



North Somerset Local Plan 2041

Ensuring the vitality of our Town Centres

Topic Paper October 2025



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1. Introduction

- 1.1 This paper sets out the policy and context for Town Centres within North Somerset up to 2041. It looks at the national policy context, followed by current local policies and work which has and is being done to revitalise the centres of the main towns in North Somerset (Weston-super-Mare, Clevedon, Nailsea and Portishead) to ensure their continued vitality and viability.

2. National policy and trends

National Planning Policy Framework

- 2.1 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) represents the Government's planning policies. It is a material consideration in plan making and decision taking. The most up-to-date iteration of the NPPF was published in December 2024 and sets out the national planning policies for England and how these should be applied.
- 2.2 The NPPF advocates a 'town centres first' approach and requires planning policies to positively promote competitive town centre environments and manage the growth of centres over the plan period. In planning for town centres Local Planning Authorities should (NPPF paragraph 90):
- a) define a network and hierarchy of town centres and promote their long-term vitality and viability – by allowing them to grow and diversify in a way that can respond to rapid changes in the retail and leisure industries, allows a suitable mix of uses (including housing) and reflects their distinctive characters;
 - b) define the extent of town centres and primary shopping areas, and make clear the range of uses permitted in such locations, as part of a positive strategy for the future of each centre;
 - c) retain and enhance existing markets and, where appropriate, re-introduce or create new ones;
 - d) allocate a range of suitable sites in town centres to meet the scale and type of development likely to be needed, looking at least ten years ahead. Meeting anticipated needs for retail, leisure, office and other main town centre uses over this period should not



be compromised by limited site availability, so town centre boundaries should be kept under review where necessary;

e) where suitable and viable town centre sites are not available for main town centre uses, allocate appropriate edge of centre sites that are well connected to the town centre. If sufficient edge of centre sites cannot be identified, policies should explain how identified needs can be met in other accessible locations that are well connected to the town centre; and

f) recognise that residential development often plays an important role in ensuring the vitality of centres and encourage residential development on appropriate sites.

- 2.3 The Government's Planning Policy Guidance (which is not policy, but technical guidance) was last updated in 2019 and states (para 1) that:

“Local planning authorities can take a leading role in promoting a positive vision for these areas, bringing together stakeholders and supporting sustainable economic and employment growth. They need to consider structural changes in the economy, in particular changes in shopping and leisure patterns and formats, the impact these are likely to have on individual town centres, and how the planning tools available to them can support necessary adaptation and change.”

- 2.5 The guidance also encourages “pop up”/meanwhile uses and expansion of the evening and night time economies to increase economic activity and provide additional employment within town centres.

Changes to the Use Class Order and potential impact on town centres

- 2.6 Introduced in September 2020, Use Class E brought together a number of former uses under one broad ‘commercial, business and service’ heading and permits more flexible changes of use between shops, restaurants, cafés, clinics, crèches, banks, offices, light industrial, indoor sports to another (or multiple and changing uses across the whole day) use within the use class E. It covers many of the activities traditionally found in high streets or town centres and is intended to support flexibility and diversity and help high streets and town centres better respond to the negative consequences of the Covid-19 Pandemic (noting that external changes to premises will likely require planning permission if not permitted by the General Permitted Development Order).



- 2.7 Bringing these uses together and allowing movement between them gives businesses greater freedom to adapt to changing circumstances and to respond more quickly to the needs of their communities.
- 2.8 This applies to any Class E use wherever located, so is not just relevant to town centres.

Permitted Development Rights

- 2.9 Permitted development rights allowing the change of use in England from any use, or mix of uses, within the Commercial, Business and Service use class (Class E) to residential use (Class C3) were introduced under Class MA of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development etc.) (England) Order 2021, coming into effect in August 2021.
- 2.10 Since amendments made in March 2024, there is no longer a size limit on the amount of floorspace that can be converted, and the previous requirement for a building to be vacant for at least three months before an application has also been removed. However, the building must still have been in Class E use for a minimum of two continuous years prior to the application.
- 2.11 Permission is granted through a streamlined prior approval process, with consideration limited to specific matters, namely: flood risk, contamination, transport and access impacts, noise from surrounding commercial premises, the provision of adequate natural light to habitable rooms, the impact of the loss of a registered health service, and—within Conservation Areas—the impact of the loss of a ground floor Class E use. Fire safety is also considered where the building is over 18 metres in height or more than seven storeys.

Sectoral Changes

Convenience sector

- 2.12 There have been a number of recent changes in the retail sector, with Covid-19 also having an impact on shopping patterns. The recent trend for smaller “express-type” supermarkets close to where people live/work is continuing with only Aldi and Lidl expanding their number of stores in preference to improving the offer within stores.



Comparison sector

- 2.13 This sector has seen a dramatic change with the closure of retail chains within North Somerset such as BHS (Weston Town Centre) and all stores within the Arcadia umbrella (Top Shop, Top Man, Dorothy Perkins, Evans and Burton) all of which other than Evans being previously present in Weston-super-Mare Town Centre. These chains have been sold to online operators such as Boohoo and ASOS. The closure of Wilko left another gap in Weston-super-Mare Town Centre. Other operators such as Marks and Spencer have moved out of Weston Town Centre favouring an M&S simply food outlet in an out of centre retail park.
- 2.14 These closures have changed the face of our high streets and town centres. In particular, Weston-super-Mare Town Centre out of the four North Somerset towns has been most affected by these changes and has seen a significant shift in the type of retailer present. In many cases, if these units have been taken up they are by discount or low value retailers, or the now ubiquitous coffee shops.

Online and click and collect

- 2.15 The trend in online shopping has continued to grow putting additional pressure on the traditional high streets and town centres. Click and collect using partner stores/locations also removes the need for a physical store presence in many cases.

Covid -19

- 2.16 The shift to home working during the pandemic led to more local shopping where a local option was available, with a corresponding reduction in town centre shopping in many cases. There has been an increase in vacant town centre units such as within the Sovereign centre in Weston-super-Mare.
- 2.17 More recently there has been some rebalancing of this trend but hybrid working is still prevalent amongst office workers meaning less footfall in town centres than prior to the Covid -19 pandemic.



Summary of national policy and structural changes in relation to Town Centres

- 2.18 The concept of identifying a Town Centre hierarchy, Town Centre area, primary shopping area and a sequential approach to locating Town Centre uses is still embedded in National Policy and guidance (an approach which the current policy framework in North Somerset follows - as set out below).
- 2.19 However, with recent greater flexibility over changes of use within Town Centres and less emphasis on retail as a core Town Centre use, typical frontage policies have become less relevant. Although local planning authorities can still exert control over new uses/buildings within Town Centres (for example allow retail over other uses in a primary shopping frontage), once the use is in place there is no ability to restrict this to retail or any other use.
- 2.20 Town centres are redefining themselves as places to meet and socialise as well as shop, with the changes resulting from Covid -19 now more bedded in. This has informed the Local Plan approach to Town Centre policy and retail/town centre use allocations.

3. North Somerset Town Centre policy and trends

Trends

- 3.1 North Somerset is served by four town centres: Weston-super-Mare, Clevedon, Nailsea and Portishead; four district centres; 22 local centres and various out of centre retail areas. There are also significant retail offerings in close proximity to North Somerset at Cribbs Causeway, Bristol City Centre and Taunton. Retail areas throughout the district are monitored annually to record any changes in occupancy and vacancy rates. The table below shows survey data from 2025.



Table 1: Retail Occupancy and Vacancy Rates for North Somerset Towns and Primary Retail Frontages 2025

Units/Town	Weston-super-Mare	Portishead	Clevedon	Nailsea
Total units	632	134	152	165
Vacant units	117	7	13	26
% of vacant units	19%	5.2%	8.6%	15.8%
Total PRF units	158	75	61	46
Vacant PRF units	29	5	6	5
% of vacant PRF units	18%	6.7%	9.8%	10.9%
% of total units in Ea use	33.2%	47%	38.8%	35.2%
% of total PRF units in Ea use	57.6%	52%	59.0%	65.2%

3.2 The existing adopted Core Strategy and Sites and Policies Plan Part 1: Development Management Policies (2016) retain primary shopping frontage policies as they were adopted prior to the most recent NPPF changes which removed this. For the sake of continuity until the emerging Local Plan is adopted the monitoring of town centre uses currently retains this distinction.

3.3 Despite changes to permitted development rights and the Use Class Order, the monitoring indicator remains that within Primary Retail Frontages (PRF) non-retail uses (i.e. all uses other than E(a) shops) should not exceed 30%, and vacant PRF units should not exceed 10%. On the 2025 snapshot, none of the four town centres meets the $\leq 30\%$



non-retail target: Weston-super-Mare 42.4% non-retail (E(a) 57.6% of 158 PRF units), Portishead 48% (E(a) 52% of 75), Clevedon 41.0% (E(a) 59% of 61), and Nailsea 34.8% (E(a) 65.2% of 46).

Existing Core Strategy approach

- 3.6 Core Strategy policy CS21 sets out a hierarchy of centres as required by the NPPF. The Sites and Policies Plan Part 1: Development Management Policies DM60-DM67 carry this forward to the detailed level and set out primary shopping areas, primary shopping frontages (a requirement of the previous version of the NPPF, although abandoned now) and the sequential approach to retail development.
- 3.7 The Core Strategy was originally adopted in 2012 but following a challenge, the housing requirement and related policies were remitted and the whole Core Strategy was finally adopted in April 2017. Retail policies remain unchanged from the originally adopted 2012 version.
- 3.8 In response to the retail studies undertaken no retail allocations were necessary or made outside of new development areas. Dolphin Square in Weston-super-Mare was identified as a mixed-use redevelopment opportunity and a supplementary planning document was produced to guide the masterplanning of the site. It has been partially redeveloped for a mixture of Town Centre uses as an extension to the High Street. Because of the change in fortunes of the retail and wider economy the remaining half of the proposed redevelopment has not come forward and is allocated for residential use.

Previous Consultation Stages of the Local Plan

- 3.9 The Preferred Options Local Plan approach to Town Centres carried forward the Core Strategy approach in line with the NPPF, but omitting a policy for the protection and retention of retail uses in shopping frontages, as this no longer formed part of the NPPF.
- 3.10 Draft policy LP7 set out the Town Centre hierarchy unchanged from the Core Strategy approach. Draft policies DP23 - DP28 reiterated adopted DM60-DM67 with the exception of the removal of the primary shopping frontage policy. As the Local Plan progressed, the retail policies were further refined and strengthened, becoming more clearly defined and consistent with national policy in the Regulation 19 consultation undertaken in autumn 2023.



- 3.11 Throughout the preparation of the Local Plan, consultation has generated only a very limited level of response to the town centre and retail policies, with the majority of comments expressing support for the approach taken. Suggestions for additional detail continued to be considered as the Plan progressed.

Employment Sites and Premises Study (October 2025)

- 3.12 A high level Employment Sites and Premises Study has been undertaken and published in October 2025 for North Somerset focusing on uses E(g), B2 and B8, but also including a high level retail analysis. This equated the additional numbers of jobs needed in the retail E(a) sector to future floorspace requirements. The estimated range of employment numbers is between 910 and 1,100.

Local Plan 2041 Town Centre allocations and policy approach

- 3.13 While some amendments have since been made to the retail policies, these primarily relate to improving clarity and effectiveness in line with the NPPF. The overall approach remains consistent, maintaining the same focus on supporting appropriate main town centre uses as defined in national policy, and applying the same sequential and impact tests. Given the continuing structural changes to retailing and the relatively low identified need for additional floorspace or employment, it is considered that the updated policies provide a proportionate and effective framework for assessing proposals over the plan period, without requiring additional site allocations.
- 3.14 The exception to this is the proposal for new Local Centres within the strategic development locations at Wolvershill (Policy LP1) and Woodspring, South West of Bristol (Policy LP2). These centres will accommodate a range of town centre uses to provide a focus for community activity and services within the new neighbourhoods.
- 3.15 North Somerset Council's alternative approach has therefore been to focus on placemaking rather than floorspace and on a wider set of measures which could make the most of our existing Town Centres, to enhance or repurpose sites including "meanwhile" temporary uses for vacant units or public realm enhancements.



Placemaking

- 3.16 In the face of the changing nature of our town centres North Somerset Council has undertaken Placemaking work. The visions, priorities and actions identified within the strategies are intended to feed into relevant council strategies and plans, including where appropriate the Local Plan. Details of the placemaking strategies are set out below.

Weston-super-Mare

- 3.17 Weston town centre has become the focus for investment with the redevelopment of Dolphin Square for leisure and hospitality uses and more recently through two Heritage Action Zones (HAZ) and the production of the Weston Placemaking Strategy.
- 3.18 The [Weston-super Mare Placemaking Strategy](#) sets out a vision and ambition for a ten-year programme of project delivery to help Weston become a healthier, greener, and more prosperous place to live, work and enjoy. It recognises the longer-term effects of the Covid -19 pandemic on the town centre and visitor economy and the move away from a retail focus within the town centre to more emphasis on the visitor/experience economy and recommends that this should be reflected in any development proposals for the town centre.
- 3.19 Much of Weston town centre lies within the Great Weston Conservation Area (Civic Quarter, High Street, Orchard Meadows and The Boulevard). Heritage plays an important role in creating an attractive and economically sustainable place. The restoration and improvement to the historic fabric such as the repair and re-use of historic buildings and enhancements to pedestrian and cycle routes into and around the town centre and to the seafront are important components of increasing the appeal of the Town Centre as a destination.
- 3.20 The Strategy was commenced before the pandemic however the impact of COVID-19 was considered as projects and programmes were developed. The ambition is that the Strategy will support the council and its partners to secure public funding and private investment to the town.
- 3.21 Regardless of the economic impact of Covid-19, residential and commercial values are low compared with the costs of construction and borrowing, such that the return on investment does not warrant the financial risk. Therefore, sites such as TJ Hughes (on the High Street) and Dolphin Square have sat vacant for several years with little progress on delivery. The intention is for a programme of placemaking activity and use of a high-quality new place identity to grow values over time, such



that investment can be attracted to deliver mixed use development. This could mean a series of lighter, quicker and cheaper projects that, while granular in scale, can derive a cumulative impact on value in the town.

- 3.22 Although lying at either end of the seafront and outside the town centre area the Tropicana and Birnbeck Pier provide important anchor points and a focus for uses and activities which can complement the town centre economy, extending the zone of activity out from the central area.
- 3.23 As well as a variety of actions around branding and use of assets, events, communications and concessions which may all impact on the perception of the Town Centre area as a thriving place to visit, work and live in the following actions are identified:-
- Encouraging housing on key sites and homes on upper floors.
 - Promoting independent retail and turning surplus retail space into homes, business premises, arts, cultural and community spaces
 - More and better quality homes within the town centre area by rebuild and re-use for rent or sale including affordable homes and improving the offer of the private rental sector.
 - Identifying sustainable future uses for key buildings such as the Tropicana and Old Magistrate's Court.
 - Potential repurposing of underused parts of the Sovereign Shopping Centre and car park.
 - Expansion of Weston College and University Centre Weston including additional student accommodation.
 - Carbon neutral infrastructure for safe cycling/walking and public transport, local renewable energy generation on buildings.
 - Rewilding planting routes down High Street and Orchard Street.
- 3.24 Proposals which contribute to public realm enhancements, increase the attractiveness and accessibility of the town centre and promote better connectivity between the seafront and High Street are supported in the Strategy and reinforced in the Pre-submission Plan (Reg 19), within Policy DP24 Town Centres.
- 3.25 Along and adjacent to the seafront priority will be given to entertainment, arts, culture and leisure uses, tourist facilities and accommodation. This includes redevelopment of the Tropicana, which has recently been granted consent. Policies also ensure that proposals should not prejudice the viability and vitality of the Primary Shopping Area and should complement activities in the town centre. Priority should continue be given to the re-use of underused sites.



Nailsea and Clevedon: Two Towns Placemaking Strategy

- 3.26 Draft placemaking strategies were produced for Nailsea and Clevedon between 2021 and 2022, but these were not adopted. Nevertheless, several of the urban design principles they explored have informed subsequent masterplanning and policy development.

Portishead

- 3.27 The Wyndham Way Development Area lies within the general Town Centre area of Portishead but outside the primary shopping area. Work commenced in 2020 to develop a [Wyndham Way Development Framework](#) which would promote better connectivity within the whole Wyndham Way area including the town centre, proposed railway station site and the marina. It is predominantly a large brownfield site, made up of numerous individual land ownerships and uses. Priorities are:-

- Introduce good planning urban design principles for 20 hectares of previously developed land within Portishead town centre.
- Make connections across the site, particularly for pedestrians and cyclists who are currently poorly served.
- Make the most of emerging improvements to public transport, including though MetroWest Phase 1b, the reopening of the Portishead to Bristol rail line and improved bus services.
- Ensure there is a supply of good quality workspace to increase the local employment capacity and meet the needs of existing and new ways of working.
- Provide new homes across multiple tenures including genuinely affordable housing.

- 3.28 The Development Framework document provides a framework for change including principles for green infrastructure, better connectivity and more efficient land uses across the area and which can co-ordinate change. This approach helps to set a clear direction of travel and coordinate designs so that they add up to deliver the vision. This includes planning the network of streets and spaces and considering different uses. It takes account of existing uses which may not change for a long time, as well as being flexible enough to allow landowners to develop a range of different options.

- 3.29 A delivery strategy has been prepared to identify how targeted interventions could accelerate development in the area. The findings of



this work have informed the Regulation 19 (Publication) version of the Local Plan 2041.

- 3.30 Local Plan policies have been drafted to ensure that development proposals adhere to the principles set out in the Development Framework.

Conclusion in relation to placemaking at the four Town Centres

- 3.31 While each town centre has distinct opportunities and challenges, several overarching placemaking principles continue to inform town centre policy in the Local Plan. These include:
- Enhancing the distinctive character and identity of each town centre, respecting the heritage and form of existing buildings.
 - Making efficient use of land through higher densities on underused sites and the re-use of upper floors to increase footfall and vitality.
 - Supporting development that creates active frontages and visual interest at street level.
 - Delivering public realm improvements and prioritising walking, cycling and accessibility to create attractive, legible centres.
 - Encouraging retail, leisure and complementary uses that generate activity throughout the day and evening in a way that is safe and reinforces local character.
- 3.32 Detailed placemaking guidance for Weston-super-Mare is set out in the Weston Placemaking Strategy, while the Wyndham Way Framework provides a similar basis for Portishead. For Nailsea and Clevedon, Local Plan policies draw on the same overarching principles of character, accessibility, and town centre renewal to guide development.



4. Overall conclusions

- 4.1 Recent changes in the retail and town centre environment — including the impacts of sectoral restructuring, Covid-19, and national amendments to the Use Class Order and Permitted Development Rights — highlight the need for a stronger placemaking-led approach rather than reliance solely on traditional land use policies.
- 4.2 The North Somerset Local Plan 2041 (Regulation 19: Publication Version) builds upon the existing policy framework while placing greater emphasis on creating vibrant, mixed-use and accessible town centres. It draws on the principles established in the Weston-super-Mare Placemaking Strategy and Wyndham Way Framework for Portishead, and applies these overarching placemaking principles across all town centres, including Nailsea and Clevedon, to guide regeneration and future development.

