Dear Councillor Bowman,

The Retail Mix & Future of the Walworth Rd.

Many thanks for attending the recent Walworth Society meeting and taking part in the discussion about the future of the Walworth Rd and its retail mix and offer as a town centre. The retail mix of the Walworth Rd and its perceived lack of fit with the needs of the local area has long been an issue. This has been exacerbated latterly by a proliferation of shops which are a positive dis-benefit to the area and our inability as a community to work with officers to curb their continued expansion.

More generally, the Walworth Road is subject to some of the problems endemic to all high streets in the UK at present but other factors also exist which will affect its future both as threats (eg the redevelopment of the Heygate Estate and the development of retail north of Wansey St) but also opportunities (eg the creation of new housing on the site of the Stead St car park and the redevelopment of the Manor Place Depot site). We would be very keen to take part in and contribute to any conversation which:

• highlights the struggles which high streets such as the Walworth Rd face
• seeks to develop strategies for the Walworth Road as a town centre which allows it both to flourish and also better to reflect the needs of local residents
• ensures that Southwark Council understands and makes use of the existing powers it has to curb saturation of establishments and considers what additional powers are needed.

We would, therefore, like to outline a number of issues which we feel that an Overview and Scrutiny Committee investigation might be able to address.

1. The Retail Mix

• Probably the greatest cause for concern is the lack of protection communities have against certain types of retail. In our area we perceive a saturation of units devoted to:
  - betting/gambling
  - high interest/pay-day loans
  - pawnbroking.
• The issue of betting shops in this area was assessed in detail in a report in November 2011 by the member for Camberwell and Peckham and makes a number of references to position of the Walworth Rd.
Our concern is that overall we are unable to defend ourselves against saturation by a range of retailers who exist principally to remove money from an area with little gain. This issue has been highlighted most recently in relation to the targeting of poorer areas via high-stakes gambling machines (http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2013/jan/04/fixed-odds-betting-terminals-poorest-communities).

In relation to betting shops we are confused that while other shops appear to be closed by 5pm on a Sunday, betting shops are able to stay open far later even on a Sunday.

The current range of retail is also problematic. There is a perception (which perhaps needs to be backed up by research) that the current range/mix of retailers fails to meet the retail and service needs of the surrounding communities. This issue is highlighted by a recent statistic which highlighted how little of the spend by people in the area (it may have been across Southwark as a whole) is actually spent in the area. What more can be done to ensure that local people are able to spend a greater proportion of their disposable income in the local area with all of the economic and job creation benefits that can have?

There is perceived a shortage of independent businesses which can deliver both a greater sense of variety to a high street. Locally run businesses also have the advantage of employing greater numbers of people in relation to turnover than multiples.

What is being done/can be done to attract entrepreneurial activities (whether through retail starts-up/trader start-ups of new non-retail small businesses. Can a programme involving affordable rents/rates for help encourage new independent businesses?

2. The Future of High Streets/the Walworth Rd.

We understand that the trading environment for both retailers and traders is particularly harsh at present. Following a poor Christmas trading period, a number of retailers are struggling to pay their rents and traders are giving up or looking to give up their pitches on East St.

We are interested to understand what strategies are being employed to support struggling businesses?

The Walworth Road faces particular problems. While we understand that the retail environment for all high streets/town centres change over time and they need to be sufficiently resilient to deal with change the Walworth Rd is particularly exposed for a number of reasons. These include:

- The redevelopment of the Heygate Estate and long-term loss of business from the residents who formerly lived there.
- The loss of car parking spaces provided at the Stead St car park. This will of course be balanced by the opportunity from the residents of the new homes.
- The longer term threat from the regeneration of the Heygate Estate and the plans for the creation of significant amounts of new retail coupled with the regeneration of the Elephant & Castle Shopping Centre.
- The long-term after-effects of the riots in the summer of 2011 and the relatively small amounts of support that the area has received compared to places such as Peckham, Tottenham and Croydon.

- It would appear that the Walworth Rd retail offer will need to cater better for larger numbers of people who are arriving on foot and by public transport as considerable amounts of new residential is created and land given over to car parking is redeveloped in favour of homes.

- What analysis is being undertaken of the long-term competitive position of the Walworth Rd as a town centre and how it is to both respond to these threats but also be in a position to maximise the opportunity of many new residents who will settle here in the next decade.

3. The Use of Powers.

- Overall there is a sense that planning officers appear to believe their powers are very limited despite evidence that other authorities have been more pro-active in making use of powers to address saturation of establishments.

- We would like to officers to be questioned in terms of what powers they think they lack and what additional powers would help to address the situation on the Walworth Road. The need for additional powers would then form the basis for dialogue with central government, MPs etc about potential legislation.

We hope that this analysis is of value and would stress our interest in working with Southwark Council on an issue that is both dear to our hearts but also fundamental to the future prosperity of the local area.

Yours sincerely,

Jeremy Leach – Chair Walworth Society