

The future of London's town centres

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The future of London's town centres

May 2013

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Terms of reference for the investigation

The previous Planning Committee (2012/13), which has since been reformed with an amended membership, agreed the following terms of reference for this investigation on 11 December 2012:

- to explore the future role of town centres in London with an emphasis on the potential range of forms and functions;
- to inform the Committee's response to the Mayor's Draft Supplementary Planning Guidance for town centres; and
- to highlight any important issues for consideration in other areas outside the remit of the SPG.

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Chair's Foreword



Town centres remain an integral part of Londoners' daily lives. For all the doomsday statistics on rising vacancy rates and falling footfall, people still value their local centre. Most retail spending still happens on the high street instead of out-of-town shopping centres or the internet. In London, town centres give us a sense of local identity that we would otherwise not have in such an enormous metropolis.

Yet every week seems to offer a new story of decline. In an age of out-of-town and internet shopping, many centres are struggling – the most obvious signs include an increasing number of empty or boarded up shops, a limited or imbalanced range of shops and facilities and a lack of pride in the appearance of a local area.

Town centres must reinvent themselves into new forms and functions if they are going to remain relevant and thrive. The right planning guidance can support them in that transformation. Our investigation asked the best and the brightest in the field for bold and futuristic visions of what London's town centres can and should become.

We heard many ideas – to improve the public realm in town centres with place specific interventions and to relocate facilities such as colleges or libraries there in order to create new focal points for interaction and increase footfall. We also heard about strong principles – for example that the most successful town centres are often those of memorable character with a strong sense of place.

Most importantly, we heard that town centres need to fundamentally rethink themselves: they must move away from being strictly retail focussed and become dynamic centres that can serve local communities with a unique and diverse offering of retail, public and community services, leisure, and housing.

Not everything that needs to be done can be addressed through planning policy, though Mayoral guidance can provide the appropriate framework to help make change happen. Our report therefore proposes that the Mayor should look to develop more innovative and interdisciplinary approaches to town centre revitalisation which could deliver change where a traditional town centres policy response has failed. We need to stop rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic and instead help keep our town centres afloat.

A large number of individuals and organisations have contributed to our research and have shared their expert knowledge and experience. I want to express my gratitude to the professionals from a range of fields who attended the Committee's formal meetings to speak about their concerns and visions for London's town centres.

Our recommendations, if implemented, will strengthen London's policy response to its struggling town centres to ensure them a brighter future.

Nicky Gavron

Chair of the Planning Committee

Executive Summary

This report explores the future role of town centres in London and considers and comments on the Mayor's draft supplementary planning guidance (SPG) on town centres, published in January 2013. It also makes additional recommendations to the Mayor on how he could further support and improve London's town centres.

Town centres face many challenges to their survival, and must diversify their offer. In particular, they must become less dependent on retailing. Many would agree that town centres are always evolving in response to change - the real challenge now is how to manage that change.

A number of experts from different fields told the Assembly's Planning Committee that "there is no 'one size that fits all' solution", therefore, the objective for any town centre programme or policy guidance should be to enable town centres to adjust to their changing economic context. The current trend of declining town centres and increasing vacancy levels provides opportunities to reinvent town centres and the retail spaces they offer. Despite a rise in e-commerce and online shopping, there are a number of ways to link this with the 'bricks and mortar' experience in town centres.

As well as addressing the range of potential uses in town centres, any planning policy or guidance should also consider the quality of the environment offered to residents, users and visitors. The key to delivering good public spaces in town centres is having a clear strategy from the outset.

Planning policy and guidance should address town centre needs both strategically and locally. At a local level, the challenge for planning authorities lies in providing resilient and flexible policy frameworks in development plans. At a strategic level, the role of the Mayor's Town Centres SPG should be to provide a framework for action and allow local planning authorities to respond flexibly to changing circumstances.

But regenerating town centres is not just a matter of planning policy, it depends on a wide range of components.

- Best practice: In addition to a policy framework, learning from elsewhere is fundamental to improving town centres – the SPG should signpost businesses, local authorities and communities to useful tools on how to implement successful initiatives.

- Financial investment: Many London boroughs have benefited from either national or mayoral funding to improve their town centres and would like these schemes continued or new programmes offered. Regular town centre health checks are one way of identifying areas in need for improvement or financial investment and can inform important policy decisions.
- Interdisciplinary working: Many areas of expertise outside the realm of planning are of great importance to town centres. They need to be included in any thinking on supporting and enhancing town centres through the planning system. London Assembly Committees have produced an extensive body of work that the Town Centres SPG could benefit from.

Having taken into account the full range of evidence received during its investigation, in written submissions and during two formal meetings with invited experts, the Committee has developed a number of specific recommendations. The majority are directed at the Mayor's Draft Town Centres SPG but there are also two further actions for the Mayor to implement alongside his SPG. The recommendations address the following areas:

Reconfiguration of town centres

The Town Centres SPG should encourage the reconfiguration of town centres, particularly in secondary retail areas, where appropriate.

Diversification

Town centres must serve new functions if they are to continue to be successful and relevant. Different functions provided by town centres should include: public and community services; third-place working; leisure and entertainment; and housing. The Town Centres SPG should highlight in greater detail the need to improve and diversify land uses in town centres.

Detailed advice needed

The Town Centres SPG would be of greater practical use to local boroughs if it included good examples to follow and a greater level of detail on how to better engage stakeholders. The SPG should also set out ways to enable collaborative processes for involving those who use town centres.

Permitted development rights

In light of government proposals on permitted development rights to allow change of use from office to residential that recently came into force, the Mayor should monitor their impact and consider revising the Town Centres SPG in the future to take account of any such impacts if necessary.

Land-use and transport planning

Planners must recognise the opportunities for higher-density mixed-use development around stations in the mid and long term. The Town Centres SPG should emphasise the links between transport planning, land-use planning, and regeneration opportunities for town centre transport interchanges.

Best practice toolkit and case studies

Best practice toolkits can provide policy makers with universal principles and a choice of options to consider so that they can implement those that are most suitable for the character and circumstances of their local town centres. The Town Centres SPG should contain a dedicated section providing such a toolkit. The SPG should also integrate a greater range of best practice examples and case studies to help showcase that positive changes can be delivered.

New approaches

The SPG would benefit from a more visionary encouragement for innovative, interdisciplinary approaches, together with suitable tools for implementation. It should explore the wider potential of these ideas to respond to current trends and future demands more effectively.

Assembly reports and Mayoral policies

The findings and recommendations from a number of London Assembly reports, in particular by the Environment, Transport, Housing, Planning and Economy Committees, should be acknowledged and taken into account as part of the Town Centres SPG. Equally, greater links to Mayoral policies and strategies in other areas should be established within the SPG to highlight cross-sectional issues and alternative solutions.

Knowledge exchange

Knowledge exchange through pan-London working groups should be encouraged and, where possible, initiated and facilitated by the Mayor to help Boroughs develop more flexible and adaptable policy solutions for London's town centres.

Town centre health checks

The Committee calls on the Mayor to carry out annual health checks of selected London's town centres to help boroughs and other authorities to develop and adapt town centre, programmes and management approaches in a more timely way.

1. Introduction

*“This is a critical time for town centres; we need to completely rethink how all services engage in the high street as the centres of social and economic activity”.*¹

Town centres face many challenges to their survival, and must diversify their offer.

- 1.1. The Mayor believes that London’s town centres should be the focus for commercial development and intensification, including residential development. They should provide a competitive choice of goods and services, be conveniently accessible and maintain a sense of place. The Mayor has adopted London-wide planning policies to achieve these objectives and supports a number of funding initiatives for town centre regeneration.
- 1.2. In January 2013, the Mayor of London issued draft supplementary planning guidance (SPG) on town centres for public consultation. This report considers and comments on the draft SPG; it also makes additional recommendations to the Mayor on how he could further support and improve London’s town centres.
- 1.3. According to the Outer London Commission, town centres face many challenges to their survival, and must diversify their offer. In particular, they must become less dependent on retailing.² But the drivers behind town centre change are complex. They include: the weakness of the national economy, changing lifestyles and demographics, and the impact of technological change. Other significant challenges include the development of supermarkets and out-of-town shopping centres, as well as increasing competition between centres.
- 1.4. Many would agree that town centres are always evolving in response to change. Many of London's town centres have radically changed over the last few decades as a result and some of their older buildings have been recycled for new uses: Bethnal Green town hall is now a hotel and the Truman Brewery in Brick Lane is now home to creative businesses as well as shops, galleries, markets, bars and restaurants. New buildings, for example Clapham Library, provide a range of offers under one roof including a flexible, adaptable space. Such changes represent dynamic responses to new competitive situations.

¹ LGA (2012): *Alternative high street. Rethinking the town centre challenge*

² The Outer London Commission (November 2012): *Second Report*

1.5. However, the current situation is unique in the diversity and the strength of forces for change which are all happening at the same time:

- The effects of recession including reduced spending power, appear likely to continue for a number of years. Their impact on town centres may well be exacerbated, especially in more deprived areas, by proposed changes to the welfare system.
- Competition from out-of-centre retail outlets and shopping malls remains a factor, often supported by a free parking offer, despite the Government's long-standing 'town centres first' policy.
- After many false starts, it appears that on-line retailing is taking an increasing proportion of sales across a wide range of trading sectors. Closures of CD, DVD and book stores are already a common sight on the high street.
- Many of London's town centres seem to have failed to adapt to these challenges. Fulham Road West and New Cross, for example, exhibit shop vacancy rates of over 20 per cent. The growing presence of chain supermarkets, betting shops and fast food takeaways highlights an increasing lack of diversity in London's centres and high streets.

1.6. The real challenge now is how to manage change.

1.7. Several experts from different fields told the Assembly's Planning Committee that *"there is no 'one size that fits all' solution"*. Every centre has its own problems, as well as its unique opportunities. Solutions, they have told us, should be bottom-up not top-down if they are to be successful. Some centres may need to contract, losing a significant number of retail units; at the same time, they must seek to retain their sense of place and their core functions.³

1.8. Evidence suggests that partnerships between the community, businesses, property owners and service providers – especially Transport for London (TfL) and public services like the NHS – could be a crucial way to plan and implement a combination of structural changes and environmental improvements.⁴

1.9. The objective for any town centre programme or guidance should be to enable town centres to adjust to their changing economic context. Centres must become even more accessible, and provide new opportunities for well-located and well-designed higher density housing. Without effective action,

³ Planning Committee meetings, December 2012 and January 2013

⁴ Ibid

The real challenge now is how to manage change

many of London's town centres will deteriorate into “*gap-toothed ribbons of run-down premises*”⁵, providing a low quality of service to their communities in a poor quality townscape.

The investigation

The Assembly’s Planning Committee began a review in December 2012 seeking to explore the future role of London’s town centres and to establish a long-term vision for the role of town centres as well as ways of using planning policy to implement any specific objectives identified.

The review had the following terms of reference:

- to explore the future role of town centres in London with an emphasis on the potential range of forms and functions;
- to inform the Committee’s response to the Mayor’s Draft Supplementary Planning Guidance for town centres; and
- to highlight any important issues for consideration in other areas outside the remit of the SPG.

In January 2013 the Mayor issued draft supplementary planning guidance (SPG) on town centres for public consultation. This SPG provides guidance on the implementation of London Plan Policy 2.15 (Town centres) as well as other policies in the Plan that are relevant to town centre development and management. It also provides guidance on Policy 2.16 Strategic Outer London Development Centres) and their potential to be developed as business locations with distinct strengths of greater than sub-regional importance.

The SPG seeks to help centres achieve their potential and to contribute to London’s success.

This report is our response to that consultation.

⁵ Written evidence from Tony Cumberbirch, former Principal Strategist and Planner, GLA

2. Visions for London's town centres – can the Mayor's SPG deliver?

- 2.1. At its first meeting in December 2012, the Committee explored the future role of London's town centres⁶ with an expert panel. The panel was asked to consider whether town centres can remain centres for retail and employment, or whether they would be more successful in focussing on culture, entertainment and services. Members and guests also debated whether policy makers, planners and businesses might have to fundamentally re-evaluate the purpose and appearance of London's town centres.
- 2.2. The panel largely agreed that town centres remain important nodes for social and commercial activity, but that their key functions are changing. Members and guests discussed the key challenges facing town centres and concluded that there are different ways of addressing them, both through planning policy and other initiatives.
- 2.3. Many of the issues facing town centre relate to their function. Some of the approaches considered included:
- Allowing a greater variety of uses besides retail in town centres, for example residential uses and different types of services, particularly health providers and council departments;
 - Making better use of public libraries and other community spaces, for example to enable flexible 'third space'⁷ working;
 - Promoting businesses that combine production and services with consumption; and
 - Involving the community more in the way the town centre is run and used.
- 2.4. The future of London's high streets is also a question of form. As well as the uses and functions to which a town centre can be put, improving the public realm as an attractive and welcoming environment is a key issue in regenerating town centres.

⁶ For the purpose of this review the term "town centres" excludes neighbourhood centres and parades of shops as these are sub-centres which serve the same areas which are also served by a larger more recognisable town centre

⁷ Spaces that are neither the office nor home, such as cafes, libraries or business centres

- 2.5. At the Planning Committee's second meeting in January 2013, Members discussed with invited policy makers, planning practitioners and other guests how some of these ideas and objectives could be realised through planning policy and other means.
- 2.6. We have therefore identified several key objectives needed to create more viable and successful town centres and our report considers them in more detail. These include:
 - Increasing footfall;
 - Diversifying the retail, leisure and public service offer;
 - Increasing employment opportunities; and
 - Learning from successful examples both in and outside London.

FUNCTION

- 2.7. Martin Blackwall, CEO of Association of Town Centre Managers (ATCM), notes that *"high streets are changing, and there is a realisation that retail space may have to shrink in some cases to survive. This does not mean that high streets should disappear or stop reinventing themselves, just that they will be simply different in the future"*.⁸
- 2.8. The London Plan promotes a hierarchic network of town centres. The purpose of each town centre differs according to its specific role and function. Not every centre will be able to maintain the same role and function in the long term. In order to address an on-going decline of their town centres or high street, local authorities should not be afraid to embark on a carefully directed policy of reconfiguration. By doing so they can release fringe retail floorspace in underperforming centres and retail areas where appropriate, in order to concentrate essential town centre functions in a smaller but more vibrant core.

Recommendation 1 – Encourage reconfiguration of town centres

The SPG should encourage local authorities to consider concentrating on essential town centre functions in a smaller but more vibrant core, where appropriate. Secondary parts of town centres might more usefully take on other functions such as housing or other non-retail uses.

⁸ Experian Marketing Services in partnership with ATCM (2012): *Town Centre Futures 2020*

Not every centre will be able to maintain the same role and function in the long term

Importance of creating diversity and footfall

- 2.9. The London Plan strongly supports town centres as the primary focus for delivering civic, amenity, leisure and social services, as well as retail. Over the last decades, many providers of public services – including local authorities, health providers and social services – have closed down services based in town centres. William McKee, Chair of the Outer London Commission (OLC), suggested that these providers should consider bringing some of those services back into town centres⁹.
- 2.10. William McKee further suggested that town centres cater to a wider range of needs. Such diversification would help town centres to remain active throughout the day – and night. Local authorities would need to identify the most appropriate activities for different town centres. These might include leisure, arts, culture, education and local authority services; small serviced office suites; and services driven by local residential demand.
- 2.11. The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI), in its written submission to the Committee, agrees that London's town centres need to provide a more diverse range of services. The Institute notes that the analysis offered by Mary Portas' government-commissioned review of the high streets¹⁰ was heavily biased towards the retail aspects of high streets, and neglected the role that other sectors can play in regenerating town centres.¹¹
- 2.12. Different models can be applied in individual town centres to make them more vibrant, each bringing in a different mix of uses of buildings. The Committee supports a number of key components that are broadly functional:

Different models can be applied in individual town centres to make them more vibrant, each bringing in a different mix of uses of buildings.

- Public services – these are often anchors that give people a reason to come to the centre: for example, council offices, health services like GPs, education institutions like colleges, police stations, post offices including Crown Post Offices etc.
- Community services – these can also be key destinations, for example, nurseries, community centres, tuition centres etc. They may require targeted incentives to locate in the town centres.
- Housing – residential uses in town centres will significantly improve their vibrancy as more people would frequent the town centre at different times of the day.

⁹ Planning Committee meeting, December 2012

¹⁰ <http://www.maryportas.com/news/2011/12/12/the-portas-review/>

¹¹ Written evidence from the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI)

- Leisure and entertainment – these increase activity in town centres, particularly in the evenings and at weekends. Although the night-time economy has to be managed more carefully than day-time activities, councils should recognise the potential benefits of leisure destinations and not be afraid of allowing a greater range of uses.
- Events and festivals – these also help to improve footfall and activity in high streets and centres. However, they are only temporary or ‘cosmetic’. If town centres are to survive, they need more fundamental change and should not rely entirely on the short-term impacts that events can bring.

Opportunity for reinventing spaces

- 2.13. The current trend of declining town centres and increasing vacancy levels also provides opportunities to reinvent town centres and the retail and service spaces they offer.
- 2.14. Philip Turner, Associate Director at AHMM Architects, suggests it could be a good idea for city buildings to be more flexible by *“returning to a model where buildings change use according to demand at different points in economic cycles or at different points during the day”*.¹²
- 2.15. The Draft Town Centres SPG considers the format¹³ of new development (paragraphs 3.4.3 and 3.4.4) and supports proposals that demonstrate flexibility in the development’s format, innovations in design, mixed use approaches or the use of multiple floors. The section also highlights the need to consider the relationship of a development with the town centre at the design stage. This approach reflects some of the evidence the Committee received and is therefore welcomed.

Public community facilities

- 2.16. Existing community spaces can and should be adapted to provide for flexible ‘third space’ activities. Third spaces are distinct from home or workplace (the so-called ‘first’ and ‘second’ spaces). They are seen as anchors of community life, fostering broader, more creative interaction in town centres¹⁴. Third places can include libraries, coffee shops and even dedicated business centres. Such spaces should be located in accessible locations such as town centres, where they would create mutual benefits for other businesses and services.

¹² Planning in London Issue 83/2012: *“A date with density”*. Interview by Lee Mallet

¹³ eg scale, orientation, configuration and land use

¹⁴ Oldenburg, Ray, ed. (2001): *Celebrating the Third Place: Inspiring Stories About The “Great Good Places” At the Heart of Our Communities*

- 2.17. David West, Founding Partner at Studio Egret West, highlighted the Clapham Library building as an example of a successful mixed-use private public partnership. It has delivered a flexible civic room – more a theatre than a library – a flexible hall, a doctor’s surgery and a one-stop shop, plus 136 apartments in the middle of a very constrained high street site. West felt that the town centre project *“shows the acceptance of the need to evolve, the need to be responsive, and the need to be place-specific”*¹⁵.

Promoting businesses which bring production and services together with consumption

At present, town centres often offer a restricted range of uses, some of them undesirable, simply to avoid shops remaining empty.

- 2.18. Other experts supported the idea of developing town centres as places of activity and creativity, not just consumption. Julian Dobson, Director at Urban Pollinators, agreed with the concept of re-linking production and sales¹⁶. Henrietta Green, food writer and consultant, suggested that a shop could also host the source of the production: for example food, carpentry or painting. Enabling the necessary change of use and opening up opportunities may require a more flexible ‘use class’ system¹⁷, however, allowing for such discretions is hard to enshrine in planning law and could lead to unintended consequences in other cases, where the goal is to protect particular uses¹⁸.
- 2.19. A third space or mixed use approach to development could also help address the problem of rising vacancies in many town centres and high streets. At present, town centres often offer a restricted range of uses, some of them undesirable, simply to avoid shops remaining empty. Other ways of bringing retail units back into use include pop-up shops, rent-free trials for new businesses, and modifications to the business rates. The London Assembly's Economy Committee in its recent ‘Open for Business’ report published a number of recommendations in this area (see details in section 4 of this report).

Recommendation 2 – Improve and diversify land uses in town centres

Town centres must serve new functions if they are to continue to be successful and relevant. Different functions provided by town centres should include public and community services (see below), third-place working, leisure and entertainment and housing

¹⁵ Planning Committee meeting, January 2013

¹⁶ Planning Committee meeting, December 2012

¹⁷ The Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) Order 1987 (as amended) puts uses of land and buildings into various categories known as ‘Use Classes’.

¹⁸ Planning Committee meeting, December 2012

Section 2.5 (Social Infrastructure) of the Draft SPG should particularly highlight the benefits of locating public services within town centres and encourage local authorities to support this approach – starting within their own remit, for example by creating one-stop shops or by relocating public facilities to the high streets when the opportunity arises. Such facilities include council offices, health services like GPs, education institutions – particularly colleges –, post offices or police stations.

Section 2.5 of the Draft SPG should also expand on the importance and potential of multifunctional community facilities in town centres and provide guidance on opportunities in locating or extending such uses in town centres. Additional references should therefore also be made in Section 3.2 (Subsection: Flexibility for new permanent uses including change of use).

The Draft SPG does not yet recognise the potential contribution that productive uses such as food production, craftsmanship or arts can make towards creating lively town centres and high streets. This aspect should be added to Section 2.1 (Subsection: Retail and change of use), Section 3.2 (Subsection: Flexibility for new permanent uses including change of use) and Section 4.6 (Street markets).

It is important to recognise that housing can play an important role in revitalising town centres by providing a potential new use for empty buildings and increasing footfall from local residents.

Need for improving community involvement and industry engagement

- 2.20. Town centres and high streets are local resources. It is essential for those involved in planning and managing town centres to understand what local customers expect, and how local communities, investors and developers can help deliver these objectives.

Understanding need and demand better

- 2.21. Dr Steve Norris, Head of Strategic Perspectives, warned that *“our high streets and town centres are facing a seismic challenge from Internet shopping”*. He explained that retail forecasters *“do not know the minds of the next generation coming through [which is] being brought up in a very different world where the high street to them may not be relevant to the*

*world that they live in. It is about how you connect it and make it relevant to generations".*¹⁹

- 2.22. Despite a rise in e-commerce and online shopping, there are a number of ways to link this with the 'bricks and mortar' experience in town centres. Creating show rooms to 'touch and feel' items while offering free Wi-Fi to order online, or a dedicated website informing customers of events and special deals in their local town centre (for example in Crouch End – see Appendix 4) are two such examples. Newly commissioned research from GfK Insight demonstrates that consumers today shop through a range of different channels²⁰.

Strategies and visions for centres should connect with the private sector at the very early stages in the process.

- 2.23. Dr Norris also pointed to the key issue of identifying individual ways of making a centre viable: *"Not every centre can be a shopping mall. Not every centre will attract a food store. Not every centre can have a street market or independent boutique shops and specialist shops. They have to fit in with their local communities. They have to work with other communities"*.²¹

Involving the community more in the way the town centre is run and used

- 2.24. Julian Dobson, noted the opportunity to rediscover how the civic, commercial and social elements can be brought together in town centres for mutual benefit²². Dr Norris agreed that involving the community and engaging with stakeholders is important, especially in helping them understand that the centre they have now may be very different from the centre they knew 20 years ago²³.

Involving developers early to ensure future delivery

- 2.25. Stephen Kelly, Divisional Director of Planning at the London Borough of Harrow, suggested that there was a fundamental issue about alignment, not only between the public sector agencies and a local authority and its own functions, but also with the development industry's aspirations and outcomes²⁴. Dr Norris noted that strategies and visions for centres should connect with the private sector at the very early stages in the process,

¹⁹ Planning Committee meeting, January 2013

²⁰ <http://www.fourthsource.com/ecommerce/british-high-streets-showrooms-for-the-digital-era-6471>

²¹ Planning Committee meeting, January 2013

²² Julian Dobson, Urban Pollinators – Email to officers, November 2012

²³ Planning Committee meeting, January 2013

²⁴ Planning Committee meeting, January 2013

should be deliverable and should include contingency plans or alternative options to react to changing circumstances²⁵.

Recommendation 3 – Provide examples and details

Subsection 7.1.4 (A collaborative approach) of the Draft SPG provides a useful introduction to the importance of stakeholder engagement for delivering successful town centres. Boroughs would welcome the inclusion of good examples to follow and a greater level of detail on how they can engage stakeholders more easily. Such advice would help them create flexible local solutions within the framework of high level strategic policies.

Greater exchange between councils and developers could also help create sustainable schemes offering flexible premises that can respond to changing market demands.

The SPG should encourage more and better collaborative processes involving those who use town centres, particularly local residents. Every opportunity should be taken to enable local people to actively shape their town centres, as this will help town centres to provide the offer that local people want and need.

Intensification opportunities for employment space and housing development

Housing injects vibrancy into town centres by increasing footfall and bringing people closer to work, transport nodes, retail and services.

- 2.26. Town centre locations, William McKee pointed out, are able to sustain intensification, especially higher density housing, while offering opportunities for sustainable development²⁶. David West supported raising residential density in sustainable locations but points to the need to increase services and public facilities in the community where new residential development would take place, including further education facilities, crèche facilities, play spaces, amenity spaces or flexible community halls²⁷.
- 2.27. As introduced under paragraph 2.12 in this report, housing injects vibrancy into town centres by increasing footfall and bringing people closer to places of work, transport nodes as well as the retail and service offer. Many experts from different fields promote town centres as areas of potential intensification which can contribute towards tackling the housing crisis²⁸.

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ William McKee, Outer London Commission – Email to officers, November 2012

²⁷ Planning Committee meeting, January 2013

²⁸ Planning Committee meetings, December 2012 and January 2013

- 2.28. Earlier this year, the Government proposed new permitted development rights that would allow the change of use from office space to residential without the need for planning permission. The Committee held a meeting on 12 March 2013 to discuss these proposals with a range of stakeholders and experts. Although the guests represented different fields in both the public and private sectors, they were unanimous in their opposition to the proposal. They were deeply concerned about the impact the proposed permitted development rights might have on London's economic recovery, on the delivery of good standard homes for all, and on London's infrastructure and amenities²⁹.
- 2.29. Furthermore, these new rights could pose significant unintended consequences for town centres and could affect the make-up of its communities as well as local services, job opportunities and amenities. Promoting vibrant and mixed use town centres that provide a range of retail, service, leisure and residential premises can help support and retain a desirable mixed community³⁰ where this may otherwise be at risk.

Recommendation 4 – Monitor impact of permitted development rights

The Mayor must monitor the impact of the new permitted development rights to allow change of use from office to residential, and should revisit his Town Centres SPG in one year's time and change it to take account of any such impacts if necessary.

Planning for transport nodes and access to town centres

- 2.30. Vibrant town centres can facilitate high quality, diverse employment, and fast transit to the centre for business, social and cultural life. Drawing from her research in peripheral towns and suburbs of major cities (London, New York and Paris), Ziona Strelitz, founding Director, ZZA Responsive User Environments, notes a great increase in life satisfaction for people who have shifted their work base close to where they live. Strelitz also stresses the need also to enable low carbon local access, in particular by walking and

²⁹ <http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor-assembly/london-assembly/publications/permitted-development-rights-for-change-of-use-from-office-to>

³⁰ There is considerable evidence that pursuing a policy of mixed communities can influence radical transformations that can positively affect areas. In: Mixed Communities Evidence Review (DCLG, 2010)
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/7606/1775206.pdf

cycling. The quality of local life in outer towns and suburbs is frequently marred by excessive local trips by car that should be tackled differently.³¹

- 2.31. Mary Portas, in her review of the high streets, recommends that town centres should implement free controlled parking schemes and generally make town centre shopping more welcome to motorists. Statistically, the average number of cars per household rises as public transport accessibility decreases³². Low cost parking appears to be a widespread concern for traders in town centres and high streets.
- 2.32. On the one hand, the London Assembly's Economy Committee found evidence that, in some cases, business owners may over-estimate the proportion of their customers that travel by car, and that removing parking charges altogether could have unintended negative consequences³³. On the other hand, the Outer London Commission notes that parking can be a legitimate concern in some town centres, especially in outer London, and that these areas may benefit from more flexible parking policies³⁴.
- 2.33. One particular challenge for policy makers, therefore, is the need to enable low carbon local access in town centres. They can address this challenge by encouraging car clubs and car sharing, or by providing more cycling facilities, including cycle hire and cycle storage³⁵ but also by increasing the provision of electric charging points for cars.
- 2.34. Sir Terry Farrell, Founder of Terry Farrell and Partners, highlighted that areas around stations are presently being rethought as potential new hubs or nodal points in London, where new housing, offices and cultural centres can be added like new villages. He supported the idea that, instead of voids, the stations can become places of dense human urban activity 24/7. He saw enormous future benefits in continuing to treat the railways as an extraordinary and positive key to London's shape and form³⁶. Infrastructure schemes such as Crossrail and Crossrail 2 promise the opportunity to

Areas around stations offer potential for new housing, offices and cultural centres – places of dense human urban activity

³¹ Ziona Strelitz, ZZA Responsive User Environments – Email to officers, November 2012

³² The Outer London Commission (2012): Second Report

³³ <http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor-assembly/london-assembly/publications/open-business-empty-shops-londons-high-streets>

³⁴ The Outer London Commission (2012): Second Report

³⁵ Valerie Shawcross AM, Ziona Strelitz, ZZA, Julian Dobson, Urban Pollinators – Planning Committee meeting, December 2012

³⁶ Terry Farrell: Shaping London. The patterns and forms that make the metropolis

reinvalidate town centres through intensification and growth, in addition to the advantage of much faster links to the West End and Heathrow³⁷.

- 2.35. The Committee has questioned whether or not there is a master-planning process, supplementary planning guidance, or other public sector shaping of development that flows from such new stations in London. Sir Terry Farrell stated that: *“there is not a lot of forward planning in Britain; it does not happen in the physical sense. (...) by and large, stations do accumulate activity around them. (...) But proactive planning is not part of what we do in this country; it is reactive.”*³⁸
- 2.36. Planners must recognise the opportunities for higher-density mixed-use development around stations in the mid and long term. They should, therefore, consistently develop strong links between transport planning and land-use planning. Both in existing and new town centres, transport schemes should be specifically engineered to provide opportunities for development and regeneration. In the US this is known as ‘Transit Oriented Development’³⁹. Also known as Transit Oriented Design, or TOD, it is a fast growing trend of creating compact, walkable communities centred around high-quality train systems which makes it possible to live a higher quality life without complete dependence on a car.

Recommendation 5 – Emphasise relationship between land-use and transport planning

Town Centres SPG should emphasise the links between transport planning and land-use planning, and regeneration opportunities for town centre transport interchanges. It should point to other sources and research on how to make the most beneficial use of transport nodes or individual stations to enhance town centres. Planners must recognise the opportunities for higher-density mixed-use development around stations in the mid and long term.

The Mayor should direct Transport for London to consider how its land holdings at and around stations can best contribute to London’s development and regeneration needs.

³⁷ <http://www.esel.org.uk/> East and South East London Transport Partnership (ESELTP) 2012

³⁸ Planning Committee meeting, December 2012

³⁹ <http://www.transitorienteddevelopment.org/>

FORM

- 2.37. As well as addressing the range of potential uses in town centres, any planning policy or guidance should also consider the quality of the environment offered to residents, users and visitors. Form should reflect function: the design of the public realm is a key factor in promoting new uses. A good quality environment, especially in the public realm, is more likely to attract people to spend time in their town centres.
- 2.38. Speaking to the Committee, Helle Sørholt of Gehl Architects emphasised the importance of the public realm: *"It is what we share, where we all move. It is the glue of the township. It is our day-to-day living room"*⁴⁰. William McKee, in his written submission to the Committee, stresses the need to create a public realm that is safe and attractive, and which provides a link between activities inside and outside buildings⁴¹. Sir Terry Farrell advocates a solution for town centres that would *"diminish traffic, narrow the roads, emphasise the public realm and pedestrianise [and] fill vacant sites with imaginative new buildings"*⁴².
- 2.39. According to Steve Norris, the key to delivering good public spaces in town centres is having a clear strategy at the outset. Financial master plans should set out who is funding a development and who is managing it once it is built⁴³. This view is supported by Mike Kiely, Director of Planning & Building Control at Croydon, who admitted that, in the past, the borough *"never really thought through the maintenance of those areas of public realm - they relatively quickly deteriorated and the good was lost"*. Having learned from this experience, public space planning now ensures that maintenance is considered as part of the design input, so that *"we produce a public realm that is beautiful, does work and does what it needs to do but also can be maintained"*.⁴⁴
- 2.40. Sir Terry Farrell highlighted that, while all public places are different, they also have much in common. Most have a pedestrian realm, cycling lanes, ease of access to certain facilities, are 'legible' and so on. He also pointed out the need for 'stewardship', which essentially means looking after a place: providing and maintaining trees, seating places and the use of public buildings⁴⁵. A Business Improvement District (BID) can in some cases take

⁴⁰ Planning Committee meeting, January 2013

⁴¹ William McKee, Outer London Commission - Email to officers, November 2012

⁴² Sir Terry Farrell in: Architectural Review – A Manifesto for London.

⁴³ Planning Committee meeting, January 2013

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ Planning Committee meeting, December 2012

A good quality environment, especially in the public realm, is more likely to attract people to spend time in their town centres.

on the role of steward: it can plan, manage – including keeping the area tidy and safe – and brand a centre, and also has access to necessary funds.

- 2.41. In 2011, the former Planning & Housing Committee published a report on the management of the public realm. The report called for changes to the planning system to keep London's public space open and accessible to all. 'Public Life in Private Hands'⁴⁶ looked at the different ways the public realm – including squares, parks and thoroughfares – is managed. It identified a number of concerns relating to the shift in the ownership and management of public spaces from local authorities to developers, and recommends solutions. The Committee found that many boroughs lack explicit policies for managing and maintaining public space in new developments, and that local people are often not given the chance to comment on how public space in their area will be run.
- 2.42. A tired town centre reflects the esteem with which it is held. Place specific public realm interventions can encourage people to visit the town centres to meet and interact with others and 'raise the spirits' of the town centre. Any investment in the public realm should be supported by a management or maintenance strategy to ensure its on-going success and take into account the views and needs of the local community.

⁴⁶ <http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor-assembly/london-assembly/publications/public-life-in-private-hands>

3. What key stakeholders look for in Mayoral guidance

- 3.1. The Committee asked experts and other stakeholders what they expected from future Mayoral guidance on the development of London's town centres. Their responses revolved around five main issues. They are looking for policies that are comprehensive, practical, innovative and joined up. Any London-wide policy should also be flexible enough to create town centres that are responsive to local needs. Finally, there was both enthusiasm and caution about the use of funding to kick-start developments.

Comprehensive policy document

- 3.2. Any forthcoming policy or guidance should address town centre needs both strategically and locally. Local authorities expressed a strong desire that the planning system should be comprehensive, flexible and not overly complex.
- 3.3. At a strategic level, local authorities and the Mayor can influence town centre development in a number of ways. One key lever is the creation of suitable planning policies, for example in the Local Development Framework or the London Plan. Another important aspect, which is partially addressed through planning policy, is transport provision, including facilities for all modes of transport, to make town centres more accessible for Londoners.
- 3.4. In the high density environment of London, it is particularly important for the planning system to develop the strengths of town centres. They are a key spatial priority of the London Plan, which sets out that they should provide access to a range of services and enable all parts of London to contribute more fully to London's economic success.
- 3.5. At a local level, the challenge for planning authorities lies in providing resilient and flexible policy frameworks in development plans. They must be able to respond to the function and character of potentially very different town centres. William McKee argues that: *"Town centres will need to adopt a strong pro-active approach in which investment is made to improve the all-round offer. Reliance on negative controls is unlikely to prove effective as customers and private capital (...) will gravitate to locations with the best offer"*⁴⁷.

⁴⁷ William McKee, Outer London Commission - Email to officers, November 2012

Any London-wide policy should be flexible enough to create town centres that are responsive to local needs.

Town centres will need to adopt a strong pro-active approach in which investment is made to improve the all-round offer.

- 3.6. Officers from the London Borough of Waltham Forest suggest that the role of the Mayor's Town Centres SPG should be to provide a framework for action and not simply restate local planning policies that the boroughs would normally be expected to undertake⁴⁸. Hillingdon officers are concerned that the Town Centres SPG will add a further level of complexity, where officers will be required to cross reference between an ever increasing number of Mayoral policy documents. Hillingdon would prefer to see the Mayor bring forward new research proposed as part of the evidence base for the next review of the London Plan⁴⁹.
- 3.7. David West called on the Mayor to 'enshrine' flexibility in the SPG. It should, in his view, allow each local London borough, each local centre, to create its own definition of how a town centre needs to perform, is utilising the use class system and can facilitate uses that make an area more active and vibrant⁵⁰. This could include encouraging policy makers and practitioners to avoid the ubiquitous and consider emphasising or introducing distinguishing features. The most successful town centres are often those that have a strong sense of place and are of memorable character.
- 3.8. The London Borough of Croydon requested that the emerging Town Centres SPG be as concise as possible and only provide supplementary guidance where it is clearly required in order to clarify policy, and allow Local Planning Authorities to respond flexibly to changing circumstances⁵¹. Both the London Borough of Barking and London Councils concur that the SPG should be clear, strategic and succinct, so that both the lay reader and the planning practitioner can use the document with ease and in a way that does not slow down the planning process⁵².

Recommendation 6 – Facilitate knowledge exchange

Where examples and case studies are not readily available to provide useful evidence, knowledge exchange through pan-London working groups should be encouraged and possibly initiated and facilitated by the Mayor. Learning from others would help Boroughs develop more flexible and adaptable policy solutions for London's town centres.

Also see Recommendation 7 of this report (Best practice examples).

⁴⁸ Written evidence from the London Borough of Waltham Forest

⁴⁹ Written evidence from the London Borough of Hillingdon

⁵⁰ Planning Committee meeting, January 2013

⁵¹ Written evidence from the London Borough of Croydon

⁵² Written evidence from the London Borough of Barking and London Councils

Best practice toolkit - Learning from successful examples

- 3.9. Sir Terry Farrell told the Committee that learning from elsewhere is fundamental to improving a town centre. Information and guidance should be made available in order to get the message out to those places that are failing, that it can be done and how others have succeeded, not just in London but also elsewhere in the world.⁵³
- 3.10. James Miller, lead consultant at Experian, in his written submission, argues that a successful town centre is one which is not only well run, but is economically and socially productive. Above all, it makes people proud to use it: an attractive and enlivening environment which fulfils multiple needs.⁵⁴
- 3.11. The Committee's expert panel of guests highlighted a number of good examples, both in London and elsewhere, where a town centre was improved through different approaches, where useful lessons might be drawn for the future. In London, in Angel and Kingston the setting up of a BID with a focus on safety and cleanliness is credited with creating a vibrant centre with a distinct identity. In Crouch End, the introduction of online branding and staging of events has increased the interest in local shops and services. The panel has also highlighted examples in Cambridge, Munich and Copenhagen. Further details of the above examples are at Appendix 4.
- 3.12. The London Borough of Southwark proposes, in its written contribution to the Committee, that the SPG should signpost businesses, landlords, local authorities, communities and other interested parties to useful tools on how to implement successful initiatives. Best practice examples of town centre renewal projects, such as Business Improvement Districts, are considered to be helpful⁵⁵. The London Boroughs of Waltham Forest and Richmond also believe that the Mayor's SPG should draw on experiences from successful implementation of town centre schemes and that the Mayor should consider introducing an officer group to discuss town centres in London (for example by cooperating with the Planning Officers Society in facilitating this)⁵⁶.
- 3.13. The Association of Town & City Management recently published its study 'Successful town centres - developing effective strategies. Understanding your high street'⁵⁷. The document includes a set of tools to help places of different sizes develop a locally tailor-made strategic road map towards

⁵³ Planning Committee meeting, December 2012

⁵⁴ James Miller, Experian - Email to officers, November 2012

⁵⁵ Written evidence from the London Borough of Southwark

⁵⁶ Written evidence from The London Boroughs of Waltham Forest and Richmond

⁵⁷ http://www.atcm.org/mfiles/files/1227-Main_Report.pdf

Learning from elsewhere is fundamental to improving a town centre

prosperity. It also provides a performance framework for town centres to evaluate their current situation and to monitor progress towards their strategic vision or objectives. Similarly, the Government's 2012 report 'Re-imagining urban spaces to help revitalise our high streets'⁵⁸ contains a section signposting key documents, guidance, tools and sources of support on how best to design or use urban spaces.

- 3.14. The Royal Borough of Kingston calls on the Mayor to encourage councils to assemble sites for retail development in town centres by providing specialist advice, particularly on the process of securing and implementing a compulsory purchase order (CPO)⁵⁹. Dr Steve Norris considers this important as *"local authorities ... do not have the people with the knowledge on CPO who can actually implement it and work with the private sector and understand what viability means for the private sector"*⁶⁰.
- 3.15. Mike Kiely agreed that CPO is an important tool that can be complicated and difficult but noted that *"you have still got to have the right scheme"*⁶¹. The Boroughs of Kingston and Richmond suggest that CPO could be streamlined or simplified. Similarly, London Councils would like to see the CPO mechanisms assessed to ensure that the process is as rapid and straightforward as possible for boroughs⁶².

Recommendation 7 – Include a best practice toolkit, best practice examples and case studies

The final SPG should contain a dedicated section providing a best practice toolkit for boroughs. While these toolkits can provide strong universal principles and even a menu of options, it should be emphasised that they are not constrictive. Town centres should only adopt those ideas which fit with their local character and circumstances.

The SPG should also integrate a greater range of best practice examples, both from the UK and abroad, that London boroughs and other stakeholders clearly wish to see in the SPG. Including such examples would help showcase to those involved in town centre planning and management that positive changes can be delivered and would help

⁵⁸

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/5987/2185491.pdf

⁵⁹ Written evidence from the Royal Borough of Kingston

⁶⁰ Planning Committee meeting, January 2013

⁶¹ Ibid

⁶² Written evidence from the Royal Borough of Kingston, the London Borough of Richmond and London Councils

motivate stakeholders by illustrating how others have succeeded.

The Draft SPG currently includes only three case study areas: pop-up shops with three examples; street markets; and libraries with one example used for each. This is a lost opportunity. In addition to providing the best practice toolkit and best practice examples, the SPG should make greater use of case studies. It could also provide more signposting to case studies provided by other sources, as it already does at 2.2.19 (Leisure and Culture uses).

More innovative and joined-up approach

- 3.16. Regenerating town centres is not just a matter of planning policy. London Borough of Brent officers, for example, suggest that planning policy on its own can only affect significant change where there is a properly functioning retail and commercial property market. Officers urge that strategic policy fully explores and addresses the issues and arguments around supply and demand, but also considers in depth factors outside of the realm of the planning policy framework⁶³. London Councils agrees that planning policies are only one of the tools available to counter the challenging trends town centres are experiencing, and cannot reverse these on their own. Their effectiveness will rely on a range of other factors: accessibility, borough commitment, and the willingness of the private sector to invest⁶⁴.
- 3.17. According to the London Borough of Southwark, successful town centres depend on a huge range of components. The council and its partners can do much to help, from markets and street scene management, parking, lettings policies, community safety measures to reduce blight caused by closed shops, all the way through to its own regeneration schemes, which can promote a mix of activities and encourage particular types of town centre uses. There is scope for a greater degree of flexibility and entrepreneurship when considering how to best encourage growth.
- 3.18. The London Borough of Waltham Forest wants to see the SPG provide innovative approaches to town centre revitalisation that can be delivered in a more joined-up way throughout London⁶⁵. According to London Councils, the most effective way to help town centres is to ensure that forthcoming and future Mayoral policy works with boroughs, incorporating local priorities as much as possible given the Mayor's pan-London responsibilities⁶⁶.

⁶³ Written evidence from the London Borough of Brent

⁶⁴ Written evidence from London Councils

⁶⁵ Written evidence from the London Borough of Waltham Forest

⁶⁶ Written evidence from London Councils

Planning policies are only one of the tools available to counter the challenging trends town centres are experiencing, and cannot reverse these on their own

Kingston Council recognises that it does not have powers to effect change on its own and that positive planned change to address the needs of residents, businesses and visitors is best delivered through partnership with the key agents of delivery⁶⁷.

Recommendation 8 – Actively consider new approaches to the future of London’s town centres

The SPG would benefit from a more visionary encouragement for innovative, interdisciplinary approaches, together with suitable tools for implementation. It would also benefit from establishing stronger links to other Mayoral strategies and disciplines outside the planning system, to help boroughs and other stakeholders form partnerships and use synergies to deliver planning policies and objectives for their town centres.

While Section 7.5 (Other resources and initiatives) touches on some of the issues and suggestions raised by stakeholders, this section should focus much more strongly on innovative, interdisciplinary approaches to development, in order to explore the wider potential of these ideas to respond to current trends and future demands more effectively.

(Also see Section 4 of this report, Beyond the planning system, and Recommendation 10)

Unique town centre experience

- 3.19. David West recommended placing the emphasis on the enjoyment of the town centre experience: *“it has got to be about enjoyment, it has got to be about lifestyle, it has got to be about choice (...) and it is about personal service and services”*⁶⁸. Stephen Kelly, Divisional Director of Planning at the London Borough of Harrow, pointed out the need to enable technology and infrastructure which could support Broadband and 4G to support that town centre experience⁶⁹.
- 3.20. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills found that many town centres are at a relative competitive disadvantage against tightly controlled shopping centres and out-of-town retail parks. Promotion, marketing and branding are ways of distinguishing a particular centre or high street from the ‘shopping centre experience’.⁷⁰ James Miller, in his written submission

⁶⁷ Written evidence from the Royal Borough of Kingston

⁶⁸ Planning Committee meeting, January 2013

⁶⁹ Ibid

⁷⁰ Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2011): *Understanding High Street Performance*

Town centre funding should be part of an on-going strategic approach to regeneration.

to the Committee, highlights the emergence of digital technology as a compelling opportunity for town centres to redefine their role as a bridge between the online and offline economies⁷¹. Crouch End has benefited from a web offer (see Appendix 4) to encourage people to use the high street. Large shopping centres often offer free Wi-Fi and online information linking customers to in-store offers.

Continued use of funding

- 3.21. Many London boroughs have benefited from either national or mayoral funding to improve their town centres and would like these schemes continued or new programmes offered⁷². These funds are currently used by the boroughs, primarily for local physical improvement such as street furniture, signage, paving, lighting and shop fronts (for example in Bexley). Many boroughs are also investing in hosting cultural events (for example Haringey), or providing business support and training (for example Lambeth).
- 3.22. David Harley, Group Manager Economic Development and Regeneration at the London Borough of Barking & Dagenham, notes that the prospect of a potential funding source alone can bring stakeholders together. The short term boost created by Barking's successful bid for Outer London Fund money was considered helpful *"when everybody was feeling down after the recession"*⁷³. According to Mike Kiely, there is a danger that the impact of these funding allocations could be *"fizzling out"* unless they are part of an on-going strategic approach to regeneration⁷⁴.
- 3.23. Regular town centre health checks are one way of identifying areas in need for improvement and financial investment and to inform important policy decisions. Such coordinated data collection comprising a large variety of town centres provides the foundation for a framework for strategic evaluation of the health of London's town centres. Initial methodologies for London-wide health checks were developed in the 1990s by London Planning Advisory Committee (LPAC) and have since been incorporated at various stages into supporting London Plan documents.
- 3.24. While these traditional measures are certainly contributing to creating footfall and a better image, boroughs should also consider more innovative

⁷¹ James Miller, Experian - Email to officers, November 2012

⁷² Written evidence from the London Boroughs of Southwark, Waltham Forest, Hillingdon, Croydon, Barking & Dagenham, and the City of London

⁷³ Planning Committee meeting, January 2013

⁷⁴ Ibid

approaches and examine the links with the more strategic objectives at a local and London-wide level.

Recommendation 9 – Perform regular town centre health checks

The Committee calls on the Mayor to carry out annual health checks of selected London's town centres. More regular monitoring of town centre performance, changes in occupation and other key data will help boroughs and other authorities to recognise positive or negative trends, and to change relevant policies, programmes and management approaches in a more timely way.

4. Beyond the planning system – how other areas of expertise can support town centres

London Assembly Committees have produced an extensive body of work that the Town Centres SPG could benefit from.

- 4.1. Many areas of expertise outside the realm of planning are of great importance to town centres. They need to be included in any thinking on supporting and enhancing town centres through the planning system. London Assembly Committees have produced an extensive body of work that the Town Centres SPG could benefit from.

Environment - Climate change

- 4.2. The extensive work of the London Assembly's Environment Committee should be considered in the SPG. For example, 'Plugging the Energy Gap' (2011)⁷⁵ and the former Health and Public Services Committee's 'Fuel Poverty' (2012)⁷⁶ have a bearing on air quality and energy efficiency issues. The Environment Committee has also produced a number of relevant air quality position papers and responses. 'For a Rainy Day' (2011)⁷⁷ – together with previous work on flooding – is relevant to the issue of climate change adaptation with regards to flooding. The Committees has also produced several reports on waste management and recycling rates.
- 4.3. Overall, the Draft Town Centres SPG offers few direct links to other Mayoral Strategies and while references to London Plan policies are included (which in turn would point to other strategies), direct references and a recognition of important objectives would put greater emphasis on the importance for town centres.

Housing – Accessibility and 'Lifetime Neighbourhoods'

- 4.4. The former Planning and Housing Committee's suburbs report (2007)⁷⁸ provides advice on intensification of centres and increasing housing density. The report highlights the importance of linking new housing and employment developments to sites of good public transport access. It also considers innovative ways of working by exploiting new technologies and flexible works spaces.

⁷⁵ <http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor-assembly/london-assembly/publications/plugging-the-energy-gap>

⁷⁶ <http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor-assembly/london-assembly/publications/fuel-poverty-london>

⁷⁷ <http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor-assembly/london-assembly/publications/for-a-rainy-day>

⁷⁸ http://legacy.london.gov.uk/assembly/scrutiny/planning_suburbs.jsp

Transport - Walking, cycling and public transport

- 4.5. A number of transport matters of relevance to town centres have been addressed by the Assembly's Transport Committee. Its findings and recommendations should be recognised by the Town Centres SPG.
- 4.6. The Transport Committee report 'Walk This Way' (October 2010)⁷⁹ focuses on measures to increase walking, including in outer London boroughs, which are particularly relevant to town centres and lifetime neighbourhoods as defined in the London Plan. The investigation found that 60 per cent of Londoners rate the quality of the street environment as the main reason for not walking more⁸⁰. The Mayor's 2009 'Better Streets strategy'⁸¹ sought to make London's streets more attractive to pedestrians and cyclists while also boosting local economies by encouraging more visitors. This is particularly relevant to high streets and town centres.
- 4.7. 'Walk This Way' found that infrastructure improvements need to be made with a strategic vision for how towns and neighbourhoods should be developed to ensure that any investment attains the maximum economic and social benefit. The Assembly's Planning Committee believes that the Town Centres SPG could do more to emphasise this approach.
- 4.8. The Transport Committee's recent report 'Gearing up' (2012)⁸² focuses on increasing cycling, including in outer London boroughs, and also recommends that cycling should be taken into account in development opportunities. Cycling, cycle parking and cycling schemes are important to provide access to town centres and to encourage more sustainable lifestyles within and near centres. TfL has confirmed that it will be developing its traffic modelling to better understand cyclists' behaviour and "likely vehicle re-assignment". Such models could be of importance in determining patterns of activity in town centres; the SPG should mention TfL's work (and its results where available) in this area.
- 4.9. There is also potential for the Town Centres SPG to include greater links with the Mayor's 'Vision for Cycling'⁸³ in this regard. For example, reference could be made to his vision to create "better places for everyone" and also his proposals for 'Mini-Hollands' in outer London, which are directly relevant to town centre locations.

⁷⁹ <http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor-assembly/london-assembly/publications/walk-this-way>

⁸⁰ Walk this way (2010), page 5: Written submission from Transport for London

⁸¹ <http://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Better%20Streets.pdf>

⁸² <http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor-assembly/london-assembly/publications/gearing-up>

⁸³ <http://www.london.gov.uk/priorities/transport/publications/mayor-s-vision-for-cycling>

Cycling and cycle parking are important to provide access to town centres and to encourage more sustainable lifestyles.

- 4.10. Further reports by the Transport Committee address the accessibility of the transport network. Its report of November 2010 looked at accessibility of London's transport network⁸⁴ while a report published in June 2011 looked at the future of road congestion⁸⁵. The accessibility report recommends that TfL should enhance the accessibility of Tube and Overground rail and also buses for people with reduced mobility – an important issue for lifetime neighbourhoods served by town centres. The SPG could emphasise more strongly the importance of increased transport accessibility for the function and performance of town centres, and provide links to relevant policies and strategies.
- 4.11. Recommendation 6 in the road congestion report⁸⁶ points to the need for reduced road congestion, through promoting more innovative ways of reducing vehicle ownership (for example through car clubs) and through managing freight delivery practices. The SPG could cross reference any relevant planning and transport policies of relevance.

Economy – town centre management and interim uses

- 4.12. The Economy Committee's latest report on empty shops in London⁸⁷, besides suggesting a number of emergency actions, calls for a change to the planning rules so that boroughs can address the rise in the number of pawnbrokers, betting shops and payday loan shops. This has also been raised by stakeholders who responded to the Planning Committee. The report also promotes pop-up and interim uses for empty shops in high streets and town centres. Both measures will contribute to making high streets and centres more diverse.
- 4.13. Furthermore, the report promotes implementing better management structures, for example through BIDs, introducing new forms of CPO and increasing accessibility – these are all issues that the Mayor could further explore in relation to town centres through his SPG.

⁸⁴ <http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor-assembly/london-assembly/publications/accessibility-of-the-transport-network-in-london>

⁸⁵ <http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor-assembly/london-assembly/publications/the-future-of-road-congestion-in-london>

⁸⁶ Ibid

⁸⁷ <http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor-assembly/london-assembly/publications/open-business-empty-shops-londons-high-streets>

Recommendation 10 – Build on Assembly reports and incorporate other Mayoral policies

The findings and recommendations from a number of Assembly reports, in particular by the Environment, Transport, Housing, Planning and Economy Committees, should be acknowledged and taken into account by the Town Centres SPG. Equally, the SPG should establish greater links to Mayoral policies and strategies in other areas to highlight cross-sectional issues and alternative solutions.

More specifically:

- Overall, the SPG contains few direct links to other Mayoral Strategies. While London Plan policies are referred to (which in turn would point to other strategies), direct references to relevant objectives would put greater emphasis on the importance of links.
- Such references could include mention of the Climate Change Mitigation and Energy Strategy, the Climate Change Adaptation Strategy, the Water Strategy and further references to the Air Quality Strategy.
- The SPG could put greater emphasis on the importance of increased transport accessibility for town centres, and provide links to relevant policies and strategies. It could also include a links to the Mayor's Vision for Cycling.
- The SPG should recognise both the work of the Assembly's Transport Committee and its findings and recommendations - including 'Gearing up' (2012), 'The future of road congestion' (2011), 'Accessibility of the transport network' (2010) and 'Walk this way' (2010) - and also TfL's work (and its results where available) in this area.
- The Mayor's SPG should consider an in-depth appraisal of housing options in accessible town centre locations, particularly in relation to the principles of lifetime neighbourhoods and mixed and balanced communities, as suggested by the Assembly's former Planning and Housing Committee.
- The Mayor could further explore through the SPG the potential to improve management structures for town centre developments: for example, through BIDs, introducing new forms of CPO and increasing accessibility.

Summary of issues

Reconfiguration of town centres

The Town Centres SPG should encourage the reconfiguration of town centres, particularly in secondary retail areas, where appropriate.

Diversification

Town centres must serve new functions if they are to continue to be successful and relevant. Different functions provided by town centres should include: public and community services; third-place working; leisure and entertainment; and housing. The Town Centres SPG should highlight in greater detail the need to improve and diversify land uses in town centres.

Detailed advice needed

The Town Centres SPG would be of greater practical use to local boroughs if it included good examples to follow and a greater level of detail on how to better engage stakeholders. The SPG should also set out ways to enable collaborative processes for involving those who use town centres.

Permitted development rights

In light of government proposals on permitted development rights to allow change of use from office to residential that recently came into force, the Mayor should monitor their impact and consider revising the Town Centres SPG in the future to take account of any such impacts if necessary.

Land-use and transport planning

Planners must recognise the opportunities for higher-density mixed-use development around stations in the mid and long term. The Town Centres SPG should emphasise the links between transport planning, land-use planning, and regeneration opportunities for town centre transport interchanges.

Best practice toolkit and case studies

Best practice toolkits can provide policy makers with universal principles and a choice of options to consider so that they can implement those that are most suitable for the character and circumstances of their local town centres. The Town Centres SPG should contain a dedicated section providing such a toolkit. The SPG should also integrate a greater range of best practice examples and case studies to help showcase that positive changes can be delivered.

New approaches

The SPG would benefit from a more visionary encouragement for innovative, interdisciplinary approaches, together with suitable tools for implementation. It should explore the wider potential of these ideas to respond to current trends and future demands more effectively.

Assembly reports and Mayoral policies

The findings and recommendations from a number of London Assembly reports, in particular by the Environment, Transport, Housing, Planning and Economy Committees, should be acknowledged and taken into account as part of the Town Centres SPG. Equally, greater links to Mayoral policies and strategies in other areas should be established within the SPG to highlight cross-sectional issues and alternative solutions.

Knowledge exchange

Knowledge exchange through pan-London working groups should be encouraged and, where possible, initiated and facilitated by the Mayor to help Boroughs develop more flexible and adaptable policy solutions for London's town centres.

Town centre health checks

The Committee calls on the Mayor to carry out annual health checks of selected London's town centres to help boroughs and other authorities to develop and adapt town centre, programmes and management approaches in a more timely way.

Appendix 1 Recommendations

Recommendation 1 – Encourage reconfiguration of town centres

The SPG should encourage local authorities to consider concentrating on essential town centre functions in a smaller but more vibrant core, where appropriate. Secondary parts of town centres might more usefully take on other functions such as housing or other non-retail uses.

Recommendation 2 – Improve and diversify land uses in town centres

Town centres must serve new functions if they are to continue to be successful and relevant. Different functions provided by town centres should include public and community services (see below), third-place working, leisure and entertainment and housing

Section 2.5 (Social Infrastructure) of the Draft SPG should particularly highlight the benefits of locating public services within town centres and encourage local authorities to support this approach – starting within their own remit, for example by creating one stop shops or by relocating public facilities to the high streets when the opportunity arises. Such facilities include council offices, health services like GPs, education institutions (particularly colleges), post offices or police stations.

Section 2.5 of the Draft SPG should also expand on the importance and potential of multifunctional community facilities in town centres and provide guidance on opportunities in locating or extending such uses in town centres. Additional references should therefore also be made in Section 3.2 (Subsection: Flexibility for new permanent uses including change of use).

The Draft SPG does not yet recognise the potential contribution that productive uses such as food production, craftsmanship or arts can make towards creating lively town centres and high streets. This aspect should be added to Section 2.1 (Subsection: Retail and change of use), Section 3.2 (Subsection: Flexibility for new permanent uses including change of use) and Section 4.6 (Street markets).

It is important to recognise that housing can play an important role in

revitalising town centres by providing a potential new use for empty buildings and increasing footfall from local residents.

Recommendation 3 – Provide examples and details

Subsection 7.1.4 (A collaborative approach) of the Draft SPG provides a useful introduction to the importance of stakeholder engagement for delivering successful town centres. Boroughs would welcome the inclusion of good examples to follow and a greater level of detail on how they can engage stakeholders more easily. Such advice would help them create flexible local solutions within the framework of high level strategic policies.

Greater exchange between councils and developers could also help create sustainable schemes offering flexible premises that can respond to changing market demands.

The SPG should encourage more and better collaborative processes involving those who use town centres, particularly local residents. Every opportunity should be taken to enable local people to actively shape their town centres, as this will help town centres to provide the offer that local people want and need.

Recommendation 4 – Monitor impact of permitted development rights

The Mayor must monitor the impact of the new permitted development rights to allow change of use from office to residential, and should revisit his Town Centres SPG in one year's time and change it to take account of any such impacts if necessary.

Recommendation 5 – Emphasise relationship between land-use and transport planning

Town Centres SPG should emphasise the links between transport planning and land-use planning, and regeneration opportunities for town centre transport interchanges. It should point to other sources and research on how to make the most beneficial use of transport nodes or individual stations to enhance town centres. Planners must recognise the

opportunities for higher-density mixed-use development around stations in the mid and long term.

The Mayor should direct Transport for London to consider how its land holdings at and around stations can best contribute to London's development and regeneration needs.

Recommendation 6 – Facilitate knowledge exchange

Where examples and case studies are not readily available to provide useful evidence, knowledge exchange through pan-London working groups should be encouraged and possibly initiated and facilitated by the Mayor. Learning from others would help Boroughs develop more flexible and adaptable policy solutions for London's town centres.

Also see Recommendation 7 of this report (Best practice examples).

Recommendation 7 – Include a best practice toolkit, best practice examples and case studies

The final SPG should contain a dedicated section providing a best practice toolkit for boroughs. While these toolkits can provide strong universal principles and even a menu of options, it should be emphasised that they are not constrictive. Town centres should only adopt those ideas which fit with their local character and circumstances.

The SPG should also integrate a greater range of best practice examples, both from the UK and abroad, that London boroughs and other stakeholders clearly wish to see in the SPG. Including such examples would help showcase to those involved in town centre planning and management that positive changes can be delivered and would help motivate stakeholders by illustrating how others have succeeded.

The Draft SPG currently includes only three case study areas: pop-up shops with three examples; street markets; and libraries with one example used for each. This is a lost opportunity. In addition to providing the best practice toolkit and best practice examples, the SPG should make greater use of case studies. It could also provide more signposting to case studies provided by other sources, as it already does at 2.2.19 (Leisure and Culture uses).

Recommendation 8 – Actively consider new approaches to the future of London’s town centres

The SPG would benefit from a more visionary encouragement for innovative, interdisciplinary approaches, together with suitable tools for implementation. It would also benefit from establishing stronger links to other Mayoral strategies and disciplines outside the planning system, to help boroughs and other stakeholders form partnerships and use synergies to deliver planning policies and objectives for their town centres.

While Section 7.5 (Other resources and initiatives) touches on some of the issues and suggestions raised by stakeholders, this section should focus much more strongly on innovative, interdisciplinary approaches to development, in order to explore the wider potential of these ideas to respond to current trends and future demands more effectively.

(Also see Section 4 of this report, Beyond the planning system, and Recommendation 10)

Recommendation 9 – Perform regular town centre health checks

The Committee calls on the Mayor to carry out annual health checks of selected London's town centres. More regular monitoring of town centre performance, changes in occupation and other key data will help boroughs and other authorities to recognise positive or negative trends, and to change relevant policies, programmes and management approaches in a more timely way.

Recommendation 10 – Build on Assembly reports and incorporate other Mayoral policies

The findings and recommendations from a number of Assembly reports, in particular by the Environment, Transport, Housing, Planning and Economy Committees, should be acknowledged and taken into account by the Town Centres SPG. Equally, the SPG should establish greater links to Mayoral policies and strategies in other areas to highlight cross-sectional issues and alternative solutions.

More specifically:

- Overall, the SPG contains few direct links to other Mayoral Strategies. While London Plan policies are referred to (which in turn would point to other strategies), direct references to relevant objectives would put greater emphasis on the importance of links.
- Such references could include mention of the Climate Change Mitigation and Energy Strategy, the Climate Change Adaptation Strategy, the Water Strategy and further references to the Air Quality Strategy.
- The SPG could put greater emphasis on the importance of increased transport accessibility for town centres, and provide links to relevant policies and strategies. It could also include a links to the Mayor's Vision for Cycling.
- The SPG should recognise both the work of the Assembly's Transport Committee and its findings and recommendations - including 'Gearing up' (2012), 'The future of road congestion' (2011), 'Accessibility of the transport network' (2010) and 'Walk this way' (2010) - and also TfL's work (and its results where available) in this area.
- The Mayor's SPG should consider an in-depth appraisal of housing options in accessible town centre locations, particularly in relation to the principles of lifetime neighbourhoods and mixed and balanced communities, as suggested by the Assembly's former Planning and Housing Committee.
- The Mayor could further explore through the SPG the potential to improve management structures for town centre developments: for example, through BIDs, introducing new forms of CPO and increasing accessibility.

Appendix 2 Views and information

Written submissions

Responses to the call for evidence

- TC001 - London Borough of Richmond
- TC002 - Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI)
- TC003 - Planning Aid for London (PAL)
- TC004 - Renaisi, Social Enterprise
- TC005 - Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea
- TC006 - Peter Brett Associates
- TC007 - London Borough of Hillingdon
- TC008 - London Borough of Waltham Forest
- TC009 - London Borough of Croydon
- TC010 - London Borough of Barking & Dagenham
- TC011 - Living Streets
- TC012 - British BIDs
- TC013 - London Borough of Wandsworth
- TC014 - London Borough of Enfield
- TC015 - Royal Borough of Kingston
- TC016 - LSE Cities
- TC017 - ATCM
- TC018 - London Borough of Brent
- TC019 - City of London
- TC020 - London Councils
- TC021 - Ben Kochan, researcher and writer
- TC022 - London Borough of Southwark
- TC023 - Peter Wood, Open University

Submissions from guests ahead of the first Committee meeting:

- TCG01 - Ziona Strelitz, ZZA Responsive User Environments
- TCG02 - Julian Dobson, Urban Pollinators
- TCG03 - William McKee, Outer London Commission
- TCG04 - James Miller, Experian
- TCG05 - Sir Terry Farrell, Terry Farrell and Partners

Committee meetings

11 December 2012, with the following guests:

- Sir Terry Farrell, founder, Terry Farrell and Partners
- William McKee, Chair, Outer London Commission
- Julian Dobson, Director, Urban Pollinators
- John Burton, Development Director, Westfield
- James Miller, lead consultant, Experian
- Henrietta Green, food writer and consultant
- Ziona Strelitz, founding Director, ZZA Responsive User Environments

15 January 2013, with the following guests:

- Helle Sørholt, founding partner, Gehl Architects, Copenhagen;
- David West, founding partner, Studio Egret West;
- Dr Steve Norris, planning expert at Strategic Perspectives;
- Mike Kiely, Director of Planning & Building Control, London Borough of Croydon;
- Stephen Kelly, Divisional Director of Planning, London Borough of Harrow;
- Nick Lynch, Planning Policy (LDF) Manager, Planning, Environment and Regeneration, London Borough of Barnet;
- David Harley, Group Manager Economic Development and Regeneration, London Borough of Barking & Dagenham; and
- Elizabeth Cox, Head of Connected Economies, New Economics Foundation

Appendix 3 Orders and translations

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Appendix 4 Examples of good town centres

Angel, Islington:

The Angel has made great strides in attracting locals through initiatives which have focused on: making the streets safer, empowering businesses, a cleaner environment, and improved community spirit. Angel AIM (Action Improve Maintain), formerly Angel BID, was established in 2007 after local businesses voted to set up a business improvement district (BID) to make their trading environment at the Angel 'safer, cleaner and brighter'.

Crouch End:

An increasing number of high streets are creating their own online brands and programme of marketing events, for example, the Crouch End Project. A small local group organised a range of evening events, drawing customers back into the community, supported by popular merchandise, a loyalty scheme and website. Now customers can both browse their local high street online and enjoy the important personal service in stores. Critical to the success of the project were great design and production.

Kingston:

Kingston town centre has grown rapidly into a busy daytime shopping area with a lively nightlife of bars, nightclubs and fast food shops. Many residents felt the town centre was threatening and unsafe at night and also that streets were not kept clean. The Council, the Police, businesses, voluntary groups and other agencies developed a coordinated response to change the town centre for the better. A combination of physical improvements and projects has changed people's views and experience - as well as retaining its reputation as a popular shopping destination, Kingston is now seen as a much more vibrant, clean and safe town centre. Kingston's BID has been key to this turnaround.

Cambridge:

The wide range of uses Cambridge's city centre provides include shopping, leisure, entertainment, museums, University faculty buildings and Colleges, offices, housing and the main transport hub. 'Love Cambridge' was established in 2009 as the trading name for the Cambridge City Centre Partnership working with a diverse range of stakeholders to ensure the city's ongoing accessibility, vitality, vibrancy, safety and sustainability.

Munich:

Outside of the UK there are good examples in Europe, where many centres have retained their traditional form and role. For example, the city of Munich has frequently been rated as one of the world's most liveable cities. It's attractive, clean, and safe centre is key to this. It is well served by public transport, accessible, easy to walk and cycle in, has lively streets, and people still live in the centre - unlike many UK contemporaries.ⁱ

Copenhagen:

As more streets and squares in Copenhagen's city centre have been pedestrianised and improved since the 1960s, the area has become more attractive yet also less accessible for the motorist. The key to the success of these inner city transformations was the incremental approach which has given residents time to adapt, to change from driving and parking their cars to walking, using bicycles and public transport. Now, many of the pedestrian streets are busy with people enjoying the many outdoor social and cultural activities.ⁱⁱ

ⁱ James Miller, Experian - Email to officers, November 2012

ⁱⁱ European Commission Directorate-General for the Environment (2004): *Reclaiming city streets for people. Chaos or quality of life?*

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