

Town Centres & High Streets – Themes

The Covid-19 crisis threatens to exacerbate pre-existing problems faced by town centres and high streets and the council has therefore made their protection a priority. It is vital that we ensure our town centres and high streets remain vibrant, thriving, accessible spaces, safe for all, which contribute to the prosperity and cohesion of our local communities.

Town Centres and High Streets are one of the four central themes of Southwark’s Economic Renewal Plan, through which we have outlined the actions we are taking in response to the economic challenges brought by the pandemic. In addition to this, a dedicated cross-council strategic response for Town Centres and High Streets is in development under the leadership of the Cabinet Member for Communities, Equalities and Neighbourhoods and the Director of Response & Renewal, to ensure we identify and respond to the broader range of issues they face.

Through this strategic approach the council will deliver its Borough Plan commitment to *“Help Southwark’s high streets to be thriving and vibrant, seeking to achieve full occupancy and encourage residents to shop local”*.

The strategy will enable us to reimagine these spaces so that they are fit for the future, balancing retail, business, development and inclusive economic growth, with health and wellbeing, sustainable transport, culture and leisure. The approach will be structured around five key themes and will align with all other council plans and strategies with relevance to town centres, high streets and neighbourhoods, and ensure that vital lessons learned from the Covid-19 pandemic help to shape future approaches.

The strategy will encapsulate the council’s vision for its town centres together with objectives, policies and proposals to guide future delivery, development and change. It will help to standardise our efforts across the borough, whilst also acknowledging that each town centre has a unique identity and may require a more targeted neighbourhood level approach in particular areas. Aligned to our “Southwark Stands Together” programme, this will highlight the diversity of each town centre and the local communities within it, and ensure that we celebrate and enhance the distinctive identity of each locality within our borough.

The five themes guiding our approach to Town Centres and High Streets are:

1. Sustainable, accessible places – A 15-minute borough
2. An inclusive, greener local economy
3. Vibrant, resilient and connected high streets
4. The heart of our communities
5. Healthy and safe high streets

1. Sustainable, accessible places – A 15-minute borough

Our Town Centres will be at the heart of our vision for a 15-minute borough: localities that are more accessible, better connected and sustainable, meeting all the essential needs of residents and encouraging self-sufficiency. Places where our communities can shop, access services and enjoy cultural and recreational facilities locally, within a 15-minute journey from their home by public transport, walking or by bike.

We will facilitate greater use of sustainable modes of transport, reducing pollution and carbon emissions. We will ensure that changes to infrastructure and the public realm improve accessibility for local people, create inclusive social spaces, and contribute to our goal of improved health and wellbeing

for all of our residents. We will use planning policies to ensure that we retain a network of high streets with a range of amenities, shops and price points that meet the needs of Southwark's population.

A 15-minute neighbourhood is a neighbourhood that provides residents with access to most, if not all, of their day-to-day needs within a short walk or bike ride from their home. The concept seeks to improve air quality, as well as make neighbourhoods safer, more diverse, inclusive and economically vibrant. A 15-minute neighbourhood will promote the use of local town centres and high streets, reducing the need for travel across the borough to access key services and amenities but does not restrict residents to shopping only within the 15-minute radius. The focus of the concept is to allow the accessibility and provide residents with the option.

2. An inclusive, greener local economy

We will deliver inclusive, greener economic growth in our Town Centres and High Streets, supporting key local business sectors, including retail, hospitality, tech, biomedical, health, construction, green and creative industries, and targeting specific support towards businesses and initiatives that enhance health, wellbeing, and opportunities for carbon reduction. Through the recovery from Covid-19, we will seek to dismantle the barriers that hold back individuals and businesses from playing a full part in our economy. We will protect and expand diversity in the local business offer, including small businesses and social enterprises, as well as Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) and female owned businesses.

We will broaden ownership of the local economy through Community Wealth Building and will work closely with local organisations and networks to promote good work and the living wage. Through our ongoing, significant investment in employment support and skills development, we will equip our residents to progress in the labour market and share in that economic growth.

3. Vibrant, resilient and connected high streets

We will support our local retail and leisure sectors, carefully examining changes in use of the high street and the impact of those changes, and we will take steps to renew our night-time economy.

Through our approach to licensing, regulation and enforcement, we will maintain standards while increasing flexibility and enabling change, and we will take a strong approach to minimising vacancies on the high street, including optimising creative meanwhile uses and maximising use of any underutilised spaces, council and community assets.

We will work closely with our partners in the culture sector to ensure a diverse cultural offer within the borough, reflecting the diversity of our residents, and we will work to improve digital connectivity in our town centres, encouraging the development and delivery of connected services for people and businesses.

4. The heart of our communities

We will foster a sense of social cohesion with town centres remaining at the heart of our diverse communities.

We will continue to respect and acknowledge difference, celebrating the unique identity and heritage of each of our town centres, working with all of our partners and communities to understand what they want for their own local town centre and high streets.

Our approach to town centres will be informed by the principles and commitments laid out in our “Southwark Stands Together” programme.

5. Healthy and safe high streets

We will continue our work to ensure high streets can reopen safely, are safe places to visit and welcoming to all ages and all communities.

We will make Southwark’s high streets healthier spaces; places within our communities that support the reduction of health inequalities, and which create more opportunities for social interaction. We will continue to explore and promote ways to increase access to health-promoting goods and services, in line with the principles set out in our Healthier High Streets Framework, and we will examine new models for piloting advice and access to services on our high streets.