Cockermouth 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 policies 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 2,500sq.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.

Policies RG7 - RG10 relate to the town centre as a whole and cover issues relating to non-retail uses; cultural and leisure facilities and use of upper floors within town centres. As in line with the national policy direction of the time, the main focus of the policies within the Local Plan is upon the protection of the retail presence within
the town centre. It is therefore considered that these policies are now out of date and require a full review.

Several area specific policies are allocated within the Allerdale Local Plan in relation to Cockermouth town centre. These include:

CCO1 This policy relates to the Conservation Area, of which Cockermouth town centre is entirely included. The policy states that re-use of buildings in courtyards and gardens of existing properties should conform to acceptable conservation standards. It is considered that inclusion of this policy within the town centre section of the LDF may simply duplicate policies within the Historic Environment section. Support for Conservation issues within town centres will be given in the Core Strategy element of the LDF. It is not recommended that this specific policy be carried forward to the Development Management section of the LDF.

CCO2 This policy relates to the potential of engineering operations to impact upon archaeological remains in the ground. It is considered that inclusion of this policy within the town centre section of the LDF may simply duplicate policies within the Historic Environment section. Support for Conservation issues within town centres will be given in the Core Strategy element of the LDF. It is not recommended that this specific policy be carried forward to the Development Management section of the LDF.

CRG1 This policy allocates the former Mitchells Auction Mart on Station Street for retailing. This allocation was taken up by Sainsburys store which is now trading successfully on this site.

CRG2 This policy relates to the Market Place, although this area was not designated within the town centre. The policy states that applications for uses other than retail or leisure will be resisted. It is considered that this policy will need to be revised for the LDF to include other appropriate town centre uses.
4. Cockermouth Town Centre - Existing Boundary & Uses

The existing Cockermouth town centre boundary, as defined in the Allerdale Local Plan (1999), encompasses the main shopping street of Main Street up to the natural boundary provided by the River Cocker, as well as the top end of Station Road.

Evidence gathered as part of the Allerdale Town Centres Health Check (2011) provides up to date information regarding the existing distribution of uses throughout Cockermouth town centre. 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 4-2 - Existing distribution of uses in Cockermouth Town Centre (Allerdale Town Centres Health Check 2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Street</th>
<th>Units</th>
<th>% of Total (245)</th>
<th>Av Floorspace - sq.m</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vacant</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Market Place / Kirkgate / Castlegate</th>
<th>Units</th>
<th>% of Total (245)</th>
<th>Av Floorspace - sq.m</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vacant</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Station Street / Challoner Street / South Street / Lorton Road

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Units</th>
<th>% of Total (245)</th>
<th>Av Floorspace - sq.m</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vacant</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Fairfield

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Units</th>
<th>% of Total (245)</th>
<th>Av Floorspace - sq.m</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vacant</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5  Assessment of Cockermouth 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 November 2011.

5.1  Northern Boundary

The current northern town centre boundary follows the back of the frontage properties along Main Street, however, evidence suggests that there is potential to re-define the boundaries to better reflect the natural boundary, current use and changing definition of town centre uses. Main Street is the Town’s main shopping street and this is reflected in the diversity of retail, services, drinking establishments and other town centre uses. As Figure 4-2 demonstrates, the area extending north from Main Street includes a large number of residential dwellings that were previously excluded from the town centre area. The River Cocker in the north represents a clear boundary and separates commercial and industrial premises from the town centre zone. The far west of this section does not have a natural boundary to the centre, however, the Trout Hotel represents the end of town centre uses on the northern side of main Street. On the south side of the road the situation is mirrored with town centre uses and character diminishing around this point. Evidence collected suggests the need to update Cockermouth’s town centre; extending westward and northwards to take in much of this section up to the River Cocker.
5.2 Eastern Boundary

The previous town centre boundary used the River Cocker to define the eastern edge, and as such the area of Market Street was excluded. The area to the east of the current boundary includes a range of uses, with a concentration of retail mainly along the south side of Market Street, and leisure uses such as restaurant, hotel and drinking establishments along the north side. The southern area also includes further leisure uses with the Kirkgate Centre and a social club. Evidence clearly suggests that the centre boundary be adjusted to better fit the uses by extending the zone across the Cocker Bridge and along Market Street. Furthermore, there is clear evidence to include the Kirkgate Centre and surrounding area.
5.3 Southern Boundary

The current boundary does not extend far south of Main Street other than the properties along Station Street and adjoining area. This area contains a large number of residential properties adjoining the Cocker and extending westwards towards Station Street and a bowling green. Station Street extends southwards from Main Street and is a clear continuation of the centre area with a concentration of retail on the west side and a more mixed pattern on the opposite where professional and financial services as well as retail units dominate. From the start of Station Road the character of uses changes with several sui generis uses such as auction rooms, a B8 storage and bulk retail units as well as several vacant units. Evidence from the Health Checks and the site visit provides a strong argument for extending the boundary to take in the southern area, extending the town centre boundary along Station Road, and east along Lorton Street. The nature of the residential area between Station Street and the Cocker does not suggest inclusion in the new town centre boundary.
5.4 Western Boundary

Figure 5.4 – Western Section: Sullart Street and South Street

The southern town centre boundary is currently formed by the north side of South Street taking in the Post Office Yard and Wilkinson’s Retail site. Given more recent development and change of use of the surrounding streets there is clear evidence to warrant a revision of boundaries. Most notable changes has been the development of Sainsbury’s supermarket in the large unit in the eastern extreme of this area, this has been developed with a large car park stretching west. A revised boundary is suggested by Fairfield Junior and Infants School on the adjoining site, while the presence of further retail uses (albeit garage related) indicates further scope of widening the definition to reflect the current character and usage. Additionally, the area around the corner of South/Sullart Street (west section) does not appear to have the character or usage consistent with the town centre therefore it is suggested that the boundary remain tightly defined by Main Street.
6 Proposed Town Centre Boundary

Figure 6.1 – Preferred Town Centre Boundary

The main changes are shown on the map above and include;

- Small adjustment of the western edge to extend taking in properties as far along as the Trout Hotel.
- Expansion northwards to take in much of the section up to the River Cocker;
- Expansion of the eastern centre boundary to better fit the uses extending the zone across the Cocker Bridge and along Market Street. Expansion southwards to include the Kirkgate Centre and surrounding area.
- Extension of southern boundary to take in the area along Station Road, and east along Lorton Street;
- Expansion of the town centre to include Sainsbury’s supermarket and adjoining retail units.

7 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. PPS6 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)’. 
7.1 Primary Shopping Frontages

Establishing the Primary Shopping Frontage Boundary is complex given the nature of the town centre, however, the level of evidence gathered has allowed conclusions to be drawn. Figure 7.1 below shows the main use classes by functional areas clearly demonstrating the relative importance of each use to the diversity and vitality.

![Figure 7.1 – Mix of use class](https://example.com/fig71.png)

Main Street plays an important role in Cockermouth Town Centre providing a large number of retail units (40% retail). Additionally, Station Street also plays an important role extending the primary retail area southwards (50% retail). Lastly, the area around Market Street also has a number of retail usages, however, the influence is reduced due to the diversity of use (32% retail).

Reflecting the current uses it is suggested that primary shopping frontage should be designated along a section of Main Street and Station Street, as Figure 7.1.2 demonstrates.

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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.
7.2 Secondary Frontages

Establishing secondary frontages provides opportunities to reflect the diversity of uses and other important shopping streets and parades within the town centre. Given the size and uses in Cockermouth Town Centre, and the nature of many of the streets it is suggested that there may be merit in designating secondary frontages. Together Figure 4-2 and 7.1 demonstrate that both the west and east extremes of Main Street, and a section of Market Street may be suitable to designate as secondary frontages. Figure 7.2 below shows the suggested approach.
8 Thresholds - Impact Assessment

Cockermouth town centre area is characterised by many local businesses and also several large national brands combining to provide a distinctive and locally important of retail offer. The diversity of both size and type of stores is reflected in the average retail floorspace which is approximately 161 sq.m with the majority (63%) of shops under 100 sq.m and 4% over 500 sq.m. Notable large units include Sainsbury’s (2,430 sq.m), The Trout Hotel (1,576 sq.m), West Cumberland Farmers (1,513 sq.m), Michells Auction (1,213 sq.m) Wilkinsons (1,167 sq.m), Carr of Cockermouth (storage) (898 sq.m), Leslie Cleland (624 sq.m) and The Conservative Club (548 sq.m). Furthermore, there are two large vacant units of over 500 sq. m. Analysis of the businesses highlights the diversity of town centre uses, in addition to the concentration of smaller independent and local businesses.

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 2,500sq.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 Cockermouth and the considerations above it is clear that this threshold is excessive and the LDF should consider setting a more locally distinctive level.

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 Cockermouth town centre for each Use Class (Figure 8.1) and each town centre category (Figure 8.2).
Therefore a threshold of 200sq. m is 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 evaluation of Cockermouth’s Town Centre it is important to consider the need for all types of uses and forms of retail such as street market stalls. A street market can be a good opportunity to increase trading and footfall within a town centre, adding to the retail offer. This review considered the need to identify a new site that would be suitable for a market within Cockermouth
town centre, however, as discussions with stakeholders revealed that there is an existing and successful market in operation, there is not the need to identify a new site at this point. The location is shown on Figure 9.1 below.