

# **Blyth Town Centre**

## **Planning Provisions and Prospects**

**A Report commissioned by Blyth Town Council,  
Northumberland**

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## Executive Summary

- ◆ **General Overview:** Overall, the prospects for housing and employment growth in the town are positive. However, the need to improve the quality of the Town Centre as an attractive venue is not matched by the prospects for additional investment in the retail sector, at least in the foreseeable future.
- ◆ **What is the Town Centre?** An up-to-date Town Centre boundary needs to be formally adopted to replace those dating back to 1999. The boundary as currently proposed in the Northumberland Core Strategy Preferred Options Consultation Document (February 2013) is broadly acceptable, subject to one minor and one substantial observation. The minor observation is that Stanley Street should be excluded from the Primary Shopping Area. The major observation is that serious consideration should be given to extending the Town Centre boundary to include the adjoining Quayside Area.
- ◆ **What is the current planning regime for the Town Centre?** This comprises the development plan (made up of the saved policies of the Blyth Valley District Local Plan (1999) and the accompanying Proposals Map; and provisions in the Blyth Valley Core Strategy and Development Control Policies Development Plan Documents (both adopted in 2007)). The National Planning Policy Framework is a major material consideration, and is currently being supplemented by the online National Planning Practice Guidance. Local Supplementary Planning Documents continue to have some relevance. The new development plan will be the Northumberland Core Strategy Local Plan, which will replace the old development plans when it is adopted (projected to be in 2015).
- ◆ **How might the provisions of the Localism Act enhance the revitalisation the Town Centre?** It is suggested that these opportunities might be quite limited. Various questions should be asked with regard to a Neighbourhood Plan. These are: What sort of growth is likely or is being sought? What resources are needed to carry out a neighbourhood plan? And, What are the key priorities of the Town Council with respect to the Town Centre?
- ◆ **How might the provisions of the emerging Northumberland Local Plan Core Strategy assist in revitalising the Town Centre?** These will essential to, but not sufficient for, the revitalisation of the Town Centre. The emerging policy context is generally supportive of the interests of Blyth and its Town Centre. It will be helpful for the consolidated draft Core Strategy that the County Council intends to publish early in 2014 to present the full range of potential provisions for Blyth in one document. It will assist further if these provisions can be seen in one place in the document, so that, for example, it can be seen how the Town Centre's connectivity will be improved to the outer suburbs and employment areas. In addition, this will assist prospective investors in the town to see what are the overall prospects for growth and development in the Town and Town Centre. A particular issue warrants further consideration – the potential for town centre residential development, including the of use unoccupied upper floors for this purpose.
- ◆ **Concluding Remarks:** These include feedback from interviews carried out on town centre management issues; suggestions on promoting the Town Centre; and concluding reflections.

# 1 Introduction & Brief

1.1 This Report was formally commissioned at a meeting of the Blyth Town Council Planning & Development Committee held on 17 October 2013. The work was to be carried out in the period October – December. The Brief was for the Report to set out:

1. What could be regarded as the current Town Centre, and whether that should be amended for planning purposes.
2. The current planning regime for the Town Centre.
3. Whether and, if so, how the Town Council might use the planning provisions of the Localism Act to enhance the revitalisation of the Town Centre.
4. Proposals for how the County Council might amend the emerging Core Strategy to assist the revitalisation of the Town Centre.

1.2 In researching for this Report I have consulted numerous documents prepared for or on behalf of the County Council as part of the evidence base for the emerging Local Plan Core Strategy, as well as documents also publicly available on the website of Arch, the Northumberland Development Company. I have had interviews with relevant staff in both those organisations, as well as with Mr S Bradley of the Town Team and Mr M Lawlor, Chief Executive of the Port of Blyth. I have also drawn on my own experience as a Planning Consultant and Planning Inspector, as well as my more distant familiarity with the Town Centre arising from my time as a planner with Blyth Valley Borough Council (from 1975), including as Borough Planning & Development Officer from 1991 to 2002.

1.3 I am grateful for the time and insights shared by those I met, but take full responsibility for the contents of this Report – which I hope nonetheless faithfully represents their views when they have been used.

1.4 The structure of my Report is as follows.

Firstly, I present a General Overview of my impressions of the town and Town Centre, and the issues and prospects it faces.

Next, I deal in turn with each of the four specific matters in the Brief.

Finally, I draw some conclusions by way of a summary.

1.5 It is my hope that this Report will assist the Town Council in taking forward its agenda for a vibrant Town Centre within its wider remit for the town as a whole.

## 2 General Overview

- 2.1 The health and prospects of the Town Centre are inextricably linked with the health and prospects of the town as a whole, as well as the Region and nation. In my view, the two contextual issues of most significance within the remit of the Town Council are the size of the town and its spatial layout. This overview contains research carried out to provide a context for addressing the four specific matters in the Brief, and provides an information base for use by the Town Council.
- 2.2 Blyth remains the largest settlement in Northumberland, indeed in England north of Tyneside. It has a significant employment base for the local population and in-commuters and also provides homes for people who work, shop and spend outside the town.

### The size of the town of Blyth

- 2.3 The overall prospects for the population of the town are set out in the following table, which is taken from Table 4.1 in the Core Strategy Preferred Options Consultation Document published by the County Council in October 2013.

Projected population changes by alternative scenarios for the Main Towns  
in the South East Northumberland Delivery Area

Settlement	Projected population change 2011 to 2031 (+/- %)		
	Using Sub-National Population Projections (2010)	Based on average housing completions 2009-2012	Based on housing numbers in the old Reg.I Spatial Strategy
Amble	-4.6%	-9.1%	+10.5%
Ashington	+6.4%	+0.4%	+12.0%
Bedlington	+8.9%	-5.8%	+6.1%
<b>BLYTH</b>	<b>+10.8%</b>	<b>+6.5%</b>	<b>+20.5%</b>
Cramlington	-16.4%	-8.2%	-2.3%

- 2.4 These “projected” figures show what would happen up to 2031 if various past trends were to continue over that period. Perhaps the most surprising figures are those for Cramlington, which was set up as a focus for the regeneration of the south east Northumberland coal field. It seems that the recent lack of house building has meant that younger adults have had to leave the town in search of housing, with the risk of a continuing decline in population. Planning policy seeks to address such issues in order to secure the desired outcome of “planning for economic growth”.

2.5 Total housing delivery in South East Northumberland over this period is thus planned to be 12,820 units, over 80% of which (10,500) would be in the main towns, as follows:

Amble	740
Ashington	1,600
Bedlington	1,200
<b>BLYTH</b>	<b>3,480</b>
Cramlington	3,480

[Source – ibid, Table 7.2]

2.6 The Consultation Document also contains Tables D.1 & D.2, which show available employment land, as follows:

Location	Available land in hectares	
	Protected for B-class uses	For flexible employment use
Amble	Nil	10.676
Ashington	21.198	6.364
Other former Wansbeck		3.226
BLYTH	5.971	4.241
Cramlington	44.123	3.255

2.7 These figures do not do justice to BEREZ, the Blyth Estuary Renewable Energy Zone. This is a strategic employment area for low carbon industries, and includes Enterprise Zone status land and Local Development Order land, where planning controls are reduced. Although most of the land in BEREZ is on the north bank, there are significant implications for growth and investment on the Blyth side, including in the Quayside Area. Planning permission has been given for 30,000 square feet of Grade A managed workspace. Not all the Quayside Area is in BEREZ, however, and there is concern that some businesses may be attracted to move from existing accommodation (e.g. in the Blyth Enterprise Centre) into the new workspaces, attracted by the rates incentive. It is to be hoped that letting policies for the new accommodation will prevent this from happening.

2.8 The Port itself has experienced something of a renaissance in its fortunes since about 2000. Much of the growth and diversification is connected to the offshore energy sector, in particular reflecting the foundation in Blyth in 2002 of the National Renewable Energy Centre (Narec). This is a UK centre for renewable energy and low carbon technologies. A more recent strategic addition will be the bunkering facility at the Bates Site, which will also be linked to the offshore industries. Overall, the Chief Executive of the Port estimates that there are currently about 500 jobs based in the Port (of which perhaps 400 are on the Blyth side). It is hoped that both the tonnage handled and the jobs supported could double over the next 5 years, though most of the jobs growth would be likely to be on the north side of the river. Narec gives a significant international profile to the town and jobs near the Town Centre provide potential customers for local services. In addition, the Port is promoting local initiatives of community interest near the Ridley Park entrance, including the BEACH project

(a marine science building for the University) and a Port museum and café in the old RNLI building. These attractions will bring people into the vicinity of the Town Centre.

- 2.9 These developments can potentially be of significant benefit to the Town Centre, if connections can be made with them. These might include reinvestigating the value of a river crossing for pedestrians and cyclists, as a carbon-friendly means of enabling the Blyth workforce to access new jobs on the north side of the river. In addition, it is desirable to encourage those working in or visiting the Quayside Area also to go into the Town Centre.
- 2.10 Thus overall, in terms of projected population growth, planned housing development and employment land availability, the prospects for the continued growth and development of the town of Blyth are positive.

### **The spatial layout of Blyth**

- 2.11 Blyth is a typical coastal town in terms of its overall layout. As it has grown from its riverside/port origins, and incorporated the early mining settlements, the town has grown away westwards and southwards from its traditional Town Centre, which is now located geographically towards the north east edge of the town. The main employment zones follow a similar pattern, and are now found on the northern and eastern edges of the town. Much recent housing has been in similarly peripheral locations, and that projected in the period to 2031 is likely to be concentrated on the outer edges of the present town.
- 2.12 In addition, the primary route through the town, the A193, which used to pass through the Town Centre along Regent Street/Beaconsfield Street, now by-passes it along Renwick Road. Routes into the Town Centre are not necessarily clear to motorists, and can include the delays that typify parts of Cowpen Road at busy times. The challenge remains of integrating all parts of the town, present and future, so that access to the Town Centre is relatively straightforward and convenient, and does not provide a disincentive or deterrent from visiting, working or investing in the Town Centre. This does not necessarily require the investment of large sums of money – for example, improved signposting into the Town Centre could help, especially from the south and from Renwick Road; and measures to inform new house buyers about the Town Centre and the merits of visiting it.

### **The Town Centre itself**

- 2.13 The Town Centre and its immediate environs have been the subject of momentous changes over the past half century. These include the closure of the ship yards; the withdrawal of rail services and the removal of the coal staites; slum clearance and the determined efforts to regenerate the retained terraces in Cowpen Quay and the town centre; the first new supermarket on the old station site; the enlargement of the Market Place; the pedestrianisation of Regent Street; environmental improvements and landscaping within the central area; land assembly to the rear of Regent Street, the demolition of the old municipal offices and the erection of the Keel Row shopping centre; the gradual, and now dramatic, regeneration of the Blyth Quayside area; and the recent construction of the major Morrisons store and associated car park.
- 2.14 Throughout this process, the Municipal Borough, the Borough Council and the County

Council have had key roles in enabling and promoting change, investment and development. Despite the size of the town, the Town Centre has never been a high rental area that attracts investors without the need for public initiatives and partnerships. Thus the Keel Row centre, and more recently Morrisons, have been enabled by significant public sector inputs in terms of land acquisition and funding. Retail planning experts also recognise that positive planning is essential, in identifying sites, supporting parking provision and resisting out of centre development, to create a positive context to attract private investment. It is striking however that the number of bodies who are able to act as advocates for Blyth Town Centre has declined. Thus, for example, none of the commissioning partners of the “Blyth Town Centre and Quayside Business Case (2006)” now exist: Blyth Valley Borough Council, SENNTRi and One North East. This puts greater importance and value on local partnerships, such as the Town Team, and it is to be hoped that some of the larger Town Centre businesses will join with local entrepreneurs to find ways to improve the general management, maintenance and promotion of the Town Centre.

- 2.15 The most recent Town Centre Health Check I have seen for Blyth is dated August 2009 and was prepared by the County Council's Corporate Research Unit. This relied on data going back to 2005 – 2007 (for example, regarding crimes that had taken place in the Town Centre), and omitted information on upper floor uses and residential uses. It was also carried out before the Morrisons redevelopment. Although the findings are of interest, I consider that they are somewhat dated and should be used with caution. The significant level of retail expenditure that “leaked” out of the town is likely still to be the case, however, as is the wish of shoppers that the retail offer should be improved.
- 2.16 The County Council also commissioned a “Study of Retail, Leisure and Other Town Centre Uses in Northumberland”, by WYG Planning & Design. The Main Report is dated February 2011 and an Update was published in January 2013. The latter significantly downgrades the prospective need for additional comparison goods floorspace in Blyth. It considers that already committed development, including an extension of Blyth Valley Retail Park, effectively extinguishes any further quantitative need for comparison floorspace in Blyth in the period to 2030. The redeveloped Morrisons store and an extension to Asda meet the need for further convenience goods floorspace till 2022, with a modest need for additional floorspace over the later part of the period up to 2030.
- 2.17 While disappointing, these findings reflect the general trends that have been impacting upon smaller town centres throughout the country. Four “waves” of dispersal have led retail spending away from traditional town centres over the last 20-30 years. These have been: food superstores; 'bulky goods' retail warehouses; regional shopping centres; and factory outlet centres. Blyth Town Centre has experienced competition from all these forms of retailing. A fifth “wave” of dispersal is now internet shopping which, by 2015, is forecast to take nearly 6% of food and grocery sales and 18% of all comparison goods. These trends have been compounded for smaller centres by the fact that since 1998, most new town centre development has been in the larger centres. It is estimated that over 1000 smaller town centres have suffered relative decline – so it may be some (cold) comfort that Blyth Town Centre is by no means unique in the challenges it faces.
- 2.18 Overall, while the prospects for housing and employment growth in the town are positive, the need to improve the quality of the Town Centre as an attractive venue is not matched by the prospects for additional investment in the retail sector, at least in the foreseeable future.

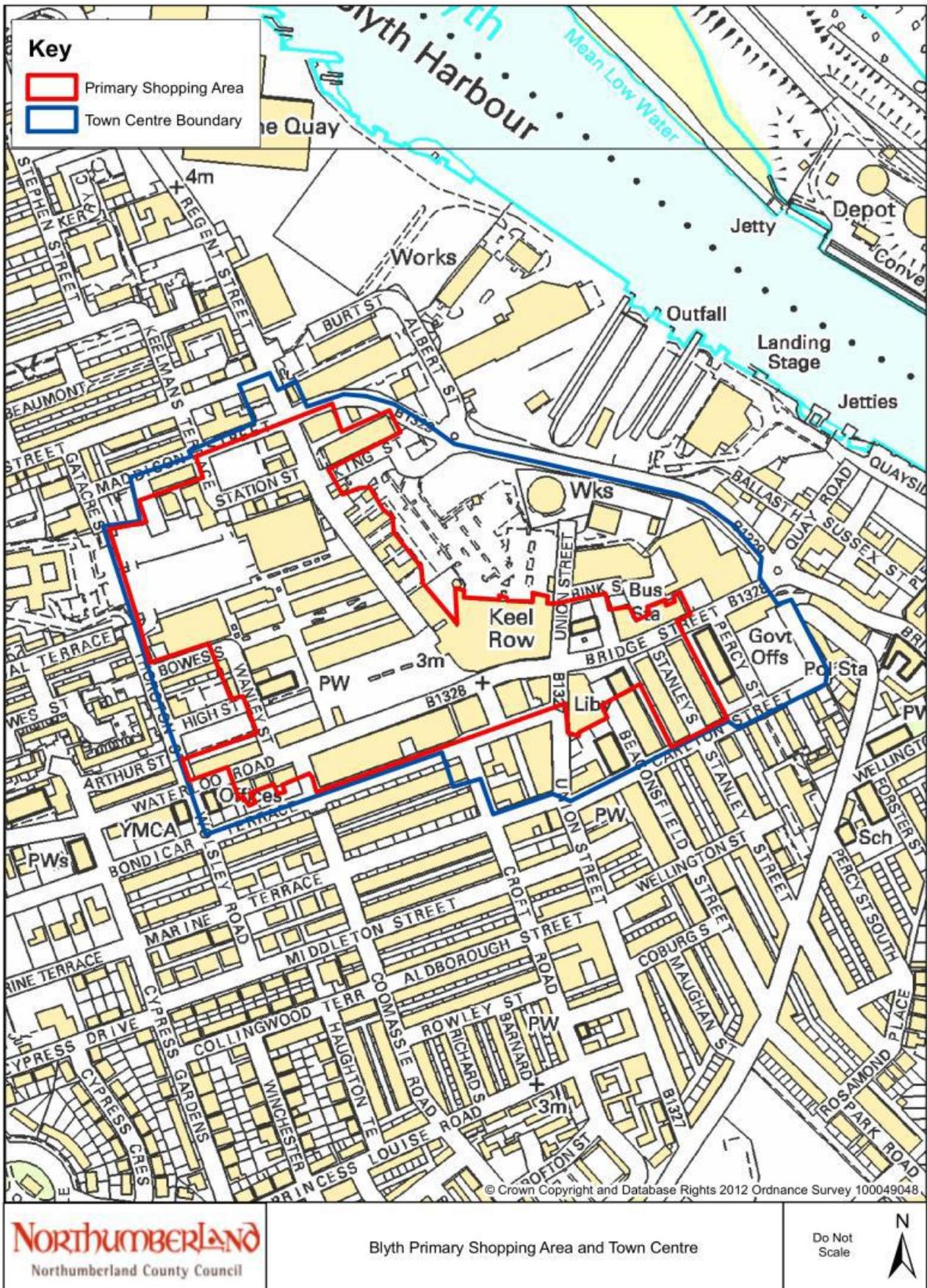
### 3 What is the Town Centre?

- 3.1 This part of the Brief requires me to consider what could be regarded as the current Town Centre, and whether that should be amended for planning purposes.
- 3.2 In simple terms, the current town centre comprises those uses one might expect to find in a town centre – the big shops, the Keel Row, the main shopping frontages, and the car parks and bus facilities that support and service them. Also included would be the main office uses along and off Bridge Street. National planning policy would go further, and include as well as retail and offices, the leisure, commercial, tourism, cultural, community and residential development needed in town centres.
- 3.3 In my view, in functional terms, there has been little change in the extent of the Town Centre over the past 20 years. There has however been considerable change within the Town Centre, in terms of the balance of shopping opportunities and access to car parking. These have both shifted in a major way to the north, with the opening of the new Morrisons store and in particular the access to its car park from Regent Street. This, and the vacating of the former Co-operative building on Waterloo Road, have combined to put the southern side of the Town Centre at a distinct trading disadvantage. I regard this as one of the major issues for the future vitality and viability of the Town Centre.

#### **A boundary for the Town Centre**

- 3.4 So far as formal boundary definitions are concerned, there have been a few of these since 1974. The most up-to-date adopted development plan boundaries are shown on the Proposals Map of the Blyth Valley District Local Plan (1999) – and this, most consider, is somewhat out of date. This Plan has two boundaries for the Town Centre. The Central Shopping Area is drawn tightly around the existing supermarkets, Keel Row centre and main shopping frontages on Bowes Street, Market Street and Waterloo Road. The more widely drawn boundary of the Secondary Commercial Area is formed by Maddison Street and the Inner Relief Road to the north; Bridge Street and Plessey Road to the east and south; and returning by the full length of Croft Road up to the rear of the shops along Waterloo Road. The District Plan policies that support these boundaries, C14 & B3 respectively, remain “saved”, and are therefore of continuing relevance.
- 3.5 In my view, there is little benefit in retaining within a contemporary definition of the Town Centre the large area of terraces south of the line of Carlton Street and all of the mixed use zone between Union Street and Croft Road.
- 3.6 This view is supported by the proposed Town Centre Boundary shown by the County Council in Appendix A of Core Strategy Preferred Options Consultation Document (February 2013) – following page. This map is based, without modification, on one produced by consultants WYG Planning & Design, in their Final Report, A Study of Retail, Leisure and Other Town Centre Uses in Northumberland (February 2011). As part of their commission from the County Council, WYG were required to review town centre boundaries and to propose primary shopping areas (PSAs) for the main town centres in the County (Alnwick, Ashington, Berwick on Tweed, Blyth, Cramlington, Hexham and Morpeth). A centre boundary was

*Image taken from Appendix A, page 175, of the Northumberland Core Strategy Preferred Options Consultation Document – February 2013*



recommended as a minimum policy requirement and to help guide future judgements as to what is in-centre, edge of centre and out of centre.

- 3.7 The definition of a boundary for the Town Centre is needed in order to comply with national planning policy as now set out in the National Planning Policy Framework (see next main Section below, pages 16-18). Among other things, this says that local planning authorities should define the extent of town centres and primary shopping areas and set policies that make clear which uses will be permitted in such locations.
- 3.8 Defining a town centre boundary is particularly important as a means of controlling retail developments outside the main shopping centres, in locations that may be disruptive locally but more significantly, have major harmful impacts on the vitality and viability of the Town Centre. I agree in general with the WYG definition, now taken forward by the County Council. If unchanged, this would become part of adopted policy in due course, and replace the outdated 1999 boundaries.
- 3.9 There is one important qualification – given the close proximity of the Quayside Area, the investments prospects there and the benefits of linking this to the Town Centre, would it be advantageous to extend the Town Centre boundary into this area?
- 3.10 At a more detailed level, I would query the inclusion of Stanley Street in the Primary Shopping Area.

### **Planning policies within the Town Centre**

- 3.11 More important, however, is the way in which the PSA policy would operate. The main Town Centre policies as currently proposed are set out in the box at the end of this Section (pages 13 & 14). They start from Policy 16, which defines a hierarchy of town, district and local centres. There are three town centres so defined in South East Northumberland – Ashington, Blyth and Cramlington. The underlying principle in the way the County Council will wish to implement these policies is to avoid competition between these town centres.
- 3.12 Policy 17 supports the maintenance and growth of local spending within Town Centres, with new development to be in keeping with the size and function of the centre and in keeping with local character. The policy is permissive of “retail warehouses or retail parks in locations that are accessible by car, where acceptable in terms of their scale and local impact”. I would urge caution in the implementation of this approach, and in permitting comparison goods spending in large out of centre outlets. Experience in general suggests that robust control of such developments is a necessary part of a strategy to support existing town centres.
- 3.13 Policy 18 concerns defining boundaries and maintaining vitality and viability. The sequential test sets a threshold of 1000 square metres for net retail floorspace outside the Primary Shopping Area. This is significantly less than the “default” figure in the National Planning Policy Framework, of 2500 square metres, and this is to be welcomed. However, I would repeat my caution about “robust control” in the reference to “strong planning reasons to locate them [main town centre uses] elsewhere”.
- 3.14 Policy 19 concerns leisure uses within town centres. This policy should enable the attraction

of non-retail and leisure-related uses into the Town Centre, including tourism, cultural and community activities. It is hoped that this will attract non-shopping trips and boost the evening and night-time economy in appropriate ways that respect local amenity.

- 3.15 Policy 21 is also to be welcomed as a means of seeking to diversify and strengthen the employment base of the Town Centre although, again, I would urge caution if a proposal for a business park was to come forward outside the Town Centre but within 500 metres of it. In the short term certainly, opportunities for such development might be directed towards the Quayside Area and, hopefully in the longer term, to the Town Centre itself.
- 3.16 These policies seem to me to be largely what is to be expected, bearing in mind they have to apply to all 7 town centres, each of which is different. It would be for the Town Council to decide if a more specific approach should be sought for Blyth Town Centre. This might be through persuading the County Council to prepare a formal planning instrument such as a Supplementary Planning Document.
- 3.17 My impression is that the County Council is likely to take a fairly pragmatic and realistic view in its role as local planning authority when dealing with planning applications and enforcement matters that affect the Town Centre. In my view, the Town Council is well placed to take a more hands-on local leadership role, engaging with a range of local interests to seek identify the problems that need to be addressed, encouraging their solution, and in general promoting the town and Town Centre of Blyth.

## **Conclusions**

- 3.18 There needs to be a formally adopted Town Centre boundary to replace those adopted in 1999.
- 3.19 The boundary as currently proposed (Appendix A, page 175, of the Northumberland Core Strategy Preferred Options Consultation Document – February 2013 – page 10 above) is broadly acceptable, subject to one minor and one substantial observation.
- 3.20 The minor observation is that Stanley Street should be excluded from the Primary Shopping Area.
- 3.21 The major observation is that serious consideration should be given to extending the Town Centre boundary to include the adjoining Quayside Area.

## **Town Centre Policies in the Northumberland Core Strategy Preferred Options Consultation Document – February 2013**

### **Policy 17**

#### **The roles of Town and District Centres**

The continuing role, vitality, viability and competitiveness of Northumberland's Town and District Centres, as defined in Policy 16 will be supported, having regard to the latest growth forecasts, with a view to maintaining or increasing the percentage of local spending retained in these centres, including the following:

- a. Within Town Centres, opportunities will be identified and proposals supported for developments which are physically and functionally integrated with and add choice to the existing retail offer in the Primary Shopping Area. This may include retail warehouses or retail parks in locations that are accessible by car, where acceptable in terms of their scale and local impact;
- b. Within District Centres, new provision should be predominantly aimed at meeting local residents' shopping needs and be of a scale appropriate to the towns' respective catchments;
- c. Where new or extended supermarkets are proposed that are physically well linked with existing Primary Shopping Areas or District Centres, it will not be sought to limit, unnecessarily, the proportion of net floorspace that sells comparison goods.

Any of the above should be in scale with the size and function of the centre and in keeping with local character. Proposals beyond Primary Shopping Area or District Centre boundaries should be sequentially tested and assessed for their impact in line with Policy 18.

### **Policy 18**

#### **Defining centres and maintaining vitality and viability**

Boundaries for the following centres are defined in Appendix A:

- Town centres: Alnwick, Ashington, Berwick-upon-Tweed, Blyth, Cramlington, Morpeth, Hexham: separate 'Town Centre' and 'Primary Shopping Area' boundaries
- District Centres: Amble, Bedlington, Haltwhistle, Prudhoe, Ponteland: single 'District Centre' boundaries

Main town centre uses should be located within Town Centre and District Centre boundaries unless there are strong planning reasons to locate them elsewhere or unless they are office uses that otherwise meet Policy 21.

The following will be subject to sequential and impact testing:

- a. Proposals for more than 1000m<sup>2</sup> net retail floorspace beyond Primary Shopping Area or District Centre boundaries;
- b. Proposals for leisure-related buildings of 2500m<sup>2</sup> gross floorspace, (not linked with wider open space activities or hotel use), that are beyond Town Centre or District Centre boundaries; and
- c. Proposals for office uses that are either more than 2500m<sup>2</sup> gross floorspace beyond Town Centre and District Centre boundaries or more than 500 metres from a public transport interchange.

All proposals for town centre uses, including those within the defined boundaries, should be in scale with the size and function of the centre and in keeping with local character.

Proposals that are smaller than the above sizes should be centrally and accessibly located.

### **Policy 19**

#### **Leisure uses within Town and District Centres**

It will be sought to provide for residents and visitors, both at daytime and in the evenings, with a range of leisure uses integrated with the retail offer of Northumberland Town and District centres.

The Council will support proposals for non-retail uses on primary shopping frontages where it can be demonstrated that:

- a. Long term vacancy of units within the frontage concerned is adversely affecting the vitality and viability of the shopping frontage; and
- b. The proposed use would maintain or add to the vibrancy of the shopping frontage; and
- c. The cumulative impact of the non-retail uses would not lead to an unacceptable reduction in the range of the retail offer of the frontage concerned or the retail role of the centre as a whole.

Continued/

## **Town Centre policies – continued**

### **Policy 21**

#### **Office accommodation within Town and District Centres**

A continuing supply of centrally located offices will be ensured through:

- a. Seeking an office element to commercial development and redevelopment schemes in Town or District Centres, where local demand exists;
- b. Locating future office business parks within 500 metres of a town centre or public transport interchange;
- c. Permitting changes of use to offices within defined town centres unless this would conflict with retail frontage policies or detract from the vitality of the frontage concerned.

## 4 What is the current planning regime for the Town Centre?

4.1 This Section presents a largely factual account of the current planning regime, with the hope that it will provide

Members with a reference point when dealing with planning matters.

4.2 The planning system, despite many recent changes, continues to be based upon a locally adopted development plan. Thus section 38(6) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 and section 72(2) of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 require that applications for planning permission must be determined in accordance with the development plan, unless material considerations indicate otherwise.

4.3 This, however, pre-supposes the existence of an up-to-date development plan. Thus, where the development plan is absent, silent or relevant policies are out-of-date, the “presumption in favour of sustainable development” means granting permission unless any adverse impacts of doing so would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits, when assessed against the policies in the National Planning Policy Framework taken as a whole, or specific policies in the Framework indicate development should be restricted (paragraph 14 of the Framework).

4.4 The components of the formal planning regime for the Town Centre may be listed as follows:

the adopted development plan

the National Planning Policy Framework – a material consideration of major importance

adopted Supplementary Planning Documents [SPD]

the emerging Northumberland Local Plan Core Strategy

### The adopted development plan

4.5 So far as Blyth Town Centre is concerned, this now comprises the relevant provisions of 3 plans adopted by the former Borough Council.

4.6 Firstly, twelve among many policies saved from the **Blyth Valley District Local Plan (1999)** are recognised by the County planners as being relevant to the Town Centre. These are set out in the Table at the top of the next page. The District Plan Proposals Map continues to be the only detailed, adopted land use plan for the Town Centre. It shows the boundaries of the Town Centre, and the Bondicar Terrace, Blyth Central and Heritage Conservation Areas.

4.7 Secondly, the **Blyth Valley Core Strategy (2007), 'A Future for Blyth Valley'**, contains new policies:

SS1 Regeneration and Renaissance of Blyth Valley 2021: Integrated Regeneration Strategy

R1 Hierarchy of retail centres

## R2 Town Centre Retail Led Regeneration

Blyth Valley District Local Plan 1999 – Town Centre Policies	
Environmental Protection and Enhancement	
E20	Shop Fronts
Community Facilities	
C14	Shopping: Main Centres
C15	Shopping: Edge of Town Centre Proposals
C16	Shopping: Out of Town Centre Proposals
Blyth Town Centre	
B1	Retail Frontage Control Policy
B2	The Market Square
B3	Secondary Commercial Area
B4	Living over the shop
BP1	Development site adjacent to Inner Relief Road
BP2	Expansion of Town Centre Uses
BP3	Traffic circulation and management
BP4	Car Parking Provision
BP5	Public Transport

- 4.8 Thirdly, the **Blyth Valley Development Control Policies Development Plan Document (2007)** contains several detailed development management policies of relevance when deciding planning applications. These concern such matters as Conservation Areas (DC23) and the Design of New Developments (DC27). There seems to be nothing specific to the Town Centre that replaces or replicates policies in the other parts of the development plan.

### The National Planning Policy Framework

- 4.9 This was published in March 2012 to replace a plethora of earlier policy guidance. It constitutes guidance for local planning authorities and decision-takers both in drawing up plans and as a material consideration in determining planning applications. In reality, in a challenge situation such as an appeal to the Secretary of State, the National Planning Policy Framework may take precedence over a local development plan, especially where the latter pre-dates and lacks consistency with the Framework. House builders and retailers in particular have been known to seek planning permissions in circumstances where a local plan is out of date or at an early stage of preparation where, as a result, the “presumption in favour of sustainable development” and the need to promote growth, have weighed heavily in favour of granting planning permission.
- 4.10 The Framework contains 12 core land-use planning principles that should under-pin both plan-making and decision-taking. The longest of these is the third, which gives a flavour of where the Government is coming from:

*proactively drive and support sustainable economic development to deliver the homes, business and industrial units, infrastructure and thriving local places that the country needs. Every effort should be made objectively to identify and then meet the housing, business and other development needs of an area, and respond positively to wider opportunities for growth. Plans should take account of market signals, such as land prices and housing affordability, and set out a clear strategy for allocating sufficient land which is suitable for development in their area, taking account of the needs of the residential and business communities.*

4.11 There then follow 13 sections under the general heading of 'Achieving sustainable development', the second of which is 'Ensuring the vitality of town centre'. Within this section, paragraph 23 sets out the main guidance for Town Centres:

#### **The National Planning Policy Framework – paragraph 23**

Planning policies should be positive, promote competitive town centre environments and set out policies for the management and growth of centres over the plan period. 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;
- define a network and hierarchy of centres that is resilient to anticipated future economic changes;
- define the extent of town centres and primary shopping areas, based on a clear definition of primary and secondary frontages in designated centres, and set policies that make clear which uses will be permitted in such locations;
- 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 and, where appropriate, re-introduce or create new ones, ensuring that markets remain attractive and competitive;
- 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. It is important that needs for retail, leisure, office and other main town centre uses are met in full and are not compromised by limited site availability. Local planning authorities should therefore undertake an assessment of the need to expand town centres to ensure a sufficient supply of suitable sites;
- allocate appropriate edge of centre sites for main town centre uses that are well connected to the town centre where suitable and viable town centre sites are not available. If sufficient edge of centre sites cannot be identified, set policies for meeting the identified needs in other accessible locations that are well connected to the town centre;
- set policies for the consideration of proposals for main town centre uses which cannot be accommodated in or adjacent to town centres;
- recognise that residential development can play an important role in ensuring the vitality of centres and set out policies to encourage residential development on appropriate sites; and
- where town centres are in decline, local planning authorities should plan positively for their future to encourage economic activity.

- 4.12 The NPPF is in the process of being supported by the **National Planning Practice Guidance**, the NPPG. This is an online source that has yet to be fully authorised after a period of consultation and testing. At this stage, it seems mainly to repeat what could be gathered from the NPPF. Thus it says that local planning authorities should plan positively, to support town centres to generate local employment, promote beneficial competition within and between town centres, and create attractive, diverse places where people want to live, visit and work. They should assess and plan to meet the needs of main town centre uses in full, in broadly the same way as for their housing and economic needs, adopting a 'town centre first' approach and taking account of specific town centre policy.
- 4.13 This positive approach should include seeking to improve the quality of parking in town centres (in line with the NPPF) and, where it is necessary to ensure the vitality of town centres, the quantity too. Local planning authorities should set appropriate parking charges that do not undermine the vitality of town centres and parking enforcement should be proportionate, avoiding unfairly penalising drivers.
- 4.14 The NPPF sets out two key tests that should be applied when planning for town centre uses which are not in an existing town centre and which are not in accord with an up to date Local Plan – the sequential test and the impact test. These are relevant in determining individual decisions and may be useful in informing the preparation of Local Plans. They require the town centre boundary to be defined, as set out in the Section on What is the Town Centre?
- 4.15 The NPPG is freely available online, and it is intended to be regularly updated. On any occasion when it is used, it will therefore be important to check that what is being relied upon is the current, up-to-date version.

#### **Adopted Supplementary Planning Documents**

4.16 These comprise a suite of SPD adopted by the Borough Council in 2008:

C1	Bus Depot Development Brief
C2	Supermarket Site Development Brief
C3	Dun Cow Quay Development Brief
C4	Commissioner's Quay Development Brief
C5	Urban Design Guide

- 4.17 Of these, the Urban Design Guide is of most current relevance and is in regular use in seeking design improvements to development applications. C2 has now largely been implemented with the Morrisons development. C3 & C4 are in the Blyth Quayside Area and largely being moved forward by Arch, in ways reflecting current development possibilities.
- 4.18 C1, the Bus Depot site, is of most potential interest, but is in abeyance until such time, if ever, there is a viable proposal to relocate the bus depot. The site remains of strategic importance within the town centre, allowing for a possible expansion of the retail offer (and offices) as well as providing an active linkage between the Primary Shopping Area and the

Quayside Area.

### **The emerging Northumberland Local Plan Core Strategy**

4.19 This Plan will “unify” and replace the older parts of the development plan, when adopted. Until then, it will be used in two ways:

it indicates the direction of travel of planning policy in Northumberland, and allows decisions to be made in the light of more up to date information than that used to justify the earlier development plan documents; but

in a challenge situation, such as an appeal, its provisions will be given little weight until they have passed formal, independent examination, unless they are clearly consistent with the National Planning Policy Framework.

4.20 The preparation and adoption of a Local Plan is a time consuming process that involves considerable public consultation and engagement.

4.21 I have included information from the emerging policies and the evidence base in my General Overview and What is the Town Centre? Sections, for Members' information. I return to them in the next-but-one main Section below on How might the provisions of the emerging Northumberland Local Plan Core Strategy assist in revitalising the Town Centre?

## 5 How might the provisions of the Localism Act enhance the revitalisation the Town Centre?

- 5.1 The Localism Act 2011 received Royal Assent on 15 November 2011. The main section of the Act is split into ten parts (totalling 240 pages), and this is followed by 25 further schedules (an additional 243 pages). Sections of the Act involving new regulations are straightforward but the Act also includes many detailed modifications of existing Acts, such as the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 and the Planning Act 2008.

### The provisions of the Localism Act

- 5.2 The Table on the following page gives a fairly full summary of the Act's provisions so that Members can draw their own conclusions, and do not have to rely only on my selectivity. The first seven parts of the Act may contain provisions of interest.
- 5.3 It is popularly thought that “localism” means allowing local people to conduct their own affairs so far as planning matters are concerned. This is not the case, as certain high profile appeals for large housing sites on unallocated land have shown. The Secretary of State has clearly indicated that the need for sustainable development, as he sees it, is to drive development forward until such time as up to date Local Plans are in place. The fact that one is in preparation, or that a community is preparing a Neighbourhood Plan, may well take second place to this “national imperative”. Moreover, when plans do come forward for examination, they will be expected to meet objectively assessed needs (in cooperation with adjoining authorities), comply with national planning policy and, in the case of Neighbourhood Plans, conform with the local planning authority's Local Plan.
- 5.4 The rest of this Section focuses on two of the more high profile provisions of the Act, Assets of Community Value and Neighbourhood Plans.

### Community Empowerment

- 5.5 The main provision of interest in Part 5 of the Act may be the opportunity for communities to identify **Assets of Community Value** that community groups can nominate. These assets include land and buildings with a current use that furthers the “social well being or social interests of the local community”. The Government indicated that local pubs and shops, village halls and community centres are the assets that they envisaged being listed. In fact, the first ACV to be listed was Kensal Rise Library in Brent, and interest has also been expressed in assets such as police stations, leisure centres, hospitals, fire stations and open spaces – even football grounds.
- 5.6 The process is that a community group can approach the local authority to list an asset as being of community value. Once registered, if an ACV is ever offered for sale, community groups have firstly 6 weeks to submit a bid request; and then secondly, a 6 month moratorium to prepare the bid. In the meantime, listing as a ACV is a material consideration in the event of any planning applications being submitted. This measure is very much responsive to community initiatives.

## Localism Act 2011 – main provisions

### Part 1: Local Government

This is one of the major sections of the Act, and the one which extends the power of local authorities, from county councils to parish councils, to 'do anything that individuals generally may do' as long as that is not limited by some other Act. It deals with the standards expected of council members, with the keeping of registers of interests and, in an important change, it allows members to have expressed prior views about a topic and also contribute towards a decision on that topic, without the risk of making the decision invalid.

### Parts 2 and 3: EU Financial Sanctions

These sections give ministers the right to require public authorities to pay fines to the European Union resulting from an infraction of European Union law.

### Part 4: Non-domestic Rates

This appears to consist primarily of technical changes to the rating of business properties.

### Part 5: Community Empowerment

The first two chapters in this section are concerned with council tax and new right for charitable trusts, voluntary bodies and others to apply to councils to carry out services provided by the council. It also allows lists to be compiled of Assets of Community Value such as shops, pubs and playing fields, which are privately owned, but which are of value to the community. If the asset is later sold, the Act makes it easier for the community to bid for and take over the asset.

### Part 6: Planning

Regional Strategies are abolished but there is a duty for interested parties to co-operate in the preparation of development plans. The Community Infrastructure Levy now includes the additional costs, besides infrastructure costs, that development places on an area and the money raised can be used to fund the improvement, replacement, operation or maintenance of infrastructure as well as its provision.

The Act allows neighbourhood plans to be developed but to be adopted they have to pass both an inspection stage and a local referendum. Suitable community organisations can obtain the rights to develop an area.

The Act specifies how planning decisions can be legally enforced and allows planning authorities to decline to process planning applications which include any region affected by a planning enforcement notice. Nationally the Infrastructure Planning Commission is abolished and new powers put in place to cover national infrastructure projects.

### Part 7: Housing

Each English housing authority must have an "allocation scheme" for determining priorities. Reasonable preference should be given to groups such as the homeless and those living in insanitary conditions but otherwise housing authorities may themselves decide who to support and the conditions of support. People subject to immigration control cannot be supported. The authorities' duty to homeless people, who are not intentionally homeless, now ceases if they refuse reasonable accommodation.

The housing authorities must publish a "tenancy strategy" giving the types of tenancy provided, the circumstances under which they are granted, their length and the circumstances in which they may be extended. This section also includes many changes to tenancy law, to the financing of local authority housing and to the handling of complaints. Home Information Packs, which were required when selling a property, are abolished.

## Neighbourhood Plans

- 5.7 This is possibly the most high profile provision in the Act, so far as planning measures are concerned. Neighbourhood planning can be taken forward by two types of body – town and parish councils or 'neighbourhood forums'. Neighbourhood forums are community groups that are designated to take forward neighbourhood planning in areas without parishes. It is the role of the local planning authority to agree who should be the neighbourhood forum for the neighbourhood area. The criteria for establishing neighbourhood forums are being kept as simple as possible to encourage new and existing residents' organisations, voluntary and community groups to put themselves forward.
- 5.8 In an important change to the planning system, communities can use neighbourhood planning to **permit** the development they want to see – in full or in outline – without the need for planning applications. These are called '**neighbourhood development orders.**'
- 5.9 It is important to remember that local planning authorities will continue to produce development plans that will set the strategic context within which neighbourhood development plans will sit and with which they must comply.
- 5.10 Neighbourhood development plans or orders do not take effect unless there is a majority of support in a referendum of the neighbourhood. They also have to meet a number of conditions before they can be put to a community referendum and legally come into force. These conditions are to ensure plans are legally compliant and take account of wider policy considerations. The conditions are:
1. they must have regard to national planning policy
  2. they must be in general conformity with strategic policies in the development plan for the local area (i.e. such as in a core strategy)
  3. they must be compatible with EU obligations and human rights requirements.
- 5.11 An independent qualified person then checks that a neighbourhood development plan or order appropriately meets the conditions before it can be voted on in a local referendum. This is to make sure that referendums only take place when proposals are workable and of a decent quality. Proposed neighbourhood development plans or orders need to gain the approval of a majority of voters of the neighbourhood to come into force. If proposals pass the referendum, the local planning authority is under a legal duty to bring them into force.

## Enhancing the Town Centre

- 5.12 Notwithstanding that some communities see neighbourhood planning as a way of protecting the status quo and preventing unwanted housing development, for example, the Government's view is that a neighbourhood plan is the vehicle whereby a local community or council can direct growth in ways that meet local aspirations. Blyth has traditionally been pro-growth – “We Grow by Industry” – and so in principle it might be a candidate for a neighbourhood plan, which could be prepared by the Town Council. However, I would suggest that consideration be given to the following matters if such a course of action is to be contemplated.

(a) What sort of growth is likely or is being sought?

5.13 The current Core Strategy Local Plan Consultation Document sets out the kind of housing and employment growth that might be likely and sought in Blyth, and I set it out in more detail in the next Section.

5.14 The main areas of new housing development would have to be on the western and/or south western edges of the town as, unless major brownfield sites come forward elsewhere, this is where the available land is located. This development will need to be planned in detail. The typical mechanisms for doing this are development briefs or Supplementary Planning Documents. There will undoubtedly be interest in out-of-centre or edge of town retailing to serve the new estates, and this will need close control in order to protect the vitality and viability of established centres, particularly the Town Centre. This requires a combination of proactive planning for such services, and robust Local Plan policies to protect the Town Centre. There will be some growth in employment, including in the Port zone (where some development is subject to Local Development Orders or is operational port development that does not need planning permission).

5.15 The options for growth are relatively limited and fairly clear cut, and require master planning and active development management. They do not strike me as being the kind of prospects that might be readily amenable to, or benefit greatly from, neighbourhood planning on the town scale.

5.16 Looking at the Town Centre itself, the possibility of new private investment in retail development seems remote at the moment. The key issues seem to me to relate to managing existing assets better, developing partnerships with interested parties and making plans for when, hopefully, investment activity will increase. Such plans will be contingent on various matters about which there can be limited certainty at this time. These conditions do not seem to me to be particularly favourable for the preparation of a neighbourhood plan just for the Town Centre, however it is defined.

(b) What resources are needed to carry out a neighbourhood plan?

5.17 Undertaking a neighbourhood plan on a town-wide or even town centre basis is a major undertaking that requires the deployment of considerable resources over an extended period of time, not to mention the need to secure a majority in a referendum. I am aware that a neighbourhood plan is being prepared for Alnwick, but this is a significantly smaller settlement than Blyth. The largest settlement for which I am aware of a neighbourhood plan being adopted is Thame in South Oxfordshire. Thame is an affluent town of historic interest that has a small market. The parish as a whole has 11,000 people and needs to allocate land for a further 600 dwellings. The neighbourhood plan runs to some 90 pages and it was prepared by the Town Council.

5.18 I would urge that a careful appraisal be made of the resource needs of embarking on similar exercise in Blyth.

(c) What are the key priorities of the Town Council with respect to the Town Centre?

5.19 In my view this is the key matter for the Town Council to be clear on when considering both initiatives under the Localism Act and inputs to the Core Strategy being prepared by the County Council. This matter is beyond my remit, I have not been briefed on it, and it is in any case a matter for the Town Council's own deliberations. I would however counsel that, in the particular circumstances of Blyth and the Town Centre, it is the priorities for action that should form the context for thoughts on the usefulness of the Localism Act, rather than the other way round.

## 6 How might the provisions of the emerging Northumberland Local Plan Core Strategy assist in revitalising the Town Centre?

- 6.1 The Local Plan Core Strategy will form the planning context for investment decisions in the Town Centre for several years, once it is adopted. The provisions of this Plan will therefore be an essential, but not sufficient, component in aspirations to revitalise the Town Centre.

### Core Strategy Local Plan Consultations

- 6.2 The Plan is currently going a rather complex multi-stage process. The main ones of most relevance to this Report are as follows:

#### Preferred Options – Stage 1

- 6.3 Following consultation on Issues and Options in summer 2012, consultation took place in March and February this year on 57 draft policies. These covered such matters as affordable housing; windfall employment development; tourism; minerals and waste; renewable energy; transport; community facilities; the natural and historic environment; and – of most direct relevance to this Report – Town Centres and retailing. The Town Centre boundary map and retail policies included in earlier Sections of this Report are taken from this Stage of the process (pages 10 & 13-14).

#### Preferred Options – Stage 2

- 6.4 This is the present round of consultations, including a public meeting in Blyth on 27 November. This consultation document:
- defines the preferred level of housing and economic growth;
  - defines the broad distribution of development to deliver the strategy for Northumberland;
  - proposes the preferred approach to the Green Belt.
- 6.5 The housing and employment land data referred to earlier in my Report are taken from this document (pages 5 & 6).
- 6.6 The part of this consultation that specifically concerns Blyth is relatively short, and I paste it into my Report as an Annex, for Member's information (pages 33 & 34).
- 6.7 The County Council intends to publish a **full draft Core Strategy** early in 2014. This should enable the full range of potential provisions for Blyth to be seen in one document.

### Provisions relevant to the Town Centre

- 6.8 The two main aspects of how the provisions of the emerging Northumberland Local Plan

Core Strategy might assist in revitalising the Town Centre seem to me to be: by promoting the further growth and development of the Town as a whole; and by defining and protecting the existing Town Centre. These are both “enabling” or “facilitating” roles. Neither will be sufficient to ensure that the Town Centre actually is revitalised or develops its potential, but both are necessary.

### **Promoting the growth and development of the Town**

6.9 The **October 2013 Consultation Document** confirms that the preferred strategic development option for Northumberland is “planning for economic growth”. This is then developed further by showing how both investment in businesses and working age migrants will be attracted into the County. The means by which this will be achieved include providing a portfolio of high quality and well-located sites, including in the BEREZ initiative; and supporting improvements to transport and telecommunications infrastructure and the County's gateways to international growth (such as the Port of Blyth).

6.10 The strategy focuses on the main towns but, other than the short section included in the Annex, says little about how the development will be allocated within the towns. Locationally, the map in the Annex at the end of this Report shows the areas broadly identified for the future major growth of the Town. They will be familiar to those aware of the planning history of the town over the past 20 years or so. I consider that the options shown are generally realistic at a strategic level and should be supported.

6.11 Moreover, it is essential that means are found of encouraging people into the Town Centre, given its peripheral location and its current attractions. One aspect of this is to ensure that the Transport provisions of the Core Strategy Local Plan, and subsequent decisions on major planning applications, seek to ensure improved connections between the outskirts of the Town and the Town Centre. Transport was among the topics included at the Preferred Options – Stage 1 consultation in February 2013. However, that document has no specific policies about improving transport connectivity within Blyth, other than:

a reference to comments being received that support developing a business case for a new link between Rotary Way and the A189 to improve access to Blyth to address congestion on Cowpen Road and support expected growth, particularly at the Blyth Estuary Renewable Energy Zone; and

a reference in Policy 44 that support will be given to the improvement of Northumberland's Strategic Highway Routes and to other road schemes identified in the Local Transport Plan.

6.12 The **Local Transport Plan** includes a commitment to “Investigate the development of a major scheme business case for Blyth Central Link Road” (page 4 of the Implementation Plan till 2015). Paragraphs 6.22 and 6.48 respectively of the Local Transport Plan Strategy 2011-2026 say:

*The A193 Cowpen Road corridor already experiences significant traffic congestion and unreliability during peak periods. The main bottleneck is the Coniston Road/Tynedale Drive signalised junction and the section between this and the junction with the A189 Spine Road. These problems are set to significantly worsen*

*with the construction of new homes and commercial developments in Blyth. This could affect the continued economic growth and prosperity of Blyth and South East Northumberland as a whole. Considerable network interventions are required to accommodate this traffic and to allow the continued growth and regeneration of the town. In the short term, capacity improvements to the A193 Cowpen Road are required to allow the town to grow and develop. In the longer term, more radical measures would be required such as the construction of a new link road to the A189 Spine Road.*

And:

*The Council will continue to progress proposals for the Blyth Central Link Road during the period of LTP3 which would see a new link being created between Rotary Way and a new junction on the A189 Spine Road. This would help ease congestion in the Blyth area particularly on the A1061 and Cowpen Road. It is anticipated that a new road link in this location will support proposals for the development of Blyth, the Growth Point sites and the BEREZ.*

- 6.13 The LTP includes other matters relevant to the Town, including improvements to the bus station; the Ashington, Blyth and Tyne railway line; and Blyth Active Travel Town initiative.
- 6.14 The present Consultation Document (Stage 2, October 2013) comments that “there are some issues with localised traffic congestion in Blyth and at key highway junctions at peak times”; and that “there are opportunities from the reintroduction of passenger rail services to the Ashington, Blyth and Tyne line”.
- 6.15 The **County's Economic Strategy** says that, in terms of creating conditions for growth, weight should be given to “providing strategic transport structure such as the South East Northumberland Link Road, business sites and premises, and investment in superfast broadband”. The Economic Strategy does not elaborate on what this Link Road will connect, but it does include the commitment that, as the economy recovers, the County “will regenerate and develop economic hubs which maximise public and private sector investment including ... Blyth Town Centre Renewal” (op cit, page 22).
- 6.16 The repeated references to improving access into the town from the Spine Road, and within Blyth to relieve congestion on Cowpen Road, are to be welcomed. Neither of these ideas is new – indeed the old Town Map for Blyth Municipal Borough showed a new road linking from Cowpen Road, along the south side of Cowpen Estate, through the Isabella area and to Broadway Circle. A potential line for this route is shown on the Blyth Valley District Plan Proposals Map. It is significant that the policy that supports this route, Policy M9, is “saved”, and thus is still part of the formal development plan for the town. I consider that it is essential that the line continue to be protected formally, if this intention is to be retained as an option for future investment. It is the type of project that, so long as the route is protected, might be funded (to some extent at least) on the back of major peripheral development, as being needed to tie this into the rest of the town and support the vitality and viability of the Town Centre. A section 106 obligation would be one way to achieve this outcome.

- 6.17 What is evident from this trawl through County documents is that there is no one place where one can find the full picture for Blyth. Nor is it evident that a holistic approach has been taken to the needs of the town and the role of the Town Centre within it, drawing together land use, economic development and transportation. (This approach may have been taken, but it cannot readily be seen from the dispersal of topic-based issues for the town in several different publications.)
- 6.18 The full draft Core Strategy that the County Council intends to publish early in 2014 should provide the opportunity for the full range of potential provisions for Blyth to be seen in one document. I encourage representations to be made to this effect. Otherwise it is not clear how the Town Centre's connectivity will be improved to the outer suburbs and employment, where the main growth areas are located. In addition, it is difficult to show prospective investors in the town what are the overall prospects for growth and development.

### **Policies specific to the Town Centre**

- 6.19 This topic is covered in the main Sections above on What is the Town Centre? There, I have set out the issues regarding the Town Centre boundary and the policies that would apply within it (the policies are on pages 13 & 14). Again, it is to be hoped that the consolidated Core Strategy document expected early next year will enable the full range of policy implications for the Town Centre to be seen in one place in the consolidated document.
- 6.20 There is a particular issue in Blyth Town Centre, which I am sure is not unique in Northumberland in this respect, and that is the potential to use unoccupied upper floors for **residential purposes**. I understand that there are institutional and other constraints on such development, including insurance difficulties. However, one of the key ways of ensuring that people are likely to use the town centre services is for them to live there. This has been an issue along the southern side of the Town Centre for many years. An earlier proposal for upper floor housing in the Hedley Young building indicated what might be possible, but unfortunately the company concerned was unable to proceed. The only reference I could find to town centre housing at the moment is in relation to parking standards. Appendix B of the February Consultation Document says that lower parking standards will apply in defined urban areas such as town centres, where public parking is available and/or there is good access to established public transport corridors. Town Centre housing is a matter that might usefully be included in the Core Strategy Local Plan, either in the section on Housing or among the Town Centre policies. It is also one of a number of "soft measures" that could be taken forward at a local level.

### **Assisting in the revitalisation of the Town Centre**

- 6.21 People will be encouraged to use the Town Centre if:

they live there;

they work there; or

there are other attractions to draw them there, whether retailing or other.

- 6.22 All three aspects need to be addressed in the Local Plan Core Strategy, but at this stage in the process, it is not clear how this is being done. Moreover, investors may be encouraged to consider the Town Centre (and its environs) more seriously if they can see clearly how these objectives are being met. At present, I do not see the Core Strategy Local Plan being as helpful in this respect as it might be. It is not necessarily so much that the policy intentions are not there, but that it is difficult to understand the picture for as a whole for Blyth and the Town Centre when the document is organised on a topic basis. Thus I consider that the Local Plan Core Strategy could assist more positively in revitalising the Town Centre, through its presentation and structure, and it is to be hoped that some progress towards this will be achieved in the next document that is due to be published early in 2014.
- 6.23 This to me also highlights the importance of County level policies being supported and “energised” by softer, management measures, both within the Town Centre, and in informing people of and promoting to them the Centre's attractions.

## 7 Concluding Remarks

- 7.1 I hope it is clear from each of the Main Sections what my conclusions are in respect to the four specific matters included in the Brief.
- 7.2 My interviews with planners and business people involved with the Town Centre were helpful in providing a context for the consideration of these specific matters. However, they also gave insights into the overall health and prospects for the Town Centre. Interestingly, those most closely connected with day-to-day matters seemed to be more optimistic than those more removed from them. But those more involved day-to-day were also acutely aware of certain matters that need to be addressed.
- 7.3 These matters fell more within the general scope of “town centre management” than “strategic policy”, and concerned the type of issues that can show up in a town centre health check. Among these matters are the following:

The parlous state of the market and the fact that, for much of the week, the traditional heart of the Town Centre is a rather large, often bleak open space. The enhancement of both the market and other uses of the Market Place is regarded as a high priority that could contribute significantly to the revitalisation of the Town Centre.

The value of improving shop fronts to enhance the general appearance and vibrancy of the Town Centre. The achievements of the Townscape Heritage Initiative were very positively regarded, and it is hoped that this kind of initiative, and investment in the public realm, will be able to continue.

The presence of certain prominent vacant premises detracts materially from the Town Centre. There is a cluster of these along or near Regent Street, while the largest and most prominent is the former Coop building on Waterloo Road. A variety of measures could be considered, both short term/interim (such as art works or displays in shop windows) and longer term (working with development partners to bring in new users).

While improving the retail offer of the Town Centre is important, it is also important to attract non-retail uses that will diversify the range of attractions and the times of day/week when people will visit the centre. Making connections with employment and other developments in the Quayside Area can also benefit the overall health of the Town Centre.

The presence of significant numbers of small independent businesses is a feature of the Town Centre. These have the potential to offer high class customer service, compared to the multiples, and, perhaps with encouragement, to improve their offers through such things as more flexible trading hours and online services.

Locally grounded partnerships will be essential to taking the Town Centre forward, especially as the number of district-wide and regional agencies is much less than in the past. Such bodies as the Town Team provide a vehicle for this, and the full range of town centre businesses should be encouraged to participate for the common good.

- 7.4 It might be helpful in conclusion to share some of the research findings of the National Retail Planning Forum ([www.nrpf.org.uk](http://www.nrpf.org.uk)). Researchers recognise the “chicken and egg” problem that faces smaller and traditional town centres. Stated simply, this is that potential customers need shops to attract them – but it is shops that attract customers in the first place – and investors will not invest without evidence of shoppers. Retail growth is thus usually evolutionary, but it can be stimulated.
- 7.5 The chicken and the egg have to be tackled simultaneously. At the macro level, efforts need to be made to:
- increase available consumer spending power (e.g. reduce “leakage”);
  - address the economic fundamentals of the town as a whole (e.g. employment and housing growth, and connectivity with the Town Centre);
  - prepare and implement a long term town-wide strategy; and
  - seek to cross a threshold to a higher level.
- 7.6 At the micro level, it is necessary to change investors' and customers' perceptions by marketing the town centre. There is a four-step approach:
- undertake market research (the Town Centre Audit);
  - design the 'product' (the Town Centre Action Plan);
  - production of the 'product' (implement the Action Plan in partnership); and
  - sell the 'product' (targeted promotion).
- It is significant that “promotion” is the last stage, and is not something that will of itself turn round the fortunes of an ailing town centre.
- 7.7 This approach is incorporated into a way forward for smaller centres. Some of this advice may be helpful in Blyth Town Centre, albeit this is a relatively large centre within the Northumberland context. The suggestions include:
- (a) begin by formulating a realistic strategy (the Town Centre Audit and Action Plan), and implement it in partnership.
  - (b) Develop local vision, niche markets, 'personality' and branding: seek to complement what is available, not necessarily compete with it.
  - (c) Attract, nurture and develop independent businesses, and provide them with low cost business support services.
  - (d) Get right the basics of accessibility, parking, public transport, pedestrian linkages, etc.
  - (e) Ensure excellence in customer service.
  - (f) Support and grow internet selling by local retailers.
  - (g) The local planning authority pro-actively to apply the “sequential approach” and create town centre or edge-of-centre development opportunities.
  - (h) Seek higher density mixed use developments in new formats.
  - (i) Resist damaging out-of-centre developments and limit competing attractions in superstores (e.g. pharmacy, post office, dry cleaner, news agency sales).

7.8 Finally, in addition to these suggestions and to my findings with respect to each of the four specific matters in the Brief, my concluding reflections arising from this Report are as follows:

- (1) there is much that could be done to improve the Town Centre as it currently is;**
- (2) preparations should continue to be made for when, hopefully, investment prospects will improve;**
- (3) partnerships with public and private sector interests, and with public support, are essential; and**
- (4) the Town Centre, and the Town as a whole, needs locally grounded advocacy.**

## ANNEX – NORTHUMBERLAND CORE STRATEGY LOCAL PLAN – PREFERRED OPTIONS 2: HOUSING, EMPLOYMENT AND GREEN BELT

### Blyth

**9.27** The preferred strategy for Blyth is for strategic, targeted growth in line with its role as a Main Town and its contribution to the overall competitiveness of the County. The level of development proposed would be above past delivery rates and beyond projected sub national population levels projections levels, but at a level below that required by current development plan policy.

**9.28** This reflects the fact that a number of the sites around the Blyth Estuary, previously identified as potential housing sites, will no longer come forward for housing development but for large scale employment uses to support the role of Blyth as a hub for the low carbon, and off-shore sectors. The level of housing growth proposed would still enable Blyth to fulfil its role, with 3,480 dwellings proposed over the plan period.

**9.29** Blyth has not delivered housing growth in the numbers anticipated in current development plan policy. It has however delivered a steady flow of new dwellings in recent years.

**9.30** The SHLAA identifies deliverable and developable sites with the capacity to accommodate almost 2,790 dwellings. This includes land within the town on previously developed land, some of which has consent for significant housing schemes such as the former Wellesley Children's Home, Blyth Links and the former Bates Colliery.

**9.31** A large site to the west of the town at Chase Farm also benefits from planning permission, and while a number of units have been constructed here already, the site is considered a strategic location for future housing, with the capacity to accommodate an additional 700 dwellings.

**9.32** Another strategic growth area, with a capacity to accommodate approximately 1,000 dwellings is located at South Newsham. Development here will add to the existing housing offer, be well located for schools, and have good access to bus services and the strategic road network. Development would enhance the viability of the Ashington, Blyth and Tyne railway line, with new and existing developments benefiting, should passenger services be reintroduced and a rail halt provided.

**9.33** Employment land within Blyth is largely located on the northern and eastern outskirts of the town, running along the banks of the river Blyth to the north and towards Blyth Harbour to the east. Whilst there are limited opportunities for expansion of existing employment areas, Blyth, and Cambois to the north, offer large-scale strategic development opportunities, which are being promoted to the low carbon and renewable sectors, advanced manufacturing, off-shore sectors and Port related activity.

**9.34** An additional allocation of 5 hectares of employment land is proposed to the south of Bebside. Given the coal resource within the area there will be a requirement to explore whether it is feasible and environmentally acceptable to extract the coal so as not to sterilise the resource. While this location was also considered for strategic housing growth, the location, next to the A189 spine road with good access to the highway network is more

suited to employment land. Land towards the roundabout on the A1061 and A192 to the west of Blyth was considered as an alternative for employment land. However, this location is considered somewhat detached from Blyth and may result in a coalescence of Cramlington and Blyth.

#### Discounted options for Blyth

**9.35** A range of alternative future development options have been considered. If the Council were to plan for the level of development required to meet sub national population projections this would require 2,940 new dwellings over the plan period.

**9.36** While development at this level would result in a significant population increase, it is not considered sufficient to revitalise the town, support the employment aspirations of the area or re-balance the ageing population. Higher levels of development, which would be required by existing policies, may not be deliverable in Blyth. Additional land would be required and an over-supply of housing may result in market failure. The direction of growth is constrained by the sea and River Blyth and the Green Belt.

