

Earls Court Business Forum Steering Group minutes

2nd June 2020

In attendance:

- **Earls Court Businesses**
 - o Flora Indica
 - o Finborough Theatre
 - o Hotel Boka
 - o KK Hotels (The George)
 - o Hotel Indigo
 - o MetroBank
 - o TLC Estate Agents
- **Council**
 - o Ward Cllrs Spalding, Ardourian and Wade
 - o Cllr Catherine Faulks
 - o Albena Karameros, Earls Court Programme Manager, RBKC
 - o Antonia Hollingsworth, Business Initiatives
 - o Graham Hart, Head of Economic Development
- **Delancey, developer of the Earls Court Development Site**
 - o Nathan Watt, Development Director
 - o Steve Burgin, Head of Retail and Place
- **The means, Earls Court Business Forum consultants**
 - o Sam Knight (stand-in Chair for the meeting)
- **Apologies from:**
 - o Earls Court Film Festival

1) Impact of the crisis

Businesses took it in turns to describe the impact of COVID-19 on their operations and their current situation. This is a broad summary:

The hotels in attendance were all completely closed, apart from one offering some rooms for key workers. The consensus was that they are working towards a 4th July reopening date, but recognising that a) this may change and b) they don't expect revenues to return to anything similar to pre-COVID until 2022. A 'good month' for the next 12 months was cited as 30% occupancy. There is therefore likely to be a knock-on impact on other businesses, such as restaurants, who benefit from hotel occupants in Earls Court. Hotels are expecting significantly reduced international travel for some time, but hoping for an increase in demand from UK residents visiting London. Some reservations have started to come in for October.

The other businesses (with the exception of MetroBank) had also closed completely. It was explained that broadly the theatre world was expected not to reopen until February 2021 and that social distancing in the theatre was a real issue. For restaurants it was highlighted that whilst some

had been able to move to delivery, this didn't work so well for fine-dining restaurants, and again that social distancing measures reducing capacity would be a serious issue affecting when it was viable to open. TLC had recently reopened and explained the property market was slowly starting to get moving again.

Sam fed back comments he had received from some businesses not present at the meeting:

- That restaurants, cafes etc needed to be able, where possible, to introduce or increase seating areas outside, and that the licensing process needed to be quick and flexible
- That parking for staff (but also potentially for customers) would become an increasing issue as more businesses open up but people are unwilling or unable to use public transport

2) The macro-view from the Council

Cllr Catherine Faulks responded to businesses' comments and gave an overview of current RBKC activity in response to COVID-19. In summary:

- RBKC and Westminster have been identified as two boroughs most likely to be hardest hit because they rely heavily on the visitor economy with hotels and museums, as well as a lot of people employed in the service industry and the gig economy
- Have so far administered £390,000 through the Business Interruption Fund and nearly £41 million through the retail, hospitality and leisure grant funds.
- Still to come is the more recently announced Local Authority Discretionary Grant Fund. The council will announce shortly how to apply and what the eligibility criteria will be
- Cllr Faulks described that RBKC is looking at other important levers to aid recovery - looking at planning use (can they be quick and nimble with change of use?), and the speed of licensing for outdoor seating etc. Across the borough they are also reviewing possibilities for increasing pavement space for people to queue etc. More information about these things are expected soon
- The Council have also sent out a business survey [the link to which is [here](#)] with the aim of understanding what more it is important for them to focus on to help (for example perhaps focussing efforts on bringing footfall back to the borough). The survey has already been circulated to the Forum and closes on 11th June.
- Cllr Faulks reported that the Council comms will be focussing on "shop local" etc. encouraging residents to use their High Streets, but would welcome ideas on what they should be doing.

Cllr Spalding raised a question about what has become of the Clean Air Village pilot projects for Earls Court? Cllr Faulks commented that whilst they were currently focussing on emergency projects these issues are still important to the recovery of the High Street, and a further update can be sought outside the meeting. Graham Hart highlighted how clean air projects, such as the bicycle delivery service in Ladbroke Grove, have been helpful during COVID-19, helping pharmacies deliver to shielded residents, and noted "we should be creative during this time".

3) Taking action

This agenda item was about what the Business Forum should focus efforts on. Sam began by recapping on results from the previous business survey and the discussions at the January event, acknowledging that priorities may have shifted, then introduced a discussion on what the forum should focus on given the new situation.

Some relevant contextual stats were presented at the beginning:

- YouGov polls show that at the end of May:
 - o Over 70% of people say they are avoiding public spaces
 - o Over 50% of people say they are avoiding touching things in public
 - o Nearly 40% of people still say they are avoiding contact with tourists, a particularly relevant stat for Earls Court
- An Association of Town Centre Managers (ATCM) survey with town centre users suggested the top four things people wanted to see when they returned to the High Street were:
 - o An increase in cleaning and sanitisation
 - o More planting and green spaces
 - o More seating to use outdoors
 - o More pedestrianisation / wider pavements

Some small ideas of interventions from elsewhere were then presented to get people thinking:

- o Providing a series of downloadable signs for businesses to use in their premises in relation to physical distancing (see [Norwich BID](#) as an example)
- o Coordinating floor vinyls and markings in the public realm
- o Multiple ways to make it easier for restaurants, cafes, pubs etc. to serve customers outside – temporarily closing side-roads to increase space for seating, ensuring licensing is accommodating to COVID-19 needs etc. (There is a national campaign for this too, the [UK Grand Summer Cafe](#))
- o Joint procurement of PPE, sneeze screens etc. to save time and money
- o COVID-19 safety accreditation to give confidence to consumers
- o Ideas about how to market the area – such as an organic business-led model using PepPartner
- o Pivoting to focus on new customer markets – i.e. finding channels such as The Court the communicate with local residents who are now more likely to stay local, UK residents on staycations etc.

Three questions were posed:

- **What should the forum be focussing on?**
- **Are the previous things still relevant?**
- **What's most important?**

The main points raised in discussion were:

- 1) **The need to get footfall back in the area.** In this context there was a discussion about using part of the Earls Court Development Site for a meanwhile use. Suggestions in the discussion were:
 - a. A temporary exhibition structure. Excel is mothballed. So temporary exhibition centre might help the whole area with its knock-on trade.
 - b. Physically distanced car-boot sales, Christmas markets etc.

On this point there was also a discussion about marketing. It was pointed out that for smaller brands, an Earls Court wide marketing effort to draw people back would be helpful. The Council noted that, whilst their budgets are suffering from reduced income, their comms team would be working with other teams across London to bring people back to London, and would be happy to work to amplify anything that Earls Court businesses are doing.

- 2) One idea in response to point 1 was to help businesses gain **COVID-19 safety accreditation** and to do an Earls Court-wide marketing push around this. Businesses raised the issue that some would struggle if they had to pay for accreditation
- 3) Also linked to point 1, **parking** was raised as an issue. As more employees return to work and visitors return, people will remain less willing or able to use public transport for a while. The development site was therefore suggested as a good location for a temporary car park.
- 4) Cllr Wade raised that there needs to be a review of the implementation of the pavement widening on Earls Court Road to enable deliveries, waste disposal, collection and safer cycling. This is key to enabling increased **safe pedestrian use of space**.
- 5) It was suggested that the Council produce a clear timetable for businesses about when they can open. There was some discussion about this, with people pointing out that on the one hand it would be beneficial for businesses and customers to have a clear timetable laid out, whilst on the other hand it was pointed out that the timetable is only as certain as central governments' announcements and that every business has different circumstances governing when it will be feasible for them to reopen.

Graham Hart noted the information is all on RBKC portal, and that RBKC is doing some work on what needs to be done as businesses reopen in terms of managing streetscapes, licensing etc. This **Action Plan** is probably the important thing to publicise alongside any timetable.

- 6) It was noted that there are two different dates for many businesses – one when you are allowed to reopen, and one when it is financially worthwhile and feasible. So what can we do to support businesses to be viable?

There was a brief discussion about support to get people online, but it was recognised that this doesn't work for everybody and that many for whom it will work are already sorting this themselves.

A key thing that was discussed was the need for flexibility with how businesses can operate in a world with physical distancing. For some this means **being allowed seating outdoors, for others this might mean being able to trade longer hours**. It was suggested that the Business Forum coordinate lobbying for this.

Other ideas that were posted in the chat:

- A drive-in cinema as a meanwhile use
- Improving the cleaning around the station entrance

ACTION POINTS:

- **SK** to work on coordinating lobbying from businesses on licensing issues
- **Businesses** to circulate any other quick-win ideas

4) Steering Group structure

Sam talked through ideas for the structure of the Steering Group and Business Forum to ensure clarity and transparency. The basic premises is that the 'Forum' is the wider group of Earls Court businesses receiving information, benefitting from activities, inputting where they want to etc. The Steering Group is a core group of businesses appointed to meet more regularly and steer the direction of the Forum.

The slides are attached

Key points to note and that came up in the discussion:

- SK reiterated that he is chairing this meeting but that a business chair needs to be found for the Forum
- With regards regularity of meetings, businesses stated that they would like another meeting within 2-3 weeks to get things moving, but that in general a monthly meeting would be sensible as a starting point and that this regularity can be kept under review
- With regards a membership fee, it was discussed that it makes sense to have no fee associated with membership of the Business Forum at the moment, but that this could be kept under review depending on how the recovery goes, what the benefits of membership are etc.
- It was noted that there are different sectors in Earls Court who will sometimes have different needs. It was agreed that it was sensible to start with one Steering Group, but that sub-groups might become appropriate to deal with particular projects or sectors in the future.

ACTION POINTS:

- **SK** to write up the Terms of Reference into a more detailed document and to circulate them to the group and to the wider Forum for comments

5) Short update from Delancey, developers of the Earls Court Development Site

Steve Burgin updated the group on progress with the Earls Court Development Site. Delancey are in the process of appointing the development team and expect to have appointed a master-planner and master-architect within the next few weeks. They have also been working on the business plan for the site.

Steve responded to questions about a 'meanwhile' use for the site and noted that they shared an interest with businesses in that they would like to use the site to raise awareness of the area and bring people here. They acknowledged that not everything will be possible because of restrictions of the site, but they are looking at a strategy whose key aim is to bring people in and familiarise them with the area, and noted the ideas of a temporary exhibition space, car boot, christmas market, parking etc. He noted that they already have some businesses on site, such as The Prince and that they are committed to investing in their site and reopening parts as soon as they can. A few other things they have been doing is introducing a food bank into one of their empty retail units, and are considering some other community uses for empty buildings.

6) Next meeting

To be arranged

7) AOB:

- An update from the Earls Court Film Festival, who had to send their apologies for this meeting, is circulated with these minutes
- Delancey have launched a website where you can find updates about the development site, and can also respond to a survey and leave comments. You can find it [here](#).