

# ALNWICK AND DENWICK NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN

## Economy and Employment Issues and Options

### 1. Context

#### 1.1 Introduction

This section considers options for the location, scale and type of employment land to meet the needs of the town in its capacity as a main rural service centre. The town therefore needs to meet both its own needs and that of a wider rural hinterland which it serves. Generally this economic area could be described as eastwards to the coast, west to Rothbury, and to the north and south, midway between Alnwick and the towns of Berwick and Morpeth respectively. The section also considers how existing assets and the town centre might contribute towards future economic prosperity. Planning for sustainable growth in Alnwick is considered critical to wider socio-economic issues such as retaining an active working population, retaining young people and attracting new investment to the town.

Responses to the Alnwick Neighbourhood Plan consultation questionnaire provided the following key comments:

- The need particularly to provide more employment opportunity for young people, including graduates and to counter an imbalanced ageing population
- The need to support existing businesses and facilitate entrepreneurship
- The need to support small scale local and new businesses
- The potential of the town to capitalise on local food and local energy sectors
- The importance of expanding the town's infrastructure including highways parking and public transport to assist economic growth
- To bring back underused buildings in the town into economic use
- The importance of supporting growth in the tourism sector.

#### 1.2 Historical Context

Employment land has in the post war years been provided on a range of small scale industrial estates, generally comprising a variety of rural and service industries and suppliers. Prior to 2000 the range of employment uses could be quite narrowly defined and was of an 'industrial' nature. Like in many service centres, modern requirements for employment land requires a much wider range of businesses to be provided for, from bad neighbour industrial uses to sensitive office, service sector and tourism related uses. Other new uses, such as car showrooms and retail trade centres have also tended to gravitate towards employment locations. There is therefore a requirement to meet the needs of a much more diversified employment sector than in the past. Retail and service sector growth has in the recent past,

been an important component of overall economic and employment growth and this is likely to continue in the future. The plan should consider how the potential growth in these sectors should be realised.

### 1.3 Policy Context

Key policy guidance is provided at National level by the National Planning Policy Framework, (NPPF) and at a local level by the adopted Alnwick District LDF Core Strategy, and the emerging Northumberland County LDF Core Strategy. The main points in relation to employment land are set out below:

#### NPPF

Section 1 Building a strong competitive economy sets out the Government's commitment to growth and "ensuring that the planning system does everything it can to support sustainable economic growth"... "Significant weight should be placed on the need to support economic growth through the planning system" *para 19*

"Planning Authorities should plan proactively to meet the development needs of business" *para 20*

Of particular relevance to Alnwick, plans should:

- "Set a clear economic vision and strategy for their area which positively and proactively encourages economic growth."
- "Set criteria or identify strategic sites for local or inward investment to match the strategy and to meet anticipated needs over the plan period."
- "Support existing business sectors ... and plan for new or emerging sectors likely to locate in their area. Policies should be flexible enough to accommodate needs not anticipated in the plan and allow a rapid response to changes in economic circumstances." *para 21*

#### Alnwick Local Development Framework Core Strategy 2007

Key policies and objectives of the adopted Development Plan in respect of economy are to:

- Provide sufficient land to meet employment needs, facilitate economic diversification and achieve sustainable levels of economic growth.
- Encourage the regeneration of and enhance the role, vitality and viability of the district market towns as key service centres.

- Promote the development of sustainable tourism.

Alnwick is identified as a main rural centre which offers “the greatest range of housing, employment and service opportunities” and is identified in Policy S1 as “a main focus for new development in the district”.

The Plan recognises important links with education, ICT provision, the availability of housing to attract an active workforce, transport and the provision of a wide range of job opportunities to reduce out-commuting and the loss of economically active people.

Reflecting its role as the main service centre the Plan allocates 17 ha of employment land to be created in Alnwick in the period 2004-2021. It is important, mid way though the period, that the effectiveness and adequacy of that strategy is reviewed.

Policy also seeks to safeguard existing sites for employment use.

Tourism is recognised for its positive contribution to the economy accounting for some 13% of the former district’s economy. Tourism development such as hotels, health and fitness, restaurants and accommodation are generally directed to the main service centres, including Alnwick. This has the dual effect of protecting sensitive areas such as the coastal AONB, and facilitating sustainability benefits by reducing travel to facilities and supporting the town’s services and shops.

#### Northumberland County –Core Strategy – Issues and Options 2012

The above document, issued for consultation in May 2012 carries limited weight but indicates emerging policy direction at the County level.

With regard to economy the key points relate to the future role of Alnwick as a service centre, and how it will meet future needs in respect of economic development, including tourism.

The Core Strategy relies upon an Employment Land Review (ELR) undertaken in 2009 to inform future needs across the County. Within North Northumberland a potential new allocation of some 10 ha is likely to be required over and above existing employment land allocations and a reduction of 13 ha in Berwick. Overall it is proposed that around 42 ha of employment land is made available within the Northern Area of the County including Alnwick.

The ELR provides additional detail, and identifies the more specific requirement for Alnwick at around 10 ha of additional land in the plan period to 2030. A key issue for the Alnwick and Denwick Plan is to determine the adequacy of this supply, given developments which have taken place or been granted planning permission since the ELR was undertaken, amounting to around 5 ha.

The Core Strategy is intended to provide only an overall strategy for the County, and is not specific in relation to suitable locations for employment land in Alnwick. The ELR however notes the preferred location to be areas adjacent to existing industrial/business parks east of the A1 on the south side of the town.

With regard to rural diversification, this is supported in the Core Strategy through re-use of existing buildings, new buildings within and adjoining existing settlements and farm diversification.

### Tourism

The Core Strategy predicts high growth over the plan period. Pertinent to Alnwick:

Tourism development, both attractions and accommodation in permanent buildings should be encouraged, in the first instance, to be located within or adjacent to the county's large settlements or service centres.

For tourist accommodation proposals on the edge of a settlement, the Council should assess these based on the benefits that would be delivered given the pressing need for more bed spaces, and the effect on the viability and vitality of any affected settlement.

## **2 Objectives for the Neighbourhood Plan**

As a result of researching the issues the following have been identified as the objectives for the Plan

- to act as a main service centre to support the wider rural hinterland and economy
- to offer a range of employment opportunities to assist in retaining a young and vibrant population and to create wealth within the town
- to meet the needs of potential new investment and new and existing businesses within the town
- to assist and enable growth and diversification of the local economy
- to provide flexibility to meet potential changes in demand through the plan period
- to meet the above objectives in a sustainable and environmentally sensitive way
- to provide an integrated approach to economic development with other key topic areas of housing, retailing, infrastructure and education

## **3 Issues and Options**

### **3.1 Issue 1 What should be the level of economic growth?**

This issue goes to the heart of the role of the town as the main service centre in the area. Historically the town would have been similar in scale to other large market towns such as Hexham and Morpeth, but growth in Alnwick, particularly in the post war years has been slower, partly due to its location beyond the Tyneside commuter belt. In recent years there has been an increased level of activity, mainly driven by the tourism economy. Potentially the town could plan to encourage a higher level of growth with the objective of attracting new investment and employment. That would create greater opportunity to attract and retain young people and to retain a higher proportion of economically active people. Conversely a restriction on economic growth would limit the type and scale of new developments likely to be attracted to the town. For younger people, and a socially mobile population, reducing opportunities in employment, leisure, retailing and services could lead to a reduction in those groups, at a time when rural areas, including Alnwick, are following a national trend of an ageing population. Creating the optimum level of economic growth is therefore seen as beneficial in creating a socially balanced and economically prosperous community. It will also reduce the need for out-commuting for work and maximise opportunity for employment across the community and is sustainable in that respect. The plan will therefore need to respond to the needs and demands of business and how best to deliver diversity of employment in a way which is accessible to all residents, and respond to future needs from particular growth sectors, such as local food, retail and green industries. The plan should be flexible enough to adapt, for example to new business opportunities which could arise through an ageing population profile.

The key issue is whether the town should plan to constrain the level of economic growth, retain growth at historic levels or actively promote growth at a higher level. The direction of economic policy at a National and County level is to promote growth, and this view is also reflected in the initial public consultation responses to the Alnwick Plan.

The extent and choice of land to be allocated for economic development use for Alnwick is therefore likely to be within the range of an additional 10 to 15 ha in the period to 2030.

#### **The options for the plan are:**

- Restrain future economic growth at a low level, or
- Retain economic growth at around recent historic levels, or
- Promote greater economic growth, but at a sustainable level.

#### **Question 1**

**Should the Plan support greater economic growth than we have seen in recent times, but at a sustainable level?**

### **3.2 Issue 2 What should be the location of development?**

Undoubtedly one of Alnwick's key assets is the natural environment within which it sits. Indeed this is important not just in tourism, but in attracting people to live and invest in the town. Yet North Northumberland continues to struggle to attract new investment – it does not benefit from the level of commercial returns experienced in regional centres or the south of England, and much of the recent activity to the south of the town has required some public funding to assist development and the provision of new infrastructure.

Commercial and employment activity inevitably requires land which is relatively free from constraints to development. Land is therefore required in locations which are both relatively easy and cost effective to develop and attractive to employers. Visibility and accessibility are important to some users, high levels of services infrastructure such as electricity supply to others. This, along with the sensitivity of the landscape, limit the choice of locations for new employment areas in Alnwick.

Northumberland County Council has undertaken a landscape review which helps to guide development to less sensitive areas, for example, away from the Capability Brown historic landscapes to the north of the town. Other factors such as ownership, accessibility and physical factors provide more of a constraint to the west.

Therefore with regard to location to a large degree the availability of infrastructure and the sensitivity of landscapes limit the options of appropriate land allocations for employment use to areas on the south side of the town:

**The options for the plan are:**

- Provide land principally east of the A1 near to existing employment sites, and / or
- Provide land south of the town at Greensfield and a range of other locations.

**Question 2**

**Should the Plan provide employment land principally east of the A1 near to existing employment sites such as the Lionheart Estate or provide employment land south of the town at greensfield?**

**3.3 Issue 3 What should be the approach on existing employment sites?**

Most employment sites, particularly more recent sites have been purposefully designed with traditional employment in mind. However the nature of employment has greatly diversified and the distinction between different employment sectors is often less distinct. There are fewer straight manufacturing uses and many businesses require sales or customer interface and showrooms. So one challenge facing some existing employment areas is how they adapt to changing demands and trends, and the need to look not just to present, but future needs.

Generally, it is assumed that existing employment sites will remain as employment sites in the plan period. However the quality of employment sites varies and there is a need to encourage new investment to maintain their long term future, requiring greater flexibility and adaptability.

**The options for the plan are:**

- Seek to retain existing employment sites for Business B1, B2 and B8 or
- Allow greater diversification of uses, providing they lead to the retention /creation of employment and reinvestment in the fabric and infrastructure of these areas.

**Question 3**

**Should the Plan seek to retain existing employment sites for office, industrial, and storage uses or allow these sites to have wider uses, providing they lead to the retention /creation of employment and investment in the fabric and infrastructure of these areas?**

South Road provides a key artery between the town centre and the Willowburn centre and major employment sites east of the A1. As the south of the town has expanded economically, the importance of the road has increased, and it is necessary to ensure good connectivity between the two centres. One way of achieving this is to promote improvements to public transport, pavements and cycleways as well as ensuring free flow of traffic. There are also opportunities to attract new investment to sites along South Road some of which are already commercial in nature. Additional employment and commercial activity may be one way to strengthen the links between the town centre and the Willowburn area which encourages greater interaction and shared trips, and this could facilitate environmental, visual and transport improvements.

**An option for the plan is:**

- Identify South Road as an economic growth corridor to attract new commercial development and facilitate improved linkages and activity between the town centre and Willowburn

**Question 4**

**Should South Road be identified as an area for new commercial development with improved linkages between the town centre and Willowburn?**

**3.4 Issue 4 What role should the town centre play in the economy?**

Alnwick Town Centre provides the focus for service, retail, catering and leisure employment. The centre's diverse mix of traditional and modern businesses is critical to maintaining distinctiveness and viability. It is important that the town centre is able, where possible to continue to attract new businesses, not just in retailing. However the capacity for the centre

to provide for new employment opportunities is relatively limited, due to the historic layout of the town, the lack of availability of larger sites and buildings and issues associated with transport and car parking. Past policies have sought to protect the town centre from non-retail uses but consideration could be given to encouraging a wider range of economic and employment uses within the town centre provided they attract customer footfall to the centre. This could have benefits such as stimulating a more vibrant evening economy or new services.

**The options for the plan are:**

- Identify areas of the town centre which are zoned or acceptable for employment uses
- Place restrictions on the use of existing buildings to retail in the centre
- Plan more generally for a wider range of commercial and businesses uses in the centre.

Given the town centre's physical constraints to expansion, and the importance of the centre to the town's economy it is important to identify ways in which it will compete to attract new investment in the future. This competition will arise primarily from competing town centres, but also from out of centre developments which the town is likely to attract in the plan period. Maintaining a vibrant and healthy centre can be assisted through both land use policies, and encouraging physical and social changes to the environment:

**The options for the plan are:**

- promote a comprehensive range of town centre changes to improve streetscape, introduce pedestrianised areas and increase parking provision
- promote a change to the use and appearance of the market place
- encourage a wider evening economy and longer retail trading such as at weekends

**Questions**

NB Questions on the town centre are in the Town Centre and Retail Topic Paper

**3.5 Issue 5 What role should tourism play in the economy?**

The thrust of National and County policy is to encourage tourism. The issue is particularly relevant for Alnwick as a key tourist destination in North Northumberland, and it is likely that demands for tourism will continue to grow within the town. However it is equally important that tourism is not promoted to an extent that has negative effects due to over-reliance on one sector for economic growth, or that it drives out other sectors which contribute to the vitality of Alnwick as a market town and service sector. A balance is therefore likely to be needed which protects the most sensitive environments, but allows growth within and adjacent to the town, in line with emerging Core Strategy policy. Initiatives to extend the

length of the tourism season could also be promoted with little environmental or land use impact upon the town.

Bearing in mind the importance of tourism to the future wellbeing of the town, one question for the Plan is therefore whether support for growth in the tourism sector should be maintained in line with National and County policy.

The other issue is whether it should seek to specifically provide new sites for tourism development (potential allocations would exclude the more sensitive locations, such as to the north of the town), or alternatively use a criteria based policy approach which would allow development subject to certain tests, such as environmental impact and effects upon the town centre.

**The options for the plan are:**

- Continue support for tourism as set out in the Alnwick Local Development Framework
- Continue to support and make provision for additional or accelerated growth of the tourism sector

and

- Allocate specific land around Alnwick for tourism development, or
- Adopt a criteria based approach to tourism development.

**Question**

NB Questions on Tourism are in the Tourism Topic Paper

**3.6 Issue 6 How can the plan specifically help to facilitate the employment of young people?**

The problem of attracting and retaining young people in Alnwick is common to other rural areas. Addressing this requires action across a number of areas including providing not only employment, but also training and apprenticeship opportunities, and the range of housing, social, leisure and service facilities which young people aspire to have access to. Alnwick is better placed than many centres to do this, but has limited further education or dedicated training facilities beyond school leaving age. Although the plan can support this in a wider sense, it is not able to provide a funding mechanism to deliver for example youth training or apprenticeship schemes. The plan could encourage the use of local labour and contractors, but only to a limited degree as it is not the role of the planning system to unduly influence the labour market. In a wider context the plan may wish to consider supporting projects which are particularly attractive and beneficial to younger people.

**The options for the plan are:**

- Have a positive policy which supports development which is beneficial to retaining and attracting young people
- Encourage the use of local labour and training schemes where appropriate within new developments
- Encourage the provision of facilities for further education, training and apprenticeships

#### **Question 5**

**Should the Plan have a positive policy of supporting development which provides jobs for young people and encourage the use of local labour and training schemes within new developments and encourage the provision of facilities for further education, training and apprenticeships?**

#### **Evidence Base**

National Planning Policy Framework  
Alnwick Local Development Framework Core Strategy  
NCC Local Development Framework Core Strategy Issues & Options  
Northumberland Economic Strategy  
Northumberland Employment Land Review 2009  
Northumbrian Tourism Strategy 2010-2015  
Alnwick Neighbourhood Plan Consultation Questionnaire 2012.