

Summary Statements

NEWCASTLE TOWN CENTRE CONSERVATION AREA

Newcastle Town Centre Conservation Area was designated in 1973 and reviewed in 2008 with a full Appraisal and Management Plan. The following brief statement identifies the environmental qualities which merit designation and which the Borough Council consider should be preserved or enhanced.

The full appraisal is still valid, defines the character of the Area and remains the main reference point. The Conservation Area review sets out the character and history of the town and its special qualities and the purpose of this statement is to see if that is still the case given the changes within the area since that review.

Newcastle Town Centre is an historic market town within the North Staffordshire conurbation. The challenges facing this town are similar to that of any historic town, to strike a balance between encouraging the economy and enhancing and maintaining the environment which makes the town special. It has a clear association with Stoke-on-Trent and the pottery towns but also has its own distinctive character with its medieval core including its church and over 50 Listed Buildings and many other historic buildings besides.

It is inevitable that there have been changes since the last review and these will be set out but the historical development of the town, its street patterns and layout remain the same. Perhaps a major change has been a downturn in people using the town as a commercial centre with the increase in online shopping which has had an impact on the town centre with less people visiting to shop. The street market is still held 6 days a week but the number of traders has drastically dropped and this is likely to be reviewed over the next 12 months. Within the Roebuck Shopping Centre national retailers left the centre and others have followed. This is largely vacant now. There are a number of vibrant real ale pubs around High Street and Bridge Street and the entertainment part of the town has shifted slightly from the lower end of High Street. The cinema has been refurbished and remains a positive aspect for the town centre. The town is used as a recreational centre and this perhaps is where the focus could be for the future growth of the town centre and investment opportunities.

Physical change has been the demolition of the St Georges and St Giles primary school at the rear of the Queens Gardens on Ironmarket and Barracks Road which has made way for a new civic hub at Castle House, comprising the Borough, County Council, including the Registry Office and the Library and Staffordshire Police making the former Civic Offices on Merrial Street vacant and part of a redevelopment site which has yet to come to fruition due to general economic uncertainty. Castle House (occupied in 2018) has created a positive building as a backdrop to Queens Gardens - also refurbished, and this area is now vibrant part of the town centre. The former Library on Ironmarket is also vacant but will hopefully be redeveloped. The former Police Station, a locally important landmark has been vacant for many years but is now currently being refurbished for offices.

The Midway area was identified as a negative and unpleasant area within the town centre and is currently being redeveloped with a 13 Storey student accommodation block. This is under construction but its height has had mixed reviews. Hassall Street buildings adjacent to the bus station has also been refurbished for student accommodation and the pedestrianisation of this street was improved.

The former swimming pool was demolished to make way for a large student accommodation block which got permission in 2015 and work started on the building but stopped a number

of years ago and remains unfinished and unsightly causing concern locally and having a negative impact on the character and appearance of the CA.

Just outside the CA but relevant to the image of the town centre, the Castle Motte off Lower Street was overgrown and since has been cleared and some interpretation and a viewing platform erected with lottery funding. Also 65 Lower Street, (formerly Maxims nightclub) and a listed Building at Risk has been restored in the last few years with extensions and utilised as a Belong care home with a successful café, tea room hairdressers and meeting rooms for residents and the community.

Street clutter, such as flagpoles, planters, street signage remains an issue and lack of joined up working between town centre groups, regeneration and highways with no consultation or cooperation and is having a damaging effect on the image of the historic town centre. There is no Design and Heritage Champion anymore which disappeared from the portfolio responsibilities, so perhaps this could be revived with the right council member on board. Vacant buildings and shops continues to be an ongoing problem within the town with the current vacancy rate of ground floor properties in January 2020 at 18%. There are vacancy hot spots within the town and the rates are increasing year on year and are above both national and regional averages. A town centre BID (Business Improvement District) was set up in 2015 with a 5 year plan that is currently being renewed. It is run by a board made up of its members, who represent town centre issues.

Despite the changes which have occurred within the Conservation Area, the special character identified by the Appraisal still remains important when considering what is significant about the Conservation Area as a Heritage Asset (including its setting) and how the individual components contribute to make the area special. The town centre retains its historic buildings and remains an attractive town centre but careful management is required to ensure that the very essence of the historic character and significance is not incrementally lost or damaged due to insensitive additions such as street clutter and vacant buildings.