Leytonstone is a lively and diverse town centre, characterised by a unique mix of historic assets, traditional high streets and large-scale retail superstores. At the eastern edge of the London Borough of Waltham Forest, its retail offer and transport links serve a broad residential area, largely composed of well-conserved Victorian terraced housing. At the same time, the town centre is a gateway to expansive green spaces in Epping Forest and Wanstead Flats.

This attractive mix of amenities has seen change gather pace in Leytonstone in the past decade, and is currently drawing a wave of new residents from across the river Lea as pressure on London’s housing stock steadily mounts. They join a community which already includes diverse creatives, avid gardeners, innovative entrepreneurs, young families, and long-standing residents who have seen the area undergo dramatic transformations, for better and for worse, in the latter half of the 20th century.

This report outlines proposals to build on the existing and emergent strengths of this population to improve the town centre, and ensure that future development occurs in a manner that enhances the public urban environment.

Recognising the rich potential of involving the informed, active and engaged community that lives and works in the town centre, proposals will outline a sequence of measures that build from short- and medium-term interventions, which can respond directly and dynamically to stakeholders, through to longer term development opportunities. In this way, we aim to map out a methodology for achieving growth in the town centre which is firmly rooted in the particular context and character of Leytonstone.
Leytonstone began life as a leafy hamlet to the east of Leyton. The High Road historically formed a link in a key route between London and Epping. Three pubs were built in the 17th century: the Harrow (1651), Green Man (1668), and the Robin Hood (1670). While none of the original structures remain, O’Neill’s and the Red Lion still occupy the former sites of the Green Man and the Robin Hood respectively.

The hamlet would be transformed following the opening of Leytonstone rail station in 1856. However, there are still remnants pre-dating this transformation in the Georgian cottages of the Browning Road (then Back Lane) Conservation Area, and a row of grand Georgian terraced houses listed at 694-698a High Road. Following the construction of shops and a bank on the former forecourts of these properties, these can no longer be seen from the High Road.

With Browning Road likewise tucked out of site behind the High Road, the only building pre-dating the railway which is readily apparent in the town centre is the Gothic-style St. John’s Church, dating from 1832-33. Together with its verdant yard, the Church sits at the heart of the town centre, and is strongly reminiscent of Leytonstone’s bucolic past.

To the north of the Town Centre, Leytonstone House is the grand former residence of Thomas Foxwell Buxton. This fine Georgian mansion (grade II-listed) is now an accountants office, while the surrounding grounds are dominated by car parking.

In 1857, Bethnal Green Industrial School, a remedial educational institution for boys from disadvantaged background, was established in the grounds of Leytonstone House. The existing structures, which include two dormitory terraces and a central hall in yellow stock brick, were completed in 1889.

The opening of the railway, and coincident increase in employment opportunities in London and West Ham, saw Leytonstone become home to a community of clerks and workmen employed outside the area. Speculative development resulted in the Victorian terraces of yellow stock bricks with stuccowork ornamentation that characterise many of the residential streets around the town centre.

The bulk of Leytonstone’s retail parades also date from this period, including the Red Lion Inn in its current form and adjacent shops dating from 1890.
Bearman’s department store was, together with the adjacent Rialto cinema, a much-loved local institution which remains a source of nostalgia for many locals. The store was constructed by a local draper on the site of a vicarage in 1905, followed by the construction of an arcade and cinema in 1910, and employed as many as 450 people at the height of its success. It is now recalled as emblematic of a diverse and high-quality retail offer in Leytonstone.

A further significant phase of development followed in the inter-war period, with the construction of further shopping parades, as well as Leytonstone Library in 1934. This was at the time an innovative example of mixed use development, incorporating shops at the ground floor with the library above, and, positioned just across the road from St. John’s Churchyard and opposite the Red Lion Inn, completes an important ensemble defining the civic heart of Leytonstone. While the original Woolworths shop front survives, the ground floor is now largely occupied by Argos, which makes little use of the ample display windows.

The inter-war period also saw further development along the High Road, with terraces in red brick and reconstituted stone largely following the rhythms of Victorian development, albeit with simplified ornamentation and a greater emphasis on symmetry by parade. Flamboyant examples of Art Deco architecture survive in the International Buildings on Church Lane and Kirkdale Road.

20th century development saw the construction of retail units at a larger scale. This included the Art Deco construction of gas showrooms at 67-678 High Road. Post-war development brought further (less sympathetic) large-scale retail units, now housing 99p stores, Iceland and the British Heart Foundation.

In 1983, following a takeover by the Cooperative group, Bearman’s department store was closed. The structure, together with the arcade and cinema, was demolished, and the superstore now housing Matalan was constructed. The Bethnal Green Industrial Schools, closed in 1932, were partially subsumed into a Tesco superstore at the end of the 20th century. The dormitory wings were converted to residential use, with some commercial units at ground floor, while the school hall saw use as the superstore’s pharmacy.

The last decades of the 20th century also saw further defining changes to transport infrastructure. In 1989, the construction of the link road, connecting Hackney to the M11 was announced. Construction would necessitate the demolition of homes at the west of the town centre, and effectively established the continuing boundary between Forest and Leytonstone wards.

Construction of the link road was widely opposed, resulting in a sustained grassroots protest campaign and attracting national media attention. Protests gathered momentum toward 1994, with
PLANNING POLICY

Relatively little planning policy exists for the study area. Where other town centres in the south of the borough and industrial districts in the west have AAPs (Walthamstow, Leyton, Wood Street, Blackhorse Lane), there is no such policy for Leytonstone. Opportunity sites have been identified just outside the fringes of the study area, e.g. adjacent to the railway. As noted above, the Browning Road Conservation Area sits just outside the District Centre. However, the vast majority of the study area is an Archaeological Priority Zone.

RETAIL

As one of Waltham Forest’s designated District Centres, the core strategy states that its role should be consolidated, encouraging the provision of main and bulk convenience food shopping, and a reasonable range of other shopping facilities and services. At the same time, specialisation and differentiation is to be encouraged. It is worth noting that the surrounding area is also served by a number of local shopping parades in Grove Green Road, Colworth Road, and High Road Leytonstone (South).

The majority of Church Lane is designated as primary retail frontage, together with parades adjacent to and opposite the Churchyard. However, a number of these frontages are turned over to office use, or make poor use of their prominent frontages.

PUBLIC SPACE

The core strategy notes that Leytonstone enjoys good access to nature, falling within catchment areas of open space thanks to the proximity of Wanstead Flats and Epping Forest.

WORKSPACE

Joseph Ray Road and Lancaster Road arches to the south are designated borough Employment Areas, suitable for small office use. A Business Improvement District operates out of Leytonstone Library.

HOUSING

Waltham Forest sets out ambitious housing targets for the borough as a whole, seeking to create 10,320 new homes before 2026, and bring 1035 empty properties back into use. The Leytonstone ward has been earmarked to provide between 251 and 500 of these new homes. The Council has subsequently set out to build or have underway 12,000 new homes in the borough by 2020, primarily in the south and west of the borough, but potentially with smaller-scale development around Leytonstone.

The Core Strategy sets out a broad support for introducing residential development in the District Centre:

‘... encouraging housing in and around town centres as part of mixed use developments on the upper floors of commercial buildings and on sites where a high quality living environment offering good levels of residential amenity, low noise levels, safe streets, personal security etc. can be created without impeding the development of primary town centre uses such as retail and other commercial uses.”

OPPORTUNITY SITES

The following opportunity sites just outside the Town Centre have been identified in LBWF policy:

SSA45 – TI car park to west of tracks. Residential and community use sought.

SSA46 – 483-495 Grove Green Road Live/work units and community use sought.

SSA 47 – Open Land adjacent to A12 – Residential development considered inappropriate. Enhancement of green space sought.
Recent Council regeneration schemes have seen ambitious improvements to the public realm, around the Central Line station, Church Lane and along the High Road. This has helped to create a welcoming arrival in Leytonstone, as well as effectively framing the transition from shopping parades to residential side streets.

Also completed in recent years is a new children’s playground and multi-sport area to the south of the Central Line car park.

The character of the Town Centre as a whole is significantly shaped by the establishment over 10 years ago of a one way system which encompasses much of the study area. This has significantly reduced car traffic in the town centre, and remains the subject of much local debate.

Refurbishment of Leytonstone Library was completed in 2015, bringing improvements to the library’s youth and IT provisions.

Waltham Forest’s Mini-Holland scheme seeks to encourage cycling across the borough, with the aspiration to improve cycle links between Leytonstone and other district centres. Specifically, a new quiet way cycle route is proposed to Gainsborough Road, Fairlop Road & Essex Road to link Leytonstone to Wood Street and Walthamstow Village. A new secure cycle hub has already been introduced adjacent to the Central Line station.

Several of Waltham Forest’s other District Centres saw direct council investment during the High Streets 2013 programme, including sections of High Road Leytonstone to the south of the Overground Line. Following the completion of building frontage works, a further scoping study was commissioned to identify additional regeneration opportunities in the area.
Council ownership in the study area is limited. Leytonstone Library itself has been recently refurbished, as described above (see Regeneration); however, commercial units to the ground floor (Argos, Cafe de Asia) are also within Council ownership, and currently make poor use of their prominent frontages.

Toward the edges of the town centre, Harvey House sits within a deep forecourt, and presents a potential development opportunity. The Church Lane car park likewise falls within Council ownership.

Limited new-build development has occurred in Leytonstone in recent years, with a 5-storey apartment block to the rear of Makalani constituting the most prominent example.

To the south of the District Centre, a 5-storey apartment block has recently been completed (2015). With a set back top floor, shallow forecourt and balconies overlooking the street, this sets a good example for residential high street development.

Elsewhere around the fringes of the District Centre, planning permission has recently been granted to replace the existing furniture emporium at 590 High Road with a 4-storey apartment block. Planning permission has been granted to convert a former substation on Gainsborough Road to accommodate nine flats. Just to the south of the Overground line, permission was granted in 2012 to construct 37 flats on the site of the single-storey Indian Muslim Federation Hall.

Key

- Council ownership
- Development site