

# Alnwick and Denwick Neighbourhood Plan

## Town Centre & Retail - Issues and Options

### 1. Context

#### 1.1 Introduction

The purpose of this section is to consider issues affecting the current and future provision of retail space in Alnwick, and an enabling environment for a prosperous market town. Alnwick shops and businesses serve the residents of the town and the surrounding district and tourists, both day visitors and holiday makers staying one or more nights.

The town has effectively two retail zones, the historic Town Centre (Bondgate, Market Street, Narrowgate, Fenkle Street and the shops around the Bus Station), and out of town centre retail at Willowburn and the Lionheart Industrial Estate, the latter being divided by the line of the A1 – see map in Appendix 1.

The retail provision of the town affects and is affected by local employment, transport (especially walking, parking and public transport), tourism and heritage.

#### 1.2 Present Context

A summary of findings from recent retail studies is included as Appendix 2 to this paper.

These studies suggest that despite a challenging external environment

- retailing in Alnwick is relatively vibrant and with a lower proportion of voids than many other centres
- the retail mix in the Town Centre is fair with a good proportion of independent retailers
- Alnwick shops are estimated to benefit from just over 50% of the retail spend of local residents and those in the surrounding district
- commercial rents reflect approximately Alnwick's 7th position (by value of retail spend) amongst the market towns of Northumberland

In 2011 Alnwick Town Centre was recognised in awards from Google Earth and BBC Countryfile Magazine.

The Northumberland County Council Town Centres Study (2011) suggests a need for some increased capacity both in terms of convenience and comparison and retail space<sup>1</sup>. Given the constraints upon space there is likely to be only limited scope to accommodate such additional

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<sup>1</sup> 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

capacity within Alnwick's historic Town Centre. It would need to be accommodated either out of town to the South or as part of linear development along the line of South Road.

### 1.3 Policy Context

#### National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)

Paragraphs 23 – 27 of the NPPF address the planning context for Town Centres. This section includes the following guidance:

*“In drawing up Local Plans, local planning authorities should:*

- *recognise town centres as the heart of their communities and pursue policies to support their viability and vitality.....*
- *promote competitive town centres that provide customer choice and a diverse retail offer and which reflect the individuality of town centres;*
- *retain and enhance existing markets... ..*
- *allocate a range of suitable sites to meet the scale and type of retail, leisure, commercial, office, tourism, cultural, community and residential development needed in town centres.....”*

#### Alnwick District Council Local Development Framework [LDF]

The LDF, adopted in 2007, does not make explicit reference to a Town Centre and retail strategy. However, it does set the LDF in the context of NCC's Community Strategy Objectives which include:

*“[to] encourage the regeneration of and enhance the role, vitality and viability of the district's market towns as key service centres”*

and adopts as one of its Community Strategy Key Goals:

*“To encourage and support sustainable business and tourism development that will enhance economic growth and improve employment prospects for all”*

#### Northumberland County Council – Local Development Framework – Core Strategy - Issues & Options Consultation (NCC I & O)

The NCC I & O consultation is now closed. In relation to the strategy for town centres and retailing, the following key issues were proposed:

- *“The hierarchy of centres;*
- *The need for new shopping floorspace;*
- *How centres can retain their comparison shopping role as regional centres grow;*
- *Town centre boundaries;*
- *Large scale leisure provision;*
- *How local leisure uses can make centres vibrant;*
- *Office development in relation to town centres”*

Alnwick is identified alongside Berwick and one of the key town centres serving the North of the county, and one of 12 'Tier 1' centres.

In terms future spatial planning, the NCC I & O says of Alnwick:

*“Significant additions<sup>2</sup> on both the convenience and comparison side will be needed to retain market share but physical capacity is restricted for large format stores in or near the centre, meaning that growth will need careful planning. The centre has a good level of independent shops but would benefit from improvements in quality.”*

## 2. Objectives for the Plan

The following are proposed as the Town Centre & Retail objectives for the Plan

- to maintain the distinctive character of the Town Centre with a good/improving retail mix and a high proportion of independent retailers
- to sustain an enabling environment for retail which supports the promotion of the town as a leisure and tourist destination, preserves and enhances the heritage values of the town and makes best use of its historic assets including the Market Place
- to sustain and increase Alnwick's share of the retail spend of local residents and those living and doing business in the district (currently measured at 51%) both by tackling voids within the Town Centre and by concentrating the development of 'out of town centre' on trade outlets such as building and constructions supplies, farm and livestock supplies, retail car sales, etc.
- to pursue the above objectives in a way which supports the Plan's aspirations in respect of employment, transport, tourism and heritage.

## 3. Issues and Options

The following list of issues derives from

- mapping issues raised in the public questionnaire completed earlier this year and in other reports and studies (see Appendix 3)
- consultations with stakeholders at meetings on 23rd and 24th July
- desk research and discussions

### 3.1 The Mix of Town Centre Uses

#### 3.1.1 The Issue

To meet the needs of local residents and visitors to the town, Alnwick must offer good mix of retail

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<sup>2</sup> The conclusion that “significant additions...will be needed” appears to be a stronger finding than the Town Centres Study .

including both convenience and comparison shops, cafe and bars, leisure and arts, and service providers (hairdressers, personal finance etc).

### 3.1.2 Options

#### Option 1a

Alnwick should draw up a Retail Development Master Plan to provide a template for and to control retail development within the Town Centre, and to control the development outlets out of the town centre.

#### Pro's

- ✓ Such a Plan would help to ensure that the cross cutting issues between the need for retail development and transport, tourism and heritage are properly recognised
- ✓ The Plan could help to stimulate a pro-active strategy for tackling voids and generally for improving the quality and appearance of retail space within the Town Centre
- ✓ The Plan would offer an appropriate response to those who are concerned that Alnwick is failing to compete with other centres such as Morpeth
- ✓ The Plan would provide a vehicle for the views and concerns of the Alnwick Chamber of Trade and others
- ✓ The Plan would support any implementation of the 'Portas' recommendations in the town
- ✓ The Plan would give guidance to landlords and to prospective retailers about the needs and aspirations of the town
- ✓ The Plan would provide appropriate safeguards for the viability of the historic Town Centre whilst allowing some development out of town centre

#### Con's

- ✗ The Plan would need to be funded and to be kept up to date
- ✗ Would the Town Council have the capacity to take this on?
- ✗ Is it within the powers of the Town Council to commission such a Plan?
- ✗ How easy will it prove to develop a Plan acceptable to the different interest groups affected – especially in retail to the guidelines for development out of town centre?
- ✗ What 'authority' would the Plan have? Can it be over-ridden against the wishes of the community?
- ✗ Given that the retail space in the Town Centre is *de facto* constrained by the size and character of the different units and planning/listed building constraints, is there a need for such a Plan?

#### Option 1b

The Retail Development Master Plan should establish a desired target for the ratio between retail shops and other commercial uses for premises in the Town Centre.

## Pro's

- ✓ Such guidance would ensure a desirable mix of retail offerings
- ✓ It would help to signal the most appropriate uses for any voids
- ✓ It would provide a vehicle for the views and concerns of the Alnwick Chamber of Trade and other interested stakeholders
- ✓ It would give guidance to landlords and to prospective retailers about the needs and aspirations of the town
- ✓ Such a Plan would also allow proper consideration for provision of housing in/near to the Town Centre

## Con's

- ✗ The guidance would need to be reviewed and to be kept up to date in the light of perceived need
- ✗ Would such guidance be binding and enforceable?
- ✗ Given that the retail space in the Town Centre is *de facto* constrained by the size and character of the different units and planning/listed building constraints, is there a need for such a target ratio?
- ✗ Would such a Plan unreasonably restrict the development for leisure, tourism and specialist retail?
- ✗ Would such a Plan tend to encourage more commercial development at the expense of affordable housing provision?

### 3.1.3 Question

- **What is your opinion about the present mix of shops, services and leisure facilities serving Alnwick?**

## 3.2 The Retail Character

### 3.2.1 The Issue

The retail character of Alnwick is in part a product of a continued high proportion of independent retailers. This is seen as a defining and distinctive advantage. But others have cited competition from Morpeth, and its Sanderson Arcade, as a example of good practice to be followed.

### 3.2.2 Options

#### Option 2a

Alnwick should develop policies to support and nurture its independent retailers.

## Pro's

- ✓ It is generally recognised that independent retailers add to the distinctive character of the Town Centre, and are appreciated by visitors

- ✓ Alnwick has received awards for the character of the Town Centre
- ✓ The nature of the majority of the retail sites in the Town Centre makes them unsuitable for high street chains
- ✓ The current retail mix in the Town Centre is generally recognised as about right
- ✓ Maximise opportunities for promoting goods with local provenance
- ✓ Such policies would be in line with the Portas recommendations
- ✓ Without support there is a risk that a number of these retailers will fail/close their businesses
- ✓ Can independent retailers be strengthened by either a 'retail academy' and/or (where appropriate) e-trading?

#### Con's

- ✗ The lack of 'big names' in the Town Centre has contributed to a perceived loss of market share to other centres (eg Morpeth)
- ✗ The quality of independent retail and their shop fronts is variable
- ✗ Many of the independent retailers have limited opening hours (eg not Sundays)
- ✗ Independent retailers are independent – they are unlikely to be significantly moved/affected by such action
- ✗ This role is the job of the Alnwick Chamber of Trade

#### Option 2b

Alnwick needs more prestige high street chains to attract/retain shoppers in the town and cannot rely on independent retail alone. Alnwick should have a policy of courting and attracting some other 'big' names, especially in 'comparison retail'

#### Pro's

- ✓ Big names bring investment, professionalism and raise the 'tone' of a high street
- ✓ Big names attract repeat visits
- ✓ Big names are more likely to open on Sundays
- ✓ Some survey respondents cited this a weakness in Alnwick's offering
- ✓ Some store units can be adapted to accommodate larger retailers

#### Con's

- ✗ Big names don't put as much back into the local economy (*a majority but not unanimous opinion*)
- ✗ We don't want to become a 'clone' town
- ✗ Retail chains have been quick to close / withdraw during the recession. Independents may have more staying power
- ✗ The wrong sort of competition could affect the viability of local independent businesses

### 3.2.3 Questions

- Do you agree Alnwick's independent retail shops are part of the town's distinctive character, and the plan should actively encourage the independent retail sector?
- Do you agree there is not enough choice of shops. Alnwick needs more retail shops offering clothing, electrical goods, home interiors, etc?
- Do you agree a wider range of businesses which will develop the evening economy of the town centre should be encouraged?

## 3.3 Building on the town centre's heritage character

### 3.3.1 The Issue

Alnwick has a compact and attractive town centre with many distinctive heritage features. The Plan needs to offer solutions to blend an appealing retail offering with the town's heritage character.

### 3.3.2 Options

#### Option 3a

Alnwick needs an integrated plan for the spatial development of the Market Place, the Northumberland Hall, and the historic Town Centre both to optimise heritage value of the Centre and to attract/retain shoppers and visitors

#### Pro's

- ✓ The Northumberland Hall and the Market Place are at the heart of the town, and yet neither is exploited to its full potential and the retail offering around the Market Square is at best mixed
- ✓ The Northumberland Hall is in need of a development plan for its future use
- ✓ Such a plan would support the implementation of any Portas recommendations<sup>3</sup>
- ✓ Better use of the Market Place featured quite strongly in public consultations and feedback
- ✓ Different ideas and options have been proposed through work led by the former Alnwick Community Development Trust. These still lie on the table.

#### Con's

- ✗ Previous consultations have failed to reach a consensus or an obvious economically viable solution
- ✗ Independent landlords influence the retail offering around the Market Place
- ✗ There are already plans to address parking in the Market Place (one of the presenting options)
- ✗ A development plan for the Northumberland Hall is likely to require major financial investment

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<sup>3</sup> In December 2011 Mary Portas published a report and recommendations following an independent review into the state of our high streets and town centres commissioned by government – see <http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/business-sectors/docs/p/11-1434-portas-review-future-of-high-streets.pdf>

### Option 3b

The retail and spatial plan for Alnwick should include proposals for partial pedestrianisation of the Town Centre

#### Pro's

- ✓ Other market towns and town centres have demonstrated that pedestrianisation can attract shoppers and encourage retail vibrancy
- ✓ The Town Centre of Alnwick is quite compact
- ✓ Some voices (including in the questionnaire feedback) favour this option
- ✓ Removing vehicles from parts of the historic Town Centre would enhance appreciation of its character
- ✓ Recent Festivals (eg the Festival of Alnwick) have demonstrated that it is possible to close parts of the Town Centre to traffic without either a parking crisis or gridlock

#### Con's

- ✗ Retailers are concerned that loss of Town Centre access and parking would lead to a loss of local trade
- ✗ The majority of those attending the stakeholder meetings were against a pedestrianisation plan
- ✗ Parking and disabled access would need to be addressed
- ✗ Access for deliveries would need to be accommodated
- ✗ The parking needs of those living in the centre of town would need to be accommodated
- ✗ The needs of the town in summer (tourist season) and winter vary
- ✗ A proportion of local residents still want vehicular access to the centre of town

### Option 3c

The retail and spatial plan for Alnwick should address poor disabled access around the Town Centre.

#### Pro's

- ✓ The cobbles and narrow pavements make the Town Centre very difficult to navigate for wheelchair users and buggies
- ✓ Alnwick has an age-ing demographic
- ✓ The Experian/Association of Town Centre Management report (Appendix 4) recognises the need for high street to adapt to a changing demographic

#### Con's



- ✗ The built environment presents a number of hazards and obstacles which not easily be overcome
- ✗ Heritage considerations may constrain some planned improvements
- ✗ The cobbles are part of Alnwick's character
- ✗ Who will bear the cost of improvements?

### 3.3.3 Questions

- **It has been agreed to implement a restricted parking zone in the market place to provide 11 short stay car parking spaces, a disabled parking space and 3 loading/unloading bays. The car parking spaces will not be available on days when markets and events are taking place. What are your views?**
- **Should Alnwick give improved priority to pedestrians within the town centre in terms of increased pavement space, improved surfaces, better street signage, etc.?**

## 3.4 Developing Retail Floorspace

### 3.4.1 The Issue

Retail studies suggest that Alnwick will need some expansion of retail space (especially comparison retail/white goods) in years to come. Some expansion may also help Alnwick to maintain/increase its share of spending from local residents and businesses and tourists.

### 3.4.2 Options

#### Option 4a

The Plan should encourage some further out of town centre outlets, both trade outlets and some retail where there is perceived to be insufficient provision.

Pro's

- ✓ The Northumberland County Council town centre study suggests a need for some expansion of retail space
- ✓ As more housing is created on the South side of the town so the natural centre for convenience shopping for some residents is no longer the historic town centre but the Willowburn estate
- ✓ There is scope for more outlets serving local trades and providing business services.
- ✓ A Plan which identifies scope for limited retail expansion may attract the attention of retail chains not yet represented in Alnwick
- ✓ A greater choice of comparison retail may retain the spending of local residents and attract more shoppers from around the district
- ✓ There is some potential logic to linking Town Centre shops and out of town centre outlets along the line of South Road
- ✓ New retail outlets have the potential to create new jobs in the town

## Con's

- ✗ Out of town centre development has the potential to harm Town Centre trade.
- ✗ The Alnwick Chamber of Trade is strongly opposed to further retail development beyond the Town Centre and voiced its concerns at the stakeholder meeting on 24th July
- ✗ Out of town centre shopping risks making people more car dependent unless linked to a public transport solution
- ✗ Will the competing plans of other market towns simply lead to an 'arms race' to attract more out of town retail?
- ✗ Jobs created may prove only to be jobs displaced from Town Centre – ie no net gain
- ✗ South Road already carries quite a heavy traffic load

## Option 4b

The Plan should seek to link the two retail 'hubs' of Alnwick both in the marketing and promotion of the town, and in its signage, parking and transport provision.

## Pro's

- ✓ The retail developments at Willowburn & Lionheart are already a reality
- ✓ Willowburn shops are closer to residents on the South side of the town
- ✓ Any significant new space for retail development will have to be found outside the Town Centre
- ✓ The new High School site, when developed, will affect the character and pattern of convenience retail
- ✓ New retail activity creates new employment and training opportunities for young people
- ✓ A well thought-out retail corridor linking the Town Centre and out of town centre shops could support trading on both sites
- ✓ A stronger retail offering will maintain/strengthen Alnwick market share of retail spending in the district
- ✓ A strong and well-planned retail offering will enhance Alnwick as a holiday destination

## Con's

- ✗ A strong and well-served retail centre adjacent to the A1 may discourage potential shoppers from coming into town
- ✗ The Alnwick Chamber of Trade is strongly opposed to further retail development beyond the Town Centre
- ✗ Respondents at the stakeholder meetings were strongly opposed to any plans which risked detracting from the viability of the Town Centre
- ✗ Space is limited for development both adjacent to the A1 and along South Road
- ✗ South Road already carries quite a heavy traffic load
- ✗ Out of town centre shopping risks making people more car dependent unless linked a public transport solution

#### Option 4c

The Plan should not focus upon out of town centre development but rather effective marketing and promotion of the Town Centre, including attention to signage, parking, 'interpretation' and access

##### Pro's

- ✓ Stronger branding and marketing of the Town Centre was a key issue debated at the stakeholder forums
- ✓ Such a proposal would follow the recommendations of the Portas Review
- ✓ The Civic Society's review of street furniture and signage made a number of suggestions for improved interpretation
- ✓ The Town Centre deserves such a focus

##### Con's

- ✗ Failure to include out of town centre development in such a Plan is to deny a reality which already exists
- ✗ Tourists and visitors will want guidance/direction for the whole Alnwick experience
- ✗ The new High School site ought to be included within any Plan
- ✗ If the Plan does not include out of town centre development, there is the risk that economic development opportunities will be lost

#### Option 4d

As part of a Plan for future retail provision consideration should be given to the creating a retail service area adjacent to the A1 - eg a 'House of Bruar' - to attract more business from passing motorists.

##### Pro's

- ✓ There is no service station of any significance quality between Washington and Berwick
- ✓ Outlet venues of this type can be popular and attract 'stop-over' visitors
- ✓ Such a development would create more local jobs
- ✓ There is land which may be suitable for such a development and some services already established
- ✓ The market for such 'stop-over' trade is arguably different from the trade which will be attracted to the centre of Alnwick

##### Con's

- ✗ A strong and well-served retail centre adjacent to the A1 may discourage potential shoppers from coming into town
- ✗ The Plan should be promoting the Town Centre as the destination – not out of town
- ✗ There is a risk of further leakage of local trade from the Town Centre to the outlets in the service area

- ✗ This would create further pressure on land use
- ✗ Who would stand to gain most from such a development?

### 3.4.3 Questions

- Does Alnwick need more retail space (including out of town centre) to serve a growing population, to compete with other retail centres, to attract visitors and to create jobs?
- Should out of town centre retail development be controlled so as not to undermine established town centre businesses?
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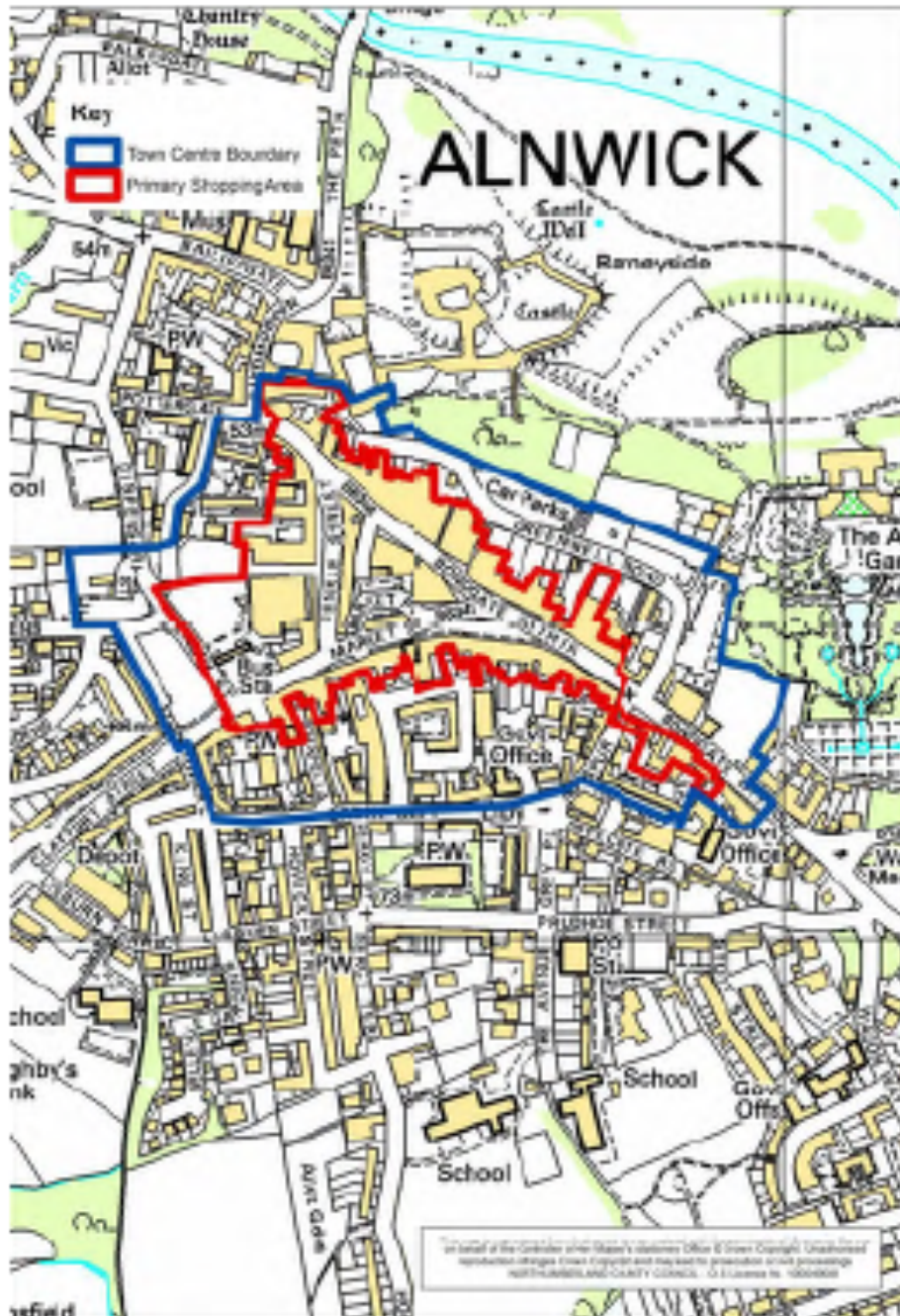
## 4. Cross Cutting Themes

- ✓ Economy – Creating/sustaining employment; sustainability of local businesses
- ✓ Tourism – Alnwick as a visitor destination; Alnwick’s retail offering as a ‘draw’ to tourists
- ✓ Heritage – Sympathetic use of the built environment of the Town Centre; Heritage, Tourism and Retail creating a ‘virtuous circle’ contributing to the prosperity and vibrancy of Alnwick as a destination
- ✓ Transport – Car park provision and pedestrian use of the Town Centre; links between the Town Centre and the A1; public transport
- ✓ Housing – How will the future development of housing a) affect demand for retail and b) affect where people will want to shop?
- ✓ Community Spaces & Buildings – The future use of the Northumberland Hall and the Market Place

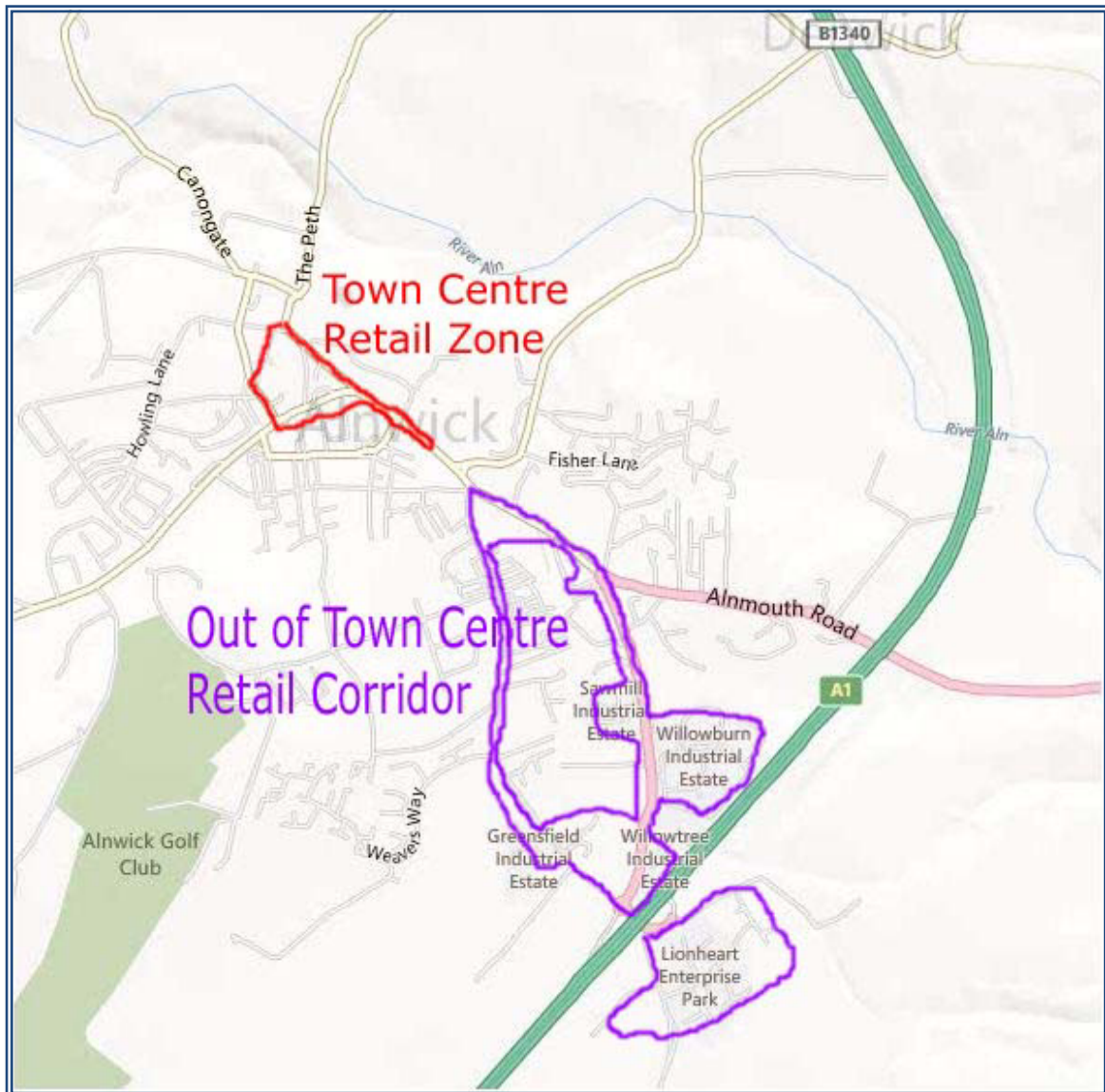
## 5. Evidence Base

Experian/Association of Town Centre Managers Report (September 2012)  
Stakeholder Meetings – July 2012  
Northumberland County Council Local Development Framework - Core Strategy Issues & Options Consultation (2012)  
Alnwick & Denwick Neighbourhood Plan Questionnaire Responses (2012)  
Alnwick Town Council Portas Pilot submission (2012)  
National Planning Policy Framework (2012)  
The Portas Review - an independent review into the state of our high streets and town centres (2011)  
Northumberland County Council Town Centres Study (2011)  
Alnwick Markets Health Check data (various)  
Alnwick Community Partnership Market Place subgroup (2011)  
Developing a Plan for Alnwick Partner Event (2011)  
Northumberland County Council Markets Strategy (2010)  
Alnwick Market Town Welcome Study – Northumberland Tourism (2009)  
Looking After our Town Centres – DCLG (2009)  
Moveable Covering for the Market Place consultation (2009)  
Alnwick Health Check (2008)  
Alnwick Civic Society Streetscape Report (2007)  
Alnwick District Council Local Development Framework (2007)  
Liveable Neighbourhoods – Sustrans (2006)  
The role of Traditional Markets in revitalising Market Towns (2004)

### Alnwick Town Centre Boundaries



Sketch Map of Town Centre and out of town centre retail zones



### 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.

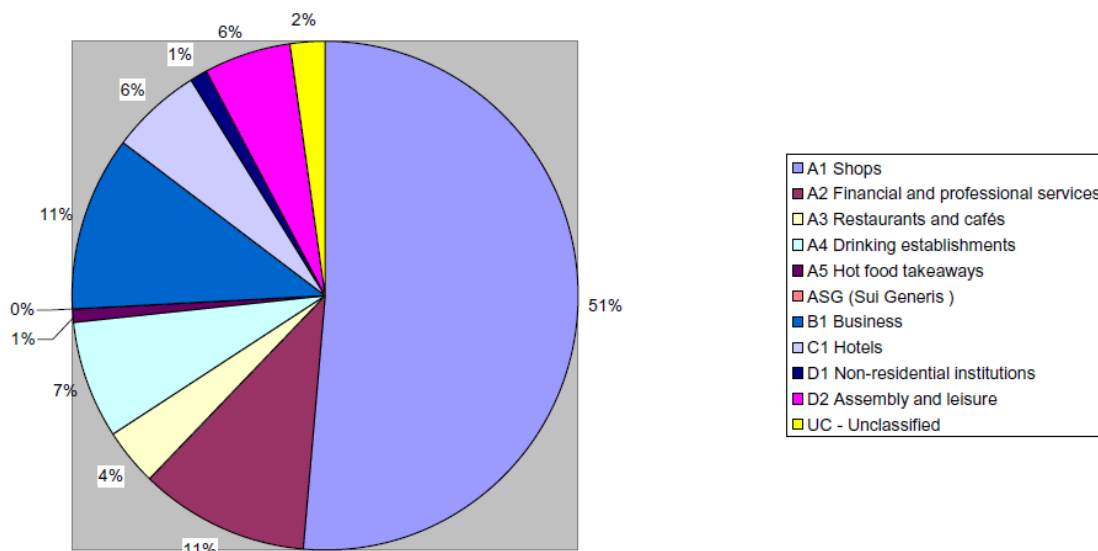
*“..This study confirms that the centre of Alnwick is particularly vital and viable. The vacancy rate within the centre is currently well below the national average and there is a strong mix of convenience and comparison goods retailers albeit focussed more on the independent sector rather than major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

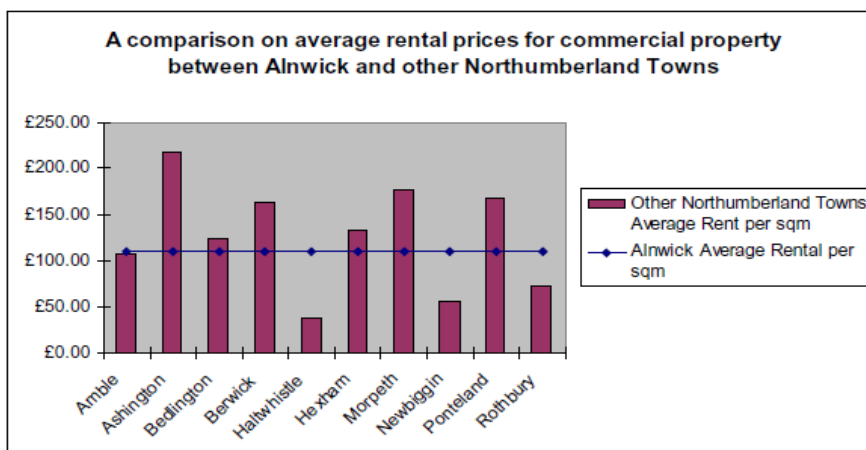
The annual value of that local retail spending is estimated at approx £52.5m (2010 prices). This places Alnwick 7<sup>th</sup> in terms of retail turnover in Northumberland behind Cramlington, Ashington, Blyth, Hexham, Morpeth and Berwick-upon-Tweed.

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%.

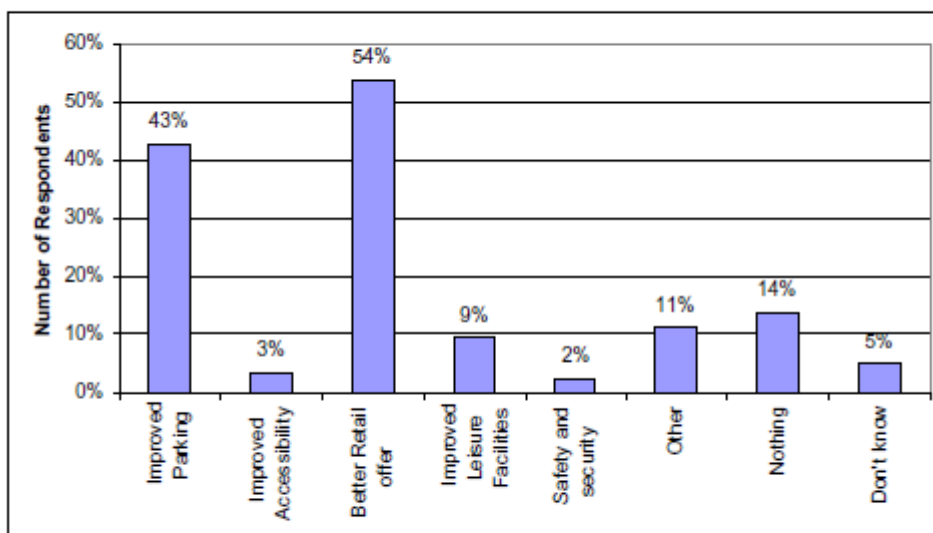
Comparative statistics from Alnwick Markets point to a slight decline in town centre footfall since 2009, coinciding with the development of the Willowburn retail park.

[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.

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BBC News Website 22 September 2012

### **Town centres 'must adapt to online shopping'**

Town centres will need to market themselves as convenient hubs for picking up products ordered online if they are to thrive into the next decade, a report says.

The report from research group Experian says retailers will have to cope with more people shopping online.

At the same time, they must cater for an ageing population, it adds.

It calls for them to focus on face-to-face service and opportunities for socialising and leisure activities.

Experian predicts that in 10 years' time there will be three million more people in the UK over the age of 70.

In order to thrive, town centres will need to offer the kind of facilities valued by older people, such as health services, and safe and accessible shopping areas.

#### Convenience

James Miller from Experian said High Streets and town centres had "a careful balancing act to play".

"They must fulfil the modern need for convenience and value of those with increasingly limited resources and incomes, but not to the detriment of quality and service sought by older and more affluent consumers," he said.

"At the same time they need to embrace technology to enrich the shopping experience by combining online shopping with the often more convenient option of collecting goods in the town centre."

More shops will need to adopt "click and collect" and retailers should embrace mobile commerce and social media to develop their online presence.

#### Regional variation

The report highlighted differences between regions, illustrated by data from a range of named towns.

By 2020, town centres in the East Midlands, the east, south-east and south-west of England will have the highest growth in their over-50 populations.

Some 51% of town centres in the East Midlands will have a high proportion of older consumers; the report particularly mentions Sleaford, Grantham and Swadlincote.

While the increase in technology and social media will have an impact everywhere, the East Midlands, the east, the north-west of England and Yorkshire and the Humber will have the greatest proportion of online shoppers by 2018.

"In many cases, these shoppers are from hard-pressed and rural consumer groups that are looking for both the choice and value that online offers," the report said.

It also said three new consumer groups with reduced disposable incomes would emerge, creating thriftier shoppers and heavily influencing the health of town centres.

These are:

- the "squashed bottom" - made up of hard-pressed singles and families, prevalent in Yorkshire, the north-west and north-east of England
- struggling elderly singles and couples - particularly in Merthyr Tydfil, Treorchy and Abertillery in Wales, Motherwell, Irvine and Coatbridge in Scotland, and the north-east of England
- the "squeezed middle" - middle-to-lower income families, found primarily in Llanelli, Pontypool and Cwmbran in Wales, the East Midlands and the north-west of England

The report was prepared in partnership with the Association of Town Centre Management.