

**Acton Business Forum
16–18 Crown Street
Acton
London W3 8SB**

Note of a meeting of Acton High Street businesses held at the George & Dragon on 23 July 2008

Present: Nilam Popat, Ealing Council
Andrea Laffey, Ealing Council
Mike Morris, Secretary, Acton Business Forum
Representatives of 20 businesses in Acton High Street

Nilam Popat said that Ealing Council had allocated nearly £2m for improvements to Acton town centre. Although this was not a huge amount of money, the theory was that small but highly visible changes would stimulate others to invest and a virtuous circle of change could be begun with some careful 'pump priming'. The kinds of changes which could be considered were:

- improvements to the paving
- removing clutter
- installing hanging flower baskets improvements to signage, especially relating to car parks and stations.

In particular, the council was considering making grants to businesses to improve their shop fronts. These would be on an 80%/20% basis (council/business). There would be a design philosophy underpinning the changes. The council had already begun a public realm improvement programme in Greenford which was proving successful. The hope would be that bigger retailers would move back into Acton once they see the improvements.

Ms Popat asked: 'Where should the most improvement be? How can we quickly change the look of Acton High Street?' She warned, however, that the High Street was a major traffic artery and there was no immediate prospect of that changing, whatever improvements were made. It was pointed out that the King's Road in Chelsea was also a very busy street but still managed to be a classy shopping venue.

The businesses generally welcomed the council's initiative and, in particular, the proposed shop-front scheme.

Points made by businesses:

- The council must also look at its own planning regulations. One business had recently tried to improve its frontage on the High Street, only to be told that they had to install traditional wooden-framed windows, which were outside its budget.

- It was unrealistic to expect conventional chain stores to come to Acton, especially with the opening of the Westfield development. Acton needed to be different and attract niche businesses.
- It would be good to encourage cafés to have tables on the pavements.
- Can the council use its powers to force development (e.g. Jeffries House)?
- Any improvements should embrace the High Street along its entire length, not just at the top end.
- The appearance of vacant shops should be considered. Some are fly-posted and look derelict.
- Parking is a huge priority. There is nowhere to 'stop and shop'.
- Large 'Welcome to Acton' signs needed. The current black metal 'Acton Town Centre' signs are not visible enough.
- Shops should be encouraged not to fit solid shutters which give the town a 'dead' feel in the evening.
- Much of the street and its paving are dirty. The area around McDonald's and the adjacent bus stop is particularly bad. The pavement there is also narrow and always crowded.
- Signage should make clear that the street west of the Gunnersbury Lane junction was still part of the High Street.

Ms Popat asked if there would be support for a 'loyalty' parking scheme, with the council bearing a part of the cost and businesses redeeming the parking ticket when shoppers made purchases. The businesses felt that this would not work in Acton because so few businesses had 'big ticket' sales and the parking refund would take too much of the profit from small transactions.

Other ideas from the businesses included:

- Christmas lights
- a 'best-dressed festive window' competition
- a revival of the 'Ealing in Bloom' competition in Acton.

Ms Popat said she would take all these points away to consider with colleagues. The council was also talking to developers and landowners. Any changes would involve many council agencies and she would offer a 'joined up' approach. This was working well in Greenford. However, to some extent, it was up to the businesses themselves to work together to bring about change.

A further meeting will be held in October, which should also include businesses from other parts of the town, including Churchfield Road.

Mike Morris
 Secretary, Acton Business Forum