

ALNWICK AND DENWICK NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN

Economy and Employment

1. Context

1.1 Introduction

This section considers 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 needs to meet both its own needs and that of a wider rural hinterland which it serves. The plan also considers how existing employment assets and the town centre might contribute towards future economic prosperity. Planning for sustainable growth in Alnwick is critical to wider socio-economic objectives such as retaining an active working population, retaining young people and attracting new investment to the town.

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

- The importance of supporting growth in the town generally
- The need particularly to provide more employment opportunity for young people, including graduates and to counter an imbalanced ageing population
- The need to support new and existing businesses and facilitate entrepreneurship
- 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
- The potential to bring back underused buildings in the town into economic use
- The wish to see continued support for 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. Like in many service centres, modern requirements for employment land now 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 also been an important component of recent economic and employment growth and this is likely to continue in the future. The plan considers 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"

Of particular relevance to Alnwick, the plan 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."

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 as "a main focus for new development in the district".

The Plan recognises important links with education, communications, the availability of housing to attract an active workforce and the provision of a wide range of job opportunities to reduce out-commuting and the loss of economically active people, and allocates land for employment development in the period 2004-21. It is important, mid-way through the period that the plan reviews the effectiveness and adequacy of that strategy.

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 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 new land releases are likely to be required and, 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 identifies the more specific requirement for Alnwick at around 10 ha of additional land in the plan period to 2030. The Alnwick and Denwick Plan has reviewed 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 ELR also notes the preferred location to be areas adjacent to existing industrial/business parks east of the A1 on the south side of the town.

Tourism

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

Tourism development, both attractions and accommodation 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.

In summary there is support for economic growth through the existing Alnwick LDF, and emerging NCC LDF. However the guidance published by Government in the 2013 NPPF provides a much clearer economic growth agenda to which Alnwick as a main service centre must respond. The plan should therefore create conditions to enable strong economic growth in the future.

2 Objectives for the Neighbourhood Plan

The following have been identified as the objectives for Alnwick and 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 Objectives

The level of economic development

Historically Alnwick 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. The plan to 2030 is 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. 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 also responds to the needs of business and delivery of diversity of employment in a way which is accessible to all residents and is also intended to be flexible enough to adapt, for example to new business opportunities which could arise through an ageing population profile.

The direction of economic policy at a National and County level is to promote growth, and this view is also reflected in the public consultation responses to the Alnwick Plan. The extent and choice of land to be allocated for economic development use for Alnwick is therefore proposed to provide an additional 15 ha in the period to 2030.

The overall objective is to:

- Promote strong economic growth, at a sustainable level.

Policy E1

Proposals which support provision of job opportunities and the economic growth of Alnwick as a major service centre will be supported.

3.2 The location of economic development

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 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, limits 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, the options of appropriate land allocations for employment use are limited to areas on the south side of the town:

The objective is therefore to:

- Provide suitable land principally near to the A1 near to existing employment sites, on the south side of the town

Policy E2

Around 15 ha of land to the east of the A1 at Cawledge and Lionheart Business Parks will be provided to meet employment needs in the period to 2030.

3.3 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: there are fewer manufacturing uses and many businesses require sales or customer interface and showrooms. 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 in employment use 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 objective of the plan is therefore to:

- Allow greater diversification of uses, providing they lead to the retention /creation of employment and reinvestment in the fabric and infrastructure of these areas.

Policy E3

Proposals for the re-use or redevelopment of existing industrial sites will be supported provided that they contribute to the creation and retention of employment and/or re-investment in the built fabric and infrastructure of these areas. Housing (C3) and shopping (A1) will not be permitted.

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 would to strengthen the links between the town centre and the Willowburn area encouraging greater interaction and shared trips.

The objective is therefore to:

- Stimulate economic activity on South Road to attract new commercial development and facilitate improved linkages and activity between the town centre and Willowburn

Policy E4

Development which provides new employment opportunities, commercial and business development along South Road will be supported.

3.4 The role of the town centre in the economy

Alnwick Town Centre provides the focus for service, retail, catering and leisure employment, and its 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 development 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 needs to be given to encouraging a wider range of economic and employment uses within the town centre. This would have benefits in stimulating a more vibrant economy and new services.

The objectives for the plan are to:

- Identify areas of the town centre which are zoned or acceptable for employment uses
- Plan more generally for a wider range of commercial and businesses uses in the centre.
- Strengthen the core shopping area for retail use

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 other 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 objectives for the plan are to:

- 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

3.5 Tourism in the local economy

The thrust of National and County policy is to encourage tourism, and this is 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 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 be promoted with little environmental or land use impact upon the town, and increased tourism will generally assist in supporting town centre shops and services.

However the type of tourism offer that may materialize is difficult to predict. Rather than allocating specific sites for tourism use, the plan therefore takes a positive approach to tourism development and adopts a criteria based policy which would allow tourism development subject to certain tests, such as environmental impact or effects upon the town centre.

The objectives for the plan are to:

- Continue to support Alnwick as a centre for tourism development
- and
- Adopt a criteria based approach to tourism development.

Policy E5

New tourism development in or adjacent to the town will be supported subject to consideration of the following criteria:

- i) Impact upon the natural and historic environment
- ii) Impact upon the vitality of the town centre
- iii) Impact upon the social and physical infrastructure of the town

3.6 Planning 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 should support projects which are particularly attractive and beneficial to younger people.

The objectives for the plan are to:

- Plan positively for 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

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.
