

## Growth Scrutiny Themed Review – Town Centres – Officer Response

### 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.

Accept, Amend or Reject the Recommendation:

Accept

### Comments:

Officers welcome the recommendation and will draft a Town Centre Strategy with consultation with Cabinet Leads, Growth Scrutiny Committee members, and key colleagues in relevant Council teams, identifying opportunities to utilise recent, planned and additional community and stakeholder engagement.

The Strategy will be delivery focused, setting out an action plan with tangible projects, interventions and investment opportunities over the short, medium and long-term.

This Strategy will be evidenced-based and key performance indicators that can be measured and monitored will be included for each of the borough's eight town centres. The Strategy will be designed as a live document – building on the example of the Lea Bridge Area Framework - that enables progress to be tracked and engagement, co-production with communities to continue.

The Strategy will be customised to each town centre, as these are distinct in character, form and function, and each face a different set of challenges and opportunities. There will also be opportunities to test and pilot initiatives and approaches in specific town centres, which can then be adapted to another of our town centres.

Development of the Strategy will be informed by data from recent public engagements, including the 15-minute neighbourhood engagement in 2022/23 including two stages

of engagement on Area Frameworks in Lea Bridge, Leytonstone, South Leytonstone and Chingford Mount.

The Strategy will build on the Town Centre Strategy 2016-2020 and align with the emerging Inclusive Growth & Economy Strategy and the 15-minute Neighbourhood Corporate Framework.

We suggest that Leytonstone town centre can be an exemplar/case study within the Town Centre Strategy, based on recent Area Framework public engagement, implementation of the Future Neighbourhood 2030 pilot projects, and High Street Task Force recommendations report.

Another key strand in the Strategy will be delivery of the Levelling Up Fund (LUF) programmes in Walthamstow, Leyton Station and Chingford Mount/Highams Park, between 2023 and 2025 and the legacy of these major investments in the borough's town centres.

#### 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

Accept, Amend or Reject the Recommendation:

Accept

#### Comments:

Officers welcome the recommendation and recognise that there is an opportunity for the Town Centre Strategy and delivery approach to build on and include learning from recent public engagement on 15-minute neighbourhoods and Area Frameworks in Lea Bridge, Leytonstone, South Leytonstone and Chingford Mount.

These engagements have involved innovative approaches to engaging with residents, including involvement of children and young people (such as through Chingford Mount Child-friendly District research supported and funded via the GLA), linking engagements to family-friendly events and festivals and co-design and co-production with local community groups, schools, youth organisations working with Street Base.

In recent years the Council has developed engagement approaches that are more user-friendly and interactive, including *Let's Talk* which has been used for the Lea Bridge Area Framework and development of the Walthamstow Cultural Quarter and My Neighbourhood engagements. These enable residents to provide feedback and be engaged in the development of shorter and longer-term improvements in their areas on an on-going basis.

### Recommendation 3:

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

Accept, Amend or Reject the Recommendation:

Accept

### Comments:

Officers welcome the opportunity to consider the development of Community Improvement Districts (CIDs) in the borough and will further scope this in discussion with Jenny Samson from *Power to Change* who presented as an expert witness on CIDs at Growth Scrutiny Committee on 30<sup>th</sup> March 2023.

The scoping exercise will include defining community businesses, investigating the potential for developing a CID and which community businesses in the borough could be involved, the benefits and costs and the practicalities of developing CIDs, as well as consideration which town centres might be best placed to develop a CID. This would involve learning lessons from CIDs that have developed in comparable areas, such as Wood Green in LB Haringey and Kilburn in LB Brent.

We can also learn lessons from pilots undertaken in the borough, such as the establishment of Leytonstone's Town Team, a steering group facilitated by the Area Regeneration team and attended by Ward Councillors and local businesses and community organisations as well as residents. Another example is the 228 Chingford Mount Road pop-up in a formerly vacant retail unit which has hosted a programme of SME pop-ups, community events, exhibitions and public engagements.

### Recommendation 4:

That services look for opportunities to facilitate and support community businesses

Accept, Amend or Reject the Recommendation:

Accept

### Comments:

Officers welcome the recommendation and the opportunity to build on good practice of facilitating and supporting community businesses, for example with the establishment of the Business and IP Centre (BIPC) and its support programme based in Leytonstone; targeted business engagement and promotion through the Leytonstone Town Team and 228 Chingford Mount Road pop up space; as well as Leyton Green Studios which provides affordable space for creative and fashion businesses in a former supermarket unit which the Council leases in Bakers Arms.

Other examples include Good Shepherd Studios where the Council is working with a locally-based operator to establish creative and community workspace which adds to

the vibrancy of Leytonstone town centre, delivering a range of social value outcomes in exchange for beneficial rental terms.

These current initiatives build on established spaces enabled by the Council in its property, such as Central Parade and CRATE in Walthamstow, which have spun out opportunities for business incubation and growth, including with the establishment of CRATE's second site in 17&Central.

We will continue to look for opportunities to support community businesses, through scoping of the Community Improvement District opportunity as outlined under recommendation 3 above.

#### 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

Accept, Amend or Reject the Recommendation:

Accept

#### Comments:

Officers welcome this important recommendation and the importance of maintaining this awareness of the borough's diversity and the important roles that town centres play for all parts of the community.

This approach sits at the heart of the Council's successful Levelling Up Fund proposals for Walthamstow, Chingford Mount and Highams Park, which are designed to bring communities together with safe, accessible and inclusive public spaces and programmes that can enhance community cohesion.

In recent years the Council has engaged communities more extensively with a wider group of residents, businesses and local community organisations to capture views, ideas and contributions of a full range of the community. We can build on the 2 stages of engagement on the Area Frameworks using the *Let's Talk* approach outlined under recommendation 2 above.

As part of the delivery of the 15-minute Neighbourhood approach, Area Frameworks in four town centres and with the Levelling Up Funding (Culture for all in Walthamstow, Leyton Station and Chingford Mount/Highams Park), the Council will be able to invest in accessible, safe, inclusive and sustainable public spaces, town centre green spaces, parks and leisure which meet the needs of the borough's diverse communities.

#### 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.

Accept, Amend or Reject the Recommendation:

Accept

#### Comments:

Officers agree with the recommendation that the borough's town centres have an important role to play providing a full range of services and activities for communities during the day.

Building on the 15-minute neighbourhood framework, comprehensive approach to town centre investment established through the Area Frameworks, and One Public Estate (OPE) funded development frameworks for Walthamstow and Chingford Mount, the Council is looking to maximise investment in co-ordinated public realm, community and social infrastructure from the development of sites and use of Council and stakeholder assets. This involves working across teams in the Council, with partners and stakeholders in the community and private sector to secure the necessary investment.

Recent examples include the St James Health Centre which will be re-provided in the Sixty Bricks Jazz Yard development in St James Quarter, the provision of a new nursery as part of Juniper House's re-development and support for the Community Hubs delivered in station buildings in Chingford, in partnership with Love North Chingford (LNC) community group, and in Highams Park in partnership with Highams Park Planning Group (HPPG).

The Council continues to invest in other key community and social assets, such as library improvements in Wood Street, Lea Bridge and Walthamstow and the delivery of new leisure facilities in Leyton. The Council also remains committed to delivering youth hubs that provide facilities and support for young people across the borough's neighbourhoods.

#### 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

Accept, Amend or Reject the Recommendation:

Accept

Comments:

Officers support the recommendation and the opportunities to use the full range of its planning, property, investment and regeneration levers and partnerships to maintain and enhance the diversification of the borough's town centres, recognising the importance of uses that can be accessed by people on all incomes.

The borough's town centres remain diverse, each with their unique character and a mix of commercial uses. As with many high streets their function has changed in recent years in line with changing shopping patterns. This had led to more hospitality and service sector businesses and restructuring of traditional retail and services, such as banks.

However, commercial units in the borough's high streets are still predominantly occupied by independent SME businesses, and despite several years of challenging market conditions, there are relatively few vacant units (below national average vacancy rates), with promising investment by new commercial occupants in most town centres.

As outlined in response to recommendation 4 above, in recent years the Council has facilitated and supported a range of community businesses and different uses which add to the vibrancy and attractiveness of the borough's high streets.

The Council has also embarked on a conscious programme of supporting, enabling and promoting cultural activities, creative workspaces and destination spaces from the small-scale window art gallery at 1b Coppermill Lane or seasonal programme in Leytonstone, to support for Luna Lounge music venue and significant investment to deliver Soho Theatre Walthamstow.

This has aligned with and stimulated opportunities for further investment – including phased delivery of Walthamstow's Cultural Quarter and support for Walthamstow High Street and Market with the Levelling Up programme, the redevelopment of 17&Central shopping centre and town square which will provide additional hospitality, retail space, and improved public space, and the strategic partnership and commitment with University of Portsmouth to open and establish its London Campus with up to 5,000 students expected to change the role and function of Walthamstow town centre over the next few years.

#### 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.

Accept, Amend or Reject the Recommendation:

Accept

#### Comments:

The Council will consider the use of its powers where a holistic business case (covering economic, social, financial benefits) can be made.

The Council has already initiated proposals to utilise empty units, such as at 228 Chingford Mount Road, and continues to engage with landlords, including TfL and The Arch Company, to connect interested businesses with vacant spaces. There have been recent successes such as in Leytonstone with support for Homies on Donkeys to open in a prominent town centre unit, expanding the business from its start-up space in Wood Street Indoor Market.

In recent years, local authorities have used CPO powers more sparingly due to cost and resource involved; however, the Council has made strategic acquisitions of commercial premises where a town centre regeneration rationale and a robust business case can be made, including to establish Soho Theatre Walthamstow and University of Portsmouth's London campus.

The Government is currently consulting on policy and strategy for High Street Rental Auctions in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill. The consultation invites ideas on what the lease arrangements should look like, spreading costs of the High Street Rental Auction process, the application of Minimum Energy Efficiency Standard requirements, how the auction process should run, and the proposed new Permitted Development Right process. If enacted into legislation, these powers could provide the Council with additional tools to work with commercial landlords to bring vacant property back into active use.

#### 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.

Accept, Amend or Reject the Recommendation:

Accept

#### Comments:

Officers recognise the importance of supporting local businesses become established and through the work of Town Centre Leads in the Area Regeneration team, the Council has useful knowledge of the current mix of town centre uses and opportunities, actively liaising with commercial landlords to make introductions to quality local businesses keen to occupy vacant premises.

The Council can support businesses establish where they are based in property it owns or leases, with preferential commercial terms balanced with the social and economic value provided by the business' activity.

The Council has developed programmes of targeted capital investment to uplift the appearance of commercial properties, making them more attractive and lettable space. The Levelling Up Fund programmes in Walthamstow, Chingford Mount and Highams Park will help boost each of these town centres over the next 2-3 years.

The Council will also continue to grow its business support programme through the BIPC in Leytonstone, which is designed to support businesses through the incubation and growth stages of development.

Developer contributions (including Neighbourhood CIL) can play a role in supporting town centre and business activity; however, the parameters of this funding, including appropriateness of any direct support for businesses and requirement for local engagement will be key tests in its application.

#### 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

#### Accept, Amend or Reject the Recommendation:

Accept

#### Comments:

Officers support the recommendation with the Council's Business Growth and Employment team continuing to signpost new and emerging businesses to available sources of advice and support. The Business Hub (BIPC) in Leytonstone Library is an example of a physical hub which provides support for new businesses. The Green Enterprise Network, facilitated by the Council's Business team continues to provide advice and support to businesses seeking to operate more sustainably as well as more cost effectively.

The Leytonstone Future Neighbourhoods 2030 Strategy, supported by the GLA and published in April 2023 includes support for businesses to be more sustainable, and to scope a pilot project for a commercial retrofit of SME business premises.



In addition, town centre business forums, including Leytonstone Town Team and Wood Street Business Forum have been facilitated by the Area Regeneration team and are working alongside businesses to deliver annual programmes of activity in town centres, such as festivals, seasonal events, street art and use of public spaces for street markets.

Recommendation 11:

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

Accept, Amend or Reject the Recommendation:

Accept

Comments:

The Government's High Street Task Force (HSTF) programme has included expert associates facilitating two stakeholder workshops in Leytonstone with Officers, Councillors, businesses, residents, community groups and other stakeholders.

An initial diagnostic report was presented in March 2023, the key recommendations were to focus on place promotion, particularly Leytonstone's varied evening economy offer, and events and festival programme, building on the creative and cultural strengths of the local businesses and community.

As part of the HSTF programme, Leytonstone has been matched with Hammersmith & Fulham Council which is receiving HSTF advice on its North Fulham High Street programme.

The final HSTF report is expected in July 2023, which will set out recommendations for short, medium and long-term interventions and will incorporate the 15-minute Neighbourhood approach, Leytonstone Area Framework engagements as well as the Future Neighbourhoods 2030 strategy.

The Council will review the findings and recommendations for implementation in Leytonstone and will also consider how these recommendations can be adapted to apply to the borough's other town centres as part of 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

Accept, Amend or Reject the Recommendation:

Accept

Comments:

The Council is developing its Affordable Workspace Strategy which sets out the borough's current workspace provision, and recommendations for providing more and better-quality workspace in the borough, including important incubation and grow on spaces dedicated to small and emerging businesses.

Current examples of affordable workspace provision in Council and private-sector owned town centre premises include Good Shepherd Studios in Leytonstone, Mainyard Studios in Leyton, Leyton Green Studios and Patchworks in Lea Bridge.

The Council continues to promote opportunities for new and affordable workspace, for example with the Levelling Up Fund investment in Chestnuts House to deliver a creative enterprise hub in Walthamstow/Bakers Arms, and proposals for business incubation space in Highams Park station which are being developed with local community group HPPG.