Town Centre Review 2012
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1. Introduction

As part of the preparation of the Local Development Framework Allerdale Borough Council will be reviewing its existing policy with regards to Town Centres and retail development. As part of this review, the Council will set locally distinctive policies in relation to:

- the definition of boundaries and frontages within its town centres; and
- the floorspace threshold for scale of edge-of-centre and out-of-centre development which should be subject to an Impact Assessment.

This document summarises the investigative work carried out as part of this review and highlights relevant evidence that will be used to inform the preparation of these new policies, from the following sources:

- Town Centre Health Checks (2011)
- West Cumbria Retail Study (2009)
- Site visits (October/November 2011)

2. National Policy

Whilst the Draft National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) is currently under consultation, Planning Policy Statement 4 (PPS4) remains the extant national policy.

The Government recognises that town centres are important places for communities. Planning Policy Statement 4 (PPS4) states that the principal objective of national policy for town and other centres is to promote their vitality and viability. This means ensuring that existing centres are alive and busy, at different times of the day and evening throughout the week, and that they are attractive to businesses and investors both economically and environmentally. In order that polices may be set which protect and enhance the vitality and viability of town centres, it is necessary that the spatial boundaries and physical limits of the centres are defined and documented.

PPS4 states that Local Planning Authorities (LPA) should clearly outline the extent of town centres within their plan area, within which realistically defined primary and secondary frontages can be set. Once defined, it should be made clear which uses will be permitted in such locations.

PPS4 also states that LPA’s should consider setting locally distinctive thresholds, to which the impact test (EC16.1) would apply for proposals in edge-of-centre or out-of-centre locations. Where a local threshold is not set, PPS4 requires impact
assessments to be submitted for retail and leisure developments over 2,500 sq.m gross.

Whilst Planning Policy Statement 4 (PPS4) remains the extant national policy, the Draft National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) is currently under consultation and expected to be adopted in spring 2012. It is therefore important to consider the emerging national policy direction from this document.

The draft NPPF maintains the current ‘town centre’s first’ principle and continues to direct LPA’s to define town centre boundaries and frontages. It also recommends the introduction of a locally defined threshold to which the Impact Assessment should apply. Therefore, at present, there is no indication of a shift in national policy and this review of town centre boundaries, frontages and thresholds is considered relevant and necessary in the course of the preparation of the LDF.

3. Local Policy

3.1 Cumbria & Lake District Joint Structure Plan (JSP) - 2001 - 2016

The JSP recognises the importance of mixed uses within town centres and sets out policies which seek to secure and promote the sustainability of communities. The sequential approach for retail and leisure development in edge or out-of-centre locations is supported, however the requirements for compliance are mainly related to the assessment of ‘need’, which has now been revoked from national policy and accessibility issues.

3.2 Allerdale Local Plan (1999)

The Allerdale Local Plan (1999) follows the ‘town centre’s first’ approach as based upon national guidance at the time of its production (PPG6 - 1996). As such existing local town centre policies relate mainly to the development of retail and shopping services and do not refer to other relevant town centre uses such as leisure, culture or office developments.

Policy RG2 sets out the need for sequential assessments of out-of-centre retail development, however the requirements for compliance relate mainly to shopping services and accessibility. There are currently no thresholds set for the requirement of an Impact Assessment and the test is not required for leisure, cultural or office developments.

Policy ARG1 allocates an area of car parking land as suitable for retail development; this allocation has never been taken up.
4 Aspatria Town Centre - Existing Boundary & Uses

Figure 0-1 - Aspatria does not currently have a defined town centre limit within the Allerdale Local Plan (1999)

The Allerdale Local Plan (1999) does not define a designated town centre area within Aspatria. The reasons stated for this were because of the town’s minor role as a local service centre, its subservient role to the towns of Wigton, Workington and Carlisle and the ‘strung out’ nature of its shops.

Evidence gathered as part of the Allerdale Town Centres Health Check (2011) provides up to date information regarding the existing distribution of uses throughout Aspatria town centre area. When recorded spatially, the data can be used to create a table of ground floor units by different use types for individual streets. This process allows an initial identification of the town centre boundary. Higher proportion of A1 retail uses will suggest the areas suited to primary frontage policies. Areas with a higher diversity of uses will be identifiable for secondary frontages.
Figure 0-2 - Existing distribution of uses in Aspatria Town Centre (Allerdale Town Centres Health Check 2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Units</th>
<th>% of Total (93)</th>
<th>Av Floorspace - sq.m</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Main Street (A596)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vacant</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Units</th>
<th>% of Total (93)</th>
<th>Av Floorspace - sq.m</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outgang Road cluster</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vacant</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*School should not be counted towards floorspace
5 Assessment of Aspatria Town Centre 2011

This section sets out the council’s assessment of existing town centre boundaries informed by evidence gathered through the Town Centre Health Checks (2011) and site visits carried out in October 2011.

5.1 Western Boundary

The western limits of Aspatria’s centre does not include a natural limit, however, evidence suggests that there is potential to logically define the boundaries reflecting current use. The area extending along West Street is primarily residential prior to the health facilities and dispensary chemist at the far west of the area indicated above. The south side of the street is characterised by residential properties, a large guesthouse in addition to a vacant employment site. While the character of West Street is not overly dominated by retail or other town centre uses the area logically suggests a western boundary with the community facilities on the north site and the vacant site on the southern.
5.2 Northern and Central Boundary

The central area of Aspatria along Outgang road is characterised by community use including Beacon Hill Community School and the library. In addition there is also a mix of use over the rest of the area including a gym, public house and café. It is considered that the area has many of the key characteristics indicating that it should, in part be included in the Aspatria Town Centre.

5.3 Eastern Boundary

The eastern area includes the highest concentration of businesses in addition to a high proportion of residential. Again there are no natural boundaries with businesses and other units distributed along King Street, not extending to the adjoining streets.
The area is also characterised by a number of vacant properties and business units. King Street includes the several convenience stores, drinking establishments and a larger Co-op supermarket. The distribution of businesses along the central street suggests a potential to draw boundaries taking in the properties either side of the road.

6 Proposed Town Centre Boundary

The current Local Plan does not designate a town centre boundary within Aspatria. There is sufficient evidence to suggest that this has led to the further deterioration of the town centre function due to the allowance of sporadic shop conversions into residential units along the length of the main street. Furthermore, the small number of town centre units that remain are also spread along a significant distance making it difficult to achieve a critical mass of businesses that make for an attractive shopping or leisure destination. Therefore, it is considered that the introduction of a town centre boundary in Aspatria, along with protective and supportive town centre policies would be a positive motion towards restoring the centres vitality and viability.

The current nature and form of Aspatria’s main street suggests a long and tightly defined Town Centre Boundary. The current western boundary is drawn to take in the community health facility and the vacant unit on the south side of the street. The Town centre has been drawn to continue along the central area and Outgang Road, but excludes the whole of the school grounds. The continuation of town centre uses down King Street suggests that the eastern town centre boundary should reflect these uses and be drawn accordingly. In addition, evidence collected suggests the boundary should be drawn tightly to the existing properties adjoining the main road as the character and use of the town centre does not extend out, other than a distance up Outgang Road.
Figure 6-1– Proposed Town Centre Boundary

7 Shopping Frontages

Whilst the Town Centre Boundary represents the broad area of functional town centre including all uses, the guidance on the definition of the Primary Shopping Area is clear. PPS4 states that the Primary Shopping Area is the;

‘defined area where retail development is concentrated (generally comprising the primary and those secondary frontages which are contiguous and closely related to the primary shopping frontage)’.

Figure 7-1 below shows the main use classes by functional areas clearly demonstrating the relative importance of each use. Significantly residential is by far the most numerous use class in both areas with retail only accounting for a small proportion of Main Street.
Due to the low level of retail and discontinuous nature of the existing units it is considered that Aspatria does not require the designation of primary and secondary shopping frontages given the extent and character of the proposed town centre.

8 Thresholds - Impact Assessment

Aspatria town centre is characterised by small mainly independent businesses, with an average floorspace of 177 sq.m, while 46% of units are below 100 sq.m. Notable large units include The West Street Health Clinic (562 sq.m), Co-op supermarket (560 sq.m), Brandraw House B&B (307 sq.m), The Grapes Hotel (291 sq.m), the Sun Inn (372 sq.m), Precise Fitness (252 sq.m), and several large vacant units (both 268 sq.m).

National policy (PPS4) allows local planning authorities to set out specific floorspace thresholds in LDFs for edge of centre and out of centre development above which impact assessments will be required. Where authorities decide not to set out a specific floorspace threshold national policy requires Impact Assessments to be submitted for retail and leisure developments over 2,500 sq.m.

In setting such thresholds, the PPS states that important considerations include:

- the scale of known proposals relative to town centres;
- the existing vitality and viability of town centres;
- the cumulative effects of recent developments;
- the likely effects on a town centre strategy and;
- the impact on any other planned investment.

Given the size and nature of Aspatria and the considerations above it is clear that this threshold is excessive and the LDF should consider setting a more locally

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1 Category ‘Other’ includes any uses out with those listed such as: hot food take away, hotels, offices and Sui Generis.
distinctive level. Furthermore, a high vacancy rate combined with several unauthorised changes of use to residential while retaining shop frontage provide further evidence of the need to encourage new and protect existing uses within the town centre.

In order to inform the provision of a locally distinctive floorspace threshold, analysis of the typical scale of floorspace within the centre has been undertaken. The following charts show the level of floorspace currently occupied within Aspatria town centre for each Use Class (Figure 8-1) and each town centre category (Figure 8-2).

![Figure 8-1- Floorspace per Use Class](image)

![Figure 8-2- Floorspace per category](image)

Considering this evidence it is clear that a low threshold must be set to reflect the nature of businesses and the existing viability and vitality of the town centre. Therefore a threshold of 50sq. m is an considered appropriate level, however, following PPS4 there may be occasions where it may occasionally also be relevant to
consider the impact of proposals below this threshold, where the proposal is likely to have a disproportionate effect or ‘tip the balance’ of a vulnerable centre.

9 Markets

As part of the evidence gathering and in the evaluation of Aspatria’s Town Centre it is important to consider the need for all types of uses and forms of retail such as street market stalls. This review considered the need to identify a site that would be suitable for a market within Aspatria town centre, however, it was concluded that at the current time there is not an identified need for a street market. Furthermore, evidence shows that there are a number of vacant retail units in the centre areas as well as a high level of residential empty properties. A street market can be a good opportunity to increase trading and footfall within a town centre, adding to the retail offer. Given the current level of trading in Aspatria together with the degree of empty properties it suggests that if a market was established there potential to further erode and reduce in the viability of existing businesses, therefore, a location for a market is not identified.