

Note of the fourth Old Kent Road Community Forum meeting

Wednesday 1st July 2015,
Astley and Coopers Tenants and Residents Hall.

Presentations

45 people attended on a very hot day, and talked about the future of retail along the Old Kent Road and in nearby streets, such as the end of East Street nearest to the junction with the Old Kent Road.

We heard from **Alistair Huggett** from the council about the High Street fund, and how this will be a sum of about £200,000 to be spent before April 2016 on improving the retail environment of the shopping area between the junction with Albany Road and the junction with East Street. Money will also go to improve the retail environment of East Street. These ideas were very useful and were used for further discussion of what exactly is needed in the small groups discussions session later on during the evening.



Next up to talk to the forum was **Nuala Riddell Morales** from Carnival del Pueblo. Nuala talked about the local Latin boom in Southwark. The cultural strengths of Latin American culture tend to be very visible, with street possessions and open air cafés, and very accessible to all. Nuala told us about ambitions to revitalise Southwark using culture and arts.

Patria Roman of Latin Elephant talked about the spread outwards of Latin American retail from the Elephant towards Walworth Road and towards Old Kent Road. There are 9 premises in the Old Kent Road accommodating 16 Latin American businesses, many of them relatively recently set up. Patria talked about the importance of Migrant and Ethnic businesses (MEBs) and explained that there are 135 independent shops owned by MEBs, and argued that therefore much more should be done to support this significant service providing and employment creating sector.



Paul Kelly, the owner and manager of the very popular Robertos café, just south of the junction with Albany Street, told us some fascinating stories about the everyday encounters, all of them very friendly, at his cafe, which has customers from all communities in the area, and indeed from many countries in the form of tourists. Paul is proud that Robertos is a meeting place for the local community. Paul reminded us that the shops to the south of the Albany Road junction are facing many commercial challenges, after all many of them have given up on retail and are now offices, or vacant. Paul talked about traffic, parking, street cleaning, and the importance of making the Old Kent Road a place where people stay longer, do not simply pass through, and therefore we need more visitor facilities and services.



Finally the very popular local author and entrepreneur **Winsome Duncan** talked about her experience of living and shopping at the Old Kent Road, and inevitably discussed the traffic and noise that prevents a full enjoyment of the otherwise very interesting shops in the area. Winsome hinted that local people would be very pleased indeed if Transport for London do decide to build a Bakerloo line extension along the Old Kent Road.

Small groups discussions

The overall agreement amongst people at the workshop is that the retail environment in the Old Kent Road needs to change, and there was a consensus about what is wrong and what solutions are needed. There are too many big box retail supermarkets and warehouse style shops selling bulkier items, which

don't add anything to the visual beauty of the Old Kent Road. Many people do find these big shops convenient and useful understandably. There is a successful retail high street between Tescos and the Bricklayers Arms, and a less successful one further south going towards Lewisham, however many residents reported not shopping all that much at any of the high street shops.



The problem that puts off potential customers is the noise, pollution and sense of a poor quality environment along the Old Kent Road, along with difficulties parking and the lack of a “sense of identity” to the retail along this almost mile long stretch of road. More diversity of retail is needed if people are to view the high street areas, and not just the supermarkets, as regular shopping destinations.

The solutions suggested were very interesting, wide ranging in their scope, and arguably all achievable. In order to get more diversity of shops it was thought that a clearer communication of what is already on offer will help, and a more elaborate version of this type of information should be possible reasonably quickly: <http://www.southlondonguide.co.uk/oldkentroad/> and a better understanding created of what kind of place we are promoting; and what is unique and important about the shops along the Old Kent Road.

Linked to the need to promote the area as a special place and not a “backwater”; environmental improvements are important, such as well maintained tree planting and links for walkers between green areas, also with less space given over in the medium term to vehicles and more space provided for shoppers and pedestrians, with more of the café culture that is already evident in places. More pubs and cafes and leisure uses will keep people in the area for longer.

Other quick to do solutions suggested were pop up shops, with some linked to the business department in the universities are either end of the Old Kent Road, publicising how the area will be changing for the better soon, better signage to the shopping areas that are successful or have potential, and showing shoppers in East Street that they have a lot to gain from venturing a bit further southwards. There are also a number of tourists visiting, and ensuring they stay longer and spend more money in the area would be a very useful change to create.

Traders report that they can succeed in the present circumstances, although many have to change their offer frequently, and be adaptable and hard working to gain enough trade. Business parking permits will be something traders will want to talk to the council about, if at all possible.

Last but not least a number of people talked about gradual change being important, not sudden change that can disrupt existing successes.

