

AGENDA ITEM: 11 Page nos. 98 – 106

Meeting	Cabinet
Date	3 April 2008
Subject	Vibrant and Viable Town Centres – A Suburban Town Centres Strategy for Barnet
Report of	The Leader of the Council
Summary	This paper seeks approval for a strategy to create the right environment for Barnet’s suburban town centres to flourish.

Officer Contributors	Brian Reynolds (Deputy Chief Executive) Hester Fairgrieve (Policy and Partnerships Manager)
Status (public or exempt)	Public
Wards affected	All
Enclosures	A strategy for Barnet’s suburban town centres
For decision by	Cabinet
Function of	Executive
Reason for urgency / exemption from call-in (if appropriate)	N/A

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1. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1.1 That the strategy for ensuring vibrant and viable suburban town centres in Barnet be approved as set out in this report**

2. RELEVANT PREVIOUS DECISIONS

- 2.1 None

3. CORPORATE PRIORITIES AND POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

- 3.1 The Suburban Town Centres Strategy contributes to the Corporate Plan priority of 'A Successful City-Suburb', specifically the objective of 'delivering the Three Strands Approach of Protect, Enhance and Grow' which includes a specific reference to enhancing Barnet's town centres.

4. RISK MANAGEMENT ISSUES

- 4.1 Failure to sustain and enhance Barnet's town centres will impair their key contribution to the social, economic and environmental well-being of the borough.

5. EQUALITIES AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

- 5.1 The Suburban Town Centres Strategy aims to create the right environment for vibrant and viable town centres in Barnet. Integral to this is the need to respect the diversity of the town centre network and to take into account the different requirements of each town centre, and the different needs and preferences of those who use them.
- 5.2 The relevant equalities priorities and targets in the Suburban Town Centre Strategy will be reflected within the key work programme of the Deputy Chief Executive's portfolio, and will form the delivery plan of the Single Equality Scheme.
- 5.3 Monitoring progress of equalities and diversity performance in relation to the Suburban Town Centres Strategy will be done as part of the council's revised performance monitoring framework.

6. FINANCIAL, STAFFING, ICT AND PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The work arising from the implementation of the Suburban Town Centres Strategy in 2008/09 can be supported from within existing resources.

7. LEGAL ISSUES

- 7.1 The development of a Suburban Town Centres Strategy is currently not a statutory requirement in the UK. However, the London Plan emphasises the strategic importance of town centres and contains a series of specific policies for London's town centres, which all local authorities must be in general conformity with. This includes maximising choice in town centres and promoting sustainable access to goods and services.

- 7.2 At this stage the implementation of the Suburban Town Centres Strategy will have no legal implications for the Council. All future decisions and their impacts will be considered via separate reports to the appropriate committees in line with the council's adopted constitution.

8. CONSTITUTIONAL POWERS

- 8.1 Constitution Part 3, Responsibility for Functions – Section 3 –Responsibilities of the Executive

9 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 9.1 The Suburban Town Centres Strategy sets out how the council will create the right environment for town centres in Barnet to flourish. It is not a public strategy document but does explicitly set out the council's facilitation and enabling role.
- 9.2 There are a number of reasons why a Suburban Town Centres Strategy is required. The most prominent is that town centres are the clearest indicator of social, economic and environmental well-being in the borough. Their critical role in creating a successful city-suburb is demonstrated by the fact that:
- 95% of residents do their main shopping in Barnet's town centres
 - Three quarters of residents visit town centres in Barnet up to four times a week
 - Two thirds of residents use Barnet's town centres for evening leisure activities
 - Barnet's town centres are sustainable – walking is the second most popular mode of access and those who walk to town centres spend the most.

Therefore while major projects like Brent Cross Cricklewood are important to the council and the future of the borough, town centres most identify "the place" for existing residents. While Barnet has a strong story on the 'Growth' and 'Protect' element of the Three Strands Approach, more is required on the 'Enhance' element. Furthermore, there is a long-standing commitment in the Sustainable Community Strategy to improve North Finchley and there are some significant development opportunities on the horizon in Edgware, Chipping Barnet and New Barnet which need to be managed effectively to ensure the benefits delivered are those that residents expect.

- 9.3 To inform the development of a strategy, an issues paper was produced in December 2007 which reviewed the performance of Barnet's diverse town centre network and identified the issues and opportunities facing them. The paper reviewed both factual data, such as retail diversity, vacancy rates and rental growth, and more qualitative research such as focus groups with residents, businesses and ward members and a Citizens Panel survey with over 500 residents.
- 9.4 While the issues and opportunities paper found that town centres are critical to the success of city-suburbs, it also found that many town centres in Barnet are struggling on a number of indicators. Retail rents in Barnet's town centres remain largely static, vacancy rates vary considerably and parking is perceived as a significant issue. Furthermore, there is low satisfaction with

street cleaning and safety/security. The paper concluded that some town centres are doing better than perceived (e.g. North Finchley), whereas others are struggling to achieve their potential (e.g. Edgware).

- 9.5 The Suburban Town Centres Strategy recognises that the council's role is not to take an interventionist approach to town centres, as ultimately it is the private sector that will invest most and will determine the amount and types of retail activity. However, it acknowledges that the council has a key role to play in creating the right environment for private sector investment as it:
- Largely determines the appearance of town centres
 - Controls parking arrangements
 - Determines the extent of change of planning use
 - Influences take up of trade waste contracts
 - Regulates the street trading environment
 - Influences residents feelings of safety and security
 - Is best placed to promote the town centres.

More detail on these elements is provided in the Suburban Town Centres Strategy.

10. LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS

10.1 None

CFO: CH

Legal: CM

Creating Vibrant and Viable Suburban Town Centres in Barnet

Why are Barnet's suburban town centres important?

Barnet has 29 district and local centres, one major centre in Edgware and London's only regional shopping centre at Brent Cross. Consequently, nearly everyone in the borough lives within half a mile of a town centre.

Each town centre is distinct, often reflecting the needs of local communities and competition between centres. Some are successful; some less so. Yet their strategic importance in the suburban agenda cannot be overlooked. As well as supporting future economic and housing growth, they are also clear indicators of the social, economic and environmental well-being of city-suburbs and create a sense of place. Consequently, they are likely to be key drivers of satisfaction in the area.

However, town centres in Barnet are also vulnerable and are facing significant challenges. The traditional role of town centres for retail trade is changing, which - combined with other trends such as increased car dependency in outer London, greater population mobility, and greater choice for spending leisure time - means that town centres need to reinvent their role.

A strategy for Barnet's suburban town centres

We want Barnet's suburban town centres to be vibrant and viable.

While the vibrancy of Barnet's town centres will depend on the private sector's willingness to invest in them, the council has a key role to play in creating the right environment to enable and facilitate this investment and growth.

To this end, the council will focus on eight key objectives:

1. To improve the appearance of Barnet's town centres

The appearance of a town centre is perceived by the public to be an important factor in determining its ambience. Focus group research with residents, ward members and businesses in September 2007 identified street cleaning, flowers and places to sit and rest as desired improvements in town centres.

Where will the council focus its efforts to achieve this objective?

- *Footway improvements:* the council has, in the past, focused investment on roads, which has resulted in considerable improvements. Overall, Barnet is in the top quartile nationally for all three Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPI) for roads (principal roads, unclassified roads and non principal roads). However, on footways the council does less well. Barnet's performance on the national footway condition BVPI currently places the borough in the second quartile. It has therefore been agreed by the council that investment should be focused on footway improvements, particularly in town centres. With a footway improvement programme already in place, the council aims to be in the top quartile for footway condition performance by 2010.

- *Street cleaning improvements:* the council launched its Clean Borough Strategy in 2007 which outlines its commitment to continuing to tackle environmental crime, including litter, fly tipping, fly posting, graffiti and other cleanliness issues. Alongside the strategy it also launched an anti-graffiti charter for businesses and extended its Town Keepers service to ensure coverage of 20 town centres. This has also enabled town centre cleaning to be carried out on Saturday and Sunday mornings, in addition to the weekday service. During 2008/09, the council will implement its second year action plan for achieving the Clean Borough Strategy, with a particular focus on town centres. It will also pursue opportunities for working with local businesses to reduce graffiti.
- *Maximising other opportunities to improve appearance* - the council will ensure it maximises any opportunities to draw on external funding (e.g. Section 106 contributions from developers) to make the town centres more attractive places to be through better seating, flowers and greenery.

2. To ensure effective control of parking arrangements

The Citizens Panel survey on town centres (2007) found that satisfaction with access by road to town centres was high but just under half of respondents were satisfied with car parking facilities. Parking was also identified as a particular problem in focus group research with residents, ward members and businesses.

Where will the council focus its efforts to achieve this objective?

The council is already undertaking reviews of its Controlled Parking Zone schemes and will continue to ensure the effective control of its parking arrangements in town centres.

3. To manage development opportunities and changes in planning use effectively

The Citizens Panel Survey (2007) on town centres found that walking was the second most popular mode of travel, after the car. Transport for London (TfL) research also found that those who walked visited town centres more frequently and therefore spent more. The issues and opportunities paper also concluded that North Finchley was one of the most successful town centres in the borough and also had the largest population living within a one mile radius. This therefore shows the benefits of increasing the number of people living in and around town centres.

Nevertheless, the issues and opportunities paper found that there was a need for the council to facilitate development opportunities to ensure that benefits to residents and businesses were maximised. However, with finite resources and such a large and diverse network of town centres in Barnet, it would be difficult for the council to do this to the same extent for every town centre. Therefore, the council's existing approach - to concentrate on the town centres in the borough where there are significant development opportunities on the horizon - is the right one.

Where will the council focus its efforts to achieve this objective?

Encourage housing: The council will use its planning power to encourage the building of / conversion to housing in town centres, where it is appropriate. This will include the conversion of redundant office space to residential. However, the council will ensure that any new housing developments take account of the character and needs of each town centre and are done within the framework of the Three Strands Approach of Protection, Enhancement and Growth.

Developing Planning Strategies: The councils' general planning policy on town centres will be contained in the Core Strategy of the Local Development Framework. In addition, the council will finalise planning strategies for the four prioritised town centres of Edgware, New Barnet, North Finchley and Chipping Barnet in 2008/09. A planning strategy will also be produced for Whetstone in the future. These planning strategies, which will set out the aspirations for each town centre, are being prepared in partnership with key stakeholders, leveraging commitment and resources from the private sector into their preparation. They will guide pre-application discussions with developers, negotiations over Section 106 agreements and allow planning applications to be shaped with an eye towards all factors affecting that town centre over the next 5 to 15 years. They would be 'material considerations' in determining any future proposals and planning applications and include information on the impact of retail expansion/supermarket development and housing density, traffic/parking/pedestrian movement, how to treat the public realm and community safety issues, planning for infrastructure and community facilities and sustainable design and construction.

The council will also need to work with TfL and the private sector in the centres where planning strategies are being produced to improve physical connections between different modes of travel and to ensure that interchanges are well integrated with pedestrian areas. In promoting better access to these town centres, this will also help to achieve the objective of 'effective control of parking arrangements'.

4. To effectively regulate the street trading environment

In recent years there has been a noticeable increase in the number of premises placing tables and chairs, advertising boards and displays on the footway in town centres. However, currently almost all street trading in the borough is unlicensed and therefore being conducted illegally. Consequently, the council needs to ensure more effective regulation of the street trading environment to enhance the character, ambience and safety of town centres.

Where will the council focus its efforts to achieve this objective?

To allow for the more effective regulation of the street scene and enable the management of any problems that may arise, the council has introduced a Street Trading Policy, with a revised fee structure. This was approved by Cabinet on 21 February 2008 and will need to be effectively implemented during 2008/09.

5. To maximise take up of trade waste contracts

Currently there are 3,200 businesses in Barnet that have trade waste contracts with the council. Data on penetration of council trade waste contracts by town centre are currently only available for four town centres – Brent Street, Hendon Central, New Barnet and Watling Avenue. Penetration in 2007 ranged from 59% in Watling Avenue and Brent Street to 73% in Hendon Central. Brent Street had the highest percentage with private trade waste arrangements (22%) and Hendon Central the lowest (5%). More than one third of businesses in Watling Avenue had no trade waste arrangements at all.

Where will the council focus its efforts to achieve this objective?

There is a need to maximise trade waste contracts in Barnet's town centres. To achieve this, the businesses in Barnet's town centres are being surveyed over the next few months on their trade waste arrangements, and this data will be used to explore opportunities for maximising take up of council trade waste contracts.

6. To improve residents' feelings of safety and security

The Citizens Panel survey on town centres (2007) found that only 32% of residents said they were satisfied or very satisfied with safety and security in their most frequently visited town centre in Barnet. Furthermore, in the focus group research (2007) with residents, businesses and ward members, the town centres of Chipping Barnet, Edgware and North Finchley were perceived as having problems with anti-social behaviour. In contrast, Whetstone was seen as a pleasant place to shop, with little anti-social behaviour.

To encourage people to use their local town centre, both in the day and in the evening, there is a need to find out what factors are driving these poor perceptions of safety and security, and when and where people feel unsafe. This will then enable the council and police to effectively address these issues.

Where will the council focus its efforts to achieve this objective?

To find out more about the perceived issues with safety and security in town centres, the council will work with the Barnet Borough Police to undertake further research with local residents and businesses during 2008/09. The Safer Communities Partnership Board will specifically focus on improving safety and security in town centres where there are particular issues (real or perceived) and this will be included in the revised Safer Communities Strategy, due to be approved in April 2008.

7. To improve access to information on town centres

The council is best placed to promote town centres in Barnet. However, the town centre issues and opportunities paper found that there was very limited information available on the council website on the amenities and services available in Barnet's town centres.

Where will the council focus its efforts to achieve this objective?

The council will ensure that in Spring 2008 its town centre web pages on Barnet Online are re-launched, bringing together information on each town centre, as well as strategies and plans affecting the town centres. It will ensure that this information is regularly updated and links to external websites, where appropriate.

8. To ensure consistency with other council programmes

The council needs to ensure that its strategies and plans, and those of partner agencies, are consistent with the aim of creating the right environment for vibrant and viable suburban town centres in Barnet. This includes ensuring that future investment in community services, such as libraries and health services, are provided in town centres where this is appropriate.