

NORTHCOTE ROAD ACTION GROUP

Evidence to Wandsworth Borough Council as part of the public consultation on the Local Development Framework

Introduction

1. In October 2006, 6682 people signed the petition organised by our group, asking the Council to take what action it could to preserve the unique character of Northcote Road. The petition clearly formed part of the Local Development Framework (LDF) consultation process, so we are confident of the overwhelming support of local residents for the aims we are pursuing here.
2. Councillor James Cousins, Executive Member for Regeneration and Community Safety, is reported as saying:
“Having played a key part in the success of Northcote Road over the years, the council has no intention of standing back and allowing the big boys to come in without a fight” (Wandsworth Borough News, 1 November 2006)
We hope that the Council will be able to deliver on this promise. We argue that this is possible if the council undertakes to be aspirational in both formulating and implementing its planning responsibilities.

Northcote Road Overview

3. There are five factors that make Northcote Road a vital and vibrant street:
 - Its variety, with a mix of retail (class 1), bars/restaurants (class A3/4) and services (class 2).
 - The excellence of the small food shops, most specialising in British food, thus reducing food miles as well as miles driven by consumers.
 - The range of shop size, from the reasonably large to the very small and the market stall.
 - Interesting shops which are individually-run, often by local people.
 - The fact that a car is not necessary to shop there - healthier for both the shopper and the environment.

For us, the local residents, Northcote Road is still the street where we can buy almost everything and have an evening out as well. Its attractions also draw people from elsewhere in London; and the estate agents use it as a particular feature when selling local houses.

4. It is the individually-run shops and market stalls which give the street its diversity and its charm. They are more interesting than chain stores, provide unusual goods, are responsive to local needs, and the staff are often there for the long term. Shopkeepers get to know their customers and contribute strongly to community cohesion, as shown each year by their contributions towards the Christmas street lights. Without them, the road would be like any other shopping mall or clone town.
5. The specialist food shops and stalls in particular are appreciated both by local residents and those from further afield. They are featured in several London guidebooks.

The Problems

6. We and the people who signed our petition have serious concerns about changes afoot which threaten the character of the area.
7. Leaseholders are facing substantial rent rises; freeholders are facing offers for their property that they may not want to refuse; and some owners are refusing to renew leases on the grounds of redevelopment. In each case an individually-run shop is replaced by a chain operator. Food shops are particularly vulnerable.
8. We also have concerns over the ever-increasing number of estate agents in parts of the road. Their demands for double frontages are substantially eating into the number of shops available in the area.

Webbs Road

9. For the purposes of this paper, we wish to include Webbs Road, which has developed in some ways as an adjunct to Northcote Road. Webbs Road provides a range of specialist shops and services (most individually-owned), less dependent on passing pedestrians than Northcote Road. To some extent these businesses face similar threats to those in Northcote Road but also the pressure to turn commercial premises into residences.

LDF The Planning Process

10. How can the planning process help? The LDF enables councils, as planning authorities, to become more aspirational about their areas than did the UDP and lays greater stress on community participation. With a strong petition behind us, we believe our voice cannot be ignored.

Our proposals

11. We have eight specific proposals, set out below:

Proposal 1. Retail Protection

We recommend that the whole of Northcote Road, the three shops in Broomwood Road at the T-Junction with Northcote Road, and Webbs Road be classified as protected secondary shop frontages.

12. We applaud the success of the UDP in protecting the retail function in Northcote Road, from nos. 1-53, 4-26 and 28-46, by their classification as protected shopping frontages. In order to maintain the diversity of retail function in the street, we recommend extending this zone to all commercial premises down the whole road, including the three shops at the T-junction with Broomwood Road, and Webbs Road. This protection would particularly halt the spread of estate agents, which many of our signatories saw as the biggest blight on the road.
13. The case for this is that all the shops see themselves as an integral part of the road, even where they are interrupted by residences.
14. We would like to see a design framework that emphasised timber-framed shop fronts in keeping with the original Victorian or Edwardian buildings.

Proposal 2. Shopping Conservation Area

We recommend the establishment of a Shopping Conservation Area for Northcote and Webbs Road.

15. This is our key suggestion to preserve the character of Northcote Road. Although a new concept, it fits well with the guidance from central government (see para 19 below) and would preserve the area's vitality and vibrancy. We urge the Council to be aspirational and take this idea forward.
16. The Shopping Conservation Area would work for shops in a similar way to that of conservation areas for buildings: criteria would be established that would have to be met before a planning application is granted. Any proposed new development would have to demonstrate how it preserved or enhanced the vibrancy, vitality, viability and diversity of the Northcote Road and Webbs Road area. This would include features such as amount of footfall and proposed hours of opening.
17. Any proposal to change premises from business use to residential use should be measured against the criteria of its effects on the vitality and vibrancy of the road as well as on design criteria.
18. The draft Core Strategy Document, in its reference to shopping, makes no reference to the vibrancy and vitality of shopping areas. We regret this.
19. National Policy Guidance Planning Policy Statement 6 (PPS 6) issued by the ODPM as LDF guidance includes the concepts of vitality and vibrancy of shopping centres. For example:

20. PPS6 paragraph 3.21: In assessing sites, local planning authorities should consider the impact of the proposal on the vitality and viability of existing centres within the catchment area of the proposed development.
21. Paragraph 3.22: Local authorities should consider the impact of the development on the centre taking account of changes to the range of services provided by centres that could be affected.
22. Paragraph 2.58 talking about the provision of local shopping: Local authorities should seek to protect existing facilities which provide for people's day to day needs. Using development plan documents or where considered appropriate other local strategies, local authorities should take a positive approach to strengthening local centres and planning for local shops and services by working with stakeholders including the private sector or and the community.
23. In the case of Northcote Road we would argue that the vitality and vibrancy of the road rests on the good health of the independently-run shops and we seek measures that will retain a proportion of these in the road.
24. We do not seek however to restrict competition, preserve existing commercial interests or prevent innovation.

Proposal 3. Scale of Businesses

We recommend the following safeguards apply within the area:

- **Retain single shop frontages, even where a business straddles adjacent shops.**
 - **Do not permit adjacent premises to be knocked into one.**
 - **Impose a cap on shop floor size, appropriate to the area.**
25. We recognise that these represent major changes, but we feel such safeguards are necessary to retain the number of small businesses in this Shopping Conservation Area.
 26. This approach is supported by the advice from ODPM. In para 3.4 of PPS 6, it recommends inter alia that “development would be of an appropriate scale”, and “would have no unacceptable impact on existing centres”. And in para 2.41: “The aim should be to locate the appropriate type and scale of development in the right type of centres and that it complements its role and function.”
 27. Any changes proposed to existing commercial premises need to be considered in the light of the impact on the existing businesses in the area.

Proposal 4. Special Category for Food Shops

We would like to see special protection for food shops, maybe a new Wandsworth Council Own Category.

28. We have noted (para 7 above) that independently-run food shops are particularly vulnerable to the pressures on the street. They are also essential to the street's character. At present their closure is not noticed by the planning system: a butcher can be changed into a clothes shop, without any need to seek planning permission.
29. Protection for independent food shops should be built into the Shopping Conservation Area, or if possible food shops should be granted a separate classification of their own (eg A1[c]) to bring them into the planning process.
30. If such changes are not achievable under current planning law, we hope that the Council will seek to join with others to lobby for a change in the law.
31. Additionally, the Council could provide support and encouragement for individual food shops to locate in the area.

Proposal 5. The Promotion of Independent Shops

We recommend that the Town Centre Improvement Scheme (TCIS) be extended to the whole of Northcote Road, the three shops at the T-junction with Broomwood Road, and to Webbs Road. We would also suggest some prioritising of resources to help the street.

32. We note that through the Town Centre Improvement Scheme (TCIS) some £220k has been made available to shops in Northcote Road since 1994.
33. We recommend the use of some resources to promote the Shopping Conservation Area proposed above. This is a creative initiative and financial backing would help to promote the whole street, supporting small businesses and preserving local employment opportunities.

Proposal 6. Promotion of the Street Market

We recommend that the Council incorporates the market in its plans and take steps to actively promote it.

34. The street market is an integral part of the success of Northcote Road, especially at weekends. Probably the most famous street market in Wandsworth, it is a major contributor to the footfall in the street that enables all businesses to trade.
35. PPS 6 states in para 2.27: "local authorities should seek to retain and enhance existing markets and where appropriate re-introduce or create new ones. Local authorities should ensure that their markets remain attractive and competitive by investing in their improvements."

36. We regret that the Council's Core Strategy Document makes no reference to street markets. The market should be incorporated in the plans and should be actively promoted.
37. Some imaginative strategies are needed to encourage stall-holders to show commitment to the market; at present there are empty pitches in the market although apparently there is also a waiting list. For example, it could be a condition of taking a stall that they operate more than two days a week and for a minimum number of weeks in the year.
38. The Council could also promote the market through, for example, keeping rents low and encouraging use on weekdays. One-off events such as Fair-trade or organic festivals, though not necessarily popular with existing stallholders, would bring increased footfall to the road.

Proposal 7. Relationship between Northcote Road and the core Clapham Junction shopping centre

We urge that the current Clapham Junction Protected Core Shopping Frontage area also be designated an area of high-density mixed-use development which would complement the Northcote Road area.

We recommend changes to give greater protection to pedestrians crossing Battersea Rise to/from Northcote/St John's Road.

39. St John's Road and the area round ASDA and Lidl seem to us to be part of the answer to the problems of Northcote Road. We seek mechanisms that attract the chain stores to concentrate in this area. Despite substantial trading activity, it lacks vibrancy and vitality and fails to capture the early evening footfall from Clapham Junction station.
40. We welcome the proposals to intensify the business use of the Lidl/Boots/ASDA area and the high-density mixed-use development at Clapham Junction station (as outlined in the Site Specific Allocations document). If chain stores and supermarkets were concentrated in this area, the two areas (Lidl/ASDA etc and Northcote/Webbs) could develop in complementary and mutually sustainable ways, offering contrasting shopping experiences.
41. We do not believe this proposal offends the five town centre strategy (outlined in the Draft Core Strategy Document, para 6.19) but it will mean treating the Clapham Junction town centre differently.
42. Improving the appearance and safety of St John's Road would attract shoppers to the street, some of whom would venture south into Northcote Road.
43. To allow the businesses in Northcote Road to benefit from this increased footfall, it is essential that improvements are made to the pedestrian crossing between the two, across the South Circular in Battersea Rise.

Proposal 8. Independent investigation

Although our group's concern is for the potential loss of the unique character of Northcote Road, the problems we have identified are not unique. We suggest that the Council commissions an independent investigation of the issues and possible solutions. Such a report could have significant spin-off benefits for other areas of Wandsworth, and place Wandsworth in the vanguard nationally in confronting these issues that this paper has outlined.

Conclusion

As demonstrated by our petition, Northcote Road is loved and enjoyed by thousands of local residents. It enables people to shop for most of their daily needs without using a car, thus reducing congestion and pollution and promoting health. Its individual shops and stalls do much to develop and encourage community cohesion, as well as bringing in visitors from elsewhere in the city. Small businesses flourish there, bringing local employment and ensuring that money is retained in the local economy.

The road's vibrant and diverse character is at risk, partly as a result of its own success, as the Council's website notes. We believe that the proposals outlined above will help to protect the area and enable it to continue to prosper. We urge the Council to give them serious consideration and to investigate further strategies.