REPORT TO: SPECIAL MEETING OF MORAY COUNCIL ON 24 APRIL 2024

SUBJECT: MORAY TOWN CENTRE HEALTH CHECK 2023

BY: DEPUTE CHIEF EXECUTIVE (ECONOMY, ENVIRONMENT AND FINANCE)

1. REASON FOR REPORT

1.1 To report the key findings of the Moray Town Centre Health Check 2023 and to ask Council to consider adopting the Moray Town Centre Health Check Report 2023 as a material consideration in future retail planning policy and planning application decision making.

1.2 This report is submitted to Council in terms of Section III (E) (2) of the Council's Scheme of Administration relating to the review or preparation of Local Development Plan and is presented to Council for efficiency to allow consideration prior to the Local Development Plan Evidence Report.

2. RECOMMENDATION

2.1 It is recommended that Council agree to:

(i) note the findings of the Moray Town Centre Health Check Report 2023 and the first town centre perception survey;

(ii) adopt the Moray Town Centre Health Check Report 2023, as set out in Appendix 1, as a material consideration in future retail planning policy and planning application decision making from 30th April 2024;

(iii) the publication of the Town Centre Health Check Report 2023 on the Planning and Development website pages; and

(iv) note the ongoing work to source town centre footfall counters.

3. BACKGROUND

3.1 Town centre audits or health checks are important to provide an evidence base of the strengths, vitality and viability, weaknesses and resilience of our town centres. This evidence base can be used to inform development plans and decisions on planning applications.

3.2 A Town Centre Health Check Framework was developed in 2010 in conjunction with Hargest Planning Ltd and has been used to prepare biennial health checks since 2010. Assessments are undertaken in the town centres of Elgin, Forres, Keith, Buckie, and Lossiemouth. The Edgar Road area of Elgin is also assessed. Limited audits were also undertaken in Aberlour, Dufftown, Fochabers, and Rothes.

3.3 The 2021 Town Centre Health Check was completed by Hargest Planning Ltd as part of the wider Moray Retail Study 2021. The 2021 Health Check was a year late due to the covid-19 pandemic. As the 2021 data was completed by an external consultant and the data was presented differently to previous health checks figures from the 2018 Health Check have also been provided for comparison.

3.4 The Town Centre Health Check data:

- Provides an evidence base for use in other studies and strategies;
- Supports the preparation and implementation of the Local Development Plan and economic development policies; and
- Provides a baseline for assessing the impacts of proposed regeneration projects.

3.5 The principal sources of information used for gathering data are field surveys undertaken during summer 2023 to record the occupier of units and the type of use (Space In Use Survey). This allows assessment against three key vitality and viability indicators: diversity of uses, vacancy rates, and retail representation.

3.6 Data on the perception of town centres was gathered through an online survey in December 2023 by Moray Council Research and Information Officers. This survey asked people six questions including which town centre the response related to, rating of various aspects of the town centre, reasons for visiting the town centre, what needs improving and a free-text question for comments. The survey results were collated by the Research and Information team and incorporated into the 2023 Town Centre Health Check. The town centre perception survey will be repeated annually.

3.7 Previous health checks have included an assessment of pedestrian flow. It was not possible to assess pedestrian flow in 2023 due to the unreliability of the automatic counters that were in place. These have been subject to vandalism and faults which meant there was insufficient data to allow competent assessment of pedestrian activity. Monitoring of pedestrian activity was passed to Strategic Planning and Development in October 2023. Options are now being actively explored for more reliable ways to monitor pedestrian activity. Options explored include street light mounted technology with the potential for this to undertake traffic counts and monitor environmental conditions. Retailer intentions, rate and yield data, consumer surveys and turnover indicators have not been monitored due to the scale and cost of undertaking the survey, the need for specialist consultants and the lack of response in previous studies.

4. <u>MORAY TOWN CENTRE HEALTH CHECK 2023</u>

4.1 The summary below provides an overview of the key findings of the health check for 2023. A copy of the full Health Check is included at **Appendix 1**.

ELGIN

4.2 Comparison retailing (i.e. clothes, gifts, furniture, chemists etc.) continues to be the dominant use within Elgin city centre, with leisure uses (i.e. restaurants, cafes, pubs, sports etc.) also making up a large proportion of units. Convenience retailers (i.e. supermarkets, butchers, newsagents etc.) continue to occupy significant floor areas due to large units such as Tesco, Aldi and Marks and Spencer. The city centre has a good mix of independent retailers but is following national trends with a fall in the number of national multiple retailers (e.g. M&Co, Superdrug, and Monsoon have left the town centre).

4.3 The number of vacant units recorded was the highest since biennial health checks commenced in 2010, with the level of vacancies similar to that recorded in 2014. Vacancies increased from 32 recorded by Hargest Planning Ltd in 2021 to 40 which gives a vacancy rate of 16%. Vacancies include the former M&Co, Superdrug, Shoe Zone, the Candy Shop, Ultimate Hair, and the bicycle shop. Long term vacancies include former Junners stores and units within the St Giles Centre.

4.4 The main reason given for visiting Elgin City Centre in the perception survey was shopping followed by work. Elgin had the lowest overall rating in the town centre perception study. It scored poorly on retail offering, evening economy, daytime events, pleasant/attractiveness, public transport access and cleanliness. Key improvements identified by respondents were shopping with car parking, cleanliness, restaurants/cafes, and events also identified by a significant number of respondents.

EDGAR ROAD

4.5 At Edgar Road national multiples continue to be dominant within the two retail parks. Vacancies have decreased from 7 to 5 since 2018. All the vacancies are within Elgin Retail Park. Since the survey was completed Pure Gym and Chest Heart and Stroke shop have opened which will further reduce vacancy levels.

FORRES

4.6 Comparison retailing and retail services are the dominant use within Forres town centre but leisure uses also make a significant contribution. Retail services (i.e. salons, post office, dry cleaners etc.) have continued to increase. The number of vacant units identified was 18, which is a vacancy rate of 16.2%. This is the highest vacancy rate recorded since biennial town centre health checks started in 2010. This is an increase from 12 recorded by Hargest Planning Ltd in 2021 and a substantial increase from the three recorded in 2018 by planning officers. Notable new vacancies since 2018 include Washingtons, Sues’s News, Stuart Cycles, Lees Wealth Management and Ladbrokes. Non-retail vacancies and the appearance of buildings impacts negatively on the perception of the health of the town centre.

4.7 Shopping was identified in the town centre perception survey as the main reason for visiting Forres town centre. Respondents rated Forres well for access by active travel, access by car, accessible for all and safety but was rated more poorly for the retail offering, evening economy and daytime events. Key improvements identified by respondents were shopping and events.

KEITH

4.8 Vitality and viability indicators in Keith have been relatively steady with the mix of uses remaining largely the same and a decrease in vacancies noted. Keith has a strong independent sector with the majority of shops being local stores with a distinct identity. Seven vacant units were identified which is a vacancy rate of 8.5% - this is lower than the 10% average used in Scotland to indicate the relative health of a town centre. However, non-retail vacancies and the condition of some buildings have a negative perception of the town centre for example the former Council Access Point and old Bank of Scotland.

4.9 In the town centre perception survey shopping was identified as the main reason for visiting Keith town centre. Respondents rated the evening economy, daytime events and pleasant/attractiveness poorly. Key improvements identified by respondents include shopping, cleanliness and events.

BUCKIE

4.10 Buckie town centre has a good mix of uses with comparison being dominant but with reasonable levels of convenience and retail services. National multiples, M&Co and RS Mcoll, have left the town centre with the centre primarily made up of independent retailers. The number of vacant units identified was 11, which is a vacancy rate of 14%. This is one unit higher than 2018 and is above the 10% commonly used in Scotland to indicate the relative health of a town centre. Vacancies include M&Co, RS Mcolls, Curiosities, and Master Phones and Vapes.

4.11 In the town centre perception survey shopping was identified as the main reason for visiting Buckie town centre followed by work. Respondents rated the retail offering, evening economy and daytime events poorly. Key improvements identified include shopping, restaurants/cafes and events.

LOSSIEMOUTH

4.12 Leisure continues to be the dominant use in Lossiemouth with reasonable levels of comparison and retail services identified. Five vacant units were identified, which is a vacancy rate of 9%. Vacancies include D&I Tropical, an optician on Queen Street and the former Co-op store that was vacated when the store moved to James Square.

4.13 Shopping was identified as the main reason for visiting Lossiemouth town centre with leisure and socialising also featuring strongly. Respondents rated the evening economy and daytime events poorly but rated safety highly. Key improvements identified by respondents included shopping, events and night life.

SMALLER SETTLEMENTS (ABERLOUR, DUFFTOWN, FOCHABERS, AND ROTHES)

4.14 A significant proportion of the uses in the centre of Moray's smaller towns are Leisure Services (pubs, cafes, restaurants, hotels, sports facilities etc.), with Comparison and Retail Services also contributing to the mix. Convenience shopping needs are provided for by a number of smaller stores, such as the Co-operative stores in Aberlour, Dufftown and Fochabers. Rothes is serviced by a Keystore and Morrisons. No vacancies were identified in Aberlour, three in Fochabers, and five in both Dufftown and Rothes.

4.15 The town centre perception survey included Aberlour and Dufftown, although the low level of response (less than 10 for each town) is noted. Shopping and work were identified as the main reason for visiting these towns. Overall Aberlour scored well with only daytime events and access by public transport scoring averagely. Respondents rating Dufftown scored the retail offering, evening economy, access by public transport and pleasant/attractiveness poorly. Key improvements identified for Aberlour include public transport and night life. In Dufftown shopping, events and restaurants/cafes were rated highly for improvement.

5. SUMMARY OF IMPLICATIONS

(a) Corporate Plan and 10 Year Plan (Local Outcomes Improvement Plan (LOIP))
Maintaining vital and viable high streets and town centres supports a growing, diverse and sustainable economy. The town centre health check can provide an evidence base for the development of policies and strategies to support town centres.

(b) Policy and Legal
If approved the Moray Town Centre Health Check Report 2023 would be a material consideration in any relevant future planning applications.

(c) Financial implications
None.

(d) Risk Implications
The risk of not monitoring the health of town centres would be an out-of-date evidence base being used for preparing strategies and the Local Development Plan.

(e) Staffing Implications
The field studies and analysis of space in use was completed by Planning Officers assisted by an intern from the Career Ready programme. The Town Centre Perception Survey was undertaken by Research and Information Officers.

(f) Property
None

(g) Equalities/Socio Economic Impact

There are no direct implications arising from this report.

(h) Climate Change and Biodiversity Impacts
Town centres are often the most accessible by public and active travel options. Successful and thriving town centres that provide a range of services and social opportunities can help to reduce the need to travel by car and support walkable neighbourhoods. Making best use of existing town centre infrastructure including reuse and regeneration of existing buildings is preferable to demolition from an embodied carbon perspective.

(i) Consultations
Consultation has taken place with the Depute Chief Executive (Economy, Environment and Finance), the Head of Economic Growth and Development, Head of Governance, Strategy and Performance, the Legal Services Manager, Democratic Services Manager, the Chief Financial Officer the Principal Climate Change Officer, and the Equal Opportunities Officer.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1 Town Centre Health Checks have been undertaken every two years since 2010 (with the exception of 2020 when the health check was delayed due to Covid-19 restrictions). This has allowed various indicators to be monitored over time and data to be used as an evidence base for developing policy and strategies to support town centres. Vacant retail units have increased in all towns with the exception of Keith and Aberlour. The national trend of national multiple retailers moving out of town centres has continued.

6.2 It is recommended that Council note the findings of the Health Check 2023 and adopt the Moray Town Centre Health Check Report 2023 as a material consideration in future planning policy and planning application decision making.

Author of Report:	Rowena MacDougall, Senior Planning Officer, Strategic Planning and Development
Background Papers:	
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