

Heatwaves and Wanstead Businesses: A Wanstead Climate Action Report

The Impact of Extreme Heat on Businesses and Community Organisations in Wanstead

September 2026

Executive Summary

Extreme heat is already affecting businesses and community organisations in Wanstead, Redbridge, in ways that extend far beyond uncomfortable temperatures.

A survey of **nine local businesses and community organisations** found that heatwaves are affecting customer behaviour, turnover, staffing, stock, supply chains, operating costs and the ability of businesses to remain open. The businesses surveyed included a restaurant, coffee shop, flower shop, newsagent, greengrocer, charity shop and community organisation, providing a range of perspectives from across the local economy.

The impact is not uniform. Some businesses experience increased demand for products such as iced drinks, ice cream and fans, while others report significantly reduced footfall and lost income. On occasion, two businesses had to shut for the day because it was too hot to work without air conditioning..

The effects also extend beyond direct financial losses. Businesses reported food and stock spoiling, increased costs for electricity and air conditioning, staff becoming unwell or unwilling to work, difficulties accessing water, disrupted supplies and customers avoiding the high street during the hottest parts of the day.

Community organisations highlighted particular concerns for older and vulnerable residents. Some people became unwell during periods of extreme heat, while unsuitable conditions in community facilities and public transport created additional pressure for families and carers.

The responses also show that local businesses can play an important role in community resilience. Shops and other accessible premises can provide somewhere for people to cool down, sit and seek relief from extreme temperatures.

The businesses surveyed are asking for practical support. This includes affordable cooling, shaded public spaces, improved public transport, action on water and infrastructure problems, financial assistance with additional operating costs, better communication before heatwaves and more direct engagement from local elected representatives.

The findings suggest that preparing for extreme heat should be treated not only as an environmental issue, but also as an **economic, public health and community resilience issue**.

Most importantly, businesses repeatedly stressed the need for preparation **before** extreme heat arrives, rather than measures introduced once a heatwave is already underway.

Introduction

Heatwaves are becoming an increasingly important challenge for local communities and economies. While much of the discussion around extreme heat focuses on health, infrastructure and the environment, businesses are also directly affected.

To understand how these impacts are being experienced locally, questionnaires were conducted with **nine businesses and community organisations in Wanstead, Redbridge**.

The survey included a range of local outlets and organisations, including a restaurant, coffee shop, flower shop, newsagent, greengrocer, charity shop and community centre. The businesses and organisations approached were willing to share their experiences, reflecting a desire among local operators to have their concerns heard.

This is a **qualitative survey of businesses and community organisations in Wanstead**. It is not intended to be a statistically representative survey of businesses across Redbridge. Instead, it provides a snapshot of the experiences and concerns being reported by local organisations on the ground.

The responses demonstrate that there is no single experience of extreme heat. Some businesses benefit from increased demand for particular products, while others face reduced footfall, higher costs, disrupted supply chains or temporary closure.

Changing Footfall and Customer Behaviour

One of the clearest themes from the responses is a change in when people visit local businesses.

Snaresbrook News reported that afternoons can become very quiet, while evenings become busier. Other businesses similarly reported reduced footfall during particularly hot periods.

One respondent estimated that their business had experienced around **10% less turnover**, alongside a significant reduction in the flow of people through Wanstead during the summer.

For some businesses, customers simply avoid the high street during the hottest parts of the day and return once temperatures fall.

However, even where overall footfall remains broadly similar, this change can create disruption. Staffing, deliveries, opening hours and stock ordering may all need to adapt to a different pattern of demand.

One restaurant reported that customers did not want to visit during the heatwave, while staff were also less willing or able to work in the conditions.

The restaurant eventually reported **16 days of complete closure**, illustrating how extreme heat can move beyond reduced footfall and become a direct threat to a business's ability to trade.

Heatwaves Create New Demand, But Not for Everyone

Extreme heat does not necessarily stop people spending money. Instead, it changes what they buy.

Several businesses reported increased demand for products associated with hot weather.

The coffee shop reported increased sales of iced drinks, while Snaresbrook News saw increased ice cream sales. Toolbox reported increased sales of fans, and Harveys Greengrocers experienced stronger demand for watermelon.

At the same time, demand for other products fell. Snaresbrook News reported a drop in chocolate sales during hotter weather.

One coffee shop described the increase in iced coffee as a benefit, but noted that financially it was difficult to determine whether this represented a meaningful overall gain.

This distinction is important. Heatwaves can create opportunities for some businesses, but those opportunities are not necessarily enough to offset lost trading time, increased costs or disruption elsewhere in the business.

One restaurant reported that after sunset customers were happier to return, but the business normally closed at 10.30pm. As the respondent put it, an additional hour of evening trade was **“not enough”** to compensate for the disruption during the day.

Lost Turnover and Business Closures

The survey responses provide several examples of extreme heat directly affecting businesses' ability to operate.

One business reported losing approximately 10% of turnover while a restaurant had to close for over a week because of the heat.

A coffee shop became so hot that staff were unable to work effectively meaning the business ultimately had to close for one to two days until air conditioning was installed.

In this case, the respondent felt that the impact on the ability to operate was greater than the direct effect on turnover.

These experiences demonstrate that the economic impact of extreme heat cannot be measured through footfall alone. A business can experience disruption through temporary closure, lost working hours, increased costs and reduced productivity even where some customer demand remains.

Working Conditions and Staff Welfare

Extreme heat creates difficult working conditions for staff as well as customers.

Daisy reported indoor temperatures of around **35°C**, creating challenging conditions inside the shop. Staff and elderly customers were both affected, with some older customers asking to sit down because of the heat.

The coffee shop reported that its building became extremely hot and that working there was difficult until air conditioning was installed. The additional cooling equipment has also created an ongoing expense.

Another respondent reported that someone working at their other branch had experienced heatstroke and was subsequently unable to work for several days.

The restaurant reported staff feeling unwell and being unwilling or unable to come to work during the heatwave.

These experiences suggest that extreme heat can affect staffing as well as customer demand. Businesses may face higher costs for cooling while simultaneously dealing with reduced staffing capacity.

There are also differences between premises. St Francis Hospice Charity Shop has air conditioning because its current premises were previously occupied by Starbucks. Other branches do not have the same facilities.

This raises a wider issue around affordability. Having air conditioning available is one thing; being able to afford the electricity required to run it during prolonged periods of extreme heat is another.

Stock, Food Waste and Supply Chains

The effects of extreme heat extend beyond the immediate premises of local businesses.

Harveys Greengrocers reported difficulties sourcing certain products. The supply of iceberg lettuce from Spain had been reduced, while asparagus from Peru was also affected. British tomatoes had become more expensive.

The business also reported ordering less stock in some circumstances to reduce the risk of products spoiling in the heat.

Daisy/Ella reported similar problems within the flower industry, including a reduced variety of flowers and fewer British-grown options. Certain flowers were becoming increasingly difficult and expensive to source, with calla lilies reportedly increasing from around £3.50 to £10.

Other respondents reported direct food losses. One restaurant said that meat had gone off and had to be thrown away.

The community centre also reported hidden costs associated with keeping food and other supplies safe. Milk could spoil if left out for around 30 minutes, while storage became more difficult.

Another respondent reported that a box of tomatoes which would normally cost around £4–5 had increased to approximately £12.

These experiences demonstrate how extreme heat can translate into higher costs and reduced availability even for businesses that are not directly dependent on outdoor conditions.

Buildings and Infrastructure Under Pressure

The survey also highlighted problems with the physical infrastructure around local businesses.

One restaurant reported that water pressure became so low that toilets and hand-washing facilities could not be used properly.

The same respondent reported problems with rubbish collection, with waste remaining outside and beginning to smell during the heat.

The community centre reported ongoing problems with the local water main and suggested that stronger enforcement was needed to ensure infrastructure problems were addressed.

There were also concerns about the suitability of buildings for increasingly hot conditions.

One respondent noted that buildings can trap heat and are not designed with extreme temperatures in mind.

Another reported that part of their building developed a crack which worsened during the heatwave before a section eventually fell. The respondent believed that if people had been sitting in the affected area at the time, they could have been seriously injured.

These are individual accounts and should not be taken as evidence that heat caused structural failure in every case. However, they illustrate the range of concerns local businesses are experiencing about buildings and infrastructure during periods of extreme heat.

Public Transport and Access to the High Street

Heatwaves also affect whether people can safely travel to and from local businesses.

The community centre reported that buses became too hot for some people to use safely. It also highlighted ongoing disruption to local bus services.

The respondent argued that public transport needs to be incorporated into heatwave planning, including appropriate air conditioning and measures to prevent buses becoming unsafe during extreme temperatures.

This is particularly significant for older residents and people who rely on public transport.

If people cannot comfortably or safely travel to local high streets, businesses can experience the effects through reduced footfall, while vulnerable residents may become more isolated.

Businesses as Community Cooling Spaces

One of the most significant findings is that local businesses and community organisations can become informal sources of support during extreme heat.

At St Francis Hospice Charity Shop, members of the public come inside partly to cool down. Many of the shop's volunteers are older people, making a comfortable indoor environment particularly important.

Daisy/Ella similarly described elderly customers asking to sit down because of the heat.

The community centre also highlighted the particular risks faced by older people during extreme temperatures.

This suggests that local businesses are not simply places where people buy goods. During extreme weather, accessible premises can become places where people rest, cool down and seek temporary relief.

This informal role is largely unrecognised in existing discussions about local heatwave resilience.

Vulnerable People and Families

The effects of extreme heat are particularly concerning for older people and people with additional needs.

Toolbox provided an example involving a family member with additional needs who attends a day-care centre without air conditioning. During the heatwave, she stayed at home, meaning the wider family had to take on responsibility for meeting her needs.

This demonstrates how inadequate adaptation in one setting can transfer pressure elsewhere.

The community centre also reported several clients becoming unwell and being hospitalised during the summer. The respondent, who has worked with older people for many years, expressed particular concern about the risks extreme heat poses to elderly residents.

The community centre also reported three deaths during the summer and described this as unusual, while suggesting that vulnerability to heat may have exacerbated existing conditions.

These observations are important, but the survey does not establish whether individual deaths or hospitalisations were caused by extreme heat. They should therefore be understood as the experiences and concerns reported by the organisation rather than as a measure of heat-related mortality.

The wider point remains that heatwave planning needs to consider the knock-on effects on families, carers and community organisations when services become unsuitable during extreme temperatures.

The High Street and the Wider Cost of Extreme Heat

The survey responses also highlight concerns that go beyond individual heatwaves.

One respondent argued that there are already too few independent businesses on the high street and that small businesses need greater support.

Another highlighted the importance of third spaces where people can meet friends and spend money locally, but said that rising rents and other costs are making it increasingly difficult for businesses to prosper.

For these businesses, extreme heat is therefore another pressure on top of existing operating costs.

One respondent described the wider pressure in stark personal terms:

"I feel sick, I can't sleep. This is affecting me. It's hurting me. I want to do something to survive in business."

This reflects an important theme running through the responses: for some local businesses, the question is not simply how to make the high street more comfortable during a heatwave, but how to remain financially viable as operating conditions become more difficult.

What Businesses Want From the Community

The responses suggest that local residents can also play a role in supporting businesses during periods of extreme heat.

One respondent encouraged people to continue spending money with local businesses or ordering by phone, warning that without local support some businesses could eventually close.

Another suggested that consumers should consider measures such as reusable cups and deposits, reducing waste and supporting more sustainable practices.

More broadly, respondents wanted people to recognise the additional pressures faced by local businesses during extreme weather.

Continuing to use local shops, cafés and restaurants where possible can help keep money circulating locally, particularly at a time when businesses are facing higher operating costs.

What Businesses Want From the Council

The businesses surveyed identified a range of practical measures they would like to see from the Council.

These included:

- **Affordable cooling:** financial assistance or support with the additional cost of installing and operating air conditioning and other cooling equipment.
- **Shaded public spaces:** more trees, covered areas, canopies and places where residents can escape direct sunlight.
- **Cooling spaces:** accessible community venues where residents can sit and cool down.
- **Better infrastructure:** action on water supply, drainage, waste collection and other local infrastructure problems.
- **Cooler public transport:** ensuring buses and other public transport remain safe and usable during extreme heat.
- **Support for small businesses:** financial assistance to help businesses manage increased electricity, water and other operating costs.
- **Support with water costs:** consideration of measures to reduce the additional financial burden created by increased water use.
- **Earlier communication:** clear information and support before extreme heat arrives.
- **Face-to-face engagement:** more regular visits and consultation with businesses, rather than engagement being concentrated around elections or formal consultations.
- **Consideration of heat in planning and development:** ensuring new developments and local buildings take increasingly hot conditions into account.

One respondent suggested that the Council could create a **refreshing public space with shade**, describing it as a positive community feature as well as a response to extreme heat.

Another suggested that financial measures similar to schemes introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic could help encourage people to spend locally during periods of disruption.

What Businesses Want From Local MPs

Respondents also identified a role for local MPs in supporting businesses.

Suggestions included:

- Additional financial support or tax relief for small businesses facing higher electricity and water costs.
- Investment in cooling and climate adaptation.
- Measures that encourage people to continue spending in local businesses.
- Better communication between elected representatives and businesses.
- More face-to-face engagement with local businesses.
- Listening to businesses' experiences directly and feeding their concerns into wider policy discussions.

One respondent said they wanted MPs to **come into local shops, listen to businesses and understand their experiences first-hand**.

Another stressed that extreme heat should be treated as a recurring issue rather than an exceptional event:

“This is the new normal, so we need to be prepared for the next time it happens.”

Are Enough Measures Being Taken?

Views on the broader response to climate change varied among respondents.

Some felt that politicians were not doing enough. Others focused on specific measures they believed would help, including reducing fossil fuel use, improving recycling and tackling single-use plastics.

One respondent argued that there is a significant difference between climate policy in theory and what happens in practice.

Another felt that responsibility should also sit with the community and consumers, rather than government alone.

These responses demonstrate that there is not a single view among the businesses surveyed about how climate change should be addressed. However, there was a common concern that practical preparation for extreme heat needs to improve.

Several respondents questioned why support and adaptation measures are sometimes introduced only once a heatwave has already begun.

Recommendations

Based on the responses collected from businesses and community organisations in Wanstead, several practical measures could help improve resilience to extreme heat.

1. Establish a Wanstead Heatwave Business Support Plan

The Council should provide businesses with clear information before periods of extreme heat, including available support, guidance, emergency contacts and practical steps businesses can take.

2. Support Affordable Cooling

Financial assistance, grants or other schemes could help small businesses and community organisations install and operate appropriate cooling systems.

Any support should consider not only installation costs but also the ongoing electricity costs associated with running cooling equipment.

3. Increase Shade Across Local High Streets

Trees, awnings, canopies and other forms of shade could make high streets more comfortable for residents and staff.

Public seating and shaded areas could also provide places for older and vulnerable residents to rest.

4. Improve Public Transport Resilience

Public transport should form part of local heatwave planning, with measures to keep passengers and staff as cool and safe as possible.

5. Protect and Promote Community Cooling Spaces

Libraries, community centres, charity shops and other accessible venues could form part of a wider network of designated or recognised cooling spaces.

6. Focus on Vulnerable Residents

Heatwave planning should specifically consider older people, people with additional needs and families who may have to provide additional care when services become unsuitable during extreme temperatures.

7. Improve Local Infrastructure

Water supply, drainage, waste collection and other infrastructure issues can become more significant during periods of extreme heat.

Local infrastructure should therefore be considered as part of heatwave resilience planning.

8. Prepare Before the Heatwave

Support must be proactive rather than reactive.

Businesses should have access to information, financial support and practical measures **before** extreme temperatures arrive.

9. Support Local High Streets

Measures such as targeted financial support, incentives to shop locally, better public spaces and consideration of the wider costs facing independent businesses could help reduce the economic impact of extreme weather.

10. Strengthen Engagement With Local Businesses

Local elected representatives and the Council should maintain regular, meaningful contact with businesses throughout the year, rather than relying primarily on formal consultations or election-period engagement.

Conclusion

The experiences shared by nine businesses and community organisations demonstrate that extreme heat is already affecting the local economy in Wanstead.

The impacts reported include changes in customer behaviour, reduced footfall, lost turnover, temporary closures, spoiled food and stock, higher operating costs, staffing difficulties, disrupted supply chains and concerns about buildings and infrastructure.

The effects are not uniform. Some businesses benefit from increased demand for products such as iced drinks, ice cream, fans and summer fruit. But these benefits are uneven and do not necessarily compensate for lost trading time or additional costs.

The survey also highlights the wider community consequences of extreme heat. Older people and vulnerable residents can be particularly affected, while inadequate cooling in community facilities and public transport can create additional pressure for families and carers.

At the same time, local businesses can form part of the community's response. Shops, cafés, charity shops and community organisations can provide accessible places where people can cool down, rest and seek temporary relief.

The message from the businesses surveyed is therefore broader than simply asking for help during hot weather.

They want **better preparation, practical support and meaningful engagement before the next heatwave arrives.**

For Wanstead's high streets, extreme heat is not an isolated environmental issue. It intersects with business viability, public health, infrastructure, transport and community resilience.

Preparing for future heatwaves means ensuring that local businesses, community organisations and residents are not left to deal with the consequences alone.

The time to prepare for the next heatwave is before it arrives.