time in the area.

“The original scheme was an improvement but the area was still dead”, said one local resident. “What has really made a difference is the different activities. The piano was brilliant and putting tables and chairs outside is great – much easier with the buggy and you feel safer too.”

The Herne Hill Shop Local loyalty card scheme has ensured that benefits are not only felt by market traders, but long suffering shopkeepers, with 57% of residents surveyed saying they spent more in the market, and 35% more in shops and an average £16 more per week. A third of shopkeepers also agreed that people were spending more time and money, with others remaining neutral. But this certainly bucks the national trend and demonstrates what a rallying impact this work can have. Indeed, almost half of stalls had employed local people to work there.

Surveys carried out after the SOL project activities found that on average almost 90% of people felt that the investment in their streets was worth the money spent. People reported walking more (47%), shopping more (52%), feeling safer and more part of a community (both 58%). Almost three quarters felt the street was more like a ‘living street’. Community engagement in the design phase and subsequently promoting the physical changes is essential.

The same principle - that improving places (physical improvements and social activities) for pedestrians delivers economic, social, health and environmental dividends – applies to the bigger streets as well as the smaller ones. Oxford Street, the nation’s biggest and busiest high street was closed to motorised traffic one Saturday last November for the eighth year for VIP (Very Important Pedestrian) Day. Sales on the day were up by £50m suggesting that a safer, more pleasant shopping environment encourages people to spend more. Of the people we polled on the day, 90% said they wanted Oxford Street to have reductions in traffic.

Conclusions

The Mayor’s proposed Supplementary Planning Guidance should focus on:

- Considering town centres as the best location for development and growth of a mix of land uses besides retail, **with a particular focus on the building lifetime communities**
- Improving local service provision (leisure, arts, cultural, consumer and public services) first and foremost from the perspective of the people who live there, and then with a view to inviting more people in
- Recognising the importance **and sustainability** of accessibility, walkability and the lifetime neighbourhoods approach in town centres
- Identifying ways to strengthen and develop town centres **with the involvement of their communities** to respond to changing circumstances and demands

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