



Blue Horizon Ventures
Harlow Council Café Assets
Report
March 2025





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Brief and Context



Context and Brief

BHV were appointed to work in partnership with Harlow Council on the analysis and recommendations to support the operation of 3 Council owned café propositions.

The project aim is to seek advice on potential operating models including staffing structures and efficiencies that could be implemented to manage three café operations, that the Council either currently owns or is in the process of developing across the town, and a possible external catering operation.

The three café operations are:

- **Harlow Playhouse Theatre Café** – an existing café / bar facility located within the Council owned and managed theatre, located within Harlow Town Centre. A new food and beverage offer is being developed as part of the Levelling Up Funded Cultural Quarter regeneration scheme ,which will change how the café / bar operates within the Playhouse in the future.
- **Harlow Innovation Park Café** – a new café facility that is ready to be fitted out and start to operate, serving an employment park in the east part of the town.
- **Harlow Museum and Gardens Café** – as part of planned improvements / redevelopment to the Harlow Museum, a new café facility is being planned that will serve as a café and space for the Museum's education outreach activities.



Context and Brief

These three cafes will be operating over a phased period. Initially only the Playhouse existing provision will be operating.

This will be followed by the opening of the Harlow Innovation Park Café; then the new Playhouse offering and finally the new Museum Café will open once that is built.

In summary the aim is to undertake a review of the existing arrangements and the future for the three café facilities and to advise the Council on appropriate operational models that would enable all three facilities to be managed professionally inhouse within the Council, ensuring an efficient and effective café service.

Advice is also required on potential social value opportunities across the 3 sites.



Context and Brief

The following presentation provides a very high-level summary of the insight, findings and recommendations.

It signposts the key points and also provides a snapshot overview for questions and discussion.

The full report is a detailed analysis and recommendations to meet the requirements of the brief.

All findings are also supported by a series of appendices which have been provided with the submission.



Food Service Trends

A Summary



Food Service Trends – In Summary

The success of the Harlow café portfolio depends on aligning its food service offer with emerging industry trends, customer expectations, and sustainability priorities. Consumer habits in café and hospitality sectors are evolving, with increasing demand for healthy, locally sourced options, premium coffee experiences, and flexible dining formats that cater to busy professionals, cultural audiences, and leisure visitors.

This section explores the latest food service trends shaping the café industry, from plant-based and sustainable dining to digital ordering and grab-and-go convenience.

By incorporating best practices in menu design, service models, design specification and operational efficiency, Harlow's café strategy can deliver an offer that is both commercially successful and aligned with local community needs.



Food Service Trends – In Summary

A wide range of food service trends have been researched and explored and full details are in the main report. Below is a summary of the core areas of focus.

- **Sustainability**
- **Health and Wellness**
- **Tech driven dining**
- **Local sourcing**
- **Experience dining**
- **Fusion and global flavours**
- **Plant based menus**
- **Ethical practices**
- **Hyper personalisation**



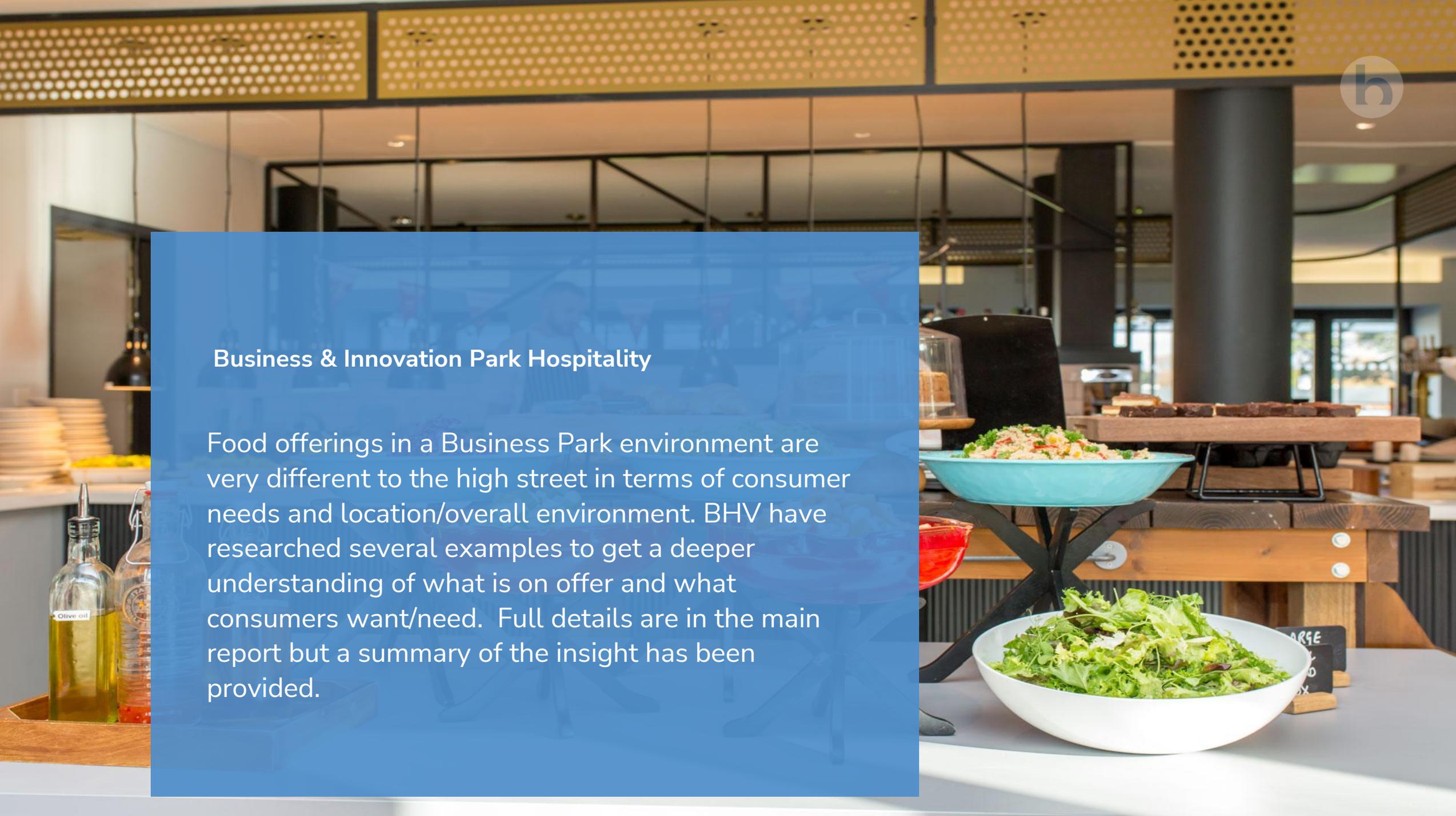
Business Park Hospitality

What does good look like?



Business & Innovation Park Hospitality

Food offerings in a Business Park environment are very different to the high street in terms of consumer needs and location/overall environment. BHV have researched several examples to get a deeper understanding of what is on offer and what consumers want/need. Full details are in the main report but a summary of the insight has been provided.





Key Insights

- **Convenience:** The food is often quick and convenient for busy professionals with limited time for lunch breaks.
- **Health-Focused Offerings:** Many business parks emphasise healthy eating, with a range of options that cater to specific dietary needs (e.g., vegan, gluten-free, low-carb).
- **Networking & Collaboration:** Spaces designed for informal meetings or business networking over meals.
- **Local and Sustainable:** Emphasis on locally sourced ingredients, eco-friendly practices, and sustainable food production.
- **Event Catering:** Customised catering services for business events, meetings, and conferences held within the business park.



Museum Hospitality

What does good look like?



Museum Hospitality

A good hospitality offering is becoming an essential part of the overall customer experience, and it is important the offerings are aligned with a broad range of audiences and key food service trends. Again, a number of examples are provided in the full report but a summary of the insights is provided.





Key Insights

Sustainability and Locally Sourced Ingredients Many museum cafés have placed a strong emphasis on sourcing local and seasonal ingredients.

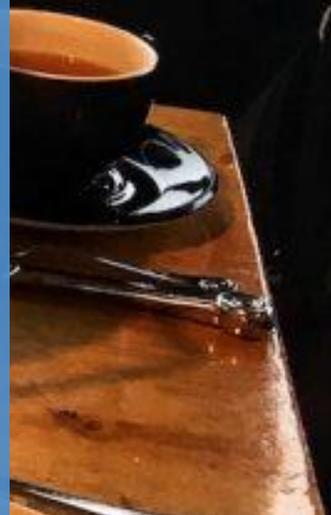
Plant-Based and Vegan Options As the demand for plant-based food continues to grow, museum cafés are offering more vegan and vegetarian dishes. These often include innovative takes on traditional meals, such as plant-based pastries, vegan sandwiches, salads, and grain bowls.

Health-Conscious Offerings Many museum cafés have shifted toward offering healthier, lighter options, such as smoothies, bowls (like acai or quinoa bowls), and salads made with fresh vegetables and grains. Gluten-free, dairy-free, and low-sugar options are also becoming more common, catering to the growing demand for food that caters to specific dietary needs.

Global Flavours and Fusion Cuisine With the rise of multicultural dining, UK museum cafés are embracing global flavours and fusion cuisine. Expect to find dishes influenced by various international cuisines, from Middle Eastern mezze and Mediterranean salads to Asian-inspired soups and street food-style dishes like bao buns or tacos.

Artisanal and Handcrafted Foods Many museum cafés have begun offering artisanal, small-batch foods like handmade pastries, locally brewed coffee, and craft sodas. This reflects a desire for unique, high-quality food that tells a story, often with a focus on craftsmanship and tradition.

Sustainably Packaged and Waste-Free Many cafés are adopting zero-waste policies, reducing single-use plastic by offering compostable packaging, reusable cups, or even using edible packaging. This sustainability push often extends to the food served, with many cafés focusing on reducing food waste by repurposing ingredients.





In House vs Outsourced Models



In House vs Outsourced Models

In-House Model

- Greater control, alignment with Council priorities, and social value impact.
- Specialist team focused solely on Harlow's assets, not distracted by other contracts.
- No additional profits motive – all returns to the council.

Outsourced Model

- Reduces financial risk but may prioritise commercial viability over community impact.
- Experts in the field with access to a wider team and specialist resources.
- Financial strength with the ability to invest in the facilities.

Recommendation

An In-house operation is recommended for long-term financial sustainability and integration with Council services, ensuring greater flexibility and social impact.



Operational Strategy



Operational Strategy – In-House Café Model

Key Approach

- Phased rollout across three venues to ensure scalability & financial sustainability.
- Centralised management model for cost efficiencies & operational oversight.
- Flexible staffing & cross-site resource sharing to optimise labour costs.

Phased Mobilisation Plan

- 2025 – Innovation Park Café - Business-focused grab-and-go café
- 2027 – Cultural Quarter Café - Playhouse Theatre hospitality & pre-show dining with integrated bar & event catering.
- 2028 – Museum Café Heritage-inspired, family-friendly café. Linked to museum events & education programmes



Operational Strategy – In-House Café Model

Key Efficiency Drivers

- Shared staffing structure → Flexible roles across sites.
- Procurement & supply chain efficiencies → Cost control via bulk purchasing.
- Digital innovation → Mobile ordering, cashless payments, CRM-driven loyalty schemes.
- Sustainability focus → Local sourcing, waste reduction, eco-friendly packaging.

Outcome

A streamlined, commercially viable café operation that maximises revenue, visitor engagement, and long-term sustainability while supporting Harlow's cultural, business, and heritage landscape.



Recruitment Strategy – Phased Approach

Aligns with café openings and events function implementation for cost efficiency and operational readiness.

Key Leadership Role (July – September 2025):

Head of Commercial Development (hospitality) – Oversees all sites, strategy, and financial sustainability.

Staffing by Café Opening Timeline:

Innovation Park Café (2025): Recruit Café & Bar Manager, Lead Chef, and FOH staff.

Cultural Quarter Café (2027): Transition from Playhouse Theatre café, recruit additional FOH & kitchen staff.

Museum Café (2028): Recruit Café Manager, Heritage Chef, and support staff.



Recruitment Strategy – In-House Café Model

- **Cross-Trained & Flexible Workforce:** Enables staff rotation across cafés, events, and theatre hospitality, optimising efficiency.
- **Financial Sustainability Focus:** Structured hiring to control staffing costs while maintaining high service levels.
- **Integration with Playhouse Theatre Hospitality:** Ensures seamless service across café trade, pre-theatre dining, and event catering.

This structured recruitment plan ensures a skilled team is in place to support Harlow Council's hospitality expansion while maintaining financial and operational efficiency.



Business Model



Business Model – Harlow In-House Café Model

Revenue Streams

- Retail Café Sales – Daily trade at three venues
- Event Capability– Corporate hire, pre-theatre dining, private functions, filming, town centre events
- Bar & Premium Beverages – Theatre bar, specialty drinks, high-margin items
- Membership & Loyalty Programmes – Discounts, subscriptions, and repeat visit incentives

Projected Daily Footfall - Retail

- Innovation Park Café → 75–150 customers (business professionals)
- Cultural Quarter Café → 88–155 customers (theatre patrons, daytime visitors)
- Museum Café → 29–95 customers (heritage tourists, families)



Business Model – Harlow In-House Café Model

Financial Sustainability & Cost Control

- Gross Profit Margins → 65% food / 70% liquor
- Staffing Costs → Optimised cross-site labour model (18% of net sales)
- Overheads → Controlled via centralised operations
- Procurement Efficiencies → Bulk purchasing & supplier partnerships

Outcome

A financially sustainable, scalable business model that balances commercial viability, community value, and operational efficiency, ensuring long-term success across all three venues.



Business Model – Year Zero Investment

The recruitment of the senior leadership team for the new in-house model represents an upfront investment before the cafés commence trading, with the first venue, **Harlow Innovation Park Café (HIP)**, launching in January 2026.

This investment is essential to ensure the strategy is successfully implemented, with dedicated expertise overseeing the planning, recruitment, and mobilisation phases.

Assuming the three key leadership roles are recruited and commence in September 2025, the projected **Year Zero cost is approximately £75,000**, inclusive of salaries, on-costs, and associated expenses.



Business Model – Conclusion

The in-house café model has the potential to position itself as a **high-quality hospitality provider within Harlow's cultural and business ecosystem.**

By leveraging the café spaces for events, corporate catering, and premium experiences, the council can **generate substantial additional revenue, increase community engagement, and create a commercially sustainable hospitality operation.**

Despite this initial investment, the cumulative cash position (before depreciation) is forecast to **turn positive by the end of Year 2 (2027), demonstrating the model's long-term financial sustainability.**



Proposition



Proposition

The café portfolio needs a clear proposition and overall identity.

To clearly communicate your offering/s and overall place in the market, plus drive commercial growth and consumer engagement, a positioning and proposition is essential.

Proposition – Process and Framework

The following slides detail the recommended process and framework to inform a new brand positioning and overall proposition for the café portfolio.

This would be a separate work stream involving all key stakeholders.

PROPOSITION PROCESS



Fully structured planning and immersion pre session.

Working session to get under the skin of the positioning opportunity and current state of play.

Development of brand strategy and proposed proposition

Collaborative session where the hypothesis is shared, discussed and refined by the group

Output

Strategic territories and places to play

Working 9Ps architecture

Session notes
Refinement of chosen territory

Final brand proposition and architecture

Output

Finalised brand architecture and strategic platform

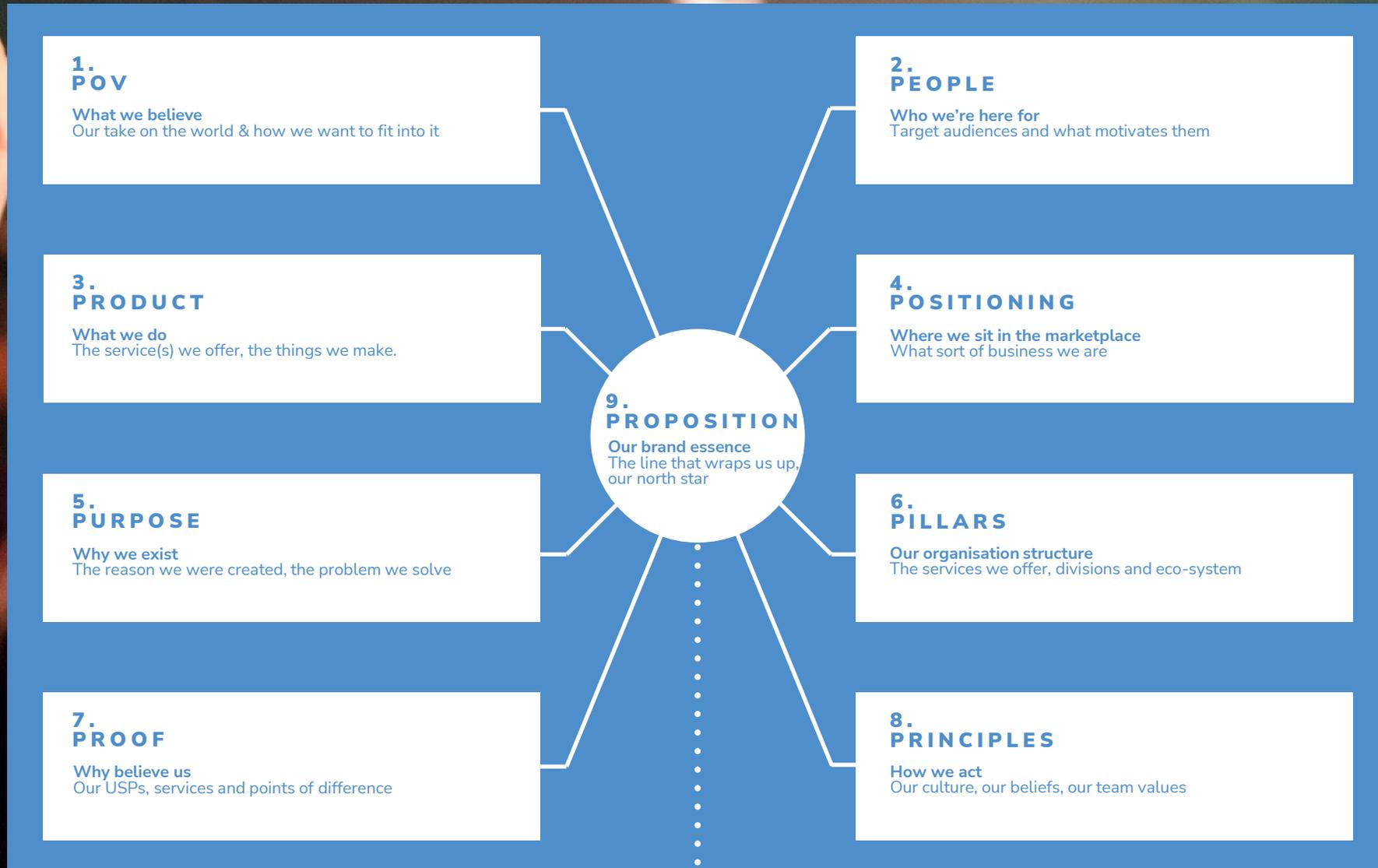
Writing of core selling story

Master narrative that will inform all external comms

Output

Core company credentials narrative and messaging

9Ps FRAMEWORK



- Brand architecture
- Credentials narrative
- Key messaging



Proposition

Output

Following the strategic process a clear positioning and proposition of the café portfolio would be proposed and how this translates into a clear set of business credentials that all team members will be able to use within their divisions.

The output will inform the messaging for all assets including website, signage, social, ads, brochures etc. It will also provide the creative brief.

In order to be consistent across all communication and ensure complete clarity, a set of brand guidelines would ideally be created.



Optimising Social Value



Optimising Social Value

To add social value to Harlow and improve the quality of life for its residents, initiatives could focus on community-building, economic opportunity, cultural development, and environmental sustainability.

Youth Mentorship Programs: Developing programs where young people are mentored by local professionals or business owners can help them develop skills, build confidence, and open career paths. This could be a great opportunity for chef skills training in partnership with the café portfolio.

Entrepreneurship and Innovation Hub for Youth: Creating a youth-focused innovation hub or co-working space could provide young people with access to resources, training, and networks to develop their entrepreneurial skills. This could be a good use of the additional space at the museum whilst driving additional footfall, as well the addition of flexible workspace within the business park and as part of the café offering.



Optimising Social Value

Physical Activity Programs: Organising fitness events, sports leagues, or outdoor activities (like free yoga in parks or group runs) can encourage healthy living and be a great partnership or sponsorship opportunity for the healthy eating range within your cafes.

Inclusive Employment Programs: Providing inclusive job opportunities for people with disabilities, or those facing social barriers, would provide significant social value to the wider community in Harlow.

Mental Wellbeing programs Activities tailored for older adults, like theatre performances, museum tours, or art therapy, could make cultural activities more accessible to this demographic. Equally the hospitality offerings would be an essential part of the experience for older adults creating more reasons to socialise in a relaxed and positive environment.

Examples of possible partnerships in order to deliver a series of social value initiatives are provided in the full report.



Conclusion



Conclusion

Harlow Council's in-house café model presents a strategically aligned, financially viable, and community-focused opportunity to enhance cultural and economic activity across its key venues.

By integrating café operations, Playhouse Theatre hospitality, and event catering into a unified model, the Council can ensure long-term financial sustainability, operational efficiency, and improved customer experience.

This model will:

- Maximise revenue potential through integrated Food & Beverage services and strategic event catering.
- Enhance visitor engagement by aligning food service with cultural programming and business park needs.
- Deliver social value through local supply chains, training opportunities, and inclusive employment.
- Ensure financial resilience by balancing commercial viability with operational efficiencies.

To achieve this, the Council **must commit to investing in leadership, operational structure**, and a phased mobilisation plan, ensuring that each café site is strategically positioned for success while leveraging cross-site efficiencies.

Thank You.



Helping transform the commercial
resilience of cultural assets.

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