

POLICY BOARD

DATE: 9 DECEMBER 2014

Hexham Bus Station

Report of the Executive Director – Local Services

**Policy Board Members: Streetcare and Infrastructure, Councillor Ian Swithenbank
Planning, Housing & Regeneration, Councillor Allan Hepple**

Purpose of report

The purpose of this report is to set out the further work carried out by officers since the decision was made by Policy Board in February 2014 that officers would explore all the options proposed for new bus service provision in Hexham.

The report explains the ongoing health and safety concerns about the existing bus station site. Tynedale District Council first attempted to address these issues between 2002 and 2006 and temporary improvements were carried out in 2010 and 2013 before further reports on overall safety and road safety were commissioned this year.

An independent review of the options was commissioned and this report sets out the results of that review alongside the historic concerns about health and safety of the existing site, the economic case for developing the site and a broad range of stakeholder feedback that the council has gathered over the summer period.

Recommendations

It is recommended that Policy Board:

- **Note the outcomes of an independent review of options for bus station facilities within Hexham.**
- **Note the independent review of health and safety at the existing bus station following long standing concerns.**
- **Note the stakeholder feedback gathered over the summer period.**
- **Approve the development of a new bus station at Loosing Hill.**

Link to Corporate Plan

This report is relevant to the following priorities included in the NCC Corporate Plan 2013-2017:

- **Economic Growth** – our aim is to promote a more prosperous county through sustainable economic growth that provides residents with ready access to high wage and skilled jobs and opportunities to create thriving businesses
- **Places and Environment** – our aim is to maintain and further improve the quality of towns, villages and countryside, and make it easier for residents to access services and high quality affordable homes and to travel using different modes of transport

Key issues

Hexham Town Council has requested that Northumberland County Council investigate fully a range of possible options for bus station facilities within Hexham.

Transport consultants AECOM were engaged in February 2014 to undertake an independent assessment of eight identified potential options. The result of this analysis indicates that a new bus station at Loosing Hill is the preferred option to emerge from the AECOM work.

The existing bus station fails to meet modern day standards in terms of passenger facilities and health and safety. The existing facility has significant deficiencies that increase the risk of injuries for pedestrians using the bus station and adjacent business premises.

The size and shape of the existing bus station site is a constraint, both operationally and with regard to the provision of passenger facilities. This results in a number of significant conflicts between buses, pedestrians and private vehicles on site.

Hexham bus station is recognised as a key regeneration site, being located in the heart of Hexham town centre and in the main retail area. The site is an important link between the new Marks & Spencer store located at Maidens' Walk and the main body of the town.

The relocation of the Hexham Bus Station offers an opportunity to regenerate a tired area of Hexham town centre, support the new retail development on Maidens Walk immediately behind the site and provide a new bus station facility which meets modern day standards and expectations.

The redevelopment of the Hexham Bus Station site would deliver significant regeneration benefits to Hexham town centre. The scheme, as currently proposed, has the potential to support the creation of 222 full time equivalent jobs, both directly and indirectly, leading to the injection of around £3.3m annually into the local economy through additional salary income alone and 150 construction jobs.

If the Loosing Hill site was chosen as the location of Hexham Bus Station it is not the case that all services would terminate at Loosing Hill. There would still be bus services operating along Priestpople with bus stops on both sides of the road near the existing bus station site.

A total of 50 parking spaces would be retained at Loosing Hill should the bus station move to this location. Surveys of car park usage across Hexham have demonstrated spare capacity in the town's car parks. In addition, the Council has worked closely with the town council and local traders to identify both short and longer-term solutions to address current parking concerns including the installation of additional signs across the town to direct visitors to less well used car parks and the reconfiguration of Wentworth Car Park to potentially create an additional 28 spaces.

Extensive stakeholder engagement has been central to the scheme development process over recent months. This has included Town & Parish Councils, local residents, bus operators, the Hexham business community and local bus users.

Background

For many years there have been two key areas of concern relating to the existing bus station site in Hexham:

- the need to provide a safer and more welcoming bus station for the town;
- the desire to develop a site in the heart of the town centre to improve the retail offer and deliver economic benefits to the town.

There has therefore been a longstanding ambition by the County Council, in partnership with Tynedale District Council prior to Local Government Reorganisation, to relocate the provision of bus services to improve safety and customer facilities, and pursue a retail and commercial development scheme at the existing bus station site on Priestpople in Hexham.

Between the late 1990's and 2008 the former Tynedale Council marketed the bus station site and engaged with a number of separate property developers on various plans for comprehensive redevelopment of the site. This was driven by concerns over the safety of the bus station and also recognition, through the Local Planning process, that the site was one of very few opportunities for the provision of new retail space within the Town Centre.

Following the receipt of a formal complaint letter by Arriva in 2006 Tynedale Council undertook a Health and Safety Risk Audit and produced a report, which was accepted by the Council, that confirmed that the site was "fundamentally not designed to cope with the volume and size of vehicles which must use it" and recommended that the bus station be relocated to a purpose designed bus station in an appropriate area.

Dysart Developments Ltd. (Dysart) first entered into an arrangement with Tynedale Council in 2007 as the fourth set of developers to propose a scheme for the site.

Northumberland County Council and Dysart have been in discussion since April 2009 with regard to redeveloping the site. During this time, Dysart has developed a good quality retail and residential scheme which would be subject to due process through the planning system once finalised and submitted.

At Policy Board in February 2014 a report was presented that sought authority for the Council to enter into an agreement for the sale of the Council's interest in Hexham Bus Station and sought, in principle, approval for the relocation of the existing bus station facility.

It was resolved that:

- A development agreement is entered into with Dysart Developments Ltd. As part of this agreement, vacant possession of the bus station site will not be passed over to Dysart until new facilities are in place;
- Officers consider all of the options that have been proposed; and
- The report of the Economic Prosperity and Strategic Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee be noted.

The Existing Bus Station

Health and safety of the existing bus station has been a concern to the Council and bus operators for many years and this still remains the case.

The size and shape of the bus station site is a significant constraint, both operationally and in relation to the provision of passenger facilities. The site does not meet modern requirements in terms of passenger environment, safe vehicular operation and effective separation of pedestrians away from the risks associated with bus operations and the other private vehicles, consisting of cars and delivery vehicles that have access rights through the site.

A Health and Safety Report prepared by Tynedale Council in September 2006 concluded that *“it would seem prudent to consider in the longer term moving the bus station to a new purpose designed site with safety and risk considerations being addressed from day one.”*

Since then, a number of arrangements and improvements have been made to the existing site to improve the pedestrian environment and manage the inherent risk. In 2010 a temporary scheme of white lining and pedestrian signage was implemented to guide pedestrians in to safer walking routes and to further mitigate the inherent risk.

After further concerns were raised, a temporary scheme was carried out in autumn 2013 to provide limited shelter for passengers whilst they wait for their buses. The council carried out a review of the bus station in early 2014 to assess the safety of these temporary measures. This report again highlighted concerns regarding the long term viability of the site as a bus station which was capable of providing modern facilities, concluding that:

‘There are obvious design issues at this site which present an on-going risk; however, efforts are being made to manage associated risks within acceptable parameters. We considered that, if the aforementioned actions are undertaken, everything possible is being done within the scope of what can be achieved on this site. However, the suitability of this facility is still very much in doubt given the narrow site and the disputed land ownership issues. If a bus did strike a pedestrian whilst reversing due to the design issues previously mentioned this could well result in litigation and enforcement action which would be difficult to defend.’

Combining the existing site with the land behind 13-17 Priestpopple is not a viable option for the council. This site, which is owned by Dysart Developments Limited, already has existing planning consent for office and residential development. The planning permission for residential units gives the land a premium value.

Dysart have confirmed that they would not be prepared to sell the site but, even if they were minded to do so, the cost would be prohibitive for the council to purchase.

Compulsory purchase of additional land next to the bus station site is an unrealistic option for the council since this would be a costly and time consuming process with no guarantee of success.

As part of the work undertaken by AECOM this year, an independent assessment of health and safety and a review of the existing bus station operation was undertaken.

A number of issues and constraints were identified with operations and these can be summarised as follows:

- **Kerb overrunning** - buses overrun the central kerbed pedestrian area and designated pedestrian crossing point;
- **Westbound on street bus stop** - buses stop on the carriageway outside the bus station which restricts access for other buses; reduces visibility; and alights pedestrians directly onto the carriageway;
- **Delivery vehicle access** - delivery vehicles block pedestrian access to the car park and adjacent businesses, forcing pedestrians to walk outside the marked pedestrian walkway and putting them in conflict with buses.
- **Restricted bus access** - the restricted width of the site results in bus access to the station, or specific bus stands, often being blocked by stationary buses and/or delivery vehicles. This impacts on the through flow of traffic on Priestpopple. The restricted site width also causes buses to routinely infringe on the marked pedestrian walkway. The site width requires some buses to reverse to complete turning manoeuvres in areas shared with pedestrians.
- **Bus layover** - buses/coaches wait for extended periods outside of the designated bus layover area. Use of the car parking area to the south of the site for bus layover restricts access for other vehicles and introduces an additional pedestrian conflict.
- **Passenger waiting area** - the compact size of the site, particularly the width, has resulted in constraints on the passenger waiting area. These include a waiting area smaller and narrower in size than that suggested for a typical interchange; and limited segregation between pedestrians and buses.

Due to the on-going safety concerns a further independent safety audit of the bus station site was commissioned in September 2014. The review identified a number of issues, some of which could be mitigated. However, the report concludes that the main impediments to ensuring a safe environment for pedestrians are the width of the site and the fact that access to the site cannot be regulated. The report concludes by stating:

- The existing facility has significant deficiencies that increase the risk of injuries for pedestrians using the bus station and adjacent business premises. This risk is much higher than would be acceptable in designing a modern bus station.
- It is clear that the existing site has width constraints that result in a compromise against the full benefits that a modern bus station facility could provide on a site less constrained by width; and
- Full mitigation of the health and safety issues outlined in this report cannot be achieved.

The Regeneration and Economic Case

The relocation of the Hexham Bus Station provides an opportunity to regenerate a tired area of Hexham town centre, support the new retail development on Maidens Walk immediately behind the site and provide a new bus station facility which meets modern day standards and expectations.

The emerging Economic Strategy for Northumberland has a vision to create '*a prosperous Northumberland founded on quality local jobs and connected communities*'. This will be delivered through a growth network which will '*support and facilitate the growth of Northumberland's network of Market Towns and ensure the rural economy is an accessible and distinctive place to live, work and visit*'.

The redevelopment of the Hexham Bus Station site would support the emerging Economic Strategy and deliver significant regeneration benefits to Hexham town centre. The scheme, as currently proposed, has the potential to support the creation of 222 full time equivalent jobs, both directly and indirectly, leading to the injection of around £3.3m annually into the local economy through additional salary income alone and 150 construction jobs.

The proposed development also includes provision for some 32 residential units, which would be of significant benefit to the town centre. It is estimated that these residential units will result in an increase in the Council Tax collected of some £34,000 per annum and will generate New Homes Bonus in the order of £192,000 for the council. In addition the new residential units, when occupied, will add to the vibrancy of the town centre through increased footfall and activity of the residents and their visitors.

The redevelopment of the site also provides an opportunity, through negotiation with the developer, to improve the availability of public conveniences in the town centre.

The bus station site is strategically located in the main retail area between the new Marks & Spencer store located at Maidens' Walk, one of the key anchors underpinning the town's retail offer, and the main body of the town. Its development would reinforce links between the store and the primary shopping core, thereby facilitating additional linked trips.

The Draft Hexham Vision 2020 and Town Plan 2014-15 (Consultation Document) outlines Hexham Town Council's longer term strategic vision for the town and reiterates the economic importance of the bus station site. The plan reaffirms the shortcomings of the existing bus station in terms of passenger experience and health and safety and the potential the existing site has to contribute to the retail attraction and vitality of the town centre.

Furthermore, a recent independent study (AMT Hexham Market Town Benchmarking Report 2014) also supports the need to improve the retail offer of Hexham. Improvement to the 'retail offer' was one of the key themes to emerge when town centre users were asked to make suggestions. Of those surveyed more than half the town centre users think the range of shops is either poor or very poor.

Studies carried out in other market towns as part of the planning process showed that people are spending money in shopping locations other than Hexham. Improving the attraction and offer remains vital to attracting spend to the town.

Current market values for commercial land in the area were provided by Jones Lang LeSalle in May 2013 and concluded that the land value for this site would be in the region of £350,000 to £400,000 per acre. The Council's land holding at the bus station site is 0.25 acre and as a result the authority should expect to receive in the order of £100,000 for its interest, (applying the higher value). As such the sum of £500,000 negotiated with Dysart can be considered as good value for money.

The current budget estimate for the provision of a bus station at Loosing Hill is £1.5m. To progress the scheme a funding package is required. This is being assembled with contributions from the Council's Capital Programme, Local Transport Plan, Rural Growth Network and from the developer, Dysart. The funding package has been identified as follows:

- £500,000 from the sale of the existing bus station site to Dysart (use of capital receipt);
- A bid of £300,000 has been submitted to the Rural Growth Network (RGF) - Local Growth Fund for 2015/16. It is expected that this application will be progressed following formal establishment of the RGF programme in autumn 2014.
- £200,000 for road safety at the new location from the Local Transport Plan
- £500,000 has been allocated in the council's corporate capital programme

The Technical Case – Options for Appraisal

Proposals for on-street provision of bus facilities on Priestpopple were presented to Hexham Town Council in February 2014. The outcome of this meeting was a request from the Town Council that Northumberland County Council investigate fully all possible options to include:

- **Option 1** - Refurbishment of the present premises and site.
- **Option 2** - The same as option 1 plus access/departure via the land to the southern boundary and then to the east.
- **Option 3** - A site at Loosing Hill utilising part or all of the existing small park area and car park area.
- **Option 4** - A site within Wentworth car park. Utilising either a shuttle service to town centre and/or re-routing bus routes to allow passengers to access a stop on Priestpopple.
- **Option 5** - A site at Railway station. Utilising either a shuttle service to town centre and/or re-routing bus routes to allow passengers to access a stop on Priestpopple.
- **Option 6** - Land at junction of Priestpopple/Corbridge Road, currently a second hand car sale site.

In addition to the options identified by Hexham Town Council, a further two options were put forward for consideration:

- **Option 7** - Priestpopple on-street bus station
- **Option 8** – Maiden's Walk

The Technical Case – Option Appraisal Process

Transport consultants AECOM were engaged in February 2014 to undertake an independent assessment of all identified potential options for Hexham Bus Station.

The developed assessment methodology and the process of reporting the assessment results were broken down into three steps:

- **Step 1:** Supporting guidance/ evidence base (including development of supporting tables)
- **Step 2:** Development of assessment matrix, based on requirements from supporting guidance
- **Step 3:** Production of site summary sheets.

Adopting a three step process ensured that the assessment results are transparent and accessible. The adopted methodology was produced following a comprehensive review of bus station design guidance and experience gained from involvement in previous bus interchange projects. The method was tested and refined during preliminary site visits before the full assessment was undertaken.

The Technical Case – Options Appraisal Outcomes

The output from the assessment process was a total score for five criteria (Accessibility; Functionality; Sustainability; Safety and Security; and Costing) for each of the eight sites. The eight sites were scored against the five criteria with weightings applied to specific factors within each criterion to enhance the robustness of the assessment. Further sensitivity testing of the figures followed completion of the assessment and this revealed that even if weightings were removed the overall outcome remained the same.

Appendix A provides a location plan of the options reviewed and a table explaining the options scores, summary and ranking.

The result of this analysis clearly indicates that, with a score of 88%, Loosing Hill is the preferred option to emerge from the AECOM work. The existing bus station was placed 7th in the scoring with 71% since the site is unable to accommodate all the facilities of a modern bus station.

Bus Service Provision

If the Loosing Hill site was chosen as the location of Hexham Bus Station it is not the case that all services would terminate at Loosing Hill. Services for residents to the west of Hexham would remain unaffected as they will continue to operate along Priestpopple and, having listened to local concerns, new bus stops would be provided on both sides of the road to drop off and pick up passengers in the vicinity of the existing the bus station.

Through services from the east, that is those services that do not currently terminate in Hexham, would also continue to drop off and pick up passengers in the vicinity of the existing the bus station.

Overall this represents 40% of services and would mean that during the week there would be at least three buses an hour in each direction travelling along Priestpopple. These buses would include services such as 85/685, 683, 687, 688, 689, 888, H11, H53.

Analysis of bus user data indicates that approximately 40% of bus users that travel to Hexham come from the west of the town and would be travelling on services which would continue to operate along Priestpopple in the Loosing Hill option. As well as these unaffected passengers, up to 50% of passengers travelling from other directions would not be affected by moving the bus station to Loosing Hill.

Bus User Survey

An independent Bus User Survey was commissioned and conducted in Hexham between the 11th and 17th August to better understand the profile of those who get buses into and out of Hexham, why they come to Hexham, how long they spend in the town centre (if at all) and where bus users go in the town centre.

The details of the survey approach and outcomes are set out in the study report. Key facts can be summarised as set out below:

- 600 bus users were surveyed which is a statistically valid survey
- just over a third (36%) of those surveyed lived in Hexham, 44% from elsewhere across Northumberland and 20% from outside of the county
- Whilst all age groups travel on buses to Hexham, the majority of the respondents were female (67%) and/or retired (55%)
- Shopping is a key reason for travelling into Hexham by bus – with 48% of bus users citing this as their key motivator.
- 76% of bus users say they do not have a disability or age-related condition that affects their ability to walk – suggesting that a large proportion of bus users are mobile.
- Of the respondents who regard themselves as disabled or having an age related condition that affects their ability to walk (24%), more than half visit Market Street and Market Place (260m from the existing bus station) and just under a third travel as far as Tesco, Aldi and Next, which is in excess of 450m from the existing bus station.
- Of those travelling to and from Hexham by bus, 92% use shops and services in the town centre.
- The typical length of time spent in Hexham for those travelling by bus was between 1 and 2 hours (49%).

To provide a full picture, bus passenger numbers were also sourced from the bus operators and a footfall count of visitors in the town centre was commissioned and undertaken during the same week.

Using an accepted methodology for footfall counts, the survey estimates the number of visitors to Hexham town centre on a typical week to be around 61,128. Bus operators provided an estimated figure of 6500 weekly bus users in the town which accounts for 10.6% of town centre visitors. Since the counts were only done within the town centre and the bus user survey indicates bus users are likely to use other areas it can be concluded that bus users will form less than 10% of all visitors to Hexham.

Given the fact that bus users form a very small proportion of visitors to the centre and that many will continue to access their buses from Priestpopple, if there was an impact on trade this is likely to be negligible. The proposed regeneration scheme is far more likely to increase visitors to the centre as the retail choice and offer is improved.

Bus Operator View

Go NE have invested significantly in vehicles and services in Hexham since becoming the town's major bus operator in 2010 and have worked hard to improve the operation within the existing site. They have stated that:

“A bus station is, essentially, a 'gateway' building for the town, being the first place that many visitors encounter. There is an opportunity to provide something that adds to the townscape, rather than detracting from it. We believe that Hexham should have a modern bus station that should provide excellent passenger facilities in as convenient a location as possible.

Hexham Bus Station is presently situated in the best possible location for bus passengers, providing good access to the town centre. Unfortunately, the building is now outdated and has no proper passenger facilities. Despite the addition of extra shelters, the passenger waiting area is largely exposed to the elements. Passenger seating is also very limited and there are no public toilets.

It would be our preferred option to leave the bus station where it is. If it were to prove to be impossible to provide an up to date, modern facility on the existing site, then we will be happy to work with the County Council to find a suitable alternative.

Operationally, the existing bus station is cramped. There are nominally five arrival/departure stands, but the space available means that it is difficult for buses to pass each other within the bus station. At busy times, the bus station becomes congested with passengers and with buses. At busy times, buses manoeuvring into and out of the bus station cause traffic jams on Priestpopple. Furthermore, the bus station is not 'buses only' - the roadway is used for deliveries to adjacent shops, causing congestion six mornings a week. There is no clear separation between pedestrians and buses - pedestrians must cross the roadway at both the 'in' and 'out' sides of the bus station. There are only two 'lay over' bays where buses can be parked between services or a spare bus kept in reserve.”

To support bus services to Hexham Go NE have also completely replaced the vehicles on the prestigious TEN service not once, but twice, to provide more capacity and improved facilities. The double deck fleet now provides free wifi and at-seat power sockets, hi-backed coach-style seating, 'talking bus' stop announcements for the visually impaired and visual signs for the hearing impaired. X84 and X85 provides two express buses an hour to Newcastle also offering free wifi.

Hexham Town Council View

The County Council and Town Council have been in discussion regarding concerns about the bus station and its future for several years. The options appraisal which was carried out earlier this year was in response to a request made by the Town Council.

Following the stakeholder engagement over the summer, officers provided an informal briefing to Hexham Town Councillors on 10th November to discuss the outcomes from public consultation about the options appraisal that they requested in February. As the meeting was not an official Town Council meeting they were unable to provide a Town Council view, however, the individual Councillors in attendance all provided comments.

Whilst there were some strong objections to Loosing Hill from a minority of councillors it was clear that as the existing bus station site is not suitable that the majority were in favour of providing a new bus station at Loosing Hill on the understanding that bus shelters providing effective protection in all weathers would be available on both sides of Priestpople at the current bus station location.

They agreed that of all the sites assessed, Loosing Hill was most appropriate as the site provides level access in to the town centre and provides improved access to the hospital area. However, there were a number of concerns over safety for both pedestrian and vehicles accessing a site at Loosing Hill, the possible congestion that might be caused and the loss of parking spaces and stressed that these issues must be addressed if any proposal is to be taken forward.

The County Councillors for the area, who are also on the Town Council, stated:

“It is perfectly clear that the MAJORITY of councillors believe the bus station is currently not fit for purpose AND the existing site would be the BEST location to be developed to include an integrated bus station, walkway to M&S, plus retail / housing, BUT, only if the health and safety risks could be COMPLETELY mitigated, the site developed to the sides and rear and up to date facilities provided that would suit local residents, bus users and bus operators. The area surrounding the current site as it stands is not in keeping with the rest of the town.

It is the councillors understanding that this CANNOT be achieved based on summary information provided by NCC, and this in turn has forced them to consider the next best and only viable alternative option, which is Loosing Hill.

Concerns remain over traffic congestion, road safety with emergency vehicles accessing and departing the hospital site and pedestrians crossing from Loosing Hill to the town, and the loss of valuable car parking spaces. It is stressed that these concerns have to be addressed before any alternative scheme can go ahead. Substantial, weather proof bus stops are also asked for on either side of Priestpople so that passengers could be dropped in the vicinity of the existing Priestpople site and facilities such as toilets, seating, refreshments and digital information points must be incorporated in to any proposed plans at Loosing Hill.

It is now up to Northumberland County Council to ensure that the public have access to ALL the relevant information including the details of the decision report, the September health and safety audit and the results of the survey of bus users as the subject of the future of our bus station has already dragged on for far too long.”

Parish Council View

Parish Councils across the Tynedale area were invited to a drop session at Prospect House, Hexham which was held on 11th July 2014. Officers from the Council and Aecom were present to provide information and answer questions and display boards setting out the process and outcomes of the AECOM option appraisal work were available.

Seven of the invited parishes were represented and during the discussions further information was requested regarding the continuation of bus services along Priestpople.

As 40% of services will continue to drop off and pick up on Priestpople, the following parishes will not be affected:

- Thirlwall, Henshaw, Greenhead, Haltwhistle, Featherstone, Hartleyburn, Knaresdale with Kirkhaugh, Coanwood, Melkridge, Plenmeller with Whitfield, West Allen, Bardon Mill, Simonburn, Newbrough, Haydon, Allendale, Warden, Humshaugh, Hexhamshire, Corsenside.

Officers attended a meeting of the East Tynedale Forum on 14th October because residents in these parishes are likely to be those most affected by any possible relocation of the bus station to the east of its current location. The meeting was attended by representatives from most of its town and parishes and the general feeling was that the information provided had answered concerns about access, bus provision and pedestrian safety when walking to and from Loosing Hill. Following the meeting, the Chair's report stated that:

'It was also commented that this clear presentation answered many concerns that had been aired in e.g. the press and whilst we recognize that NCC has provided several opportunities for those with questions, that perhaps the information could have been more clearly disseminated to the wider Tynedale community. 'If they will not come to you go to them!' Having said that this was a great example of that and we would like to thank you both for your presentation and County Councillor Anne Dale for raising the opportunity with the forum.'

Stakeholder Feedback

To reflect the importance of the issue to residents of Hexham and the wider Tyne Valley, extensive engagement has been central to the scheme development process over recent months. The outcomes of this process can be summarised as follows:

A drop-in session at Prospect House, Hexham was held on 11th July 2014. Officers from the Council and AECOM were present to provide information and answer questions and display boards setting out the process and outcomes of the AECOM option appraisal work were available.

Given the level of interest at the initial event in July, a further week-long event was held in August 2014 at the Queen's Hall in Hexham. Information was again displayed and Council officers staffed the event throughout the week to ensure as many residents as possible had the chance to feed into the process.

Forms were provided on each day to enable attendees to provide their feedback. A total of 528 feedback forms were returned. Of the responses received, 66 were in favour of a move to Loosing Hill, 386 against and 76 did not express an opinion. A summary of the responses received is included as Appendix B but key concerns are summarised here.

A significant number of people disagreed with the option appraisal findings stating they wished to retain the bus station in its current location and have it upgraded. The main reasons given were:

- its central location;
- loss of trade in the town centre that would result if it was moved;
- Loosing Hill was too far for bus users to walk especially those with mobility issues;
- there was no need for more shops;
- Loosing Hill would create additional congestion; and
- The loss of car park spaces would exacerbate existing parking issues.

Those that supported the Loosing Hill option chose this in the main because they felt the current bus station site was dangerous, caused significant congestion problems on Priestpople and was unsightly and in a poor condition.

Many of those attending the events and providing feedback when questioned were not bus users.

On December 23rd 2013, the Council received a petition raised by local resident Dr Anne Pickering. It was titled "We, the undersigned, strongly object to the Northumberland County Council selling Hexham Bus Station and ask them to keep it as a Bus Station as previously agreed". This was presented to the Council's petitions committee in January 2014. The committee resolution was that the decision taken in March 2012 (*that the immediate need to relocate bus station facilities in Hexham is therefore removed, until such time as the Council wishes to pursue another development scheme for the site*) does not bind future decisions of the Council. There is nothing in local government law to bind previous decisions; Councils are entitled to review, amend or even rescind an earlier decision where this is feasible. In this instance it was recommended to Policy Board that a further proposal should be considered following those in 2012.

A further survey was received from Dr Anne Pickering during the summer. This was placed in various locations such as shops across the town and asked respondents to choose their preferred option for the bus station from a list of 6. Whilst this demonstrates popular support for the retention of the bus station at its current location guidelines for carrying out engagement indicate that sufficient and accurate information of any proposition should be available so that anyone signing has the information they need to make an informed choice. Clearly this was not provided either in the written or verbal form. Furthermore, the exercise does not provide any indication of who is giving the response and whether they were bus users.

Hexham Business Forum have also engaged with the consultation process and have been supportive. The business forum is a membership based 'not for profit' trade association for the Tynedale area ran by a management board made up from members of the business community. The forum has a membership of over 90 paying businesses as well as a circulation list of 400 and its stated mission is to help the area to become a more thriving and economically prosperous community.

The business forum confirmed their support for the proposals in a letter to the Council stating that they '*welcomed the review into the Hexham Bus Station which we consider to be a poor gateway into our Town Centre*' and that they considered that '*the existing bus*

station site provides one of the few opportunities for the development of new retail space within the Town Centre and the proposals presented by Dysart at the recent exhibition in July outlined the significant possible benefits that a redevelopment of this site could bring to Hexham’.

The letter from the Business Forum concluded by confirming *‘support for the redevelopment of the existing bus station site and the associated development of new bus station facilities on Loosing Hill subject to efforts continuing, with the Town Council, to address ongoing concerns over parking availability and pedestrian access to the town centre from the proposed new bus station site’.*

A petition has also been received from Hexham Independent Traders, an unconstituted body representing the views of a number of independent traders in the area around Battle Hill and Market Place, asking for the bus station to be “updated and kept on its present site”.

A petition has also been received from a resident of the Tyne Valley, Anne Rosemary Newton of Stocksfield on the basis that the signatories *‘...want, and need, the bus station updated and kept on its present site, because it is the most convenient situation for passengers, preferred by the bus company and cause the least inconvenience to other traffic.’*

Conclusion

Pedestrian and Operational Health and Safety:

For many years the council has been aware that health and safety of the existing bus station has been a concern to this Council, the former Tynedale District Council and bus operators and this still remains the case.

The size and shape of the bus station site is a significant constraint, both operationally and with regard to the provision of passenger facilities. The site does not meet modern requirements in terms of health and safety. Concerns include: safe vehicular operation alongside the lack of effective separation of pedestrians away from the risks associated with bus operations and the other private vehicles (consisting of private cars and delivery vehicles) that have access rights through the site. The current bus station does not provide a modern passenger environment either; it has no enclosed waiting facilities, toilets or other passenger facilities.

Several reviews into the health and safety implications of the site have been carried out since the early 2000s culminating in a road safety audit prepared by independent consultants in September 2014 which concludes:

- The existing facility has significant deficiencies that increase the risk of injuries for pedestrians using the bus station and adjacent business premises. This risk is much higher than would be acceptable in designing a modern bus station.
- It is clear that the existing site has width constraints that result in a compromise against the full benefits that a modern bus station facility could provide on a site less constrained by width; and

- Full mitigation of the health and safety issues outlined in this report cannot be achieved.

It is therefore clear that, on health and safety grounds alone, the council must consider moving the bus station to mitigate the serious risks associated with the existing site constraints.

Town Centre Regeneration and Economic Development:

The redevelopment of Hexham Bus Station is an important project for the regeneration and economic development of the Town, which is recognised as Rural Growth Hub Town and key service centre within Northumberland. The development of the scheme provides an opportunity to work with the private sector to ensure the redevelopment of the existing poor quality bus facility in Hexham, bringing new quality retailing units and residential accommodation into an area of the town centre that is showing signs of decline and support a new retail development on Maidens Walk immediately behind the site. This aligns with the vision of the draft Economic Strategy for the County which looks to '*support and facilitate the growth of Northumberland's network of Market Towns and ensure the rural economy is an accessible and distinctive place to live, work and visit*'.

As specified previously, the Market Town Benchmarking report indicated that over half the town centre users wanted to see an improvement to the retail offer and considered the existing centre to be poor or very poor. Spending is leaking to other towns and without improvements to the retail offer this is likely to continue. A greater range and choice of shops could help to address this.

Given the fact that bus users form a very small proportion of visitors to the centre and many are likely to be able to continue to access their buses from Priestpopple, if there was an impact on trade this is likely to be negligible. Indeed it is considered that the regeneration of the bus station site is far more likely to increase visitors to the centre as the retail choice and offer is improved rather than reduce it.

A total of 50 parking spaces would be retained at Loosing Hill should the bus station move to Loosing Hill. In addition, the Council has worked closely with the town council and local stakeholders to identify both short and longer-term solutions to address current parking concerns. It should be noted that surveys of car park usage across Hexham have demonstrated spare capacity in the town's car parks with an average of 34% of spaces available in Loosing Hill car park on an average weekday. Furthermore, Marks and Spencer short stay car park, on an average weekday, has 63% of spaces available, which equates to 82 available parking spaces. Whilst it is recognised that Marks and Spencer charge for parking, this is refundable in store.

The council have now installed additional signs across the town to direct visitors to the less well used car parks and improved the information available online to potential visitors. In addition options for the reconfiguration of Wentworth car park to increase long stay capacity by 28 spaces are being finalised prior to agreement with the Town Council. We will monitor the impact of these changes and will continue to work with the Town Council on alternative provision if required.

Views of Bus Users:

Whilst considering the relocation of the bus station there has been a significant voice of opinion stating that moving the bus station to Loosing Hill will cause significant difficulty for

the elderly and people with mobility difficulties. It should be noted that there is a difference of 170 metres between the town centre and Loosing Hill and the existing site.

The survey of bus users indicates that, of the respondents who regard themselves as disabled or having an age related condition that affects their ability to walk (24%), more than half visit Market Street and Market Place (260m from the existing bus station) and just under a third travel as far as Tesco, Aldi and Next, which is in excess of 450m from the existing bus station.

Additionally, of those who said they have a mobility issue, approximately 50% identified themselves as living to the west of Hexham and so would still be able to access their buses from Priestpopple.

It is accepted that there will be a small number for whom distance will remain a problem. Having listened to these local concerns, new bus stops would be provided to drop off and pick up passengers in the vicinity of the existing bus station enabling all passengers to change buses and still be dropped off or picked up on Priestpopple. Whilst waiting for an alternative bus, the new site would provide far better facilities for passenger comfort than the present site could do and would better meet the needs of those with poor mobility as it will be designed to DDA standards.

Recommendation:

The relocation of the bus station facility to Loosing Hill is therefore considered to be the best available option to provide a safer and more welcoming bus station for the town of Hexham. A site at Loosing Hill would be in a relatively central location to the town and 40% of services would continue to operate along Priestpopple.

The site at Loosing Hill would provide enough space to accommodate five bus stands and accompanying running lanes and manoeuvring space; drop-off, layover and maintenance area; taxi rank, customer waiting area, customer toilets, staff facilities and cycle stands.

The proposal will provide a key regeneration site in the heart of the town centre which will both improve the retail offer of the town and deliver significant economic benefits as well as providing a bus station which meets the needs of all passengers.

Implications

Policy	The project will support the Council's health and safety and regeneration policies.
Finance and value for money	The funding package for the proposal is set out in the document.
Legal	Legal colleagues are part of the internal project team and have been consulted as part of the development agreement process with Dysart.
Procurement	Standard procurement procedures will be followed in order to procure any future external support.
Human Resources	N/A
Property	Land and facilities including car parking spaces will be disposed of and/or replaced.
Equalities (Impact Assessment attached) Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	N/A
Risk Assessment	The proposal is designed to remove the current health and safety risks to the public which are inherent at the existing constrained bus station site. A risk management plan will be developed for any detailed proposals.
Crime & Disorder	The modern design of the development and new well-lit bus facilities will reduce the fear of crime. The provision of housing on the existing bus station site will also impact upon the fear of crime, through more residential activity in the evenings.
Customer Consideration	The retail and residential development will provide a more diverse retail offer for the town centre, improved public realm and a better quality environment. The area of Priestpople will be enhanced through the new development. Consideration will be given to customer requirements when developing the detailed designs for the alternative bus facilities at Loosing Hill, including for changes to the junction of Priestpople and Corbridge Road to facilitate safe pedestrian crossings.
Carbon reduction	The provision of an improved bus station environment will encourage a switch to more sustainable modes of transport.
Wards	The following wards will be directly impacted by the proposed scheme: Hexham West, Stocksfield and Broomhaugh, Corbridge, Humshaugh, Hexham East, South Tynedale, Haltwhistle, Hexham Central with Acomb, Haydon and Hadrian.

Consultation

Referenced in main body text.

Background papers:

- Hexham Bus Station Option Assessment Report. AECOM. May 2014
- Hexham Bus Station Research. Public Knowledge. August 2014
- Hexham Bus Station Health and Safety Inspection Report. Northumberland County Council. April 2014
- Hexham Bus Station Road Safety Review. AECOM. October 2014.
- www.northumberland.gov.uk/hexbus

Report sign off.

Finance Officer	AD
Monitoring Officer/Legal	N/A
Human Resources	N/A
Procurement	N/A
I.T.	N/A
Executive Director	BR
Portfolio Holder(s)	IS/AH

Author and Contact Details

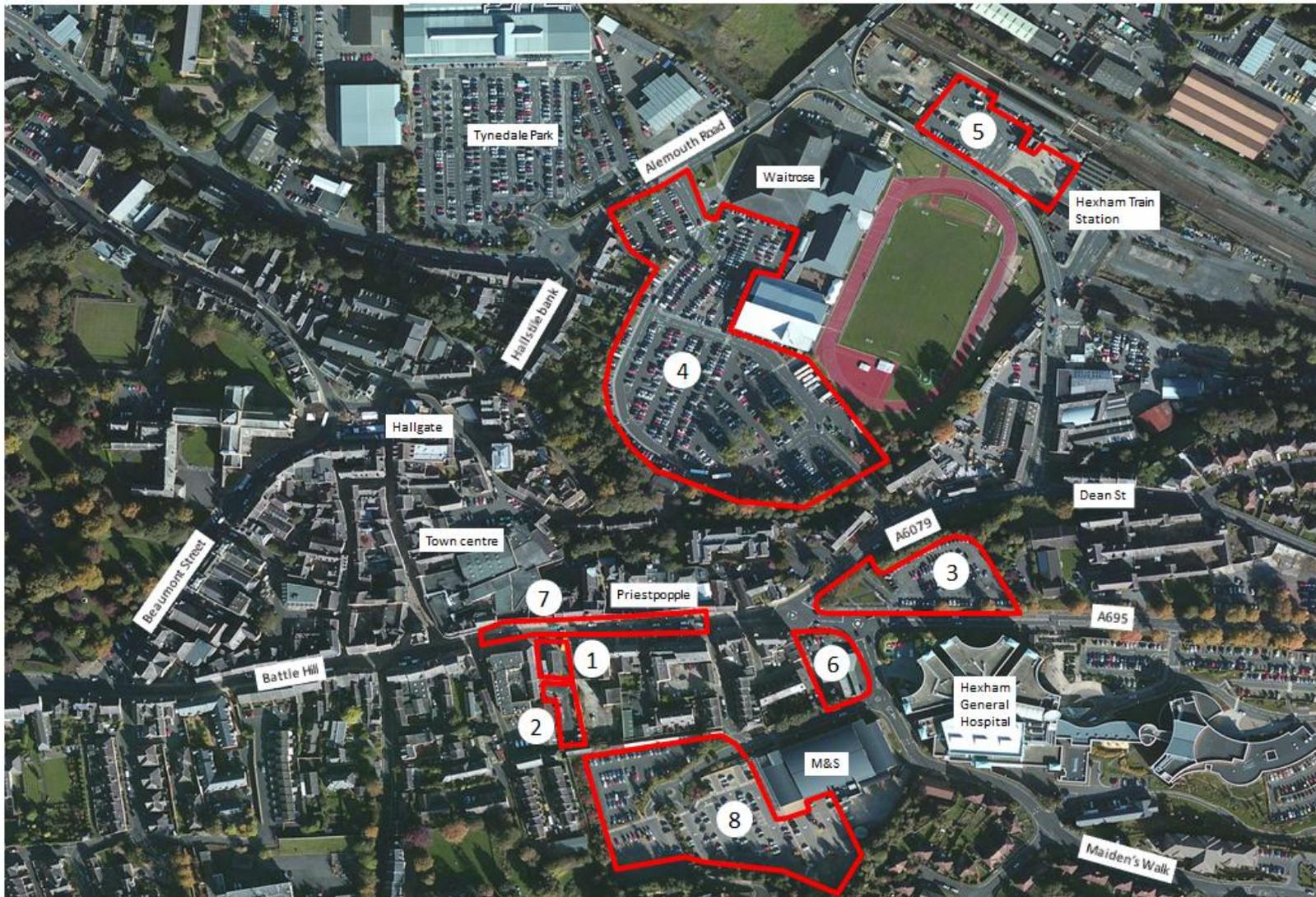
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Appendix A – Option Appraisal: Location, Score, Summary and Ranking



		Appraisal Summary		Score
Rank	Site Number / Description	Advantages	Disadvantages	Total
1	Site 3 – Loosing Hill	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Of new sites, Loosing Hill is closest to town centre • Site size enables provision of all facilities associated with a modern bus station* (see note below) • Site within NCC ownership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Further from town centre when compared to existing site (although within acceptable walking distances) • will impact upon car parking provision 	88%
2	Site 4 – Wentworth Car Park	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Site size enables provision of all facilities associated with a modern bus station * (see note below) • Site within NCC ownership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significant gradient of walking route to town centre • will impact upon car parking provision 	80%
3	Site 8 – Maiden's Walk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Site size enables provision of all facilities associated with a modern bus station * (see note below) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Land purchase required • Impact on bus journey times • will impact upon car parking provision 	79%
4	Site 5 – Hexham Train Station	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Site size enables provision of all facilities associated with a modern bus station * (see note below) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remote from town centre • Need for shuttle bus to access town centre (cost and penalty of interchange) • Impact on bus journey times • Land part owned by Network Rail 	74%
5	Site 2 – Existing Hexham Bus Station site + additional land to south	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central location • Land to rear of bus station is under council ownership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constraint of site is width and this is not addressed with this option 	72%
6	Site 7 – Priestpopple on	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central location • Sufficient space to 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Upgrading of Beaumont Street junction required 	71%

		Appraisal Summary		Score
Rank	Site Number / Description	Advantages	Disadvantages	Total
	street bus station	meet operational requirements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Site within NCC ownership 	to facilitate bus turning. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Removal of parking and loading/unloading on Battle Hill would be required to facilitate free movement of buses • Associated impact on bus journey times 	
7	Site 1 – Existing Hexham Bus Station	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central location • Site within NCC ownership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Size and shape of site restrict improvement • Safety risks on site 	71%
8	Site 6 – Land at SW corner of Priestpopple & Corbridge Rd		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insufficient space to meet basic requirements of bus station • Land purchase required 	56%

* Refers to provision of the space required to accommodate five bus stands and accompanying running lanes/manoeuvring space, drop-off, layover, maintenance area, taxi rank, customer waiting area, customer toilets, staff facilities (as existing provision), and cycle stands'

Appendix B – Summary of Responses from Consultation Feedback

Feedback	Response
The present bus station location is best.	A bus station directly in the centre of town is preferred in terms of location. However the existing site is not fit for purpose as a modern bus station facility.
The views of Hexham residents must be taken into account.	An extensive consultation exercise has been carried out over summer 2014 to set out all the facts in relation to the options being considered. This has enabled the views of Hexham residents to be taken on board.
Many people believe that the decision has already been made on the bus station.	At the time of consultation, and still to this day, no decision had been made on the future of the bus station.
Considerable loss of trade in town centre if the station is relocated.	The redevelopment of the existing site for retail would provide the opportunity to increase the town's retail offer.
Would like for the bus station to stay where it is, just needs updating and revamped.	The existing site is not wide enough to ensure the segregation of pedestrians and buses and to accommodate the safe turning of the buses. Even if the council could develop the existing site this would not allow for the full potential to provide £3.3m economic benefit; improve the variety of shops; create 220 new jobs; or separate pedestrians from moving buses.
Toilets, seating, passenger information, clean and tidy are all important features of a bus station facility.	Passengers expect and deserve modern facilities such as toilets and proper waiting provision and a new bus station would be an opportunity to provide these.
Walking to and from Loosing Hill for certain age groups would be unsuitable.	From the existing site to Loosing Hill is around 270 steps – that's the same as walking four aisles in Tesco. In any case, many bus services would continue to operate along Priestpople should the bus station move to Loosing Hill allowing many passengers to access buses as they currently do.
More traffic congestion at Loosing Hill and be too dangerous for people to cross the road.	Traffic and pedestrian routes would be reviewed in the Loosing Hill area – and suitable crossing points ensured.
Don't need more shops, too many are already empty.	A recent independent Hexham Market Town Benchmarking Report (May 2014) showed the town had 8% empty shops compared to a national average of 14%. Since the survey was carried out it is evident that

	vacancies have reduced further. The survey also showed more than half of town centre users think the range of shops is either 'poor' or 'very poor'. A development on the bus station site would improve the attractiveness of the town for shoppers and bring more trade for all businesses. Studies have shown that people are spending a lot of money in other shopping locations other than Hexham.
Loosing Hill the best option.	This is confirmed by the AECOM report.
Parking is bad enough without losing more spaces.	The Council have been working with the Town Council to identify parking solutions for the town.
Current situation is dangerous and congested.	This has been acknowledged in the Health & Safety Report and the work by AECOM.
Provide improved facilities for buses to turn within the existing site.	The maximum width of the existing site is 23m. This width is too narrow to accommodate the minimum turning circle for a range of bus types. This includes the minimum turning circle for a single deck bus which is 23.8m. It is not possible to increase the turning width within the confines of this site.
The gardens at Loosing Hill should be retained.	Any option developed for Loosing Hill would not impact on the gardens.
All you are concerned about is making money.	To redevelop the existing site would be more expensive than a move to Loosing Hill and would not accrue the economic benefits of a commercial development on the existing site.
The survey criteria are largely subjective and can be made to fit any requirements.	This is acknowledged and the consultants were asked to independently scrutinise the scores provided and to carry out sensitivity tests around the weightings applied. This demonstrated that the ranking of options did not change.