

The contribution of local high streets to sustainable communities

This study demonstrates the key part that local high streets play in contributing to the Government's public spaces, social inclusion and sustainability agendas, using three case studies from different English cities. The research investigated the varied functions these streets performed, and the problems that street users experienced. The study, by Peter Jones at University College London and Marion Roberts and Linda Morris at the University of Westminster, found that:

- These mixed-use high streets provided a rich variety of shops and businesses that generally served the diverse needs of their local populations, and also served a regional catchment area.
- The great majority of local residents walked or used public transport to get to their high street – very few drove. A substantial proportion of people coming from further afield used public transport.
- The high streets were important public spaces, and many types of informal activity took place on them.
- The streets were used intensively, with large volumes of both pedestrians and road traffic. While this could contribute a sense of 'buzz', serious conflicts were evident between pedestrians and traffic at busy times.
- Residents and visitors expressed high levels of satisfaction with the range of local shops, businesses and other facilities along the high streets, and enjoyed the opportunities to observe street life and meet friends.
- However, these advantages were offset by negative features, particularly the dominance of road traffic, the poor appearance and condition of the streets, and the lack of greenery, seating and public toilets.
- The researchers concluded that:
 - high streets, despite neglect over the years by engineers, planners and politicians, have a key role to play in enhancing urban liveability, social inclusion and cohesion, and in developing sustainable urban communities;
 - to realise their potential, the planning and design of local high streets need to be more balanced, to take due account of their function as 'places' to shop and visit as well as their role as 'links' in providing through routes for road traffic;
 - the wide range of agencies with responsibilities for high streets need to be better co-ordinated, alongside arrangements for formal dialogue with local street-user groups; the appointment of a town-centre manager could provide significant benefits.



Background

This study arose from a desire to answer a number of questions about mixed-use high streets:

- Do local high streets belong to the past, or are they relevant to future visions of urban living?
- Have changes in retailing patterns, with shopping provision concentrated in large precincts in town centres and out-of-town developments, weakened the traditional commercial base for local mixed-use high streets?
- Do high streets accommodate other types of activities?
- Does through-traffic dominate these streets to the extent that their other functions are impaired?
- What contribution can local high streets make to sustainable development and rejuvenation of public spaces, as set out in the Government's 'Sustainable Communities' and 'Cleaner, Safer, Greener' policy agendas?

The study investigated sections of mixed-use local high streets in three inner-suburban areas: Ball Hill in Coventry, London Road in Sheffield, and the Upper Tooting Road/Mitcham Road approaches to the Tooting Broadway junction in South London. Each has a substantial residential catchment area that has suffered from some degree of social deprivation or has a substantial ethnic mix.

The aim was to understand these streets' significance to their users, as spaces they travel through and as somewhere to shop, meet and pursue other activities, thus contributing to local identity. The objective was to investigate and record all the varied aspects of daily life on these streets – what people did there, and what they felt about the streets. Particular attention was paid to the potential conflicts that could arise through the streets' dual function as a 'link' or through route and as a 'place' or location to shop or meet friends.

Social inclusion

The study found that the three case-study streets had much to offer their local populations, though they varied in their retail mix:

- Tooting provided the most comprehensive array of shops and services open during the day and into the evening, with a strong Asian component and two lively off-street markets.
- Ball Hill in Coventry catered for a mainly daytime clientele, with few evening activities.

- London Road in Sheffield had a strong evening economy based around pubs and restaurants, and less emphasis on daytime activities.

In each location, all sections of the local population used the high street, including a broad cross-section of age ranges and ethnic groups. Patterns of use varied by time and location, reflecting the different lifestyles of the various population groups and the location of different types of businesses. The only groups with indications of under-representation and possible exclusion were disabled people and people with children in pushchairs. However, the samples were too small in each case to pursue this issue in more depth.

Street activities

The 'link' function of all three locations was very important, with high volumes of road traffic and significant numbers of pedestrians 'just passing through' the area, at all times of day. In Tooting in particular, large volumes of interchange between bus and underground and bus-to-bus also took place on the two streets. However, the main movements of pedestrians were associated with 'place'-related activities, and in Tooting very high volumes of pedestrian activity were recorded:

- On a typical weekday, around 33,000 passengers entered or left Tooting Broadway underground station, and 46,000 people boarded or alighted from buses in the area.
- At the busiest points on the footway, around the Broadway junction, flows reached 1,200 pedestrians per hour on a weekday, with an even higher rate of 1,500 per hour on a Sunday.
- Between 08.00 and 19.00, some 17,000 vehicles passed along each of the main roads in Tooting on a weekday.
- 160 buses per hour passed through Tooting at peak times.

Video analysis showed ten different types of activity taking place on the footway by day or night, ranging from street-workers at stalls or selling pirate DVDs, to people chatting, resting or waiting for others, as well as small numbers living on the street.

Street conflicts

Detailed investigation drawing on CCTV evidence found that the competition for space between the different street activities and modes of transport were a source of tension and conflict because of the high intensity of use. In both Tooting and Ball Hill, there were 'pinch

points' where pedestrians had to walk in the road when the pavements were too busy to accommodate everyone. Over 50 per cent of people surveyed on the street in Ball Hill and Tooting thought that there was a problem in moving along the pavement.

In addition to problems at road junctions, traffic accidents were also concentrated around points of public transport interchange, for example where passengers changed from one bus route to another and made 'informal' crossings through the traffic. Buses were also delayed through lack of adequate pull-in space. In Ball Hill, 70 per cent of businesses loaded and unloaded in the street itself, and 60 per cent reported problems in doing so.

The street experience

Both residents and visitors expressed satisfaction with their local high streets in terms of the range and quality of the goods and services they had to offer, and the opportunities for informal social contact they provided:

- 95 per cent of residents who had lived in Ball Hill for ten years or more agreed with the statement "I usually bump into people I know when out in the area shopping".
- 70 per cent of business owners in London Road agreed with the statement "London Road is a good place to run a business like mine".

There was much less satisfaction, however, with the experience of visiting these streets as 'places'. Concerns were recorded about the high levels of traffic noise, poor general appearance, the lack of greenery, and limited and poor-quality amenities such as public toilets and places to sit:

- Between 78 and 90 per cent of businesses and street users in all three locations perceived traffic volumes to be a problem.
- Over half the street users were dissatisfied with the availability of seating and places to rest, and over two-thirds were concerned about the lack of public toilets.

Street audits also identified problems in each location with uncared-for pavements and messy, cluttered street furniture.

Sustainability

The majority of local residents who came to each centre did so on foot. The streets also drew in shoppers and visitors from outside their immediate areas, many arriving

by public transport and others by car, and so they had a wider, more regional economic and social significance:

- Over 90 per cent of residents came to London Road on foot; just under 80 per cent did so in Tooting, with the proportion in Ball Hill lying between these two figures.
- 40 per cent of visitors to Ball Hill came by car, compared with 20 per cent in Tooting, which is better served by public transport.

In general, visitors spent more time and money per visit than local residents, but came to the area less often. As a consequence, while car users spent more money than public transport users or those arriving on foot on a per trip basis, this difference disappeared when account was taken of the frequency of their visits.

Crime and anti-social behaviour did not feature as a major problem in any of the three case-study areas. The overall condition and maintenance of the streets were of more significance to most people. However, only Tooting had an appointed local authority town-centre manager, whose brief was to care for the condition of the town centre as a whole in terms of both the vitality of the businesses and the quality of the street scene. In each area, maintenance and improvement activities were hampered by lack of powers and the division of responsibilities among agencies.

Conclusion

The study found that the mixed-use local high streets were well used and well liked, and encouraged sustainable and inclusive patterns of usage. Realising their potential as significant public places has been hampered by the priority given to their through-traffic or 'link' functions, over the needs of people who visit them as places for a variety of purposes. Local planners and urban designers have also not given priority to the 'traditional' high street. Resolving the challenges posed by the problems and tensions experienced on current mixed-use high streets is no small task, but by doing so these streets could become a cornerstone for future sustainable communities.

The study derived policy and practice recommendations in four broad areas relating to the need to: (i) adopt a balanced 'link and place' approach to mixed-use street planning and design; (ii) provide better co-ordination between agencies and street-user stakeholders; (iii) encourage enhanced information-gathering and sharing; and (iv) provide more resources and powers.

The researchers also make specific recommendations, based on experience from the three case-study areas. Some of these would require more resources for local authority departments with a responsibility for mixed-use high streets, and include the need to:

- reduce traffic dominance, accident risk and severance by widening footways, adding barrier-free median strips, planting greenery, providing extra controlled crossings, and introducing 20mph zones;
- enable street spaces to be used for different functions at different times of day, or different days of the week (for example, using certain footway spaces for loading at night when streets are quieter, or allowing kerbside parking outside peak periods);
- reduce street clutter and improve the quality, attractiveness and cleanliness of the footway and frontages;
- make better provision for wheelchair users and people with pushchairs;
- improve public amenities, for example more seating, better lighting, well-maintained public toilets, and a generally higher-quality public realm;
- co-ordinate public transport provision to make informal interchange easier and reduce traffic and pedestrian congestion and accidents;
- develop procedures and training packages to encourage agencies to work more closely together in planning, designing, managing and operating mixed-use high streets.

About the project

This study, by Peter Jones at University College London and Marion Roberts and Linda Morris at the University of Westminster, was part of a Joseph Rowntree Foundation programme aiming to improve understanding of how people use urban public spaces. It used a range of qualitative and quantitative methods, drawing on existing and new survey data.

The research collated a broad range of data from public agencies, and carried out urban design appraisals and a community street audit for each location, including traffic and pedestrian counts. Stakeholder surveys were carried out with 150 businesses in Tooting, 78 in Coventry and 86 in Sheffield, and resident surveys with 309 households in Tooting and 207 in Sheffield. In Tooting, there were 512 questionnaire interviews with people walking along the street, 489 in Coventry and 405 in Sheffield. In addition, 33 interviews were held with officers from the public agencies most involved with the case-study streets. Three focus groups were held in Tooting, and informal workshops were held with key stakeholders in each location. To observe street behaviour, existing CCTV footage was provided in Tooting and was specially commissioned in Coventry.

For further information

The full report, **Rediscovering mixed-use streets: The contribution of local high streets to sustainable communities** by Peter Jones, Marion Roberts and Linda Morris, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press as part of the Public Spaces series (ISBN 978 1 86134 958 9 price £14.95). You can also download this report free from www.jrf.org.uk.

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