TOWN CENTRE VACANCIES

1.1 At SLB July 2022, Members noted the importance of quality retail providers and noted the developing Town Centre Strategy. Councillor Lynn Williams, Leader of the Council advised that town centre shopping habits had changed prior to the pandemic and that leisure services tended to draw people into the town centre such as a good restaurant offer. Members further requested that a detailed report on the number of empty retail premises including whether they were of a temporary nature and their quality be included within the next performance report.

1.2 Inclusion of this information in the quarterly performance report would be disproportionate to the rest of the performance report content, so a standalone report has been produced. The information is sourced by the Retail and Vacancy Survey which is conducted quarterly and dates back to August 2011.

1.3 The Retail and Vacancy Survey demarcates 3 overlapping zones in the town centre. The outermost zone is classified as Periphery Town Centre, the middle zone is classified as Core Retail Area and the central zone is classified as Principal Retail Core. The August 2022 Retail and Vacancy Survey identified 618 units across the 3 zones. Demolitions and regeneration work since 2019 has resulted in a consolidation of 75% of units included in the surveys being located in the Core and Principal Retail zones. Where existing businesses have relocated to a different unit in a different zone since 2019, it has been a move from the Periphery Town Centre into the central retail zone, no existing businesses chose to relocate to the Principal Retail Core since 2019.

1.4 **Headlines**

52% of total units in the town centre have been in business consistently since February 2019.
16% of the units consistently in business are restaurants and/or leisure units.
This increases to 28% when pubs and clubs are included
This increases to 38% when fast food and drink outlets are included.

Investigations into the changes in businesses in the 3 zones since February 2019 resulted in 4 groupings of the currently vacant units. (Appendix A)

- Short term business before becoming vacant
- Recently vacant units
- Long-term vacant units
- Lockdown vacant units

1.5 The vacancy rate since February 2019 has increased in the Principal Retail Core.
19 units in this zone have been vacant more than 50% of the time since February 2019.

1.6 Investigations into the changes in use in the Principal Retail Core highlight 7 units which have had a series of temporary businesses since 2019. The majority of the temporary businesses were fast fashion and accessories. 2 of the units have had 3 or more changes of business use since February 2019 as well as periods of vacancy.

1.7 In the Principal Retail Core, where businesses have opened in a unit after a period of vacancy the business offer was mixed, but there is a clear reduction in presence from high street brand names, which mirrors the national picture. New businesses in the area remained open for 12 months on average with several units experiencing periods of vacancy.

1.8 Where there are well known brands; Lids the new store in Houndshill is the first store in the UK branded retailer. Build-A-Bear Workshop is the full non city based store location in the North West.

1.9 The vacancy rate in the Core Retail Area has decreased by 1.1% since February 2019.
56 units in this zone have been vacant more 50% of the time since Feb 2019.

1.10 Investigations into the changes in use in the Core Retail Area highlight 18 units which have had a series of temporary businesses since 2019. There is a pattern in their business uses which included fast fashion, cafes, fast food as well as brow and nail bars.

6 businesses have relocated to another unit in the zone. Most businesses relocate to a unit in the same zone.

1.11 In the Core Retail Area, where new businesses opened in a unit after a period of vacancy the businesses tended to include; cafes, takeaways, bars and coffee shops and convenience stores. New businesses in the area remained open for 15 months on average. The businesses which remained open for less than 6 months included convenience stores and takeaways.

1.12 The vacancy rate in Periphery Town Centre has reduced slightly by 0.2%. However number of sites included in this zone has reduced by 22 units since 2019. When looking at the outermost zone in isolation, the proportion of vacant units has remained unchanged at more than 1 in every 4 units being vacant with most of the units vacant since before February 2019.

1.13 Investigations into the changes of use in the Periphery Town Centre highlight 7 units which have had a series of temporary businesses since 2019. There is no clear pattern in their business uses which have fluctuated between music shops, cafés, bars, information centres and home goods.

1.14 In the Periphery Town Centre, where businesses have opened in a unit after a period of vacancy the businesses offer was mixed. New businesses in the area remained open for 12 months on average. There is a clear split between short term and longer tem businesses; businesses that remained open for less than 6 months included gift, ice-cream and joke shops, businesses that remained open longer included bars, restaurants and off licences located on or in close proximity to the prom.

1.15 In August 22, 15 new businesses have occupied previously vacant units:

- Lids – Houndshill.
- Victoria Street Market, Perfect Nails & Beauty - Victoria Street.
- Love Bargains, Smart Menswear, Blackpool Market, Bar 137, Records & Relics - Church Street.
- Neighbourhood Sub - Birley Street.
- Precious Gifts Shop - Clifton Street.
- Stays in Blackpool - Queen Street.
- Moments in Time, Melissa Louise, Blackpool Inspirations - Topping Street.
- NHS Lancashire Oral Surgery Clinic - Cookson Street.

1.16 Appendix 4(b) includes a list of the previous businesses listed in the vacant units. These have been categorised based on their type of vacant status and have been listed to demonstrate the qualities of businesses that have preceded the currently vacant units.

1.17 Appendix 4(b) includes a footfall counts from Visitor Insights which acts as a proxy for assessing the potential customer base in each zone.