

IS NORTH SHIELDS BEING ALLOWED TO DIE?



Is North Shields dying? In common with all small town centres because of the migration of the shopping public to 'Out-of-Town' shopping centres and hypermarkets it appears that it is being allowed to.

Developments such as Silverlink, Tesco and Morrisons, which are more convenient with their big free car parks, seem to have it all their own way. The creation of Business Parks with offices for major employers like the Council and Government Departments again all with huge free car parks is fuelling the demise of the town centre further by diminishing the numbers of people coming into town to work. This problem is further exacerbated by the number of long established quality shops that have left the town centre, such as Littlewoods, Safeways, Hintons, Leveys, Delcor, Greenwoods, Grants jewellers, Grants menswear, Chambers tobacconists, Chambers newsagents, Fairbairns footwear, Sunlight laundries, Fantasia Fabrics, The Card Shop, Pringles, Ethel Austin, Kids Style, etc. They have closed down and have not been replaced by equivalent businesses and in general their owners haven't been able to sell them on. Shops that have been here for decades are gone forever. In general they have been replaced by second hand charity shops, takeaways, amusement arcades and shops which obviously have a place in our society but don't qualify as quality shops which will attract customers to the town centre.

Without a meaningful and determined approach to the regeneration of North Shields town centre, this trend of closures and deterioration will continue until there is no incentive to come into the town at all. The Council have a responsibility to all members of the community to breathe life back into the town and to reverse the trend they have created through the ill considered out of town expansion of green field sites instead of expanding the town and keeping its heart beating.

The Council need to create a vision for North Shields Town Centre and to stop piecemeal developments that could prevent the overall future development of the shopping area. A radical approach is required, including the possibility of compulsory purchase to condense the town centre and create a more streamlined road network; we need something more efficient and desirable than the hotchpotch of shops and run down areas that co-exist at the moment.

New quality shops need to be encouraged into North Shields such as national chains for food, clothing, shoes, jewellers, furniture, etc. North Shields is being allowed to lag further and further behind Whitley Bay, an example of this being the opening of a new Tesco Express in its town centre whilst North Shields town centre is simply left to suffer in the shadow of their big brother supermarket in Norham Road? North Shields can only survive if it's made economically viable for these premium shops to return to the town centre and this means providing the conditions to suit them by taking actions that encourage potential customers into the town.

There are serious issues with regard to in town parking. Some may argue there is already sufficient parking in North Shields as there are always parking spaces available in both the newly introduced 1p per minute spaces and 50p per hour sites. Many town centre businesses refute this. These new short term parking facilities might be a success for 'butterfly' shoppers who visit the town for a specific reason to visit banks, dentists, opticians etc, but there is an inadequate supply of affordable parking provision for 'browsers' who need at least a couple of hours in town, and for those who work all day in North Shields. This is confirmed by a quick walk around the existing free parking or 'one hour free with no return' areas which show that these are generally full, as are the unrestricted areas. To fulfil the demand for these people there needs to be more low cost mid to longer stay areas and also an increase in 'free all day' areas that don't adversely affect residential parking.

The Council needs to make a start by re-visiting their parking strategy so that car borne customers can access the shops more easily and to give town centre retailers the opportunity to compete with out-of-town shops. They need to remove the generally expressed public perception that you either cannot get parked in North Shields, or you have to pay to park there. It's time the road sign in Nile Street saying how many prosecutions there have been this year was removed – it does nothing to encourage motorists.

No-one likes to pay for parking and therefore parking provision, whilst charging to maintain an adequate turnover of cars in the very centre of the town, should be reorganised to take account of this fact, elsewhere in the town. When asked why they don't shop more frequently in North Shields, shoppers mention not only the greater selection of shops to be found in nearby out of town sites, but also the plentiful supply of free parking that they provide. North Shields cannot be compared to larger conurbations, such as Newcastle. It is a local town, not a city, and the public have a different attitude to parking charges.

Not only do we need a selection of better quality shops in North Shields, but we also need more free, or very cheap, mid to long term parking to attract potential customers.

Whilst there is a serious and immediate need for a long term strategy there are measures that can be taken with relative ease.

- A degree of control over parking in the town centre is necessary, so maintaining the existing 1p per minute charges to maintain turnover of parking spaces in the busy central areas is acceptable however, the 50p an hour elsewhere discourages shoppers. Creating a new band at 30p per hour in the remaining charged areas in the town centre will create parking availability for browsers whilst maintaining control and turnover.
- There should be no parking charges on Saturdays, other than in 1p per min areas, encouraging shoppers to the town when the commercial areas are closed.
- Parking densities could be increased within the centre by creating more one way roads and increasing the parking available on them.
- The areas outside the central area but within the periphery should be made free of parking restrictions altogether, except where support for residents parking is required. In this case make such streets 'Residents Only' overnight from 4.30pm

to 9-30am, but not all day, making spaces available for shoppers rather than workers. This would apply to streets like Newcastle Street, Cecil Street, Beaumont Street, Williamson Street, Stanley Street, etc.

To increase the overall total of available parking in the town centre, the Council should consider the following proposals:-

- 1) Make Stephenson Street one way southerly and re-designate it as the A187 with free herringbone parking on the right hand side.
- 2) Make Norfolk Street one way northerly and re-designate it as the A187 with free parallel parking on both sides between Saville Street and Albion Road. Norfolk Street is the same width as Nile Street where this already occurs, and this change would create extra free parking for town centre workers.
- 3) The elongated roundabout effect created by Proposals 1 & 2 would improve north - south access to the town centre. It would also improve accessibility to and possibly the better use of, the multi-storey car park. This appears to be very under-used at present, possibly because the entrance is not well sign posted or obvious and again because it costs 50p per hour.
- 4) Howard Street could be changed by Proposals 1 & 2 from a busy through road to a tranquil one way street with herring bone car parking on both sides with access from Norfolk Street and exiting onto Saville Street. This would prevent it being used as a rat run. This arrangement would provide more than double the parking capacity than at present and if cheaper as well would be a boon for the professional sector of the town and their customers. They are well represented in this area and need some encouragement to remain and help maintain North Shields as a commercial centre.
- 5) Create a one-way loop for the bus services serving the bottom of the town with buses going north up Borough Road, east along Railway Terrace and south down Rudyerd Street making this area the main pick up and set down area, with the bus shelters relocated from Bedford Street. This would further reinforce the interchange with the metro service. The one way roads on the loop could then be used to create more parking availability.
- 6) Borough Road could have free herringbone parking on both sides.
- 7) Railway Street could have parallel parking on both sides.
- 8) Rudyerd Street could have parallel parking on both sides clear of the bus stops.
- 9) The loop created by Proposal 5 and shifting the bus shelters from the bottom of Bedford Street would enable it to be either pedestrianised or alternatively provision made for herringbone parking on both sides with access gained from Saville Street and exiting through Wellington Street to Rudyerd Street.
- 10) Stanley Street could be made one way from Borough Road with parallel parking on both sides.
- 11) Williamson Street could be made one way from Borough Road with parallel parking on both sides
- 12) Lower Bedford Street which is one way could be free parallel parking on both sides, not just one side as at present.
- 13) Lower Little Bedford Street could be one way free parallel parking on both sides with the existing solid yellow lines removed.
- 14) Lower Rudyerd Street could be free parallel parking on both sides.

- 15) Now that council staff have left or are leaving and no longer need all the car park in Upper Camden Street, consideration should be given to making the top part permanently available to the public. It is currently only available to the public on weekends. The original parking area behind the Northumberland Square offices, plus the waste land belonging to Turnbull's could be used as parking space for the Northumberland Square property developers.

In addition to the above proposals, better signage indicating the parking availability should be erected on the three main northern entrances to the town, i.e. Spence Terrace, Preston Road, and Tynemouth Road / Linskill Terrace. The southern access from Howdon Road seems adequate mentioning as it does the free car parking and multi-storey car park.

Better signage is needed to direct traffic along Albion Road to the multi-storey car park via the proposed North-South link. A prominent sign on Saville Street, possibly on the opposite side of the road, indicating the entrance to the car park also needs to be erected. The actual entrance to the multi storey car park is set back from the road and is not obvious to motorists until they are passing it. The car parking company Excel could then be approached to introduce more competitive charges for their car park to benefit from this improved vehicular access and signage. They may also be willing to dedicate some of the unused upper floors for the shop workers of the businesses represented in the Beacon Shopping Centre.

Another option to create parking could be to re-open negotiations with Nexus to obtain use of the neglected Station Goods Yard which currently is blight on the town centre. Taxis could continue with their existing arrangements though their area could be reduced by moving the fence slightly. The remainder could be cleared and a ramp constructed across some gardens in Lovaine Place to form an entrance and exit to the newly created car park. It could also have an access to the Metro platforms and create an interchange facility bringing the station in line with those at Wallsend, Whitley Bay, Tynemouth, and Northumberland Park etc. Although there might be objections about this causing an undesirable increase in traffic to North Shields, it would also mean that there would be a reduction in traffic elsewhere on the road system.

To make the roads safer for everyone regardless of any additional traffic being created, consider reducing the speed limit within the town centre periphery to 20mph in a similar fashion to housing estates.

These changes could be at least be tried as they would not cost a lot other than a few signs and road markings. Temporary barriers could be strategically placed at junctions which had become "No Entry" to change people's habits. This way the changes could then be tweaked again at a later date if they didn't work out beneficially.

Finally, any changes must be well publicised making everybody aware of them and to inform and to encourage car borne shoppers to revisit North Shields. Hopefully the customers will return and the better quality shops will.

*North Shields Chamber of Trade & Commerce
Acknowledgement: Robert Dixon Mather*