

TOWN CENTRES FACTSHEET

Background

There are 6 main town centres and 17 smaller local centres in East Lothian (with further neighbourhood centres planned amidst new residential developments e.g. Wallyford).

The Local Development Plan 2018 established this hierarchy of town centres and contains policy TC2 Town and Local Centres against which determinations of planning applications in town and local centres are assessed. Town Centre strategies were prepared as Supplementary Guidance for the six main town centres. Within town and local centres uses that are acceptable in principle include retailing, business and office use, restaurants, leisure and entertainment. The principle of change of use from one of these uses to another is supported. Residential use in a town or local centre is only acceptable in backland or above ground floor locations and new buildings are expected to reflect the prevailing vertical mix of land uses in the area by providing town or local centre uses at the ground floor where this is appropriate in their context. There is no restriction on the number or geographical distribution of non-retail commercial uses in town centres which is intended to ensure the centre's continued vibrancy, vitality and viability.

National policy context

National Planning Framework 4 (2023) seeks to encourage, promote and facilitate development in our city and town centres, recognising they are a national asset.

It reaffirms the Town Centre First principle where town centre locations are the priority for new retail development. It seeks to encourage town centre living. Communities should be able to access the shops and goods they need by a range of sustainable transport modes including on foot, by bike, and by public transport, as part of local living.

Local Development Plans are to identify where clustering of non-retail uses may be adversely impacting on the wellbeing of communities and should identify areas where proposals for healthy food and drink outlets can be supported. They are to identify locations suitable for drive- thru facilities, if appropriate.

Residential use in town centres

NPF4 encourages town centre living and requires the Council to be proactive in identifying opportunities to support residential development which can be beneficial for the economy

of a town centre. Examples of forthcoming Town Centre projects, aimed at enhancing the town centres and improving quality of life for those living there: Dunbar Conservation Area Regeneration Scheme, shop front improvement scheme in the centre of Prestonpans town centre and progression of Feasibility Studies for key town centre properties in poor condition that adversely affect a town centre.

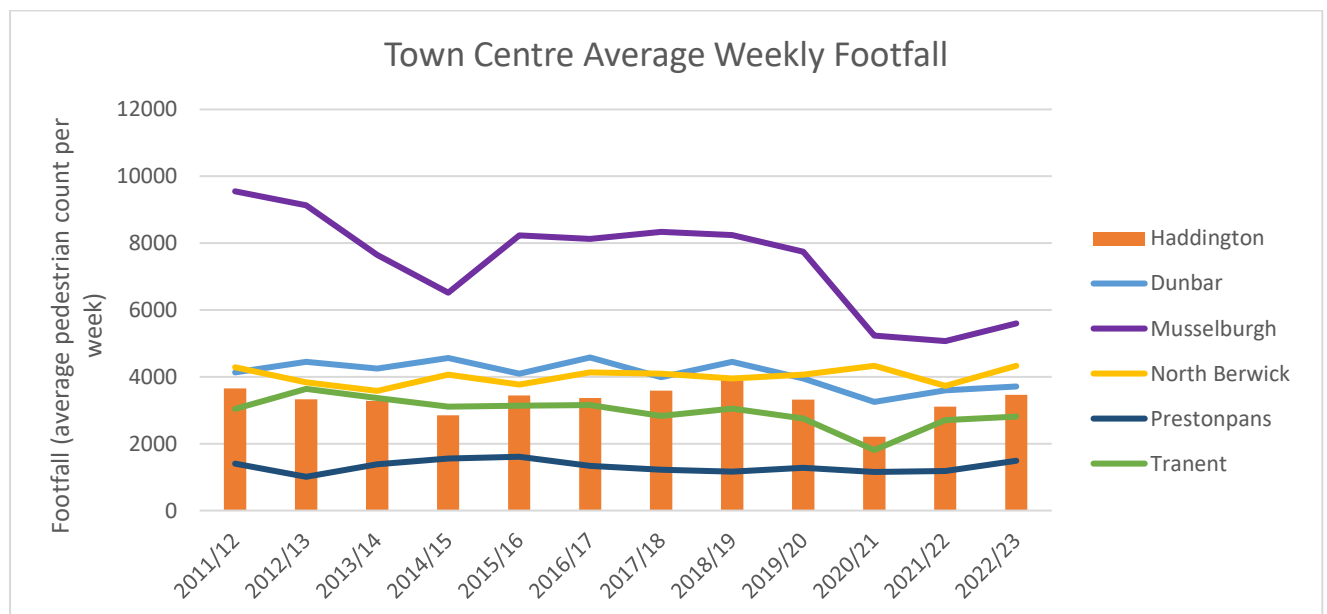
Current Trends

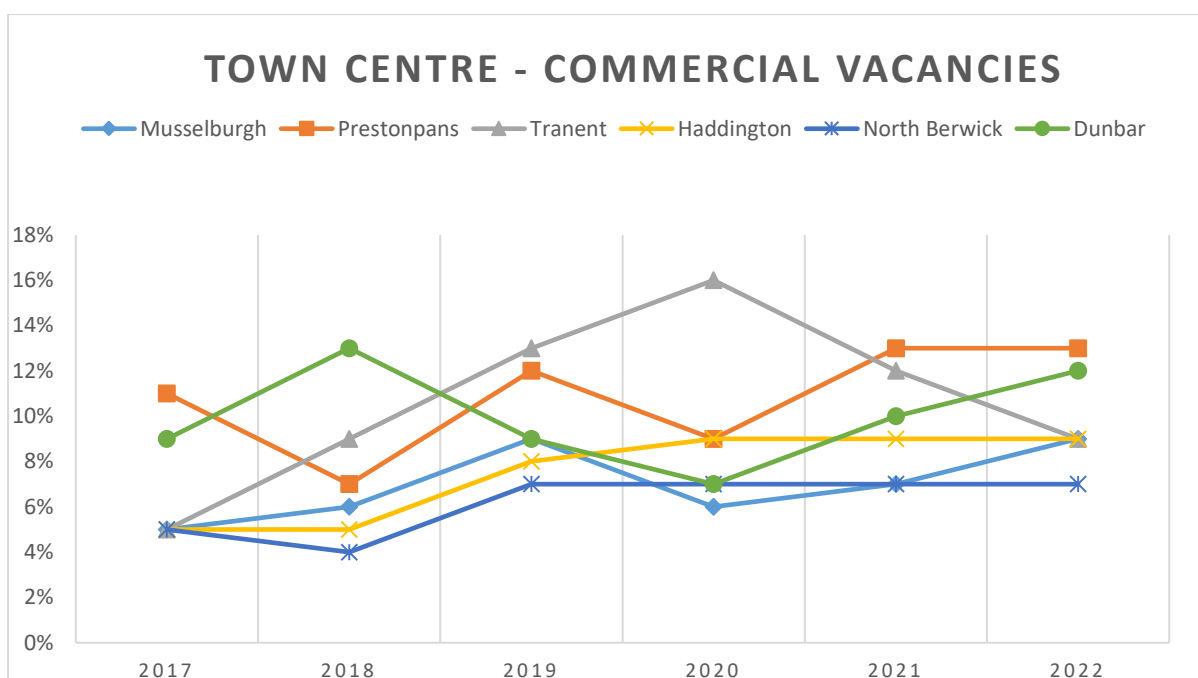
Recent data identifies the retail vacancy rate across Scotland as an average of 15.7% (The Scottish Retail Consortium, 2023) equating to 1 in 6 stores lying empty. The fallout from the Covid pandemic and the current cost of living crisis are taking their toll on retailers nationally. Vacancy rates are highest in shopping centres, with town centre vacancies across Scotland at 14.8% currently. However, retail sales grew by 3.9% - the highest rate in 3 years and sales of energy saving goods, such as air fryers and heated clothes airers, are credited with this boost. The proportion of shopping done online continues to increase nationally.

As part of the Evidence for the Local Development Plan, the Local Authority are to prepare a Town Centre Audit. The Council undertakes yearly survey work on town and local centre uses and vacancy rates, commissions an annual survey on town centre footfall and in 2021 had a retail expert look at capacity for new retail development in East Lothian (Ryden, in association with Roderick MacLean Associates, 2021). Some of the key findings are detailed below:

Health of Town Centre – Audit

Commercial





KEY POINTS for next LDP

Most East Lothian towns have, and will continue to, experience population growth. Currently East Lothian has below national average vacancy rates for all 6 of the main town centres. With population increasing, the town centres will hopefully continue to be supported. There have been some recent changes, however, such as the closure of the large M&Co units in Haddington and Musselburgh.

During the covid pandemic footfall in town centres declined, but is now rising again. The pandemic did not appear to affect vacancy rates in East Lothian town centres.

Currently most uses are allowed in our town and local centres e.g shops, offices, leisure, hot food. Some centres see concentrations of hot food takeaways, often these are within the central shopping area, some are close to schools e.g Tranent.

There are almost very few development opportunity sites within the 6 town centres. There is also no need for new food supermarkets, based on people's expenditure (Ryden, 2021). East Lothian residents mainly undertake food shopping within East Lothian's towns, with only 15% spending outside of East Lothian. For non-food items the figure is much higher, with 70% of expenditure taking place outside of East Lothian's towns and centres (Ryden, 2021).