

Old Kent Road Community Forum workshop notes; 11th February 2015.

1. Community Views

The enjoyable things about Old Kent Road are the people, history, “pockets” of interesting character, and the location close to central London. A lot of people talked about Old Kent Road having a “mixed community”, meaning a diversity of shops, cafes and people, that it is a “mix of the real South London and new migrants”. In a similar way six people talked about the vibrancy of the road, and talked about Old Kent Road being a place for community life, and some talked about how local businesses help each other out. One person simply said Old Kent Road has a rich history, and five people said that this rich history has left behind lots of hidden character and gems. Another person pointed out that Old Kent Road is “probably the oldest street in the country” having been built by the Romans to link the rest of the country to the seaport at Dover. Seven people talked the location of the Old Kent Road a mile or so from Westminster as being of importance to them as residents and businesses, whilst also being “affordable compared to other areas of London”.

The things that people said they do not enjoy are the low quality buildings that create an impression of a “downgraded community”, and the barrier that the traffic on the road creates north to south as it is often so difficult to cross. The roads monopoly board status (cheapest place in London) was mentioned in three of the five workshop groups. These workshop groups talked about low quality buildings fragmenting other areas of quality and character, and talked about how high levels of traffic spoil any chance of a quiet shopping and leisurely walk and endanger pedestrians and cyclists. The road was said to be a “big, ugly road”, and one person said that “sometimes there is oil on the road and great dust clouds polluting the area”.

Turning to the future: many people talked about The Old Kent Road’s fantastic history, and one person suggested that as it “used to have an incredible identity” it is possible to “regain it”. Somebody else pointed out that it is already attracting artists from other areas of London as there are affordable workshops spaces to rent. Faith groups also locate at the Old Kent Road because of the transport links and low rents, and many want to invest in the future here, as do many local businesses.

The word many people use to explain their ideas about the future is opportunity. There is an opportunity to keep the best of existing residential, commercial and community uses; and to improve the way people enjoy the place; with one person saying the road needs “urban greening, being brought into the 21st century”. Some people said that there is an opportunity for new homes and jobs to be created in the future. Two people highlighted that such new homes and jobs have to be available to the area’s young people.

Some people talked about their fears for the future. If the Old Kent Road is to be recreated as one of the most expensive monopoly board stops rather than the cheapest (and in real life too of course) surely, some said, house prices, rents, business costs and retail prices will rise as well. A view about this is that whilst we would all like to see a lot of improvements, how do you get investments without losing the lively retail character of the area?

There is also the fear of being unwelcome in the new world of regenerated Old Kent Road. One faith group leader talked about how they had been located at the Old Kent Road since 2005, about how their congregation combine Sunday worship with some weekly shopping afterwards, but also how they are were worried that if there is to be expensive new housing nearby they will soon be seen as an unwelcome generator of traffic and noise. Local businesses that have been in the area since the beginning of the last century also feared changes if those changes placed their business into the “eyesore” category compared with brand new buildings.

2. What needs to change

A good number of comments were about wanting to see sensitive and locally useful proposals to build and create better open spaces and parks, civic and community buildings, new homes, new leisure, entertainment and cultural uses. Some people talked about the chance to create new community hubs, and some talked about the need for new jobs that local people could get, perhaps with new training and education uses playing a role. A few people wanted the few remaining pubs to be kept.

Another popular theme is about changes to traffic and transport. Another large number of comments were about encouraging the development of plans to invest in transport, with all forms of transport discussed as interesting except more vehicle movements. Some people discussed a new tube line being the generator of change and improvement.

Many comments were about developers needing to build in a way that would **enhance existing areas of character and history** and join up these so that the Old Kent Road regains a sense of place.

A few comments were about **more wholesale change**; as the area is perceived by some as having degraded environments at the present time.

Some people asked the council to **build on the historical pattern and character of the Old Kent Road** and not allow the creation of an identical sense of place to any other large scale regenerated neighbourhood in London. In a similar way some people talked about the need to insist on the protection of historic buildings and groups of buildings.

3. More discussion and debate

The first question is how should we get more people involved in the discussion? One person said that it will be “a lot of work for the council to reach out to everyone” but went on to point out that equally consultations are “a lot of call upon community time”. The answer seems to be to target outreach to residents, local businesses, including shops, artists, schools and young people, old people, all income groups, council estates, voluntary sector organisations, faith groups, local police, universities, Latin American, African and other migrant communities – and to do this whilst at the same time getting some improvements done sooner rather than later..

The next question is what to talk about? Transport was a very popular topic for future meetings, along with the need for new local jobs including apprenticeships and skills training, rubbish and waste collection, shopfront improvements and the appearance of the area, the needs of businesses, including talking about any future plans for compulsory purchase, affordable homes and the future of council housing, leisure needs, health and local health facilities, poverty and the need for investment to combat poverty, making changes that won't mean rebuilding in a few decades time, building and open space design issues, looking more at the history and character of the road, entertainment uses, shops and markets, temporary uses whilst new developments are organised, and explaining where new developments might go.

What should we do to make those meetings interesting? Enable local people, especially young people, to get involved in heritage study projects, and photography, art and film projects to look at the issues along the Old Kent Road. Bring the products of these projects to the meetings. Bring interesting maps, get key speakers along, reach out to migrant communities so they will come along too, set up a website for the project. Give people a taste of the food from around the world that is available from Old Kent Road cafes.

How should we get in touch with people? Do everything possible as people are looking at many different ways to get information. It must include leaflets, emails, letters, adverts, and social media campaigns. We must go to local events to tell people about the project and invite them to the next meeting, and we need to think of phrases and titles that people will remember, like the I Love Peckham campaign, and we should go out to local sports events over the summer.

Where shall we meet next?

Pembroke House

New Covenant Church

Central TRA hall at the end of Dunstan Road

Avondale Square hall

Darwin Court

Local schools

Christchurch (next to Treasure House)

Treasure House again

4. Finally

One person asked a very interesting question to end their workshop group – what happens to the community forum once our consultations end?