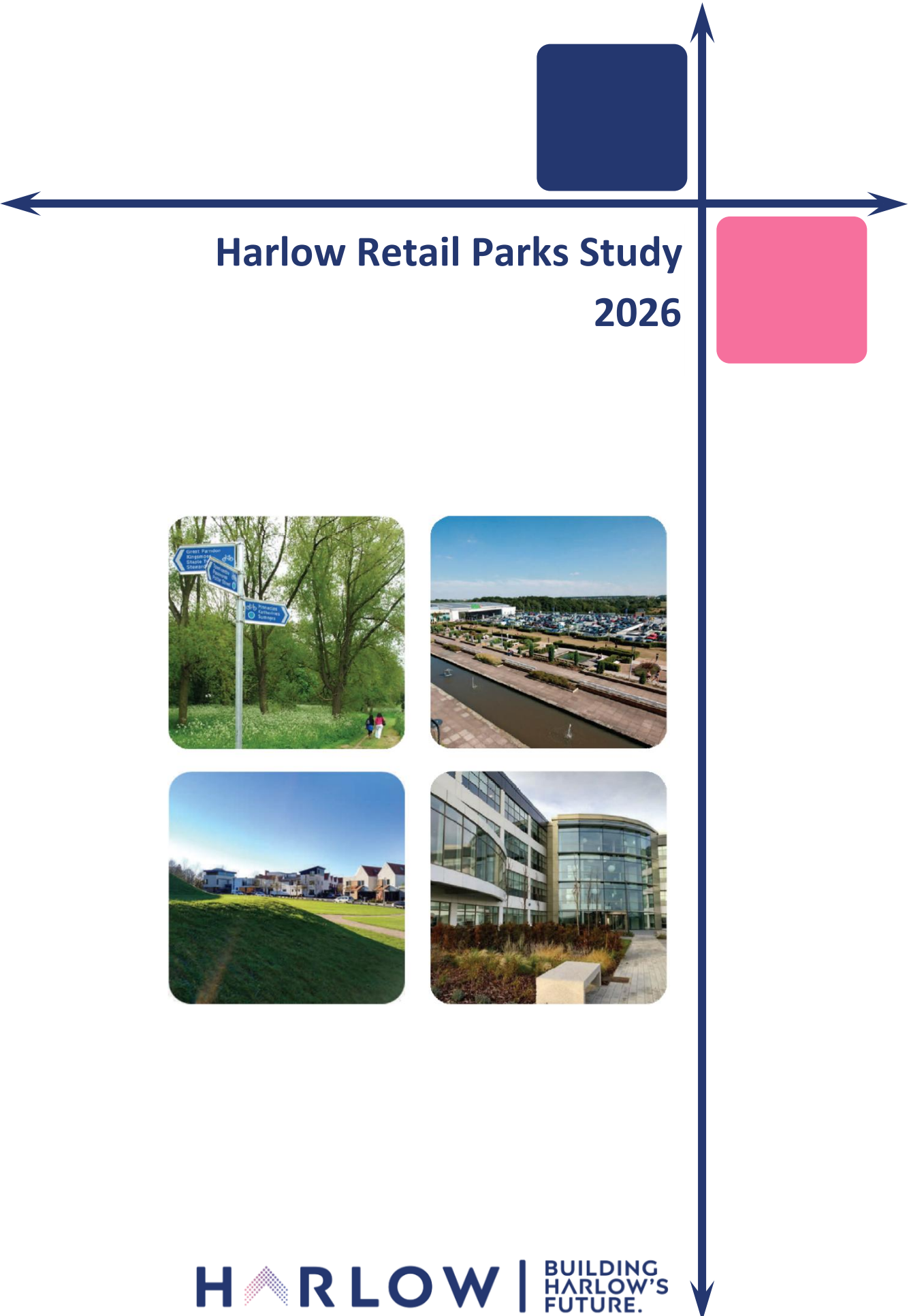




Harlow Retail Parks Study 2026



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1 Introduction

1.1 Monitoring of Retail Parks

1.1.1 In order to inform the preparation of planning policies, and reflecting the duty placed on the Council as Local Planning Authority to review the socio-economic and environmental conditions of the district, the Council assesses the uses of the Retail Park units in Harlow. This provides analysis of changes that have occurred in the uses of the units. Surveys began in 2015, and although these have not been done annually until 2023, they provide a good indication of any changes.

1.1.2 The Retail Parks are designated in the Harlow Local Development Plan, which was adopted December 2020. The monitoring of Retail Parks is important to provide a barometer on the vitality, viability and success of Harlow's retail areas. Such monitoring also allows the identification of trends and the measurement of success of the local planning policies which seek to manage the proportion of uses within the Retail Parks.

1.2 Harlow's Retail Parks

1.2.1 There are five designated Retail Parks in Harlow, all located in the north of the district:

- Harlow Retail Park
- Princes Gate
- Queensgate Centre
- St James Centre
- The Oaks

2 National Legislation and Policies

2.1 Use Classes Order

2.1.1 Uses of land and buildings are categorised into various uses known as 'use classes' which are defined by The Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) Order 1987 (as amended) (UCO).

2.1.2 The uses most commonly found in retail areas are listed below.

Class E – Commercial, Business and Service

- E(a): display or retail sale of goods, other than hot food [formerly A1]
 - Examples include shops, hairdressers, pet shops, sandwich bars and retail warehouses

- E(b): sale of food and drink for consumption (mostly) on the premises [formerly A3]
 - Examples include restaurants and cafes
- E(c): provision of financial services and professional services (other than health or medical services) [formerly A2]
 - Examples include banks, building societies, estate agents and employment agencies
- E(d): indoor sport, recreation or fitness
 - Examples include gyms [formerly part of D2]

Sui Generis – certain uses which do not fall within any use class – includes units for:

- Theatres
- Amusement arcades/centres or funfairs
- Launderettes
- Fuel stations
- Hiring, selling and/or displaying motor vehicles
- Taxi businesses
- Retail warehouse clubs
- Nightclubs
- Casinos
- Betting offices/shops
- Pay day local shops
- Hot food takeaways (sale of food and drink for consumption (mostly) off the premises) [formerly A5]
- Public houses, wine bars and drinking establishments [formerly A4]
- Cinemas [formerly part of D2]

2.1.3 The Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended) states that a change of use does not require planning permission if the new use and former use are in the same use class. If they are not in the same use class then the change would require planning permission.

2.1.4 Under permitted development rights enacted by the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995 (as amended), changes of use between certain classes do not require planning permission.

2.1.5 Changing uses between those classified as Sui Generis, however, would require planning permission, because each use classified as Sui Generis technically occupies a use class of its own.

- 2.1.6 Units housing McDonald's, KFC, Tim Hortons and Subway were previously classified as Sui Generis in this Study. However, to ensure accordance with the Retail Frontages Study and general good practice, as of the 2025 version of this Study these units have been reclassified and historic data and maps have been amended accordingly.
- 2.1.7 Units housing McDonald's, KFC and Tim Horton's – which are predominantly restaurants with a 'hot takeaway' element – have been reclassified as E(b). Units housing Subway – which is generally considered to operate as a 'sandwich bar' rather than a 'hot takeaway' – have been reclassified as E(a).

2.2 National Planning Policy and Guidance

- 2.2.1 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) sets out the Government's planning policies for England and how these should be applied. It provides a framework within which locally-prepared plans for housing and other development can be produced.
- 2.2.2 Chapter 7 Ensuring the Vitality of Town Centres within the current [NPPF 2024](#) states 'local planning authorities should apply a sequential test to planning applications for main town centre uses which are neither in an existing centre nor in accordance with an up-to-date plan' (paragraph 91) and also states 'when considering edge of centre and out of centre proposals, preference should be given to accessible sites which are well connected to the town centre. Applicants and local planning authorities should demonstrate flexibility on issues such as format and scale, so that opportunities to utilise suitable town centre or edge of centre sites are fully explored' (paragraph 92).
- 2.2.3 The NPPF goes on to state that for retail and leisure development outside town centres which is not in accordance with an up-to-date plan, an impact assessment should be undertaken where the development is over a proportionate, locally-set floorspace threshold (2,500sqm gross by default) (paragraph 94).
- 2.2.4 However, paragraph 15.28 of the Harlow Local Development Plan (HLDP) states that proposals for retail and leisure uses outside of the Town Centre which exceed 500sqm in size will be required to be supported by an impact assessment.

- 2.2.5 The [NPPF \(2026\)](#) sets out policy TC3: Main town centre uses outside town centres which sets out that ‘a sequential test should be applied to proposals for main town centre uses for which planning permission is required, where these are neither in an existing centre nor in accordance with an allocation for that purpose in an up-to-date development plan.’ The policy also sets out that ‘the sequential test means that main town centre uses involving new development should be located within town centres identified in the development plan; then, if this is not feasible, in edge of centre locations; and only if suitable sites are not available should out of centres be considered.’
- 2.2.6 The National Planning Practice Guidance (‘Town centres and retail’ chapter) provides further information on the sequential test and impact assessment.

2.3 Harlow Local Development Plan (HLDP)

- 2.3.1 The Harlow Local Development Plan (HLDP), which was adopted in December 2020, sets out the long-term planning vision for the district and guides future development across Harlow to 2033. It includes a number of policies relating to Retail Parks in Harlow.
- 2.3.2 The Retail Hierarchy, which reflects the role and function of the district’s retail centres, is set out in Policy RS1 with Harlow Town Centre being where retail development should be directed in the first instance and where Retail Parks are at the bottom of the hierarchy.
- 2.3.3 Retail Parks are protected as a provider of bulky retail goods in Policy RS3 which ensures they do not provide direct competition with the town centre. Policy PR10 sets out the criteria that development in Retail Parks must meet, which is as follows:
- a) the sequential approach is satisfied;
 - b) the development is in Use Class A1 and is for the sale of bulky goods, or provides leisure activities;
 - c) any sub-division does not result in any separate retail unit being less than 1,000sqm in size

3 Findings

3.1 Harlow Retail Park

Use Class	2015	2016	2019	2023	2024	2025	2026
E(a)	50% (2 units)	75% (3 units)	75% (3 units)	75% (3 units)	75% (3 units)	50% (2 units)	75% (3 units)
E(b)	25% (1 unit)	25% (1 unit)	25% (1 unit)	25% (1 unit)	25% (1 unit)	25% (1 unit)	25% (1 unit)
Vacant	25% (1 unit)					25% (1 unit)	

3.1.1 Harlow Retail Park has consistently performed well since 2015. There was one vacant unit during the 2015 survey, however, this was filled the following year and stayed occupied. In 2025 a different unit became vacant – the first recorded vacancy in a decade which was filled again in 2026.

3.2 Princes Gate

Use Class	2015	2016	2019	2023	2024	2025	2026
E(a)	100% (5 units)	100% (5 units)	100% (5 units)	80% (4 units)	80% (4 units)	100% (5 units)	100% (5 units)
Vacant				20% (1 unit)	20% (1 unit)		

3.2.1 Princes Gate has consistently performed well since 2015. However, there was one unit that was vacant during the 2023 survey which was due to B&M moving to the Queensgate Centre and was not filled at the time of the 2024 survey. By the 2025 survey this had been filled and has stayed filled.

3.3 Queensgate Centre

Use Class	2015	2016	2019	2023	2024	2025	2026
E(a)	68% (13 units)	74% (14 units)	74% (14 units)	75% (15 units)	75% (15 units)	70% (14 units)	75% (15 units)
E(b)	11% (2 units)	11% (2 units)	16% (3 units)	15% (3 units)	15% (3 units)	15% (3 units)	15% (3 units)
Sui generis	5% (1 units)	5% (1 units)	5% (1 units)	5% (1 units)	5% (1 units)	5% (1 units)	5% (1 units)
Vacant	16% (3 units)	11% (2 units)	5% (1 unit)	5% (1 unit)	5% (1 unit)	10% (2 units)	5% (1 unit)

3.3.1 Queensgate Centre has varied in performance since 2015. There were 3 units that were vacant in 2015 and 2 units continued to be vacant in the 2016 survey.

3.3.2 By 2019 there was only one vacant unit (1), which by 2023 had been subdivided into 3 units to become units 1a, 1b and 1c. Another unit became vacant around this time, while two units (3a and 3b) merged to become unit 3, providing B&M a larger space to move to from Princes Gate. A further unit became vacant by the time of the 2025 survey which was filled again in 2026. At present, however, there remains one vacant unit which has remained vacant since first surveying this in 2023.

3.4 St James Centre

Use Class	2015	2016	2019	2023	2024	2025	2026
E(a)	74% (14 units)	68% (13 units)	53% (10 units)	63% (12 units)	63% (12 units)	63% (12 units)	63% (12 units)
B2	16% (3 units)	16% (3 units)	16% (3 units)	16% (3 units)	16% (3 units)	16% (3 units)	16% (3 units)
B8	5% (1 unit)	5% (1 unit)	11% (2 units)	5% (1 unit)	5% (1 unit)	5% (1 unit)	5% (1 unit)
Vacant	5% (1 unit)	11% (2 unit)	21% (4 units)	16% (3 units)	16% (3 units)	16% (3 units)	16% (3 units)

3.4.1 St James Centre has varied in performance since 2015, with a higher rate of vacant units than other retail parks, particularly since 2019. Unlike Harlow's other retail parks, St James Centre occupies units housing B2 and B8 uses. The 3 units that have been vacant since 2023 have stayed the same with 1 unit having been vacant since the 2015 survey and another (E(a)) since the 2019 survey.

3.5 The Oaks

Use Class	2015	2016	2019	2023	2024	2025	2026
E(a)	80% (8 units)	90% (9 units)	90% (9 units)	89% (8 units)	89% (8 units)	78% (7 units)	89% (8 units)
E(b)	10% (1 unit)	10% (1 unit)	10% (1 unit)	11% (1 unit)	11% (1 unit)	11% (1 unit)	11% (1 unit)
Vacant	10% (1 unit)					11% (1 unit)	

- 3.5.1 The Oaks has consistently performed well since 2015, although a unit became vacant between the 2024 and 2025 surveys, which is the first time there has been a recorded vacancy in a decade, but became filled during 2026.
- 3.5.2 Between 2019 and 2023, units 7a and 7b – occupied by McDonald's and Carphone Warehouse – merged to become unit 7. The latter moved into a space within the Currys unit in Harlow Retail Park.

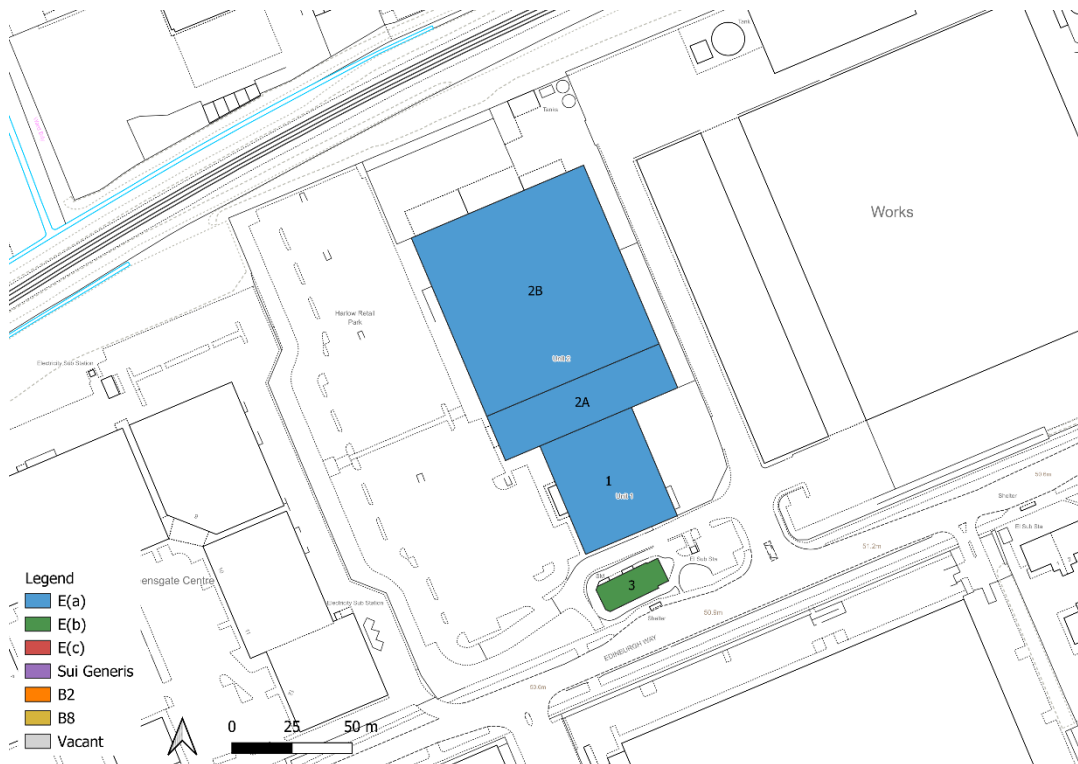
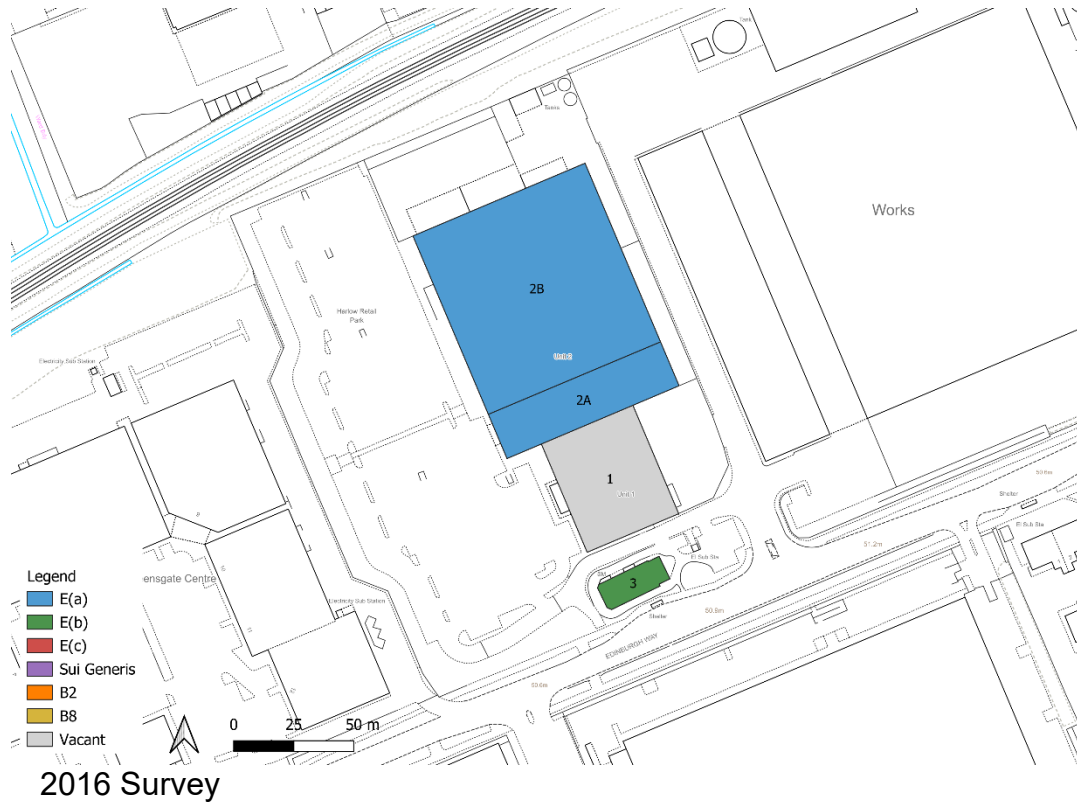
4 Conclusion

- 4.1.1 Harlow's retail parks have performed well over the last decade, despite challenges being experienced by the wider retail industry, such as impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, changing retail habits and increasing operational costs.
- 4.1.2 The predominate use across the retail parks is E(a). There are also some restaurants (E(b)) which provide hot takeaway elements, one unit in use as a cinema (Sui Generis) and some units, in St James Centre, in B2 and B8 uses.
- 4.1.3 Vacancy longevity has varied across the retail parks since surveys begun. Harlow Retail Park, Princes Gate and The Oaks all have seen very few vacancies and when these have occurred, they have been filled again very quickly. Queensgate Centre has improved on the vacancy rate from 2019 with only 1 unit staying vacant since. The vacancies at St James Centre have stayed the same since the 2023 survey with 1 unit having been vacant since the 2015 survey and another since 2019.
- 4.1.4 The next survey for this Study will take place in April 2027.

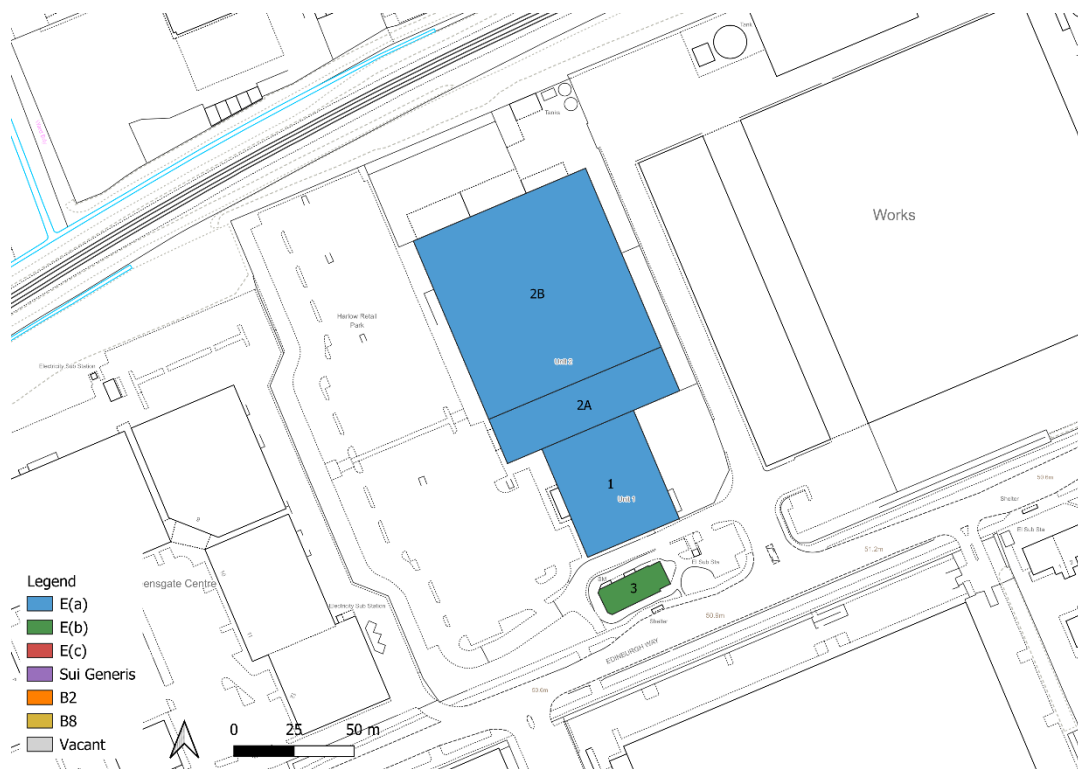
5 Appendix 1 – Retail Park Maps

Harlow Retail Park

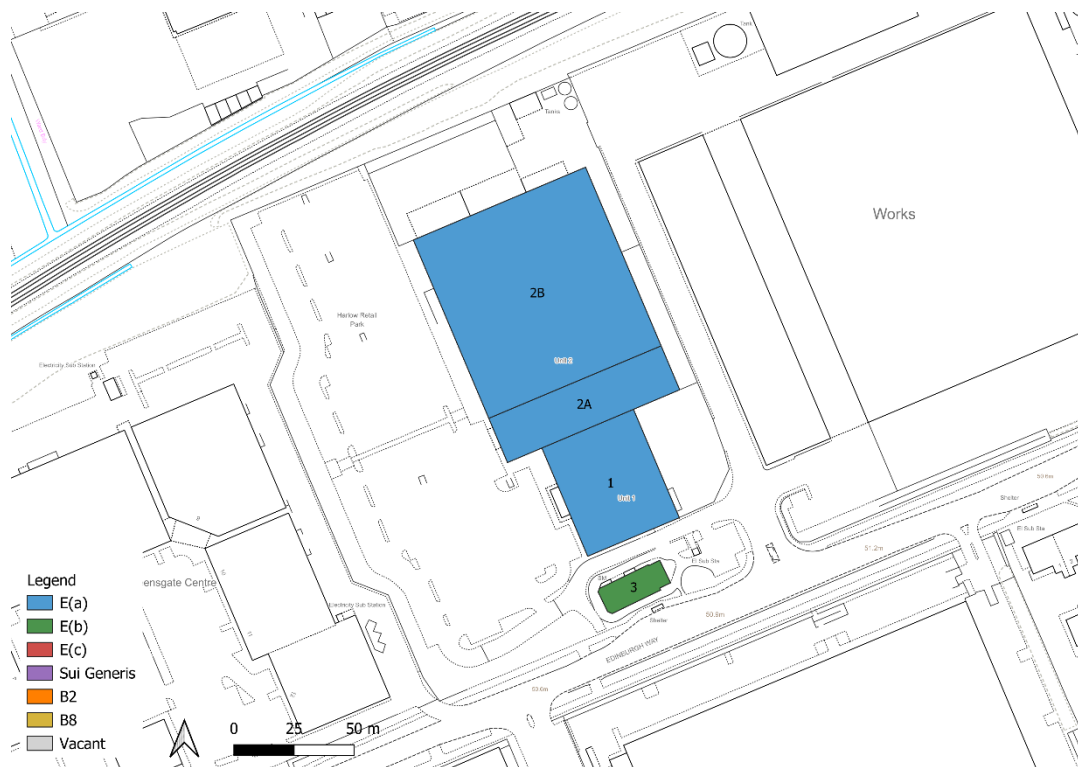
2015 Survey



2019 Survey



2023 Survey



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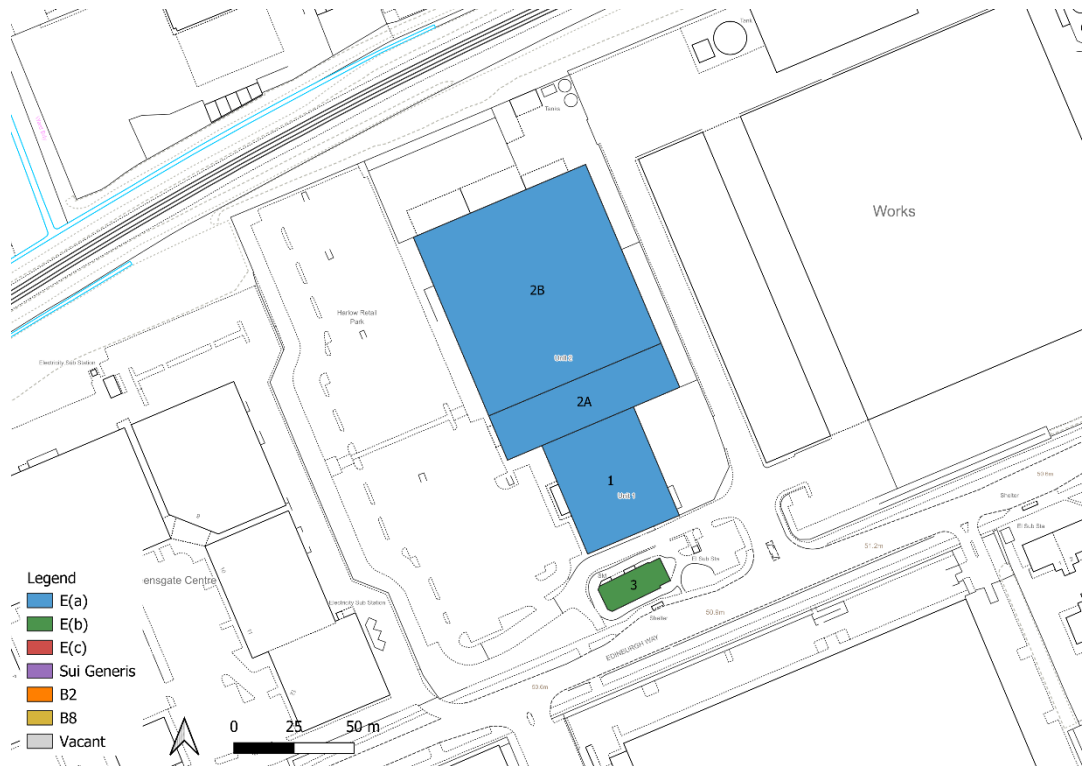
Legend

- E(a)
- E(b)
- E(c)
- Sui Generis
- B2
- B8
- Vacant

0 25 50 m

Map of the Sui Generis site in Glasgow, showing the layout of buildings and surrounding infrastructure. The map includes a legend, a scale bar, and a north arrow. The buildings are labeled 1, 2A, 2B, and 3. The site is bounded by the Forth and Clyde Canal to the north and the Glasgow City Centre to the south. The map also shows the Glasgow Subway and the Glasgow City Centre.

2026 Survey



Princes Gate

2015 Survey



2016 Survey



2019 Survey



2023 Survey



2024 Survey



2025 Survey



2026 Survey



Queensgate Centre

2015 Survey



2016 Survey



2019 Survey



2023 Survey



2024 Survey



2025 Survey



2026 Survey



St James Centre

2015 Survey



2016 Survey



2019 Survey



2023 Survey



2024 Survey



2025 Survey



2026 Survey



The Oaks

2015 Survey



2016 Survey



2019 Survey



2023 Survey



2024 Survey



2025 Survey



2026 Survey

