

# Leith Town Centre Guidance



January 2025

# INTRODUCTION

Development plans guide decisions on applications for planning permission. The statutory development plan comprises the National Planning Framework (adopted February 2023) and the local development plan, namely City Plan 2030 (adopted November 2024).

This guidance sets out the approach to the change of use of shop units within Leith Town Centre and assists the implementation of development plan policy.

Leith is one of Edinburgh's nine town centres (including the City Centre) defined and protected in the City Plan 2030 as a hub for a wide range of activities including shopping, providing local services and as a leisure destination.

The Local Development Plan provides a framework for a tailored approach to assessing proposals for change of use applications in individual town centres. This guidance was originally prepared, as statutory supplementary guidance, in accordance with the superseded 2016 Local Development Plan, prior to the National Planning Framework forming part of the statutory development plan. However, the substance of the planning guidance remains valid in the context of the current statutory development plan, and is unchanged by the update.

The guidance has been updated only to reflect:

- Statutory changes to permitted development rights
- The overarching policy framework of the current statutory development plan, both in terms of:
  - National Planning Framework 4; and
  - City Plan 2030, including Policy Re 4: Alternative Use of Shop Units in the City Centre and Town Centres,
- Revisions to town centre boundaries to accord with the boundaries defined by City Plan 2030.

The updated guidance is no longer statutory supplementary guidance, but will remain as planning guidance and a material consideration in the determination of planning applications.



# AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This guidance assists the delivery of National Planning Framework 4 objectives and policies, in particular to ensure town centres are vibrant, healthy and resilient places for people to work, enjoy and visit.

This guidance assists the City Plan 2030 aim to support the existing network of city, town and local centres which are an important focal point for people who live and work in Edinburgh, providing shopping, leisure and community facilities in locations which are easily accessible by walking, wheeling and cycling or public transport. They also contribute to local living and 20 minute neighbourhoods.

This guidance is a material consideration for planning applications seeking consent for a change of use of a retail unit where permitted development rights do not apply. The Council's [Guidance for Businesses](#) is also of relevance to proposals of change of use. This will also be a material consideration in the determination of applications.

This guidance has been informed by a 'public life street assessment' carried out by design consultants for the Council, which explored how the town centre should evolve to maximise the potential for benefiting public life and a health check which has considered the centre's strengths, vitality and viability, weaknesses and resiliencies.



# LEITH TOWN CENTRE

Leith Town Centre is one of Edinburgh's nine town centres (including the City Centre Retail Core) defined, protected and promoted as the heart of the community and a hub for a wide range of activities from shopping and providing local services and as a leisure destination. Leith Town Centre (defined in Maps 1 and 2) starts just to the north of the city centre and follows Leith Walk north to take in parts of Great Junction Street, Duke Street and the Kirkgate. Leith Walk has evolved from a historic route that led from the Port of Leith to the city to a main arterial route into the city centre. Most of the town centre is within either the Leith Conservation Area or the New Town Conservation Area.

Leith Ward has the highest population density in the city and is one of the most densely populated areas in the UK. There are over 16,000 residents that are within an easy walking distance of the town centre boundary (see Map 1 and 2). The resident population and visitors to Leith was set to increase with the following developments:

- Four dedicated student accommodation blocks
- New housing at Tennant Street and Brunswick Road
- Proximity to Edinburgh St James development and new hotel at Baxter's Place;
- Extension of the Tram line to Newhaven.

Leith Town Centre was subject to an extensive road and public realm renewal programme referred to as the 'Leith Programme'. Funded by the Council and Sustrans, it focused on delivering high quality public realm, focusing on walking, cycling, public transport and street life along Leith's principal street. The first three phases are complete, with further

phases subject to consultation. From March 2017 the 20mph programme was introduced in the Leith area. Reduced traffic speed will improve the sense of security for pedestrians and cyclists.

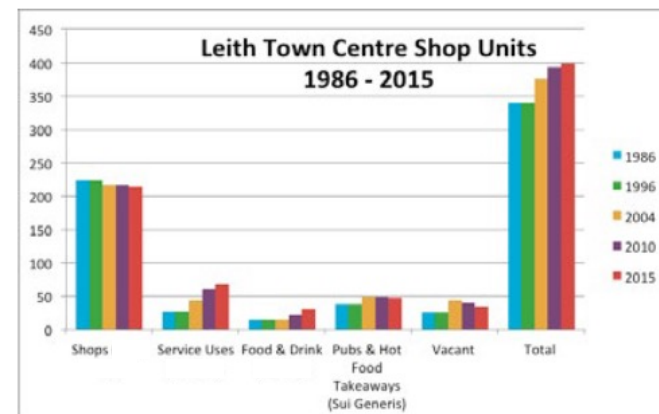
The average quoting retail rent (2 years ending Sept 2015) (£/sq ft) is £12 which along with Portobello, is the lowest rent in the city and equates to half the rent of Bruntsfield/ Morningside and Stockbridge Town Centres.

Leith has benefited from the trade waste policy that only allows trade waste to be presented on the street/outside premises for one-hour within set collection windows. This has significantly reduced pavement clutter and improved pedestrian movement, especially at peak times of day.

## Shops and other town centre uses

Similar to Edinburgh's other town centres, the shop units are predominantly ground floor units under traditional tenemental housing. The planning system cannot control what goods shops are selling, nor can it control which company occupies a shop. Leith has a dedicated pedestrian shopping precinct at the Newkirkgate with national retailers like Lidl with dedicated parking to the rear. There is an extended stand alone supermarket at the bottom of the Walk. Some units have been merged to accommodate larger units, often for the 'local' format national supermarkets (Tesco Metro, Scotmid, the Cooperative and other independent supermarkets). There is a good mix of other convenience shops to serve the large local population, as well as specialist independent shops to draw in trade, making Leith a shopping destination. The shopfront design is of varying quality across the centre.

The mix of uses has been monitored in city-wide shop surveys periodically undertaken since 1986. As the graph below shows, the mix of uses follows trends seen in other town centres like a small loss in shops contrasting with an increase in service uses and food and drink uses. Pubs and hot food takeaways have remained more stable over the years, and there has been an improvement in the vacancy rate. The 2015 survey shows a 10% rate which is below the national average and which is between 9% and 13%, but higher than Edinburgh's average of 7%.

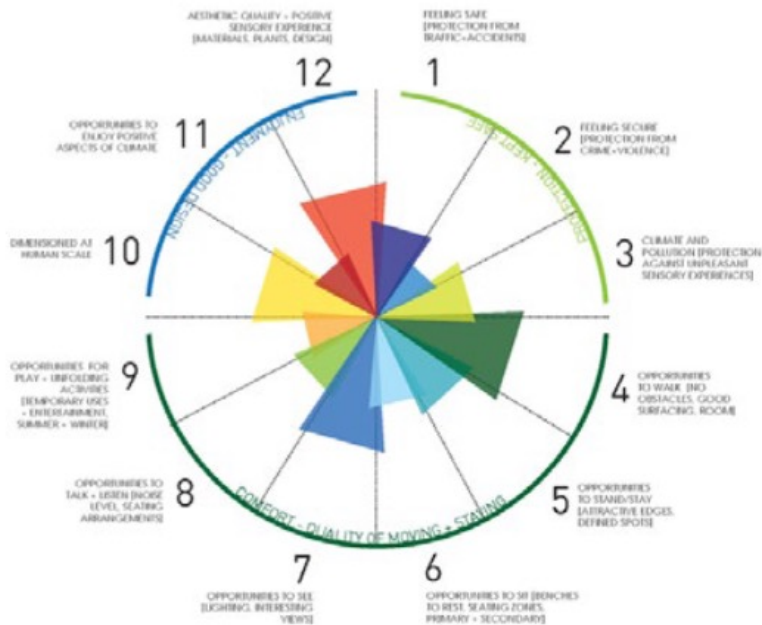


## Public Life Street Assessment

A systematic methodology using direct observation techniques (pedestrian counts, behavioural mapping and tracing studies) was used to assess both the place and movement function of the Leith Town Centre. The results are summarised below and in the accompanying graphics.

### Place Function Analysis

The place function was assessed against 12 Quality Criteria advocated by Gehl Architects. Generally the place function score is split between those areas already improved under the Leith Programme, and those yet to be transformed by the programme. The sections south of Pilrig Street, as well as Great Junction Street, have a poorer score. As identified in the 'wheel' diagram below, Leith scored moderately on its aesthetic quality and detail design. The assessment highlighted a need to address lack of vegetation and planting throughout the centre.



As a movement route the centre scores highly especially in the improved sections. Generally there is good lighting and opportunities to enjoy views up the Walk. Wider footpaths, particularly in the newer sections, allows shopfronts to be appreciated and creates space that feels at a human scale and less dominated by cars.

The place function scored less well on opportunities to enjoy positive climate as there is currently little shelter from inclement weather; there are few opportunities for play and unfolding activities; traffic noise and lack of sheltered seating from traffic make few opportunities to talk and listen. Overall there is a lack of places to sit or stay in a comfortable setting due to lack of shelter and seating. Feeling safe and protected from traffic and accidents scored poorly. The assessment drew attention to a perception of crime and anti-social behaviour.



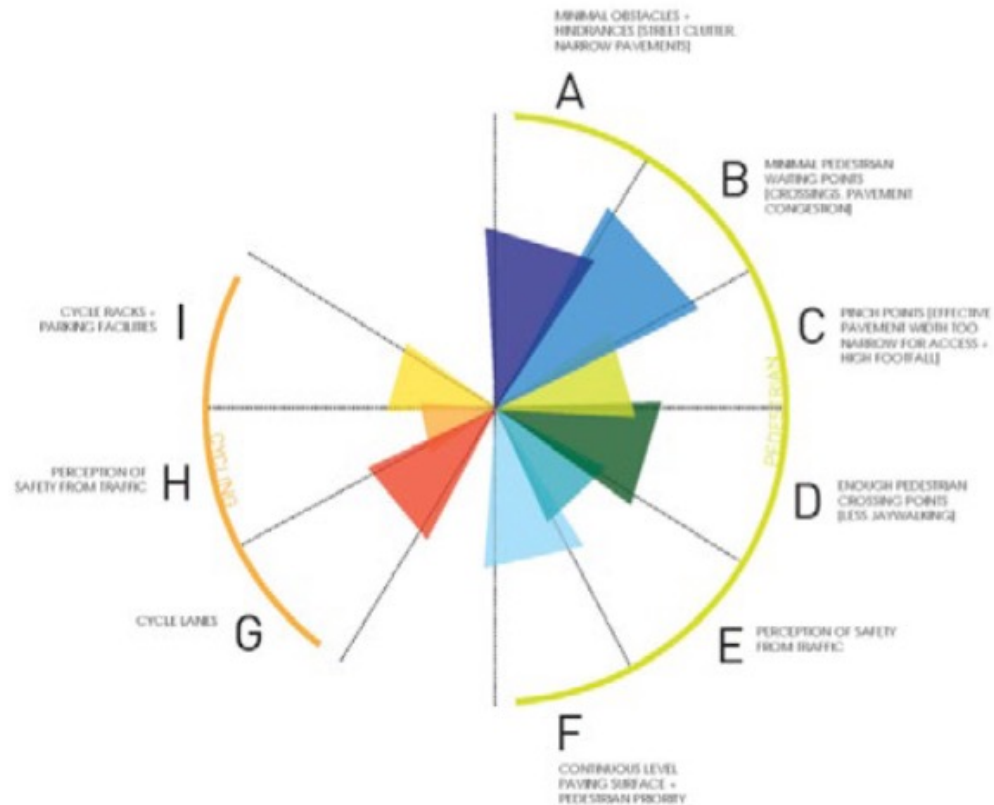
## Pedestrian Movement Function

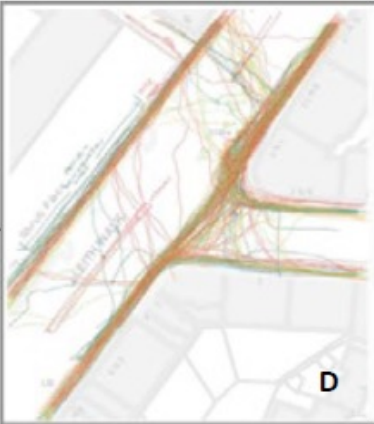
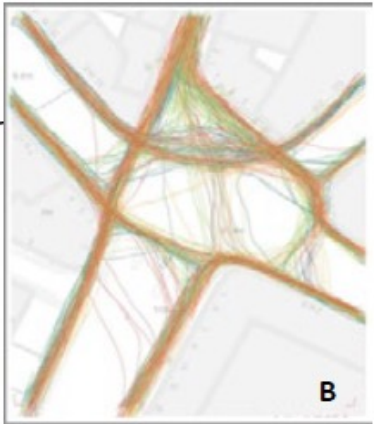
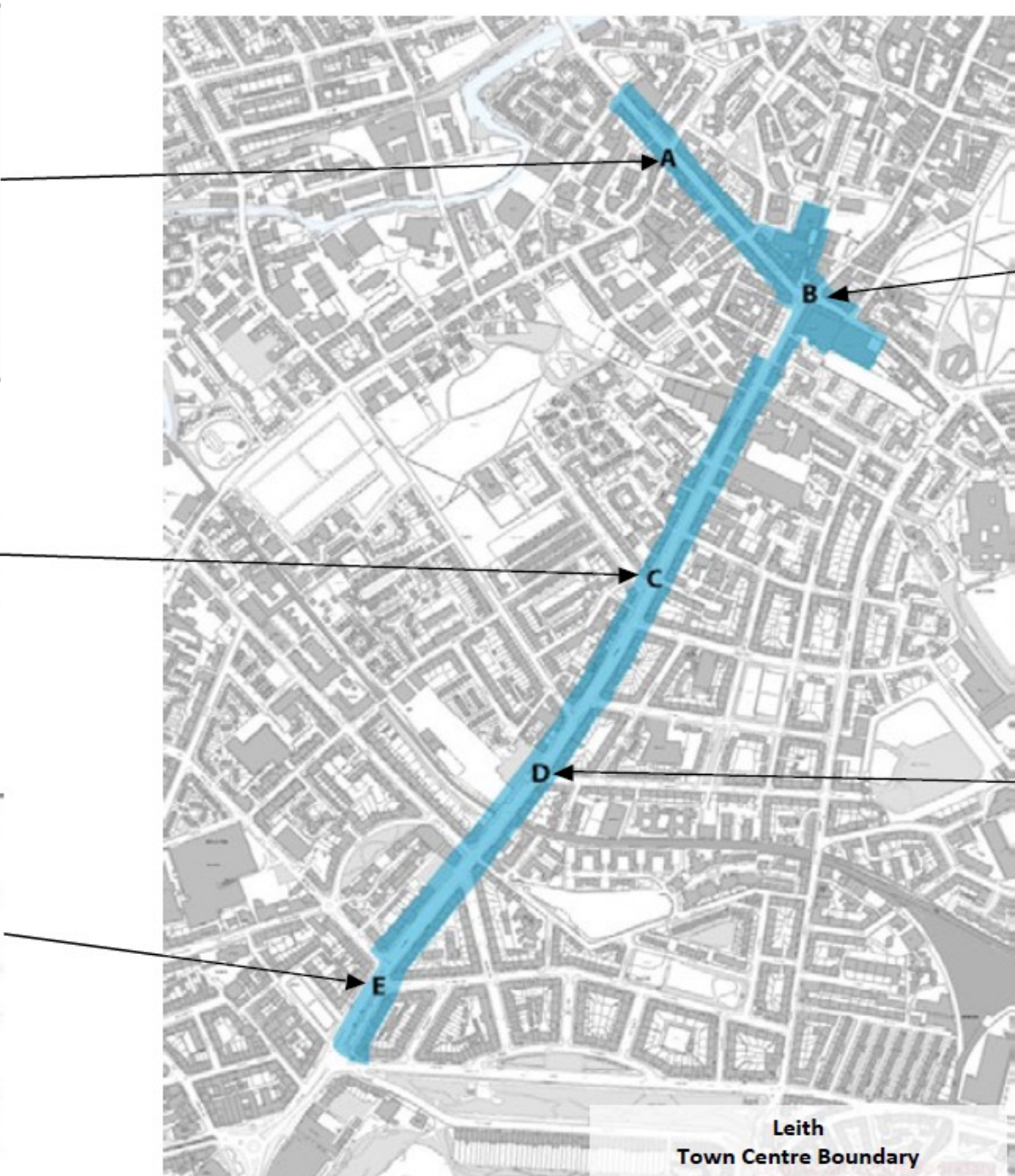
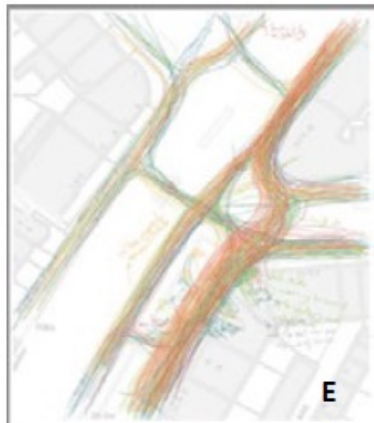
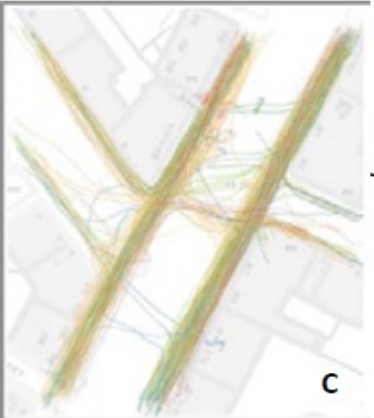
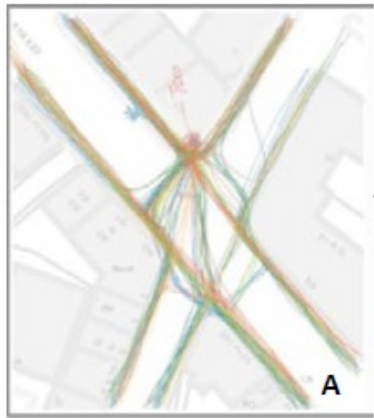
As described in the ‘wheel’ diagram below, Leith enjoys minimal pedestrian congestion (with the exception of Great Junction Street). Along the length of the Walk there are few waiting points for pedestrians when crossing minor roads. The completed section of the Leith Programme has particularly helped minimise pedestrian waiting points with the raised entry treatment of side streets; wide and clear pedestrian routes; and the addition of new crossings. Elsewhere such as Great Junction Street movement is impeded by narrow pavements, higher number of obstacles and A-frames are prevalent in the south of Leith Walk.

There are some sections that pedestrian movement tracing (see images below) highlighted as problematic, such as the south of the Pilrig Road junction and the complex junction at Montgomery Street/Elm Row. Where new crossings have been added, these have been welcomed.

Paving surface and width is a problem in the sections yet to be improved and in Great Junction Street where there is a lack in pedestrian priority in terms of carriageway space and junction layouts. User interviews expressed concern regarding traffic in terms of accidents, volume and noise.

The map and images below show the observational tracing studies carried out at the five locations (A-E) within the town centre boundary. The tracing studies mark pedestrian movement lines. As these build up, pedestrian desire lines and highly trafficked routes become more obvious, giving a graphical representation of the volume and direction of pedestrian movement.





# THE VISION FOR LEITH

There is great potential to improve the movement and place function of Leith Town Centre. Three key overarching aims have been identified for the town centre as a whole. Both the Planning and Transport Service and Localities teams should endeavor to apply these, where appropriate. External parties should consider these when submitting planning applications.

**AIM 1 - Promote PLACE by maximising Leith Town Centre's contribution to an active public street life, encouraging people to spend longer in the town centre by enhancing the comfort, interest and quality of the public realm.**

a) Bringing visual interest to the streetscape that can be appreciated by pedestrians, such as supporting:

- outdoor seating;
- appropriate pavement displays of traders' goods;
- high quality shopfront design that complies with the Council's Guidance for Businesses, and the Listed Building and Conservation Area Guidance.

b) Adding opportunities to shelter from the elements, rest and enjoy positive climate, for example by supporting the addition/use of:

- Planters, trees, awnings, overhangs;
- formal or informal seating.

c) Creating flexible public spaces that allow options to test outdoor markets/temporary stalls/seating spaces, for example at Elm Row or the Kirkgate.

d) Improving the environmental quality of all amenity space, regardless of tenure, to create informal open spaces, for example at Croall Place.

e) Any development opportunity should make a positive contribution to the public realm by meeting the Street Design Guidance and future public realm strategy.

**AIM 2 - Facilitate MOVEMENT and increase footfall by prioritising pedestrians and cyclists over cars.**

Leith Town Centre scores well for movement, but there are some areas that still need to be redesigned to reduce pinch points (congestion) and increase pavement space.

a) Improve connections with the wider walking and cycling networks and QuietRoutes network, for example creating more direct routes to Pilrig Park through the redevelopment of the Stead's Place/100 – 152 Leith Walk block and from Great Junction Street potentially from Pirrie Street; and in the long-term to connect to the Powderhall train line, the route of which is safeguarded as a long-term active travel off-road route;

b) Upgrade junctions by moving kerbs to create wider pavements and narrower carriageways to help reduce congestion at the narrow sections of pavement, for example at the junction with Bonnington Road;

c) Reduce street clutter that impedes pedestrian movement, particularly at Great Junction Street;

d) Simplify complex road junctions for example the Elm Row/ Annandale Street/ Montgomery Street junction through the next phase of the Leith Programme.

**AIM 3 - Create a DESTINATION that provides a vibrant mix of shopping and other town centre services for residents and visitors.**

a) Maximise Leith's large resident population and ensure that the town centre meets their shopping needs and demands,

balanced against the benefits of extending economic activity and footfall into the evening.

b) Recognise the retail focus at the foot of the Walk, supported by busy bus stops and available parking, and nurture it by applying an appropriate planning policy that protects shop use (see Policy LTC 1 below).

c) Capitalise on the wide pavements and clustering of food and drink with outdoor seating permits located between Stead's Place and Iona Street by applying an appropriate policy that allows greater flexibility in changes to food and drink.

d) Town centres are highly accessible and desirable locations for a variety of uses, including residential and small business use. These uses would be supported as part of the redevelopment of larger sites such as H40 Steads Place and OPP41 Jane Street in City Plan 2030. Development opportunities within the town centre boundary and directly adjacent to the street frontage should also deliver:

- active frontages with ground floor commercial units;
- clear pedestrian links through the site;
- opportunities to create or enhance public spaces, where possible.

e) Consequently, the conversion of any shop unit to residential use within the town centre boundary will not be permitted.

f) Ensure Leith capitalises on the opportunities that the three tram stops safeguarded along Leith Walk will bring to the immediate vicinity.



# CHANGE OF USE POLICIES

The policies in this guidance apply to shop units.

**What is a shop unit?** Premises accessed directly from the street and designed primarily for shop use. In some locations the shop unit can be above street level or at basement level but still have direct access and be visible from the street.

**What is a shop use?** Shop use is now included within the class 1A (shops, financial, professional and other services) as set out in the amended General Permitted Development (Scotland) Order 1992, e.g. charity shops, tattoo parlours, beautician, estate agents etc.

Other uses falling outwith the definition of class 1A include:

**Food and drink (class 3)** – Use for the sale of food or drink for consumption on the premises e.g. restaurants, café.

**Business use (class 4)** – general office, light industry or research and development, which can be carried out without detriment to the amenity of any residential area.

**Assembly and leisure use (class 11)** – e.g. cinema, and gymnasium.

**Sui generis uses** – e.g. betting shops, pay day loan shops, pubs and hot food takeaways.

## Permitted Development Rights

Class 11A of the amended General Permitted Development (Scotland) Order 1992 does allow the change of a use of a building/shop unit within Class 1A to Class 3 (food and drink) without planning permission. However, change of use is not permitted by this class if it involves a unit directly

below a residential dwelling or within 1 metre of a residential dwelling. In the case of LeithTown Centre, Class 1A does not apply to the majority of shop units.

Class 11B of the amended General Permitted Development (Scotland) Order 1992 allows the change of use of a building unit from Class 1A to Class 4 (business) without planning permission if the building or unit is 300sqm or less.

## Purpose of the Guidance

The purpose of this town centre guidance is to assist planning officers and applicants in determining whether a change of use of a shop unit would undermine the retail function of the centre. It has been prepared to support the delivery of Policy Re 4 of City Plan 2030.

### **Policy Re 4: Alternative Use of Shop Units in the City Centre and Town Centres**

*In the City Centre Retail Core and town centres, changes of use of a shop unit to a non-shop use will only be permitted if it can be demonstrated that:*

- a. *The change would not undermine the retailing function of the centre, and*
- b. *The proposal is for an appropriate commercial, community or business use, which would complement the character of the centre and would not be detrimental to its vitality and viability.*

*The Council's city centre and town centre planning guidance will be used to assess whether the change of use would undermine the retail function of the centre. These guidelines*

*have been prepared following detailed analysis of each centre and set out detailed advice tailored to identify the appropriate balance of uses within each centre to maintain their vitality, viability and deliver good placemaking.*

Planning applications should be assessed against the policies in this guidance. Where a proposal meets the requirements of the policies, a change of use is not expected to undermine the retail function of the centre. Where a proposal is contrary to the policies, there is a risk that a proposal would undermine the retail function of the centre, unless there are other material considerations that outweigh the loss of the retail unit, for example, a significant number of vacant units exist in the same retail frontage.

## Guidance Policies

The three policies below (Policy LTC1, Policy LTC2 and Policy LTC3) set out when a shop unit can change from a shop use to a non-shop use.

### LTC 1 – Alternative Use of Shop Units in Defined Frontages (foot of Leith Walk)

In the Frontages at the foot of the Walk area, defined in Table 1 (see Map 1), the change of use of a shop unit to a non-shop use will be permitted provided:

- a) as a result of permitting the change of use, no more than one third of the total number of units in the frontage will be in non-shop use; and
- b) the proposal is for an appropriate commercial or community use which would complement the character of the centre and would not be detrimental to its vitality and viability.

#### Table 1: Frontages (foot of the walk area)

2-52 Great Junction Street and 1-3 Duke Street

1-67 Great Junction Street and 2-4 Leith Walk

Kirkgate – all units

### LTC2– Alternative Use of Shop Units in Defined Frontages (Elm Row and Leith Walk)

In the Frontages at Elm Row and Leith Walk, defined in Table 2 (See Map 2), the change of use of a shop unit to a non-shop use will be permitted provided:

- a) as a result of permitting the change of use, no more than one half of the total number of units in the frontage will be in non-shop use; and
- b) the proposal is for an appropriate commercial or community use which would complement the character of the centre and would not be detrimental to its vitality and viability.

#### Table 2: Frontages (Elm Row and Leith Walk)

25-75 Elm Row and 88-96 Brunswick Street

1-23 Elm Row

265-295 Leith Walk

### LTC 3 – Alternative Use of Shop Units Elsewhere in Leith Town Centre

For those locations not within a 'frontage', but elsewhere within the Leith Town Centre boundary, a change of use from a shop to a non-shop use will be permitted provided a proposal is:

Class 3 – food and drink uses

An appropriate commercial or community use which would complement the character of the centre and would not be detrimental to its vitality and viability.



## Other Relevant Information

### National Planning Framework 4

#### City Plan 2030

Other relevant policies in City Plan 2030 include:

**Re 1** Town Centres First Policy

**Re 3** Town Centres

**Re 9** Entertainment, Leisure and café/restaurant developments – Preferred locations

**Re 11** Food and Drink Establishments

**Env 13** Shopfronts

**Env 9** World Heritage Sites

**Env 11** Listed Buildings – Setting

**Env 12** Listed Buildings – Alterations and Extensions

**Env 13** Conservation Areas – Demolition of Buildings

**Env 14** Conservation Areas – Development

**Env 15** Historic Gardens and Designed Landscapes

Policy Re 3 generally supports shop uses in town centres.

Policy Re 9 supports leisure and entertainment facilities in town centres. Policies Re 11 considers the impact on nearby residents for proposals such as public houses and hot food takeaways. Env 13 supports improvements to shop fronts.

**Licensing** – Food and drink, public house and hot-food takeaway uses will often require other consents and are subject to separate controls by licensing for: alcohol; hours of operation and outdoor pavement seating. For more information on these, see the Council's web site on [licenses and permits](#).

**Guidance for Businesses** – non-statutory guidance to assist businesses in preparing applications to change the use of a property as well as providing guidance on shopfront design.

**Edinburgh Street Design Guidance** – Edinburgh's new Street Design Guidance brings together previously separate CEC guidance on street design to achieve coherence and co-ordination across the city, with the ultimate goal of providing the people of Edinburgh with a world-class network of vibrant, safe, attractive, effective and enjoyable streets. The guidance will apply to a range of Council services who manage streets for various purposes.

**Edinburgh Design Guidance** – The Edinburgh Design Guidance sets out the Council's expectations for the design of new development in Edinburgh. The guidance is intended for all new buildings and should be used as a point of reference, a basis for the planning, design and communication of new development proposals and a material consideration in assessing planning applications. It aims to provide guidance on how to comply with the policies in the local plans, explain the key ideas which need to be considered during the design process, give examples of good quality design, and set out the requirements for design and access statements.









## Definitions

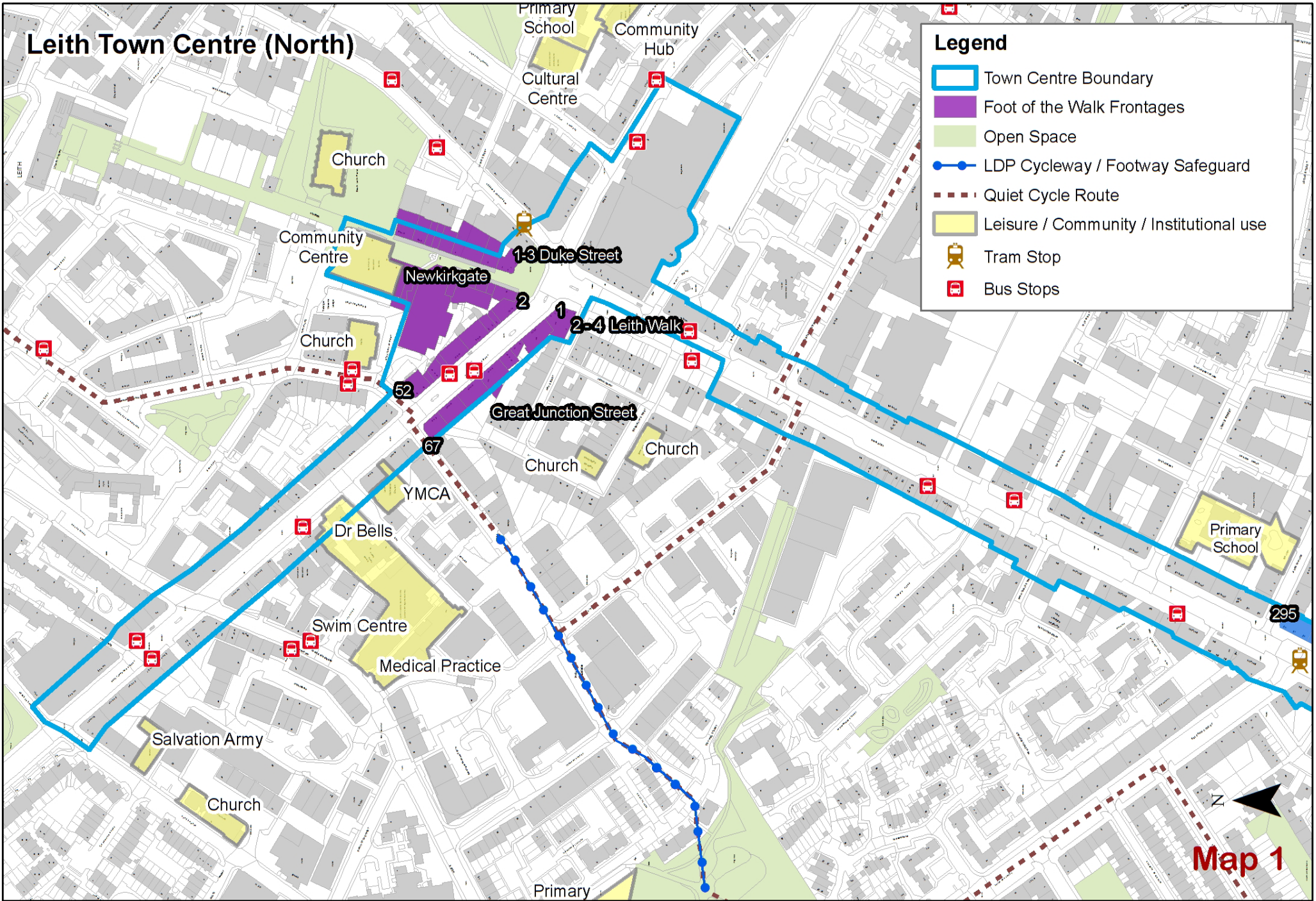
**Shop unit** – As defined in the City Plan 2030, a shop unit is a premises accessed directly onto the street and designed primarily for shop use.

**Class 1A** – are shops and financial, professional and other services. Uses under Subsection 1 are; retail sale of goods other than hot food, a post office, sale of tickets, a travel agency, sale of cold food for consumption off the premises, hairdressing, direction of funerals, display of goods for sale, hiring of domestic or personal goods or articles, a launderette or dry cleaners, for reception of goods to be washed, cleaned or repaired. These uses are where the sale, display or service is principally to visiting members of the public. Uses under Subsection 2 are; provision of financial, professional or any other service, which is appropriate to provide in a shopping area and where the sale, display or service is principally to visiting members of the public.

# Leith Town Centre (North)

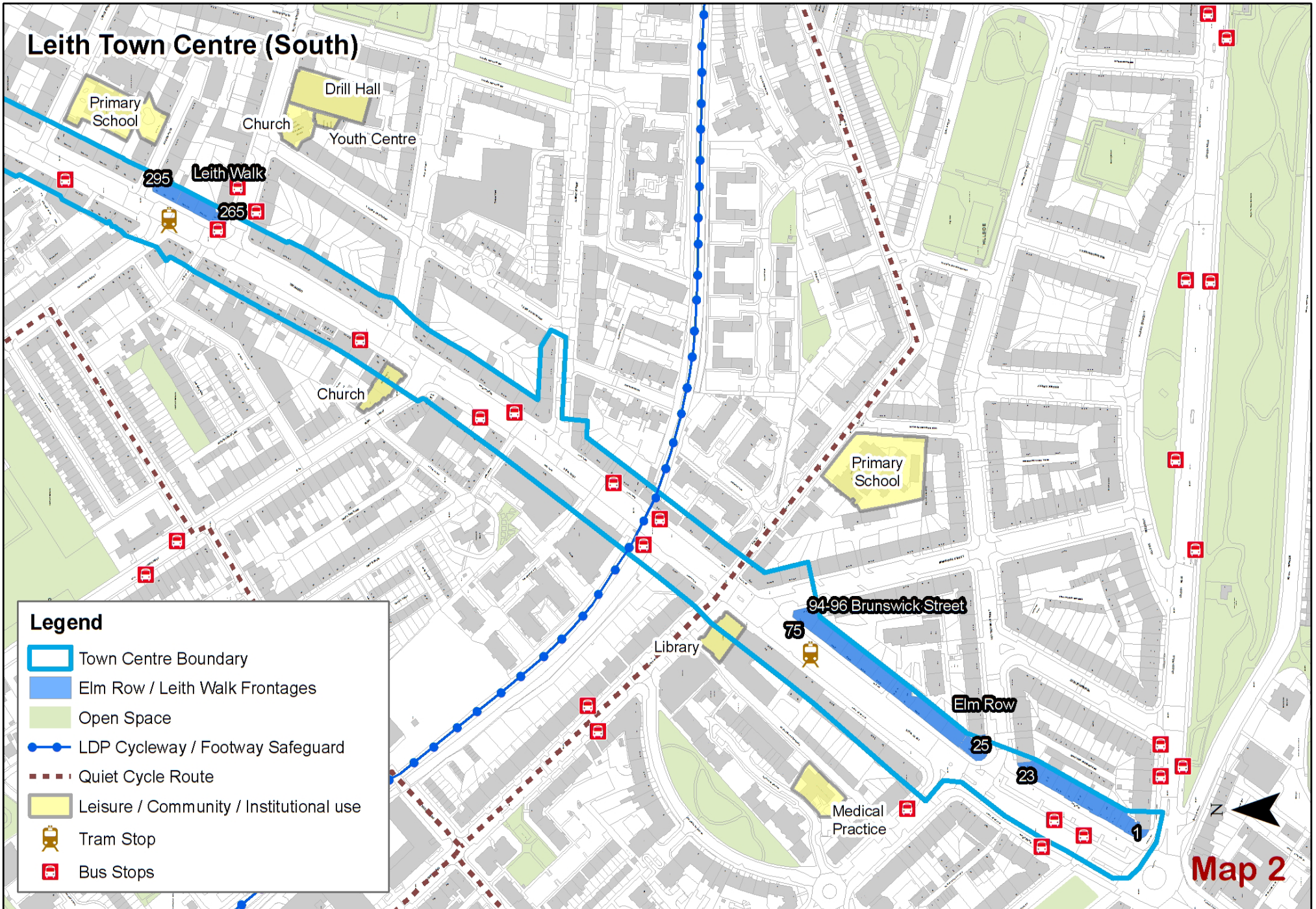
**Legend**

-  Town Centre Boundary
-  Foot of the Walk Frontages
-  Open Space
-  LDP Cycleway / Footway Safeguard
-  Quiet Cycle Route
-  Leisure / Community / Institutional use
-  Tram Stop
-  Bus Stops



**Map 1**

# Leith Town Centre (South)



**Legend**

- Town Centre Boundary
- Elm Row / Leith Walk Frontages
- Open Space
- LDP Cycleway / Footway Safeguard
- Quiet Cycle Route
- Leisure / Community / Institutional use
- Tram Stop
- Bus Stops

Map 2

Contact us:

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[www.edinburgh.gov.uk/cityplan2030](http://www.edinburgh.gov.uk/cityplan2030)

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January 2025



HAPPY TO TRANSLATE

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