

Local government network blog

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High street regeneration: how a council boosted a revamp for local businesses

Waltham Forest council has invested millions in to breathe new life into its Leyton high street and win a London Planning award



📍 Leyton High Road recently received a London Planning award. Photograph: Waltham Forest council

In a time of austerity where we are seeing what has been dubbed the death of the high street, regeneration work is not always a top priority for councils. Spending money to help businesses and provide residents with better high streets is often considered too much of a gamble.

However, at Waltham Forest council we have decided to put money into this area. As a result earlier this year Leyton **won best town centre project at the London Planning awards** and it has been heralded in national newspapers as the Notting Hill of East London. This is thanks to its pastel shaded parades of shops and burgeoning cafe culture.

Since then Waltham Forest council has rolled our similar redevelopment projects to a further nine high streets throughout the borough, investing £9m in total.

The leader of Waltham Forest council Chris Robbins thinks the success of Leyton is enough to inspire confidence and that more projects like this are needed in the area. He lives near Leyton High Road and was the main driving force behind the transformation.

"We got it right in Leyton because we worked with the businesses," he says.

"It would have been impossible without them buying into the idea and working closely with the architects and designers. Obviously as individual businesses they had to agree to changes to their shop fronts."

Our strategy in Leyton relied on a consistent look and feel; the signs above shops were made a uniform size and small changes such as having all shops bring shutters inside windows created a different atmosphere.

The council invested £850,000 in the shop front improvements off the back of a £2.25m facelift deriving from the Olympic and Paralympic Games that saw extensive renewal and replacement of pavements, road surfaces and street furniture.

Robbins says comparisons to Notting Hill smack a bit of "journalistic licence". His plan was to make sure that the identity and tradition of Leyton was retained. "In essence regeneration should be about changing places so that people use them in a new and different way. But it is important to recognise that the relationship people have with their high street has changed," Robbins says.

The question for councils is what place high streets now have in society. In Waltham Forest we believe that these areas have something unique to offer. Traditional high streets sit as a stark contrast to the chrome and glass of large shopping centres.

We have helped businesses make the most of what they have to offer, and make their own improvements. Outlets have chosen to capitalise on investment differently; from a dress shop constructing new changing rooms to a restaurant adding an extension.

Princess, a boutique on Leyton High Road, is one of many shops to have benefited. The family-owned business, run by Penny Philippou and her daughter, sells evening wear, bridal wear and accessories.

Philippou says, "We've had so many compliments on our shop front and it's attracting more customers thanks to the changes. The shop front was totally restored and repainted. New window shutters were installed inside the shop, allowing evening browsers to view the display at night and making the high road more attractive and safer."

Councils cannot prop up failing businesses or paper over the cracks of an out-dated business model but we can facilitate and stimulate change by providing leadership and help high streets fulfil their potential.

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