



Town Centre Regeneration in Brent

A report of the Overview & Scrutiny Task Group

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Membership:

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Foreword by Cllr Lesley Jones, Chair of the Town Centre Regeneration Task Group

As a councillor, I am only too aware of the value that local people place on their town centres which are the heart of local communities and provide easy access to shops, post offices, banks, pubs and restaurants.

Brent is fortunate to have many such centres, over seventeen in total varying in size and footfall. The new development at Wembley will also provide the borough with a new modern complex providing a range of leisure and retail facilities.

During the course of our work, it became apparent that the role of town centres is changing. Many of the traditional shops such as butchers and bakers which used to frequent our high streets have been subsumed into larger supermarkets.

The challenge for many councils, including Brent, is how to keep our centres lively and vibrant spaces in view modern shopping styles such as internet shopping and large retail complexes.

A lot of good work is already happening to support centres through the work of our dedicated town centre management team and many other departments across the council.

The recommendations developed by this task group contain a range of interventions to encourage people to shop locally and to maintain high environmental standards which make town centres pleasant places to shop in.

I would like thank my fellow task group members who have taken time out of their busy schedules to participate in this review. Thanks also to all those who gave evidence at our meetings.

A new Town Centre Strategy is currently being drawn up and coupled with our recommendations will provide a focus for future work on town centre regeneration in Brent. I look forward to seeing the outcome of this in due course.

Executive summary

Introduction

Over the last twenty years many town centres across the UK have been affected by the rise in car ownership and the use of the internet which in turn has led to changing retail patterns.

The overview and scrutiny committee commissioned this task group to review the council's approach to town centre regeneration and particularly consider what could be done to stem the decline of town centres and what interventions would be useful for those at risk of failing.

There are around thirteen town centres in Brent of different sizes some of which border with neighbouring boroughs. The GLA have ranked town centres in London by hierarchy rated according to their size, status, range of shops and the wider facilities that they provide. Wembley and Kilburn are the main centres in Brent. District centres include Willesden Green and Harlesden

Key findings of the task group:

- A new town centre strategy is currently being developed and will be important in developing a joint council wide approach to town centre management
- The Council has two town centre managers who look after Wembley, Willesden and Harlesden. They play an essential role in managing local partnerships, being the first point of contact for their town centre and leveraging in additional funding for town centre projects. The task group felt that they would benefit from additional support from officers across the council when dealing with environmental issues.
- A newly appointed neighbourhood working team will be well placed to identify town centre issues at the ward level.
- There is a key role for the planning department in helping to redefine town centres and identify sites on the edge of the high street which would be suitable for alternative use such as offices.
- Other issues affecting town centres include crime, environmental issues such as dumping of large bulky items and dropping litter.
- Access to town centres remains a concern both in terms of need for parking facilities for short stay shopping to concerns that high traffic volumes make centres unpleasant for shopping.

Recommendations

- 1. That a core group of officers work in partnership with Town Centre Managers to ensure a quick response to environmental issues**
- 2. That the new town centre strategy is endorsed by the relevant portfolio holder and clear resources are identified to deliver its objectives**
- 3. That neighbourhood working officers ensure that local businesses are included within their consultation**
- 4. That neighbourhood working officers with a town centre in their ward dedicate at least one walkabout a year to focus on town centre issues**
- 5. That the planning department identify a suitable location to trial a project on flexible uses of property on the periphery of the high street**
- 6. That the Streetcare department explore practicalities and possible opportunities for a pilot scheme on fixed penalty fines for people who drop litter.**
- 7. That the Environmental Health Team develops a specific performance indicator around ensuring that all local shops have a trade waste contract.**
- 8. That the transportation unit investigate the possibility for more dual use of car parking bays, i.e. residents/pay and display and more short term parking in the town centre.**

Introduction

Over the last twenty years many town centres across the UK have been affected by the rise in car ownership and the use of the internet which in turn has led to changing retail patterns.

The overview and scrutiny committee commissioned this task group to review the council's approach to town centre regeneration and particularly consider what could be done to stem the decline of town centres and what interventions would be useful for those at risk of failing.

Background

Town Centres are often the heart of the local community. They are the hub for economic, social and leisure activities; often a microcosm of the wider community, giving an insight into the demographics, people, culture, diversity and economic prospects of an area. When successful, town centres are the economic engines of most communities, allowing enterprise to flourish and providing jobs for local people.

The growth of out of town 'American style' retail centres and the expansion of supermarkets revolutionised shopping patterns in the UK. Economies of scale has enabled larger supermarkets to bombard consumers with more choice, lower prices, free parking and longer opening hours. The rise of the car means that people are more mobile and willing to travel further to do their shopping.

The larger supermarkets have also swallowed up the trade of the specialist shops such as butchers and bakers meaning that traditional high streets which would provide a retail mix to cater for local needs no longer exists and many local centres have experienced a decline in footfall. Research suggests¹ that that the larger centres have managed to survive or recreate themselves in the face of competition but smaller centres are more likely to feel the impact.

The rise in technologies such as internet shopping has also affected the use of the high street with more people favouring supermarket deliveries by the internet. The rise of the global economy with many local jobs moving overseas to cheaper locations has also led to people having to travel further to employment.

With larger developers taking business, and often regeneration opportunities elsewhere, the result has been town centres are in decline and attracting high concentrations of crime and at night are often 'no go areas' rather than lively vibrant spaces for local communities.

The changing role of the high street has sparked a debate amongst planners and government policy makers on what the future of town centres should look like. Local authorities are at the centre of this discourse and are in the position to shape policy to create town centres that future generations will be proud of. For councils this is more than about regeneration and planning but also cuts into the heart of its social inclusion and place shaping role.

¹ London's Suburbs Unlocking their potential, URBED.

Methodology

This review is well placed to influence the forthcoming Town Centre Strategy which is currently in draft stage and being developed by the councils town centre managers. The document will play a key role in providing an overarching strategic framework for a new vision for town centres in Brent.

The task group agreed to focus on three main areas

- To consider initiatives that will help to revive Brent's Town Centres through looking at good practice at other councils
- To look at the contribution of other services in the council to town centre regeneration in Brent
- To identify themes that should be included in the town centre strategy

The task group met with:

The West London Business Group

Assistant Director, Regeneration

Senior Community Safety Officer

Director of Streetcare

Director of Planning

Local residents who act as street watchers and report environmental issues to the council

Head of Major Projects, Transportation Unit

Town Centre Managers, Wembley, Willesden and Harlesden

To gather evidence for this review a questionnaire was sent to all Brent Councillors asking for their views on how to regenerate town centres. Desk top research on existing work in this area was also carried out.

The Policy Framework

Since the early 1990's government policy has sought to stem the rise of the out of town retail centres and move towards the promotion of more sustainable developments which reduce the need for the car. In 1996 the government published Planning Policy Six: Town Centres and Retail Developments. (PPG6). This introduced the concept of the 'sequential approach' which states that business and leisure activity such as shops, banks and offices should be located in the town centre or if no sites are available as close to the town centre as possible. This guidance has been influential in encouraging retail developments back into towns.

Further policy guidance for town centres at the regional level rests at the Greater London Authority through the London Plan. This document sets out a statutory planning framework which guides development in London. Although the document is still in the early stages of implementation, it highlights the importance role of town centres and encourages boroughs to develop ways to support them. The Plan states a similar view to PPG6, that boroughs should pursue a policy of intensification. This means that all new developments should be directed to the town centre to provide a business hub within these areas, ensuring that they are the centre for activity.

This in turn feeds into the councils own Unitary Development Plan 2004, which also sets out policies around town centre development in Brent.

The Brent Context

There are around thirteen town centres in Brent of different sizes some of which border with neighbouring boroughs. The GLA have ranked town centres in London by hierarchy rated according to their size, status, range of shops and the wider facilities that they provide. Wembley and Kilburn are the main centres in Brent. District centres include Willesden Green and Harlesden, a full list is included at **Appendix A**.

The most significant piece of work on town centre regeneration currently taking place in the borough is the regeneration of Wembley.

The new Wembley Development is set to become the flagship town centre for Brent. The £4.6 billion development will include a range of top retailers, a leisure complex and new housing. In accordance with the Mayor's intensification policy the Director for Planning told the task group that all new retail developments are being directed to the Wembley area. This development will provide much needed improvements and will provide a catalyst for regeneration across the borough as a whole.

The Council also has a dedicated town centre management team consisting of two town centre managers (TCM) who look after Wembley, Willesden and Harlesden and an information officer. Their role is to develop partnerships and work with businesses working strategically for the improvement of regeneration within Wembley, Willesden and Harlesden Town Centres. Town Centre Managers (TCM's) also market the town centres and attract external funding. TCM's told the task group that they had recently been successful in securing almost £1 million from the London Development Agency's enhance pot for improvement to town centres. One of the projects will be looking at how to develop a brand for Willesden. It is hoped that this work will give the area a distinct identity and attract investment.

The corporate Strategy 2006-2010 sets out a range of measures which contribute to support town centres agenda under the themes of Improving the quality of life for all residents and transforming the local environment. Practical measures include:
Provide 20 accessible public toilets in town centres and parks across the borough by 2010.
Improvements in the quality of roads and pavements in town centres
Creating a broader retail offer within Brent's high streets and town centres. It has agreed to deliver:

- An increase in the retail floor space, turnover, visitor numbers and profitability of Wembley and Kilburn retail sectors
- A Town Centre Strategy for Brent agreed by mid 2008 and delivery of its action plan
- Reduce illegal trading in the borough Sign-up 500 local traders to the 'Good Traders' scheme by 2010.
- The Regeneration Action Plan published in 2007 has identified a strategic priority in relation to town centres:
- Develop a clear framework for measuring the performance of Brent's town centres, and the impact of existing interventions on those most at risk of decline

Activities will include:

Develop and implement a town centre strategy to secure healthy and vibrant town centres that meet the needs of local people. As part of the strategy:

Review the existing town centre management arrangements across the borough with a view to maximising their effectiveness

Set out a clear approach for new investment in town centres, which considers the role of a range of mixed uses including retail, leisure, community and residential.

Task Group Findings

Overall the task group found that town centres in Brent faced two particular issues. The larger centres need to continue to attract businesses to the area to provide jobs for local people and serve as a catalyst to attract developers and generate further regeneration. Smaller centres are unlikely to be what they once were; the key to the future vibrancy of local centres is to encourage a good range of retail, cultural and essential services to locate on the high street.

This will continue to provide a focal point for local communities, to improve footfall and enable local businesses to thrive This approach was supported by the a report by the North and West London Alliance on Town Centres²

TCM's highlighted that although some of Brent's high streets are lively vibrant places, many have been in decline for a number of years due to a range of reasons including underinvestment, competition from neighbouring centres and changing local demographics. The borough still faces many of the challenges that exist in town centres nationally such as problems of accessibility due to lack of parking spaces, high levels of crime and antisocial behaviour, illegal use of forecourts, graffiti and dropping litter. All of which contribute to making the centre unattractive and causing shoppers to go elsewhere.

The Director of Planning told members that the borough faces challenges in attracting developers largely because many are choosing to locate in Brent Cross, which is currently under expansion. The TCM for Wembley reported that many of the large developers require bigger units than is currently available on Wembley High Road therefore they will not come to the area.

The task group also identified the following themes which would improve town centres in Brent:

A Council wide Approach

The development of the town centre strategy is an important step in developing a joint council wide approach to town centre management. There also needs to be commitment from the very top of the organisation that revitalising local centres is a priority for the council. The strategy will need ownership from the relevant portfolio holder backed by an action plan and a commitment to see the objectives delivered. The council are employing consultants to review the current arrangements for Town Centre Management and will develop a strategy with mini action plans for all centres in Brent. This work is an important aspect of the sustainability agenda which has been identified as one of the priorities of the current administration.

² Over the Edge? Town Centres and the London Economy, North London Strategic Alliance and the West London Alliance, 2007

Recommendation:

That new Town Centre Strategy is endorsed by the relevant portfolio holder and clear resources are identified to deliver its objectives.

Role of Town Centre Managers

The task group found that town centre managers play an essential role in developing strategic partnerships with local businesses and other stakeholders to tackle issues within the town centre. They have also levered funding for town centre improvements in the Local Development Agency enhance pot. The West London Business Group pointed out that having town centre managers acting as a point of contact for businesses who are considering locating in Brent made a significant difference.

One of the councillors who responded to the task group survey lamented the loss of town centre support in their area. Other council officers raised concerns about the viability of a town centre manager to effectively work across two town centres.

The task group felt that one particular issue that needed to be addressed was the ability of town centre managers to mobilise environment teams to provide a speedy response to environmental issues on the high street such as abandoned bulky waste.

Councillors felt that improvements need to be made in ensuring that when environmental issues are reported by town centre managers that they responded to promptly. In considering the best way of ensuring that this happens it was felt that TCM's working in partnership with streetcare and environmental health to deal with environmental issues was the best way forward.

Recommendation:

That a core group of officers work in partnership with Town Centre Managers to ensure a quick response to environmental issues

Develop a Local Vision

A thriving town centre can help to engender a sense of identity and local pride. Many smaller local neighborhood centres need to attract back those residents who live locally but choose to use other centres this was specifically raised by the town centre manager as being a problem in Willesden, which is an affluent area but many local people go elsewhere to do their shopping. The Assistant Director for Regeneration highlighted that we need to promote small specialised centres such as Ealing Road which caters for a niche market but has a wider appeal.

Brent has recently appointed a new neighbourhood working team who will work with councillors to develop a ward plan to tackle issues of concern to residents. Although each ward will have a dedicated budget of £20,000, the primary aim will be to influence main stream budgets to re-direct resources to areas identified in the ward plan. The task group found that there is a variety of work happening at the ward level to address town centre issues. The questionnaire to local councillors highlighted that partnerships are taking place at the local level and it will be important to ensure that these are fed into the ward plan.

Local ward councillors already play a lead role in local communities through liaising with local residents and acting as an interface between the council and local residents. They can also act as a conduit for town centre issues by feeding them through the relevant channels. For those wards which have a town centre, neighbourhood working can be useful mechanism to achieve change.

The task group also found that limited resources mean that town centre manager's focus mainly on the larger centres in Brent and smaller centres do not benefit from any dedicated support. It is particularly important to ensure that concerns of local businesses are acted upon. Members felt that it is important to ensure that businesses in the area are supported where possible.

Recommendation

That neighbourhood working officers ensure that local businesses are included within their consultation

That neighbourhood working officers with a town centre in their ward dedicate at least one walkabout a year to focus on town centre issues

Redefinition of High Street

Many of the properties on Brent high streets are dominated by shops on short term lets with land lords living abroad and properties managed by agencies. Shop owners struggle to make a profit and this is exacerbated by high rents for the properties. Therefore many Brent high streets are dominated by short term lets, an uninspiring retail mix, and in general a lack of investment by landlords.

The Assistant Director for Regeneration pointed out that we need to make bold decisions about the use of properties. Many shop owners are either making low profits and are unable to participate in measures that could bring about improvements such as Business Improvement Districts³. Also landlords are not able to take advantage of the high property values.

Our high streets need to be configured to reflect the needs of the local area. A long row of shops often means that many of them are poor quality and degraded which will impact upon the quality of the local street scene.

A possible solution is for the council to evaluate local high streets which could be shortened by more flexible usage of properties on the peripheries. This would involve the planning department identifying sites that have a number of shops that are struggling to make a profit or buildings that are disused altogether and re-designating them for mixed use. New usage could be for office, leisure or accommodation purposes and would be subject to planning permission.

This approach was supported by the Assistant Director for Regeneration, Town Centre Managers and the Head of Major Projects in the Transportation Unit. The Director of Planning reported that this takes place already where suitable sites are identified.

The task group feel that this approach should be actively pursued as a policy in consultation

³ A Business Improvement District (BID) is a precisely-defined geographical area of a town, city, or commercial district, where businesses have voted to invest collectively in local improvements in addition to those delivered by statutory authorities.

with local people and ward councillors.

Recommendation

That the planning department identify a suitable location to trial a project on flexible uses of property on the periphery of the high street

Local Demographics

Brent has also experienced changing local demographics which also have a major impact on the high street. This was specifically identified as the case in Wembley, which used to be an affluent area but over time has become home to migrant communities who have less disposal income. The Director for Planning pointed out that Marks and Spenser's on Wembley High Road suffered declining sales and eventually closed due the competition from Primark.

The Assistant Director for Regeneration pointed out that as residents have more disposal income this will in turn impact upon the high street. Improvements come through gentrification of the area. As schools and housing get better it will draw people to the area. This will lead to a demand for quality local retail and independent shops and attract developers and improve footfall and retail quality on local high streets.

Crime

The Senior Community Officer reported that town centres in Brent are often crime hotspots with different types of illegal activity prevalent in different areas. The Director for Streetcare pointed out that most of the new CCTV installations go to town centres for this reason. Much of the work of the Community Safety Team has focussed on developing a partnership approach to addressing these issues. A project to tackle street drinking on Wembley high road involved a partnership between the council and the Primary Care Trust.

Task Group members felt that Safer Neighbourhood Teams, which consists of a team of Police Community Support Officers (PCSO's) in every ward in London has gone some way to improve crime in Brent's high streets The Senior Community Officer told the task group that Safer Neighbourhood Panels exist in every ward and they develop a crime plan to identify actions to tackle crime locally. The Officer also pointed out that a holistic approach needs to be taken when planning for town centres for example a proliferation of betting shops on the high street can contribute to high crime rates there needs to be recognition of the drivers of crime to avoid them where possible.

Environmental Issues

A clean and attractive environment is essential to attract people to town centres. The Over the Edge: town centres and the London Economy report states that "Town Centres not only need to be clean, green and safe' if they are to attract and retain major employers, but they also need to

offer staff the image of a good working place'⁴This view was shared by the Director of Streetcare who pointed out that residents expect town centre cleaning to be of a high standard.

The task group noted that PCSO's play a positive role in providing a reassurance on the street in terms of crime but had less success in reporting environmental issues which was also part of their role.

The new neighbourhood working team also has a key role in tackling environmental concerns they will be working closely with streetcare, who have a dedicated officer for every ward in the borough to report environmental concerns.

A member of the task group pointed that despite the councils best efforts, litter dropping remained a problem on the high street. A member of the task group gave an example about how members of the local community were mobilised to pick up litter from their local high street and within minutes of completing the task the high street was dirty again. It was felt that enforcement was needed to send a strong message to people about zero tolerance towards litter dropping.

Brent is developing a Public Realm Strategy which deals with many of the environmental issues raised in this report. Although the council has a range of measure in place to deal with litter the problem still persists. The task group feel that enforcement is necessary. A suggested approach would be to run a small pilot scheme of issuing fixed penalty notices using, CCTV evidence within a designated area. The pilot should identify how this scheme can be rolled out more widely across town centres in the borough.

The task group found, often through personal observations as councillors that local businesses dumping waste on the high street was a significant problem in many Brent High streets. The Town Centre managers agreed that this was a problem but enforcement duties are the responsibility of the environmental services team. This is not only a visible eyesore for residents but could also lead to other undesirable effects such as attracting rodents.

Recommendation:

That a pilot scheme is trialled in a designated area to issue fixed penalty fines to people who drop litter.

That Environmental Health Team develop a specific performance indicator around ensuring that all local shops has a trade waste contract.

This approach has already been adopted by Cheltenham Borough Council:

Case study Cheltenham BC – fixed penalty notices

Cheltenham is a tourist destination and it is well known for its annual festival. The cleanliness of the environment is an important consideration both for visitors and residents. The council was looking for ways to improve the environment that would not place further demand on the street cleansing budget, and in turn the council tax payer.

⁴ Over the Edge? Town Centres and the London Economy , North London Strategic Alliance, West London Alliance

The demonstration project set out to establish whether enforcement could provide a cost-effective route to maintaining a clean environment by tackling litter, waste, clutter, fly-posting and graffiti and in the long term by changing people's attitudes to waste and litter.

Two of the main aims were to develop a fast-track approach to the introduction of fixed penalty notices for dog fouling and littering, and to tackle the problem of the storage of waste and waste receptacles on the high street.

Consultation revealed a strong public demand for the introduction of fixed penalty notices. Additional funding from the council created a new post - an environmental enforcement officer. Existing highway enforcement officers agreed to take on environmental enforcement so the team in total consisted of three people. Cabinet agreed a policy on the use of fixed penalty notices and delegated responsibility to the relevant group director.

One of the benefits of being part of the shared priority group was the opportunity to network and exchange information. Cheltenham was able to draw on Barnsley's experience of issuing fixed penalty notices in developing its own policies and implementation.

An awareness campaign was run supported by the Tidy Cheltenham Group and Police Community Support officers. The introduction of fixed penalty notices received a lot of press and captured public attention. Officers were due to begin issuing notices in August 2004. Officers felt that the project had achieved a lot by gaining public support and the council will continue to track the success of the project through Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPs), customer survey and local performance indicators on fly-posting and graffiti.

Access to Town Centres

Accessibility to town centres was also raised as an issue. Shoppers like to have somewhere to park and most high streets in Brent do not have parking. Both the TCM's and Head of Special projects in Transportation raised parking as a problem. Brent is quite unique within London Boroughs in that the council only owns a few car parks and the rest are within private ownership. The public have more confidence in car parks which are run by the council. Shoppers like to know that there is car parking available before setting out on their trip.

However this needs to be balanced with requests for more pedestrianisation of high streets. When asked what they would like future town centres to look like, Streetwatchers, who are local residents who volunteer to report environmental issues to the council, told the task group that they should be places where people can meet and socialise. It was thought that traffic often makes this difficult due to noise and pollution, Harlesden was cited as a particular problem. Sudbury was thought to be a good example of a nice green town centre and is a good example which can be spread across the borough.

The Head of Major Projects within the Transportation Team reported that Kingsbury has enjoyed the benefits for wide areas of public footways which have been retained despite pressure for parking and through traffic. The transportation team recognise the benefits of adopting this approach more widely. There are however different demands that need to be balanced. Transport for London regulations want to reduce congestion in the broadest sense. The policy is to redesignate the boundaries between the cyclist, people with disabilities, the pedestrian and the private motorist, with the pedestrian first in the hierarchy.

Many of the parking bays which are restricted for designated residential use are only fully used

in the evenings. However shoppers would benefit from using these bays during the day for a quick shopping trip. This would also help to attract more shoppers to the high street. One of the task group members felt that this would be particularly beneficial on Ealing Road. It is evident that the design and configuration of controlled parking schemes are strongly biased by the responses of local residents who form the majority of respondents to local consultation. More weight could be given to the needs of town centres for both customer parking and servicing of shops.

Recommendation:

That the transportation department investigate the possibility for more dual use of car parking bays

Transport and Employment

A report by the London Assembly entitled *Semi-detached: Reconnecting London's Suburbs*⁵ highlights the interlinking problems of transport and employment facing the suburbs. As many people who live in outer London commute to employment in the centre, this has led to the rise of car use in outer London and more pressure on public transport. However there is neither the road space to segregate different forms of transport nor the densities to support a higher quality public transport to increase to meet the demand. A report entitled *Outer London Issues for the London Plan*,⁶ highlights that even with planned editions to capacity such as Crossrail, overcrowding is still likely to increase at worrying rates. The report further warns that in outer London the workforce is forecast to increase faster than jobs with the majority of workers heading off to central London.

The West London Business Group noted that businesses are faced with high cost for space in West London and it is often cheaper for businesses to locate outside of the London area. Skills shortages and difficulties in navigating through planning requirements were also cited as problems for businesses who may be considering locating in Brent.

This cuts into the heart of the sustainability agenda. In order for the council to effectively tackle reduce carbon emissions and energy use we need to create communities in which people can live and work locally, thus reducing the need to travel. Town Centres need to be places which local people are proud of and keen to raise families and establish long term roots. This will involve a combination of attracting larger businesses to locate in Brent and supporting more facilities for home working in the borough. This view was supported by the West London Business Group who felt that the council should consider encouraging IT support on high streets. This would provide IT support to people who live locally and work from home.

The council has had some success in tackling these issues through its award winning *Brentin2* work employment programme which has managed to place over two thousand local people into jobs.

⁵ *Semi-Detached: Reconnecting London's Suburbs*, June 2007

⁶ *Outer London Issues for the London Plan*, Greater London Authority, May 2007

Conclusion

The task group are aware that this is not an exhaustive review of all the work to improve town centres in Brent. Other areas that would benefit from scrutiny could include how to develop the evening economy and what further support could be provided to small and medium size enterprises in the borough. However the measures outlined in this report, will build upon the good work that is already taking place to regenerate town centres in Brent.

Appendix A

London Plan Town Centre Clarification

Major Centres Wembley Kilburn	
District Centres Burnt Oak Cricklewood Colindale/The Hyde Harrow Harlesden Willesden Green Wembley Park Preston Road Neasden Ealing Road Kingsbury	