

March 2026

Ilford_Opportunity Area Planning Framework

Public Engagement

Working with Ilford's Communities



Diverse
Dialogues

Contents

Introduction

Opening Statement	5
Purpose of this Report	6
Engagement Data	7

Listening to Young People

Methodology and Summary	9
Activity One: Living in Ilford	10
Activity Two: Careers and Skills	12
Activity Three: My Future in Ilford	14
Ursuline Academy Summary	18
Activity One: Living in Ilford	19
Activity Two: Careers and Skills	20
Activity Three: My Future in Ilford	21

Journeys and Civic Destinations

Overview	23
Arriving: Transport Hubs	24
Staying: Civic Spaces	26
Moving: Connections and Routes	28

Ilford’s Economic Future: A Business Perspective

Building Ilford’s Economic Vision Together	31
Ilford’s Unique Selling Point	32
Growth and Customers	34

Next Steps

How to work with the Community	37
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Introduction

Opening Statement

Diverse Dialogues

Diverse Dialogues is an urban strategic consultancy that delivers social value in the built environment through inclusive design, community engagement, and effective delivery. We empower communities and create lasting solutions by partnering with councils, developers, and design teams to help them deliver high-quality, equitable, and impactful spaces.

We embed inclusive design principles from the earliest stages, ensuring accessibility and equity are integral to the design development process. Our expertise lies in advancing gender-informed practices, capturing the lived experiences of women, girls, and gender-diverse people to shape neighbourhoods that feel welcoming, safe, and usable by all. This approach influences everything from brief writing to spatial strategy, public realm integration, and detailed design interventions.

Diverse Dialogues goes beyond statutory standards, fostering a deeper understanding of inclusion within design teams. By translating community insights into actionable design solutions, we help shape developments that reflect the ambitions and realities of the people who will live, work, and move through them. Our work ensures that inclusive design is not an afterthought but a core driver in delivering places that are vibrant, accessible, and socially sustainable.



Purpose of this Report

Objectives

This report presents findings from three strands of community and business engagement conducted between January and February 2026, commissioned to inform the Ilford Opportunity Area Planning Framework. Working with young people, older and disabled residents and local businesses, the engagement was designed as the beginning of a genuine dialogue, one that builds relationships, surfaces lived experience and generates insights.

The findings are intended to directly inform planning policy, design guidance, public realm investment and the economic vision for Ilford at a moment of significant transformation, ensuring that regeneration benefits and takes into account the needs of existing communities and accommodates and attracts new communities.

Project Team

Led by Diverse Dialogues, the business roundtable was delivered in collaboration with the GLA and London Borough of Redbridge, and the senior and disabled residents workshop in partnership with Transport for London.

Recruitment

Community members were recruited through existing and new community networks, word of mouth and direct outreach, to reach a wide range of residents and businesses. Sharing via:

- Community WhatsApp groups and local networks
- Building on Redbridge Council's business relationships
- Partner organisation networks including Colours of Redbridge
- Encouraging word of mouth within communities
- Members involved in existing outreach networks, such as Ilford Arrival.

The overall engagement approach acknowledged the existing engagement from Ilford Arrival and looked to complement the approach by identifying questions and topics so they complement and do not duplicate learnings.

Methodology

1. Youth Engagement

Participatory workshops with young people (Aged 16 – 27) focusing on prompted conversations and active listening, to surface how the next generation experience living in Ilford and what they want from it, with a focus on existing infrastructure and aspirational futures.

2. Senior and Disabled Residents

A facilitated workshop with older residents and people with disabilities, in partnership with TfL, using mapping activities to explore arrival experience, civic spaces and movement, examining what currently works, what fails and what this community needs from regeneration.

3. Business Roundtable

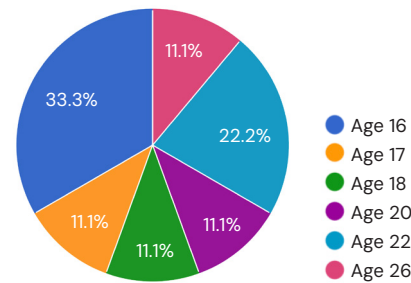
A structured conversation with six Ilford town centre businesses alongside GLA and Redbridge Council officers, exploring economic USP, growth ambitions and the conditions needed to build a genuine long-term working relationship between businesses and the council.

Engagement Data

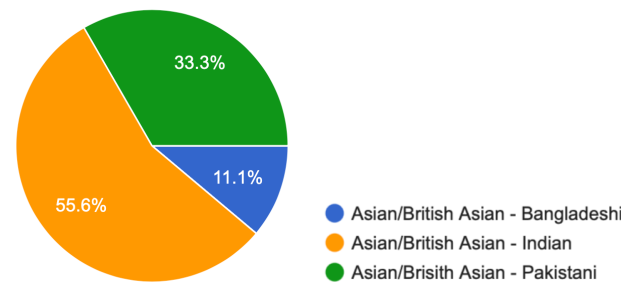
Youth Workshop [Exc School]

9 participants

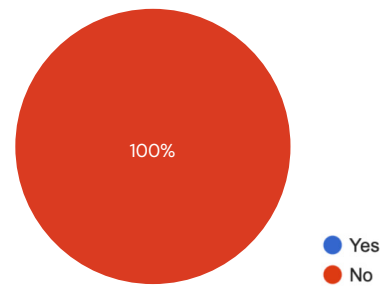
Age



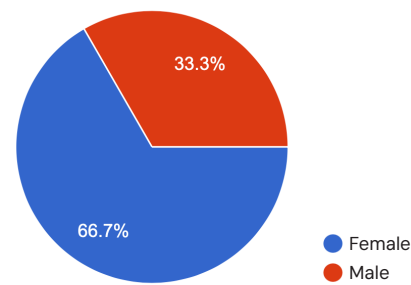
Ethnicity



Physical Disability



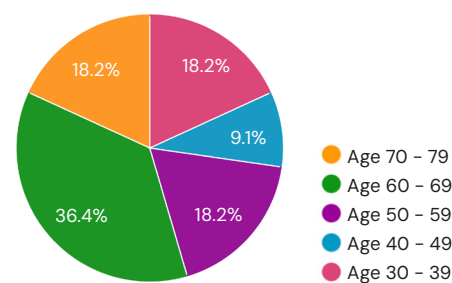
Gender



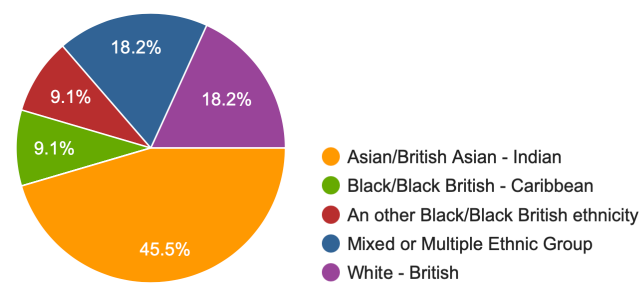
Senior and Disabled Residents

11 participants

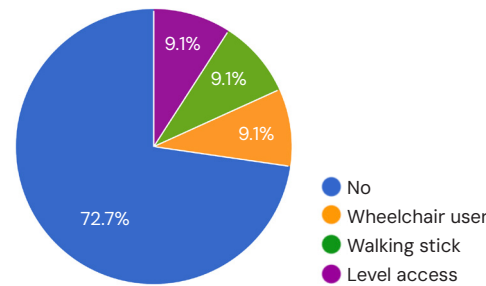
Age



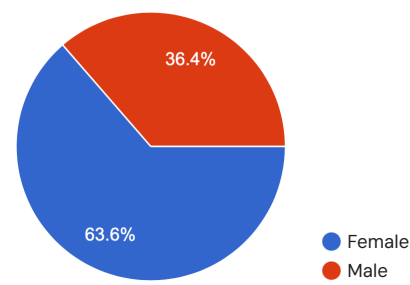
Ethnicity



Physical Disability



Gender





Listening to Young People

Listening to Young People

9

Methodology and Summary

Who we spoke to

The youth engagement strand brought together two distinct groups of young people with connections to Ilford: a mixed group of nine young residents and regular visitors to the town centre, and twenty, sixth-form students from Ursuline Academy, a girls' school serving the area. Sessions were held separately, each designed to surface honest and unfiltered perspectives on what Ilford currently offers young people, and what it would need to become in order to genuinely work for their futures.

Discussions were structured around three shared activities: how participants currently experience Ilford; what the town centre would need to offer to support their ambitions and social lives; and whether they could see themselves living here — and on what terms. Small group formats were used throughout, with facilitators capturing responses through conversation, post-its and worksheets. Groups reconvened to share reflections, with participants feeding back across topics.

Participants were 100% South Asian, reflective of a significant portion of Ilford's youth population, but not the full picture. Findings should be read with an understanding that cultural familiarity reflects a specific reference point, not the cultural anchors of all young people in Ilford.

What we heard

Across both sessions, a consistent picture emerged: young people are rooted in Ilford by culture, family and familiarity, but are not being retained by it.

- Ilford is where they are from. It is rarely where they choose to go.
- Safety, career opportunity and quality of environment are the deciding factors to leave or spend time in Ilford.
- Their spending, ambition and social life are already happening in other parts of London.

Young people in Ilford are not disengaged. They are clear-eyed. They know what the area gets right; its diversity, its food, its cultural familiarity, and they are equally precise about what it gets wrong. These sessions did not produce a wish list. They produced a set of conditions that would need to change for young people to invest their futures here.

Key outcomes

1. Living in Ilford

Ilford is experienced as a place of deep familiarity but limited aspiration. Young people move through it rather than dwelling in it. Safety shapes every journey, particularly for women. The town centre is a convenience, not a destination.

2. Careers and Skills

Young people have well-formed ambitions; in healthcare, the creative industries, architecture and finance, but cannot pursue them locally. Work experience, apprenticeships and meaningful employment require leaving Ilford for other boroughs or Central London.

3. My Future in Ilford

The vision is consistent: safe streets, quality homes, cultural infrastructure and a town centre worth staying for. Young people are not asking for luxury. They are asking for a place that takes them seriously and reflects that in what it builds.

Activity One: Living in Ilford

Approach

In small groups, participants shared their personal relationships and stories of Ilford, structured around three topics:

- **Ilford to You:** How participants currently experience Ilford
- **Future You:** How the town centre could work better for their futures
- **Living in Ilford:** Whether they see themselves living here.

“Jobs in Ilford are limited, I’d train here, then go to Central London”

What we heard

Ilford emerged as a place of deep familiarity but limited aspiration. Participants described it through its cultural anchors; south Asian food, places of worship, Asian groceries, family proximity, while consistently framing the town centre as somewhere to pass through rather than stay in. Stratford, North Greenwich and Romford were named as actual destinations and “Ilford is where you get things done and leave.”

Across all three topics, a gap emerged between what young people want and what the town centre currently offers. They are already spending money on pottery studios, music venues, food festivals and jewellery workshops, in other parts of London, and would do the same in Ilford, but don’t believe it will change enough to have the same offers. Safety surfaced as a constant undertow, particularly for girls, shaping which routes feel possible and how the town centre is experienced at every hour. And when conversation turned to living here, housing affordability and career opportunity were the determining factors, not just amenities, but whether Ilford can offer a future worth staying for.



Both: Participants engaging in discussion

Ilford to You

Ilford is held close and kept at arm’s length at the same time. Participants described deep roots alongside a habitual instinct to leave. The town centre is where you pick things up, not where you linger. **“Stratford is a destination, Ilford is a stop on the way.”**

Safety sits beneath every description of the area. Phone theft, incidents in Valentine’s Park, unlit subways and street harassment were raised. For girls, moving through the town centre at any hour involves a constant, low-level negotiation of risk.

Yet participants also named something harder to quantify: a warmth, a relatability, a sense that strangers here feel less strange. **“You can stand outside a restaurant and start a conversation.”** You see people from the same background, it feels diverse.

Future You

Participants are travelling to other parts of London for experiences that could exist here. Mercato Metropolitan was cited as something that moved in the right direction with new cuisines, but missed the mark: too expensive and not a space to hang out.

What participants want is not generic activation. They want things calibrated to how they actually live: socialising, diversity of food, spaces that work for multi-generational groups, and events. Lighting, atmosphere and a sense of occasion matter.

Participants were largely unaware of existing cultural institutions. Wayfinding and marketing are as much a barrier as provision. Newham was named as a borough that **“reaches its young people through dedicated social media and consistent programming.”**

Living in Ilford

Housing costs are rising faster than the area’s offer, and participants were clear about the mismatch: **“expensive for what it is”**, and with none of the infrastructure. Exploitation in the rental market for young people, was a deep concern and reality.

Family is a strong anchor. Parents, siblings and caring keep young people returning, but returning is not the same as staying. The aspiration, for most, is to leave and visit, maintaining ties without being bound to a place that doesn’t yet offer them a future.

Flats feel temporary for most but others are intrigued by density with desire for design quality; houses feel like homes. But participants also acknowledged the maths doesn’t work; single incomes, rising rents, a housing market that demands you be wealthy to participate. They want quality, affordability and the sense that whoever builds here has thought about who actually lives here.

Activity Two: Careers and Skills

The objective of this activity was to understand how young people in Ilford think about their career futures; what sectors and pathways interest them, whether they see Ilford as a place to grow and succeed professionally, and what the town centre would need to offer in terms of facilities, employers, training and opportunity to genuinely support their ambitions.

Across the conversations, a clear and consistent picture emerged: young people in Ilford have well-formed ambitions in healthcare, architecture, the creative industries, sport, teaching and finance, but do not see Ilford as the place those ambitions can be realised. Participants expressed passing through rather than putting down roots, with Central London seen as the default destination for meaningful work, providing earning potential and professionalism that Ilford does not. LB Newham and LB Waltham Forest were also included for junior roles.

Where participants expressed a desire to stay, it was rooted in family, community and familiarity, not in confidence that Ilford could support their career. The absence of relevant employers, work experience pathways, sector-specific apprenticeships and a modern, liveable town centre were cited as the barriers standing between young people and a future invested in Ilford.

- Participants were asked to respond to six prompt areas:
- Career interests and priorities:** What fields of work young people are drawn to and what matters most to them in a job.
 - Ilford as a place to grow:** Whether participants see Ilford as somewhere they can realistically develop a career, and if not, what would need to change.
 - Work experience in Ilford:** Whether participants currently work or have worked locally, and how that experience has shaped their view of Ilford's employment offer.
 - Apprenticeships and graduate jobs:** Whether locally-based apprenticeships or graduate roles would appeal, and why.
 - Town centre support for working life:** What facilities, employers, infrastructure and lifestyle factors Ilford Town Centre would need to offer to genuinely support young people's career development as they get older.
 - Skills for the future:** What skills participants are looking to develop to reach their education and career goals.



"I want to open a dental clinic one day, but Ilford is saturated with clinics, so I wouldn't consider being a business owner here."

Participants engaging in conversation over activity 2, talking and noting down each others responses.

Healthcare (medicine, dentistry, social work), architecture, creative arts, sports science, teaching and finance all emerged as career aspirations. Young people know what they want, the gap is in Ilford's ability to reflect those sectors back.

The dominant view was that Ilford does not offer enough of the right kinds of jobs. Several described a 'start here, leave for Central London' trajectory, using Ilford as a base while seeking opportunity elsewhere.

Those open to apprenticeships cited proximity, family and familiarity as motivators. But relevant apprenticeships, in healthcare or the creative sector, simply don't exist locally. The result: young people feel pushed out.

Multiple participants identified the same catch-22: local jobs ask for prior experience, but Ilford offers no meaningful pathways to gain it. Shadowing, internships, and paid work experience were all named as missing opportunities.

Design offices, creative workspaces, civic sector organisations and social enterprises feel absent from Ilford's current offer for young people. Participant's said they 'wouldn't even think to apply' locally because the employers are limited.

A counter-narrative emerged: some participants said they would stay and build locally precisely because of family, community ties and the place they grew up in. Belonging, not just opportunity, is a retention factor.

Beyond qualifications, participants named confidence, personal branding, software literacy and ADHD management as skills they are working on. The skills ecosystem must address the whole person, not just technical competencies.

Several participants said professional development courses, not just jobs, would make Ilford more relevant to their futures. A town centre that hosts learning, skills development and career progression would create reasons to be here.

Participants still in education or planning for university flagged the importance of part-time employment that fits around study. This is the type of work that builds early economic ties to a place and creates the habits of local investment.

A physical local jobs and careers resource, somewhere to find out what's available, make connections and get guidance. This is a low-infrastructure intervention with high potential impact on how young people relate to Ilford's economy.

Leyton Orient was cited as a local anchor institution that creates real, community-rooted work. The principle extends: young people want to be connected to hospitals, schools, creative organisations and civic bodies.

What would it take to make Ilford investable? Visible career pathways, accessible work experience, support for neurodivergent young people, creative and civic workspaces, and a town centre that feels modern and liveable.

My Future in Ilford

Take a moment to think about yourself and consider yourself in 5 or even 10 years time:

In your own words, write or draw, what you desire from your ideal future in Ilford. There are no limits!

Think about:

- How would you like to be living in Ilford?
- What type of home?
- What is near your home?
- What activities do you do?
- Where do you work, how do you get there?
- Who do you see? Where do you meet?
- Where do you go for fun?

IF I was to live in Ilford, I would only want to live in a house not a flat / apartment to have my own family I would want good variety of shops nearby, groceries and clothes shops etc. so I don't have to travel far to get necessities.

I wouldn't work in Ilford, I'd want to work in central London, and I'd get there by train / public transport.

I'd see my family as most of them live in or around Ilford and my friends, and I'd want to have nice casual coffee shops to meet at or nice parks in the summer.

I'd want there to be things to do for all ages like bowling alleys, theatre shows, golf etc. Fun things you can plan days out for with friends or family.

It should be clean, well-lit and taken care of. There should be plants / trees around (not overly greened) and people should take pride in the area they live in.

My Future in Ilford

Take a moment to think about yourself and consider yourself in 5 or even 10 years time:

In your own words, write or draw, what you desire from your ideal future in Ilford. There are no limits!

Think about:

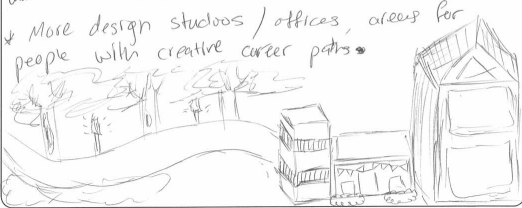
- How would you like to be living in Ilford?
- What type of home?
- What is near your home?
- What activities do you do?
- Where do you work, how do you get there?
- Who do you see? Where do you meet?
- Where do you go for fun?

* I would like Ilford to have a better reputation, whether that may be through creating spaces that help people that are struggling and give them a purpose, cleaning the area, giving it more modernity and improving safety.

* I would like an apartment / flat complex, that has inbuilt activities like gym, game room etc.

* Never more inviting establishments, activities other than food / shopping and maybe some late night activities.

* More design studios / offices, areas for people with creative career paths.



Community, connection and keeping diversity

Participants want to socialise and connect locally, meeting friends in Ilford rather than always making the trip into Central London. They want to recognise people in their neighbourhood, feel a sense of community, and maintain the cultural diversity that already defines the area. Several responses mentioned family explicitly: living near parents and siblings, seeing them regularly, building a life that keeps those ties intact. The borough and council was also asked to play a more active role in connecting young people; through volunteering schemes, peer tutoring, and structured opportunities that build social capital alongside career capital.

My Future in Ilford

Take a moment to think about yourself and consider yourself in 5 or even 10 years time:

In your own words, write or draw, what you desire from your ideal future in Ilford. There are no limits!

Think about:

1. How would you like to be living in Ilford?
2. What type of home?
3. What is near your home?
4. What activities do you do?
5. Where do you work, how do you get there?
6. Who do you see? Where do you meet?
7. Where do you go for fun?

1) I would want more modern spaces that I can take walks in and more modern houses and more safer to walk day & night.

2) House with green space front and back

3) Supermarket, studios, activities, coffee shops, green plants, flowers on a sidewalk.

4) Walking, cycle routes like tower hamlets.

5) Train, bus, car is fine but ease of traffic

6) I ~~was~~ actually recognise local people with a sense of community family + friends.

7) Hobbies, bowling.

Creative and cultural infrastructure

The creative economy appeared repeatedly and directly echoes the findings from Activity 2. Young people in Ilford are culturally engaged and creatively ambitious. The town centre does not currently reflect or support that. One participant drew buildings and streetscapes, imagining a redesigned town centre with spaces explicitly for people with creative career paths. Position Ilford as a genuinely creative destination, not just a retail and food offer.

Home on their own terms

A clear preference for houses over flats, rooted in a desire for family life, space and ownership. Where flats were accepted, participants attached conditions: spacious, well-designed, with amenities like gyms and communal rooms, and near a park. The type of home is not separate from the kind of life people want to build around it. Housing in Ilford will only retain young people if it feels like a genuine foundation for adult life, not a compromise.

Green space, public realm and beauty

Parks, trees, plants along pavements, communal green spaces, public art, murals and light installations all appeared across the responses. Public art as wayfinding and a destination, and a town centre legible and beautiful enough to travel to. Participant's described wanting flowers and cycle routes like Tower Hamlets. They called for the everyday environmental qualities that signals to people that a place cares about itself and the people who live in it.

My Future in Ilford

Take a moment to think about yourself and consider yourself in 5 or even 10 years time:

In your own words, write or draw, what you desire from your ideal future in Ilford. There are no limits!

Think about:

- How would you like to be living in Ilford?
- What type of home?
- What is near your home?
- What activities do you do?
- Where do you work, how do you get there?
- Who do you see? Where do you meet?
- Where do you go for fun?

I would like to live in an apartment in a fun building near a park with shops, within walking distance of bus stops, and I'd like to have good lighting to fit the atmosphere. I want to see a library and a cafe / shop. I'd like to be near for a park and it's nice to not walk away from it.

Getting around and arriving well

Train and public transport were the assumed mode of travel for work, most participants imagined commuting into Central London rather than working locally. Within Ilford, walk-ability, cycle routes, better lighting and easier parking all came up. The desire for a sense of arrival came from a participant who imagined themselves or a friend arriving at Ilford station by train or bus and being able to orientate themselves, describing better signage, public art and a town centre that is clear in its offer. It's clear that whilst Ilford is well-connected thanks to the Elizabeth line, the way the town centre is stitched into this major piece of transport infrastructure tells a different story. The arrival experience matters as it sets the tone for everything that follows; better connections and awareness about what Ilford has to offer.

Ursuline Academy Summary

Approach

The session brought together twenty young women from Ursuline Academy for a structured engagement exploring their experience of Ilford, their ambitions for the future, and what living well in the borough would look like for them.

The group brought honesty, energy and a clear-eyed view of what Ilford currently gets wrong and what it could become. Their responses form a consistent picture: a place they are rooted in by community, family and familiarity, but that is failing to match their expectations for safety, quality, leisure and future opportunities.



Both: Students independently reviewing activity 3 and reflecting on their futures in Ilford



Ursuline Academy students following the engagement workshop

Activity One: Living in Ilford

ILFORD TO YOU

The streets don't feel safe, especially for young women
Ilford Lane, the station and back streets at night were all named as places where participants feel on alert. Bus stops and public spaces are places for harassments and parents warn their children to not stay and hang around. Safe green spaces for girls were explicitly requested.

Home, but not good enough
Ilford was described as diverse, community-oriented and familiar. But every positive came paired with a counter-weight: dangerous, chaotic, dirty and overcrowded. "market that can be smelly and it makes everything feel super busy and space seems limited with all the stalls."

Everywhere else is where they go
Whilst The Exchange is somewhere they can hang out, for cinema, food, music and activities, participants named Stratford, Romford and Central London. Ilford is where they live. Everywhere else is where life happens.

FUTURE YOU

A high street with colour, culture and life
Participants want murals on Ilford Lane, public art, live music, a more lively and eye-catching street environment. The high street could be a destination. Right now it isn't. Leisure they'd actually pay for; Pottery, ice skating, trampolining, design classes, music lessons, arcades, bowling, and all-female leisure spaces.

A youth space that is unambiguously theirs
A Future Youth Zone equivalent was named directly — two floors, music studios, hair studios, canteen, affordable memberships. Young people know exactly what they need. They just can't find it in Ilford.

Affordable housing but better quality and more of it
Participants want to stay in Ilford if the housing improves. Bigger units, better lighting, greener, cleaner, architecturally more interesting. Affordable housing should not mean compromised housing.

LIVING IN ILFORD

Nightlife, restaurants and somewhere decent to eat
Good clubs, karaoke, music, and sit-down restaurants with proper tables and seats were all named. The current offer, dominated by fast food and chicken shops is not what this group wants from their town centre alone. They are also craving a broader selection of cuisines, wanting a shift from the dominant South Asian eateries.

Space over density
A house with a garden was the consistent preference. Flats are accepted reluctantly, and only if family-sized, quieter and with access to outdoor space. Cramped, noisy flats are not a foundation for family life.

The neighbourhood needs to feel close-knit
Participants want to know their neighbours, see friends on the way to work, feel proximity to family. Community is already there, the physical environment just needs to support and reflect it.

Activity Two: Careers and Skills

Almost no one saw Ilford as a place for their careers to develop. Reasons being: pay is too low, the job market is too small, the environment doesn't feel professional or elevated enough to take seriously as a workplace destination.

Several participants compared Ilford unfavourably not just to Central London but to Stratford and Canary Wharf. They see Ilford more as a commuter base, with the Elizabeth line carrying them to professional opportunity elsewhere.

Stratford, Canary Wharf and London Bridge were aspirational references.

Healthcare is a dominant vocation

Medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, midwifery and psychology featured across the group. Whilst there are clinics and businesses, there are no roles for young people. There is nowhere in Ilford to shadow, train or gain clinical experience. Young people with healthcare ambitions are being prepared in a place that can't show them the work.

Participants asked for progression pathways and facilities for skilled technical workers, such as motor sports and engineering, that sits alongside university.

Work experience is always the missing link.

The creative economy

Performing arts, sustainable design, animation, music and crafts all appeared as genuine interests.

The Town Hall and civic buildings should be cultural anchors supporting skills

No shadowing, placements, internships locally. Young people with ambitions cannot build the experience their careers require without leaving Ilford.

"You can't exceed in Ilford – opportunities are more in Central."

Soft skills are being neglected and participants know it

Communication, public speaking, interview skills and confidence were named repeatedly. Young people know what they need to develop. A local skills ecosystem should address the whole person, not just qualifications.

Activity Three: My Future in Ilford

Almost every participant imagined a future Ilford that is safe, green, well-maintained and socially alive. A place that feels cared for rather than endured. The vision was consistent: houses over flats, parks within walking distance, leisure that

doesn't require a trip into Central London, and streets that feel welcoming after dark. One participant noted that Ilford currently feels centred around one culture, making it uninviting to others, and hoped for a greater mix of culture.

Arcades, ice rinks, bowling, pottery, karaoke bars, cafés, cinemas, galleries, music classes, participants want a leisure offer that means staying local is a choice.

Green space, parks and the ability to walk, not drive to life

Parks appeared in almost every response. Several participants imagined walking or cycling to work. Green, peaceful, human-scaled streets are not a luxury ask. They are what makes a place worth living in daily.

A town centre that is vibrant at night, not just in the day

Nighttime activities, karaoke, restaurants, cultural venues and safe social spaces after dark all featured. Young women want to be out in the evening. The town centre needs to make that feel possible.

A place that feels cared for, clean, maintained and not run down.

A real house with a garden and space between neighbours. Where flats were accepted, they needed to be high quality with green space attached.

**Safety is the foundation
Everything else is built on it**

Safety was named in every form; in parks, on streets, at home, at night. It is not an aspiration. It is the precondition for everything else young people are asking Ilford to become. Comfortable to navigate alone and without fear!

Youth infrastructure: a space that is explicitly for young people

One participant drew Ilford as a series of dotted connections and called for a Future Youth Zone equivalent. Young people need a building that is unambiguously for them, not borrowed time in other spaces.

Working locally or within walking distance is desirable, with several participants imagining cycling or walking to a clinic, studio or office.



Journeys and Civic Destinations

Overview

Approach

A workshop was held with eleven older residents and people with disabilities, in partnership with Transport for London. The session explored how Ilford town centre functions as a transport hub and civic destination, examining arrival experience, accessibility, the quality of civic spaces and the connections between them. Participants moved across three facilitated roundtables, each focused on a different aspect of town centre life: arriving, staying and moving.

The conversation was rich, specific and at times urgent. Across all three activities, a consistent picture emerged, Ilford's public realm is not currently designed around the needs of its ageing and disabled population, and those residents know it. They desire more green space across their town centre and need suitable access for independent use.

Their expectations are not unreasonable. They want to arrive with dignity, stay with comfort and move with confidence.

What we heard

This group was unambiguous: they want to see change in their lifetime, not as a promise embedded in a 20-year planning framework. Many are already making choices, redirecting their civic lives to Stratford, Barking-side and Walthamstow, and will not wait indefinitely for Ilford to catch up.

Beneath the practical asks about infrastructure and civic space ran a deeper current: this community wants to be seen. The need for spaces that actively support social connection and mental wellbeing was as consistent as any transport or design request. And participants were clear that physical redesign alone will not be sufficient; service culture, from bus driver behaviour to Dial-a-Ride provision, must change alongside it.

Key outcomes

1. Design for dignity at arrival

Ilford's transport infrastructure must centre the needs of older and disabled residents; from Dial-a-Ride pick-up points to platform access, bus stop design and crossing times.

2. Invest in civic spaces that invite staying

Small and large civic spaces must actively support health, independence and social connection, with accessible toilets, seating, shelter and a programmatic offer that reflects the full breadth of community life.

3. Connect the town centre for everyone

Crossings, underpasses and street-level design must be redesigned to enable slower, assisted movement, unlocking access to Valentines Park, Ilford Lane and the 'cultural quarter' for those currently excluded.

Arriving: Transport Hubs

The arrival experience

For older residents and people with disabilities, arriving in Ilford town centre is rarely experienced as a straightforward act of transit. It is shaped by negotiation, with unreliable services, inaccessible infrastructure, and environments that consistently signal that their presence has not been designed for. Across the discussion, participants described transport not as a neutral means of getting somewhere, but as a daily test of independence. The Freedom Pass was widely cited as an essential enabler, yet the conditions in which it is used, overcrowded buses, inconsistent driver behaviour, and poorly located stops, frequently undermine the autonomy it is meant to support. Mobility was named as the group's top priority, and the gap between what transport provision promises and what it actually delivers for this group was a consistent thread throughout the conversation.

What we heard

This group's relationship with Ilford's transport network is defined less by choice and more by what is available to them. Independence, dignity and safety are the baseline asks, and currently, the arrival experience falls short on all three.

Not all barriers identified are resolvable through physical redesign. Bus driver behaviour toward older and disabled passengers reflects a service culture issue sitting with operators, not planners. Platform inaccessibility falls within rail operator rather than local authority control. And active travel was largely absent from this group's aspirations, not in principle, but in practice. Any transport strategy that prioritises active travel without equally investing in assisted and public transport risks excluding older and disabled residents from regeneration's benefits entirely.

Independence under pressure

Participants consistently framed transport access in terms of maintaining independence, the ability to get to Ilford on their own terms, without relying on others. Yet the infrastructure repeatedly places that independence at risk. Platforms that cannot be accessed unaided, bus stops that offer no logical orientation, and a Dial-a-Ride service experienced as an afterthought rather than a designed solution all communicate the same message: that this group's mobility needs have not been centred in the planning of the town centre's transport environment.

The arrival experience lacks dignity

The designated pick-up point on Balfour Road was described as unsafe, hard to reach and unwelcoming and participants questioned why the station couldn't have a more accessible location. At bus stops, participants described feeling exposed, unable to secure seating, and competing for space with school-age passengers. The physical conditions; stops positioned too close to the pavement edge, no shelter from rain, poor sightlines onto oncoming traffic, compound a broader sense that these spaces have not been designed with older or disabled users in mind.

Safety shapes whether the town centre is used at all

Perceived safety emerged as a powerful filter on participation in town centre life. Several participants stated they do not travel to Ilford after 7pm. The town centre was described as unwelcoming, with sensory overload adding to a sense of stress and anxiety. For this group, safety is not only about crime, it is about whether the physical environment feels navigable, predictable and forgiving of slower movement. Until that changes, the town centre's potential as a destination for this community will remain unrealised.



Participant sharing their arrival experience into Ilford

"There is no designated accessible route in the town centre and I don't always know if I can make it to my destination safely, in all honesty, I'm left to survive alone or rely on friends. I can't be independent."

Ilford Train Station and Ilford Hill

- For some disabled residents, navigating from Ilford Hill station entrance to the Balfour Road designated pick-up point is not possible unaided, requiring road crossings to reach what was described as a **"tucked away corner."**
- The station environment does not yet read as a civic arrival point. Participants described it as generic and unwelcoming, a place that processes movement rather than receives people. **"It doesn't feel like the welcome Ilford needs."**
- Poor wayfinding and signage compound a lack of arrival, particularly for those visiting less frequently or supporting others who need more assistance.
- **"Bus stops collect people together"** on Ilford Hill and cause large amounts of the pavement to be inaccessible. there is a desire to see bus stops located apart or pavement widened.

Clement Road Bus Stops

- Safe and comfortable waiting spaces are required on Clements Road, which functions as a **"meeting point for friends travelling on different buses or catching the Dial-a-Ride"**, making the quality of the waiting environment both a social and accessibility concern.
- The crossing between the library and Kenneth More Theatre presents a safety risk for those with mobility concerns. The approach angle means that **"people who require more time to cross cannot see oncoming bus traffic"** until they are already in the road.
- Evening activation around bus stops is insufficient for this group to feel safe after dark. Lighting, art and greening were suggested as interventions that could transform the feeling of waiting.
- Current **"bus stop seating excludes wheelchair users and those with mobility needs"**.

Staying: Civic Spaces

Small moments, large ambitions

Ilford's civic spaces currently fail to offer a compelling reason to linger. Participants described a town centre that functions as a transit point rather than a destination. Yet beneath this frustration sat a clear and differentiated vision: participants understood instinctively the difference between small civic moments and larger civic destinations that could anchor the town centre as a place of genuine community life. Both are currently missing but require different responses. At the small scale, the ask is specific: accessible seating, shelter, quiet outdoor space where spontaneous social encounter is possible. The absence of accessible toilets was raised repeatedly as the most immediate barrier to spending time in the town centre. At the larger scale, ambitions were bolder; a youth club, swimming, farmers market, outdoor cinema and spaces for socialising and nightlife.

What we heard

This group's relationship with Ilford's civic spaces is shaped by absence as much as experience. The spaces that exist do not meet their needs, and the spaces they want do not yet exist.

- Existing civic spaces feel unsafe, unwelcoming or inaccessible, particularly after dark or for those with mobility needs.
- A strong desire for more green space. Health, wellbeing and social connection were consistently named as the purpose green civic spaces should serve, not leisure as an add-on but as a necessity for independent living.
- Aspirations consistently pointed beyond Ilford, to Stratford, Westfield, and Barking, signalling that this community knows what good looks like but is not finding it locally.

Safety determines whether spaces are used at all

For this group, safety is the primary filter on civic space use. Valentines Park was repeatedly cited as somewhere participants have stopped visiting because of an accumulated sense that the space is not designed for or welcoming to older and disabled residents. Poor lighting, dogs roaming without control, and a perception of crime after dark were all named. This is not a minor amenity issue, it represents the effective exclusion of a significant portion of the community from one of Ilford's most substantial green and civic assets.

Civic space must actively support health and independence

Participants did not describe civic space as a luxury, they described it as infrastructure for independent living and for spaces that support gentle physical activity, social encounter and mental wellbeing. The desire for a rock garden, quiet water features, somewhere serene to sit, a board games space, an outdoor cinema were heard. The absence of accessible toilets, adequate seating and step-free routes through civic spaces was repeatedly raised as the practical barrier that makes these spaces unusable regardless of their quality.

Civic life is conditional and time-limited

Where participants do engage with Ilford's civic spaces, it is on carefully managed terms. The library remains a valued anchor, used not only for books but as a point of access to services including Age UK and benefits support, suggesting it functions as a de facto community hub. Valentines Park is still visited, but only in daylight hours and rarely after 4pm — its potential as an evening or year-round civic asset is effectively closed to this group.



Participants discussing their experiences with civic spaces

“Remember to take into account all ages of residents using Ilford”

Small Civic Spaces

- Oakfield Road and the Exchange entrance were identified as existing small civic spaces with unrealised potential. Modest interventions around seating, greening and activation could transform these into genuine pause points, particularly for those who find larger or busier spaces overwhelming.
- A quiet outdoor space with seating that accommodates different mobility needs was most consistently raised.
- Accessible toilets were identified as a baseline requirement, their absence currently determines whether this group can spend time in the town centre at all, as was shelter from rain.
- A café or informal meeting point where friends could gather was described as a small but meaningful intervention. Somewhere with enough activation to feel safe but enough quiet to feel welcoming.

Large Civic Spaces

- Participants described wanting a civic offer that reflects the full breadth of community life; a youth club, swimming facility, farmers market, restaurants, wine bar and spaces for socialising and nightlife were all named.
- An outdoor cinema with step-free access was raised as a specific aspiration. A space that is inclusive by design rather than as an afterthought, and that activates the town centre in the evening.
- Large civic spaces should bring generations together; a youth club, community games space or shared outdoor activity area were described as opportunities for older and younger residents to occupy the same space on equal terms.
- Valentines Park's potential as a venue for festivals, community events and civic gatherings was explicitly named.

Moving: Connections and Routes

Moving through Ilford

For older residents and people with disabilities, movement through Ilford town centre is characterised less by navigation than by avoidance. Participants described actively routing around the town centre rather than through it, choosing car journeys, alternative destinations or simply staying home over engaging with an environment that feels hostile and leads to less confident movement. Crossings that don't allow enough time, underpasses that are steep, confusing and unwelcoming, and streets where paving offers no clear distinction between pedestrian and vehicle space all compound a sense that Ilford's public realm prioritises through-traffic over the people who live there. Furthermore, disabled members expressed concern that Dial-a-ride, a lifeline to their independence, was a resource unable to provide them drop offs close enough to their destination.

What we heard

This group's experience of moving around Ilford is shaped by what they cannot do as much as what they can.

- Better connections would unlock significant parts of Ilford's existing offer; Valentines Park, Ilford Lane and the cultural spaces around Clements Road are within reach but currently severed by poor infrastructure that doesn't encourage movement between these spaces and across the town centre.
- The Elizabeth line has improved connectivity but its benefits are undermined by poor onward navigation from the station, the last hundred metres matter as much as the journey itself.

Movement through Ilford is defined by avoidance

Participants have stopped trying to navigate the disjointed town centre, seeing it as a place for specific activity rather than an all day visit. Walthamstow was cited as a positive comparison; Barking, Romford and Chadwell Heath not aspirational alternatives. Active travel was effectively absent from participants' aspirations, not as a matter of principle but because the environment does not feel safe or navigable. Any connections strategy that centres cycling without equally addressing slower, assisted movement risks compounding this group's exclusion.

Crossings and underpasses are the critical pinch points

Insufficient crossing times were raised as a fundamental barrier for those who move more slowly or use mobility aids. Underpasses were described as having potential, as connectors rather than barriers, but only if made less steep, better lit and properly signposted. The paving on the bus road from Clements Road was identified as a specific safety risk, its lack of distinction from the carriageway creates confusion for those with visual impairments or cognitive difficulties. The participants were clear that new infrastructure must not replicate existing failures.

Better connections would unlock the town centre's wider offer

Participants could articulate precisely what better movement would afford them; access to Valentines Park via Cranbrook Road, a genuinely dual high street linking the High Road and Ilford Lane, and an evening route from the 'cultural quarter' to restaurants and social spaces. Islington was cited as a model with road calming and a less car-centric approach that has transformed movement on foot. The ambition is not to make Ilford somewhere else, it is to make its existing assets reachable for the people who already live there.



Participants exploring connectivity across Ilford Town Centre

I get "negative energy from buildings, everything is deserted"

Winston Way / Clements Road

- Winston Way presents a significant barrier to movement from the south. The crossing is insufficient for those who move slowly or use mobility aids, cutting off a key arrival route into the town centre or access to Ilford Lane.
- The old post office on Clements Road and surrounding vacant buildings were described as generating "negative energy", with deserted frontages that make the street feel unsafe and unwelcoming, particularly for those moving slowly or alone.
- Underpasses have potential as connectors but are currently steep and not accessible for disabled users, poorly lit and inadequately signposted.
- Public toilets are absent from this route, raising a practical barrier that determines whether this group can move through this part of the town centre at all.

High Road / Cranbrook Road

- The High Road is identified as an under-connected asset. The market stalls do not encourage ease of access to shops. Gathering points were cited as existing nodes of social activity that needs better pedestrian infrastructure to strengthen and extend for more users.
- Cranbrook Road represents the critical northern connection to Valentines Park. Currently this route does not feel safe or navigable for older and disabled residents, severing access to green assets.
- Crossing the railway remains a fundamental barrier for those approaching from the north, insufficient crossing times and poor wayfinding mean this connection is avoided rather than used.
- Lack of disabled parking on and around the High Road was raised as a barrier to those who cannot walk from further afield. Those for whom active travel is not an option feel excluded.

Building Ilford's Economic Vision Together

Approach

On 10th February 2026, Diverse Dialogues facilitated a business roundtable at Redbridge Town Hall, bringing together six Ilford town centre businesses alongside officers from the Greater London Authority and London Borough of Redbridge. The session was designed as the beginning of a genuine working relationship, one where business ambitions directly inform the economic vision for Ilford's future. Participants represented a cross-section of the town centre's existing offer: retail, leisure, culture, faith, creative work-space and business association.

The conversation explored three areas:

1. Ilford's unique selling point and what sustains it;
2. Growth ambitions and the conditions needed to realise them;
3. How businesses and the council can work together going forward.

What emerged was a group of businesses that are invested in Ilford's future, clear about what they need and ready to be genuine partners in shaping it.

Next Steps

Businesses were clear about the kind of relationship they want with Redbridge Council; one built on influence and agency rather than routine engagement for its own sake.

- Businesses want early understanding and where possible involvement in planning and investment decisions. Not post-hoc consultation once directions are set, but a genuine collaboration when it matters.
- Contact should be purposeful and tied to moments of real influence. Quarterly meetings are only useful if there is something concrete to shape, decide or respond to.
- A shared business platform for collective marketing, resource sharing and networking, was identified as the most practical and immediate next step, one that businesses could lead with council support.

Ilford's Economic Future: A Business Perspective

*"We're not the hipster borough,
I want to serve our community."*

Businesses engaged with:

- City Gates Church + Conference Centre
- South Ilford Business Association
- Space Studios
- The Exchange
- The Lab Gyms
- Vision Redbridge Culture & Leisure

Key outcomes

1. Protect the affordability advantage

Ilford's competitive edge; affordable units, lower operating costs, and diverse customer base. Regeneration must protect this through affordable commercial space provision and businesses that make Ilford distinctive.

2. Create conditions for the evening economy

Businesses cannot build an evening economy alone. Anchor uses, programming, lighting and safety infrastructure are needed to create the conditions that give businesses the confidence to invest and extend their offer.

3. Develop a coordinated marketing platform

A coordinated, business-led marketing platform, bold, genuine and digitally active, could shift external perception and drive footfall that no single business could achieve alone.

Ilford's Unique Selling Point

People are the product

Ilford's unique selling point is not its retail offer, its transport connections or its development pipeline, it is its people. Businesses operating in the town centre described a community that shows up, invests in local businesses, refers others and returns. The loyalty of Ilford's customer base was cited as a foundational business asset, one that larger, more generic town centres cannot replicate. Diversity is not a demographic fact here but an active commercial advantage: the mix of cultures, backgrounds and communities creates demand for a breadth of offer that businesses have organically responded to. Several described Ilford as an accidental portfolio, a place where complementary businesses have clustered around shared communities rather than a planned economic strategy.

The Elizabeth line has shifted Ilford's position significantly, increasing footfall, reducing journey times and connecting the town centre to a wider London catchment. Combined with comparatively affordable rents and operating costs, this makes Ilford a genuinely compelling proposition for businesses that in other areas would be priced out. The opportunity is to build on this moment deliberately, to articulate and amplify what already works before the pressures of regeneration risk diluting it.

What we heard

Businesses in Ilford are not waiting to be told what their USP is, they are living it. The challenge is translating that lived experience into a coherent economic narrative that attracts investment without undermining the community foundations that make the town centre distinctive.

- Ilford's Elizabeth line connectivity and comparatively low operating costs create a genuine window for businesses priced out of inner London. This advantage is time-limited and needs to be actively marketed before rents rise with regeneration.
- The town centre's diversity is its most defensible commercial asset. Businesses described a customer base that is loyal, vocal and willing to spend, but currently undeserved by the evening and cultural offer available to them.
- Businesses are already collaborating informally, referring customers, sharing resources and building networks, but lack the formal infrastructure to scale this. Collaboration with Redbridge Council will give an opportunity to make that ecosystem intentional.

Ilford's Proposition

Community loyalty drives Ilford's economy. Local resident customers spend, refer and return. This is a relationship economy that regeneration must protect, not disrupt.

Space Studios, Vision Redbridge and City Gates form an emerging creative and civic cluster. With deliberate investment it could become a significant regional draw.

The Elizabeth line has connected Ilford to London, but connectivity alone doesn't drive footfall. The town centre must now give people a reason to stop, stay and spend, by marketing its USP more widely.

Six Ilford businesses reflected on how the town centre currently works for them:

City Gates Church + Conference Centre

Operating as a genuinely multi-use civic anchor; café, conference centre and church. Its collaboration with the council on community grocery provision demonstrates what is possible when businesses and local government build trust. The ambition is to expand courses and skills provision, using the existing footprint to serve more of the community.

The Exchange

The Exchange has struggled with significant shifts in retail culture and whilst they understand the USP of SMEs in Ilford, they face higher barriers to entry in larger retail environments, with chain operators given preference. The Exchange needs to draw in larger commercial retailers to balance economics and allow room for SMEs to join.

South Ilford Business Association

Ilford Lane was described as one of the town centre's most distinctive and commercially active streets; easy to navigate, culturally rich and well served by the Elizabeth line. However, it is not celebrated enough, often seen as separate to the town centre and not as well connected from transport.

Space Studios

"Space Studios is unexpected", offering affordable creative workspace that simply isn't available in inner London. Space Studios attracts artists, makers and creative businesses who then become part of the community fabric. The mix of people and disciplines creates a creative ecosystem, feeding an accessible culture irrespective of age, language etc.

The Lab Gyms

A small business, new to Ilford serving two distinct customer bases: wealthy local residents spending on premium leisure and specialist sports professionals. East London's established identity as a hub for sports specialists makes Ilford a credible and affordable location for high-performance training that generic gym provision can't

Vision Redbridge Culture & Leisure

Managing some of Ilford's most significant cultural assets; including the library, one of the busiest in the region. Ilford's cultural offer is described as an accidental portfolio; 350-seat theatre, outdoor arts, community programming that punches above its weight. The opportunity is to make this portfolio legible, marketed and connected to the food and evening economy.

Growth and Customers

The 6pm problem

Ilford's businesses know their customers and their customers are loyal, but the town centre loses them at 6pm. There is currently no compelling reason to stay beyond essential needs, and businesses described this as the single most significant barrier to growth. The evening economy gap affects most businesses in the room, from leisure and culture to food and retail. Ilford Lane businesses are currently the only consistent example of successful evening trading.

The future arrival of thousands of new residents creates both pressure and opportunity. Businesses reflected: new residents will bring different expectations, higher spending power and demand for a "more sophisticated offer". The risk is that existing businesses are bypassed rather than supported to evolve. The opportunity is to upgrade the offer in ways that serve both existing and new customers, building on community loyalty rather than replacing it with generic provision.

Ilford carries a negative external narrative that does not reflect the experience of the businesses and communities who know it well. Several participants described the need to sell a more positive story, not to misrepresent what Ilford is, but to make visible what it already offers.

What we heard

Businesses are ready to grow but they need the town centre to grow with them. The evening economy, demographic change and narrative are three levers that the OAPF can pull directly.

- The evening economy cannot be unlocked by businesses alone. Policy and emerging development need to align with business needs to create appropriate conditions; anchor uses, programming, affordable units, lighting and safety infrastructure that give businesses confidence to invest.
- Businesses are already an informal network, referring customers, sharing resources and supporting each other, but some lack the formal infrastructure to scale. A business support framework coordinated through the council could multiply what already exists.
- Family-friendly, incidental leisure, somewhere to hang out without a formal spend commitment, was consistently described as a missing offer that both existing and incoming residents would use.

Conditions for Growth

Businesses want to diversify their offer but need the conditions: affordable units for quality independents, complementary uses and a critical mass that makes Ilford a destination visit.

Ilford's existing customers are loyal, vocal and local. Regeneration that prioritises new residents over existing communities risks destroying the relationship economy that makes the town centre resilient.

Businesses are already telling Ilford's story within their communities. A coordinated marketing platform could amplify that story beyond them, shifting external perception and driving new footfall.

Growth is possible, but it requires conditions businesses cannot create alone. These are the asks.

Family and Leisure: South Ilford Business Association
Ilford Lane wants to broaden its offer; more family-friendly, more mid-range, more incidental spend. The ask is not to replace what exists but to add complementary uses that extend dwell time and attract customers who currently bypass the Lane apart from essential spend. Opportunities to directly connect to the High Road would strengthen this.

Working Together The Exchange
"Collaboration with the council has been great." The Exchange wants a formal, ongoing relationship with Redbridge about economic growth, not one-off consultations but a genuine working partnership that gives businesses early sight of planning decisions, inward investment conversations and opportunities to shape what comes next.

Evening Economy: City Gates Church + Conference Centre
Events bring people in but they're expensive to host and not sustainable alone. City Gates wants to extend its evening offer; café, conferencing and community programming, but needs council-led anchor activity to share the financial risk of building a new after-dark audience from scratch.

Family and Leisure: Space Studios
"People mix, feel at home, travel out of home." Space Studios attracts a creative community that spends locally, but needs affordable, family-friendly leisure nearby to extend visits. The creative cluster and a broader leisure offer are mutually reinforcing, one draws people in, the other keeps them there.

Evening Economy: The Lab Gyms
The Lab would consider moving closer to the High Road, greater visibility could significantly grow its customer base and encourage evening use. But premium rents are a barrier to relocation. With clients travelling from across the borough, parking access is also a non-negotiable requirement. The right unit, at the right rent, in the right location could unlock serious scale.

Working Together: Vision Redbridge Culture & Leisure
"We have become a family." Ilford's businesses already operate as an informal network; referring customers, sharing resources and supporting each other. Vision wants to see this formalised: a business forum with real influence, regular contact with the council and a shared platform for marketing the town centre collectively.



Next Steps

Next Steps

How to work with the Community

How the OAPF can respond

This engagement has generated a clear and differentiated set of asks, from young people, older and disabled residents, and businesses. What unites them is a desire for genuine involvement: not to be consulted once and forgotten, but to have ongoing influence over decisions that directly affect their lives. The OAPF has a specific opportunity to respond to this, guiding the structures, policy and design standards that turn this engagement into lasting change.

Community involvement must be ongoing and meaningful and structured in a way that genuinely shifts power rather than simulating it. The communities who participated in this engagement were not passive recipients of planning decisions, they were experts in their own experience, with specific, actionable knowledge about what Ilford needs. Panels, business forums and

participatory design methods are not consultation tools, they are mechanisms for authorship. When communities have real influence over the places they live, work and grow up in, they invest in those places. They become advocates, ambassadors and stakeholders in the success of regeneration rather than bystanders to it.

Future policy, regeneration and development management teams have an opportunity to build this into its delivery framework from the outset. Not as an add-on once decisions are made, but as a structural commitment to shared ownership of Ilford’s future.

Make accessibility a baseline priority Older and disabled residents identified systematic failures across transport and public realm. Accessibility must be addressed by how the town centre develops.	Design the evening for everyone Safety, programming and anchor uses are needed. A coordinated evening economy strategy is the intervention with the greatest cross-community impact.	Establish influential community panels One-off engagement isn’t enough. Formal community panels with real influence decisions and regeneration improvements, are required to build agency.
Create a targeted business forum Ilford’s businesses are ready to collaborate, but need a formal structure with early sight of planning decisions and genuine influence over outcomes.	Prioritise youth voices Young people offered the most ambitious vision for Ilford’s future. Their voices must be embedded in ongoing decision-making and co-created realities with emerging schemes.	Embed gender-informed participatory practice Young women described a town centre that doesn’t feel safe or designed for them. Building on good practice, Ilford has the opportunity to take a radical approach.

**We create space for dialogue, shift power
to communities, and unlock possibilities for
shared decision-making.**

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