

MUNICIPAL YEAR 2015/2016 REPORT NO.

MEETING TITLE AND DATE:

Overview and Scrutiny
Committee 30th July 2015

REPORT OF:

Director of Finance, Resources
and Corporate Services
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Agenda – Part: 1	Item: 5
Subject: Scrutiny Workstream - Review of High Streets and Town Centres Wards: All Key Decision No: N/A	
Cabinet Member consulted:	

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Scrutiny Workstream was established by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to undertake a review of high streets and town centres. Particular areas of focus were the numbers of empty units, management of town centres, the retail mix/variety of shops and Business Rates. In relation to these:

- 1.1 Members carried out a variety of visits to ascertain numbers of empty units, the retail mix on offer, and the current look of our high streets.
- 1.2 The management of town centres was discussed with representatives of Enfield Business and Retailers Association and the Chamber of Commerce.
- 1.3 A survey was undertaken of 3 areas to identify the variety of shops. Members heard from senior managers about the Business Rate process, both locally and nationally.

The findings from the review are set out at paragraph 4.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

Members are asked to note and support the following recommendations:-

- 2.1 Review how data on empty units is collated to ensure the Council has the most up-to-date information available. (see 4.1).
- 2.2 Involve retailers with the development of Town Teams and encourage retailers to work proactively with the Council. (see 4.9).
- 2.3 Ward Councillors to attend retailers' meetings. (see 4.10).
- 2.4 Proactively advise small, independent retailers of the discounts available for Business Rates. (See 4.22).
- 2.5 Liaise with the relevant Town Centre Management Group to devise a mail shot relating to marketing the borough and signposting help and advice. (see 4.23).
- 2.6 Establish a Landlord/Letting Agents Forum (see 4.13).
- 2.7 Within planning legislation, consider how the Council can influence shop front design, to enhance the aesthetic appearance of the high street. (see 4.11).
- 2.8 Consider how the Council can influence the variety of shops within a high street or town centre. (see 4.17).

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The workstream was established to look at the Borough's high streets and town centres and look at why there appeared to be an increase in the numbers of empty shops.
- 3.2 Empty units account for 8% of all shops in the Borough, comparing to a national average of 11.8%.
- 3.3 High streets that have thrived in recent years have done so because they maintain a healthy balance of leisure activities, services, high street chain and attractive independent stores.
- 3.4 Although retail parks have advantages, especially in parking convenience, there are a number of shops and services better suited to the high street such as shoe repair, dry cleaning, hairdressing, opticians, general healthcare and banking.
- 3.5 In Enfield the main town centres are considered to be:-
- Enfield Town
 - Southgate
 - Palmers Green
 - Edmonton
- 3.6 The main high street shopping areas are:-
- Enfield Highway
 - Ponders End
 - Cockfosters
 - Upper Edmonton
- 3.7 Members have undertaken a number of activities as part of this review, including:-
- Visiting Enfield Highway, Ponders End and Southgate to assess the quality and variety of the retail offer.
 - Carry out a survey of Palmers Green Town Centre to test the robustness of data relating to empty/occupied units.
 - Meeting with the Director of Environment and Regeneration to discuss the LBE role in town centre development.
 - Meeting with the Chamber of Commerce and Enfield Business and Retailers Association to hear about their work with local retailers.
 - Holding a public meeting to hear the views of local retailers and residents.
 - Approaching companies new to our town centres to discover why they chose Enfield as a location for their business.

- Discussing the setting and collection of Business Rates with the Director of Finance, Resources and Customer Services.

4. FINDINGS

Empty Units/Premises

- 4.1 The initial stage of the review considered how LBE collates information relating to vacant and occupied premises in the Borough. Having been provided with details of existing shops across a range of locations, spot checks were carried out in Enfield Town, Palmers Green, Enfield Highway and Ponders End.
- 4.2 It was difficult to obtain information for Enfield Town as the data was only available in postal districts, rather than reflective of the town centre itself.
- 4.3 The information relating to the other areas was, in places, inaccurate as units that were listed as empty were occupied and vice versa. This may lead to difficulties in collecting Business Rates from the retailer.
- 4.4 The Workstream Members heard from the Assistant Director of Environment and Regeneration that progress is being made in attracting new companies to the borough, with Robert Dyas in Enfield Town being a valuable recent addition. It is envisaged that direct approaches to a number of retailers will lead to positive outcomes.
- 4.5 A difficulty can occur when attempting to contact landlords of retail units. This can be a contributory factor to units being vacant for a long period of time. A register of landlords would alleviate this problem.

Management of Town Centres

- 4.6 Currently, the Enfield Business and Retailers Association (EBRA), a not for profit organisation, manages the Town Centre and High Street portfolio on behalf of the Council. Grant funding totalling £179,000 is provided to EBRA, which includes £24,000 from the High Street Innovation Fund.
- 4.7 Representatives from the Chamber of Commerce and EBRA provided details of their roles in a meeting with Workstream Members. They act as a conduit between the retailers and the Authority, providing advice to both retailers and Council officers/Members. EBRA liaise with the Police on security matters and have implemented a radio system to inform retailers of security alerts.
- 4.8 Although not a solution to the issue of empty shops, EBRA organise the placement of shop front vinyls that give the impression that units are occupied, rather than having a stark, unwelcoming impression on

the high street. These currently cost approximately £600 per unit to install.

- 4.9 Funding is to be withdrawn from EBRA at the end of this financial year, and a revised model of governance is to be established. The *Enfield Town Centres Management Framework –Consultation Report* highlighted that 61% of respondents would prefer Town Teams to be established. It is important that local retailers are involved in any new model of governance to ensure ownership.
- 4.10 A meeting with one of the longest established retailers in Enfield Town resulted in a request that Ward Councillors attend meetings of the Local Retailers Association to hear the issues and share information.
- 4.11 As part of a walk-round of a number of areas, Members noted the inconsistency of design of shop fronts, particularly in relation to shop signs and names. The shops along Enfield Highway have varying depth of signs in a range of designs, fonts and colours. In contrast, shops bordering Southgate Circus have a uniform approach which gives a more aesthetically pleasing appearance. It is recommended that planning submissions for retail units should allow Members to take decisions based on a standardised approach to shop front design.
- 4.12 At the Workstream's public meeting, attended by local residents and retailers, Members heard that there is a willingness on the part of retailers to work with the Council to improve our Town centres and High Streets. Parking was an emotive issue and a scheme discussed at the meeting, allowing customers to re-claim parking fees at nominated shops, has now been implemented.
- 4.13 The Council should consider establishing a forum for landlords/letting agents and Town Centre Management to meet to discuss issues relating to vacancy factors, mobility, planning issues and access to council services.

Variety of Shops/Retail Mix

- 4.14 The Borough has 2 long established markets in Edmonton Green and Enfield Town. The bustling covered market in Edmonton is popular with shoppers with a varied range of goods, particularly greengrocery.
- 4.15 The market place in Enfield Town has capacity for 95 stalls, although in recent years this level hasn't been reached. The market sells a range of greengrocery, flowers, clothes, watches, electrical goods and fast food. The Old Charitable Trust administers the market, collecting rent from stall holders and income from the car park, operational on non-market days. Comments from current stall holders indicate that high pitch fees may be prohibitive to potential stall holders.

- 4.16 In order to attract a sound customer base, the retail offer must be varied. As part of the review, surveys were undertaken in Enfield Highway, Cockfosters and Enfield Town, collecting information on the variety of shops available.
- 4.17 The survey indicated that in Enfield Highway, over 40% of the shops are either takeaways (15%), Mini Marts (16%) or Hair/Beauty (10%). There are no shoe shops, book shops, opticians or card shops.
- 4.18 Members noted that the lack of variety and choice could be detrimental to the success of the high street in this area. It can be noted that there are fewer takeaways in Enfield Town and Cockfosters combined, than there are in Enfield Highway.
- 4.19 Over the last 2 years, 3 large retailers have established their business in Enfield Town. Each of these companies, Office, Robert Dyas and Pandora were asked to complete a questionnaire relating to their experience of moving to Enfield.
- 4.20 Only Robert Dyas provided a response and in summary, Enfield was highlighted following a strategic location review including demographics, retail mix and competition. In addition, letters were received from local residents encouraging the company to establish a store in Enfield.

Business Rates

- 4.21 The Director of Finance, Resources and Corporate Services informed Workstream Members of how Business Rates are set by Central Government rather than locally by the Council.
- 4.22 The Government, recognising that many highstreets are experiencing challenges as they look to adapt to changing consumer preferences in how people shop, such as internet shopping, retail parks etc decided for the years 2014/15 and 2015/16 to provide a Business Rates Retail Relief Grant of £1000 for 2014/15 going up to £1500 for 2015/16 to businesses that meet the criteria. However, despite targeted multiple leaflet distributions regarding the retail discount scheme, the Workstream found that many retailers don't claim this, possibly due to a lack of awareness.
- 4.23 Workstream Members agreed that a mail-shot should be sent out to local retailers, not only as a marketing exercise but also providing guidance on how to access Council services. It was suggested that this further communication could be included with Council Tax Bills.

5. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

None.

6. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

To support the economic development in the Borough by making our Town Centres and High Streets attractive places for visitors to shop and enjoy leisure time.

7. COMMENTS OF THE DIRECTOR OF FINANCE, RESOURCES AND CUSTOMER SERVICES AND OTHER DEPARTMENTS

a. Financial Implications

The costs of this work stream will be found from within the existing budget

b. Legal Implications

Under section 13 of the Planning and Compulsory purchase Act 2004 the Council has a duty to keep under review matters which may be expected to effect the development of their area or the planning of its development.

In addition the Council has a positive duty under the National Planning Policy Framework to ensure the vitality of town centres and under paragraph 14 to “positively seek the development needs of the area” and “to pursue policies to support the viability” of town centres. Moreover where town centres are in decline there is a duty to “plan positively for the future of town centres and to encourage economic activity.”

The recommendations to this report fall squarely within these provisions.

The Council would also be acting within its general powers of competence under section 1 of the Localism Act 2011.

c. Property Implications

Where the Council owns retail units within the main Town Centres, as set out in section 3.5 and 3.6, these tenant’s, if not already engaged, should be invited to participate in the next round of consultations.

8. KEY RISKS

Implementation of the suggestion recommendations should assist in all of the areas of focus including reducing the number of empty units, increasing with the retail mix/variety of shops and the management of town centres.

9. IMPACT ON COUNCIL PRIORITIES

Fairness for All, Growth and Sustainability, Strong Communities

Maintaining and improving Enfield’s town centres and high street shopping areas will ensure that the majority of residents have access to accessible quality shopping areas. Attractive, vibrant shopping areas encourage

residents to shop locally, strengthening the local economy and contribute to the development of strong communities.

10. EQUALITIES IMPACT IMPLICATIONS

Corporate advice has been sought in regard to equalities and an agreement has been reached that an equalities impact assessment is neither relevant nor proportionate for the approval of this report.

11. PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

Maintaining and improving Enfield's town centres and high street shopping areas will contribute to the achievement of a number of Council priorities.

12. PUBLIC HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

A healthy high street will impact positively on people's health in terms of services, food and entertainment. However to maximise the public health gain it may be useful to consider how the town centres can be made pleasant and attractive centres in themselves which has been shown elsewhere to itself increase commerce and retail.

Background Papers

None