

## London Forum Members Meeting 30 July 2020 The Future for our High Streets

### Format

This Zoom meeting was hosted by Paul Thornton and chaired by Clare Birks. There were two excellent speakers, Ian Harvey Chief Executive of Civic Voice and member of the government's High Streets Task Force and Emma Robinson, Barnes Town Centre Manager. Over 40 people from London civic societies participated, which is an indicator of just how concerned civic societies are about their town centres and high streets.

### Introduction

Clare provided some background for the discussion recalling that people have been concerned about our high streets for at least 20 years. Town centres have been subject to waves of change, first the supermarkets and retail chains, then the out of town shopping centres and more recently, online shopping and entertainment. This has reduced independent retail, making many of our high streets look like a uniform selection of national chain outlets. That expansion has meant that, in the UK we have twice the retail floor space per head of population that there is in Germany.

The Grimsey reports in 2013 and 2018 noted a vacancy rate of 12 % and rising on high streets, and recommended high streets become community hubs with shops, hospitality, culture, leisure, health and community services. Grimsey's COVID supplement published earlier this year assessed around 50% of retail and hospitality firms as being significantly financially vulnerable. Indeed, it seems every week, every day even, we hear of retail and hospitality closures.

When it comes to London, the West End's post-COVID problems have been well-aided: footfall is around 25% of normal. But so far there has been little other published information about London. Before the meeting, London Forum asked member groups to take stock of their local high streets and report the numbers of shops open, closed and vacant. Although not a complete survey nor a scientific sample, it provides useful context. The results are shown below.

## London Forum High Streets Survey July 2020



Responses – geog spread, range 21-421 outlets, mid 71

	Central	SW	SE	NE	NE	Total
Inner		4	1	4	3	12
Outer		12	3	3	3	21
Total	4	16	4	7	6	37

Survey Results – typical High Street comprises

	% of outlets	Outliers - %
Shops	57	Westcombe 79 Fulham 77 Marchmont St 21 Carshalton 22
Financial Serv	8	Highgate 43 Brixton 18 Amwell St 0 Archway Road 0
Restaurants	23	Bermondsey St 48 Exmouth Market 47 Centre Court Wimbledon 5 St John's Wood 11
Vacant	7	Peckham Rye Lane 19 Centre Court Wimbledon 16 Other Wimbledon 0 Dulwich 0

Survey Results – % closed typically

	%	Outliers - %
Shops	11	Wimbledon 0 Carshalton 0 Amwell St 40 Angel 30
Financial Serv	0	Teddington 43
Restaurants	14	Dulwich 0 Morden 0 Amwell St 50 Marchmont St 46

London's high streets are more buoyant than the national statistics suggest. The vacancy rate is only 7% as compared with the national 12% and over 80% of shops and restaurants are open for business.

However, we can expect things to become more difficult in the last part of the year with a likely recession, the end of government payroll subsidies, catch-up rent payments, extra loans to be serviced and business rates.

In addition, high streets will become more vulnerable to shops and restaurants switching to other uses in the new planning class E which becomes effective from September.

Clare then introduced our two speakers to help us see what can be done.

### **Ian Harvey, Chief Executive Civic Voice**

Ian opened with a stirring cry to action for civic societies. For him, high streets are the 'face of our economy' and their future is largely in the hands of private equity firms which have invested hugely in retail over the last ten years – but have no commitment to the local community. In his view local authorities no longer have the skills or experience (or maybe even a legal basis) to resist the plans investors put forward for the re-purposing or redevelopment of their retail property. Grimsey reported 70% of people think their high street has declined in the last five years. He made an impassioned plea for civic associations to get out there and make themselves heard so that communities can influence the direction of change.

He is concerned about the post-lockdown recovery which will be very challenging. Footfall on high streets is gradually increasing post-lockdown, but remains no more than about 50% of the same week last year. We must not underestimate the recovery challenge.

Civic Voice members have given him very clear work priorities:

- Bring back life to our town and city centres
- Give local communities more influence in planning and placemaking
- Protect and enhance conservation areas

He urged us all to go and talk to other community organisations, our local councils, the business improvement districts, and local businesses to create a coalition of the willing and work out with them what it is that all groups can agree to push for by way of improvement. He's happy for Civic Voice and London Forum to work together.

He recommended we read the 2020 Grimsey report *Build Back Better* and the High Streets Task Force has produced useful tools and data [here](#).

### **Emma Robinson, Barnes Town Centre Manager**

Emma has been Barnes Town Centre Manager since 2012, employed by a community association and part-funded by the Council. She stressed the importance of working collaboratively with the community and finding ways to make their support evident e.g. thousands of signatures on a petition or turning up at a meeting.

In 2013 she organised a community workshop to develop a community vision, and the elements of that vision became her project list. It's slow burn stuff and many of those projects are still works in progress. Her advice was to be prepared to keep at it over the long term.

Two early initiatives were a 20 mph speed limit, which they eventually persuaded the Council to implement, and improvements to bus services, which they haven't succeeded in convincing TfL of the need for (yet).

The closure of Hammersmith Bridge to vehicles in 2019 was a blow and left residents with mobility issues feeling stranded. Emma introduced a bicycle shuttle service across the bridge. Local businesses complained about the impact on their takings, but research showed that was confined to a minority of businesses. The rest were doing well out of the closure!

Narrow pavements mean that when COVID-19 hit, people didn't feel they could socially distance, so Emma got hold of some traffic cones and coned off the parking spaces to provide more space for walking. There were few objections and they are now asking the Council to make this permanent.

As people were finding it difficult to get food, they opened an online community shops so that local food shops could deliver (by e-cargo bike) to online order. They made 70 deliveries in the first week. It has tailed off now, so they will relaunch with more shops involved.

For the longer term, they are examining the feasibility of turning a local 100-year abandoned railway bridge into a walkway and garden.

Altogether, these initiatives were an impressive range of projects for town centre improvements, with rapid response to the bridge closure and COVID-19.

## **Discussion**

### Community support

In response to several questions and comments, Emma emphasised that you have to work constantly at gaining and maintaining community support. Think hard about what matters to each section of the community and make sure there is something in the project for almost everyone to support. It was acknowledged that it can be especially difficult where a high street is on the boundary between two local authorities. Some concerns were expressed about business improvement districts which can often focussed on what's good for local businesses, rather than the whole of the community. There was a call for examples to be shared of local councils doing good, effective consultation with communities.

### Business Support

Another frustration was aired about the difficulty of engaging local traders, and it was agreed that you have to find the one or two who do want to be involved in community issues, and bit by bit bring the others along. A project to encourage people to shop locally is a good way of building positive relationships with local businesses.

### Temporary Highways Changes

TfL has launched a Streetspace programme which provides funding to Councils for temporary changes that, post-lockdown will encourage active travel and enable social distancing. These can be introduced without consultation, though if the Council wishes later to make them permanent, there will have to be consultation later. Local societies have mixed experience, and in Peckham, Barnet and other neighbourhoods, changes have been introduced or planned which are causing anxiety locally because of the feared impact on local businesses in terms of making of deliveries difficult. It's particularly hard given all the other COVIC changes that businesses have had to adapt to.

## Campaigning

There was a short discussion about how best to campaign to counteract the influence of the private equity firms. There is an opportunity to work alongside the property professional associations who generally are critical of the government's plans to radically simplify the planning system.

## Issues for experts

A couple of points were raised which will be followed up after the meeting – whether Article 4 Directions can be used to limit the impact of the new planning use class\*, and how the calculation of business rates appears to penalize small businesses.

## Conclusion

Clare thanked both speakers and member groups. Paul Thornton and Peter Eversden also thanked everyone and said London Forum would be thinking about several questions where London Forum might itself helpfully take an active role. Paul closed the meeting.

## Further Action

As was said in the meeting, we can't fix all of the problems at once. The important thing is to start, so for example civic societies may want to consider one or more of the following:

- If the chains may close leaving empty gaps on the high street, start the conversation with the Council and community groups now to develop a vision for the future high street
- If vacancies are the main issue, find out who the owners are and talk to them about lowering the rent; talk to the Council about taking them into Council ownership or making them a community asset
- If customers aren't coming to the high street, start a 'shop locally' project e.g. with a website for online ordering, posters showing what can be bought where etc
- If customers come to the high street but don't spend much money, develop a plan to improve the environment – more green, seating, public toilets, entertainments, so that they linger and spend more.

## Further Information

- Further information about planning use classes can be found [here](#).
- There is further information about Civic Voice here [www.civicvoice.org.uk](http://www.civicvoice.org.uk)
- The High Streets Task Force [www.highstreetstaskforce.org.uk](http://www.highstreetstaskforce.org.uk)
- Barnes Town Centre <https://richmond.gov.uk/services/business/local-information-for-businesses/business-direct/business-news/business-direct-barnes-town-centre-manager>

\* In the opinion of planning experts Town Legal, it cannot. Change of use within Use Class E is not Development, so there is no Permitted Development Right that can be disapplied.