

Growth Scrutiny Committee

Themed Review 2022-23

Town Centres

Chair's Introduction

Town Centres are the beating hearts of our communities. They are where people go to shop, to eat and drink, to get information, to participate in leisure, arts and cultural activities and most of all to meet up with other members of their community. With our strong emphasis on 15-minute neighbourhoods supporting and developing town centres is the focus of the councils priorities.

With all of this in mind in the summer of 2022 the Growth Scrutiny committee in Waltham Forest decided to make town centres the subject of our thematic review for 22/23. We felt that by shining a spotlight on the work on town centres and bringing in external witnesses to share best practice we could really add to the emphasis which the 15-minute neighbourhoods had put on this area.

Our decision was definitely validated by the energy and dynamism of the debates and discussions which we had over several meetings. We heard from our own council officers about the work we are already doing and we were lucky enough to have discussions with many external witnesses from organisations who are leading the work in this area. I would like to very much thank our own officers, the fantastic external witnesses and committee members for making those debates and discussions so interesting and productive.

Following on from those discussions we were able to identify areas where much of this good practice could be implemented and based on this have put together a series of key recommendations. We very much hope that these will be helpful to Waltham Forest in continuing our work to develop and support our town centres and take forward our work on 15-minute neighbourhoods.

Cllr Marie Pye

Chair of Growth Scrutiny Committee

Summary of recommendations

The Committee recommends:

Recommendation 1:

That the Council develops an evidence-based town centre strategy to guide and inform work across the borough and provide an overarching framework, ensuring:

- It is informed by data and research, including evidence of good practice on a local, regional and national level
- It allows services to measure the work that is undertaken in the borough's town centres
- It allows flexibility to take individual approaches across Town Centres, recognising that each locality may have their own identity
- That this flexibility provides opportunities to coordinate and learn from the work undertaken for each locality and how they can interact with each other
- That businesses, local communities, partners and councillors are involved in the development of the Strategy.

Recommendation 2:

That the Council seek to move beyond engagement with communities to involvement, co-production and co-design of Town Centres, particularly seeking to collaborate with existing community groups and to involve local residents in the process, to ensure each Town Centre is shaped to the local community

Recommendation 3:

That, as a pathway for increased community involvement in shaping Town Centres, services consider creating Community Improvement District(s) in Waltham Forest

Recommendation 4:

That services look for opportunities to facilitate and support community businesses

Recommendation 5:

That the Council reflect on the diversity of communities and maintain awareness that Town Centres are for numerous groups within the local community

Recommendation 6:

That the Council champion Town Centres as a social centre in the daytime, enabling it to be a resource for those that need support most. This should include working with other public sector partners, for example, health partners, children's services and leisure providers so that the services needed most are within easy reach.

Recommendation 7:

That the Council identify mechanisms to ensure diversification in High Streets and identify opportunities to make Town Centres mixed-use, this should include:

- A variety of brands, independent and local businesses
- Non-retail activities providing goods and services at different price points
- Supporting leisure and cultural activity, such as galleries, craft and music workshops and sport

Recommendation 8:

That the Council considers the compulsory purchase or rental of empty units which could then be used for incubators for new independent businesses, leisure or cultural activities.

Recommendation 9:

That the Council prioritise bringing new local businesses and enterprises into new developments in the borough and consider offering subsidies or using neighbourhood CIL as an incentive.

Recommendation 10:

That services focus on providing support around resilience for new and emerging businesses, particularly local business to ensure they are successful and able to navigate instability

Recommendation 11:

That services utilise the findings from the High Street Task Force report in Leytonstone, and build these into the Town Centre Strategy

Recommendation 12:

That services look for opportunities for to introduce affordable workspaces in our town centres and to use them as way to promote good quality employment

Background

The last three years have seen significant events that have had a profound impact on communities across the country, such as the pandemic, the climate emergency, and the cost-of-living crisis. These events have altered how communities use town centres, how often, for what and when. This means that Councils have had to frequently assess how they shape local town centres and adapt to the changing natures of these spaces.

As Waltham Forest Council recovers from the pandemic and tackles the ongoing multipronged cost-of-living crisis, whilst remaining keen to invest in local areas, it is key that Town Centres, the heart of local communities, are developed in a way that maximises the benefits across the borough. It is important to recognise that successfully developing town centres and adapting them to the requirements of local communities today can cause further positive impacts such as the creation of jobs and community cohesion.

Waltham Forest's previous Town Centre Strategy 2016-2020¹ was pre-pandemic and the Council's High Street Action Plan 2020² was an immediate response to the pandemic, therefore both approaches no longer fully capture the ever-evolving opportunities and challenges faced by the borough's Town Centres. Therefore, Growth Scrutiny Committee decided to conduct its review by first hearing from the Council on their current plans and strategies for the borough's Town Centres. Then following this at each subsequent meeting, external witnesses would be invited, to share experiences, initiatives and comment on their own successes and failures. Committee members would be able to ask questions from witnesses, to inform the development of a suitable approach to enhancing Waltham Forest's Town Centres.

Methodology

In September 2021, the Committee received a report from officers from the Regeneration team on the Council's current approach to Town Centres and outlining its future plans. The Committee then used its meetings from November 2022 to March 2023 to hear from external witnesses from a range of organisations, they received presentations and were able to ask questions from witnesses.

The Committee welcomed two witnesses at each meeting, the details for each are summarised below. A summary of the discussions had at each meeting can be found in Annex 1. The Committee would like to thank the witnesses for their valuable input into this review, and for their time they dedicated to the meeting.

¹<https://www.walthamforest.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2021-11/Town%20centre%20strategy%20and%20delivery%20plans%202016-20.pdf>

²<https://www.walthamforest.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2021-11/Waltham%20Forest%20High%20St%20Action%20Plan.pdf>

Holly Lewis – GLA

Ms Lewis is a Mayor's Design Advocate for GLA, she is involved in a variety of work around high streets and town centres and also works on the Government's High Street Task Force. Ms Lewis explained that she would be talking about the findings from a combination of these areas. Ms Lewis also explained during her presentation that the GLA were partnered with We Made That, an organisation that works exclusively for the public sector and charities and were committed to delivering public good.

Josh Cottell – Centre for London

Mr Cottell is a Research Manager at Centre for London. He explained during his presentation that Centre for London are the capital's dedicated think tank and are dedicated to developing new solutions to some of London's biggest challenges. Mr Cottell advised that he would be talking through research that was recently conducted on town centres.

Peter O'Brien – London Borough of Haringey

Mr O'Brien is the Assistant Director of Regeneration and Economic Development at the London Borough of Haringey. Mr O'Brien advised he would be talking through some of the background of high streets in Haringey and the work that was being completed, as well as offering some reflections on the challenges Haringey had come across, particularly the impact of pandemic and the recovery process from this.

Sean McLean – Sheffield City Council

Mr McLean is the Director of Regeneration of Development at Sheffield City Council. Mr McLean explained he would be talking about the Heart of the City development ongoing in Sheffield but advised that the redevelopment of Sheffield City Centre had been ongoing for around 25 years. He explained that they were currently on site of the £500 million development and would talk through some of the challenges that Sheffield had experienced, how the development was funded and what had been completed so far.

Judith O'Doherty – High Street Task Force

Ms O'Doherty is from the High Street Task Force, this was commissioned by the government in 2019 and has been set up to strengthen local leadership in high streets and town centres by providing information, advice, knowledge, and data. Ms O'Doherty advised she would be talking through work recently conducted in Leytonstone town centre, including a diagnostic report and describe the next steps in HSTF advice and support package.

Jenny Sansom – Power to Change

Ms Sansom is from Power to Change, she explained they are an independent trust that strengthens communities through community business, which works to create thriving places when local people take ownership of spaces that matter and deliver services communities need. Ms Sansom advised she would give an overview of Power

to Change's work in general and also the work done to pilot Community Improvement Districts in England.

Key Findings

The Committee recommends:

- **That the Council develops an evidence-based town centre strategy to guide and inform work across the borough and provide an overarching framework, ensuring:**
 - **It is informed by data and research, including evidence of good practice on a local, regional and national level**
 - **It allows services to measure the work that is undertaken in the borough's town centres**
 - **It allows flexibility to take individual approaches across Town Centres, recognising that each locality may have their own identity**
 - **That this flexibility provides opportunities to coordinate and learn from the work undertaken for each locality and how they can interact with each other**
 - **That businesses, local communities, partners and councillors are involved in the development of the Strategy.**

The Committee recognised early in the review that the Council were lacking a clear direction for a potential Town Centre Strategy, and that the basis of this review would be to gather evidence to help shape what the strategy could look like. The Committee heard how it was imperative to have a clear evidence based when creating the strategy that is informed by data and research. The Committee heard how it was key not only for the evidence base, but throughout the process and implementation of the strategy to involve all stakeholders, including businesses, local partners, such as the NHS, councillors, and most importantly local communities. The Committee recognised and heard from witnesses how vital it was to recognise the diversity that exists within the borough, and between different town centres. Therefore, flexibility should be built into any Town Centre Strategy to be able to navigate this diversity. The Committee noted the boroughs differences as a learning opportunity and recognised despite any differences between town centres, they could still interact in a positive way with each other. By involving key stakeholders at an early stage, the Council can ensure that services that are available across town centres are complementary, and the Council is able to utilise the assets that are already available around its town centres.

The Committee recommends:

- **That the Council seek to move beyond engagement with communities to involvement, co-production and co-design of Town Centres, particularly seeking to collaborate with existing community groups and to involve local residents in the process, to ensure each Town Centre is shaped to the local community**
- **That, as a pathway for increased community involvement in shaping Town Centres, services consider creating Community Improvement District(s) in Waltham Forest**
- **That services look for opportunities to facilitate and support community businesses**

The Committee heard from several witnesses the benefits of involving communities when re-shaping town centres. The Council could look to go beyond general forms of engagement and seek the involvement of not only existing community groups but local residents that the town centre serves. The Committee wished to explore this topic further and invited a witness from an organisation that championed this and heard a key pathway to this was through the formation of Community Improvement Districts. The Committee heard that the most successful town centres were ones that were created by and for the local community.

The Committee recommends:

- **That the Council reflect on the diversity of communities and maintain awareness that Town Centres are for numerous groups within the local community.**
- **That the Council champion Town Centres as a social centre in the daytime, enabling it to be a resource for those that need support most. This should include working with other public sector partners, for example, health partners, children's services and leisure providers so that the services needed most are within easy reach.**

The Committee recognised that each town centre may be distinct and have its own opportunities, and this was reflective of the communities it served. The Council should consider this diversity and remember that even within each town centre there will be distinct groups it needs to serve. The Council has an opportunity to create social hubs in town centres, by moving beyond retail to encouraging public sector partners to become involved in local areas to provide services that are needed by each community.

The Committee recommends:

- **That the Council identify mechanisms to ensure diversification in High Streets and identify opportunities to make Town Centres mixed-use, this should include:**
 - **A variety of brands, independent and local businesses**
 - **Non-retail activities providing goods and services at different price points**
 - **Supporting leisure and cultural activity, such as galleries, craft and music workshops and sport**
- **That the Council considers the compulsory purchase or rental of empty units which could then be used for incubators for new independent businesses, leisure or cultural activities.**

The Committee heard that it was important to maintain a variety of shops and services in town centres. Many witnesses mentioned the shift away from retail dominance to people seeking experiences from their town centres. The Council has opportunity to encourage this different use of space, particularly encouraging leisure activity, by utilising the assets it already possesses and considering the expansion of its stock.

The Committee recommends:

- **That the Council prioritise bringing new local businesses and enterprises into new developments in the borough and consider offering subsidies or using neighbourhood CIL as an incentive.**
- **That services focus on providing support around resilience for new and emerging businesses, particularly local business to ensure they are successful and able to navigate instability**

The Committee were concerned that despite there already being quite an assortment of local businesses within the borough already, many of these were struggling to survive. They were keen to learn what more the Council could do to encourage new local businesses whilst also supporting those that already exist.

The Committee recommends:

- **That services utilise the findings from the High Street Task Force report in Leytonstone, and build these into the Town Centre Strategy**

The Committee heard evidence from a witness that had already began some work in one of the boroughs town centres and thought it was crucial that any findings from this report was built into the Town Centre strategy. In addition to this, as this work was

bespoke to one area in the borough, the Council could commission this service in other areas in the borough to identify the unique opportunities in each place.

The Committee recommends:

- **That services look for opportunities for to introduce affordable workspaces in our town centres and to use them as way to promote good quality employment**

The Committee heard how thriving town centres provide an opportunity for employment for local residents, therefore by introducing workspaces at the heart of communities, in high streets and town centres, good quality employment can be encouraged.

Conclusion

The Committee is hugely grateful to the wide range of witnesses who have contributed so positively to this report, sharing their experiences, initiatives, opportunities, and challenges. Their testimony has framed the thinking for the Committee for this review and contributed to the recommendations made. Despite the variety of evidence heard, a number of key themes stood out to the Committee. One of the main objectives of this review was to establish an approach to developing a successful Town Centre strategy. The Committee were able to make a number of recommendations to the Council around how a strategy should look, and 'Strategic Approach' forms one of the themes in this review's recommendations.

A second theme that emerged from this review was around how the Council can better support business in the boroughs Town Centres. A number of witnesses offered advice and ideas around how to diversify town centres with a mixture of businesses and extra support to ensure their survival.

Finally, a central theme that emerged from this review, with testimony heard around the importance of this from nearly all the witnesses and this was around community involvement in shaping a town centre strategy. It became apparent very quickly that the key to successful town centres was to begin the process by collaborating with those its purpose was to serve – the local community. The Council already has good links with community groups and good history of engagement, however evidence from witnesses demonstrated how this could be done optimally and could lead to thriving town centres across the borough.

Annex 1 – Summary of Meetings

22 June 2022³

The Committee agreed to focus this year's thematic review on Town Centres. The Chair introduced the idea and explained this topic was discussed and received interest from the Committee the previous year. The Chair explained this would be a good opportunity to speak to expert witnesses in the area and that a variety of experts would be invited throughout the year.

21 September 2022⁴

The Committee received a report from Will Teasdale, Director of Regeneration and Delivery, this explained the approach the Council was currently taking around Town Centres. The Committee noted that the last three years had proved difficult for town centres, however there were opportunities for a locally engaged population and for businesses in the borough. The Committee noted the Council had a significant role to shape and improve town centres, this included three inter-related roles: serving local communities, places to live, work and learn, and a focus for community activity and cultural destinations.

The Committee asked if more could be done about vacant shops across the borough. Mr Teasdale recognised there were a number of shops that had been empty for a number of years, and the vast majority of these were privately owned, however the Council was actively trying to establish engagement with third party owners and landlords. The Committee asked how the Council was ensuring residents were kept safe when encouraging the night-time economy. Mr Teasdale reassured that the Council was working on improving safety in the borough, particularly during later opening hours and that the Council was working with Transport for London and Network rail to improve infrastructure and bus routes, but there are funding pressures in this area.

The Committee also asked how the Council was supporting existing local businesses. Mr Teasdale responded there has been an intensive approach to engage with as many businesses in the borough to promote initiatives and share information on how the Council is able to support them. The Committee asked officers to recognise that each town centre was unique, but also to look for opportunities to replicate success across the borough. Mr Teasdale noted the diversity that existed in the borough and stated that the Council was building on what existing businesses were already doing to increase footfall and make them a destination place. He explained that activities and events such as markets can be replicated in all parts of the borough and bring new opportunities. Mr Teasdale also noted that initiatives work best when the Council work directly with local groups.

The Committee noted that within the report, only two of the twenty initiatives listed were in the South of the borough. Also, that it appeared the Council lacked a clear

³ <https://democracy.walthamforest.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=693&MIId=5520&Ver=4>

⁴ <https://democracy.walthamforest.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=693&MIId=5521&Ver=4>

vision for a Town Centre strategy and not much progress has been made. The Committee stated that hearing from expert witnesses over the course of this committee cycle would be of great benefit to hear new ideas and initiatives.

29 November 2022⁵

This meeting the Committee heard from two external witnesses, Holly Lewis from the GLA and Josh Cottell from Centre for London. Ms Lewis noted there was three priorities that she would advise for any Council undertaking Town Centre improvement work. Firstly, 'what to do with all that space?' she said that vacancy is a problem across the country, however there was a trend that locally focused high streets were generally performing better. Ms Lewis also noted that changing social habits had an impact on town centres as people were less likely to go out to buy things anymore, but to have an experience. The second priority was 'active travel transitions,' encouraging walking, cycling, and reducing car usage – Ms Lewis noted this was something Waltham Forest were already successful in. The third and final priority was 'acting with holistic understanding and impact,' this meant recognising that high streets and town centres are an important piece of infrastructure that function as a magnet for those in the community who may need that extra support. Ms Lewis emphasised the importance of engaging meaningfully with those in the local community as town centres should be shaped for their needs.

Mr Cottell explained that he would focus on one aspect that was key reshaping to town centres, the community engagement aspect, and the commitment to engage with a wide range of local partners. He stated that there was a natural alignment between the move away from retail dominance and towards greater community input. Mr Cottell noted that local communities were best placed to propose and deliver new uses for vacant units in town centres and high streets. He also emphasises that broad, inclusive, and meaningful engagement were the key to success in reshaping town centres, and this could lead to the creation of new governance mechanisms such as Community Improvement Districts (CIDs). Mr Cottell stated that it was important to recognise that those community groups that were involved in reshaping town centres need greater resources committed to them. He recognised that direct funding was difficult at this time, but other types of resources are valuable, such as providing a place to meet. Mr Cottell noted this approach of community wealth building and utilising the assets that the Council already manages, such as buildings and giving discounts on those buildings for local groups can boost local business and local job growth.

The Committee noted that challenges facing town centres and high streets are national and quite common, however the responses are often locally driven. Ms Lewis emphasised there was no one size fits all approach, and it was important to go through the process of engaging with local people and understanding what the challenges they face are, and that this could also identify opportunities. Ms Lewis noted that data demonstrated that those places that were more locally responsive are the ones that were doing well.

⁵ <https://democracy.walthamforest.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=693&MId=5522&Ver=4>

The Committee asked how the Council could ensure that the needs of all the local community are met and their issues suitably addressed, particularly how to manage the interests of different groups and organisations. Mr Cottell responded that one route would be the Community Improvement District approach, as this gives the opportunity for more local people to be involved. He said that another way could involve initiatives such as compensating people for their time, providing a space for people to meet and holding meetings at various times and places.

The Committee asked a question around what the impact of working from home could be on town centres. Ms Lewis answered that there was actually a lot of data to state that often, but dependent on the general type of employment of the local population, town centres are doing better where people are working from home.

The Committee noted interest in the idea of Community Improvement Districts and suggested looking into these at a future meeting.

31 January 2023⁶

The Committee heard from two external witnesses at this meeting, Peter O'Brien, Assistant Director of Regeneration and Economic Development at the London Borough of Haringey and Sean McLean, Director of Regeneration of Development at Sheffield City Council. Mr O'Brien noted that the Haringey economic development strategy has been put on hold due to the pandemic and the focus had since shifted to responding to the challenges faced by high streets. A 3R model has been instrumental in this – respond, re-open and recover and that Haringey Council had worked closely with the business community to achieve this.

Mr O'Brien gave some examples of projects Haringey were currently working on, one was Made by Tottenham, and this involved connecting the creative activity that was happening within industrial estates in the borough to what was happening on the high streets. He emphasised that this project was very much led by the creative community and extremely focused on distinctiveness – it enabled them to grow the artistic and creative focus to also look at the economic opportunities this could bring. Mr O'Brien explained that Made by Tottenham had included pop-up shops, different events throughout the year and hosting markets. Mr O'Brien noted that since the pandemic Haringey were working and operating in a vastly different way and had taken a new placemaking approach. He mentioned aspects such as knowing communities better, working in a collaborative way with focus, and co-production on both strategies and implementation of these. Mr O'Brien noted the major strategic engagement effort that had taken place in Wood Green and how this involved engaging in a different way, reaching widely and diversely as possible and focusing on how engagement works. He said there was a particular focus on workshops where there was a genuine deliberative dialogue around what was trying to be achieved on high streets and in communities. Mr O'Brien stated there was a recognition that the previous dominant retail model would no longer work, and that Haringey were exploring an array of alternative, non-residential uses to make up for the shortfall in traditional retail and give people other reasons to visit these spaces. Mr O'Brien said that at Haringey they

⁶ <https://democracy.walthamforest.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=693&MId=5523&Ver=4>

recognised the role of high streets and town centres as anchors for communities and therefore they needed to reflect those communities and be purposeful for them.

Mr McLean explained how the landscape was quite different in Sheffield, as the fourth largest city in England and major redevelopment of the city centre had been ongoing for quite some time. Mr McLean explained that the Heart of the City project began as retail led but the plan had now moved to a mixed-use scheme with hospitality and offices playing a significant role. He noted that Sheffield Council has fully funded the development, and this had given a large level of control around the project - using the example of fifty-two private apartments that had been sold to the open market but restricted to owner occupied meant a start to the creation of neighbourhoods with a sense of identity and belonging to the area. Mr McLean also mentioned how Sheffield had a keen sense of creating public open spaces and providing facilities in the city centre so people would be attracted to live there and create a neighbourhood. Mr McLean also noted how an office block in the centre was one of the first net carbon zero blocks in the area, and as the council was the developer it was able to push the boundaries in terms of sustainability and setting elevated expectations for future developments.

The Committee asked a question around in how to move away from the commercial model and encourage other entities in the town centre space. Mr O'Brien answered that Haringey were working with public sector partners, including the NHS to see how they could provide better facilities and services locally for residents. He said they were also working with workspace operators to encourage workspace use to complement the more traditional retail, hospitality and leisure uses. Mr O'Brien noted that they were looking at wider creative uses also, working within available council assets or responsible development partners to accommodate this. Mr McLean noted that for Sheffield it was about building flexibility into units and being open to different developers and retailers. He said that Sheffield were focused on turning buildings into cultural and creative assets and creating leisure uses also to bring different users into the city centre. Mr McLean emphasised it was key to think about the types of services and facilities people want in a neighbourhood.

The Committee asked a question on how to successfully maintain a balance of bringing in bigger national competitors and smaller local ones. Mr McLean noted that a town centre needs a vibrant mix of bigger brands that people expect to see but also being able to encourage and support local business to provide that mixed economy people want. Mr McLean explained that they had taken this approach with contractors too, as they had worked with both local and national contractors throughout the development. He said it was important to support local business not just in terms of lettings but throughout the development process. Mr McLean said it was important to provide a range of spaces to encourage a variety of businesses but also wrapping around good support to those businesses that do come and helping with business planning to give the best chance of survival. Mr O'Brien said that for Haringey, the question is how do you promote an environment where the kind of retail offer is genuinely reflective of the community it serves? He noted that looking across London it is evident how diverse individual high streets are, and that even across Haringey each high street and local community can be different. Mr O'Brien used an example that in the east of the borough, in particular Tottenham, there was a fairly low vacancy rate and what was on offer there was entirely independent retail, hospitality and leisure

uses. In contrast, areas that are dominated more by the bigger or chain brands were struggling more with vacancy, this demonstrated the resilience and adaptability of independent and local businesses.

The Committee asked to what extent each place allowed for any public participation when shaping town centres. Mr O'Brien emphasised that public participation was at the heart of Haringey's approach, and they were moving beyond the traditional forms of engagement to co-production and co-design where possible. He noted that engagement had been diverse and adapted on a case-by-case basis. Mr O'Brien expressed the sentiment that high streets are most successful when residents feel like that is their high street, that it is serving them, and they have an active say on what is happening to them. Mr McLean noted that Sheffield was particularly different to London, as it had a city centre rather than high streets or town centres very much within the existing communities. He stated that publication participation was a huge part of the development project, and that there was a dedicated website and dedicated communications team and consultations happened frequently with the public.

The Committee asked how to approach upskilling young people through development plans and provide employment for young people. Mr McLean stated that Sheffield had done this largely through the construction process and had worked with contractors to place an emphasis on employment and skills, this involved setting apprenticeship targets, visiting schools, and visiting care leavers. Mr O'Brien noted that Haringey were trying to do work around networking between young people and local businesses to develop a better understanding between the two groups, based on feedback from one of the boroughs youth hubs.

30 March 2023⁷

The Committee heard from two external witnesses at this meeting, Judith O'Doherty from the High Street Task Force and Jenny Sansom from Power to Change. Ms O'Doherty explained to the Committee that she had visited Leytonstone at the end of January to conduct an 'unlocking your place potential' workshop with a number of local stakeholders. This was an exercise that the High Street Task Force does to assist in identifying challenges and opportunities to strengthen both high streets and the broader place area. Ms O'Doherty noted that once the workshop had taken place a report was submitted to the Council with initial findings. She explained that most opportunities that were found were around reinvention, so this involved placemaking activities and rebranding. It was found Leytonstone had an array of cultural assets and other opportunities around festivals and markets. There was an opportunity for more co-ordination and programming of the offer and an opportunity to better utilise some of the public spaces. This would help to increase footfall in the town overall and attract future investment. Ms O'Doherty stated there was an opportunity to develop a clear identity or vision of what the town was trying to do. She noted they had look at the plans already in place by the Council, but a lot of it was very planning-centric – therefore additional support could be offered to the Council following the initial recommendations made and that if all parties agreed, they would work to progress these opportunities identified in Leytonstone.

⁷ <https://democracy.walthamforest.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=693&MId=5524&Ver=4>

Ms Sansom explained that the premise of community led high streets was about increased involvement from local residents and from community led businesses. Ms Sansom explained that Power to Change were specifically working currently to pilot Community Improvement Districts (CIDs), which was a model to bring community led organisations into strategic partnerships with other local actors around town centre regeneration. She stated that community led high streets offer different opportunities, such as learning new things, a chance to socialise, offering services that are needed, services that bring people together and a chance to build skills. Ms Sansom also noted that lower vacancy rates were associated with community or publicly owned buildings compared to the private sector. Ms Sansom explained that the first step to making this happen is involving local people and community led organisations in strategic discussion around each individual town centre and this partnership gives a prominent role to communities. Ms Sansom noted they had 7 CID pilots currently, which all came from different starting points – some led by Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), some led by communities, both existing and new structures and one in partnership with two local authorities. She explained the main aims of the pilots were to learn how they work, what support was needed and how they best thrive. Ms Sansom noted that the main findings so far was that it was a learning process rather than an entity, they were constantly evolving because town centres were always evolving. She said that the main roles were strategic governance, communication and bringing people together – and that amplifying local voices was key.

The Committee asked a question about how these initiatives could fit into the Council's new Corporate Plan – 15-minute neighbourhoods. Ms Sansom responded that 15-minute neighbourhoods were a very laudable model and that it is good for Councils to be working towards that and to an extent was what they were doing with CIDs. As CIDs aim to bring communities together to service those people and try to work out how to meet community needs and a liveable neighbourhood in that town centre space with a variety of services and spaces for people to meet and learn. Ms O'Doherty agreed that as an urban planning concept, it was one that many were working towards, and the High Street Task Force were supportive of this concept.

The Committee asked a question about whether the Council could, through licensing powers, define class usage and use this to ensure there was a mixture of shop types on high streets. The Chair responded to this question by explaining that local authorities used to be able to define and restrict certain numbers of class usage in one space through planning rules, however the government had removed this power a number of years ago. The Committee commented on the importance of keeping high streets and town centres vibrant with a variety of shops.

The Committee asked how to boost resilience for new and existing businesses, to ensure they are successful. Ms O'Doherty noted that this was particularly tough economic environment for businesses to operate in over the past few years. She suggested local schemes such as enterprise support schemes or providing advisory services through bids, and mainly to ensure opportunities for partnerships with businesses as they establish to provide support and assistance. Ms Sansom noted

that during the pandemic community shops and pubs had a much higher survival rate than traditional small or medium enterprises, therefore demonstrated a high level of resilience. She explained that these could because people are loyal to those businesses as they are part of the community and may spend time helping and typically, they would provide a broader range of services than the traditional businesses. Ms Sansom also highlighted that diversity gives resilience.