

To note: Buckhurst Hill

The attached report has been commissioned by EFDC Officer from a specialist external consultant.

Work on this report was carried out between December 2020 and April 2021 so some of the observations may refer to issues and conditions that existed at that time and may have been subsequently addressed.

The report is often linked with development proposals focused on the immediate actions required to improve the town centres. Further reports will be brought forward, often associated with more significant investment and development to cover the medium and long-term improvement of the town centres.

The immediate resources required to address priority town centre issues were identified in the EFDC 2021/22 Budget or will be supported by specific Covid 19 recovery grants made available by the Government.

It is intended as with the Waltham Abbey and Ongar town centre reports, that all approved recommendations will be project managed in detail, assigned to managers, given timelines, supported by identified resources and their delivery and impact monitored.

The reports have been produced after extensive consultation. This consultation with local members and other key partners will continue.

Although not specifically mentioned in this report, work on the ground will be linked with other initiatives such as sustainable transport with sub projects of demand responsive transport, cycling routes, electric car charging points and various greening and tree planting initiatives being taken forward as per our Green Infra-structure Policy and climate change action plan.

Comments only for Cabinet: Epping

The report is generally positive and has only been edited with regard to minor language changes.

The only other issue of note is how active the District wishes to be about frontage, preserving retail space at the core of the town and other associated actions. At one level there is an option of a "Schedule D" protection of the town centre, through an updated Planning re frontages, signs, colour palette etc, through to informal guidance and encouragement. It should be noted that Government has become more permissive recently regarding change of use and similar but a balance between a market driven adaptive look and feel to the place, versus a Planning determined look, needs to be considered.

Draft

Buckhurst Hill

Regeneration Study and Proposals

“The most successful high streets and town centres will need to change to reflect the communities they serve by transforming themselves into community hubs, playing to their strengths of offering human interaction and a unique sense of place and community”

HM Government response to an enquiry into High Streets and Town Centres in 2030 (presented to Parliament in 2019)



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AUTHORS NOTE:

The contents of this report and the recommendations made are based on Studio 3 Ltd's view of the town centre as a whole and the actions which should be taken to regenerate the towns and increase their general attractiveness to residents, visitors and businesses. Absolutely no consideration has been given as to whether the suggested actions and/or any related costs are the responsibility of the County, District, Town/Parish Councils or any other body.

What is crucial is that the different Councils, Town Partnerships, businesses and residents come together to agree priorities and for each organisation to put in place the necessary actions within their remit/responsibility to make the required improvements.

The regeneration of our town centres is the responsibility of all stakeholders. Key to these changes are the businesses, residents and Town/Parish Councils themselves. They are closest to the town and really know and understand the town and the needs and requirements of the local community. Their counsel and guidance should both therefore be provided and encouraged at all times.

The reinvention of our town centres will only be achieved by a joint and collaborative approach utilising the knowledge, expertise and skills of a range of people, bodies and organisations. No single person or organisation can achieve this on their own and everyone has their own specific part to play. It is essential that any plans have the buy in of all connected persons and that all parties support each other through the process.

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Foreword

Epping Forest District Council is reviewing a number of its town centres with the objective of regenerating them and making them a better and more attractive place to live, work, visit and play. There have been numerous projects over the years to generally improve the amenities, however the UK as a whole is now in the midst of a new era which will undoubtedly change high streets up and down the country. Covid 19 has unexpectedly changed the way we live and also as a result, our relationship with our local high street and/or town centre. More people are now shopping locally and more people are working from home, which in turn is encouraging them to use their local amenities on a more regular basis. The Grimsey Review advises that high streets need to be re-invented as unique community hubs, designed around health, education, culture, housing, leisure and arts and crafts, along with retail shops. If towns can get it right, consumers should emerge from the pandemic with a stronger sense of community and a desire to support their local town centre. Strong high streets can build communities, keep crime at bay and foster civic pride and togetherness.

A YouGov poll revealed that only 9% of Britons want life to return to “normal” after the coronavirus outbreak is over. The positive from the above is that this is a great time to engage with our local communities and reinvent our town centres while the focus is on them and before things automatically revert to the “old” normal.

The Grimsey Review goes on to advise that for town centres and high streets to thrive and rediscover their community purpose we need to see:

Localism - A massive shift in power to local communities and a renewed focus on localism. Local people must be empowered to redesign their own high streets and have a say on the businesses, services and amenities that occupy it.

Leadership - Local leaders should be valued and recognised. Candidates for leadership roles should be selected for having a broad range of dynamic and collaborative skills in order to get the best out of communities. Local leaders who embrace change and are brave enough to imagine a new world have a better chance of succeeding.

Fewer cars, more green spaces - fewer streets and a huge expansion of green space, parks and town squares. Our towns must no longer be designed around the car as people learn to appreciate the benefit of open spaces.

Other important takeaways from the Grimsey Review that should be considered is the fact that there is a growing view among young adults that businesses need to be accountable to more than their bottom line and for the wellbeing of people and communities. It goes on to confirm that 72% of millennials (aged 24 to 38) would rather spend their money on an experience or an event than buying things and that this is reflected in the shift towards leisure, arts, culture and dining on the high streets. Deloitte’s 2019 Millennial Survey showed that millennials will patronise and support companies that align with their values and make a positive impact on society. Generation Z’s (aged 5 to 23) are also socially focussed with their opinions on companies formed by their ethics, practices and social impact.

The Grimsey Review confirms that town and high street plans should put sustainability and the environment at the heart of everything; should base their development on quality of life and experiences and not blind mass consumerism; should recognise and reward great local leadership; and allow local communities to develop their places to compete for people to live, work, visit and play.

Introduction

Buckhurst Hill is a gorgeous town just south of Loughton. The main shopping centre in Queens Road is slightly off the beaten track and as such would only be visited if you had a specific reason to go there. The town has a great feel, good community spirit, a busy little shopping centre and benefits from 2 London Underground stations. It has 2 community halls, a great deal of outside leisure space and is also on the edge of Epping Forest. Buckhurst Hill has an estimated population of circa 11,380 people (2011) (Source: UK Office for National Statistics) and an average house price of £603,477 (Source: Zoopla).

Queens Road, the main shopping street, stretches for just over half a mile and along its length includes residential, retail, offices and some industrial/business units. The main section of the retail offer is at the bottom, easterly end, of Queens Road. Buckhurst Hill is a fairly affluent area which lends itself nicely to supporting the eclectic array of independent retailers and businesses.

Although the centre has a great deal going for it, it could also do with some love and attention to keep its unique personality, maintain and/or increase its Village like feel and keep itself fresh and relevant for locals and their everyday needs and requirements. In addition, it is felt that by developing its village vibe and encouraging an alfresco and continental feel the area could also become more of a destination which could increase its buzz and in turn provide additional footfall and ultimately trade for the numerous shops and businesses.

Literally just outside London, Buckhurst Hill is a gem and probably one of the best kept secrets within the Epping Forest district. Its support and development are crucial to its continued and future success. The area lends itself nicely to being developed as a proper 20-minute neighbourhood, along much the same lines as Walthamstow Village. It has everything a family needs within a short walk and priority can easily be given to pedestrians and cyclists, particularly at the eastern end of Queens Road.

Buckhurst Hill town centre is already a unique location and would benefit from regeneration with a minimal amount of time, effort and money. It has an active, interested and passionate Parish Council and Residents' Society and on the whole the people who live there love it and would undoubtedly support an improved town centre.

1 Quick Wins

There are a number of matters which could be addressed quickly and cheaply and could make considerable improvements to the centre of Buckhurst Hill:

- *Sweep/clean Queens Road on a regular basis and ensure that litter bins are emptied and litter is cleared from the street/pavement.*
- *Arrange for the clear marking of parking bays along Queens Road – particularly in areas where road improvements/alterations have been made requiring the removal of previous markings.*
- *Arrange for the cleaning/redecoration/repair of all street furniture – lamp posts, bollards, railings, planters, litter bins, benches etc.*
- *Repair/replace broken and/or bent signage.*
- *Replace broken/previously removed bollards.*
- *Replace/re-lay broken and uneven paving along the length of Queen Street, make good lifted areas around tree bases.*
- *Arrange for relaying of road surfaces/filling of potholes along Queen Street, as required.*
- *Re-lay/replace uneven cobbled areas at the bottom of Queen Street, particularly in the loading bay at the junction with Kings Avenue.*
- *Tidy and upkeep green spaces along Queens Road and weed kill as necessary – particularly at the western end of Queens Road and also at the entrance to Andrews Close.*
- *Arrange for regular parking enforcement to combat overstay, double parking, parking on the pavement etc. in Queens Road and also Station Way.*
- *Add dog poo bins at appropriate intervals and further bike hoops as required along length of Queens Road.*
- *Weed kill areas in Station Way, outside the parade of shops and around the station forecourt area.*
- *Make good all broken and uneven paving in front of the shops in Station Way.*
- *Refurbish/replace railings outside shops in Station Way.*
- *Landscape green spaces outside station in Station Way.*
- *Add benches, planters/baskets etc to parade of shops/station entrance in Station Way.*
- *Replace broken bollards and add further bollards as required to area around the station entrance road in Station Way.*

2 Town Management

2.1 Town Centre Leadership

Town centre regeneration is about localism and local leadership and the way to make this work is to provide local leadership with its finger on the pulse and with a connection to the local community. Therefore and accepting that this project is being driven by Epping Forest District Council, it is suggested that buy in, action and leadership should be provided by Buckhurst Hill Parish Council with the support of a Town(s) Centre Manager appointed by the District Council.

All Parish Councillors are local and as a result should be able to bring the local community and businesses together and develop a strong visionary plan to reinforce the distinctive heritage of the town, assist in making the town centre a real community hub and making Buckhurst Hill a far more attractive town for locals and visitors alike. The role of an independent Town Centre Manager will be critical to provide professional expertise and an unbiased view on what is needed locally.

The great thing about Buckhurst Hill is that it already has great community spirit and an extremely active Residents' Society. I am certain that all of these working together with the Parish and District Councils will produce excellent results.

Recommendations:

- 1) Engage with Buckhurst Hill Parish Council (BHPC).***
- 2) Obtain BHPC commitment to the scheme and to providing leadership and support.***
- 3) Work with BHPC and Buckhurst Hill Residents' Society to establish and action a realistic plan.***

2.2 Town(s) Centre Manager

It is suggested that the Council commits to the appointment of a shared Town Centre Manager initially on a two-year fixed term basis. The manager would act as a single point of contact to receive ideas, thoughts and views from local stakeholders and as such, would be known and trusted by businesses, retailers and residents alike. They would work with the Town Council to ensure that standards are adhered to and that the town is as vibrant and attractive to local people and visitors as possible. A review of the post would be undertaken after 12 months to assess progress against the Town Centre action plan and the success of interventions, and extended if necessary.

NB. As a part of their regeneration, Stockton-on-Tees council has pulled together a multi-disciplinary team of market management, street licensing, civil enforcement and business support to manage their town centre. Stockton is a much larger town than Buckhurst Hill, however the principles of hands-on organisation and management are much the same.

Recommendations:

- 4) Write Job profile and agree responsibilities for Town Centre Manager post.***
- 5) Post to be part of EFDC Economic team that reports direct to the Chief Operating Officer.***
- 6) Town Team establishment on a virtual basis, to be priority.***

2.3 Establishment of a Town Team

To achieve the required changes, considerable two-way dialogue needs to be sought from the town's residents and businesses. Buy-in from the community is important to ensure that there is a need or requirement for any proposed changes and that as a result these are carried out with the support of the town. Buckhurst Hill already has an active Residents' Society and there is also a Town Partnership representing the businesses in Queens Road. Although the Town Partnership is not currently very active, it could potentially be revitalised and brought back into life and could be developed to include the retailers in Station Way and Loughton Way. It is thought that these, in conjunction with the Parish Council, could be used as a catalyst for pulling together a formal Town Team.

It is important that the Town Team is made up of a cross section of the community including residents, businesses and retailers. A fair representation of age, sex and race should be included and input should be encouraged from organisations such as educational establishments, religious groups, social groups (e.g. Scouts etc) together with members of the Parish Council and any tourism and visitor groups.

Recommendations:

- 7) Decide with BHPC the make-up of a Town Team and what it will be called.***
- 8) If utilising current Town Forums and Residents' Society, engage with and obtain commitment and support from the Chairmen accordingly.***
- 9) Arrange initial meeting to establish parameters and put in place a plan for Town Team development and action.***

2.4 Attracting New Businesses and Brands

In conjunction with the Town Team, work could be done to identify key brands, businesses and/or other organisations to attract to Buckhurst Hill and then steps taken to secure them. Thought could also be given to approaching landlords of empty units and considering the viability of making them available for short term let - for perhaps pop-up shops, start-up ventures, new/irregular non-high street retailers to test the water for their market and for more experiential and art-based activities including exhibitions, shows, demonstrations etc.

Recommendations:

- 10) Put in place programme to encourage new businesses.***
- 11) Target prospective businesses.***
- 12) Communicate requirements to commercial agents.***
- 13) Consider use of empty units for non-conventional retailing i.e. pop ups, start-ups, experiential etc.***

3 Town Offer

3.1 Queens Road

Queens Road is very much the centre of Buckhurst Hill. It is a lovely road stretching for approximately half a mile and made up of a combination of retail/food and beverage, residential and offices/commercial premises. Although there are shops at various intervals along Queens Road, the main retail section is at the eastern end. Queens Road is the main shopping area in Buckhurst Hill and is also home to a Waitrose and within a short walk, Buckhurst Hill London Underground Station. There are small parades of retail in Station Way and Loughton way, however these are very much convenience type stores with, I would suggest, a very local appeal. The Lower Queens Road also has a very small parade of shops including an extremely popular bike shop.

Buckhurst Hill has a great Village feel to it and to my mind it is important that this village atmosphere is maintained and in fact should be capitalised on. What really makes this place is the combination of uses, its “local” feel and the wide range of retail choice and differentiation. As a fairly affluent area, it is well set to be able to support a range of more upmarket, niche and specialised offers – to some extent this is already demonstrated by the presence of a quality butcher, specialist wine shop, designer clothing retailers, specialist watch shop, speciality coffee shops and now at the western end of Queens Road, a new grocer and deli.

I have some concern that as time goes on some of the lovely period houses in Queens Road will be demolished and replaced with modern blocks of flats and also that retail units may be converted to residential use. This I would suggest should be carefully monitored with steps taken if necessary, to restrict the ability for this type of work to take place if required. Part of the success of Queens Road is its combination of uses. To flood it with increased residential housing and reduced retail will kill off the uniqueness and attractiveness of the shopping area and turn Buckhurst Hill into another bland outer London suburb with insufficient parking.

Like Walthamstow Village, Buckhurst Hill lends itself nicely to becoming a “20-minute neighbourhood” with a real community feel and buzzy and attractive high street. In Buckhurst Hill there are easily accessible facilities for all sections of the community - shopping, education, healthcare, community facilities, recreation and sport - all within a 20 minute journey, either on foot, by cycle or by public transport. The car could really become a second priority and as a result the sense of local community could grow as locals get to know each other and share the benefits of their local neighbourhood and shopping centre.

Recommendations:

- 14) Consideration should be given to how the new local plan can help to protect the makeup and appearance of Queens Road.***
- 15) Consider the restriction of further residential development in Queens Road and protect retail offer from conversion to residential use.***
- 16) Get buy-in from BHPC, Buckhurst Hill Residents’ Society, local residents and businesses to the benefit of formally converting to a “20-minute neighbourhood” and take appropriate action.***

3.2 Retail

The retail offer on Queens Road consists approximately 110 individual shops spread along its half mile length. With the exception of Waitrose, Costa (x2), Prezzo and Ladbrokes, all are independent and offer a varying range of products and services. Queens Road currently has a retail vacancy rate of 5% which is under half of the national average. Hair and beauty take up a massive 21% of the retail units and unusually in the current climate there are 8 independent fashion retailers (7% of the retail units). As would be expected there are no

banks in Buckhurst Hill, however there are 4 post offices – one at either end of Queens Road, one in Station Way by Roding Valley station and one in Loughton Way.

Queens Road has attracted a number of newer niche retailers. These include a nice butcher, a quality wine shop, a trendy florist, speciality watch shop and an upmarket men's fashion retailer to name but a few. These shops have stylish shopfronts, are nicely fitted out and add to Queens Road in terms of both appearance and the quality and speciality of their product and/or service. There is also an emerging coffee culture with a number of trendy coffee shops and cafes. To make more of Buckhurst Hill, add to its buzzy village feel and make it a destination, Queens Road needs to attract more of these types of businesses and the Council needs to support them by ensuring a bright, clean and attractive public realm. It has been suggested that the town is crying out for retailers such as a fishmonger, baker, gift shops, a shoe shop and a hardware store. It was also suggested that the town centre should be home to a plastic free refill shop and also a speciality whole food/organic shop.

I am concerned that with the majority of the retail offer at the eastern end of Queens Road this area receives the majority of the town centre focus. My feeling is that extra effort should be made to include all sections of Queens Road in any initiatives and also in the interests of a single town community that the retailers in Station Way and Loughton Way are also taken into consideration. This whole town approach would mean including all retailers in any Christmas lights and decoration initiatives and also inviting all retailers to be a part of any town centre activities, initiatives, markets etc.

A varying element of high streets is the progression of the weekend and evening economies. We now live in a seven day a week world with extended working hours. Businesses need to adjust to the needs and requirements of their customers and this may now include opening longer/different hours, opening on Sundays etc. The town centre manager could discuss these matters with retailers and see if there is any scope for taking these considerations further with a view to increasing footfall and also, subsequently, trade. At the current time people are tending to shop nearer to home and using their local town centres as opposed to going to the larger out of town shopping centres. With Waitrose as an anchor store, Buckhurst Hill lends itself nicely to this and it is important that retailers also take advantage of it and go that extra mile to ensure a clean, safe and welcoming environment and a comprehensive range of products and services. If customers can see the benefit of shopping locally and enjoy it, they are less likely to change their habits when the pandemic is brought under control.

Recommendations:

- 17) EFDC and BHPC to maintain and increase the attractiveness and draw of the Buckhurst Hill public realm.***
- 18) Town Centre Manager to work with retailers and encourage their attractiveness and viability.***
- 19) Seek the appetite and interest of Station Way and Loughton Way retailers in being included in any town centre initiatives.***

3.3 Pedestrianisation

In the interests of promoting the 20-minute neighbourhood and making Buckhurst Hill town centre a more attractive place to visit, shop and socialise, I would recommend making the eastern end of Queens Road from the junction at Kings Place/Kings Avenue to the junction at Princes Road/Victoria Road, available for pedestrian and cyclist access only between agreed hours – this could be between say 10:00am and 22:00pm, to enable access for deliveries etc. at other times.

The road layout should be redesigned, with parking spaces, kerbs etc. being removed and the area redesigned to provide for further planters, benches and bicycle hoops. A central, clear road way should be left for access purposes.

Recommendations:

20) Takes steps to redesign layout of eastern end of Queens Road and make available for pedestrian and cycle access only between agreed hours.

3.4 Speciality Market

The Grimsey Review highlighted the importance of markets and their positive effect on residents. In a report by the Institute of Place Management (2015) it explained why markets are economically, socially and politically critical for town centres. The report also confirmed that markets can generate footfall increases of circa 25% and have been shown to increase retail sales with market visitors spending money in other shops. The report then goes on to explain that markets provide low barriers to entry and as result can encourage new businesses and nurture retail innovation.

With a view to increasing the viability of Queens Road and again, adding to its village feel it is considered that it would be an ideal venue for a regular, weekend, flower/plant market (or other speciality market). This market could be laid out at the eastern, pedestrianised end of Queens Road and if done properly could become a real destination for locals and visitors alike – similar to the Columbia Road flower market.

Recommendations:

21) Take steps to put on a regular, weekend, flower/plant market and advertise accordingly.

3.5 Library

Buckhurst Hill library is a lovely building sitting in the middle of the shopping area at the western end of Queens Road. I understand that it has been threatened with closure and although currently under reprieve there are various discussions in connection with its possible relocation to another part of the town.

It is considered that in fact, the library should be left exactly where it is and developed to also make it into a Community hub for the town. Redeveloping the library and renovating it to make it fit for modern day should be a priority and consideration should be given to how its uses can be widened to provide a range of community-based uses and activities

Its location at the western end of Queens Road would assist in increasing footfall to that part of town which in turn would assist retailers and other businesses to flourish and also help pull both ends of Queens Road together as more of a cohesive shopping centre.

In addition to the benefits to the community in developing the library and a possible community centre, I am also concerned for the building's fate if it is let go. The site would undoubtedly be developed for residential use and potentially this beautiful, historic arts and crafts building could be lost which would have an immense effect on the characteristics of Buckhurst Hill town centre and Queens Road. For Buckhurst Hill and Queens Road to survive, it needs to maintain its unique and quirky character, its variety of buildings and its mixed-use including community, retail, business and residential uses. Without it, Buckhurst Hill will become just another faceless suburb.

Recommendations:

- 22) Consult with library owners/operators and obtain commitment/make arrangements for its continued use.**
- 23) Carry out required maintenance work and also modifications required to make the building safe and accessible for all users.**

3.6 Community hub

The idea of the “20-minute neighbourhood” is to have a full range of services and facilities within easy reach of each other. This comprises homes, shops, businesses, green spaces, schools, medical centres, play areas etc together with function space within which community events can take place. As discussed above, the library, I feel, would provide an ideal location for a community hub and a space for community events. Utilising the library would also ensure that this lovely building is maintained for the benefit of the community for many years to come.

The community hub could provide for local exhibitions, demonstrations, lectures and talks, social space for mums’ groups, youth activities, perhaps a Police drop in desk, a mini job centre for local employment and as a meeting space for community themed meetings, consultations and discussions. It would be a useful and safe space for older residents and generally aid a stronger sense of community and wellbeing.

The events run at this Community hub would also bring continued footfall to the western end of Queens Road which would in turn benefit retailers and businesses at that end of the road.

Recommendations:

- 24) Review benefits of Community hub and put together program of events.**
- 25) Publicise Community hub and program of events.**

3.7 Tourism/Visitors

Although Buckhurst Hill is not a particular tourist/visitor attraction, it is a lovely town with a real Village feel. If the town centre can be developed to include more niche, exclusive and experiential retailers and also become known for a fantastic flower (or other speciality) market I could see it becoming a destination for visitors, which would of course increase its attractiveness and viability. If the library could also be developed as a Community hub offering a variety of exhibitions, demonstrations and classes, this would add another dimension to the town centre and also encourage people to make more of the western end of Queens Road.

Recommendations:

- 26) Promote Buckhurst Hill as a destination.**
- 27) Develop town offer to make town centre more attractive to visitors**

3.8 Signage

The signage to Buckhurst Hill shops/Queens Road at the junction with High Road should be revised to make it larger and more prominent and also to ensure that it is both clearly legible and not lost in the undergrowth.

Likewise, larger and more prominent signage for Buckhurst Hill shops, parking and the station should also be placed at the junction of Palmerston Road and Victoria Road.

Lower Queens Road, just by the underpass from Queens Road has a small parade of shops, including a popular bike shop and launderette. It is felt that more could be made of these shops if they were clearly signposted from Queens Road – from Waitrose and/or the junction of Queens Road and Victoria Road and at the entrance of the underpass.

Recommendations:

- 28) Review signage to Buckhurst Hill shops/Queens Road from High Road and make more prominent.***
- 29) Review signage at Palmerston Road and make more prominent.***
- 30) Add signage to promote shopping parade on eastern side of the railway.***

3.9 Public Facilities

Buckhurst Hill should be reviewed to ensure that there are the required public facilities. These facilities would include adequate seating for all sections of the community in all areas, open, clean and functional public toilets, adequate lighting at all times across all areas of the town centre, bike racks/hoops in easily accessible places and strategically placed dog poo bins.

Recommendations:

- 31) Review benches and seating in Buckhurst Hill and ensure adequate for the needs of the town.***
- 32) Review bike racks/hoops within the town centre and at other destinations and ensure adequate for the needs of the town.***
- 33) Review dog poo bins in town centre and other areas as appropriate and ensure adequate to the needs of the town.***
- 34) Ensure that all areas of Buckhurst Hill, including car parks, alleyways, underpass etc are adequately lit.***
- 35) Review provision of public toilets and ensure they are adequate for the town.***

3.10 Kings Place Play Area

Kings Place Play Area is the nearest playground to the town centre. Although well positioned in a fairly central location it is restricted by the types of play equipment, to fairly young children. The issue with this is that the park doesn't therefore serve a useful purpose where parents have different age children or where children are slightly older. In the interests of a 20-minute neighbourhood and having all of the facilities required within close and easily accessible proximity, it would be good if the playground could be enlarged and provided with equipment aimed at older age groups.

Recommendations:

- 36) Review Kings Place Play Area, address any maintenance issues and consider increasing the size and equipment range to cover a wider range of age groups.***

3.11 Wi-fi and Digital Presence

The digital age and the need for connectivity is increasingly important for numerous sections of the community. As a result I would suggest free wi-fi availability on Queens Road.

It should be acknowledged that people are now shopping differently and that circa 30% of retail sales are being done online (Office of National Statistics, Aug 2020). This figure is up from 21.9% at the beginning of March 2020 and the beginning of the Covid 19 lock down. Regardless of the pandemic, online sales will continue to grow, and retail experts KPMG predicts the figure rising to 50% by 2025. As a result, retail businesses need to adjust their business models accordingly and develop their offer for both markets.

As a part of adding a wi-fi option to the town centre a social media presence should be developed enabling online and offline businesses. Mobile technologies and virtual shopping should be used to enhance the consumer town centre experience and in turn increase footfall.

Consideration should be given to bringing in a third-party contractor such as Click It Local or Maybe (www.maybetech.com) to develop online, social media/town centre/retailer collaboration.

I understand that there is a Buckhurst Hill website being developed – this would assist in the visibility of Buckhurst Hill and it is important that all retailers are represented.

Recommendations:

- 37) Put in place free WIFI within Queens Road and publicise.**
- 38) Consider benefits of Click It Local scheme. Secure and promote accordingly.**
- 39) Agree way forward in respect of Social Media strategy/presence and execute accordingly.**
- 40) Arrange for assistance and support for retailers in establishing an online presence.**

4 Appearance

As previously stated, Buckhurst Hill is a hidden gem. It has a lovely Village feel, a close local community and appears to have the genuine love of everyone who lives and works there. Queens Road is very attractive and has an unusual split of retail, residential and other business use. Having said this, it could do with some attention to maintain its attractiveness and also its continued appeal.

Maintaining and increasing the attractiveness of the public realm makes a massive difference to a town centre. It encourages people to visit and also increases their dwell time, which in turn benefits the local shops and businesses. Making a town into something that residents can be proud of and somewhere they are pleased to be seen increases their loyalty and encourages support and engagement.

4.1 General Maintenance and refurbishment

The majority of the general maintenance issues are covered in the Quick Wins earlier in this report.

Recommendations:

- 41) Review Quick Wins and arrange for work to be completed.**

4.2 Shop Fronts

The uniformity of shops fronts along a retail centre can markedly increase the attractiveness of the road and also increase the attractiveness and draw to individual stores. Although some shops in Queens Road are attractive and in good repair, there are also a large number which require redecoration and/or complete refit. Although this type of work is generally the responsibility of the landlord and/or the leaseholder I feel that it would be a real benefit to Buckhurst Hill if shopfronts were standardised and in keeping with the general feel of the town. To do this would undoubtedly assist the retailers in attracting business, increase the attractiveness of the public realm and improve the town centre for everyone's benefit.

It would be good to agree a uniform approach to shop front and signage presentation along Queens Road and ensuring this is adhered to. Failing that, careful consideration should be given by the Council in allowing changes to shop fronts and/or shop signage and in ensuring that any proposals are in keeping with the area. Perhaps to promote this, consideration could be given to providing some form of incentive or match funding scheme to assist retailers in the cost of refitting their shop fronts.

Recommendations:

- 42) Consult with BHPC, Town Partnership and retailers to consider options in respect of shop fronts and making/keeping them attractive and in the overall style of Queens Road.***
- 43) Consider uniform scheme and approach to the design and style of town centre shop fronts and signage.***
- 44) Consider incentive/match funding scheme to encourage updating of existing shop fronts and signage.***

4.3 A-Boards and other retail paraphernalia

A number of retailers have A-boards and other retail paraphernalia, external trading/retail displays on the pavement outside their shops. Although I understand the need for this, if not carefully managed these can block access and generally make the place look untidy. Street trading licences should provide for these and lay out the conditions and spaces for use – the Council should monitor this and ensure that all conditions are being complied with, particularly to ensure that Queens Road remains as attractive and accessible as possible.

Considerations should be given to some form of demarcation outside each store over which seating, A-boards and other retail paraphernalia, if allowed, cannot overstep.

Recommendations:

- 45) Review town centre policy and regulations for trading from the front of premises, retail displays and A-boards on the pavement and enforce accordingly.***

4.4 Bin Collections

Council should ensure that all businesses have the required trade waste licences and that these bins are emptied as required. It is not acceptable for retail and commercial properties to leave their bins and accumulated rubbish on pavement areas between collections.

Recommendations:

46) Ensure businesses have the required trade waste agreements.

47) Ensure pavement areas are clear of accumulated rubbish and bins.

4.5 Station Way

Although the shops in Station Way are a small parade, they play an important role in the local community and also no doubt for commuters using the station. The public realm around the station and these shops does however feel a little run down and appears to be an unremembered and unimportant part of Buckhurst Hill, which is a shame. Although there are yellow lines and marked parking spaces, cars park everywhere here including on the pavement. This is reducing and impeding pedestrian access and also making the whole area look unattractive and more like a car park.

My view is that this part of Buckhurst Hill needs to be brought up to date and given a new lease of life. This would be of great benefit to both shopkeepers and local residents.

Most of my suggested works are listed in the Quick Wins section above, however I would recommend that the Town Team, when formed, consider the role of this part of the town and actions taken to enhance it.

Recommendations:

48) Review Station Way shopping parade and station entrance and put in place plans to enhance the area and increase its appearance and attraction.

4.6 Trees and Planters

Tree lined pedestrian routes and landscaped areas all contribute to civic pride and generally make a town more attractive. There are a number of trees and planters along the shopping sections of Queens Road, however I feel these should be reviewed and increased as required. Particular attention should be given to the very eastern end of Queens Road, running up to the railway which is particularly characterless and also various other parts of Queens Road running all the way to the top, perhaps in locations where the pavement widens and/or where further bollards may otherwise have been considered. The addition of a 20-minute neighbourhood style pedestrianised area at the eastern end of Queens Road (as mentioned above) would also have a requirement to increase the planting to make the area softer and more attractive.

I understand that there is currently an arrangement with retailers to water and generally look after planters outside their shops. If the provision of planters etc is going to be extended consideration should be given to whether this should continue and/or Council landscape teams should take this over.

As mentioned elsewhere in this report, the green space outside the entrance to the station in Station Way needs tidying up and could be made to look particularly attractive with some form of planting considered along the two parades of shops in Station Way.

Recommendations:

- 49) Review current “green” townscape and work to develop and improve.**
- 50) Increase numbers of planters/hanging baskets etc along Queens Road.**
- 51) Review current arrangements with retailers in respect of watering etc and see if and/or how this arrangement should be amended.**
- 52) Review green space outside station in Station Way and make plans to landscape and add planters/baskets etc along parade of shops in Station Way.**

5 Access

Town centres need to recognise that Co2 emissions have to be reduced and as a result there is much more emphasis on ensuring a reduced reliance on cars. To this end, town centres need to ensure their accessibility via other methods of transport and provide for these methods accordingly. In addition to reducing carbon emissions this will also encourage the use of the town centre by a wider range of the community via various methods of transport.

Simply stopping car access and reducing or taking away parking spaces, doesn't resolve this problem. Undoubtedly people will still want to access Buckhurst Hill town centre by car however there is a balance between encouraging pedestrian, cycling and public transport access and then gradually reducing provision for motor vehicles as other methods of travel develop and gain traction.

For generations urban areas have been designed exclusively around the car. This now has to change and town centres developed to provide attractive, walkable and cyclable physical space.

5.1 Junction of Queens Road and Princes Road (Western End)

Princes Road has been made one way and exits from a wide junction at the western end on to Queens Road. I have been advised that a large number of people ignore the one-way system and drive the wrong way down Princes Road to access properties at the western end and the various closes off of Princes Road – saving them the time of driving through and round the town centre. This clearly is dangerous for pedestrians and other road users who think it's a one-way street and are only expecting traffic coming from the eastern end.

Firstly, consideration should be given to the appropriateness of this road remaining one way. On the basis that the one-way system remains, I would recommend that the junction at the eastern end is reduced in size to one single lane and that the space taken is used to extend the pavement areas. This extended pedestrian area could be planted out, provide additional benches and also a street trading space for the restaurant and other retailers adjacent to it. This provision would make Princes Road very much one-way whilst also adding to the public realm and increasing the attractiveness of the eastern end of Queens Road.

Recommendations:

- 53) Review viability of one-way system in Princes Road.**
- 54) Consider extending the pavement at the junction of the western end of Princes Road and Queens Road, thus reducing the exit from Princes Road to a single one-way lane.**
- 55) Arrange for benches and planting to extended pavement space and allow street trading for adjoining restaurants and retailers.**

5.2 Speeding in Queens Road

It is understood that a number of cars travelling down Queens Road, do so at considerable speed. This clearly presents a safety issue for all other road users. I am not a great fan of speed humps/sleeping policeman due to the noise they cause, the damage they can cause to some vehicles and also as a result of their general need for upkeep. Queens Road at certain points is wide enough to accommodate chicanes to slow the traffic down. These chicanes could initially be put in on a temporary basis to test their effectiveness perhaps by using substantially sized planters.

Recommendations:

56) Consider using chicanes as an aid to slowing down the traffic in Queens Road. Temporary chicanes could be constructed using large planters and placed at appropriate intervals.

5.3 Cycling

Cycling is increasingly being promoted and encouraged and it is important that all residents of a town should be able to access the town centre, the town's various green and public spaces, leisure centre and attractions easily and safely by bike. In addition, the town should also provide for cycle racks/hoops at the various destinations to enable the bikes to be safely secured.

My feeling in Buckhurst Hill is that the majority of roads are fairly quiet and that as a result there is minimal need for dedicated cycling lanes. Having said this, a detailed review should be carried out to confirm the same and on roads or routes where traffic is busy and/or congested provision for safe and secure cycle lanes should be made.

Recommendations:

57) Review cycling accessibility in Buckhurst Hill particularly around main roads and make arrangements for the provision of safe, secure and clearly marked cycle paths and routes.

5.4 Buses

Buckhurst Hill has bus routes running along High Road, Palmerston Road and on the eastern side of the railway in Buckhurst Way/Albert Road/Loughton Way with all routes stopping at Buckhurst Hill Station. There aren't any buses that run through the town centre, although the walk from Buckhurst Hill station to Queens Road is less than 5 minutes. This lack of town centre transport could put some sections of the community off accessing Queens Road and its amenities. With this in mind, consideration should be given to either extending existing bus routes, perhaps to the Queens Road car park (lower) or alternatively providing some form of local round trip mini bus service covering the whole length of Queens Road.

Recommendations:

58) Consider public transport connection to Queens Road and weigh up local need for extending existing bus services or putting on an alternative option.

5.5 Trains

Buckhurst Hill and Roding Valley London Underground stations provide regular commuter and other services in and out of London and assist in making Buckhurst Hill a popular commuter town.

5.6 Car Parks and Parking

Parking is potentially an issue in Buckhurst Hill, particularly for residents. From what I understand more resident parking permits have been issued than there are resident parking spaces. I'm not sure what the answer is to this and how it could be addressed. I do know however that if more flats are built and houses are allowed to be extended and considerably increased in size then in the current climate the numbers of resident owned cars in Buckhurst Hill will continue to increase, as will the parking issue.

Consultation could be used to seek opinions of residents on remote parking. Consideration could then be given to providing residents' only spaces in the Queens Road south car park and, if necessary, extending the car park/making it a 2-storey car park.

Clearly if the town centre is going to become more of a destination an increased number of visitor spaces will also be required.

All new parking should include provision of electric charging points.

Recommendations:

- 59) Consult with BHPC, BHRS, residents and businesses on parking requirements and provision of remote resident parking.***
- 60) Review usage of Queens Road south car park and consider provision of a number of residents' only spaces.***
- 61) Consider the alteration of Queens Road south car park to make more spaces or make 2- storey, depending on previous considerations.***

6.1 Market Research

In addition to the thoughts and expertise of the author, consultation for this report has been obtained from the following:

Epping Forest District Council
Buckhurst Hill Parish Council
Buckhurst Hill Residents' Society
Buckhurst Hill Town Partnership
Various councillors and other prominent/influential Buckhurst Hill residents
Various Buckhurst Hill retailers
Various Buckhurst Hill residents

It is accepted that additional research will be required from residents, retailers and businesses to move the ideas in this report forward. It is felt however that if the initiative is going to be Community/Parish Council driven then the research should be carried out more locally.

7. Sources of Additional Support

High Streets Task Force (www.highstreettaskforce.org.uk) – supporting communities and local government to transform their high streets.

Click It Local (www.clickitlocal.co.uk) – online shopping/delivery service

Maybe (www.maybetech.com) – A smarter approach to social media

Action List

Priority

<i>EFDC/Highway Rangers to complete “quick wins”</i>	1
<i>Appoint Town Centre Manager</i>	1
<i>Discuss and establish Town Leadership Team - form Town Team and/or refocus Town Centre Partnership</i>	1
<i>Complete research on thoughts and considerations of residents and businesses – incorporate and implement where appropriate</i>	1
<i>Take steps to protect make up and appearance of Queens Road, particularly from residential development</i>	1
<i>Discuss vision for Queens Road and target new and specific retailers and businesses</i>	1
<i>Review the “green” street scene and public realm on Queens Road, consider the addition of planters etc and action accordingly</i>	2
<i>Consider reducing western end of Princes Road to a single lane, extending the pavement areas and landscaping accordingly</i>	2
<i>Carry out all general maintenance/refurbishment recommendations</i>	2
<i>Consult on feasibility of keeping Queens Road Library, carrying out maintenance and renovation works and also turning it into a community hub</i>	2
<i>Establish Community hub and put together a program of initiatives and events</i>	2
<i>Take steps to form BH as a 20-minute neighbourhood and action accordingly</i>	1
<i>Plan revised, pedestrian layout for Lower Queens Road</i>	2
<i>Establish regular speciality flower market and publicise</i>	2
<i>Consider use of planter chicanes in Queens Road to slow down the traffic</i>	2
<i>Consider options in respect of the style and general appearance of shopfronts and consider schemes to encourage retailers/landlords to u date their shops</i>	3
<i>Talk to retailers re shop fronts, A-boards, pavement trading etc</i>	2
<i>Review signage to Buckhurst Hill shops from High Road and Palmerston Road</i>	2
<i>Put in place signage from Queens Road to shops in Lower Queens Road</i>	2
<i>Review provision of public facilities within town centre, including seating, bike racks/hoops, dog poo bins, toilets, lighting of public areas etc and act on findings</i>	2
<i>Develop town offer to make BH more of a destination</i>	3

<i>Review trade waste licenses and ensure public areas are clear of accumulated rubbish</i>	2
<i>Review retailers in Station Way and Loughton Way and see how they can be included in town plan and town initiatives</i>	2
<i>Review town WIFI proposal and put in place accordingly</i>	2
<i>Develop town centre social media on line presence</i>	2
<i>Review parking arrangements and consider options for increasing resident parking</i>	3
<i>EFDC and BHPC to consider improvements to the public realm in Station Way shopping parade and put in place a suitable improvement plan.</i>	2
<i>Review Kings Place Play Area and consider plans to extend the size and increase the equipment for older age groups</i>	2
<i>Review cycling accessibility in BH and ensure suitable to the needs of the community</i>	2
<i>Review bus/public transport connection to Queens Road and ensure that it is adequate. Consider extending existing bus routes from BH Station or adding alternative town centre shuttle</i>	3