

Talk on High Streets Future project at Forum AGM 9 March 2021

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We thought it would be a good idea to set up a small group to consider the future of our village centres - by which I mean Hampstead village and South End Green – because of the rapid changes that are going on around us. These changes raised the question of what kind of high streets we want to have, and whether we as residents should or can influence the process at all.

Changes are on several levels. First of all, there's faster turnover. Over the past year some 15-20 shops and restaurants have gone. It's not one way traffic, because a good number of new businesses have arrived. There's no crisis. But the pandemic has accelerated the process. It's possible that the makeup of our centres could change quite a lot, and quite quickly.

Secondly, the pandemic has altered shopping habits. All of a sudden we are buying a lot more online. It's a national shift, and not a new one. Big chains and department stores have been disappearing, and in some towns it's a crisis. The government set up a task force, and weighty expert reports have been written. Hampstead is not as affected as other places, but we are subject to the same trends. This again raises the question of what we want from our high streets.

And then thirdly there is the shift to working at home. None of us knows what will happen after the pandemic, but it does seem plausible that many people will spend more time working at home than they did before the pandemic. That could affect what we want from our high streets.

What do we think about the changes that we see? Do we want to try to influence them? If so, how might we do this?

The negative answer is that we can't do much. There's an argument that the market deals with the whole issue. Businesses that are not needed will not succeed, and will be replaced by other businesses. And we've already heard from Janine another reason why we might not be able to do much – the fact that the government plans to remove and relax large parts of planning controls.

However, a strong positive theme of the expert reports that I mentioned is that this is an opportunity. Communities can and should play a greater role in shaping their high streets. As we move away from high streets being clones of each other, communities can influence them to become more local and individual. High streets are not just about buying things. They are a hub for all sorts of activities – for meeting people, for cultural activities, and so on.

So can the Hampstead community seek to affect the future shape of our retail centres? We know from our first consultations about the Hampstead Neighbourhood Plan that residents do feel strongly about the makeup of our high streets. So our plan is to canvass people's views in a consultation in the next few months.

Once we have a better sense of these views, our aim would be to craft them into a strategy for the future, much as we did with the Neighbourhood Plan. But we are not talking about a legally enforceable document, or about imposing anything on anybody. What we are talking about is building a shared vision. This means the broadest possible engagement, with residents, with the business community, with Camden, even with the landlords who actually own our high streets. But this will depend on whether we feel that there is a will to create such a vision. Our hope would be that a strategy would have some effect on decisions that are made, so that our community would be helping to shape the future.

Finally I would just stress that we as the Forum have no view or agenda of our own. We simply think it would be useful to gather views on the changes that are happening around us. All of our group, which consists of Linda Chung, Carissa Bub, Janine Griffis, Stephen Taylor and me, would be very happy to hear any questions and thoughts, and we'd certainly appreciate help in carrying out the project.