

## **FROM GREY TO GREEN: REPURPOSING LONDON'S STREETS**

### **SUMMARY OF PRESENTATIONS AND DISCUSSION, 20 May 2021**

#### **Stephen Edwards, Director of Communications, Living Streets**

- It is an exciting time for walking with walk to school week, healthy streets, and active travel all growing in importance.
- Behaviour change, with more people interested in walking and healthy lifestyles, should lead to infrastructure change with improvements to streets.
- Recent years have seen record Government investment in active travel initiatives.
- A reflection of growing consensus over benefits of walking for health and the environment and the opportunities this brings in terms of levelling up health, economic and social inequalities.
- But constantly need to demonstrate the case and challenge the myths, eg no evidence of impact of making streets safer for walkers on emergency vehicle response times, and car-journeys now back at pre-pandemic levels. Electric cars are not the solution as electricity still has to be generated and charging points can add to street clutter which can be a challenge for people with disabilities.
- Still too many pedestrian deaths caused by drivers, as well as new evidence of deaths due to air pollution; and around 40% of people do not meet recommended levels of physical activity.
- The way to increase active journeys is to strategically plan around the needs and challenges faced by particular groups .
- We need to create more parklets and pocket parks, as well as repurpose parking spaces to improve streets and reclaim the grey for green.
- The recent London Living Streets 'Central London Footways' network is a great starting point.
- We need to give politicians courage by giving voice to quieter sections of the community and developing effective communications along with our campaigns.

#### **Alice Roberts, Head of Campaigns, CPRE London**

- Campaigning on greyspace, such as unnecessary car parks, roads, street parking, is increasingly important in towns and cities.
- We need to make better use of this space to provide housing, increase green spaces, and promote healthier streets.
- Improving our public realm can also help manage rainfall and temperature, and improve visual amenity - we would all prefer to live in a park rather than a car park.
- Our report last year 'Parking Transformed' demonstrates how improvements can be made.
- But there are growing pressures for major, car dependent development in London's Green Belt, eg in Hounslow around Heathrow and Enfield, even though there are huge opportunities to make better use of existing developed land.
- We are promoting local action to improve streets for people and nature by reducing greyspace with new plans for parklets, tree planting and public realm.
- With local elections coming up in May next year we have put out a call to action to identify locations for street greening. We are encouraging people to develop a vision for changes to local streets and town centres, maybe even create a parklet outside your home or estate, and call on local councillors to work to make these ideas a reality.
- Want to start in our own neighbourhood, at the end of St John St where there is a wide expanse of unnecessary tarmac on a site that was once the location of a fine public building, much of which could be converted to a green, pedestrianised public realm for the benefit of local residents and workers.

#### **Ben Connor, Green Infrastructure Team, Greater London Authority**

- The GLA have a strong interest in making London a greener city. It has historically developed and stood by policies to protect and enhance the city's green spaces.
- Greening the city is as much about social justice, addressing health inequalities and lack of access to green space, as about the environment for its own sake. Over half of Londoners live in areas of green space deficiency - more than 400 metres from a public green space.

- With a growing population and associated housing pressures, improving access to green space will become even more important and more of a challenge.
- While the GLA has no direct control over the provision and use of green space it can exert influence in a number of ways, including through the London Environment Strategy and the London Plan which seeks to protect the Green Belt from development and promote urban greening through a 'green infrastructure approach' with more street trees, sustainable drainage, green roofs, street parklets.
- When it comes to repurposing streets and street greening, there is also the Mayor's Transport Strategy which has a target of encouraging a major modal shift with a target of over 80% of journeys to be by sustainable or active travel modes by 2041, and promotes the concept of 'Healthy Streets'.
- Following recent research by the National Trust that argued for more investment in green infrastructure, the GLA has commissioned new research by consultants Vivid Economics and Barton Willmore - to be published shortly - who are looking at the potential benefits of costed interventions in 3 London boroughs to improve health outcomes.
- Funding will be available to level up access to urban green spaces through investing in such projects as new pocket parks and green walking routes and making recent 'Streetspace' interventions permanent.
- The Mayor wants to maximise opportunities to make London a greener and more climate resilient city.

#### **Makaela Gilchrist and Will Sandy, Landscape Designers, The Edible Bus Stop**

- The overarching aims of their landscape design practice is to promote grassroots greening to increase biodiversity.
- See themselves as 'cross-disciplinary creatives', taking bleak sites and making them beautiful.
- Dalston Curve Garden is a good example of what can be created from a small, unloved, hidden space.
- 'Guerilla gardening' also has a part to play and links with the thinking behind the 'edible bus stop'
- Keen on the idea of 'reframing spaces' by encouraging debate and asking what might people like to see instead of wasted, unattractive greyspace in the future.
- Like to open up discussion with unusual methods such as street performers, or even an 'eco-friendly' fashion show in unused parking bays. Such cultural activities can act as catalysts for change and conversation.
- International experience helps inform urban design interventions such as the 'catalyst cube', an adaptable, interactive, exhibition space which invites people to cross thresholds they wouldn't normally cross.
- Such physical interventions can become assets for communities and local authorities to test ideas, engage citizens, encourage conversations and get things moving in the right direction.

#### **Sarah Berry, Local Campaigner**

- It is important to encourage local community action to support the extension of healthy streets.
- Local experience of promoting a Low Traffic Neighbourhood in South London has been informative and encouraging.
- Need communities to reclaim a sense of ownership of public space to encourage greater care, eg by reducing the occurrence of fly tipping. In general, the less space that is provided for cars encourages greater community responsibility for the space.
- Has found that communities can demonstrate considerable energy and creativity around tackling problems associated with greyspace and excessive traffic.
- Sensible to take a multifaceted approach that aims to reach as many audiences as possible, taking account of different motivations and meeting people on the ground 'where they are at'.
- Interesting thought-experiments would be to consider what if greater street greening was seen as a health policy to support the NHS? What if it was an economic argument? What if it was a measure to promote ageing with dignity?
- Ultimately, we need to encourage people away from using cars to alternative ways of getting around. Electric cars by themselves won't reduce particulate pollution caused by brake dust and tyre erosion. Street charging points can also be a hindrance to pedestrians.

#### **KEY POINTS FROM DISCUSSION**

- Need to get better at persuading local politicians to have the courage to deliver solutions.

- We must question whether we can run an efficient, liveable city with so many cars on the road.
- Community led solutions are the key to progress and gaining local support.
- The 'right to light' is an important issue that should not be forgotten when considering reuse of greyspace.
- We should always take a 'landscape first' approach to urban design interventions.
- Do we have enough data and evidence to support the case for street greening, healthy streets, modal shift? GLA has lots of data on these issues and is generating more through new research.
- Need to consider wider environmental stresses, such as noise pollution as well as air pollution.
- Centric Lab at UCL has carried out some interesting research on these issues.
- Impact of excessive traffic and pollution on deprived communities, along with lack of access to public and private green spaces (such as gardens), makes this a major social justice issue.

#### **FINAL THOUGHTS FROM SPEAKERS**

- We should be guided by the 'art of the possible' - small scale interventions to improve everyday journeys can make a huge cumulative contribution.
- We should demonstrate how to make wonderful, green, walkable neighbourhoods using case studies such as redevelopment of the Enfield retail park.
- We need to value green infrastructure in the same way we value other forms of infrastructure such as sewerage.
- We should learn from international experience and case studies such as the wonderful New York Highline.
- We need to engage audiences from different cultural backgrounds to learn from different perspectives and build broader alliances for change.