

**Blyth Neighbourhood Plan**  
**Town Centre Background Paper**  
October 2024

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# 1. Introduction

- 1.1 Feedback from early engagement on key issues for the neighbourhood plan highlighted the importance of the town centre and the need to increase vibrancy and activity.
- 1.2 The purpose of this background paper is to outline the national and local approach to retail and town centre planning policies. It provides further background to the approach contained within the Pre-Submission Draft Blyth Neighbourhood Plan on the review of the town centre and primary shopping area boundaries and key shopping frontages as currently defined within the Northumberland Local Plan.
- 1.3 Blyth Town Council are inviting comments on the background paper alongside the consultation on the pre-submission draft plan. Comments can be submitted in the following ways:
- Using the online form available at: [www.blythtowncouncil.gov.uk/neighbourhoodplan](http://www.blythtowncouncil.gov.uk/neighbourhoodplan)
  - Returning a response form and sending it by email or post to the address below.
  - By email to: [neighbourhoodplan@blythtowncouncil.gov.uk](mailto:neighbourhoodplan@blythtowncouncil.gov.uk); or
  - By letter to: Neighbourhood Plan, Blyth Town Council, Arms Everytne House, Quay Road, Blyth NE24 2AS.
- 1.4 You can pick up a response form from the following locations<sup>1</sup>:
- Blyth Town Council, Arms Everytne House, Quay Road Blyth NE24 2AS
  - Blyth Library, 20 Bridge Street, Blyth, NE24 2DJ
  - Blyth South Beach Library, Fulmer Drive, Blyth NE24 3RJ
  - Briardale House, Briardale Road, Cowpen, Blyth, NE24 5AN
  - CVA Blyth Valley, 14 Market Street, Blyth NE24 1BQ
  - The Buffalo Community Centre 55 Regent Street, Blyth NE24 5LL
  - The Dave Stephens Centre, Links Road, Blyth NE24 3PL
  - The Isabella Community Centre, Ogle Drive, Blyth, NE24 5JF
  - Newsham Pavilion, Beatrice Avenue, Newsham, Blyth, NE24 4BP
- 1.5 If you have any questions about the plan, you can get in touch with the Town Council using the contact details above.
- 1.6 Comments must be received by **5pm on Monday 6 January 2025**.

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<sup>1</sup> Please check opening times before attending any of these locations.

## 2. Planning policy background

### Background

- 2.1 As neighbourhood plans are part of the development plan, they are required to be prepared in accordance with legal requirements. Only a neighbourhood plan that meets the ‘basic conditions’ can be put to a referendum and made. The basic conditions include that plans must have regard to national planning policy and guidance and be in general conformity with the strategic policies contained within the development plan for the area.

### National Planning Policy and Guidance

#### National Planning Policy Framework

- 2.2 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF – 2023) sets out the Government’s planning policies for England and how these are expected to be applied. Section 7 explains that planning policies and decisions should support the role that town centres play at the heart of local communities, by taking a positive approach to their growth, management and adaptation. Paragraph 90 states that planning policies should:

- 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 Paragraph 91 requires local planning authorities to apply a sequential test to planning applications for main town centre uses which are neither in an existing centre nor in accordance with an up to date plan. Main town centre uses are:

*“Retail development (including warehouse clubs and factory outlet centres); leisure, entertainment and more intensive sport and recreation uses (including cinemas, restaurants, drive-through restaurants, bars and pubs, nightclubs, casinos, health and fitness centres, indoor bowling centres and bingo halls); offices; and arts, culture and tourism development (including theatres, museums, galleries and concert halls, hotels and conference facilities).”*

- 2.4 The sequential test requires main town centre uses to be located in town centres, then edge of centre locations. Only if suitable sites are not available (or expected to become available within a reasonable period) should out of centre sites be considered. Paragraph 92 states that when considering edge of centre and out of centre proposals, preference should be given to accessible sites which are well connected to the town centre. Applicants and local planning authorities are required to demonstrate flexibility of issues such as format and scale so that opportunities to utilise suitable town centre or edge of centre sites are fully explored.
- 2.5 Paragraph 93 states that when assessing applications for retail and leisure development outside town centres, which are not in accordance with an up-to-date plan, local planning authorities should require an impact assessment if the development is over a proportionate, locally set floorspace threshold. If there is no locally set threshold, the default threshold is 2,500m<sup>2</sup> of gross floorspace. Impact assessment should assess:
- a) *the impact of the proposal on existing, committed and planned public and private investment in a centre or centres in the catchment area of the proposal; and*
  - b) *the impact of the proposal on town centre vitality and viability, including local consumer choice and trade in the town centre and the wider retail catchment (as applicable to the scale and nature of the scheme).*
- 2.6 The NPPF requires that where an application fails to satisfy the sequential test or is likely to have significant adverse impact on one or more of the considerations identified above, it should be refused.

#### National Planning Practice Guidance

- 2.7 NPPG highlights the importance of town centre strategies based on evidence of the current state of the town centre and opportunities that exist to accommodate a range of suitable development to support their vitality and viability. It states that strategies can be used to establish:
- The realistic role, function and hierarchy of town centres over the plan period. Given the uncertainty in forecasting long-term retail trends and consumer behaviour, this assessment may need to focus on a limited period (such as the next five years) but will also need to take the lifetime of the plan into account and be regularly reviewed.
  - The vision for the future of each town centre, including the most appropriate mix of uses to enhance overall vitality and viability.
  - The ability of the town centre to accommodate the scale of assessed need for main town centre uses, and associated need for expansion, consolidation, restructuring or to enable new development or the redevelopment of under-utilised space. It can involve evaluating different policy options (for example expanding the market share of a particular centre) or the implications of wider policy such as infrastructure delivery and demographic or economic change.
  - How existing land can be used more effectively – for example the scope to group particular uses such as retail, restaurant and leisure activities into hubs or for converting airspace above shops.
  - Opportunities for improvements to the accessibility and wider quality of town centre locations, including improvements to transport links in and around town centres and enhancement of the public realm (including spaces such as public squares, parks and gardens).
  - What complementary strategies are necessary or appropriate to enhance the town centre and help deliver the vision for its future, and how these can be planned and delivered. For example, this may include consideration of how parking charges and enforcement can be made proportionate.

- The role that different stakeholders can play in delivering the vision. If appropriate, it can help establish the level of cross-boundary/strategic working or information sharing required between both public and private sector groups.
- Appropriate policies to address environmental issues facing town centres, including opportunities to conserve and enhance the historic environment.

2.8 NPPG also provides further detail on the application of the sequential approach in decision making. However it does not refer to the role of neighbourhood planning, other than highlighting that neighbourhood planning groups are important stakeholders when planning for town centres.

## Development Plan

### Northumberland Local Plan

2.9 The local plan covers the period from 2016 to 2036. It was adopted in March 2022 and includes several policies relevant to town centres and retailing. It highlights that Northumberland's town and village centres are key to the functioning of the economy of the county, that they are not only shopping centres but also provide essential community services and are the focus of significant employment opportunities. The local plan identifies a hierarchy of centres, with Blyth classified as a 'main town – larger centre', all of which:

*"have a good level of retail provision along with wide ranging town centre community facilities. They are hubs for public transport and offer a good level of off-street car parking. They can be regarded as pivotal points for community activity, jobs and services for large populations and wide hinterlands."*

2.10 Policy TCS1 seeks to bolster the position of centres within the hierarchy relative to other tiers and the regional centres that rank above them. The policy resists proposals which would seek to replace significant areas of main town centre uses where it is demonstrable that this would undermine the overall role of the centre and its position within the hierarchy. Policy TCS2 defines town centre and primary shopping area boundaries (see figure 1), highlighting that these may be subject to review or updating within neighbourhood plans. The policy requires that main town centre uses should be located within these boundaries, unless there are positive planning reasons to locate them elsewhere that outweigh other policy considerations.

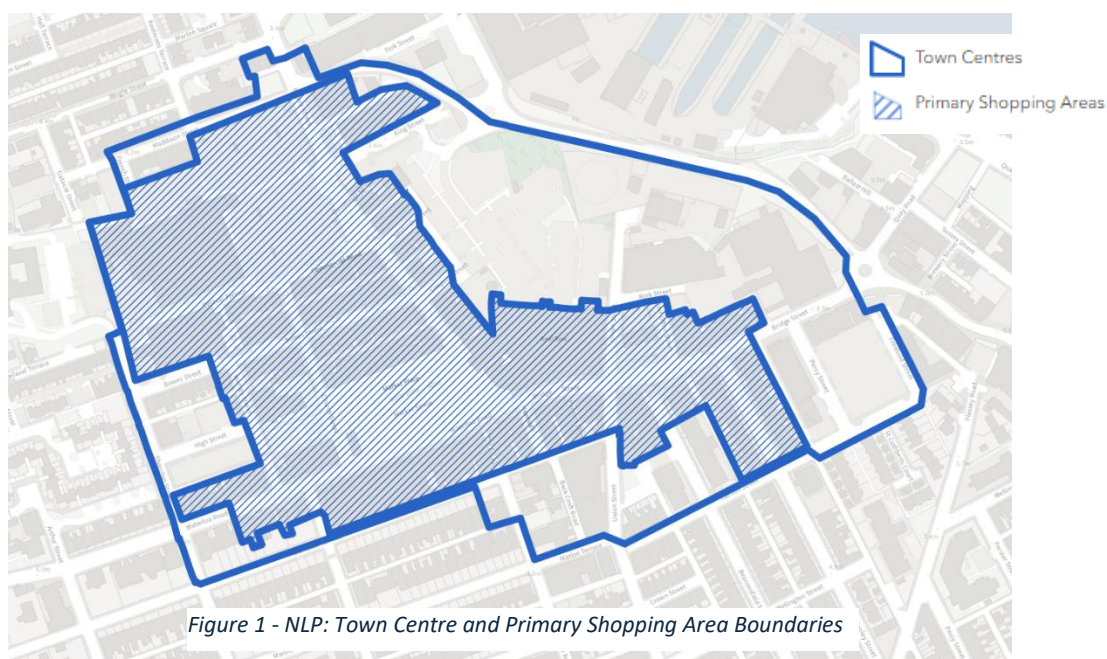


Figure 1 - NLP: Town Centre and Primary Shopping Area Boundaries

- 2.11 Policy TCS3 seeks to ensure that the roles of centres are maintained and enhanced. Within main towns, the policy supports development which would add choice to the existing shopping and related service offer in primary shopping areas and a wide range of main town centre uses within the wider town centre, as well as promoting centres as places to live and work. Reference to Blyth Town Centre is included within the policy. It highlights the need to consider opportunities to the north and east of Keel Row, including a replacement bus station, should the existing bus station be displaced. The policy also supports schemes for the renewal of frontages, especially where it would result in more modern shopping, leisure or office floorspace. Again, Blyth is highlighted within the policy, specifically areas around the Market Place, Regent Street and Bowes Street.
- 2.12 Policy TCS4 resists proposals for main town centre uses on sites outside defined town centre boundaries and where they are of a scale that would be inappropriate in a less accessible location. It requires such proposals to be subject to sequential and impact testing.
- 2.13 Policy TCS5 recognises that in order for high streets to remain vibrant a strong element of shop front activity needs to be retained and therefore identifies key shopping frontages for the seven main town larger centres, including Blyth (figure 2). The policy states that applications that would result in the active ground floor frontage falling below 75% of the key shopping frontage would not be supported. In addition, in areas identified as key shopping frontages, hot food takeaways would not be supported. The policy also supports proposals for improvements in the public realm and protection of public open spaces.

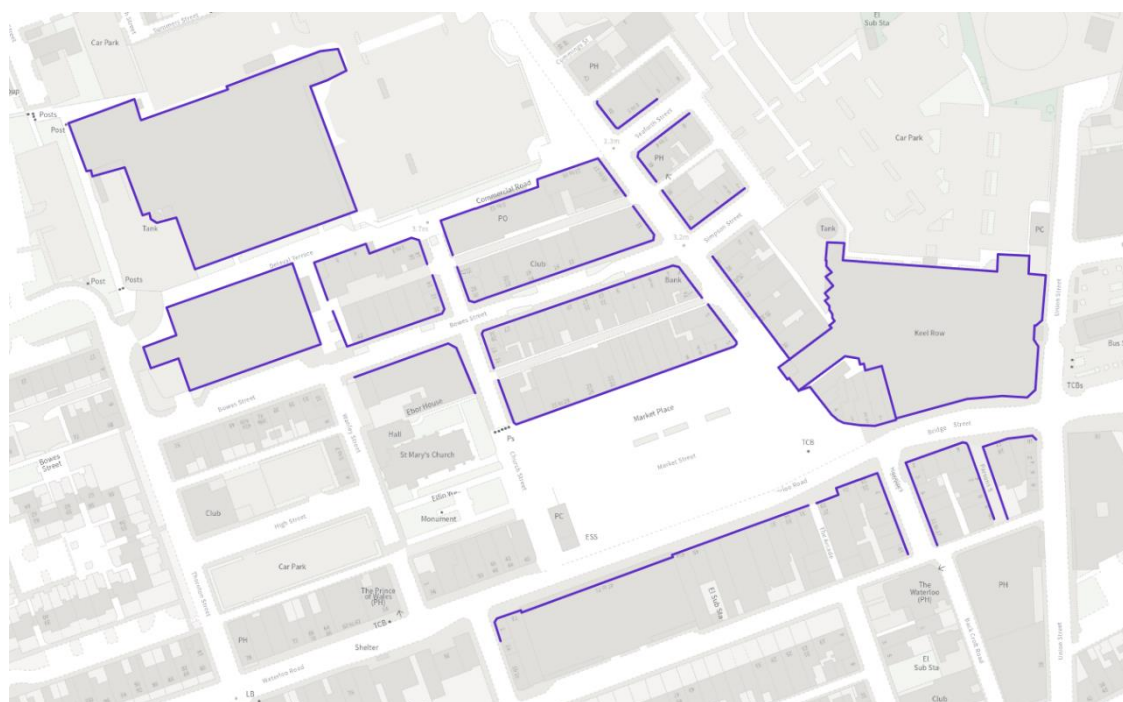


Figure 2 - Key shopping frontages

#### Evidence documents supporting the Northumberland Local Plan

- 2.14 The policy approach to the twelve main towns in Northumberland was informed by several evidence documents. The Northumberland Town Centre and Retail Study was initially prepared in 2011 and subsequently updated in 2013 and 2016. A Technical Background Paper – Policy Approach to Northumberland’s Twelve Main Town Centres, was prepared by NCC in 2018. It takes the conclusions from the town centre and retail studies and explains how these have informed the requirements for the twelve main towns.

2.15 For Blyth the conclusions of the studies were:

- The town would be appropriate for additional retail capacity in the short to medium term - particularly for comparison shopping, and additional land (up to 4 hectares) may be needed within the plan period (to 2036) unless an alternative solution can be found.
- There may be an opportunity to address the issue of unmet large scale leisure requirements. However, it was noted that a large retail scheme adjacent to Morrisons, in the north of the town, was proposed. It is highlighted that if implemented, this would push back the approximate dates when additional floorspace is needed.
- The town has a high proportion of its overall retail and leisure offer located well away from its centre, which means that it is weaker and more vulnerable to change.
- The centre is physically constrained as a result of residential development, conservation areas and the port.
- There is some scope for expansion towards Keel Row car park and the bus station and depot.
- The fabric of the existing town centre is ageing with a significant number of units vacant, including along key frontages which is considered to reflect the shortage of opportunity for larger, floorplates that may be required for larger retailers.



### 3. Boundary Review

#### Background

- 3.1 As detailed within section 2, neighbourhood plans can amend the boundaries of town centres, primary shopping areas and key shopping frontages. The NPPF glossary states that town centres are predominantly occupied by main town centre uses and excludes small parades of shops of purely neighbourhood significance. A primary shopping area is an area where retail development is concentrated but would also include other uses appropriate to town centres. Key shopping frontages are areas where it is sought to keep the majority of the frontage in retail or similar active frontage uses.
- 3.2 There is no standard methodology for the review of town centre boundaries, primary shopping area boundaries or key shopping frontages. The review of the boundaries defined within the Northumberland Local Plan considered:
- changes that may have occurred since they were defined;
  - planned new developments, both under construction or yet to be implemented; and
  - the retail occupancy of the areas.

#### Town Centre Boundary

- 3.3 The northern part of the town centre boundary runs along Maddison Street, including the frontages of numbers 30-60, numbers 41-45 and Keelmans House, on the southern side. All the properties, except numbers 60-62 and 30 comprise residential dwellings. Numbers 60-62 are occupied by Boots Pharmacy and number 30 a barbers. Given the main character of this part of the area is residential, it is considered that the boundary should be amended to exclude these elements and extend along Maddison Street – see figure 3.

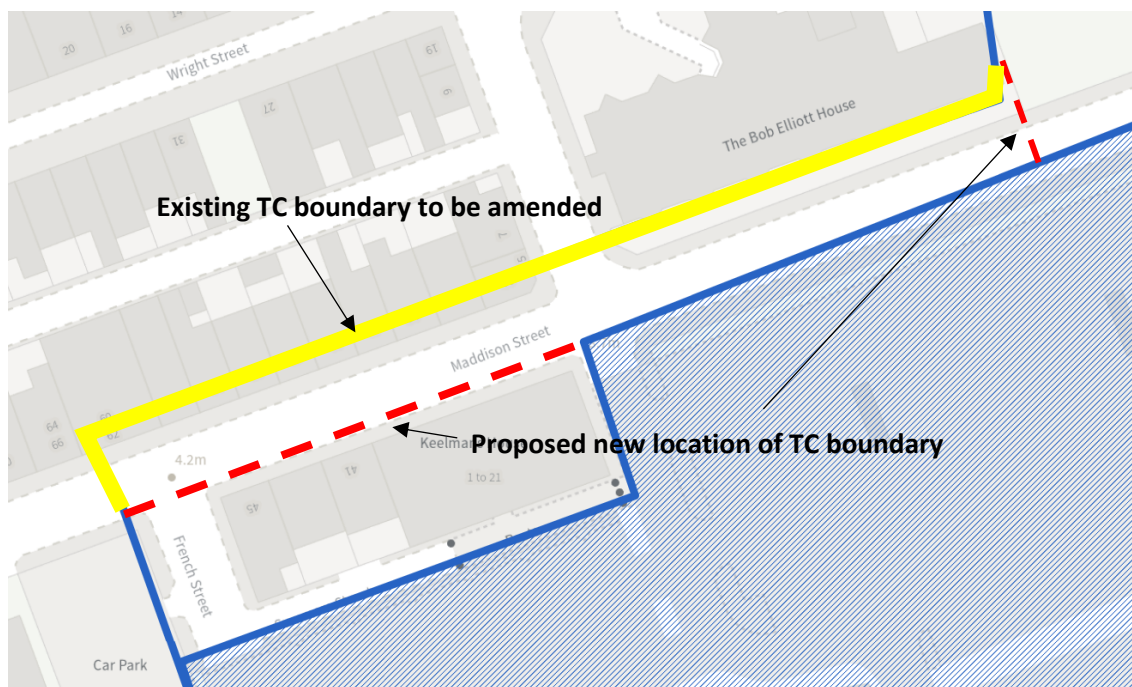


Figure 3 - Proposed amendments to TC boundary at Maddison Street

- 3.4 Where Maddison Street meets Wright Street/ Regent Street, the town centre boundary includes and area of open space, two retail units (43A and 66 Regent Street), hot food takeaway (1 Wright Street), fitness studio (1A Wright Street) and funeral directors (70 Regent Street). Beyond these commercial units, the main use is residential with some commercial/ business elements on the edge of the town centre boundary – this part of the boundary is therefore considered appropriate.
- 3.5 The town centre boundary extends along the B1329 to the east. Within this part of the boundary, there are a mix of uses, including funeral directors, retail, beauty, car parking, bingo hall and bus depot. The uses within this area are considered appropriate for inclusion within the town centre boundary. However, beyond the existing boundary to the east, between Freehold Street and Bridge Street, there is a cluster of uses that would be appropriate to be located within the town centre – these include health services, driving test centre, vets, café/ bars (see figure 4).

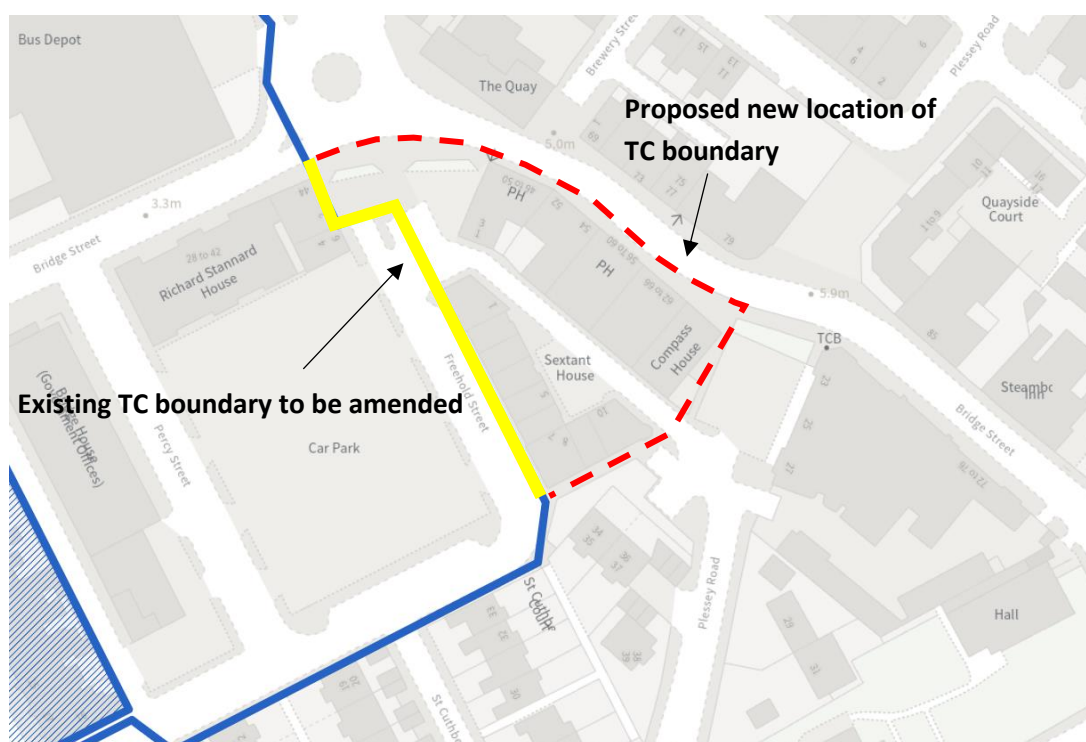


Figure 4: Proposed amendment to TC boundary at Bridge Street

- 3.6 The southern part of the town centre boundary extends along Carlton Street and Marine Terrace. The land to the north of Carlton Street and Marine Terrace lie within the town centre, uses include car parking, job centre, professional services, beauty salons, nursing home, methodist church, retail units and public houses. Whilst there are some residential units among the commercial units, the boundary is considered appropriate in this location. Uses to the south of Carlton Street and Marine Terrace are predominately residential.
- 3.7 The town centre boundary then extends north on Croft Road to its junction with Bondicar Terrace. Again, the majority of uses within the existing town centre boundary are commercial, with residential areas to the south, outside the boundary. Thoroton Street comprises the western boundary. With residential uses outside the boundary and commercial uses within, including beauty salons, estate agents, cafés/ pubs and car parking. The boundary is therefore considered appropriate in this location.

## Primary Shopping Area Boundary

- 3.8 The existing primary shopping area follows a similar boundary to that of the town centre boundary to the north and south, but excludes parking areas to the east (to the north of the Keel Row and south of Bridge Street), bingo hall and bus depot. The southern boundary excludes the job centre, nursing home, methodist church and dwellings. The western boundary excludes a social club, car park and dwellings. The uses within it are considered appropriate to be included within the primary shopping area, it is therefore proposed that no amendments are required.

## Key Shopping Frontages

- 3.9 The local plan defines key shopping frontages on:
- Morrisons supermarket;
  - Former Wilko store;
  - Groups of retail and commercial units on Delaval Terrace, Commercial Road, Bowes Street, Waterloo Road and Bridge Street;
  - Market Place; and
  - Former Keel Row shopping centre.
- 3.10 Morrisons supermarket plays an important role in the town centre it is therefore considered appropriate to retain the key shopping frontage designation in this location. Whilst the former Wilko store is vacant, given the important position of the building within the town centre and primary shopping area, it is considered appropriate for the allocation to remain.
- 3.11 The groups of retail and commercial units on Delaval Terrace, Commercial Road, Bowes Street, Waterloo Road and Bridge Street are the central part of the primary shopping area. Whilst there are some vacant units, given their position and role, it is considered important that units in this area retain an active frontage.
- 3.12 Planning permission has recently been granted for the development of a cultural hub on the Market Place. The development is proposed to include a cinema, creative play and event space and café. It is therefore considered appropriate to retain the key shopping frontage allocation for properties fronting Market Place.
- 3.13 The Keel Row Shopping Centre closed in February 2024 and work has begun to demolish the building. The demolition is linked to proposals for the Energy Central development which will provide a higher-level skills and innovation facility, developing energy sector expertise at degree and PhD levels. As a result of this, it is considered that the existing key shopping frontage allocation should be removed.



Figure 5: Amendments to key shopping frontage at The Keel Row

## 4. Summary and conclusions

- 4.1 This background paper has outlined the national and local approach to retail and town centre planning policies. It describes the results of the review of the town centre and primary shopping area boundaries as well as the key shopping frontages.
- 4.2 It recommends revisions to the town centre boundary to exclude properties on the northern side of Maddison Street and for the town centre boundary to be extended to the south east (between Freehold Street and Bridge Street). No changes are considered necessary to the primary shopping area. With regard to the key shopping frontages identified within the local plan, it is proposed that as a result of the closure and demolition of the Keel Row Shopping Centre that the frontages associated with the building are removed, with all others retained.
- 4.3 The proposed amendments are included within the pre-submission draft plan, on which comments are invited. Following feedback, the background paper and plan will be revised, where appropriate.