

GOOD GROWTH BY DESIGN

RECOVERY

ROUNDTABLE

HIGH STREETS & TOWN CENTRES

MAYOR OF LONDON

The *Good Growth by Design (GGbD) Recovery Roundtable* series invites Mayor's Design Advocates and other external experts to discuss the most pertinent topics facing London's built environment in the wake of the global health crisis and its ensuing social and economic impacts.

The first *Recovery Roundtable* held on 9th June, chaired by Deputy Mayor Jules Pipe, focused on high streets, asking participants to consider the *High Streets and Town Centres: Adaptive Strategies* report, released in 2019. The report showed that high streets are about more than retail, focusing in particular on their social and community value, and outlined ways in which high streets could adapt and diversify to enhance this broader role.

Participants agreed that the global health crisis has accelerated many of the trends already impacting the high street, forcing us to confront these challenges today. But also, out of these challenges a number of opportunities arise. As such the guidance is more acutely needed than previously and there could be broader buy in of the principles that underpin it.

The following is a summary of key reflections and propositions for how London's high streets can react to this challenge, and the role that the Greater London Authority should play in the recovery.

MEETING NOTE – 9TH JUNE 2020

FIONA SCOTT

Gort Scott Architects, Mayor's Design Advocate

Real estate: 'There were still many who saw our high streets primarily as places of rent extraction and property speculation. I think the crisis has probably taken some of the wind out of those sails, and I'm hopeful the commercial real estate industry will allow rents to adjust, opening up new opportunities.'

Planning Flexibilities: 'There is a growing acceptance that successful high streets are built on varied activity not just retail, all of these uses and activities are threatened. We will quickly need more flexibility in planning and policy to allow movement between different non-residential uses.'

Car-free: 'Everyone is seeing first hand what car-free London looks like, and that any investment in high streets will have a limited effect if we don't get a handle on air pollution and the way we've allowed vehicles to dominate.'

Adaptive Recovery Plans: 'Already a lot of good ideas are undertaken by boroughs in London, and set out in the guidance. It's now about how these come together in practice to form adaptive recovery plans.'

HOLLY LEWIS

We Made That, Mayor's Design Advocate

Re-localisation: 'The fact that 90% of Londoners live within a 10 minute walk of their local high street is even more important than we ever realised [in the current crisis]. High streets social role become even more important in periods of social isolation. If you set out to design a network of shared infrastructure from scratch, which all Londoners could get to, it would look more or less like our high streets do now.'

Biases: 'As we rush into these pedestrian- and cycle-friendly adaptations of our streets – even though they are very well-meaning – we need to resist the normative. English-speaking, adult, straight, white, middle income, able-bodied, fully-sighted people with no dependents are being passively prioritised. We need to take the time to check our biases, and make sure we are not prejudicing a groups of society.'

DAN HILL

Vinnova Sweden, Mayor's Design Advocate

Short-term, long-term: 'As people set up new technology, we tend to overestimate the short-term impact, but underestimate the long-term impact. So all of a sudden the high street is supposed to be in crisis, but London is fairly resilient in that sense.'

Strategies: 'All of the things we wrote about in the *Adaptive Strategies* report, from before the pandemic – physical-digital retrofit; massively reduced car traffic; new forms of engagement, participation and ownership new types of workspace; a far more diverse balance of ownership and activity; fewer retail spaces, but those that remain with a stronger sense of local provenance and identity; slower, quieter more active mobility, more civic spaces – the door is now open to them in a way that is possibly even greater than they were before.'

High Street Sweden: 'In Sweden there is a radical mission to retrofit streets. We have been looking at the street as one coherent layer and through the widest possible partnerships, developing a kit of parts that can build out from parking spaces to deliver micro mobility hubs, greenery, places for kids – developing the typical parklet model. It's tactical urbanism with a strategic impulse.'

SIMON PITKEATHLEY
LEAP / Camden Town Unlimited

Rapid change: 'We knew that high streets and town centres were going to change a huge amount in the next 10 to 12 years, that's now happening in the next 10 to 12 months. And the challenge is to work out which bits are going to change. Meanwhile use can be used more constructively.'

Barriers to entrepreneurship: 'Small business entrepreneurs have always been good at innovating up to a point, but then they hit other barriers. They have to become building managers, lease-holders, accountants. We should try to help unlock these barriers in order to help these areas. We should be working with new partners, experimentation is everything.'

AMY LAMÉ
Night Czar

Pan-London approach: 'High streets are really complex, especially when licensed premises are put into the mix. We need a pan-London approach to repurpose and manage outside space, if we plan this now, we will reduce the risk of things going wrong.'

Recovery: 'Our high streets at night are absolutely crucial to our economic and social recovery post COVID-19.'

EMILY GEE
Historic England

Local heritage: 'London's heritage is such a fundamental part of the capital's recovery because of its importance to our wellbeing and the economy. Lock-down shifted the focus onto the local, giving people much more time to appreciate their own particular historic environment, perhaps getting to know it for the first time, and establishing links with local businesses.'

Car-free: 'An example in Newport, on the Isle of Wight, where local businesses on the historic high street have been convinced to move all the on-street parking to empty lots, and invited artists to create wonderful interventions to allow social distancing. We hope it will help support independent businesses, but also show that moving cars out is not necessarily a disincentive for businesses, and could indeed be the opposite.'

PETER O'BRIEN
LB Haringey

Engagement: 'Crisis has created the context in which we've had to engage extraordinarily with our community, we've revealed so many people with challenges we knew nothing about. The challenge is to hold onto that much deeper connection and use that as we move forward.'

Decision-making: 'There has been a remarkable speed of local government decision making which has been immensely liberating in responding to the crisis. But I would also caution there is a risk of nervousness around other categories of decisions that can slow down development. Let's focus on the momentum of delivery.'

LUCY WEBB
LB Croydon

Challenges to independents: 'Interestingly, some of the mixes that you would look for in a successful high street, such as independent bars, independent cinemas, artisan shops – those centres have been the ones that have found it tougher in the crisis.'

Mutual aid: 'We are watching our businesses themselves coming together on the high street to mobilise local people, a mutual aid movement that we desperately want to hold on to and build on as we go forward.'

SERENA SIMON
LB Westminster

Keep building: 'We felt we were on a tight rope, trying to be very sensitive to what was happening, thinking 'what messages do we put out there?' But actually the feedback from our stakeholders and communities is that they still want us to continue, to keep up with our regeneration programme.'

Crowdfunding: 'We've been able to utilise our crowdfunding platform – which we launched just before lockdown – to support the rollout of matching donations from our business community to the voluntary and community sector.'

INDY JOHAR
Architecture 00, Mayor's Design Advocate

Scale of change: 'We need to acknowledge the scale of the forthcoming economic crisis and the potential for massively growing inequalities. We must be careful not to predicate pre-COVID solutions to what is a fundamentally challenged context.'

Economic restructuring: 'The redistribution of London's central business district is going to happen, and I think it's going to be one of the biggest risks that we're facing – as well as opportunities. I think we have to look at different zones emerging: zones of uncertainty, zones of tipping points of positive change, and those at deep risk of scarring. And we have to look at high streets from that perspective and proactively work on the long term spatial segregation effects between neighbourhoods.'

Remake the regulation: 'We need time limited smart licensing and focus more on impacts like noise pollution, rather than controlling uses.'

Cooperative high street governance: 'We need to think about governance, which for me is about mini smart BIDS, local high street partnerships and building the right micro governance infrastructure that involves citizens.'

Outer London: 'There's a strategic opportunity to focus more on outer London cycle and walking capabilities. We've seen most of the cycle restructuring of streets happen in the centre. We need to reimagine it for a different economic geography.'

The delivery economy: 'We need smarter ways of regulation and compliance of the growing delivery [gig] economy, such as the 'dark kitchens'. How do we regulate them? Because if we lose trust in that economy, that will be a big issue.'

OJAY MCDONALD
Association of Town and City Management

Beyond retail risks: 'For decades we've been looking at the diversification of the high street away from just purely retail and looking at more cultural uses, more leisure, more hospitality. My fear now is that unfortunately Covid-19's impact is probably bigger on those activities.'

VIDHYA ALAKSESON
Power to Change

Community businesses: 'There are real opportunities for community businesses and for the social economy more widely, partly because they tend to thrive in areas of decline. They've got a good track record of taking on empty space, bringing it back into use, and growing smaller micro businesses.'

Community improvement districts: 'We're working on the concept of Community Improvement Districts with the Centre for London, developing new governance models for high streets. Central to this is getting a different mix of players around the table. Community organisations have a lot to offer, but they're often not in those strategic conversations.'

'Phoenix fund': 'With property values potentially declining there are opportunities I think – for the GLA particularly – to support community organisations to take on ownership. We've been looking at the idea of a 'phoenix fund', to help community organisations take on ownership, by holding properties while they raise the finance.'

TONY BURTON
Civic Voice

Valuing investment: 'There's a challenge here about how we value investment which strengthens social infrastructure, and not just physical outcomes. That includes valuing investments which are about the process of involving people, as well as about what they can see.'

ROGER HAWKINS
Hawkins Brown, Mayor's Design Advocate

Trade fairs: 'Would it be possible to promote the high street as an alternative venue for large-scale trade and exhibition shows? It would enable these underused shopfronts to get a new use, and encourage people back onto the high street.'

WAYNE HEMINGWAY
Hemingway Design, Mayor's Design Advocate

Rent cut: 'Nationwide, retailers are looking for an average of a 50% rent cut. Now that sounds scary for landlords, and it can sound scary for councils because of rates, but it can also create an enormous opportunity. I'm looking at this as a time when exciting new ideas can come to market.'

YOLANDE BARNES
Bartlett Real Estate Institute

Neighbourhood: 'We have to be thinking about the high street in the context of the neighbourhood, the neighbourhood that is live, work, play, stay, make, visit and learn – all those things. Lockdown has shown a polarisation between the neighbourhoods that work for people and those that don't work.'

Planning classes: 'The primary planning use classes are far too narrow. They make for not nearly enough of the highly flexible spaces that are needed. We've got to get used to the idea that the same piece of urban space can be and should be used for a whole variety of things over time.'

CHRISTOPHER HAYLEY

Nesta

Innovation: 'One thing I would like to see is high streets looking at spaces as ways to showcase innovation and invention to younger people. There's a role for government here to create flexible regulation, fast-tracking permits, and possibly using public procurement a bit more imaginatively to support innovative small businesses.'

Digitisation: 'One of the things this crisis is going to do is accelerate a vast shift toward digital. It's even more important now that we get high street firms, and SMEs more generally, to think about digitisation, otherwise they are going to be left behind.'

FURTHER READING

[High Streets and Town Centre: Adaptive Strategies](#)

[London at night: An evidence base for a 24-hour city](#)

[Westminster City Council's BAME Network: A look into the disproportionate impact of COVID19 on Black, Asian and minority communities](#)

Mayor's Design Advocates, Advocate Organisations and GLA staff are inputting into a [shared repository](#) of literature, which is a useful resource in framing built environment issues in the COVID context.

UPCOMING ROUNDTABLES

Ecological urbanism
Equality, diversity and inclusion in the built environment sector
Child-friendly city
Public realm
Housing design
Social infrastructure

CONTACT

Sarah Considine, Good Growth by Design programme manager
SarahE.Considine@london.gov.uk