



Social distancing and the future of the high street

APPG on Customer Service meeting, 20th July 2020

This meeting was a virtual meeting, held on Zoom

In attendance:

- Philip Davies MP, Chair
- Chris Evans MP, Co-Chair
- Liz Twist MP (Labour) (Blaydon)
- Jo Gideon MP (Conservative) (Stoke-on-Trent Central)
- Baroness Harris of Richmond DL (Liberal Democrat)
- Helen Aoife Iliff – Medical colleague of Baroness Finlay of Llandaff
- Rifka Chakkalakal – Head of Public Affairs, Retail, Boots
- Anne Stoddart – Commercial Director at the Institute of Customer Service
- Joanna Causon – Chief Executive at the Institute of Customer Service
- Andrew Caplan – Retail & Pharmacy Operations Director, Boots
- Catherine Rutter – Managing Director Connect, Lloyds Banking Group
- Gareth Morgan – Director, Cavendish Advocacy
- Oliver Hazell – Senior Account Manager, Cavendish Advocacy
- Charlotte Ridley-Rundle – Monitoring Assistant, Cavendish Advocacy
- Kelsey Pienaar - Executive Assistant to Joanna Causon, Institute of Customer Service

Philip Davies opened the session by thanking all in attendance and explained that discussion would look at the future of high street, especially in relation to social distancing and its impact on customer service. He then opened the floor for Jo Causon, Chief Executive of the Institute of Customer Service.

Contributions from invited speakers

Jo Causon, Chief Executive of The Institute of Customer Service

- Jo welcomed guests and explained that, from the Institute's perspective, the future of the high street is a key topic.
- Explained that the high street has faced challenges prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly with the shift to online, although this has accelerated in importance.
- Argued that this presents an opportunity to think about reinventing the high street.
- Noted that the pandemic has seen communities brought closer together and greater support for localism.
- However, she said almost daily job losses on the high street counterbalances this.
- Spoke about the significant number of major brands that have closed stores on the high street, noting that this affects whether people want to visit the high street.
- Said that some parts of country are seeing more buoyant high streets than other parts.
- Noted the challenge presented by social distancing and the compulsory wearing of face masks in stores.
- Revealed the Institute remains positive, believing that there is a significant place for both the physical and the virtual, with physical bearing particular importance for supporting local communities.
- Introduced the Institute's 'Backing our essential workers: Service with respect' campaign, explaining its call for a change in the law to recognise abuse against service professionals, for training for service professionals, and its aim to encourage customers to think about own behaviour.
- Revealed that retailers typically rank in the top 50 in the UKCSI.

Philip Davies MP

- Thanked Jo and welcomed Catherine Rutter.

Catherine Rutter, Managing Director Connect, Lloyds Banking Group

- Explained that her role affords her responsibility for contact centres and processing areas at Lloyds Banking Group.
- Noted how empty the streets have been both in cities and smaller high streets.



- Explained that her work during Covid-19 has predominantly focused on how to enable colleagues to work from home.
- She explained that this has been a major consideration for Lloyds, as the company had 200 staff members of their workforce of 7000 working from home before Covid-19 struck. This figure now stands at 4500.
- Revealed that Lloyds has been conscious of still needing to have branches open and that they have worked on widening opening hours.
- Said Lloyds saw an initial increase in customers' use of online services but also noticed that some customers still want human contact.
- Explained that Lloyds has been training telephone operators, given certain customers do want to speak to someone.
- Noted the general success of calls with these customers.
- Said Lloyds has utilised their branch resources to help with making calls, with telephone operators sitting in branches instead of larger contact centres.
- Revealed that predominantly a younger age group of colleagues work within their contact centres.
- Said Lloyds has kept city centre sites open predominantly in Leeds and that the bank is looking to see if colleagues could walk to their local branch to work rather than commute by public transport to central offices.
- Argued it helps some colleagues to start to come back into the office for their own personal health and wellbeing and that not everyone wants to work from home.

Andrew Caplan, Retail & Pharmacy Operations Director, Boots

- Revealed that Boots had been at the eye of the storm at the beginning of lockdown however, they have kept the vast majority of their stores open.
- Said that, particularly from a pharmacy perspective, he has seen the importance of community during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Noted that local pharmacies are really important for vulnerable and elderly customers.
- Argued that Being able to adapt services will be increasingly important for companies with a high street presence.
- Noted that Boots has seen a quick move to virtual services, revealing that virtual health and medical support has helped where access to GPs has been harder under lockdown.
- Spoke of a 'good news' story that colleagues arriving at their local pharmacy to work have been met with thank you notes attached to the front door.
- Said Boots has seen an increase in customers picking up parcels from high street branches and that this trend will continue.
- Spoke of the launch of the online consultation service as part of the relationship between Boots and Macmillan.
- Noted that Boots expects both virtual and face to face services to continue past the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Revealed that Boots has seen changes in customers' priorities, with their primary concern now being safety. Said Boots is trying to ensure this.
- Argued that the pandemic has also shown the role of big brands in local communities and society in general, and that this will need to be continue.
- Said that Boots has opened up its consultation rooms and safe spaces to vulnerable people.
- On future challenges, he spoke of social distancing and operating during the busier winter period. He also noted the difficulty face masks pose to those who are hard of hearing.

Contributions from attendees

Philip Davies MP

- Thanked the speakers for their answers to his questions and posed a question to Catherine regarding MPs' concern about banks reducing the number of branches in small towns. He asked if banks would use Covid-19 as justification for closing more branches.

Catherine Rutter, Managing Director Connect, Lloyds Banking Group

- Explained that Lloyds looks at footfall regarding opening and closing branches.
- However, she said that Lloyds has not seen a particular change in this from a Covid-19 angle.



- Noted that Lloyds instead accept that their buildings exist and work on making better use of that existing space, as some floors have gone unused for years.
- Said this has been particularly successful when getting branch colleagues to take calls.
- Explained that Lloyds' approach has focused on the community, especially in relation to colleagues not wanting to commute as far anymore.

Andrew Caplan, Retail & Pharmacy Operations Director, Boots

- Added that Boots has always been a champion of the high street, noting that the business has 2500 branches.
- Revealed that Boots is currently only seeing 50% of the footfall on the high street compared to pre-Covid-19.
- Said that multiple branches closing does make high streets less attractive for customers.
- Noted he hopes to see that the drive to shopping locally will make some high streets busier.
- Explained that Boots will always be opening and closing branches, revealing that they recently opened a new branch in a retail park.
- For pharmacies, he said, the location is important as they provide access to healthcare.

Philip Davies MP

- Asked Andrew how Boots is measuring customer satisfaction ratings at this time.

Andrew Caplan, Retail & Pharmacy Operations Director, Boots

- Explained that Boots doesn't use mystery shoppers as they have better sources of feedback, including asking pharmacy customers to respond online, social media, and random till surveys.

Catherine Rutter, Managing Director Connect, Lloyds Banking Group

- Added that Lloyds uses an external company, with opportunities for customers to give feedback at the end of a call or to complete surveys online.
- Noted that customers were appreciative of Lloyds keeping branches open.
- Also found during the Covid-19 pandemic that customers were happy for vulnerable customers to be prioritised in queues on the phone.

Philip Davies MP

- Opened the floor to attendees to ask questions of the speakers.

Helen Aoife Iliff

- Introduced her work with Baroness Finlay of Llandaff on creating a 'social distancing' badge, which identifies and protects clinically vulnerable people who have been previously shielding from Covid-19. The badge is intended as a 'polite prompt' to others to maintain a respectful distance.
- Explained that the badge has been rolled out in Wales and has seen an enormously positive response.
- Noted that the policy enables businesses to be identified as 'social distancing aware'.
- Argued that the strict concrete messaging on social distancing is off putting for many, calling for messaging to retain a focus on safety and care but also move towards empowering people with confidence to get back outside.
- Revealed that her proposals are sitting in Whitehall and conversations are ongoing with Asda and asked the speakers if they are interested in rolling them out.

Andrew Caplan, Retail & Pharmacy Operations Director, Boots

- Said that Boots wants social distancing for all customers and revealed that they are considering extending opening hours to support everyone.
- Said that Boots would certainly be interested in getting involved with supporting vulnerable people.

Helen Aoife Iliff

- Clarified that her scheme is for all people, not just vulnerable people.
- Argued that there needs to be a wider society of responsibility that is open to everyone.

Andrew Caplan, Retail & Pharmacy Operations Director, Boots

- Noted that the high street has done a very good job on this.



Catherine Rutter, Managing Director Connect, Lloyds Banking Group

- Added that, because Lloyds has kept branches open throughout the pandemic, they feel they are experts in social distancing.
- Revealed that Lloyds are talking to the National Autistic Society to see what the bank can do to better support autistic customers.

Baroness Harris of Richmond DL

- Asked Andrew what steps they are going to take when people say they cannot wear face masks because they cannot afford them.

Andrew Caplan, Retail & Pharmacy Operations Director, Boots

- Stated that it shouldn't be a retailer's job to enforce mask wearing and that Boots doesn't want to put colleagues in difficult positions if customers fail to wear one.
- Revealed that Boots has put posters on doors reminding customers of the need to wear one from Friday 24th July and have developed training for all colleagues.
- Said that Boots will provide a face mask if a customer says they have forgotten one or cannot afford one.
- Noted that Boots provides PPE to colleagues.

Baroness Harris of Richmond DL

- Asked what PPE is provided to Boots and Lloyds staff.

Andrew Caplan, Retail & Pharmacy Operations Director, Boots

- Explained that Boots has a variety of protective kit, with Perspex screens on tills, visor masks for colleagues on shop floors, and normal face masks should colleagues request one.

Catherine Rutter, Managing Director Connect, Lloyds Banking Group

- Added that, although this is not her area, Lloyds has PPE for all colleagues but wearing it is up to their discretion.
- Said they have enabled social distancing in branches and offices.
- Said she would confirm any changes in Lloyds' PPE provision to Jo.

Philip Davies MP

- Asked Boots to confirm whether their staff would intervene if a customer walks into a store without a face mask.

Andrew Caplan, Retail & Pharmacy Operations Director, Boots

- Clarified that they will remind customers of the need to wear a face mask and will provide one if a customer does not have one.
- Noted that Boots is a pharmacy providing a vital service and that some customers might not want to divulge why they are not wearing a face mask.

Jo Causon, Chief Executive of The Institute of Customer Service

- Said that this is why the Institute's 'Back our Essential Workers – Service with Respect' campaign is so important.
- Noted there is a big difference between a customer either forgetting a mask or being unable to afford one versus a customer being abusive or violent towards service professionals.
- Said organisations must protect their people in customer related roles and ensure they feel supported.
- Said we need organisations to step in where there is violent or violent abuse against staff.

Philip Davies MP

- Expressed empathy for staff that are going to have additional demands placed on them.
- Asked Andrew to feed back on how the introduction of compulsory face mask wearing goes on Friday 24th July.
- Noted that this information would be useful to feed back to Ministers.
- Said he hopes that other large retailers will help with the provision of face masks where customers cannot afford them.



Baroness Harris of Richmond DL:

- Asked Catherine whether the top banks are being sensitive to retailers who are in a difficult financial position.

Catherine Rutter, Managing Director Connect, Lloyds Banking Group

- Said that Lloyds looks at every case individually but said they have tried to be proactive in reaching out to businesses, especially SMEs.
- Revealed that Lloyds' team of relationship managers has worked hard on this, providing advice, overdraft increases, loans, and digital skills training to customers.
- Said Lloyds has seen success in supporting businesses during this time.

Jo Causon, Chief Executive of The Institute of Customer Service:

- Spoke of the importance of hubs and local community, referring to an increase in the desire to be much more connected to local community during the pandemic.
- Revealed that several organisations within the membership are thinking about this idea.
- Noted the increasing desire to work close to home.
- Something that I think is worth exploring – having high street that is mixed use.
- Referring to Catherine's point about thinking creatively about buildings and spaces, said that exploring a mixed-use high street is an idea worth exploring.
- Called on organisations to use the pandemic as an opportunity to think differently about work; rather than raging against the machine, they should work creatively with existing trends.

Philip Davies MP, Chair of the APPG, made a final request of Andrew to liaise with the Institute and the Group on how Friday 24th July goes in relation to the compulsory wearing of face masks coming into force. He then brought the meeting to a close and thanked speakers and guests.

Ends at 10:15am