

High Streets Task Force Workshops write up

On 6th June 2023, the High Streets Task Force convened two workshops to discuss how to put the recommendations from their recent report into action.

As part of the workshops, participants ranked the eleven recommendations in priority order, selecting the top 5 for further discussion on how to bring these ideas forward into a reality.

Participants in both workshops prioritised 'Community Ownership' and 'Walking, Cycling and Public Transport Connections' alongside 'A Voice for all' and 'Supporting the Existing' for workshop one and 'A heart for the Community' and 'A High Street for people' for workshop two. Discussion focussed on the practicalities of putting these ideas into practice.

Walking, Cycling and Public Transport Connections

Enthusiasm was high but hope was low for developing a better functioning and better integrated network for active travel on and around East St. The poor state of local bus services, the topography of the area, a perceived lack of infrastructure (including criticism of the current contraflow on East St) was all felt to be significant barriers to encouraging more people to avoid car use.

There was however a broad consensus that if developed, an active travel network could encourage a wider group of people to visit and pass through East St from across BS3's broad demographic range. Walking, cycling and public transport connections would make regular visits to East St a possibility for a diverse group of people, including those with mobility and/or other access needs and help retain its function as a regularly used and useful local high street.

To be done well, participants noted that all demographics must be included in the design and promotion of services, and that liveable neighbourhood principles such as legibility and a feeling of safety must be at the heart of designs. Enforcement came up as a priority for both workshop groups, firstly the importance of enforcing current traffic restrictions on East St in order to keep those walking and wheeling safe, and secondly to better enforce Bristol city Council's low car policies in relation to new developments coming forward. People wanted to see cycling infrastructure improved but in a way that integrated sensitively with the existing street scape and did not add to 'clutter'.

Who needs to be involved? Sustrans and other local cycling groups, public transport providers (including community bus providers), bus passengers, local residents, urban designers and street scene shapers, Bristol Walking Alliance, Avon and Somerset Police, Bristol Disability Equality Forum, politicians from Bristol City council and WECA, Bristol City Council officers (including regeneration, transport & highways, and public health), University of Bristol, the traders of East Street, and rail operators.

What happens next?

- Working with the University of Bristol to encourage active travel amongst incoming students
- Continued enforcement of current restrictions on East St and low/no car development policies and the creation of local 'ambassadors' who can build relationships and influence better behaviour.

- Working with Bristol City Council Officers and Ward Councillors to unlock S106 payments for active travel infrastructure
- Better communications around current routes and planned changes as part of the Bedminster Green and Whitehouse St regeneration projects.
- Joined up campaigning across different community groups on bus provision in South Bristol
- Joint working between ward councillors and community groups to move forwards with plans for a residents parking zone in Windmill Hill.
- Further discussion is needed around e-Scooters and how their use can be safely integrated into East St.

Community Ownership

Communications on community ownership took two strands, the first around agency, local buy-in and a 'sense of community ownership' and the second around actual ownership of key assets by those that use, work and visit them.

Workshop participants saw community ownership as a tool for retaining a diverse range of functions on East St including retail but also light-industrial and maker spaces, and some of the more 'futuristic' and experiential functions of a high street such as a community hub, a Library of Things, a DIY bike kitchen, a homework club, nourishment and wellbeing hub and many other ideas. It was felt that ideas like these would take time to embed and needed to be visualised and experienced to be understood, but that as one participant noted 'people care about and look after what they own'.

The key barriers discussed were around a feeling of 'is this really possible!?' with some wondering 'could I really be involved in something like this!?'. Examples from elsewhere came up, Nudge Community Builders, the recent successful transfer of Zion Community Centre to community-ownership, and the Onion Collective's East Quays development in Watchet were amongst those mentioned as inspiration. Several groups emphasised the need for a steward or expert guide for an approach like this and almost everyone wanted to know 'what's possible?' referring to a better understanding of what buildings might be available and what might be able to happen in them.

Who needs to be involved? A committed group with a clear vision, Share Bristol, Landlords and commercial agents (with long term vision), Funders, Bedminster BID, Bristol City Council, community leaders, existing businesses (especially those trading in essential goods), Doctors and healthcare providers, artists coops, the pubs, existing community hubs.

What happens next?

- There is a need for group forming & momentum building to establish a community of interest and local support for the concept of community ownership. Initially this could be through wider local support for the emerging East Street Property Partnership and/or connecting with others who have done this elsewhere in Bristol and beyond.
- To understand what opportunities are available, we need to map ownership in the local area to identify what assets might be bought into community ownership.
- Once opportunities are identified, an application to the Autumn round of the Community Ownership Fund could be made to secure identified buildings.
- To help gather ideas and support local people to 'imagine beyond that which they can see', a vision for what more community ownership on East Street could enable is needed, perhaps delivered as part of the East Street Property Partnership work or through the development of a new community space.

- As new projects emerge, on a meanwhile or more permanent basis, cross-organisational solidarity and support will be needed to help them thrive. Coordination via newsletters and local groups and networks should be utilised to support projects to thrive.

A Voice for all

Perhaps *the* key recommendation from the HSTF report was the evolution of a new organisation which brought the many different individuals and groups working together on East St into one space to collaborate and share ideas. We discussed this group being an evolution of an existing organisation (such as the Bedminster BID or Action Greater Bedminster, both of whom were present at the workshops), or a new organisation.

Regardless of which approach was taken, the priorities were clear; this should be a group that is representative of the local area, that reaches a new audience and encourages a greater diversity of people to get involved with community development work by being welcoming and accessible, that has a clear purpose, vision, and governance structure, and that has accountability and decision-making power.

Those who are already involved in existing groups warned of burn out, a sense of apathy and ‘we’ve been here before’, and how currently there are ‘a small number of people doing a lot of heavy lifting’, including on delivering some essential statutory functions (such as the allocation of local Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funding). A new group would need to bring fresh energy and resource whilst making strong connections with and building on the essential work of existing organisations. A new or amalgamated group can avoid duplication of resources and mean that more people are available.

Who needs to be involved? Bedminster BID and East St traders, Disability Forums, Windmill Hill City Farm, Community and environmental Groups, Action Greater Bedminster, WHAM and BS3 planning group, GPs and pharmacies, Bristol City Council, University representatives and Students Unions, BS3 Community, the Library, agencies supporting people who are street homeless, Parents groups, arts organisations. Ashton Gate Stadium/Bristol Sports was also referenced

What happens next?

- The workshops identified several conversations that need to take place to determine how the functions and capacity of existing organisations work together and where the gaps are. A better understanding is needed of where a new group might fit before plans progress.
- Greater engagement is needed with local businesses in the area with Bedminster BID being a key player in facilitating this.
- Using the momentum from BS3 in 2025 events, AGB, Bedminster BID and Windmill Hill City Farm (perhaps supported by the Ward Councillors) are in a unique position to tie together disparate activities to create a platform where different voices could come together to discuss the future, perhaps starting with an asset mapping exercise.
- An immediate need is for better communications between different groups with activities on and around East Street, perhaps via a regular community meeting facilitated by Bristol City Council.

Supporting the existing

Alongside the excitable chatter of new organisations and new ideas, there was a clear theme peppered through most conversations about the need to support what already exists on and around East St. Local people are proud of the diversity of independent traders on East St and the function the street plays selling every day, useful goods to the mostly low-income communities of South Bristol. Whilst many participants welcomed newer entrants such as The Emporium, Silver & Steel, Lucky Strike and the new bar & kitchen owned by The Lanes (which is set to open opposite the entrance to St Catherine's Place shopping centre imminently), it was agreed that businesses such as Georges, Sunshine Café, the Fruit & Veg shop, and the two butchers (Kelvins and Stan Butts) are also integral parts of a thriving future for East St.

This is an idea that needs funding to help secure leases and properties, and resource long term engagement with existing businesses. Action is needed now before a likely rise in property values and rents as a result of the BCC-led Bedminster Green and Whitehouse Lane regeneration projects. One significant barrier is a perceived lack of footfall to East St and participants felt BCC and other partners should prioritise activities that increase footfall and regular custom.

Who needs to be involved? Existing businesses on and around East St (including light-industrial spaces), Universities, 'anchor' businesses and organisations, East St market, incoming resident groups, libraries and civic functions, local asset owners, voluntary sector, local councillors, GPs and dentists, existing resident groups.

What happens next

- Working with existing traders to help them expand/adapt their offer to accommodate existing and incoming demographics
- Working to get more independent businesses on longer, more secure and affordable leases or owning their buildings where possible.
- Building a long term vision amongst landlords and commercial agents of a street full of independents.
- Activities are needed to increase footfall to East Street both for everyday shopping and occasional visits.

A Heart for the Community

The HSTF recommendations on the provision of physical space for the communities of East St to come together were two-fold, recommending a 'market square' style exterior space and also the provision of a patchwork of spaces for community use. The existing 'East St Vision' speaks to the former and perhaps because of this, conversation at the tables focussed on the latter and what new community spaces could look like on East St. Groups discussed the potential for establishing permanent spaces but also taking over vacant units on a 'meanwhile' basis to build momentum and try out new ideas. Meanwhile uses were seen as a valuable way to 'prototype' more permanent uses especially.

Those round the table felt it important that these spaces were multipurpose and multifunctional and also financially sustainable. Visibility and prominence on East St was felt to be important alongside the highest standards of accessibility. Through building momentum, collaboration, and a clear vision of the type of uses that were wanted and needed on East St, it was hoped that groups or projects could take advantage of 'the right space at the right price at the right time' should an opportunity

arise. One participant raised an important barrier in the high cost of refurbishing some of the larger units on East Street which have fallen into disrepair.

Who needs to be involved? Local businesses, BCC Business Development, advice services, GPs and social prescribing providers, midwife services, the East St Property Partnership, Organisations that would like to provide services in these areas but do not currently, art spaces (for all ages), groups with links to young people, toy library, repair café, Library of Things and a food club.

What happens next?

- Work has already started to establish a community hub within the St Catherine's Place shopping centre and further support via existing groups, funders and the emerging East Street Property Partnership [link] is needed.
- Relationship building with landlords and commercial agents is needed to build a longer-term vision and find property partnerships which value long term social value.
- A clear vision is needed to demonstrate what could be possible on East St with thriving community spaces as part of the street's ecosystem.
- Conversations need to be ongoing with the developers of Bedminster Green and Whitehouse Street to ensure that the new spaces being created as part of the regeneration are fit for purpose and meet local need.

A High Street for People

'Inclusive Design' was a lynchpin of conversations on this recommendation which speaks to the design and function of East St, especially in relation to how buses use the street, and how 'natural surveillance' is achieved. Workshop participants focussed on the twilight hours, the prevalence of shut shutters and the lack of businesses that open later into the evening and night-time. Conversation focussed on how to activate underutilised spaces, especially larger ones and especially in the evening and at night. Participants were in agreement that any changes should benefit all and not discriminate be it those with physical access needs, or those impacted by poverty or homelessness.

Acknowledging the existing East St Vision which suggests a path to the semi-pedestrianisation of East Street, It was acknowledged that there were two potentially-conflicting truths; First that the bus stops of East St are very well used and an essential connection for many living further out in South Bristol, and second that East St's narrow carriageway is poorly suited for buses and their presence is having a negative impact on perceptions of safety for those walking and wheeling and inhibiting a more progressive redesign of how the street functions.

Who needs to be involved? Groups which represent all users of East St (across all age groups), Students unions and other student groups, local businesses with active frontages, Bedminster Green developers), Bristol City Council

What needs to happen next?

- Bedminster BID and the traders of East St must lead or be integral to how these proposed changes will impact those whose livelihoods depend on the street. Recommendations such as removing buses from travelling down East St or partial pedestrianisation of the street should be led by those impacted and the BID has a significant role to play here.

- Bristol City Council and Avon and Somerset Police should continue with their ongoing and increased enforcement of current traffic, speeding and parking restrictions to continue to encourage safe and convivial behaviour by all.
- Bedminster BID, Bristol City Council, and Avon and Somerset Police should continue to support those traders impacted by anti-social behaviour in the area.
- Community support for managing relationships between East St traders and regular users of the pocket parks, and to manage the negative impacts attached to activities like street drinking
- Bedminster BID should be supported in their allocation of funding to ensure works to the public realm are in line with the HSTF report, reducing 'clutter', improving sightlines and making the street more navigable for those with access needs.
- Greater engagement is needed with local businesses in the area with Bedminster BID being a key player in facilitating this
- Bristol City Council and other partners should work to harness funding that arises from the Bedminster Green regeneration to support the delivery of the HSTF recommendations for East Street.

What happens next?

Following the workshops, Ellie Freeman, Chair of Action Greater Bedminster, said:

'It's really good to see the range of people that have been involved in this process, and to hear the enthusiasm and ideas about how to improve one of our main retail streets. I'm looking forward to working closely with the Bedminster BID and the council as well as other partners to take this project forward. We will be working hard to keep the public informed and involved.'