



SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

High streets in towns and small cities: summary of committee visit to Staines-upon-Thames

On Tuesday 21 May 2024, the Built Environment Committee undertook a visit to Staines-upon-Thames. The visit consisted of two roundtable discussions and a walking tour of Staines-upon-Thames town centre.

The following Members took part in the visit:

- Lord Moylan (Chair)
- Baroness Andrews
- Lord Bailey of Paddington
- Baroness Miller of Chilthorne Domer
- Baroness Warwick of Undercliffe

At the first roundtable, the committee met with:

- Daniel Mouawad, Chief Executive of Spelthorne Borough Council
- Jack Wagstaff, Chief Officer and Board Executive of the North West Surrey Health & Care Alliance
- Neil Orpwood, Associate Director for healthcare at HLM Architects
- Jackie Taylor, Group Head of Neighbourhood Services, Spelthorne Borough Council
- Sian Bowen, Principal Asset Manager, Spelthorne Borough Council

At the second roundtable and on the walking tour, the committee met with:

- Joana Santos, BID Manager at Visit Staines
- Andy Edmeads, Marketing Manager at Visit Staines
- Gary Little, Elmsleigh Centre Manager
- Joanna Hall, Two Rivers Centre Manager
- Paul Millner, Owner Lewis Furniture
- Steven Harvey, Owner Oasis Estate Agent
- Tony Woodward and Vanessa Kane, Talking Tree



Background and future of the high street

The committee undertook two short walking tours of Staines Town Centre and heard about the background of the high street.

Staines town centre has a mix of independent and chain retailers alongside a leisure and hospitality offering. The town centre is dominated by two shopping centres. The local authority-owned Elmsleigh Centre is a more traditional indoor shopping centre. The second, the Two Rivers Shopping Centre, was built in the 1990s by Westfield and is an outdoor shopping centre with a large surface car park in the middle. The high street had been pedestrianised for at least 25 years, and it hosted a market on Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays which drove up footfall in the town centre. The centre was described as having a strong ‘evening’ economy but had no night clubs or other features of the nighttime economy, through the choice of the local authority.

Historically, the main axis of the town had run from east to west along the high street; however, the opening of the Elmsleigh Shopping Centre and Two Rivers Shopping Centre at a crossroads with the high street had shifted the main walking route to north to south. A local business owner noted that this did have some impact on footfall at the farther ends of the high street, but most felt that visitors shopped the whole town centre: “People come to Staines, not to the Elmsleigh or Two Rivers Centre.” The local authority owned roughly half of the properties in the town centre with the roads managed by Surrey County Council.

Local business owners viewed Staines as a successful town centre, especially in comparison with other local towns. There were few empty units in the town centre, and those that had become vacant were in contract or had planning applications under consideration. It was felt that the town centre did not look run down, compared with competitor towns such as Woking or Walton-on-Thames.

Future of high streets

Town centres are evolving and the national story of changes in consumer preferences to more hospitality and leisure options on the high street was mirrored in Staines-upon-Thames: “You can’t rely on retail forevermore”. It was emphasised that a mix of uses on the high street was key and that high streets needed to be places where “you can get your coffee and your MRI”. Beyond a changing mix of businesses, steps were being taken to introduce more housing on or near the high street. This need for mixed use was reflected in the decisions of shopping centre managers, one of whom acknowledged that they consider the wider balance of business offerings when seeking tenants for a vacant property – ensuring the space does not become too dominated by one type of business. New apartment buildings were planned for behind the Elmsleigh Shopping Centre, a mixed-use development was being pursued for the former Debenhams site and vacant space above shops was being turned into housing. This was viewed as a positive and local businesses owners were confident that it would boost footfall on the high street: “We will essentially be their corner shop”.



The role of luck and timing

The committee heard that Staines-upon-Thames had been somewhat lucky in both the retailers who took new leases on the high street as businesses began to go into administration and the timings of some store closures. For example, there had been efforts to secure a Primark store on the high street for many years, as it draws in younger customers, and discussions about a potential site on the high street had begun. However, the deal finally began to move forward at conveniently the same time as BHS closed and left a large empty unit. The centre manager noted that, if Primark had already committed to another site, it would have been difficult to find another appropriate retailer to take over the BHS store given its size and the Elmsleigh Centre would have had difficulty in repurposing the space. Furthermore, whilst the centre managers noted that they had sought Boden, LK Bennet, and other major multiplier stores on the high street for years, they had been unsuccessful. Whilst disappointed at the time, this had subsequently protected the high street from suffering substantial vacancies when those types of outlets reduced their high street presence.

Role of local authority asset management

Spelthorne Borough Council is a large commercial asset owning local authority. Many of its purchases were financed by a £1 billion loan from the Public Work Loans Board. It currently holds eight buildings both across the borough and in Reading and Hammersmith. Attendees from Spelthorne Borough Council viewed this a successful part of the borough's plans. The buildings provided a £50 million commercial revenue stream which covered the management of the buildings, contributed to reserves and subsidised discretionary services as well as delivering loan repayments with interest to the Government. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities appointed a Best Value Inspector in May 2024 to carry out a Best Value Review.

The council attributed their success in managing commercial assets to having internal experts with commercial expertise and a commercial mindset; having locked in at an average of 2.3 per cent interest rate over 50 years; and, ensuring that investments were within the local area where it knew the market. It was noted that the Government may not want to promote this model to other local authorities who may struggle to replicate this success if they did not have a suitably commercial mindset.

Elmsleigh Centre

Spelthorne Borough Council completed its purchase of the Elmsleigh Shopping Centre in 2020. It was 100 per cent let and, despite a 20 per cent reduction in footfall since the Covid-19 pandemic, there had been an increase in footfall of 5 per cent in 2023. The committee heard that owning the centre allowed the borough council to make a commercial return, but also make choices based on what will stimulate local vitality and support the community. The former Decathlon Store had been replaced with a work hub and youth hub and the upper floor was being



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used to support a range of community activities. In 2025, a new library would open in the former store including a museum, a citizen's advice centre and community meeting rooms. These activities helped to drive footfall to the area and the location meant they were easily accessible to residents.

Leisure Centre

The council would shortly be opening a new Passivhaus leisure centre for the borough. It would cost c£48 million and had been entirely funded by the local authority. The scheme would use 70 per cent less energy than the old building and therefore the authority therefore expected to recoup the costs in approximately a decade, depending on energy price movements.

The Cavell Centre

The committee heard that the provision of health services on the high street could have a significant impact on footfall. We heard that 10 per cent of all journeys made in Surrey were either a resident going to a health care appointment or a member of NHS staff going to work. Redirecting some of these journeys to high street or town centre sites by relocating health services could have a positive knock-on impact on local businesses and deliver a better service to residents.

In January 2021, NHS Surrey Heartlands was successful in a bid to build one of six NHS Cavell Centres. The centres were intended to bring together health and social care services into one building, including the co-location of GP practices, dental practices, and GP support. Following a review of potential locations, Spelthorne Borough Council, as part of the NW Surrey Alliance, planned to deliver the new centre, alongside new homes, and business services, on the Oast House site near to the town centre. £3.2 million, including £250,000 from the NHS, was spent on getting the site to planning permission. At that point the Government informed the Alliance that the capital funding was no longer available but may become available following a 2025 spending review. This was viewed as impractical. Attendees understood that the funding had been reprioritised to efforts that would increase the speed of delivering of hospital improvements.

Subsequently, the Oast House Cavell Centre project had stalled as the rise in costs of materials and labour in the time since the plans were made would likely prohibitive its development. It may be possible to deliver a similar type of project upon completion of the new leisure centre, following the demolition of the old building.

Reflecting on the process and working with central government, attendees were disappointed about the removal of capital funding and shared difficulties in working with the Government: "The machinery of state is obstructive." It was felt that the wider benefits of Cavell Centre developments in delivering housing and town centre regeneration were not appreciated by the Department for Health and Social Care, which looked at the project solely through the health lens and did not necessarily care if any other benefits were delivered. This was compounded by



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the difficulty of quantifying wider social benefits. Attendees felt that the significant time and resources that had to be invested without a secure funding route for the capital development itself was wasteful and the NHS capital regime lacked the commercial flexibility to enable it to act as a catalyst for wider public development. The process had undermined their confidence in joint working across government departments.

The impact of out-of-town shopping

Spelthorne Borough Council was described as having a “uniquely tight planning policy” which restricted out-of-town shopping centres. Many attendees, especially those from local businesses, considered this a central feature of the success of Staines. Camberley was cited as a local town which had been significantly impacted by a large out-of-town M&S store. In Staines, the “out of towners are in town”.

The council’s approach to planning for the Two Rivers centre in particular was praised. By not permitting a roof to be placed on the development, it forced the shopping centre to have a different look and feel to the Elmsleigh Centre and made it blend more seamlessly into the high street. The centre manager acknowledged that, if it were built today, the design may have sought to include the two rivers more prominently in the design and include more outside seating but, she nonetheless felt it had aged well.

Working with each other

All attendees emphasised the importance of partnership working. It was notable that throughout the roundtable with local businesses and the Business Improvement District (BID) attendees regularly used the word ‘we’ to describe activities being run across the town (even those attendees who perhaps would traditionally be viewed as competitors). Events were organised on the high street throughout the year by the BID, individual businesses and the shopping centres, but there was an emphasis on advertising these as community initiatives rather than being linked to a specific company.

Working with businesses to try and maintain the offer within the town centre was emphasised by the local authority. Spelthorne Borough Council had willingly given up M&S’s lease in the Elmsleigh Centre early to facilitate a move for the company, even though it was in the competitor shopping centre, because it viewed keeping the business in the town centre as a greater priority and necessary to maintain footfall on the high street which would in turn benefit their businesses.

Beyond working with local businesses, it was emphasised that understanding the wants and needs of the community was paramount. The borough council, along with other public sector groups (the NHS, Surrey County Council) were central in driving change on the high street and delivering successful projects like the hoped-for Cavell Centre.



Parking

The importance of available parking was emphasised by nearly all attendees at both roundtables. Surface parking in the centre was more successful than multi-storeys as it was easier to navigate, and customers felt it was safer. It was noted that on weekends there could be traffic jams as people queued for a vacant spot in the Two Rivers car park, despite there being free and cheaper parking available behind the Elmsleigh Centre in a multistorey. The convenience of town centre parking, with both shopping centres and the high street within a 500m walk, was considered a key part of the area's success. The income from the Two Rivers car park formed a substantial portion of the landlord's income.