Brent	**Resources & Public Realm Scrutiny Committee** 29 July 2026
	Report from the Corporate Director, Neighbourhoods and Regeneration
	Cllr Matt Kelcher – Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Planning

Revitalising High Streets and Town Centres

Wards Affected:	All
Key or Non-Key Decision:	Non-Key decision
Open or Part/Fully Exempt: (If exempt, please highlight relevant paragraph of Part 1, Schedule 12A of 1972 Local Government Act)	Open
List of Appendices:	Appendix A: Town Centre Health Check Information Appendix B: Examples of town centre interventions
Background Papers:	None
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1.0 Executive Summary

1.1. The report provides an assessment of the performance, effectiveness, and impact of the Council's current approach to revitalising high streets and town centres. It seeks to equip the Committee with the evidence and early strategic insight needed to consider and comment on the direction of the emerging High Streets Strategy.

2.0 Recommendation(s)

2.1 Committee considers and provides feedback on the Council's current town centre activities.

2.2 Committee sets out what it considers the priorities for the High Streets' Strategy and Implementation Plan should be.

3.0 Detail

3.1 Contribution to Borough Plan Priorities & Strategic Context

3.1.1 Brent's town centres play a strong role in supporting the Borough Plan priorities. In respect of 'Prosperity and Stability in Brent', the viability and strength of town centres is the primary way in which local people develop their perceptions of the economy and own confidence around spending and investing in Brent. Promoting our town centres as unique cultural destinations and economic hubs are key to the Council supporting the local economy.

3.1.2 Town centres provide an opportunity for many of Brent's entrepreneurs to start and grow their businesses. They are a place where people have access to goods and services to support many aspects of their daily needs, as well as being a place for social exchange and major civic events. As such, they are one of the principal elements that defines Brent as a destination. In respect of the priority of a 'Cleaner, Greener Future', the quality of their appearance and the public realm, particularly their cleanliness, upkeep and maintenance of buildings and the public realm as well as safety are a key determinant of how they are perceived. This also impacts the pride they give local people.

3.1.3 Across several aspects, they are a key element in supporting the priority of 'Thriving Communities'. They provide for example locally accessible high quality fresh produce and foods that can give young people 'The Best Start in Life'. Their accessibility to much of the population within a short walking distance, and consistently higher levels of public transport accessibility help contribute towards supporting 'A Healthier Brent', enabling people to make other transport decisions than relying on private cars.

3.2 Background

Current Approach and Strategic Context

3.2.1 There are 17 defined town centres/ high streets within Brent as identified in (page 481) the Brent Local Plan. Cabinet on 24th April 2017 prioritised nine town centres where Council and external funding was to be focussed. Of these, six were to receive additional town centre management resource (designated town centre managers). These six and their position in the London Plan town centre hierarchy (Brent does not have the highest designation 'international' centre) are: Wembley (major with the potential to move to metropolitan status in the future London Plan); Ealing Road, Harlesden, Neasden and Willesden Green (all district) and Church End (local with the potential to move to district status in the future London Plan).

3.2.2 Kilburn (major) was later given town centre management resource. Two town centres Colindale/ The Hyde and Burnt Oak (both district) also were allocated a town centre manager. These were however, deprioritised after the pandemic. This was due to their stable business base, lack of development opportunities and no opportunity for strategic alignment with neighbouring Barnet and Harrow who had no town centre management function. As such, seven town centres currently benefit from town centre manager oversight.

3.2.3 In addition, Brent's remaining town centres are: Cricklewood, Kenton, Kingsbury, Preston Road, and Wembley Park (all district) and Kensal Rise, Queens Park, Sudbury (all local). There are some significant neighbourhood parades (e.g. Queensbury and Salmon Street), but these are not formally identified as town centres.

3.2.4 The approach to all the priority centres was initially set out in the Town Centres Investment Plan. For each centre it had some background, a vision, the town centre's performance, and key opportunities to deliver the vision, including projected timescales and broad costs. It also set out a Town Centre Management Plan (priorities, areas for action, resource and partners) and an Investment Plan of current/ planned projects.

3.2.5 The Investment Plan and input of town centre managers, along with other evidence base documents and close working with other teams across the Council and partners aligned Council activities to better support Brent's town centres. Examples, include the Brent Local Plan policies so that new development supports each town centre's role in the period to 2041 also taking account of the Brent Town Centres Strategy & Recommendations Report 2018. predicted changes to the demand for town centre uses as assessed in the Brent Retail and Leisure Study 2018. The Brent Inclusive Growth Strategy: Economy directs the work of the regeneration and skills and enterprise teams in prioritising support for town centre vitality and viability.

3.2.6 Our Town Centre Managers are frontline service providers for the Council and the go to point of contact for businesses, residents and other organisations. Their work involves close liaison and joint working internally and externally, both to address immediate issues and strategy to help reduce what is consistently a high volume of reactionary work.

3.2.7 Town centre managers work closely with other area-based Council officers such as the Neighbourhood Managers, and ASB Localities Managers in seeking to address matters such as street cleansing and waste management, premises licensing, street licensing, parking enforcement, public realm, crime and community safety. Reflecting the multiplicity of Council functions that impact on Brent's town centres, they are also in continual dialogue with many service areas to deal with problems, or support opportunities for improvement, such as trading standards, planning enforcement, development management, non-domestic rates, transportation, property, regeneration, employment and skills, community development, Brent Start, Brent Works, etc.

3.2.8 External to the Council, businesses are the main contacts, but others include property owners, TfL, police, faith groups, residents groups, voluntary/ 3rd sector representatives, adjacent boroughs, GLA, etc.

3.2.9 The Investment Plan informed the early work of the town centre managers subsequently appointed to reflect the Council's increased priority on town centre improvement. Since then, oversight of town centres has been a standing item for the responsible Cabinet member for their bi-weekly/ monthly briefings. This has informed the subsequent work programme and priorities of the Council's three town centre managers.

3.2.10 The Council has no substantive property ownership in town centres. This means unlike, for example, a shopping centre owner or institutional investors with numerous holdings across a town centre, it has very little direct control over the quality or type of businesses that occupy premises. Brent town centres also are not characterised by this type of large-scale ownership in the private sector either. Small-scale individual property ownership predominates. This might have helped reduce the number of national chain occupiers that would have created more generic town centres. It does however also have its downside; the Council is unable to directly curate or get support from large portfolio property owners to influence the town centre offer to align with or support any town centre vision. The exception is the LDO, and the adjacent frontages south of Engineers Way through to Wembley Stadium station which Quintain own/ manage.

3.2.11 Quintain's work shows the benefits of large-scale active management of the commercial offer, control of premises signage/ advertising, exceptional public realm quality and on-going maintenance and activation strategy, particularly of the cultural offer such as on-going events, etc. that substantially add to the sense of place for Wembley Park.

3.2.12 The Council's town centre management function has no substantive revenue funding. As such, the managers are heavily reliant on funding opportunities that arise from the activities of other Council services and external sources to help support delivery of town centre priorities that they will lead on, e.g. grants from MHCLG, GLA, arms-length Government organisations, such as Historic England and strategic (CIL)/ Neighbourhood Community Infrastructure Levy (NCIL).

3.2.13 The team has had success in capturing these funds over the last 10 years. The most recent example being £110K awarded in June 2026 for the GLA's Summer Streets programme. This will deliver a range of events to activate Wembley/ Ealing Road, Kingsbury and Willesden Green town centres for the remainder of 2026 and ideally create a legacy of future events. Nearly all external funding is ad-hoc in its source, amounts and timing. It is also subject to the priorities of the funder; these might not wholly align with Brent town centre priorities and often has short bidding and spend periods.

3.2.14 The Investment Plan and 2018 Needs Study identified the macro national changes to retail and leisure spending that had occurred and were expected in the future to impact Brent's town centres. At that time, sustained low economic growth since the 2008 financial crisis had impacted prosperity, disposable income and consequentially spend on town centre goods and services. The likely outcome of the Brexit vote was unclear, albeit little upside was predicted and relatively pessimistic future growth was assumed. In addition, on-line sales which for all fashion goods had increased from 17% in 2013 to 24%, was expected to increase further; purely on-line operators were expected to also take greater market share.

3.2.15 Brent residents even at that time had a greater propensity to shop on-line than the national average. In 2017 24.1% of non-food shopping purchases were made online, 8.7 percentage points above the UK average. For convenience shopping, nationally the big four supermarkets were losing market share. There was a move towards spend in smaller stores to smaller top up type shopping and increased importance of discount operators such Aldi and Lidl. Banks and building societies which had already significantly reduced their high street presence were forecast to have a 36% drop in visitors between 2017-22. Against these challenges, commercial leisure and food and drink (except pubs which were predicted to decline) was seen as an opportunity nationally and locally to refocus centres and take up commercial space.

3.2.16 At that time, it was evident nationally that for some poorer performing centres, particularly those in more deprived areas, impacts were becoming severe. Terminal decline for many centres was predicted by some commentators to be inevitable.

3.2.17 For the most part and certainly in terms of occupation levels, Brent town centres were in 2018 however performing relatively well. Overall, vacancy levels were much lower than national rates and even below the London average. High performing Brent district centres in respect of lack of vacancy were Wembley Park (5th), Kingsbury (6th) and Kenton (7th) out of London's 151 designated centres. Poorer performing district centres were Willesden Green (125th) and Neasden (130th). The performance of Wembley (26th) and Kilburn (30th) was however less positive compared to London's 34 major town centres.

3.2.18 The relatively overall good performance was helped by Brent's continued substantial population growth and therefore spending power. This has helped mitigate much of the impact of the wider trend of reductions in individuals' town centre spending. Brent's town centres for the most part principally serve and are used by the borough's population with local independent businesses predominating. Exceptions are Wembley and Kilburn which have a wider draw, reflected in their major status and their cultural/ evening economy mix. Brent Cross and Westfield Shepherd's Bush, Harrow town centre and the West End tend to capture the population's higher order comparison retail spend, typically provided in national multiples. For Brent, this has reduced the impact of chains that have either ceased trading or closed poorer performing premises.

3.2.19 Some of the predicted trends, such as the move towards internet shopping have undoubtedly intensified further. For example, 48% of fashion spend is now on-line (against the 24% predicted in 2018 above). This was hastened by behavioural changes resulting from the pandemic and reduced delivery times/ ease of returns. The pandemic also had a substantial impact on the hospitality sector. Subsequently this sector has also been affected by a multiplicity of factors contributing to rising costs and labour shortages. These have been against a backdrop of the 'cost of living crisis' that has reduced disposable incomes and discretionary spending. Whilst the hot food sector has continued to grow and overall represent a greater number of the units occupied since 2018, the focus of many of these has shifted towards being heavily takeaway dependent. These demand side pressures on town centre uses undoubtedly will raise further challenges for Brent town centres and any actions for their improvement.

3.2.20 The Council has commissioned a Town Centre Health Check, with results expected late summer. Interim information received is included in the next section of this report. The new Brent Local Plan will also be supported through new evidence on retail and leisure needs and options for sustaining the performance and the relevance of town centres to the 'placemaking' of Brent. This new empirical evidence base will be used to refresh a new Brent Town Centre Vision, Strategy and Investment Plans for priority centres.

State of Brent's High Streets and Town Centres

3.2.21 Currently across all 17 Brent town centres the vacancy rate is about 7.6% of floorspace and 7.8% of units. This is below the London average of 9% and national average of 10%. There is however, a wide range in performance, with unit vacancy just 3.4% in Ealing Road, whilst in Church End it rises to 9.8%. (See Appendix A Table 1) These figures do also occasionally mask pockets of concern within individual town centres. The Willesden Lane section of Kilburn has roughly three times the vacancy on the main High Road. Broadly there has not been any substantive changes in relative performance of Brent's town centres against each other since 2018.

3.2.22 Most tenants (over 60% on average) in town centres, as perhaps would be expected, are convenience (food) and comparison (goods) retailing, and leisure (restaurants, etc). (See Appendix A Table 2). However, there are both variations in this as a total and within their individual components of town centre tenant mix. Ealing Road has for example a very high representation of these three groups (84%). This is skewed by comparison retailers (over 50%), whereas nearly all the other centres tend to hover around 20% comparison. The exception to this is Church End at 11%. Convenience retailers tend to comprise around 15% of tenants in most town centres, except for Church End, at nearly 30%. Leisure hovers at around 25% across centres, with Wembley Park, perhaps unsurprisingly given its proximity to the Arena and Stadium having the highest representation (39%).

3.2.23 Around 77.5% of Brent's population lives within a 15-minute walk of a town centre (either in Brent or adjacent). Accessibility is enhanced when considering public transport options. Many of the places beyond a 15-minute walk are however, among the most income-deprived places in England and Wales. This is especially around Stonebridge Park and the North Circular, parts of Church Lane, and Dollis Hill. For some people in these places, accessing town centres requires more cost and effort than for people living within (if not mobility impaired) easy walking distance.

3.2.24 High levels of income deprivation create an associated lack of disposable income. Many residents need to focus on affordable basics, which has implications for the town centres. For example, the widespread desire/ need for and shift towards 'experience economy' uses in town centres (e.g. dining, cultural spaces, attractions), to address the reduced need for retail space, is unlikely to resonate with people who can't afford those things. Most of the Neasden and Church End catchments, and a large proportion of Harlesden, comprise the 10% most deprived in England and Wales. Catchments for Kenton and Kensal Rise mostly fall within England and Wales's top half of incomes, so are more secure/ robust. The rest have catchments somewhere in between. (See Appendix A Table C).

Economic Activity and Drivers of Vitality

3.2.25 Currently around 21% of jobs and 4% of businesses in Brent are in town centres. They are therefore a significant contributor to employment. Unsurprisingly given its size and diversity of premises that it accommodates, the largest by some distance is Wembley with nearly 50% of all jobs in Brent's town centres. (See Appendix A Table D). Possibly contrary to perceptions given the amount of older office stock that has been converted to residential, employment in town centres has risen by 8% since 2018. There has been a large increase in the number of businesses, however the average number of people they employ has dropped by 2.33 people per business to 8.39 people.

3.2.26 The regeneration of town centres is supported through several Council activities. Consistent with National Policy, the London Plan and Brent Local Plan, town centres are the priority location for development requiring planning permission. This is particularly for new 'town centre uses' such as retail, offices, leisure and other activities that attract a lot of people, such as civic offices, healthcare services, etc. For example, the new consolidated College of North-West London (supported by CIL) currently under construction on Olympic Way is wholly within the Wembley town centre boundary. This will animate a currently dead frontage along Olympic Way, substantially increase footfall and wider vitality of the area as well as the viability of adjacent commercial premises.

3.2.27 Residential development is also a priority due to the accessibility town centres provide for residents meeting most of their day-to-day needs without having to travel. An example of significant recent delivery is in Wembley. Within the High Road's boundary in the last 5 years over 1500 dwellings or purpose-built student accommodation have either been completed or are under-construction.

3.2.28 Local Plan policies also seek to retain commercial units that become vacant and if possible, repurpose them for other commercial uses, or affordable workspace, before allowing them for example to change to residential. In association with major developments, policies also make developers contribute towards construction training. This is aimed at supporting Brent residents from disadvantaged backgrounds. Completed developments are also encouraged to employ a proportion of Brent residents via Brent Works.

3.2.29 In Wembley, in advance of its redevelopment, Ujima House which had been purchased by the Council, was used as a meanwhile space for affordable workspace and community facilities, e.g. Stonebridge boxing club. Its replacement will have a social enterprise led café and affordable workspace. Whilst opposite, the new Zephaniah House, also part of the Council led redevelopment, will include a large (800 sqm) space made available to a community organisation to activate/ manage. Larger meanwhile uses in advance of redevelopment are Boxpark, Troubadour Theatre and the Mundo Pixar Experience in Wembley Park. Through s106 obligation / planning conditions meanwhile use of previously vacant units at Montrose Cresent and Atlip Road are accommodating creative and cultural activities and supporting the Ealing Road Alperton Creative Enterprise Zone. This is in advance of permanent tenants for ground floor commercial units to be found.

3.2.30 As part of the wider Council's activities of supporting people into work, town centres such as Harlesden have been the location for the placement of training facilities. Brent Hairdressing Academy initiated by Brent Start opened in June 25. This offers Brent residents aged 19 years or over the opportunity to develop their skills in hairdressing, hair styling and barbering, as well as supporting routes to other education and training in its classroom.

3.2.31 A range of town centres have consistently been promoted by Brent (Willesden Green and Harlesden) when bidding for the Mayor's Creative Enterprise Zones. Ealing Road was ultimately chosen. Supported by £70K of GLA funding, the zone is an area where additional support is provided to help local artists and creatives to put down roots and grow in their area. It is implementing projects to inspire young people and local people who want to join creative industries; supports bespoke education and skills development in the area's unique fashion and jewellery creative sectors, creates opportunities, jobs, businesses and affordable workspaces for new entrepreneurs, invests in sustainable and local creative projects that support a local circular economy, e.g. March 26 providing a 10 week course on Asian fashion and sustainable skills; expanding the creative network and promoting the area's assets, culture and offer, and supporting businesses planning for a resilient and thriving future.

3.2.32 To support business growth, town centre managers have for example used NCIL funds to provide courses to train Brent town centre businesses over a period of 10 sessions (from March 26) to develop their presence on the web, for both promotion of their businesses to raise aware/ draw in trade, but also for commercial transactions. This has resulted in 10 businesses going from no on-line retail presence to gaining orders via their new websites.

3.2.33 Brent has high levels of entrepreneurship, with small business formation rates amongst the highest nationally. Town centres, due to comparatively low rents and regular availability of vacant premises are areas that provide good opportunities for these businesses to start up. However, most new businesses that might typically let these premises often fail within a year. Insufficient turnover to sustain the business is the main reason.

3.2.34 One of the most consistent issues raised with Town Centre Managers is business rates costs. The Council does not set or directly benefit from the rates collected; its role is as a collecting agency for national government. The Council does have some powers to offer business rates discounts. This might be used for example to encourage new start-ups or new business investment within our town centres. Any discount must however be financed by the Council to replace any business rates income otherwise lost to Government.

3.2.35 In most town centres, despite the activities of the town centre managers over the last decade, business leadership and taking ownership of a town centre vision and an improvement agenda has had some notable successes but has been limited boroughwide. Whilst there are obviously many stakeholders involved in creating successful town centres, the examples set out above in respect of what can occur in respect of a co-ordinated curation indicate the importance of an active approach from businesses to shaping a place. Businesses engage well when approached directly by town centre managers.

3.2.36 With just 3 members of staff comprising 0.4 Team Leader, and 2.6 FTE staff the town centre team has a small capacity for dedicated support. Most businesses are themselves are unable to consistently commit to additional external activities. Exceptions are Wembley which has a reasonably well-established traders' association (WTA), Ealing Road (Little India), Harlesden and Neasden. Each has a constituted board of directors and chair, with members able to for example donate time and other activities for 'in-kind' support to projects relying on leverage in of additional resources, e.g. GLA Summer Streets initiative.

3.2.37 There are opportunities to develop unique partnership approaches to individual town centres. Brent and Camden formed a strategic alliance along Kilburn High Road in 2022 which successfully secured £8m from TfL for the Better, Safer Kilburn safety and public realm scheme. The first phase of this has been completed earlier this year. The scheme will incorporate widened pavements, prioritised pedestrian crossing of side roads with continuous footways, three new pedestrian crossings (Dyne Road, Drakes Courtyard and Burton Road), additional green infrastructure, pocket parks at Messina Avenue and Greville Road) and improved the public realm surfaces, street lighting and additional seating. Bus journeys will be improved through longer bus lane hours, extended bus stopping areas, and reorganised servicing parking.

3.2.38 Additionally, Brent and Camden have jointly developed One Kilburn, a Community Improvement District approach. This provides opportunities for bringing all local stakeholders together across the borough boundary and facilitates residents leading town centre development alongside businesses. which Camden Council, with the support of Brent and other stakeholders in and around the Kilburn town centre, has initiated provides a model of engagement and potential impetus to independent delivery outside of Council led schemes. It receives significant in-kind support from both Councils to support a wider place-based partnership approach and is now moving towards more formal governance.

3.2.39 More recently to better support community leadership (business or otherwise) in Willesden Green the Council has initiated the process that hopefully will result in a robust co-delivery partnership. This seeks to encourage and support for the longer term from at least 30 people from that area. They will initiate and lead on a vision for the town centre and associated priority projects that it will lobby third parties (including the Council) to support. Early engagement has been very well received, has energised the community and points to the likelihood of a self-sustaining body to push forward an agenda for the town centre.

3.2.40 Nationally the Business Improvement Districts (BID) model is used in many areas to support town centre strategy and day to day management. It consistently captures the highest level of business engagement and leadership in town centre strategy delivery; a typical example is Milton Keynes. BIDs usually generate a significant annual funding stream through an additional charge collected by councils on qualifying business premises. Oversight of this is typically through a board who direct strategy and spend, usually being able to use their funds to lever in funding. BIDs have previously been discounted for Brent. This has been due to the perceived financial burden that it might place on businesses and an associated likely lack of support to pass the necessary ballot required for them to proceed.

3.2.41 More recently its potential was considered in respect of Wembley, focussed on an Accommodation BID through capturing a modest visitor levy. This could support town centre improvements and marketing to publicise and enhance the visitor experience. Uncertainty has inhibited progress on if and how to progress this, due to the Government's move to seek to legislate for Mayor's ability to collect and spend these funds. Once this has been completed it will be clearer on whether a locally administered option is possible.

Social and Community Value of High Streets and Town Centres

3.2.42 The Council has through either purchasing and fitting out vacant premises, e.g. Harlesden Picture Place for community use, or supporting third sector groups occupy them, e.g. Church End Youth Anchor facility brought into use derelict or otherwise problematic long term vacant properties within town centres. This removes the perception of decline, increases footfall/ activity and through services provided also lead to increased community value in those areas.

3.2.43 Contracts for construction of these schemes typically sought social value through training and employment of Brent residents. In the case of the Youth Anchor this has been supplemented through the lead contractor being a local and socially focussed enterprise. This has supported more youth employment and training opportunities in design and fit-out than would otherwise have typically been given by a private sector contractor. Whilst these schemes show what can be possible, their capital cost to the Council has been significant. This means that their replication/ application in most town centres may be limited.

3.2.44 It would undoubtedly be beneficial for vacant or under-used property to be repurposed for community use. Without Council financial support, if not already in public sector ownership, this is likely to be challenging given the ever-tightening limitations on public sector funding availability. Premises even in poor condition usually have high residual values. Demand for residential conversion adds to this pressure.

3.2.45 The social value of Brent's town centres in respect of showcasing cultural identity and creating a sense of place and bringing the diverse people of Brent together is important. The town centre team with the support of others have sought to animate town centres through a continued range of cultural or social events of which Summer Streets will be the latest. These have often focused on supporting local community groups, artists and entrepreneurs deliver the interventions, e.g. Kilburn Music Mile Festival, Ealing Road Festival, shop shutter artists, bridge/ wall mural artists, buskers, Harlesden Reggae Walk of Music, Brent art trail, etc. (See Appendix B for example images) As well as supporting the sense of place, they do have positive economic impacts, e.g. for the Kilburn festival turnover on event nights was up 14% compared to usual with participating pubs having their largest takings of the year.

Best practice and innovation

3.2.46 Brent is a member of the Town Centre Management Institute (TCMI) so through networking can pick up early on any best practice and innovation that can inform its approach. Brent regularly submits for the TCMI annual awards (amongst others). This year it was on the shortlist for the Best Culture and Arts Scheme for the boroughwide cultural activation programme delivered in the seven priority town centres.

3.2.47 The most impactful best practice town centre projects that are showcased nationally tend to be done at scale with a heavy emphasis on capital schemes, e.g. Sloane Street's major public realm changes incorporating active travel prioritisation, greening and high-quality materials, or Walthamstow's wholesale shopfront parade change. Brent has implemented these types of initiatives. Kingsbury, Wembley High Road and parts of Kilburn have had substantial public realm upgrades in the last 5 years. In Harlesden a successful shopfront improvement scheme (Historic England funded High Street Heritage Action Zone) was delivered. Appendix B shows before and after images of shopfronts. Longer term measures of success in these cases are likely to be quantified through increases in footfall, reduced property voids and higher rents.

3.2.48 Schemes of this nature have an enduring impact on people's lives. For example, "The Lighthouse" in Harlesden - a hub for the charity Refugee Education UK - situated in a long-term vacant bank premises is an example of the innovation required for financing community focused schemes. The building's refurbishment pulled together funding from the Architectural Heritage Fund (£300K), Historic England (£366K) and NCIL (£394K) in addition to the charity's funds. This and examples of Brent town centre schemes identified in previous sections have and are continuing to have impact.

3.2.49 Perhaps, one of the largest challenges for Brent is tackling the financial landscape within which high streets sit. When external funding opportunities come forward, they often require bids against competing areas and are heavily over-subscribed. Funds such as the £20 million Pride of Place fund for each Harlesden and for St Raphs/ Stonebridge represent a major opportunity. The Government commitment to this long-term funding source may however reduce MHCLG's flexibility to provide new town centre funding opportunities for other parts of Brent.

3.2.50 The Council will be diligent in following up any future funding opportunities. This includes CIL and NCIL, which is dependent on development activity. It will also take account of prospective changes in Government policy that seek to support town centres to be set out supporting the national cross-government high street strategy that has previously been mooted for publication later this year.

Emerging High Streets Strategy and Future Direction

3.2.51 The new Council administration is keen to develop a modern strategy to boost our high street and town centres and make them destinations for footfall. They are keen to bring these plans for pre-scrutiny and get ideas from all the parties represented on the Council. This discussion at Scrutiny is the perfect way to begin this wider policy development. The new strategy will take account of contemporary evidence captured by the forthcoming final version of the town centre health check, as well as the local plan evidence base around future retail, leisure and employment needs.

3.2.52 A successful strategy will begin with an overall vision for “Destination Brent”. It would seek to harness and coordinate the potential of key partners including the Council, private sector, public sector, the third sector, faith groups and residents. It can then develop more specific visions for individual town centres based around the identity, strengths and challenges experienced for each centre. Areas of focus together with action plans could identify key parters, high street identity and promotion; activation; and actions on empty units; public realm; other improvements (e.g. shop fronts and murals), etc.

3.2.53 These town centre documents could be standalone, developed subsequently with more detailed engagement and consensus building. However, without an overarching strategy it would be more difficult to coordinate actions and potential funding streams that could be implemented more effectively across more than one centre.

3.2.54 In respect of individual town centres, to gain real credibility and traction, appropriate engagement and ownership of the vision and actions will need to occur, promoting as much as possible a ‘bottom-up’ approach. As the process of progressing with the Willesden Green vision has shown, this is resource intensive and will take time to get to a position where it is robust framework for taking things forward.

3.2.55 As indicated above, the Council’s resources are limited and the impact that this strategy could have on our centres would be constrained in the absence of action from our partners.

3.2.56 In respect of the priority town centres, if retaining a specific number for investment, consideration should address whether those focussed on should be the same as those currently. Current town centre managers are thinly spread given the breadth of responsibility/ potential workstreams identified. A reduction in the number of priority town centres may enable a greater focus on key priority centres. Alternatively, other structures which have a proven track record of working elsewhere, such as BIDs for centres which have a higher proportion of national chains more able to pay additional rates (Wembley, Kilburn and Harlesden) could be reconsidered.

3.2.57 There are several opportunities that are likely to benefit our town centres in the future. This includes the positive effects of continued population growth, albeit at a slower rate than has occurred over the last 20 years, buoyancy of London’s economy and (in normal times) high degrees of interest in development and investment in Brent. Opportunities to capture the wider benefits of Wembley’s events (stadium and arena), including Euro28, could be captured through the strategy. Brent’s diversity also allows our town centres to differentiate themselves and have a unique selling point that draws in wider custom.

3.2.58 Challenges include the trends in town centre uses, with retailing and many services, e.g. banks moving further towards internet transactions predominating, reducing the need for physical premises as well as hospitality sector pressures being sustained. The value of residential uses and flexibility of permitted development could also lead to further reduction in commercial and third sector space available to support Brent’s economy, jobs for residents and entrepreneur development.

3.2.59 The lower price/ value focus of many Brent town centres perpetuates new businesses focussed on uses which many people perceive as non-aspirational, or actively reflective of comparative decline, e.g. higher than average proportions of gambling, fast food, barbers, value comparison, vapes and phone accessories, etc. Evidence indicates that this actively discourages Brent town centre use by residents with higher disposable incomes, who divert to the higher order centres identified above. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that this can be addressed at scale without either a substantial change in Brent’s demographics, or the financial profile of its residents. Change where it does occur is likely to be incremental and slow, e.g. as has happened in Queen’s Park.

3.2.60 Overall, Brent’s town centres are relatively successful and reflect the needs of most Brent residents. Whilst keeping vacancies low is desirable a more aspirational strategy will look to develop qualitative measures in terms of place making, attractiveness to business investment and overall vibrancy of the location - particularly in terms of customer experience. This will build on the characteristics that support the ‘Destination Brent’ theme that centres and facilities such as Ealing Road, the Wembley/ LDO and Kilburn have in drawing in from the wider London catchment. Dealing with problems such as safety, cleanliness, access, parking and deliveries will all feature in a review of town centre needs. The Committee’s views on the ‘what’ and the criteria for prioritisation of interventions for town centres is crucial to our understanding in developing what is needed for a strategy and vision at this very early stage.

3.2.61 There are likely to be in relative terms diminishing funds available for the Council and public sector organisations to positively intervene in the physical fabric or with social and community support, particularly in the absence of BIDs. Given the limited council resources, there is an increased need for businesses and residents to take collective action. The High Streets’ Strategy could help to promote and support this, identifying the role that the council can take in supporting this. However, many businesses have a limited capacity to lead on or potentially contribute to taking forward the town centre agenda, presenting a risk to the success of the strategy in those areas with less organised business associations. The strategy will need to clearly identify the vision, opportunities and challenges for our town centres and what is thought to be required to ensure the continued success and prosperity of our centres.

4.0 Stakeholder and ward member consultation and engagement.

4.1 As this matter is facing scrutiny in advance of a new strategy being drafted there has been no stakeholder and ward member consultation and engagement in the writing of this report. Future town centre policy, strategy or projects will be subject to the relevant Council approval processes that will consider and set out the consultation and engagement that has occurred in supporting any recommendation to approve such work, or its subsequent stages post recommendation. Views from the committee on the nature of consultation and engagement are welcomed. (see 10 Communication Considerations below).

5.0 Financial Considerations

5.1 Revenue funding of the town centre management function is sufficient to cover the salaries of the three town centre manager roles. It currently does not account for or have capacity to support any additional necessary activities, e.g. annual monitoring data to measure/ understand town centre performance.

5.2 Any activities led on or undertaken by town centre managers which requires additional resource is funded through internal bids e.g. CIL, NCIL, Council's capital programme, or the revenue/ capital budgets of other departments who collaborate/ deliver the services to support the work. In addition, external bids for funds provided through the Mayor, Government or third parties provides a significant but more uncertain element of finance to address town centre manager led projects.

5.3 Any Future town centre policy, strategy or projects will be subject to the relevant Council approval processes that will consider these matters if relevant at the time.

6.0 Legal Considerations

6.1 There are no legal considerations arising from this report. Future town centre policy, strategy or projects will be subject to the relevant Council approval processes that will consider these matters if relevant at the time.

7.0 Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) Considerations

7.1 Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) considerations are paramount to the development of any new strategy for high streets. An Equalities Impact Assessment will be carried out as part of this process and will incorporate measures to engage widely with all parts of Brent's communities, businesses and stakeholders. Future town centre policy, strategy or projects will be subject to the relevant Council approval processes that will consider these matters as required.

8.0 Climate Change and Environmental Considerations

8.1 Climate and environmental consideration will feature significantly in this work and appropriate levels of engagement and impact analysis will be undertaken. This will also include engagement with relevant groups in this field and with the Council's own Climate Team.

9.0 Human Resources/Property Considerations (if appropriate)

9.1 As indicated the nature of the Strategy must be proportionate to the Council's ability to deliver and influence based on its current staffing capacity.

10.0 Communication Considerations

10.1 At this pre-production stage communications will need to be planned as part of the timetable for producing the strategy.

Report sign off:

Jehan Weerasinghe
Corporate Director, Neighbourhoods and Regeneration