

The Knightsbridge Partnership's Response to London Assembly Economy, Culture and Skills Committee call for evidence on London's high streets

1st November 2024

This is the Knightsbridge Partnership's response to The London Assembly Economy, Culture and Skills Committee investigation into the state of London's high streets. We have addressed questions 1, 2, 3, 6 and 7 as the most important to our area.

The Knightsbridge Partnership (TKP) is a Business Improvement District, formed in 2022, which represents over 200 local businesses. It intends to also become a property BID in 2025.

The Knightsbridge footprint spans the boroughs of Westminster and Kensington and Chelsea. The area is dominated by the A4 Brompton Road and the A315, which are TfL's responsibility as part of the Transport for London Road Network (TLRN). The area is one of London's two International Centres. It is both an international luxury shopping and hospitality destination for 37 million visitors a year and a local high street, serving its 22,000 local residents and also workers.

The current imbalance in the place and movement functions of Knightsbridge and Brompton Road sits at the absolute heart of many of the issues and challenges facing the study area. As with many of London's corridor high streets, Brompton Road is traffic-dominated, noisy, suffers from poor air quality and has narrow footways, few places to cross the road and few trees and greenery. It is currently an uninviting place to shop.

1. How have recent economic shocks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, rising inflation, and cost-of-living pressures, impacted London's high streets?

The pandemic dramatically accelerated the need for retail to evolve. International visitor numbers to the UK have already halved according to Visit Britain (March 2020). In Knightsbridge, prior to the formation of the BID very little development and investment in the area had taken place. In response, the Knightsbridge Partnership has taken a place-based approach to restore Knightsbridge as the world's number one luxury destination and also as a vibrant and attractive local high street.

The loss of tax-free shopping has affected our businesses because it was an important attraction for high-spending international visitors, particularly from China and the Middle East. Knightsbridge was the location in which 15% of all of the U.K.'s tax-free shopping took place, so the loss of this spending incentive has hit the area hard.

2. How effective has the support from the Mayor of London, local authorities, and central government been in helping high streets recover and adapt?

The support from the Mayor of London, TfL and the two borough councils has been invaluable. The Additional Rate Relief, VAT deferral and reduced rates and specific support for the food and beverage sector have all been welcome.

We particularly value the proactive approach to working in partnership that the Mayor of London's team, TfL, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster City Council have taken to improving our area's public realm.

The introduction of Planning Use Class E in 2020 simplified planning, enabling property owners to attract new tenants, respond more quickly to changing consumer trends and provide a better mix of traditional retail, with food and beverage and cultural and experiential offers. As such, to ensure high streets thrive and the wider economy grows, we encourage as much deregulation and freedom from the public sector as possible. The requirement for regulation, such as licensing of premises and outdoor dining, should be minimal and approached by the public sector to enable growth as the guiding principle.

3. Can you give examples of any particularly successful regeneration projects on a London high street, and what were the factors that enabled this success?

The Knightsbridge Partnership has developed a holistic and integrated place and public realm strategy to revive the area, which consists of:

1. A flagship public realm scheme for Knightsbridge and Brompton Road, which will include 5,000 metres of additional footways, 2,000 metres of greening, 170 new trees, 13 improved pedestrian crossings and two new pedestrian crossings.
2. A family of neighbourhood public realm and space projects to create new public spaces and better and safer walking routes for the local community.
3. Placemaking plans, including activating the public realm with art and bringing the retail offer into the public realm, a bespoke 'Knightsbridge welcome' for all visitors to the area, curating and growing an evening economy and integrating the area's wellness offer with the Mayor of London's Healthy Streets agenda.
4. Detailed plans to ensure the area is maintained to a high standard and a new, integrated approach to safety which will harness new technologies including facial recognition, CCTV, AI and autonomous vehicles.
5. Outlining a potential public and private funding and financing strategy to deliver the proposals, with a clear and compelling investment case.

We recommend a place-based approach to reviving the fortunes of any London town centre or high street, starting with an analysis of an area's specific issues and assets and from this analysis preparing a detailed strategy and action plan. Our approach has differed to other areas, which more generally look at one issue at a time, or appoint consultants with pre-conceived notions of the solutions.

Our consultants, Attis, developed a structured framework, consisting of nine criteria, to appraise Knightsbridge and benchmark it against other destinations in order to understand which aspects of the

area need to be improved in order for it to compete better with other destinations. The framework could be adapted to appraise any London high street.

4. How can community-led regeneration initiatives be better supported, and what are the key factors that contribute to their success?

We encourage spending time on co-creation with the local community and all stakeholders. The Place and Public Realm Strategy for Knightsbridge was co-created over a year in collaboration with residents, representatives from community groups, local property owners, businesses, TfL and the two local authorities, resulting in consensus and high levels of support for the proposed improvements to the area.

A range of engagement activities were undertaken, including an online survey (available in nine languages), a drop-in session, walking tours, a focus group for UAE Emirati women, meetings, presentations to community groups and three co-design workshops.

The results revealed that 69% of respondents described Knightsbridge as 'good' or 'excellent', but 31% said it has worsened. Respondents gave several reasons for this, in particular concerns about traffic dominance, air pollution and crime.

The top priority to improve Knightsbridge (suggested by almost half of all respondents) was adding gardens and other green spaces, and planting trees. Improvements to the pedestrian environment were the next highest priorities: increasing footway widths, repairing pavements and removing street clutter.

6. What do you see as the main future challenges for high streets in London, and how can these be addressed?

The main challenges for high streets are the advantages of online sales, changes to work patterns, particularly in the office sector, the shift in consumer preferences to seeking experiences rather than traditional purchase of goods, frequent tube strikes, rising business costs and low growth projections and the increasing prevalence of crime.

The Knightsbridge Partnership is concerned by the growth in shoplifting and violence and abuse against shopworkers, which add to the costs of running businesses and can affect the well-being of staff and customers.

The Knightsbridge Partnership welcomes the new government's proposed investment in additional police officers and the 2024 Budget announcement to scrap the immunity for low-value shoplifting and provide additional funding to crack down on organised gangs targeting retailers.

We encourage a strategic and tactical partnership working to make high streets safe, including:

- Zero tolerance of crime, even low-level crime: Progress prosecutions, in particular for repeat prolific offenders

- Take a data-led approach by focusing on higher-incidence crimes, specifically theft from property (including businesses), organised street begging, crime against the person (including violence against shop workers) and vehicle theft, and prioritising hotspot locations
- Visible presence as a deterrent: Working with the police to increase their presence
- Implement advanced proactive surveillance systems, use cutting-edge technology including police-operated 'live' real-time and retrospective facial recognition. Use facial recognition and AI to prevent organised crime
- Investment in infrastructure, in particular assess and improve lighting on key streets
- Encourage enforcement of strict penalties for criminal behaviour to deter crime. Rigorously progress police prosecutions and criminal behaviour orders to prevent persistent criminals from visiting Knightsbridge. In parallel, support rehabilitation programmes such as addiction programmes and priority recruitment.

7. How are sustainability and environmental concerns being addressed on your high street? What further steps could be taken to create greener, more sustainable high streets?

Research indicates that both consumers and investors place increasing importance on genuine sustainability credentials of the places they visit and goods and services that they consume.

The Mayor of London, RBKC and Westminster City Council have declared climate emergencies and have strategies for climate mitigation, adaptation and resilience. The public realm proposals in the Knightsbridge Place Strategy will play a key role in ensuring that Knightsbridge contributes to mitigating carbon emissions and is also resilient and more able to adapt to extreme weather conditions due to the additional greening and sustainable drainage measures.

Brompton Road was recorded as breaching the hourly legal limit for nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) for the whole of 2017 by 18 January of the same year. Whilst pollution levels have reduced in recent years as traffic levels have been impacted by pandemic-related changes, there is still cause for concern in the area.

Only 55% of commercial buildings in Knightsbridge have Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) ratings of 'C' or above. No buildings have an 'A' rating, and 16% have a very poor rating of 'G' or 'F'. Greater clarity from planners that measures to reduce emissions and energy use take precedence over heritage considerations, and also extending and fast-tracking programmes such as the Mayor of London's Business Climate Challenge and Green Business Action London's Better Future Programmes to accelerate retrofitting of buildings is encouraged.