

Portobello Town Centre Guidance

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January 2025

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THE CITY OF EDINBURGH COUNCIL

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 Portobello Town Centre and assists the implementation of development plan policy.

Portobello 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 This guidance was originally prepared, as statutory supplementary guidance, in accordance with the superseded 2016 Local Development Plan, prior to the National Planning Framework forming part of the statutory development plan.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.



PORTOBELLO TOWN CENTRE

Portobello Town Centre (defined in Map 1) lies to the north of the city centre and takes in Portobello High Street from Flint Terrace to the west and ends at Pittville street at Abercorn Park in the east. Portobello High Street is an arterial route into Edinburgh from the east and serves as the main shopping and commercial street for Portobello. Almost the entire town centre falls within Portobello Conservation Area. The promenade and beach play a key role in giving Portobello its unique setting and identity, and make Portobello a popular 'destination' for daytrips, especially in the summer months. It retains its village feel with an engaged community that promotes local initiatives such as the community buyout of the former Portobello Old Parish Church, in Bellfield Street, and Brighton Park hosts a monthly market.

Similar to Edinburgh's other town centres, the shop units are predominantly ground floor units under traditional tenemental housing or purpose built shop units with terraced housing to the rear. The shopfront design is of varying quality across the centre. The main anchor supermarket is located off Bath Street and is not visually connected to the main high street. The second main food retailer to enter is the purpose built medium sized supermarket with car park located at the western end of the town centre.

Strengths and weaknesses

To assess how the Town Centre functions in terms of pedestrian and cyclist movement and as a place to visit, a study called a public life street assessment was carried out by design consultants for the Council, and explored how the town centre should evolve to maximise the potential

for benefitting public life. This study used a mixture of techniques, including direct observation (pedestrian counts, behavioural mapping and tracing studies), user interviews and land use surveys.

A health check has also been carried out to assess the Town Centre's strengths, vitality and viability, weaknesses and resilience.

SWOT Analysis

Strengths

- Village feel with presence of civic buildings acting as architectural landmarks eg police station and town hall
- Community capital – community run assets and monthly market
- High proportion of independent shops. Stable shop to non-shop ratio
- The Promenade and beach make Portobello a destination, and is an active travel route and alternative to the high street
- Relatively minimal pedestrian congestion

Weaknesses

- Poor wayfinding from the Promenade to the High Street
- Slightly high vacancy rate
- Limited crossing points, parts of the street feels one-sided

- Narrowest section of the street between Brighton Place/ Bath Street and Windsor Place, is perceived as a pinch point and an area of conflict between cyclists, buses and on-street parking

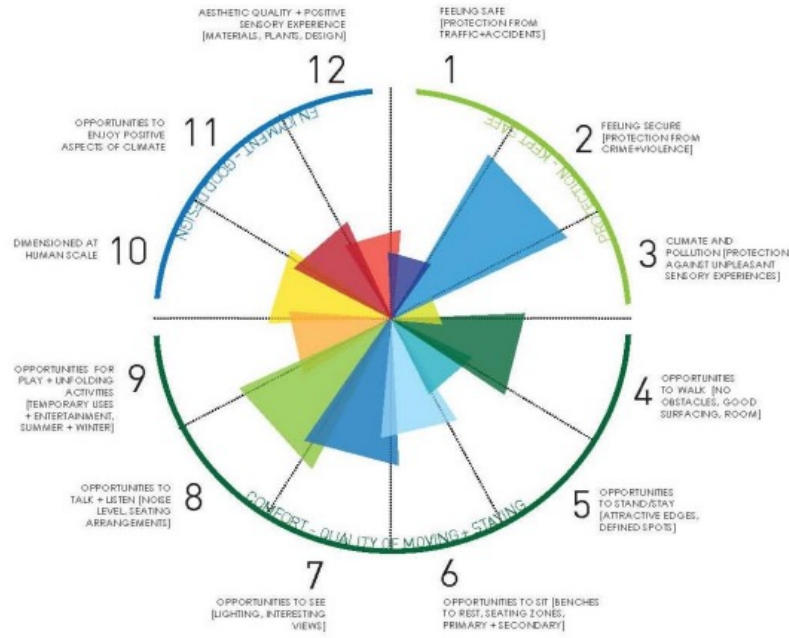
Opportunities

- Better links and connections between the High Street and Promenade, including improved wayfinding
- Better use of space outside Town Hall
- Protection from climate and traffic
- Build on social capital and chance encounters by redressing the lack of spaces for unfolding activities and play, opportunities to stand and stay, and rest

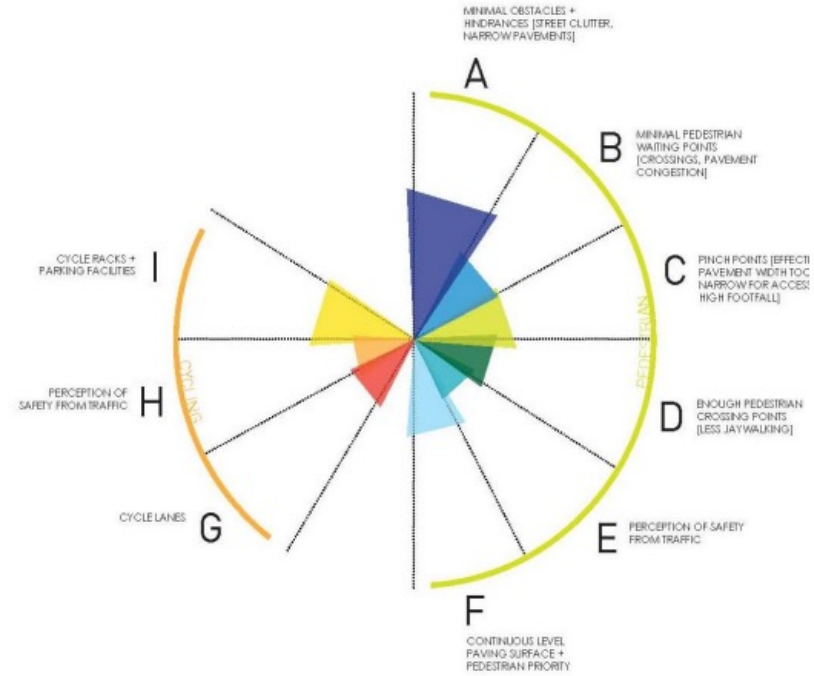
Threats

- Traffic noise, volume and pollution
- Lack of cycle lanes and parking

FINDINGS FROM PUBLIC LIFE STREET ASSESSMENTS



Place Function



Movement Function

VISION AND PRINCIPLES

The Public Life Street Assessment and health check highlight areas for potential improvement in the Town Centre, particularly relating to the movement and place function. The vision for Portobello is to:

- a place with an active public street life with a quality public realm that is comfortable for all users and thereby would encourage people to stay longer;
- streets and public realm that priorities pedestrians and cyclists and thereby increases the ease of movement and increases footfall; and
- a mix of shopping and other town centre services that supports the resident community and creates a destination for visitors.

The Supplementary Guidance goes some way to achieve the wider vision through the following principles, which should be considered when submitting and assessing a planning application for a change of use within the Town Centre:

1. Supporting high quality shopfront design (see the Council's Guidance for Businesses and Listed Buildings and Conservation Area Guidance).
2. Ensuring active frontages to the street by permitting glazing which will allow for natural surveillance, create a visual interest on the street and encourage street users to linger, whilst prohibiting the change of use from shop use to residential in ground floor units. Supporting outdoor seating where pavements are wider and micro-climate is favourable.

3. Supporting Class 3 food and drink uses on corner units where there is an opportunity to activate the public street life.
4. Maximising opportunities for formal and informal outdoor seating incorporating shelter or shop front awnings at key points along the town centre
5. Ensuring development makes a positive contribution to the public realm by meeting the Street Design Guidance and Edinburgh Design Guidance.
6. Incorporating and enhancing natural and built features where they can contribute positively to the Town Centre, for example the connections to the Promenade/beach.
7. Supporting additional cycle parking facilities at key points along the Town Centre.
8. Taking opportunities to remove street clutter and other redundant items identified in any relevant street audits prepared by the Council or Living Streets.
9. Ensuring appropriate arrangements are in place for storage of waste, internally and externally.

A number of other programmes and plans have the potential to address some of the other issues highlighted in the Public Street Life Assessment:

- A bus shelter replacement programme has taken place, including replacement bus shelters with advertising panels in the town centre. Future replacement programmes will present an opportunity to improve placement of shelters.

- The reviewed Portobello Conservation Area Character Appraisals provides the context to manage change that affects the conservations areas unique characteristics and set out opportunities for enhancement.
- Road and footway investment – Capital Programme
- The Council's Wayfinding Project. This has improved navigation, wayfinding and appreciation of assets such as the Promenade/beach.
- A locality based approach to service delivery operates in Edinburgh. The town centre is within the North East Locality. Locality Improvement Plans have been prepared. These set out the future priorities for the area and consider opportunities to enhance the local sense of identity and belonging.
- In March 2017 the 20mph programme was introduced in the Portobello area. Reduced traffic speed will improve the sense of security for pedestrians and cyclists.
- Portobello has benefitted 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 the day.

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 Portobello Town 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.

The policies below set out when a shop unit can change from a shop use to a non-shop use. The policies apply to ground floor units only or basement/first floor units that are directly accessed from the pavement.

Frontages are used to ensure that a minimum percentage of shop units are retained in shop use to meet the basic shopping needs and provision of the walk-in population. Keeping this level of protection is balanced against the benefits of extending economic activity and footfall into the evening. Elsewhere in the town centre a flexible approach to appropriate changes of use applies. Corner units for example towards the eastern end of the centre with streets leading perpendicular to the Promenade, could capitalise on the outdoor street spaces, improving the public realm and providing for an active public life.

Guidance Policies

PTC1 - Alternative Use of Shop Units in Defined Frontages

In the frontages defined in the table below (and in Map 2), the change of use of a shop unit to a non-shop unit 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.

Frontages
100-162 Portobello High Street
111-153 Portobello High Street
164-208 Portobello High Street
210-240 Portobello High Street

PTC2 - Alternative Use of Shop Units Elsewhere in Portobello Town Centre

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

- a. Class 3 – food and drink uses
- b. An appropriate commercial, community or leisure use which would complement the character of the centre, support the main shopping function, and would not be detrimental to its vitality and viability.

Residential Use

For placemaking purposes it is important that ground floor uses help bring activity onto the street. Residential units at ground floor level tend to add little vitality to the town centre. Portobello already has a significant – and growing – population living within walking distance of the main shopping streets and within the town centre itself, therefore, changing shop units to residential is not supported. However, opportunities should be considered for promoting residential use above shop units in any new development or redevelopment schemes within or on the edge of the town centre boundary.

Other Relevant Information

National Planning Framework 4

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.

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.

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](#).

Edinburgh Street Design Guidance – guidance on street design to achieve coherence and co-ordination across the city.

Edinburgh Design Guidance – sets out the Council's expectations for the design of new development in Edinburgh

Portobello Conservation Area Character Appraisal – describes what is special about the conservation area and helps in making decisions on proposals that affect the areas special character.

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.

Primary Retail Frontage – a group of shop units that has been identified as providing a focus for retail within the town centre.

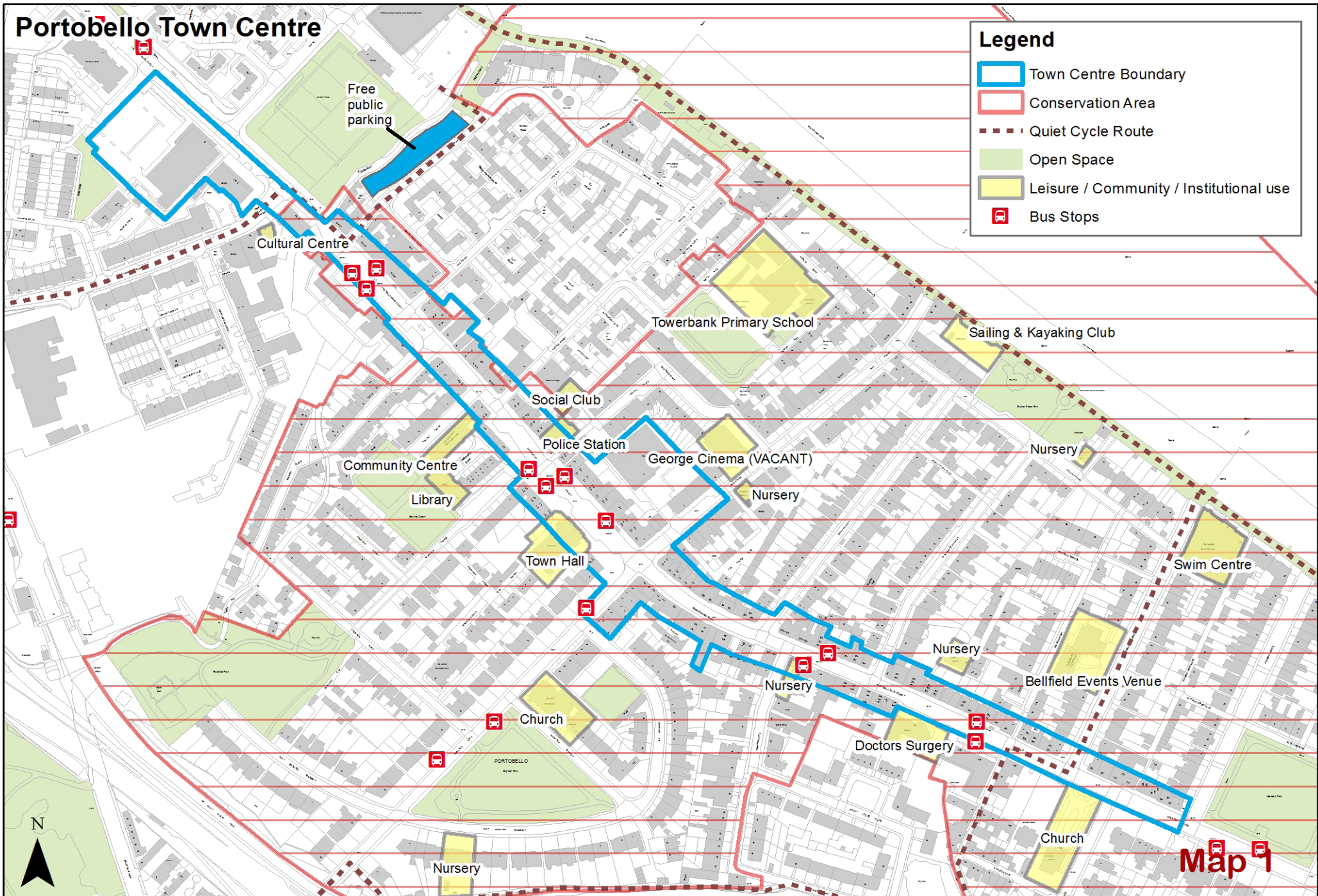
Class 1A – are shops and financial, professional and other services. Uses under Subsection 1 are; retail sale of goods other than hot food, a post office, sale of tickets, a travel agency, sale of cold food for consumption off the premises, hairdressing, direction of funerals, display of goods for sale, 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.



Portobello Town Centre

Legend

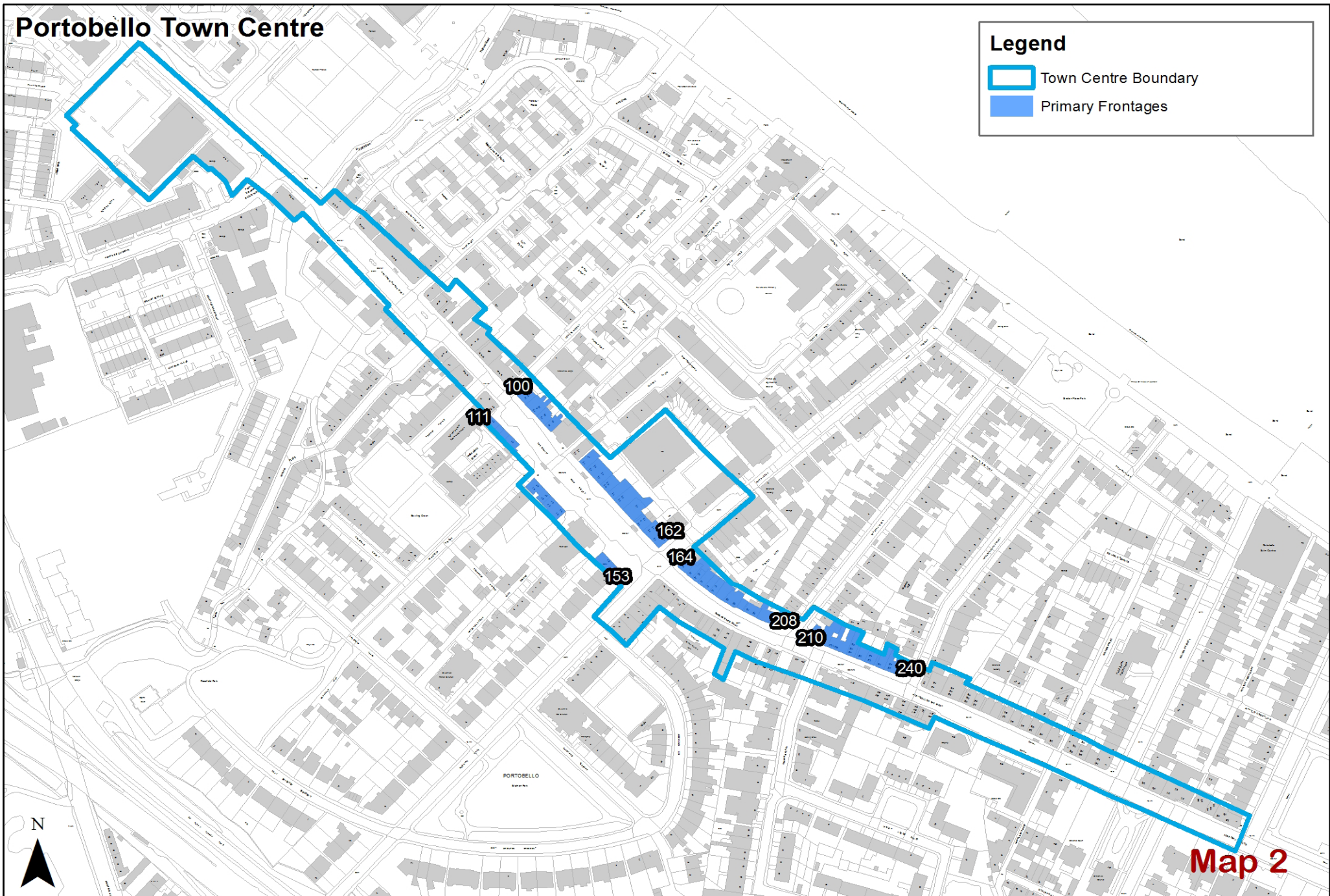
- Town Centre Boundary
- Conservation Area
- Quiet Cycle Route
- Open Space
- Leisure / Community / Institutional use
- 🚌 Bus Stops



Portobello Town Centre

Legend

- Town Centre Boundary
- Primary Frontages



Contact us:

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January 2025



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reference 24-1554

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