

The civilising influence of the grey pound

Making Richmond's shopping centre safer, cleaner and more pleasant was a target that the Lib Dems first got in their sights when they took control of the borough in the eighties.

Pedestrianisation was then emerging as a way to make life more civilised for shoppers and to reduce accidents and air pollution and the possibility was explored.

Two decades later they are still dipping their toes in the water and meeting the same frosty reactions from traders and residents' associations whose reactionary instincts come to the fore every time a planner puts pencil to paper - or today mouse to screen - to exclude or limit through traffic.

The latest £3million transformation which has been devised with Transport for London contains the same very sensible and practical elements. Understandably the influential residents and traders lobbies are cautious, fearing that any plan to seal off the Church Street junction and restrict traffic through George Street will force

drivers to divert around what is probably London's most perfect village green and destroy amenity and hit house prices.

Clarence Street traders are worried that small shops will be affected should vehicles be banned - although all the evidence suggests that long-term businesses in traffic free areas boom.

Richmond has so much going for it as a "shopping experience" (as current jargon would have). Like the King's Road or central Hampstead, it combines an old world charm with a chic glamour that gives a sense of occasion for all who visit.

Yet after dark it is a magnet for the binge drinking young - an influx so overwhelming that it squeezes out the middle-aged middle class whose presence discourages thuggery and laddery more effectively than any police patrol. And this is at the core of the night time lawlessness that is widespread.

Once aunts and granmas feel it is not safe to take an evening stroll you are in trouble, as has been witnessed all over the country

from Nottingham to Glasgow, from Exeter to Manchester. This has been the situation with Richmond since the seventies and is getting steadily worse.

Making it attractive for grey heads to mingle with spiky gels is the key to stamping out drunkenness and booziness and needs brave and radical thinking. This needs to be embraced in the current moves to improve conditions there.

There are ways of excluding through traffic altogether from between 10am and midnight in the Quadrant, George Street and Hill Rise which would be represent a tremendous green advance. True it cannot be done overnight, but Transport for London's proposals are moving gradually in that direction.

It is possible to get to Richmond Hill and East Twickenham by using the Chertsey Road and Richmond and Twickenham Bridges. An excellent bus and tube service exists with the bus garage and tube and station well able to get people in and out for shopping and

socialising.

Bernard Russell once wrote that the key to improving the fabric of our society lay in enlightened self-interest and there is wealth of wisdom and professional know-how in organisations like the Friends of Richmond Green and the Richmond Society.

But sometimes the Great and the Good who occupy the houses and shops that fringe the town encompass conservative factions that tend to myopia.

They would be the first to agree that motorists who want to drive through rather than drive to the entertainment that are on offer need to be forced into retreat. But the measures required to bring this about will have some unfortunate side effects and will certainly take many years to bring real improvements.

There is a danger too that in extending traffic restraint measures and making it more attractive to people to sip a glass of wine, down a pint of beer or chat over a cup of coffee on the pavements and lanes

could attract even more roughnecks.

So the kind of work now being proposed needs to be coupled with more penalties to discourage breweries' happy hours and other insidious methods to tempt the young to drink not wisely but too well. Planners need to recognise that tacky takeaways and late night venues further encourage irresponsible lawless cavorting.

We live in an age when the grey pound is more powerful than it ever was and the percentage of over forties is growing. Creating the kind of conditions to get them out in the evenings with their families and grandchildren is the key to cutting crime and spearheading civilised values.

Let us hope that reaction to the consultation process currently being embarked upon will recognise this. Richmond remains a jewel in London's crown - and if we cannot get things right here there is little hope for the capital's less fortunate hinterland.