

Alnwick Town Centre Studies – Retailing & Leisure

Overview

Evidence from the Northumberland Town Centres study (February 2011) and the Alnwick Town Centre Health Check (2008) both suggest that Alnwick Town Centre is relatively well served provided for in terms of retail and leisure facilities.

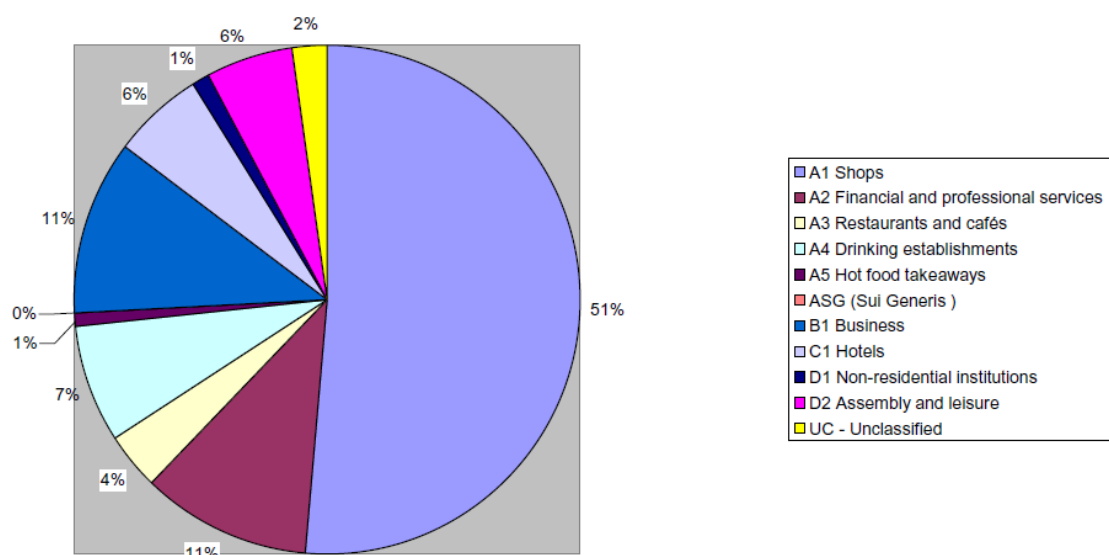
“..This study confirms that the centre of Alnwick is particularly vital and viable. The vacancy rate within the centre is currently well below the national average and there is a strong mix of convenience and comparison goods retailers albeit focussed more on the independent sector rather than major national multiples found in higher order centres.

Similar to Berwick-upon-Tweed, Alnwick also has a strong leisure offer (restaurants, cafés, bars and pubs) which seek to service both the needs of the local community and tourists who frequently visit the centre and surrounding area.” [Town Centre Study]

Approx 50% of the available floorspace is for retail. In 2008 the vacancy rate was 5%. An updated count in May 2012 gave a vacancy rate of 6% - of which approx 3% was represented by the new developments at Macarthy & Stone & Gentoo. There are only 6 charity shops (out of approx 180 shopfront units) in the centre of town.

Anecdotal evidence from the Alnwick Chamber of Trade suggests that there are a number of town centre businesses still trading but for up for sale/expected to close.

Floorspace use by Class – 2008 Health Check



Range & Diversity

“The range and diversity of the retail offer directly influences the appeal of a town centre to visitors and shoppers. Convenience goods are consumer goods purchased on a regular basis, including food, groceries toiletries and cleaning materials. Comparison goods are durable goods such as clothing, household goods, furniture, DIY and electrical goods.

In Alnwick town centre, the majority of businesses are comparison retail (54 independent, 21 multiple chain). The category which has the 2nd highest amount of businesses is leisure services: 33 of which are independent, and 11 multiple chain. There are 15 convenience retail premises and 23 retail service in total.” [2008 Health Check]

NB. The mix will have changed since 2008 with the opening of LIDL, Wilkinson, Costa and TwentyOne.

Market Share & Leakage

The studies referenced suggest that consumers in the Alnwick catchment area spend approx 51% their retail £££'s with local businesses (including 'out of centre' retail such as Willowburn). Alnwick maintains a similar market share in terms of health & fitness and pubs & bars, but enjoys a lower market share in terms of restaurants, cinemas and other leisure activities (bingo, bowling).

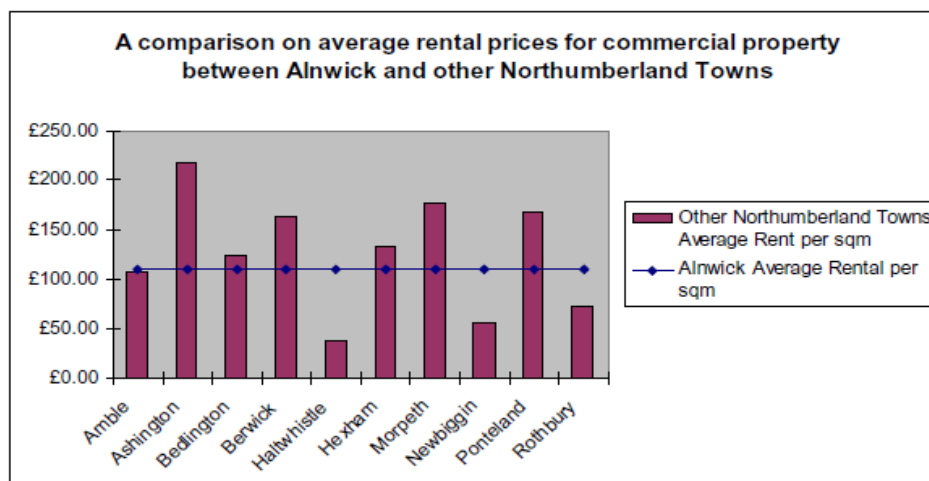
The annual value of that local retail spending is estimated at approx £52.5m (2010 prices). This places Alnwick 7th in terms of retail turnover in Northumberland behind Cramlington, Ashington, Blyth, Hexham, Morpeth and Berwick-upon-Tweed.

Being a historic market town, the scope of increasing retail capacity within the town centre is very limited. The market share data cited suggests that many retail outlets in Alnwick are outperforming the norm in terms of sales to sq ft. Over time expected growth in demand points to the need for modest additions to capacity both in terms of convenience and comparative retail.

The studies, which are based on household surveys, do not take into account seasonal tourist spending or the growing effect of internet sales.

Comparative Rents

The table below (although dated) suggests that average rents reflect the retail potential of the town.



Source: Northumberland Property Database, December 2007

Footfall

Footfall around the town centre is variable according to weather and the tourism season. It averages some 4,000 - 4,500 approx. on a normal weekday, rising to 5,000 – 5,500 for some week-day markets and 8,000 – 8,500 on a Saturday. Festivals, such as the Music and Food Festivals, can boost footfall in the town by more than 50%.

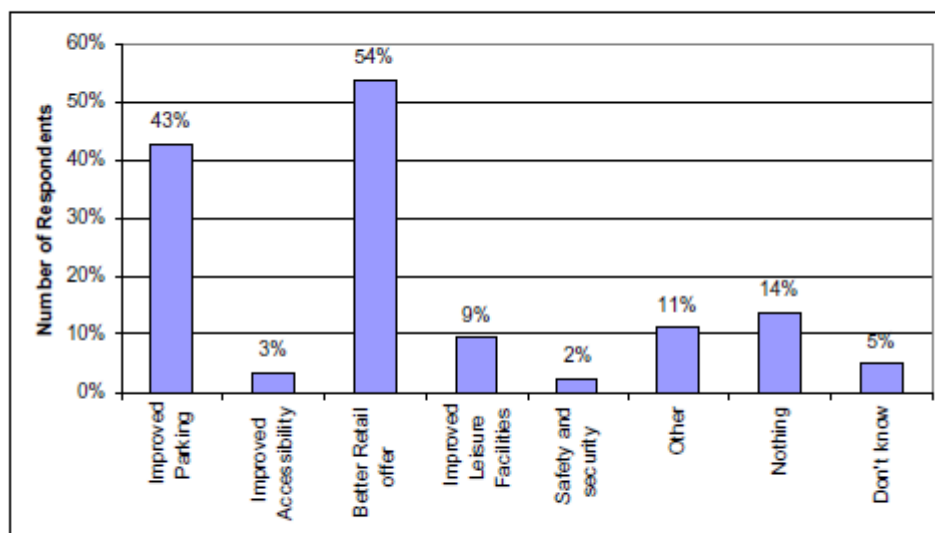
Comparative statistics from Alnwick Markets point to a slight decline in town centre footfall since 2009, coinciding with the development of the Willowburn retail park.

[These estimates are based upon footfall counts by NCC, Alnwick Markets and the Alnwick Food Festival]

Perceptions

Despite the comparative analysis above, and the recognition given to Alnwick town through the Google Earth and BBC Countryfile Magazine awards consumers, when asked, would like to see a greater variety of retail shops in the town centre as well as better parking facilities.

Figure 52: How would you make this town centre better?
(Excludes 'don't know' responses unless otherwise specified)



Source: Northumberland Infonet Shopper Questionnaires, June 2008

Base: 295 respondents

Summary Findings from Northumberland Town Centres Study (2011)

Alnwick Town Centre

The research undertaken by Infonet informing this study confirms that the centre of Alnwick is particularly vital and viable. The vacancy rate within the centre is currently well below the national average and there is a strong mix of convenience and comparison goods retailers albeit focussed more on the independent sector rather than major national multiples found in higher order centres.

Similar to Berwick-upon-Tweed, Alnwick also has a strong leisure offer (restaurants, cafés, bars and pubs) which seek to service both the needs of the local community and tourists who frequently visit the centre and surrounding area.

Similar to other historic market towns within Northumberland, Alnwick's primary shopping area is dominated by its historic core and important conservation area. As a result, the opportunities for comprehensive retail and leisure development are particularly limited. Therefore, it will continually prove difficult to accommodate large scale retail developments within the centre which leads to the provision of facilities beyond the PSA and town centre boundary once the sequential approach has been applied. A recent example of this is the new Sainsbury's store in Alnwick which could clearly not be accommodated within the town centre.

However, this does not rule out the potential for any future retail and leisure development within the town centre over the plan period.

Clearly, the findings of this study appear to suggest that there will be some modest need for additional convenience and comparison goods retail facilities in the medium to long-term (i.e. by 2019). As the current primary shopping area is effectively focussed on three streets including Bondgate Within, Market Street, and Fenkle Street, the opportunities for further development within the Primary Shopping Area are clearly constrained. Furthermore, the low vacancy rate within the town centre means that any opportunity for the redevelopment of groups of vacant properties is also limited in the short to medium-term. However, there are a number of sites to the west of the town centre primarily focussed on Lagny Street which might have some potential for future redevelopment. This may also include the current bus station off Clayport Street and land including and to the rear of the Telephone Exchange off Fenkle Street. Beyond this, it is difficult to see how further redevelopment opportunities could be accommodated within the historic core without removing or significantly altering current buildings fronting onto the primary shopping streets.

As a result, whilst there may be opportunities for further incremental development over time within Alnwick, we do not believe that it would be sensible to plan for major retail expansion in and around Alnwick, as any significant development would have to occur in an out-of-centre location which could prove damaging to the future vitality and viability of the town centre as a whole.

The Practice Guidance accompanying PPS4 makes it quite clear that in historic centres, it is often more appropriate to adopt a cautious strategy to new retail and leisure development so as to ensure that the vitality and viability of the established historic core is not undermined by large scale retail and leisure developments in an out-of-centre location.