Cairngorms National Park Town Centre Health Checks 2023

Nasim Mehrabi (June 2024)

Contents

Introduction

Town centre health checks have been undertaken in the Cairngorms National Park's main settlements every one to two years since 2010 until 2018. The last town centre health check was undertaken in 2018 and can be accessed via the links provided in the Appendix of this report. Due to the Covid 19 Pandemic the Town Centre Health Checks were suspended and this will be the first study undertaken since 2018.

Since 2018 there have been significant socio-economic and political changes in the UK, such as the Covid 19 Pandemic and the UK's exit from the European Union. It is therefore even more important now to monitor the health of the towns in the Cairngorms National Park, since these events have occurred, as the data can help to provide a picture of town centre vitality and viability and monitor town centre change.

The Local Development Plan 2021 identifies the following settlements as Strategic Settlements; Aviemore, Ballater, Grantown on Spey, Kingussie and Newtonmore. The Local Development Plan sets out a development strategy which focuses most development in the Strategic Settlements. The Town Centre Health Check therefore reports on the Strategic Settlements, rather than the intermediate or rural settlements. The data was collected in August 2023.

The data presented within this report will be used to monitor the implementation of the National Park Partnership Plan 2022 and will help inform the preparation of the next Local Development Plan. It will also be a reference for the local authorities responsible for the town centres, community action plans and local place plans.

Policy Context

Town Centre Action Plan

The Town Centre Action Plan, published in 2013, was Scottish Governments response to the national reviews of town centres. It promoted the Town Centre First principle and the use of data driven interventions to improve town centres under the six themes of town centre living, accessible public services, proactive planning, digital towns, enterprising communities and vibrant local economies.

Since the publication of the Action Plan, Scotland's National Performance Framework was adopted, which contains a suite of the National Outcomes that are aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, to reposition the focus on wellbeing, inclusive development, climate emergency responses and health and inequalities. Town centres have therefore been identified as key to delivering change, which can be achieved through the Town Centre First and Place Principle.

'Town centres have continued to have a fight for their future. Then came Covid-19, which altered the world as we knew it and amplified existing, and produced further, inequalities.' (Scottish Government, 2021)

In 2021, Scottish Government reviewed the Town Centre Action Plan reaffirming the need to ensure town centres offer "a sustainable, local economy and society with diverse and mixed uses attracting and meeting the needs and desires of their local communities" (A new Future for Scotland's Town Centres, P7). Town centres need to ensure they "enhance a sense of community, place, identity and that advance equality by enabling all members of society to participate fully". As part of the review, Scottish Government has recommended that there is a need for a revised and enhanced focus on measurement and data for town centres, supporting the need for the Cairngorms National Park Authority to continue Town Centre Health Checks.

Place Principle

The Place Principle supports the National Performance Framework and aims to promote a shared understanding of place, identifying existing services and assets, and potential improvements that can improve the outcome for local people and communities. The data collected through the town centre health check can help inform future Local Place Plans, supporting the delivery of the Place Principle.

'Towns and town centres are for the wellbeing of people, planet and the economy. Towns are for everyone, and everyone has a role to play in making their own town and town centre successful.' (Scottish Government, 2021)

National Planning Framework 4

National Planning Framework 4 Policy 27 specifically addresses town centres and promotes a town centre first approach to development. It aims to encourage development in town centres by applying the Town Centre First principle. Work undertaken through the town centre health checks will help inform future policy and planning decisions supporting the Town Centre First approach. Policy 27 (a) states: 'Development proposals that enhance and improve the vitality and viability of city, town and local centres, including proposals that increase the mix of uses, will be supported'.

The findings of the Town Centre Health Check can help support the implementation of this policy.

Policy 27 also states that development in town centres for residential development will be supported where the development utilises a derelict or vacant site in some instances. The data collected from town centre health checks will also help inform future planning policy in the next Local Development Plan regarding the use of vacant sites in the town centre.

Policy 28 specifically addresses retail, aiming to promote and facilitate retail investment to the most sustainable locations, which are most accessible by a range of sustainable transport modes – in this context the town centres identified in this report. Undertaking regular town centre health checks, over time, can help to identify changes offering meaningful comparisons and insights against previous years. As each settlement has very different characteristics, the towns centre health checks are not intended to offer a comparison between settlements rather help identify opportunities for improvement or identify barriers within a given locality.

Policy 28 addresses proposals for retail, which include expansions and change of use, which will be supported if they are consistent with the town centre first principle

Other National Planning Framework 4 Policy implications include Policy 31 Culture and Creativity, which aims to support regeneration and town centre vibrancy, Policy 30 Tourism and Policy 23 Health and safety.

This report will help inform the preparation of the next Local Development Plan, helping identify deficiencies in the retail provision in terms of quality and quantity in the identified town centres. It also identifies potential needs arising from infrastructure and active travel requirements to improve the town centres.

Methodology

The methodology for undertaking town centre health checks was reviewed and updated in 2016. The review proposals aimed to obtain a better understanding of each town centre's vitality and viability by incorporating indicators which were set out in Scottish Planning Policy (2014) and the Town Centre Toolkit (2015). Maintaining the core framework, the 2016 health checks provided a new baseline against which the 2018 and 2023 health checks can be monitored and compared. In light of the adoption of National Planning Framework 4 in 2023, further changes have been made, reporting on a wider range of uses, and collecting more detail on food retail (both grocery and catering) which can be used to inform the Local Development Plan with regard to healthy eating options in town centres as required by National Planning Framework 4's Policy 23.

Understanding Scottish Places

Understanding Scottish Places sets a methodology for assessing town centres through the document's 'Your Town Audit' approach. The audit provides users with an analysis of more than 50 measures across the 7 key performance indicator themes, most of which fall beyond the scope of this town centre health check. However, the following key performance indicators taken from the audit methodology have been included:

Accessibility:
- Data will be collected on the public transport / transport hubs that are accessible in the town centres. This can be further supported through a desktop study of the service times and frequency of services accessible from the town centre.
- Parking – on / off street; public / private; free / paid; number of spaces; cost / hour, car count / usage. Data collected from town centre health check walkabout.

Local Service:
- Retailers – number of multiples / independents; by comparison / convenience / service. Data will be collected from the walkabout on the total number and type of retail operators.
- Other unit uses including personal and business, public services, leisure services, cultural services and if evident the evening economy will be recorded.

Local Capacity:
- Data on vacant land / and or buildings will also be collected.

The process for carrying out the town centre health checks involves three main aspects:
- Pedestrian counts
- Inventory of town centre businesses and other non-residential uses
- Assessment of town centre characteristics and activity

The data collected is undertaken at one spatial level, namely the town centre as defined in the currently Adopted Local Development Plan 2021 and present in the maps of this report.

Pedestrian counts

Pedestrian counts are undertaken at two locations within each town centre, recording two-way movements. The aim of this is to ascertain the level of pedestrian activity at different locations and different times within each town centre. Pedestrians are counted at each location for 5 minutes at 11am; 12pm and 1pm.

Inventory of town centre businesses and other non-residential uses

The type and location of each business within the boundary of each defined town centre is recorded to build our understanding of the business and retailer representation within each town's centre. In 2023, additional categories for places of worship and healthcare were added. Also, the category for restaurants, bars, cafes was extended to include take-aways. Details of the type and name of establishments was recorded for further analysis in the Local Development Plan Evidence process for the preparation of the next Local Development Plan.

Businesses uses were divided into 12 different categories[1]:
- Non-food retail
- Charity shops
- Food shops for example supermarket, butcher, deli, bakery etc
- Restaurants, bars, cafes and take-away
- Retail services, for example post office, hairdresser, photo shop, dry cleaning, garage
- Financial and business services, for example property services, accountant, solicitor, bank etc
- Hotels and accommodation
- Tourism and leisure

---

[1] Some businesses encompass uses that fall within than one category, for example a large retailer may have an in-store cafe – in these circumstances, the primary use has been recorded.

- Community / public, for example local authority office, community centre.
- Other private businesses
- Healthcare, this includes dentists, medical clinics and pharmacies
- Places of worship
- Vacant

The composition of local businesses can be an important indicator of town centre vitality. Higher than average levels of vacant premises can indicate that there is lower demand in a town centre and poorer town centre health whereas a more varied mix of businesses and low vacancy rates can indicate a more thriving town centre.

Monitoring the types of town centre businesses, levels of change and vacancy rates over time will help to understand key trends and identify any issues that are affecting the vitality of particular town centres.

Assessment of town centre characteristics and activity

In addition to the quantitative data gathering of pedestrian counts and recording business types, qualitative information is gathered about different aspects of the physical environment and accessibility of each town centre. These are observations made by the reporting officers about how they experienced the town centres, and what they felt are their strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for improvement.

Observations for each town centre were based on the following indicators:

Physical environment

- Appearance, condition, and physical structure of the town centre (including any constraints, opportunities and assets). This may include comments about Pavements and streets – clutter, signage, cracks, potholes etc, Cleanliness and / or comments on the public realm furniture i.e. seating, bins – number, condition and age. This may also include conditions of buildings, shop fronts, window displays and hanging baskets.
- Condition of the historic environment and assets, considering their contribution to the town centre's structure and noting any that enhance the town centre.
- Evidence of investment by users – noting any recent or ongoing improvements to the built environment that could benefit the town centre.
- Sense of place - What is distinctive about the town centre and whether it has a sense of local identity.
- Safety and security – lighting, visible closed-circuit television, passive policing measures if evident.

Public spaces / realm

The health check also considers how public spaces within each town centre are used, how they interact with the wider town centre and what opportunities may exist to improve them in a way that can benefit of the whole town centre.

'Squares may often be historic marketplaces, particularly in rural contexts, that now act as gathering places for local events. It is important to critically appraise how well a town square supports the variety of uses that it is expected to support'. (Town Centres Toolkit, 2015, Page 19)

The health check also includes observations about town centre high streets, considering how people used them and what made them pleasant spaces or not.

Accessibility

Ease of movement is fundamental in encouraging footfall. The perception that a town is easy to navigate and walk around will affect how people use it and how often. When carrying out the health check, accessibility of the town centre is appraised by examining how easy it is to move around and for example if there are suitable crossing places.

'Most Scottish towns have a main or high street which acts as a central spine for footfall and activity. Towns can develop in various ways around their high streets, and not always to the benefit of pedestrians, so it is important that their success as an active

and bustling thoroughfare for people on foot is continually appraised'. (Town Centres Toolkit, 2015, Page 19)

In addition, the impact of traffic, availability and suitability of parking, cycling facilities and public transport are also examined through the health checks to help understand the wider aspect of accessibility. This includes observing the impact of traffic on the town centres, noting what provision there is for cyclists and what level of public transport is available.

Public facilities
In addition to the range of data collected on property use in the town centres, the 2023 town centre health check collected data on the location, quality and accessibility of public toilets.

SWOT analysis

A SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis was undertaking for each town centre. It broadly notes the good and not so good things in the town centres as well as any things that could be improved and any known threats to the town centre.

The analysis considered the following questions:
- What are the best parts of the town?
- Where do people like to go?
- Is there anything that lets the town centre down? Why?

Findings

This section sets out the key findings from the health check of each town centre. This includes an outline the composition of businesses in each town centre, qualitative observations, a SWOT analysis and map showing the spatial distribution of businesses and non-residential uses.

Aviemore

Aviemore is the largest town in the National Park with a population of over 3,000[2] people. It has experienced significant growth over the last two decades and continues to be a popular destination for visitors due to its close proximity to Cairngorm and Glenmore and its reputation as an outdoor activity hub.

For the first time in 2023 the town centre health check looked at the number of premises within the town centre boundary that have a residential use. In Aviemore, only 5% of all the buildings within the town centre boundary are currently in residential use (Figure 1).

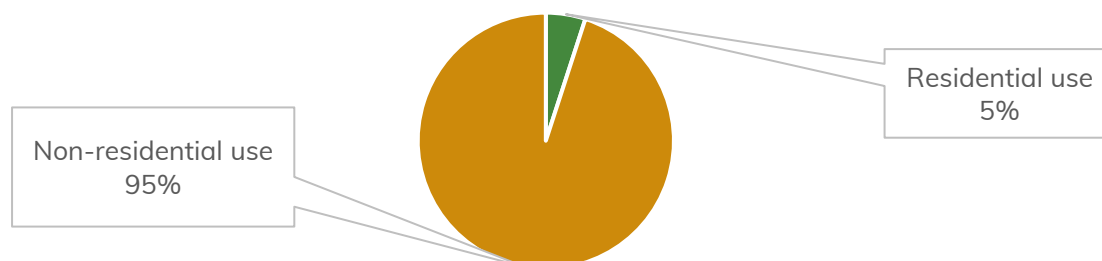
Residential use
5%

Non-residential use
95%

Figure 1 Proportion of premises within Aviemore town centre boundary used for residential use compared to non-residential use in August 2023.

The business composition chart (Figure 2) shows that the town centre has a range of business types, with non-food retail forming the highest proportion at 23% followed by restaurants, cafes, pubs and take-aways which account for 18%. Hotels and accommodation and healthcare uses account for only 1% each. Of all the town centre business premises, 45% (29 premises) of them represent chains and 55% (35 premises) independent retailers (slightly less than the 60% recorded in 2018).
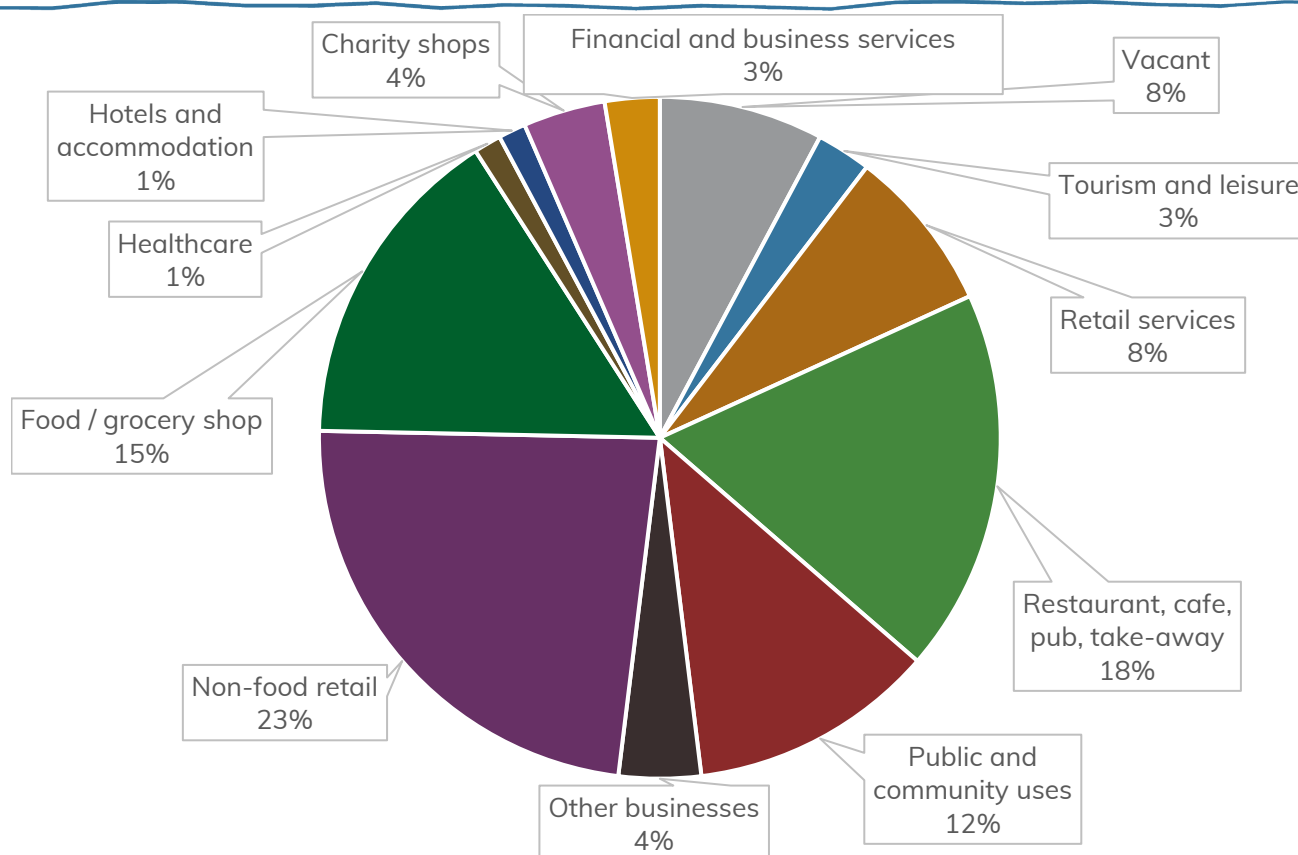
---

[2] Understanding Scottish Places, http://www.usp.scot/

Figure 2 Composition of town centre premises with a non-residential use in Aviemore, August 2023.

Composition of town centre businesses

Composition of the town centre businesses has been recorded in the 2016 and 2018 town centre health checks and meaningful comparisons can be drawn between the different years to identify trends and changes to the business vitality of the town centre. Therefore, the selected data on only business premises which reflect those collected in previous years have been compared (Figure 30 and Figure 31).

The number of food / grocery shops in Aviemore town centre has doubled in terms of numbers from 6 in 2016 to 12 in 2023 (Figure 30), proportionally rising from 11% to 16% (2016 - 2023) (Figure 31).

The number of retail services has also increased proportionally from 4% in 2016 to 8% in 2023 (Figure 31), representing an increase of 4 premises over the period.

The number and proportion of vacant buildings in Aviemore town centre has increased proportionally from 5% in 2016 to 8% in 2023 (Figure 31) representing a 100% increase in numerical terms with 3 additional vacant buildings during the period (Figure 30). It is unclear yet whether this is the beginning of a longer-term trend or the effects of the

Covid-19 pandemic and current financial uncertainty which have delayed the units being let / or re-let.

The number and proportion of buildings recorded as public and community use has increased from 7% (in 2016 and 2018) to 12% (Figure 31), which in terms of numbers of premises was reported as 4 in 2016, 5 in 2018 and 9 in 2023 (Figure 30) representing a significant increase. However, a change to the recording method to include public toilets, and public transport related structures (not previously included) accounts for the significant increase rather than an increase in new public or community buildings in the town centre. The increase in premises / buildings from 2018 to 2023 was 4.
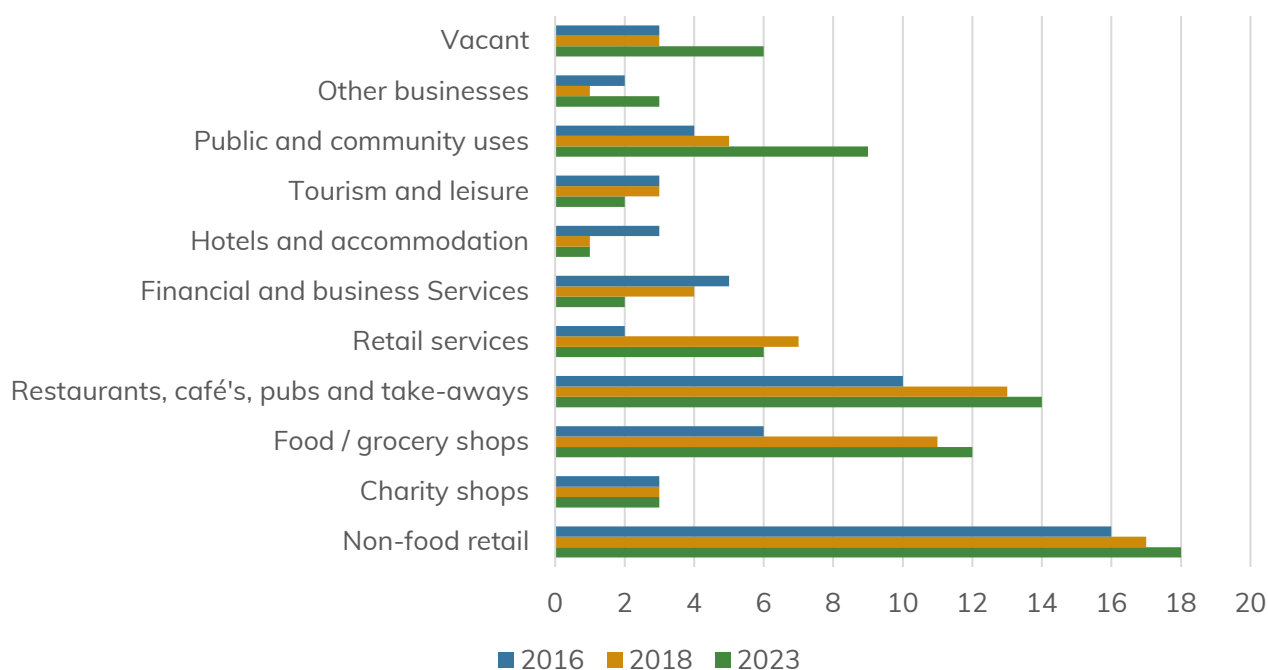

Figure 3 Number of business premises by type in Aviemore town centre for 2016, 2018 and 2023.

There has been little change in the number of restaurants in Aviemore, with 18 recorded in 2023, equal to 2016 (with 19 in 2018). The number of charity shops (5) has remained constant in Aviemore since 2016 (Figure 30).

Two sectors that appear to be in decline in the town are the financial services and hotel and accommodation. Financial services have decreased proportionally from 9% in 2016 to 3% in 2023 (Figure 31) representing the loss of 3 financial services businesses during the period (Figure 30). Hotel and accommodation businesses have decreased from 5% proportionally in 2016 to 1% in 2023 representing the loss of 2 hotels and accommodation providers.
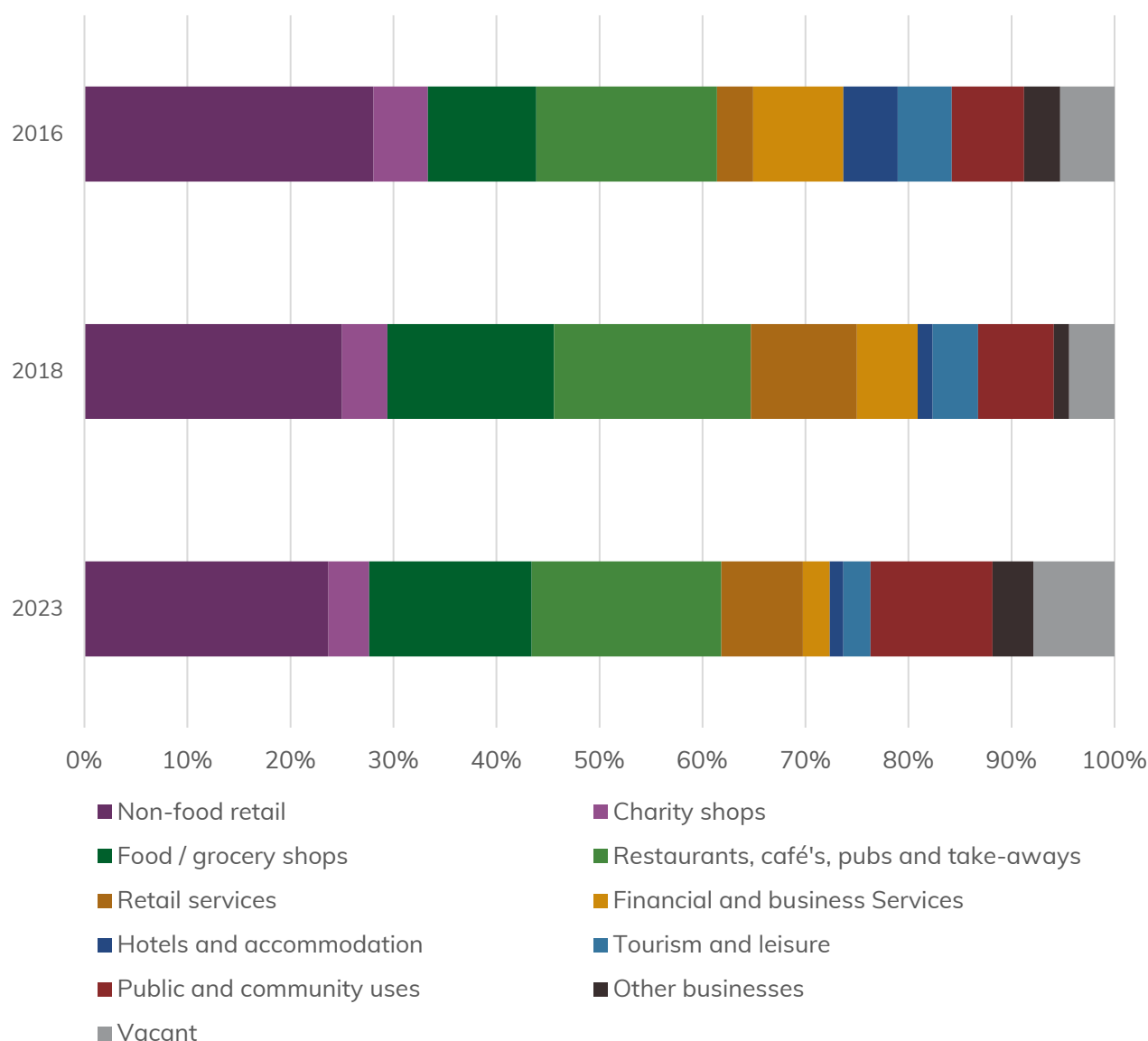
Figure 4 Composition of town centre businesses in Aviemore town centre, 2016, 2018 and 2023.

Pedestrian count

Aviemore produced the highest pedestrian counts (Figure 1) of all the town centres demonstrating a potentially strong and thriving town centre. The overall numbers recorded increased at Location 1, in 2023, from 76 at 11am to 101 at 1pm. Lower numbers were recorded at location 2, in 2023, and provided a lower range across the times surveyed (32-40). Overall lower numbers were recorded at both locations in 2023 compared to 2018, which saw peak of 120 people at 12pm at location 1 compared to 94 in 2023 (Figure 2). However, this is still significantly above the peak of 72 people recorded in 2016. The difference between 2018 and 2023 may be attributed to the count being performed slightly later during the summer holiday period.

The weather during the 2023 pedestrian count, in Aviemore, was recorded as 15°C, dry, sunny with a moderate breeze.
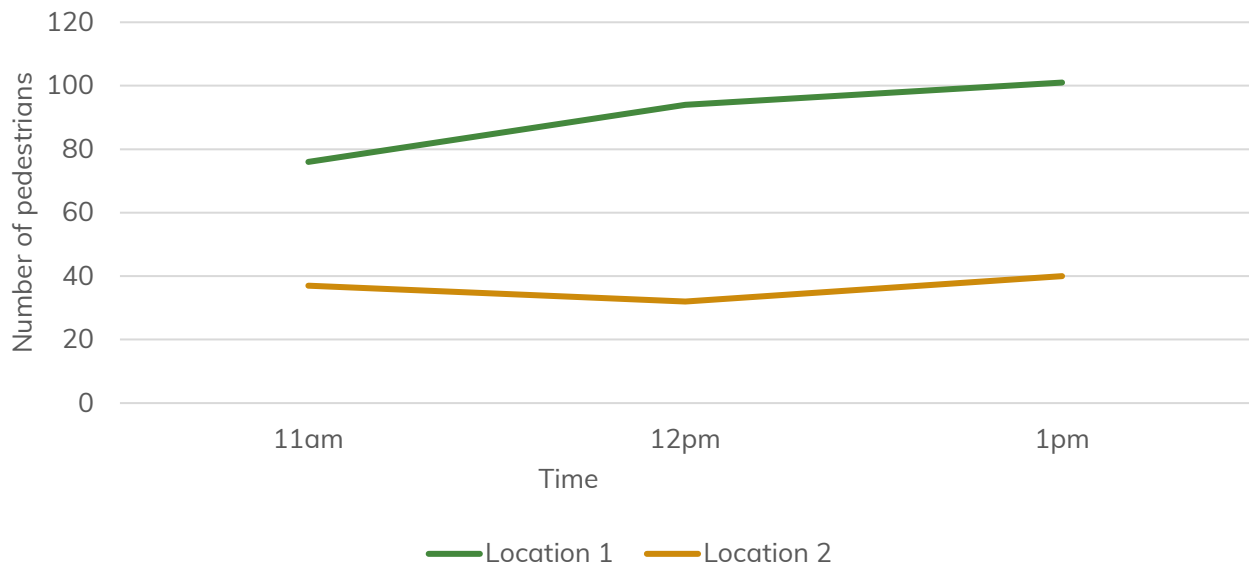

Figure 5 Pedestrian counts at locations 1 and 2 (see Figure 25) in Aviemore town centre, August 2023.
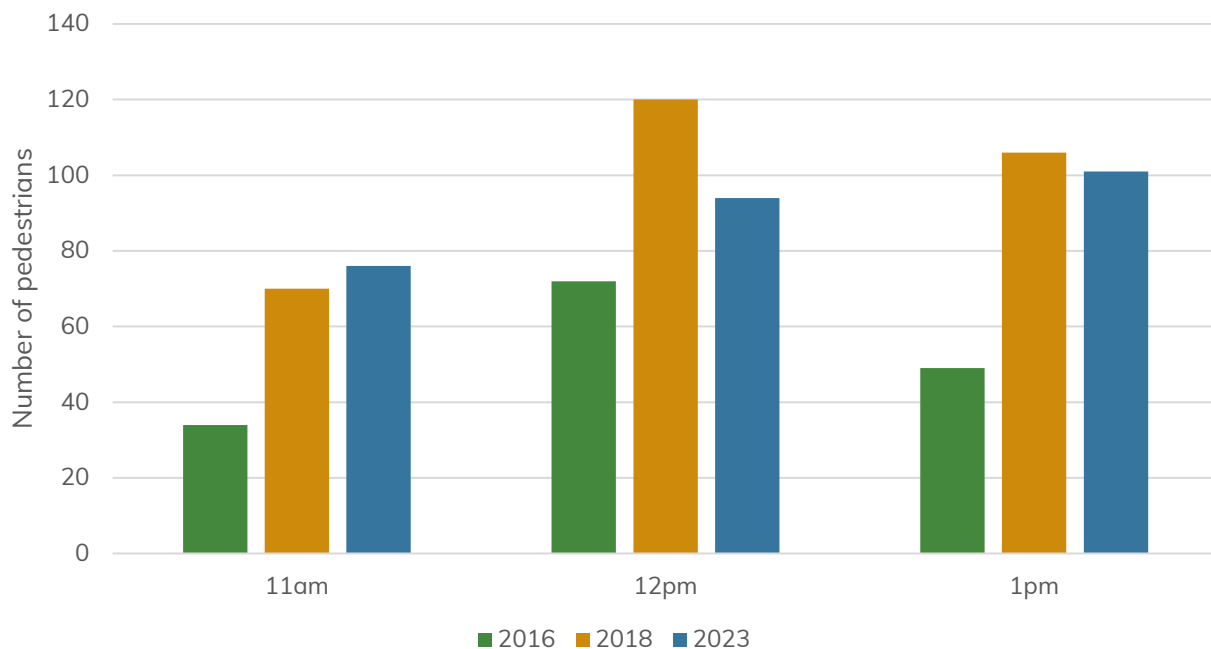

Figure 6 Comparison between pedestrian counts at location 1 in Aviemore town centre in 2016, 2018 and 2023 at 11am, 12pm and 1pm.
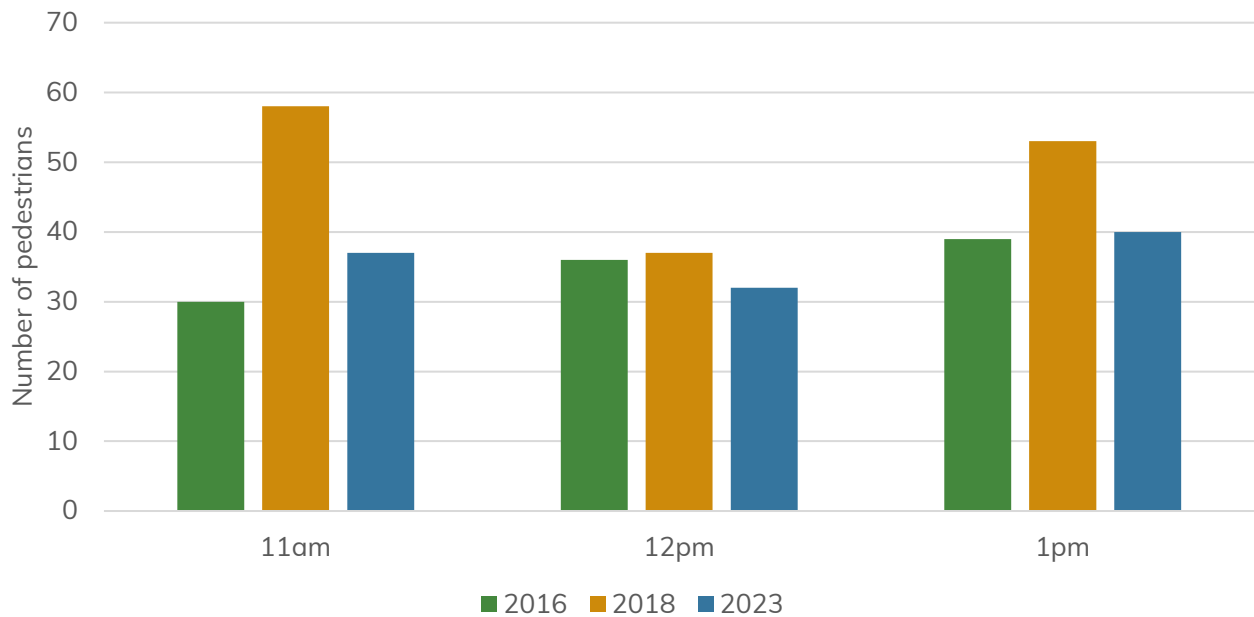
Figure 7 Comparison between pedestrian counts at location two in Aviemore town centre in 2016, 2018 and 2023 at 11am, 12pm and 1pm.

Physical environment

Aviemore is relatively unique in the local context of the National Park. It is characterised by its landscape setting and contains a range of architectural styles and building types including a few reflecting the traditional vernacular as well as a range of modern buildings. The main thoroughfare is Grampian Road which comprises a variety of retail outlets from very small units to a large supermarket and retail complex.

The covered walkways along the main street are in poor condition, with areas of peeling paint (Figure 8) and in some places discolouration or painted in an ad-hoc manner not in keeping with the existing. The building condition at the exterior of the Mountain Warehouse retail unit is also in poor condition (Figure 9), as well as the now assumed vacant business centre which is adjacent to the rear of the shop.

Figure 8 Poor condition of covered walkways in Aviemore town centre, August 2023.

Figure 9 Poor condition of exterior façade of the Mountain Warehouse retail unit in Aviemore, August 2023.

Generally, the town contains few buildings of architectural merit along its High Street, with the exception of the Cairngorm Hotel and Aviemore Railway Station. The MacDonald hotel's main building, which dominates the Aviemore's skyline, is in need of attention and adds no architectural aesthetic benefit to the town. That said, the gardens and greenspace adjacent are well maintained and do offer a pleasant green space bordering the lower high street (Figure 10).

Figure 10 Green infrastructure provided by the Macdonald Hotel within the town centre in Aviemore. August 2023.

The green space next to the Macdonald Hotel is reportedly used by locals on pleasant summer days as a place to sit and eat lunch or socialise. In winter months it is often used by younger children to sledge and play in the snow forming an important informal public space in the town centre.

The town centre contains various street furniture and extensive planting and areas of green open space providing linkages to businesses, residential areas and paths. The town centre continues to thrive and has been enhanced by the development of a large retail park increasing retail provision for Aviemore and the surrounding area. There continues to be demand for premises in Aviemore with low numbers of vacant properties.

Sence of place (distinctiveness and local identity)
Aviemore portrays and feels like a holiday destination (see Figure 11 and Figure 12), which makes it distinct from the other towns in the National Park. Most of the shops, in terms of built environment, offer little or no aesthetic architectural merit nor contribute to a distinctive local identity, two sections consisting of poorly designed and under maintained cover walkways.

Figure 11 View of Aviemore town centre, August, 2023

Figure 12 View of covered walkway in Aviemore town centre, August 2023.

Buildings of notable worth include the Railway Station (Figure 13) and adjoining buildings / units and the Cairngorm Hotel (Figure 14), both of which continue to be well-maintained. Slightly outwith the town centre boundary is the Premier Inn Aviemore Hotel, which although of contemporary design uses materials and a massing approach akin to other modern development with the National Park.

Figure 13 Aviemore Rail Station, August 2023

Figure 14 Cairngorm Hotel, August, 2023

Vacant plots within the town centre detract from the better maintained buildings and offer a negative first impression of the town centre to visitors (Figure 15).

Figure 15 Vacant unit adjacent to the Railway Station, Aviemore, August, 2023

Figure 16 Vacant Plot at Laurel Bank awaiting Scottish Ministers final decision on approved planning application. August 2023

Public realm and green infrastructure

The green infrastructure in the town centre is well maintained and provides a welcome distraction from the architecturally poor built environment. Within the town centre there is a dedicated green space for community use, which also offers a covered performing, gathering or event space (Figure 17). The space is well suited for public use with additional benches and seating areas. Although the space was not observed at night, there did appear to be a lack of dedicated lighting which may limit the spaces ad hoc use during the evenings and shorter days experienced in the autumn and winter seasons. The MacDonald Hotel offers a large green space, adjacent to the main road that breaks up the dense development running down the main street. This space is a large open space which could serve larger community gatherings, ideally located, however at present does not seem to be used for events. It is however a pleasant space open to the public which could be enjoyed by locals and visitors during the summer weather (Figure 10)

Figure 17 Community and event space offering very good green space within the town centre. Aviemore, August 2023.

Figure 18 Public space surrounding Car Park adjacent to the public toilets. Aviemore, August 2023.

Adjacent to the public toilets there is another public space that is reportedly well used and offers places to sit and socialise (Figure 18). During the town centre health check, it was observed this space was used by local workers using the space to socialise and take lunch.

The hanging baskets in the town are well-maintained and there was adequate provision of public bins and a water bottle filling station on the high street, well located near location two of the pedestrian count survey (the busier location).

Adjacent to the retail development, containing the larger retail units of Tiso, Aldi and Home Bargains, there was a green space that was reported to have been utilised for market operations. During the visit it was noted that it was being used as unauthorised parking. This may reflect the fact that the free parking along the main street was full. The large retail car park has limited time parking, and the other parking available is pay and display perhaps promoting people to use the empty unregulated space, which was causing damage to the grass underfoot.

Accessibility: Ease of pedestrian movement
Pedestrians can move easily around the town centre with two good pedestrian crossings serving the main route through the centre. One area of concern that was noted was the access to the car parking behind Boots, Skiing Doo, and the Galaxy Noodle bar etc. Although this can be accessed by a pedestrian path at the main vehicle access point, the stairs behind the opticians offer no access for through physically impaired or wheelchair / or buggy users.

Traffic and parking

There is largely good provision of parking available – mostly off street however some of it appears unregulated roadside parking particularly in the town centre, as in the case mentioned in the last section. There is a range of pay and display, limited time and free unrestricted parking options available in the town centre (Figure 19). On-street parking does provide good access to the retail units, however there is a lack of disabled parking available outside shops on the main street. Motorised vehicles at present dominate the High Street.

Figure 19 Wide range of town centre parking in Aviemore, top left: Tesco car park, top centre: free parking next to Macdui Bar and Restaurant, top right: parking behind Bank of Scotland building, bottom left: 3 hour parking at Aldi, bottom centre: free parking next to the rail station, bottom right: free on-street parking.

During the site visit construction as underway at the petrol station to develop further parking with electric vehicle charging facilities (Figure 20).

Figure 20 Work underway to the plot at the rear of the service station to provide BP Pulse electric vehicle charging. Aviemore, August 2023.

Signage and ease of navigation

The town centre is largely based along Grampian Road making it easy to navigate. The town centre encounters a steady flow of traffic which can affect movement and visibility of signage. Previously there are two pedestrian crossings in the southern half of the town centre which created greater difficulty crossing in the northern part. However, as a result of the new retail park, an additional crossing has been created. This has greatly improved movements across the busy road making the town centre easier to navigate. There is a lot of different signage – different colours, fonts and styles which could be confusing.

Cycling facilities and ease of movement

There is cycle parking in the town centre and good connectivity to surrounding routes and public paths. Adjacent to the station there is dedicated and well-maintained cycle parking offering limited spaces, and some protected from the elements (Figure 21). There are currently no electric bike charging points in the town centre. In terms of wheeling infrastructure, there are no dedicated cycle routes / paths in the town centre which means cyclists requiring 1.5m spacing from other vehicle users wishing to pass can cause congestion. This is however, is the same across of all the town surveyed in this report.

Figure 21 Covered cycle parking is available next to the train station, however, is poorly signposted, and limited in its size.

Public toilets

There are public toilets available in the town centre, which are open 24 hours a day, easily accessible, free to use and well maintained, albeit it somewhat dated in decor (Figure 22).

Figure 22 Free Public toilets in Aviemore town centre, August 2023

Public transport

Aviemore is well served for public transport with bus and rail services north and south to Inverness and Edinburgh / Glasgow. Bus and rail services are co-located making travel through the town relatively easy. New easy to identify shelters have been erected for both coach and bus use, offering improved shelter from the elements. There are good bus and coach services connecting Aviemore with Perth, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Inverness. There is also the tourist steam railway running between Aviemore and Broomhill and local bus services to Grantown on Spey.

Figure 23 New bus shelter for coaches and bus services serving the area. August 2023.

Figure 24 New bus shelter for coaches and bus services serving the area well located next to the rail station (behind) for connecting services. August 2023.

SWOT analysis

Overall, the town centre health check identified the following:

Strengths
- Good range of independent specialist shops and services.
- Busy and well used town centre, both by locals and tourists.
- Strong historic character.
- Strong royal connections apparent.
- Good range of cafes and eateries.
- Attractive town centre environment with well-maintained greenspaces, trees and planting.

Weaknesses
- Inconsistent built environment / poorly designed architecture.
- Poor signage to recreation infrastructure e.g.,path networks
- Incoherent and cluttered street layout/ access from different levels in the north part of the town centre.
- Lots of street furniture and different signs.
- Limited opportunity for future development on High Street.
- Lack of public crossing beyond / near the north part of the designated town centre.
- Lack of shops for local people (resident comment).

Opportunities
- Construction underway next to the service station to include Electric Vehicle charging.
- Planning application to develop Laurel Bank site is currently awaiting determination by Scottish Ministers.
- Work on-going to look at developing the Aviemore Highland Resort site.
- Capitalise on the environment and the town role as an outdoor capital.
- Promote cultural identity.

Threats
- Climate change – reducing number of snow days will impact winter economy and ski season – local economy heavily reliant on the tourism industry.
- Impact of A9 dualling
- Increasing number of second homes in wider area could leave some businesses vulnerable in terms of staff accommodation.
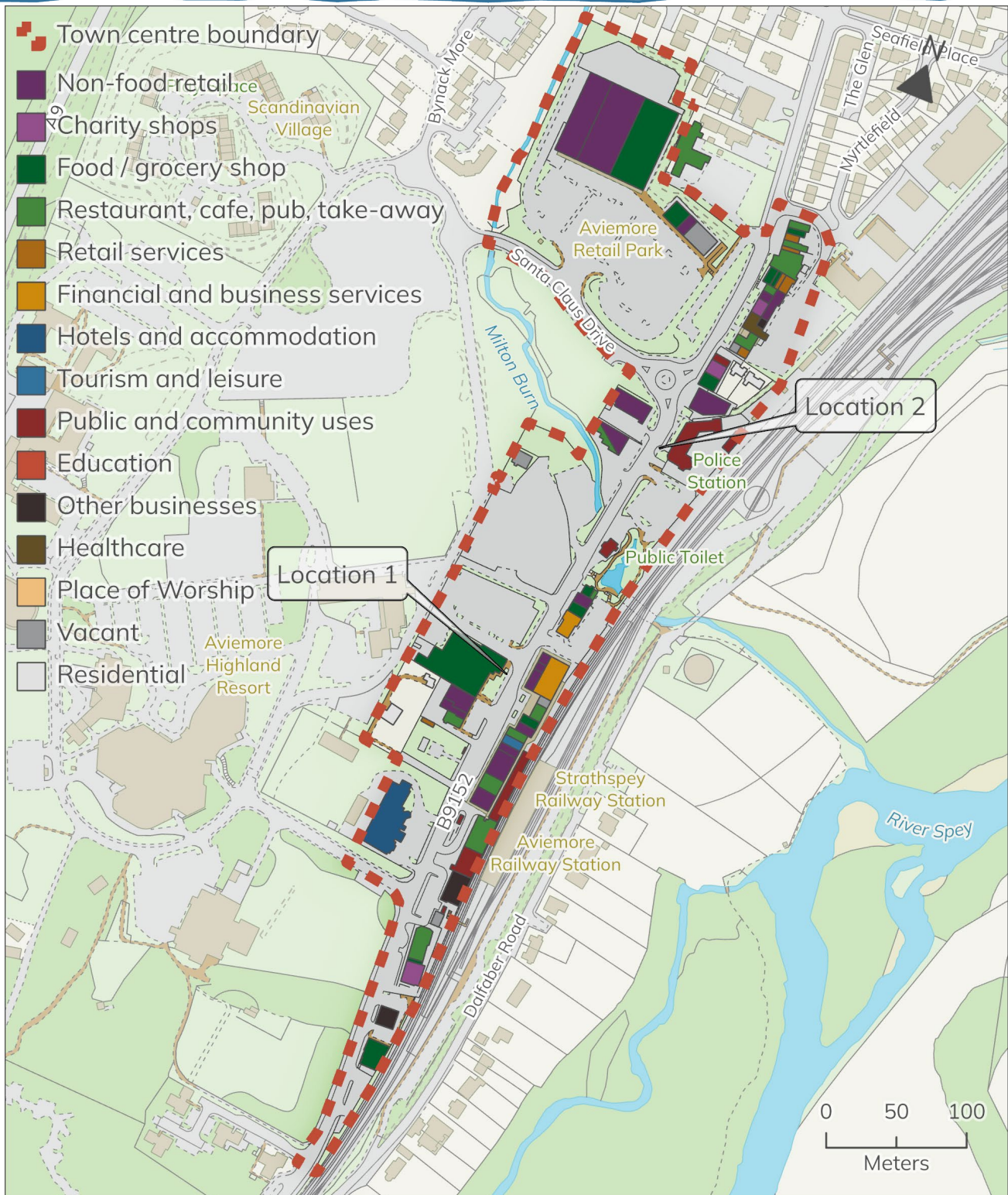- Increasing vacancy rates.

Figure 25 Aviemore town centre uses and pedestrian count locations, August 2023.

Ballater

Ballater, often cited as a Victorian village, is a significant settlement in the National Park. It sits in Deeside in the eastern part of the National Park and has a population of just over 1,500[3]. The town has strong royal connections due to its proximity to Balmoral and boasts an attractive historical centre. Today its economy is heavily reliant on tourism, attracting visitors because of its royal connections, local scenery, and rural Scottish pastimes (notably fishing and shooting).

Figure 26 The B listed Ballater Station refurbishment was completed in August 2018 following the fire in 2015, and fully operational in September 2018. Image, August 2023.

Town Centre Businesses

In Ballater 47% of all the buildings within the town centre boundary are currently in non-residential use and 53% are designated as residential dwellings (Figure 27). This represents a significantly different town centre composition compared to Aviemore (Figure 1).

The highest proportion of businesses in the town centre are non-food retail which account for 39% of all businesses (Figure 28). Other significant proportions include restaurants, cafes, pubs and take-aways which make up 20% (representing 24 establishments) and food and grocery shops which make up 11%. Of the town centre businesses 91% of the premises were recorded as being independent outlets up from 83% in 2018 (84% in 2016).

---

[3]

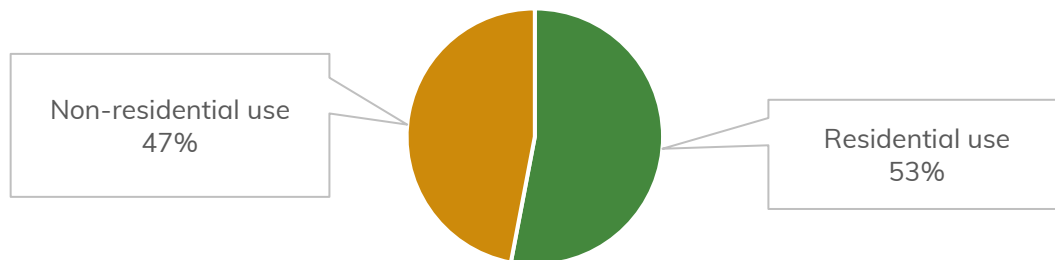Understanding Scottish Places, http://www.usp.scot/

Figure 27 Proportion of premises within the town centre boundary used for residential use compared to non-residential use in Ballater in August 2023.
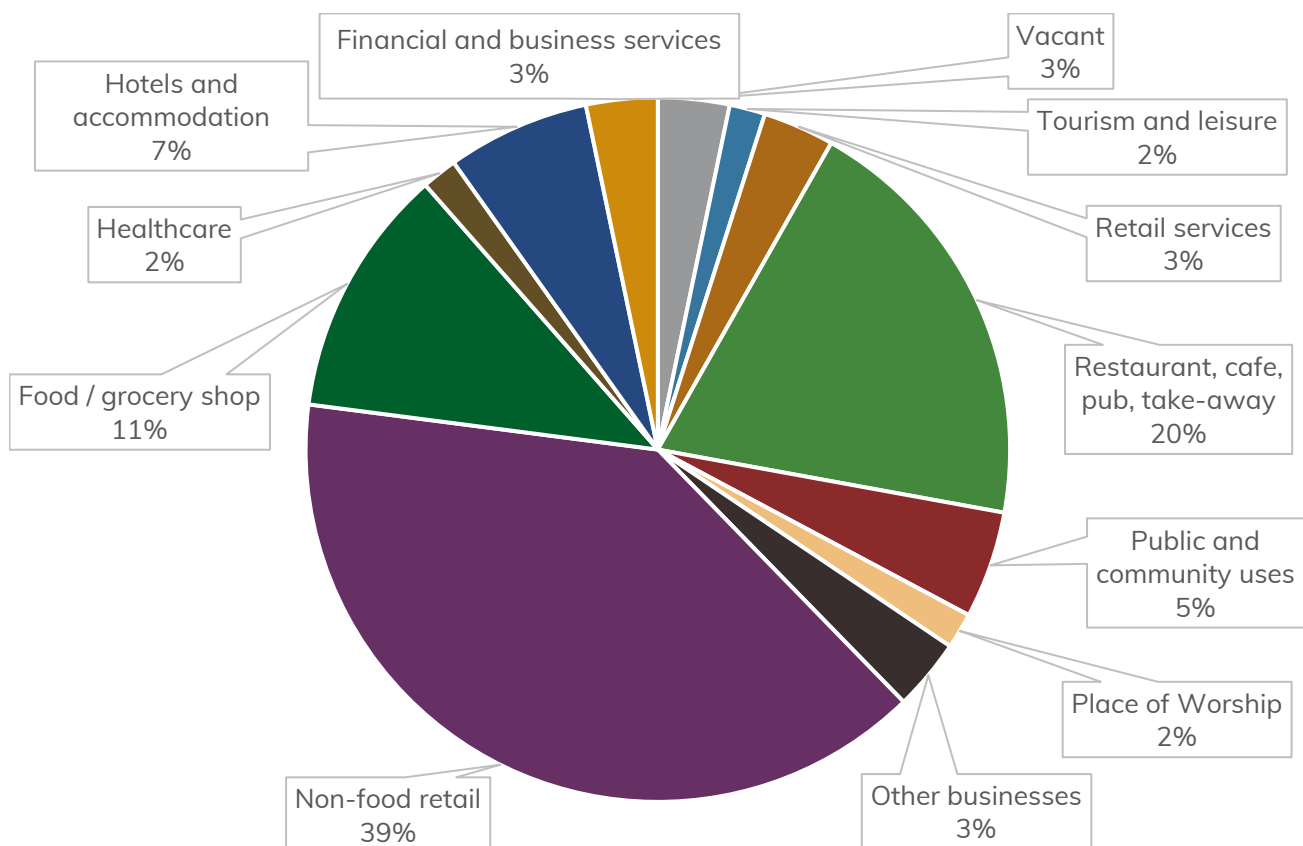

Figure 28 Composition of town centre premises with a non-residential use in Ballater, August 2023.

Composition of town centre business

In Ballater, the number and proportion of vacant properties has dramatically decreased from 12 (22%) in 2016 to 3 (3%) in 2023 (Figure 27). This is due to the 2016 Town centre health checks being carried out about a year after the 2015 flood event that badly affected many businesses in Ballater, meaning in that many were still closed and awaiting refurbishment prior to re-opening when the health check was carried 2016.

Non-food retail businesses have significantly increased since 2016 when only 15 premises (27%) were recorded to 24 in 2023 (41%) (Figure 29 and Figure 30). Restaurants, café, pubs and takeaways have also increased from 7 businesses in 2016 to 12 in 2023 representing a 71% increase across the period. This may reflect the fact the town is a popular holiday destination attracting an affluent clientele with potentially more disposable income. Non-food retail, food/grocery and restaurants, cafes, pubs and take-aways dominate the town centre (Figure 30).

Unlike some of the other town centres there are no charity shops withing the town centre.

Between 2016 and 2023 there have been little or no change in the numbers of hotels and accommodation, public and community use buildings, financial and business services, tourism and leisure or food / grocery shops (Figure 29). It is worth noting the number of financial and business services businesses has reduced from 3 to 2 (2016-2023) which is a trend seen across all the towns in the National Park.
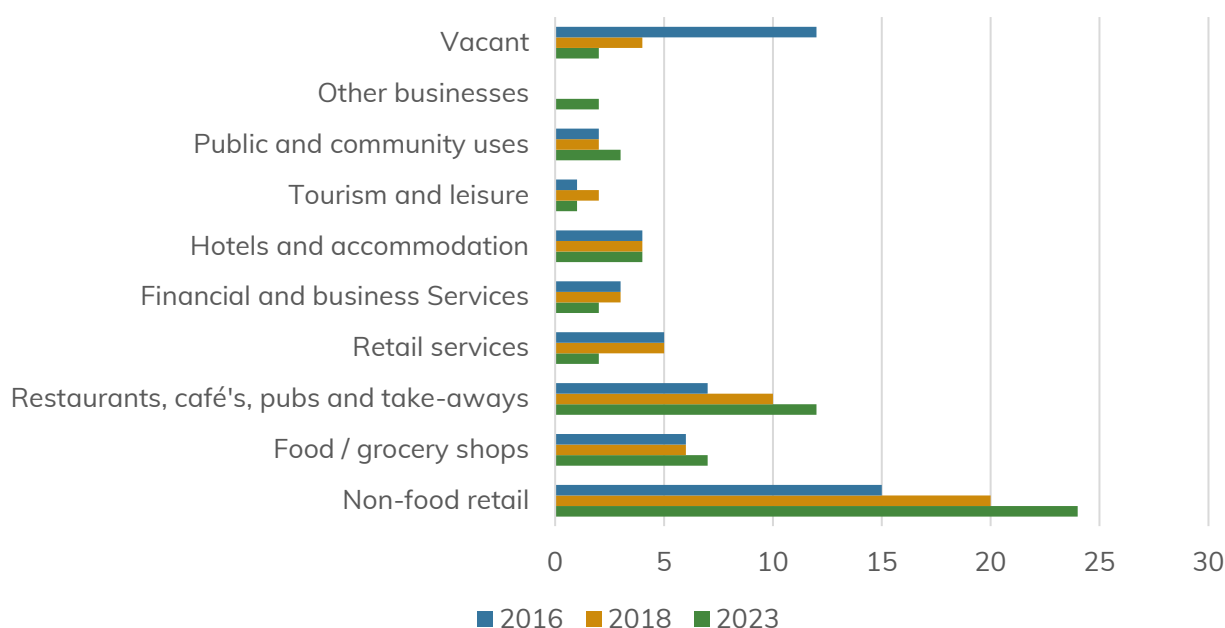

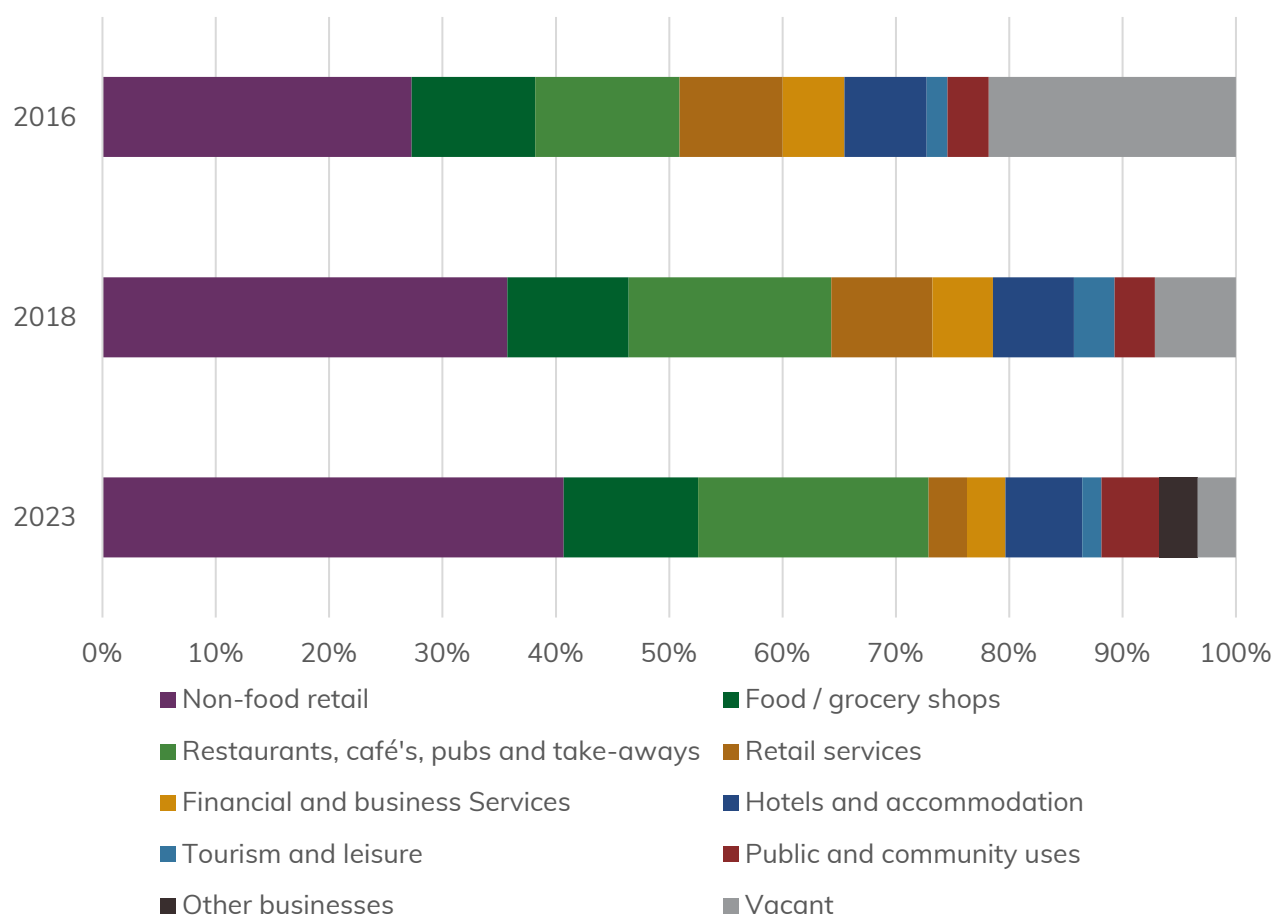Figure 29 Number of business premises by business type in Ballater town centre for 2016, 2018 and 2023.

Figure 30 Composition of town centre businesses in Ballater town centre, 2016, 2018 and 2023.

Pedestrian count results

The pedestrian count (Figure 31) indicated that the town centre was slightly busier at location one in 2023 (86 people recorded in total over all three times) than in 2018 (83 people). However, this represents a fairly comparative result between 2023 and 2018, compared to 2016 when in total only 61 people were recorded.

At location two significantly less people were record in 2023 (96) compared to 2018 (124). This may be influenced by the fact that the Town Centre Health Check was carried out a few weeks later in 2023 than 2018, or that external factors (for example, events in the area) played a factor. As seen at location one, the result is still significantly higher than the footfall record in 2016 (73 people).

Overall, at both locations there appears to have been a significant increase since 2016 but perhaps a lesser degree of change since 2018.

At location one, in both the 2018 and 2013 surveys it was busier at mid-day, however at location two it was busier at 11am.

The weather during the 2023 pedestrian count, in Ballater, was recorded as overcast.
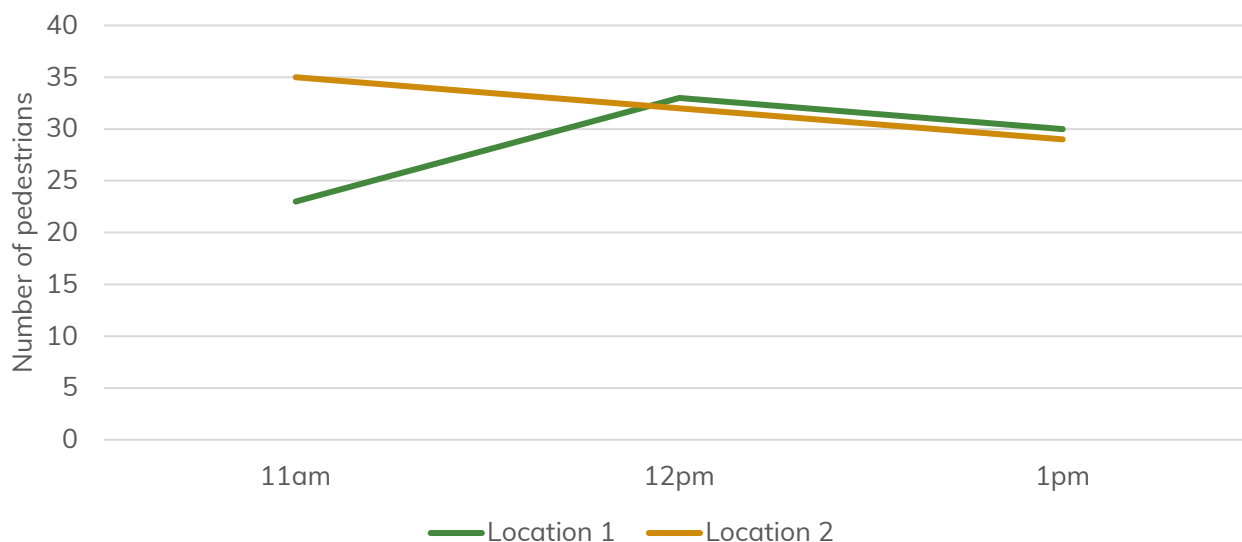

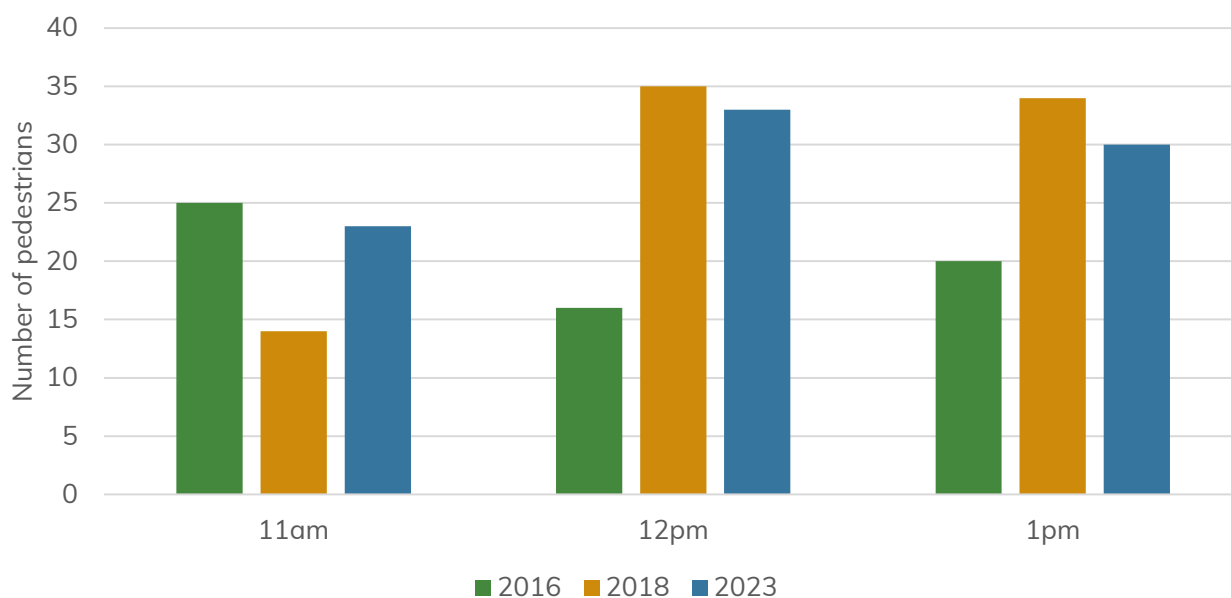Figure 31 Pedestrian counts at locations 1 and 2 (see Figure 43) in Ballater town centre, August 2023.

Figure 32 Comparison between pedestrian counts at location 1 in Ballater town centre in 2016, 2018 and 2023 at 11am, 12pm and 1pm.
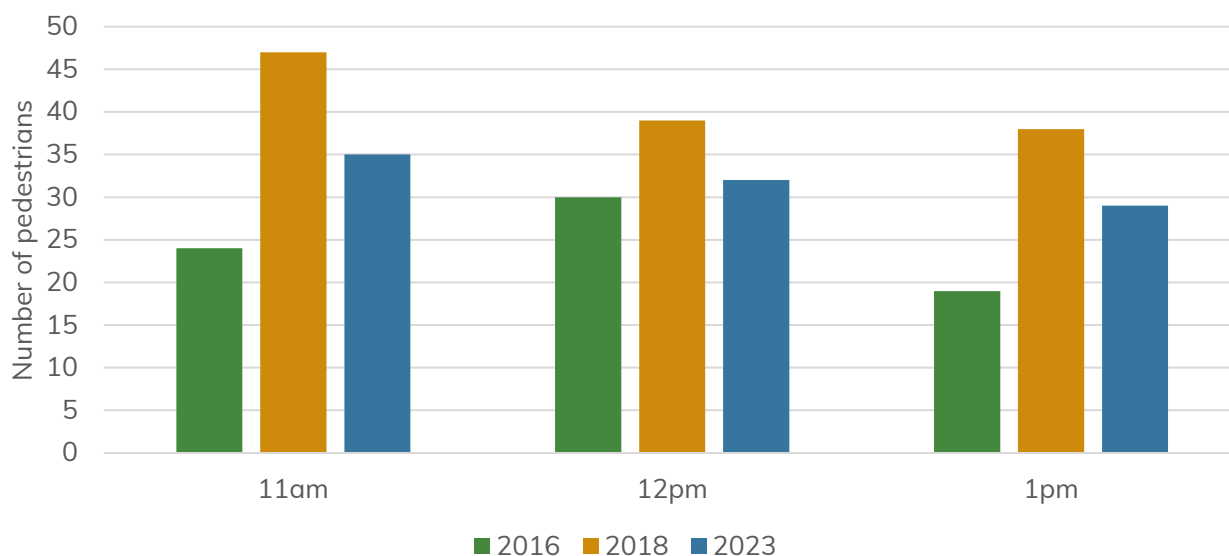
Figure 33 Comparison between pedestrian counts at location two in Ballater town centre in 2016, 2018 and 2023 at 11am, 12pm and 1pm.

Physical Environment

The quality of the built environment in the town centre is very high – with a strong historic aesthetic created by the granite buildings. There are two focal points of business divided by the church in the central square. There is a strong historic / royal identity with the Royal Deeside brand a key selling point.

The town centre appears very green, with an abundance of planters and flower boxes, which are well maintained. Overall, the town centre is aesthetically pleasing with a strong royal presence.

Sense of place

There exists a strong sense of place and setting within the town centre created in part by the historic fabric (Figure 34) and its royal connections, but also by the impressive natural landscape surrounding the town in the shape of rugged edges and wooded hills. The clarity of the sense of place is improved by the well maintained and presented streetscape.

Figure 34 Strong historic identity with well-maintained public realm surrounding the public buildings in Ballater. August 2023.

Public realm and green infrastructure

The town centre offers well maintained, welcoming and accessible green spaces (Figure 35). There is a large green open space surrounding the church with a smaller area opposite both well maintained, clean and tidy.

Figure 35 Ballater offers excellent green spaces within the town centre, which are easily accessible and well maintained. August 2023.

There are an ample supply of street furniture including public seating, bins and recycling facilities which all appear in a good and tidy condition.

Figure 36 Colourful and well-maintained public realm which is easy to navigate and provides adequate signage and bins (including recycling options). August 2023.

Accessibility: Ease of pedestrian movement

The town centre has a traditional grid iron pattern centred around the Square and is easy to navigate. The pavements are narrow, with street furniture potentially creating problems at busier periods for people with limited mobility – this is especially evident on Bridge Street. There is also a lack of public crossings in the town centre. However, the pavements are well maintained with dropped curbs suitably located for those with limited mobility (Figure 37). Following the rebuilding of Ballater Station, the public realm in this area has been significant improved, making the area more pedestrian friendly.

Figure 37 Well-maintained, wide accessible pavements in the town centre. August 2023.

Traffic and parking

Car traffic dominates the town centre, both with the number of cars and parking – both in designated car parks and along the pavement edges. The town centre offers ample parking at and around the church, however the amount of hard landscaping and parking, especially large coaches, erodes the setting of the church.

Figure 38 Car parking around the Church erodes its setting. August 2023.

The main car park (left) does offer two electric vehicle parking chargers, easily accessible in a central location.

Figure 39 Ample parking available in the town centre. August 2023.

Cycling facilities and ease of movement

On first impression the town centre doesn't feel very cycle friendly, during the health check visit it was noted there were lots of cars and narrow roads, with pedestrians frequently spilling out into the road. There are, however, two bike shops within the town centre which provide bike facilities including parking. There is further cycle parking available at the central green space. From the town centre there are good connections to the surrounding areas, paths and Deeside way.

Public Toilets

There are centrally positioned public toilets (Figure 40) located in the Church car park that are free to use.

They are located in a central location and well maintained. They are easily accessible with suitable entrances for the disabled toilet. They are also located in a well-lit location.

Figure 40 Public toilets in Ballater town centre. August 2023.

Public transport

There are regular bus services to Aberdeen, which run hourly until midnight. There are digital timetables which provide real time updates to any change in the services.

Figure 41 Ballater provided excellent public transport information in the town centre both through easily accessible timetables and digital boards providing real time information on services. August 2023.

Signage and ease of navigation

The town centre is well signposted, within the centre there are numerous finger posts and some brown signs (heritage) signs. It is well signposted, but not so much to appear cluttered. There are also some public information and interpretation boards.

Figure 42 The town has a well maintained and cared for central information board easily accessible for visitors. Finger posts are also located centrally and connect visitors with adjoining active travel networks. August 2023.

SWOT analysis

Overall, the Town Centre Health Check identified the following:

Strengths

- Clean and tidy streetscape.
- Busy centre.
- Well known and popular.
- Good green infrastructure and open space within the town centre.
- Good variety of retail offerings.
- Wide pavements with some accessible cycle parking.
- Excellent public transport and links to other services / settlements

Weaknesses

- Car dominated feel to town centre with a lot of informal parking around the central church.
- Main car park in the square dominated by buses.
- Lack of affordable housing in the wider area may hinder economic growth with regards to seasonal staff accommodation.

Opportunities

- More defined parking to maintain setting of the Church and improve pedestrian access.
- More cycle parking, and dedicated cycle routes through the town centre.
- Need for more electric vehicle charging points.
- Strengthening the role of tourism – there could be further opportunities to enhance the visitor experience and the town may benefit from a wider range of tourism accommodation.

Threats

- Flooding, as seen in 2015.
- Becoming too popular – during the town centre health check visit it was noted the streets were very busy.
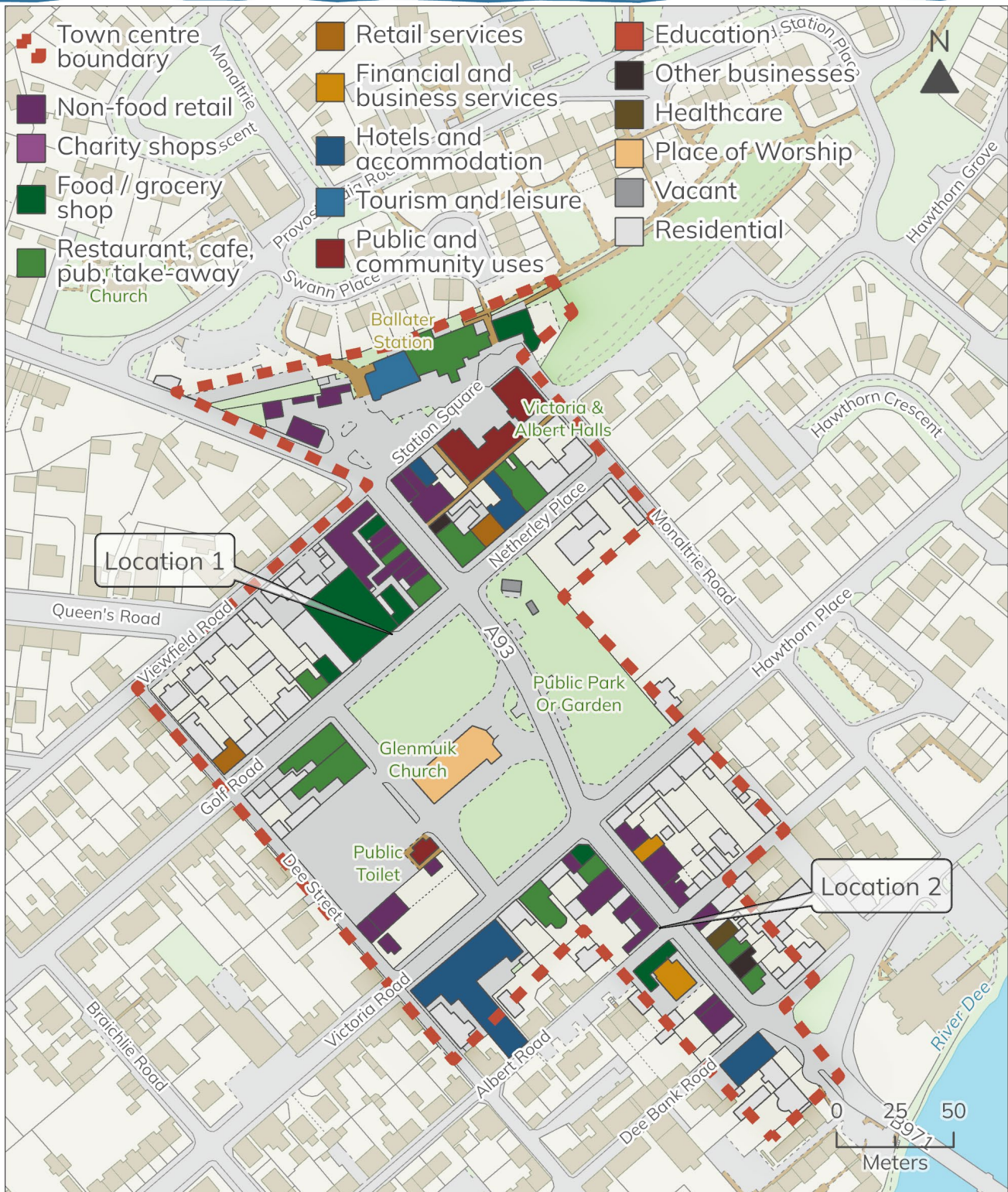- Car dominance and the reliance on car use.

Figure 43 Ballater town centre uses and pedestrian count locations, August 2023.

Grantown on Spey

Grantown on Spey lies in the north of the Cairngorms National Park and is one of the main service centres in Badenoch and Strathspey with a population of just over 2,400[4] . Grantown has a traditional (and typical of Badenoch and Strathspey) long High Street and central square which forms the hub of the town.

Town Centre Premises

In Grantown on Spey, 48% of the premises in the town centre were recorded proportionally as being for non-residential use in 2023 (Figure 44). This represents a significantly different town centre composition compared to Aviemore (Figure 1), instead with a composition more akin to Ballater.
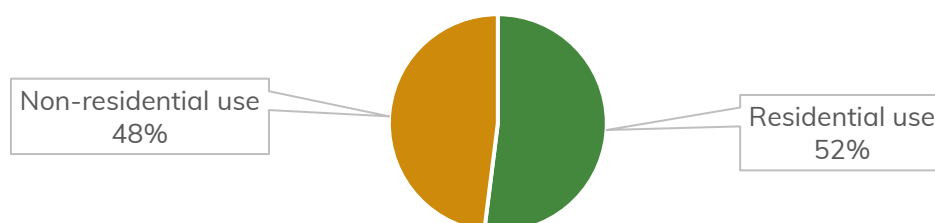

Non-residential use
48%

Residential use
52%

Figure 44 Pro Proportion of premises within the town centre boundary used for residential use compared to non-residential use in Grantown on Spey in August 2023.

The highest proportion of non-residential premises in the town centre are non-food retail which account for 26% of all businesses representing 20 establishments (Figure 45). Other significant proportions include; other businesses accounting for 13%, restaurants, cafes, pubs and take-aways which make up 11% (9 premises) and food and grocery shops which make up 13% (10 premises). Of the town centre non-residential premises (totalling 78) 84% of the premises were recorded as being independent outlets up from 72% in 2018 (and in 2016). This high proportion of independent to chain led retailers is similar to Ballater's composition (92% independent).

---

[4] Understanding Scottish Places, http://www.usp.scot/
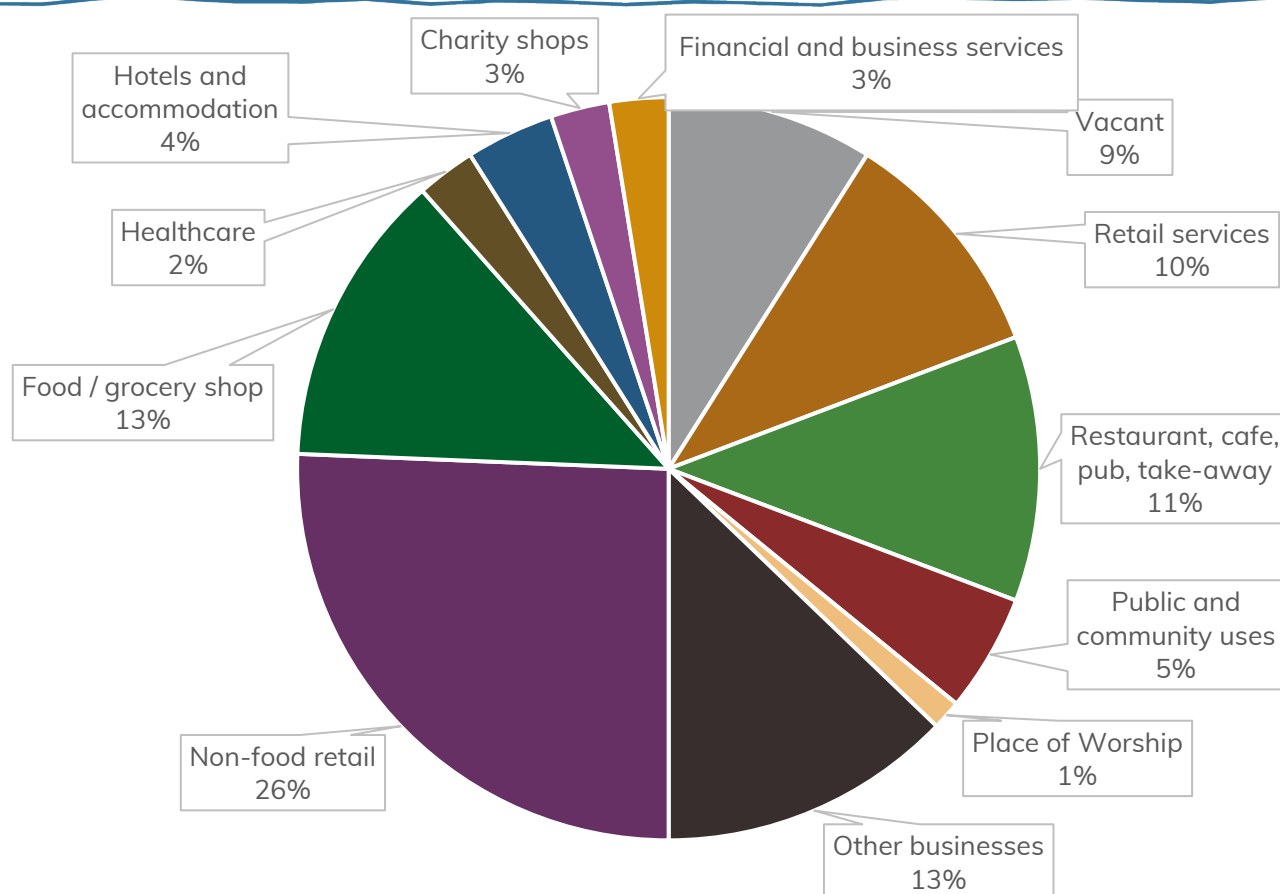
Figure 45 Composition of town centre premises with a non-residential use in Grantown on Spey, August 2023.

Composition of town centre business

In Grantown on Spey, similar to in Ballater, there is an increase in non-food retail. This was stable between 2016 and 2018, but in 2023 rose from 20% of the businesses to 27% (Figure 47) representing an increase of 5 new businesses (Figure 46). Other businesses have also significantly increased proportionally from 4% in 2016 to 13% in 2023. It is possible the increase in these businesses is a result of the Covid-19 Pandemic and a switch from restaurants, cafes pubs and takeaway business and retail services. Restaurants, cafes, pubs and take-aways have reduced from 12 in 2018 to 9 in 2023. Retail services have also decreased in this period from 12 businesses to 8 (Figure 46).

Interestingly the number of vacant properties in the town has remained constant at 7 or 9%. Given the fact that there was a 5-year gap between the most recent and last town centre health check it is possible that not enough data has been collected to say whether this is typical or not. However, it does remain a problem given the small size of the town that nearly 10% of the town centres business premises are vacant.

The number of financial and business services businesses have also severely declined (as seen in the other towns to a lesser degree). In Grantown on Spey in 2016 there were 6 businesses serving financial and business needs whereas in 2023 this number has reduced to 2 (Figure 46). The loss of the last bank on the High Street is perhaps a visual reflection in the changes in the way financial services are administered in rural towns.

Tourism related business have also decreased from 2 (3%) to nothing in 2023 (Figure 47) There has also been a modest decline in hotels and accommodation with the loss of one establishment since 2016 (Figure 46).
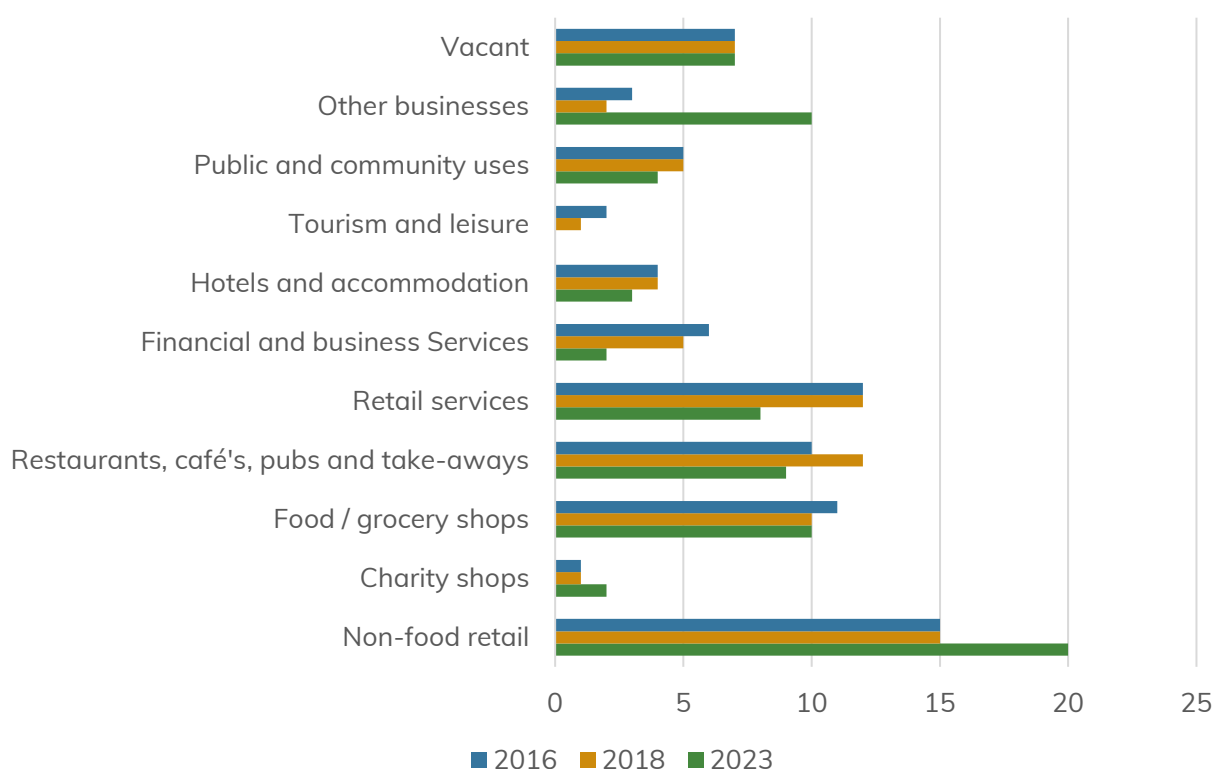

Figure 46 Number of business premises by business type in Grantown on Spey town centre for 2016, 2018 and 2023.
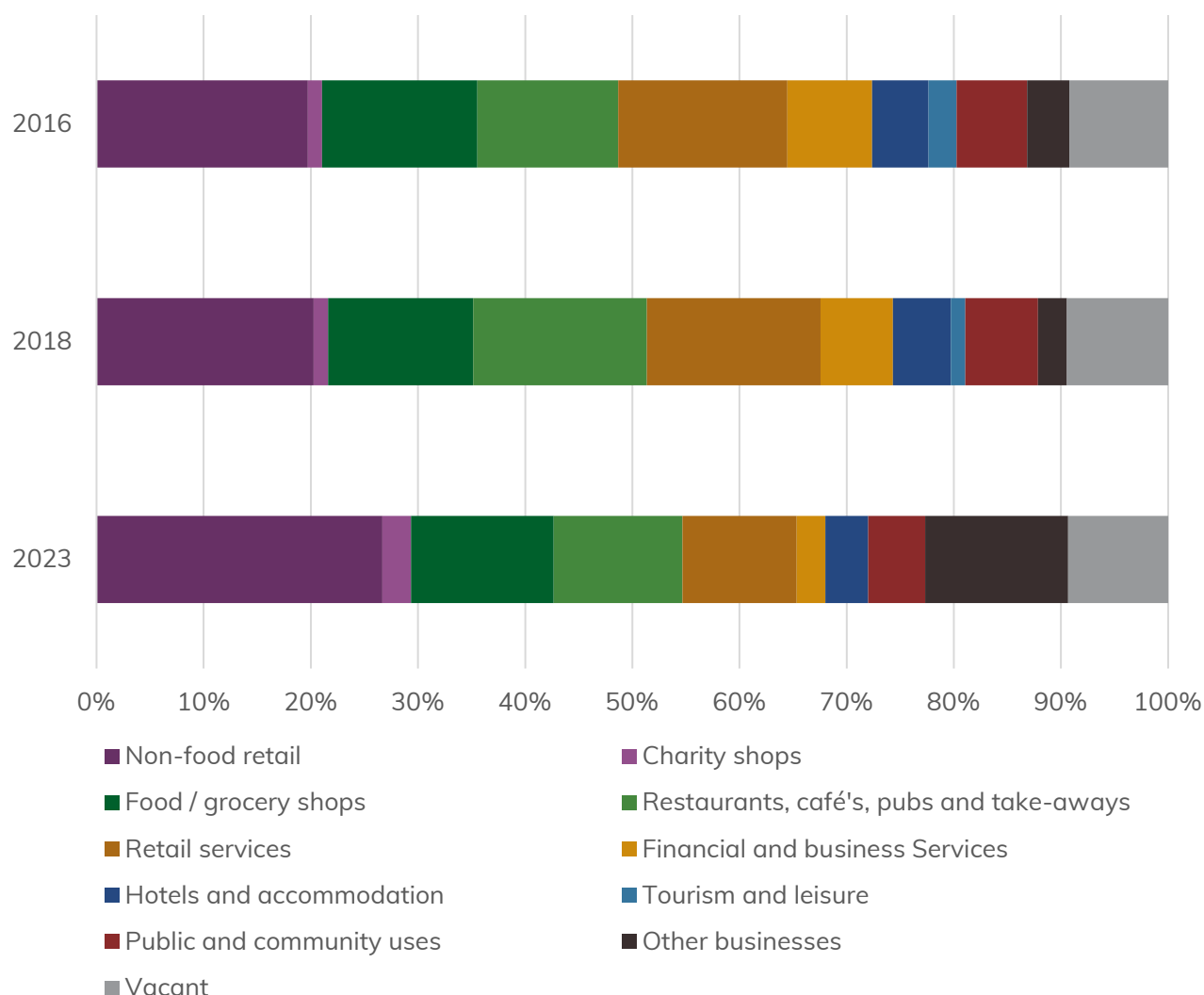
Figure 47 Composition of town centre businesses in Grantown on Spey town centre, 2016, 2018 and 2023.

Pedestrian count results

During the 2023 pedestrian survey location one was significantly busier than location two with 38% more people counted overall at location one (Figure 48). The results for both locations showed that it was busiest at 1pm (Figure 48). Looking back at the results from the previous years (2016, 2018) this is not correlated to those findings (Figure 49 and Figure 50). It could therefore not be significant in terms of determining the busiest periods in the town on any given day.

In terms of overall numbers of people counted across the two locations the results from 2023 would indicate the town centre could be becoming less busy (Figure 49 and Figure 50). In 2018, 185 people were recorded across both locations and all three times, compared to 136 in 2023 which represents a 31% decrease in footfall. The figure for 2023 was also 11% lower than the numbers record for 2016 (152 people).

The weather during the 2023 pedestrian count, in Grantown-on-Spey, was recorded as 18°C, cloudy and warm, from 12pm turning to sunny.
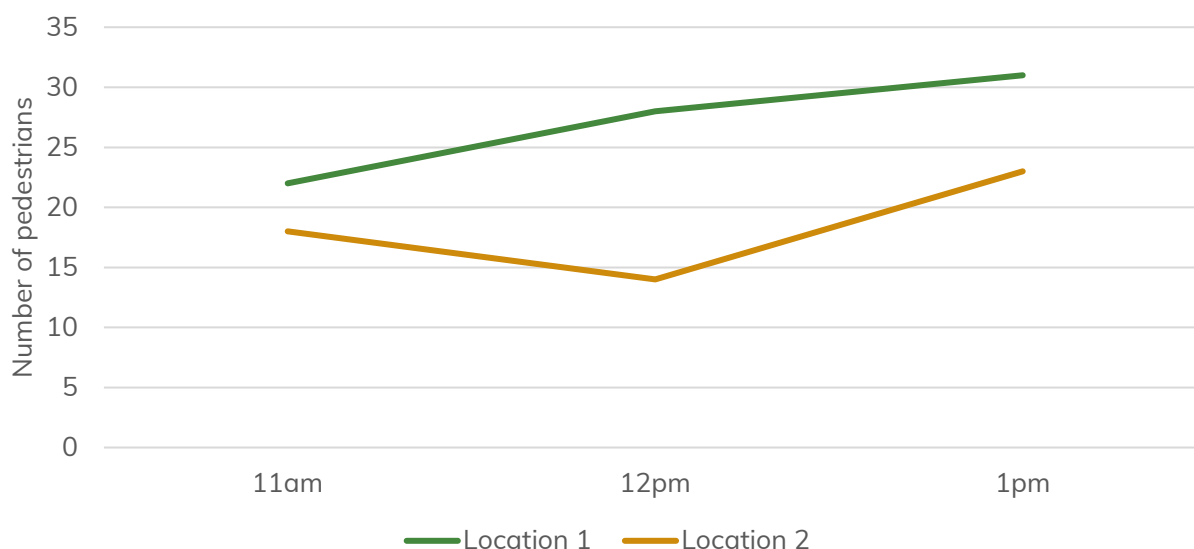

Figure 48 Pedestrian counts at locations 1 and 2 (see Figure 60) in Grantown on Spey town centre, August 2023.
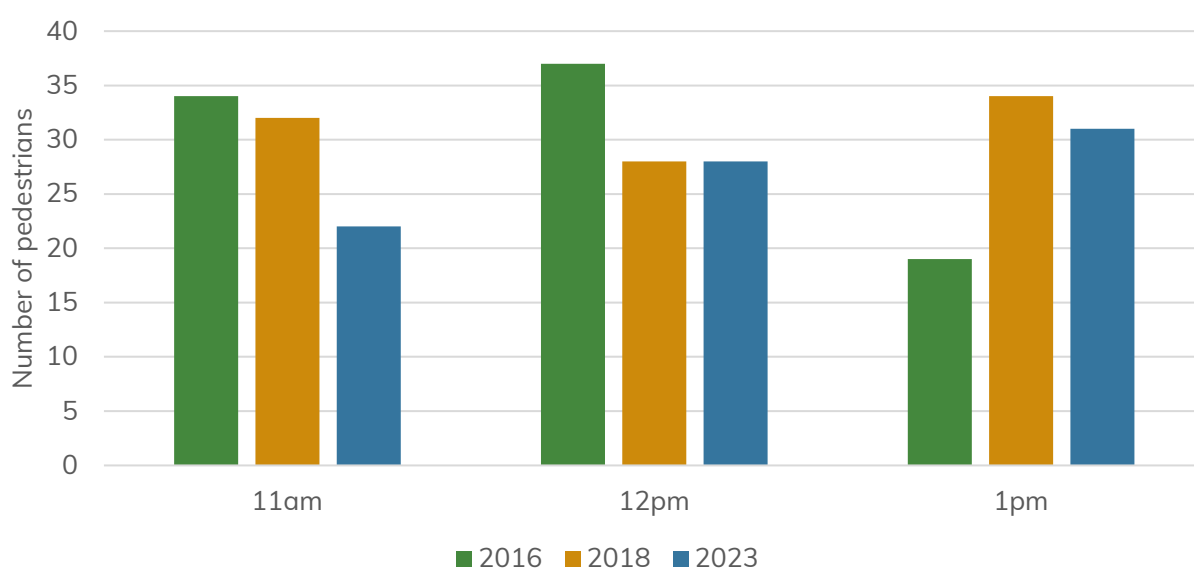

Figure 49 Comparison between pedestrian counts at location 1 in Grantown on Spey town centre in 2016, 2018 and 2023 at 11am, 12pm and 1pm.
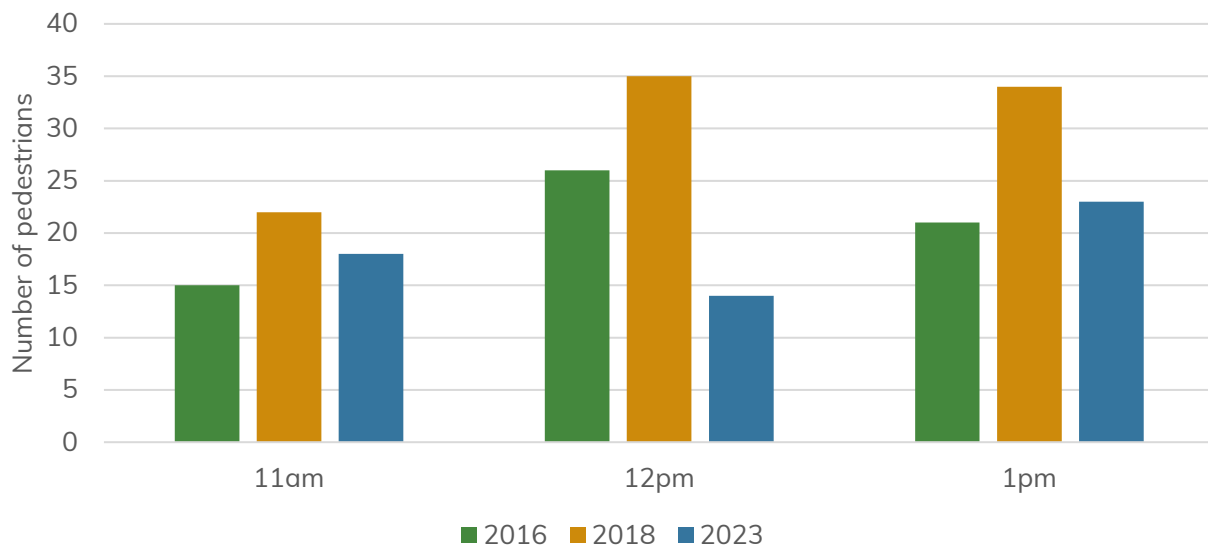
Figure 50 Comparison between pedestrian counts at location 1 in Grantown on Spey town centre in 2016, 2018 and 2023 at 11am, 12pm and 1pm.

Physical environment

The town centre is generally well maintained, attractive and provides a high-quality built environment. The physical structure of town centre buildings largely appears to in reasonable condition, with a small number of the High Street premises showing some wear and tear.

Figure 51 Wear and tear on building on High Street needing some attention next to vacant unit Grantown on Spey, August 2023.

Figure 52 Generally well-maintained, clean and tidy High Street in Grantown on Spey. August 2023.

There are a range of shop fronts and sizes on the High Street, however a high number have retained traditional shop front styles, particularly the smaller premises. Work has been undertaken since the last town centre health check on a couple of properties on the High Street to bring vacant properties back into use and improve the condition and quality of the town centre.

Figure 53 Vacant property on the High Street. Grantown on Spey, August 2023.

Figure 54 Vacant property (old post office) on the High Street. Grantown on Spey, August 2023.

Figure 55 Vacant property (old bank building) on the High Street. Grantown on Spey, August 2023.

There were still a number of vacant properties (Figure 51, Figure 53, Figure 54, and Figure 55) noted during this visit. The recently undertaken Conservation area

masterplan appraisal, by Highland Council looks at the physical environment of the town centre which falls with the recently expand conservation area. The conservation area appraisal for Grantown on Spey provided by the Highland Council, provides an in-depth review of the area and can be accessed here:

- https://her.highland.gov.uk/api/LibraryLink5WebServiceProxy/FetchResourceFromStub/1-2-2-5-0-8_d88f5522f651305-122508_b8de4120f7f71fd.pdf

Sense of place (distinctiveness and local identity)

Grantown on Spey has a strong historic identity being one of Scotland's first planned towns and with a well-defined large conservation area. However, the conservation area has not been actively regulated in planning terms which has affected the quality of the historic environment in some parts of the town centre. With the recent conversation area appraisal and management plan now put in place there is the opportunity for improvements to be made to further improve the quality of the historic sense of place and build on its existing strong local identity.

Public realm and green infrastructure

The square offers a pleasant open green space with planters which constitute the green infrastructure within the town centre (Figure 56). The barriers surrounding the green spaces are in places, in poor condition, and prevent accessible access. Access to the green space is further hindered by the abundance of parking, both in acceptable spaces and illegal parking, mainly around the Co-op, Maclean's Highland Bakery and Premier shop.

Figure 56 Green infrastructure on the Square in Grantown on Spey, August 2023.

Accessibility: Ease of pedestrian movement

The main High Street pavements are wide and easy to navigate, however there exists a problem around the main square, especially in front of the Co-op, Maclean's Highland Bakery and Premier shop. There is no pedestrian crossing across the square and the ad-hoc and often illegal parking and lack of awareness for pedestrians makes crossing from one side to the other difficult due to visibility issues for pedestrian crossings. That said the main High Street is served by two pedestrian crossings, with excellent multi-directional crossings at the lower end of the high street next to the pharmacy and post office. All crossings have dropped curbs and are accessible.

Traffic and Parking

The town centre can encounter considerable traffic which leads to congestion. There is on-road parking along the High Street and in the Square – however this is unregulated and therefore leads to parking problems in some areas as already measured.

Cycle facilities and ease of movements

Cycling in the town centre is difficult due to the car dominance along the High Street. There are no dedicated cycle lanes or cycle parking on the High Street. There is cycle parking on the Square opposite the Co-op, however it is limited and uncovered (Figure 57). There is cycle parking outside the Cairngorms National Park Authority offices, however it is not clear whether these can be used by the public as they are within the office curtilages. There is also not signage to direct cyclists to the parking.

Figure 57 Cycle parking on the Square in Grantown on Spey. August 2023.

Public toilets

There are public toilets which are accessible, clean and well maintained. They do however incur a 50p charge for use. Another toilet blook is currently under refurbishment just outwith the town centre boundary located behind the library adjacent to public parking, next to the town's only recycling point.

Public transport

There are currently bus services to Aviemore and Inverness, however they are reported (by local residents) to be unreliable and infrequent. The bus service to Aviemore does connect with the neighbouring villages. Bus services may have been cut in recent years due to under use. Due to the rural location of the town, there is a strong reliance and preference for private car use to travel to and from the town centre. The main bus stops on the square do have digital boards giving real time updates on services.

Signage and ease of navigation

Signage for vehicle movement is adequate and well placed at the junction directing people leaving and entering the town centre. On the Square there is signage – finger posts, that are useful in directing people to connecting areas.

Figure 58 Image right: Finger posts on the main square in Grantown on Spey connect the area with surrounding footpaths. August 2023.

At the junction at the southern end of the High Street there is good signage to connecting towns, however there is wear and tear on the sign to Inverness. There is no signage to the National Park offices and the square could benefit from more signs directing people to the museum, recycling, public toilets, parking etc.

Figure 59 Well-placed and well-maintained public information boards in the main square in Grantown

Figure 60 Traffic signage at the junction on the southern end of the High Street.

SWOT analysis

Overall, the Town Centre Health Check identified the following:

Strengths

- High number of independent specialist shops.
- Distinct sense of place.
- Attractive green spaces.
- Built heritage.
- Easy to navigate.
- Outstanding surroundings e.g. proximity to Anagach Woods and accessible outdoors with a good path network.

Weaknesses

- Lack of formal tourist attractions
- Vacant premises.
- Condition of some units on High Street is very poor.
- Lack of cycle parking.
- Lack of electric vehicle charging.
- Outdated feel to the retail offerings – little appeal to the younger residents/ visitors.
- No opticians.
- Lack of food delivery options.
- Lack of later evening catering.

Opportunities

- Further promotion of the town and surrounding woods / walks as an outdoor visitor destination.
- Strathspey Railway extension.
- Improvements to signage to maximise visitors to Grantown Museum.

Threats

- Macro-scale economic changes which affect local businesses (small changes or a poor season can affect the viability of a business).
- Parking / traffic – no enforcement and level of traffic and illegal parking affected.
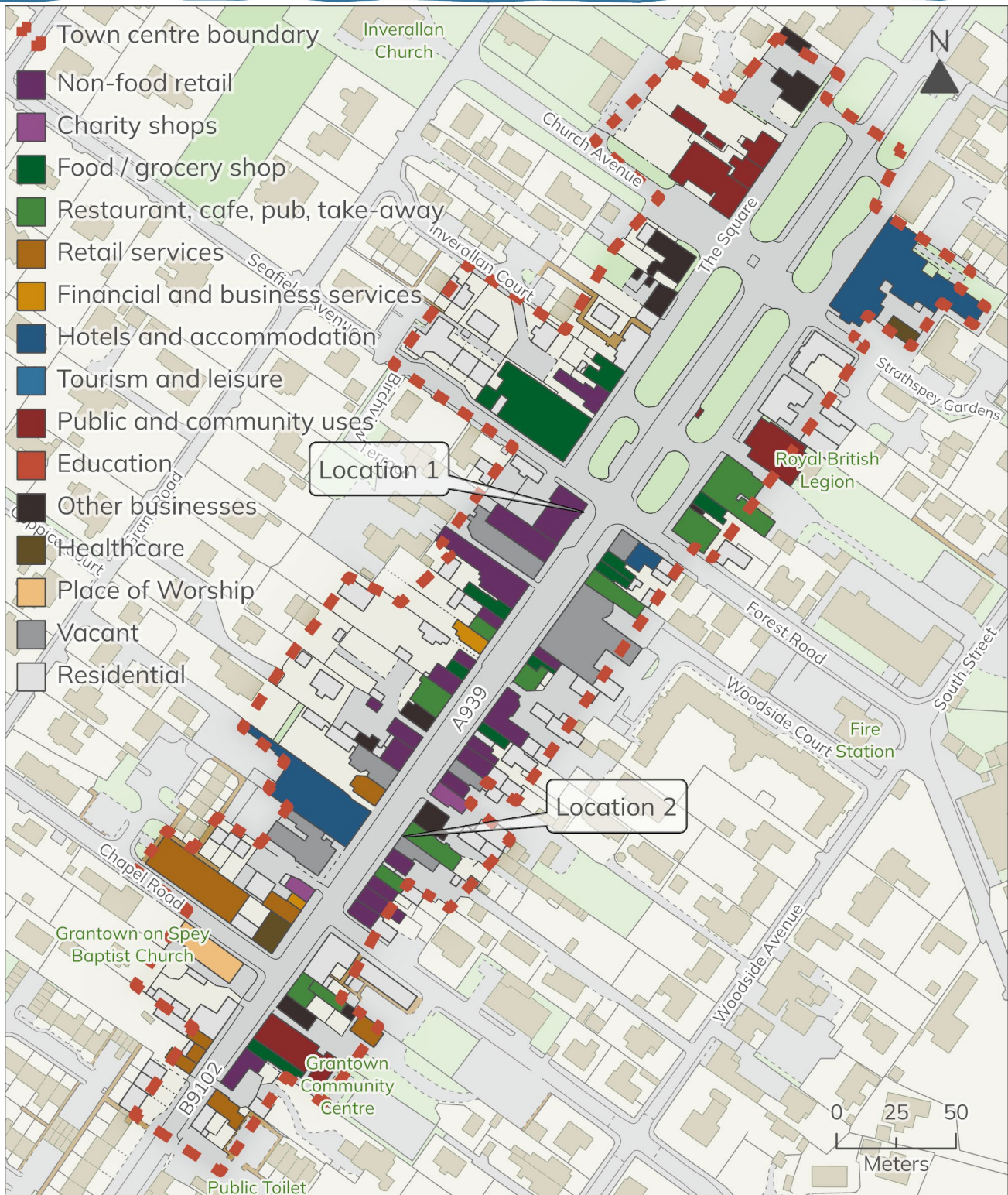- Deterioration and lack of maintenance of older buildings in the town centre.

Figure 61 Grantown on Spey town centre uses and pedestrian count locations, August 2023.

Reproduced by permission of Ordnance Survey on behalf of HMSO. © Crown copyright and database right 2023. All rights reserved. Ordnance Survey Licence number 100040965 Cairngorms National Park Authority.

Kingussie

Kingussie is the oldest settlement in Badenoch and is a traditional Highland town, which began life as a planned village in 1799. It expanded in the 1800's with the introduction of the railway which brought tourism to the town. However, the A9 has now meant the town is bypassed and may have contributed to a decline in economic activity. It has a population of nearly 1,500[5]. It is a popular destination for visitors with a number of attractions nearby. The town centre is focused along a long traditional high street typical of the area.

Town Centre Businesses

In Kingussie a large proportion (73%) of the buildings within the town centre boundary are designated for residential use (Figure 62). Similar to Newtonmore this represents a significantly different town centre composition compared to Aviemore (Figure 1) were the majority of premises in the town centre are designated for business use, and to a lesser but just as significant different to Grantown on Spey and Ballater, which have more evenly split proportions.
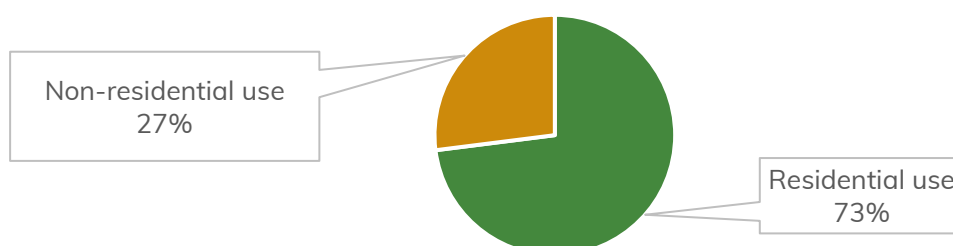

Figure 62 Proportion of premises within the town centre boundary used for residential use compared to non-residential use in Kingussie in 2023.

Figure 62 shows that Kingussie enjoys the most even distributed proportion of different business uses of all the towns in the National Park with no one business/ use dominating too strongly. The greatest proportion of businesses being seen in non-food retail which accounts for 12% of the non-residential premises in Kingussie (8 premises). Hotels and accommodation, retail services and public and community uses each account for 11% (representing 7 premises per use). Proportionally 16% of the premises were recorded as vacant (10 units). Charity shops, tourism and leisure, food and grocery, healthcare, other businesses, restaurants, cafes, pubs and take-aways and places of worship each account for 3-8% each.

---

[5] Understanding Scottish Places, http://www.usp.scot/

Of the town centre businesses 89% of the premises were recorded as being independent outlets up from 75% in 2018 (and 82% in 2016). This high proportion of independent to chain led retailers is equal to the proportion recorded in Ballater in 2023 (92% independent).
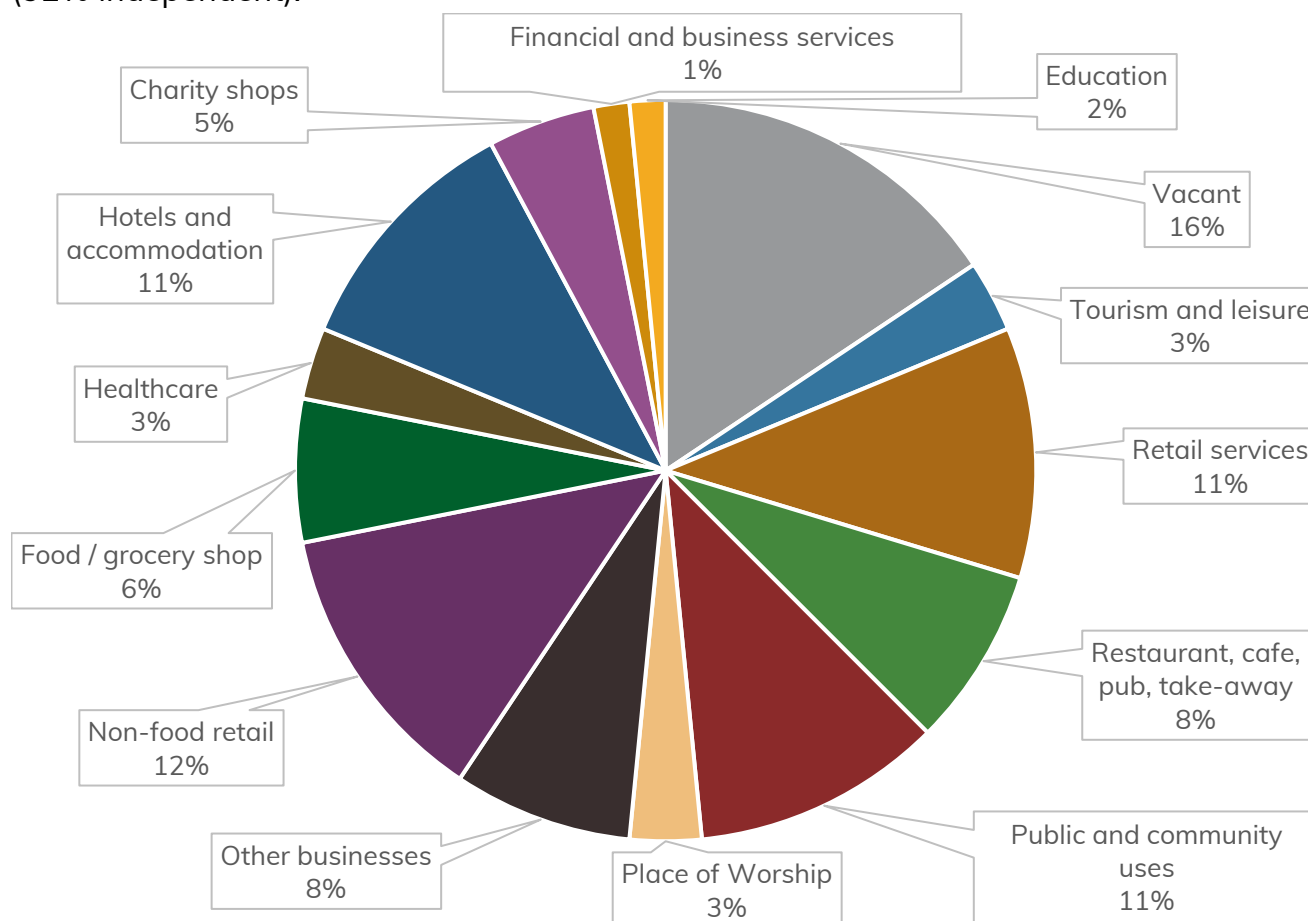

Figure 63 Composition of the town centre buildings recorded as non-residential use in Kingussie in 2023.

Composition of town centre business

The number of vacant businesses in Kingussie has increased since 2016 overall, when only 6 business were recorded at being vacant, with 10 in 2023 (and 11 in 2018).

Dissimilar to other towns the numbers of hotels and accommodation businesses have been steadily increasing from 5 in 2016, 6 in 2018 to 7 in 2023 (Figure 64). Charity shops have increased from 1 shop being recorded in both 2016 and 2018 to 3 in 2023. This may be attributed to the inception and growth of the Caberfeidh Horizons charity operations in Kingussie. Non-food retail businesses have also increased since 2016 from 7 to 8 (Figure 64).

There is a clear decreasing trend in financial and business services (as seen in other towns in the National Park since 2016). These businesses have decreased from 3 in 2016, 2 in 2018 to only 1 being left in 2023 (Figure 64).

Retail services have also decreased both proportionally and in terms of absolute numbers throughout the three town centre health checks, reporting 9 (19%) in 2016, 8 (16%) in 2018 down to 7 (12%) in 2023.
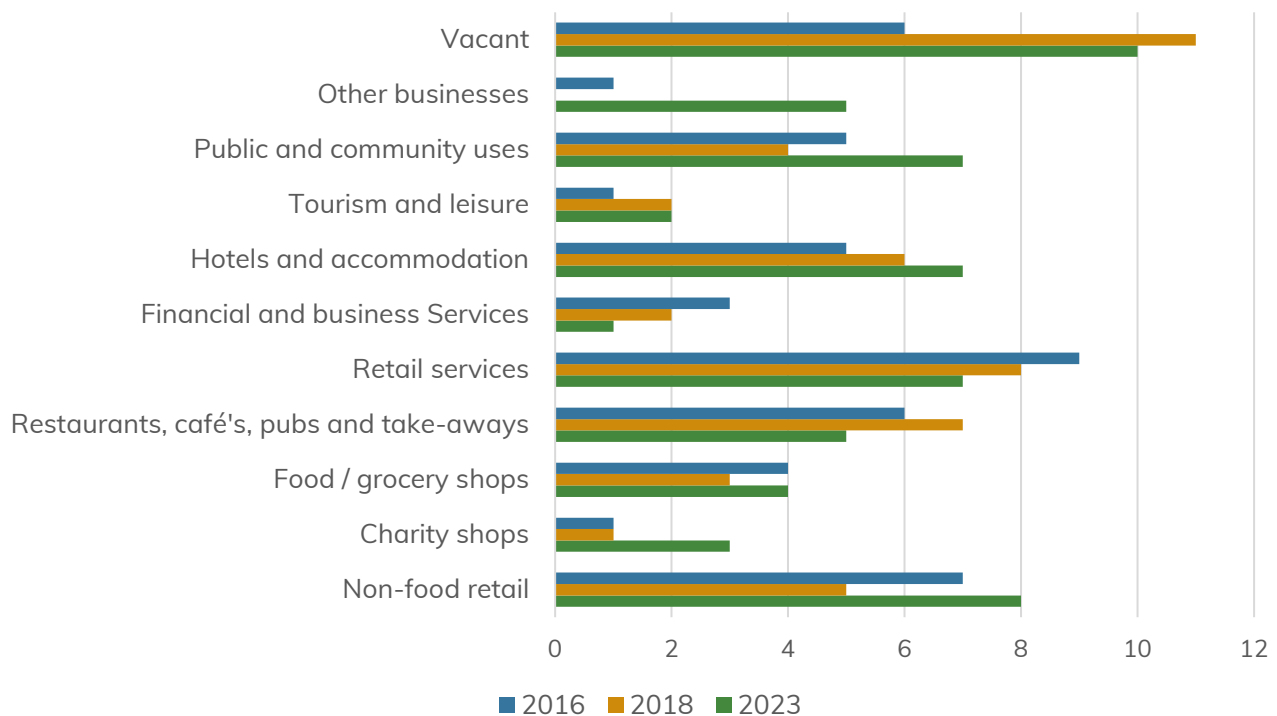

Figure 64 Number of business premises by business type in Kingussie town centre for 2016, 2018 and 2023.
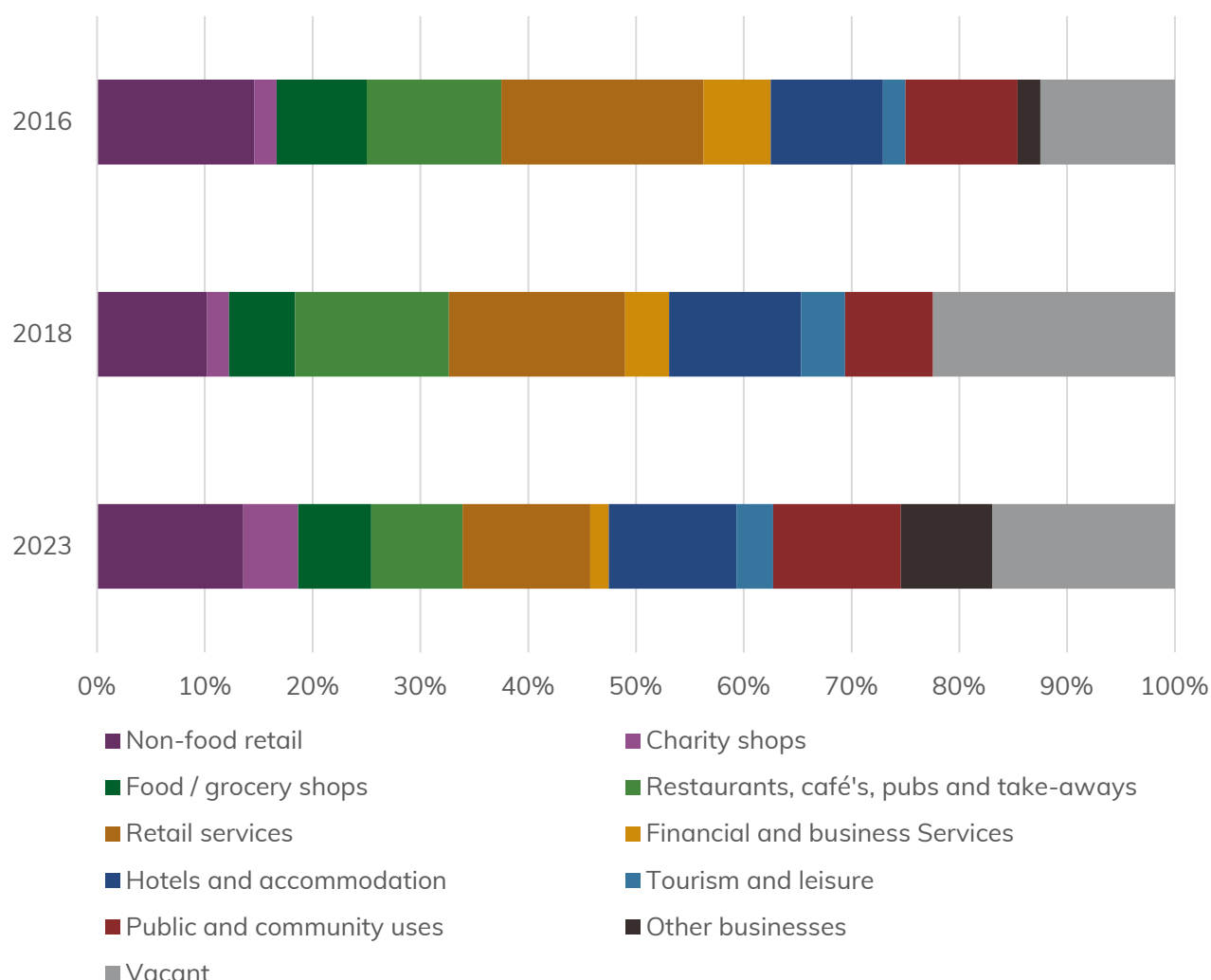
Figure 65 Composition of town centre businesses in Kingussie, 2016, 2018 and 2023.

Pedestrian count results

Figure 66 shows that the total number of pedestrians recorded throughout the day at location one (40 people) was 76% higher than at location two (18 people). In similar fashion to Newtonmore the busiest time across both locations was 11am (sum of location one and location two). Footfall decreased in the afternoon, as seen by the number of pedestrians recorded at 1pm.

At location one the trend for a lower footfall at 1am is consistent with the 2016 and 2018 figures (Figure 67). However, there is no clear trend in the data for location two across the 2016's, 2018's and 2023's data.

In terms of overall numbers of pedestrians recorded across both locations throughout the day, there appears to be a declining number of people using the town centre (Figure

67 and Figure 68). In 2016, a total of 90 people were recorded, which fell to 88 in 2018 and 68 in 2023, representing a 28% decrease from 2016 – 2023.

The weather during the 2023 pedestrian count, in Kingussie, was recorded as overcast.
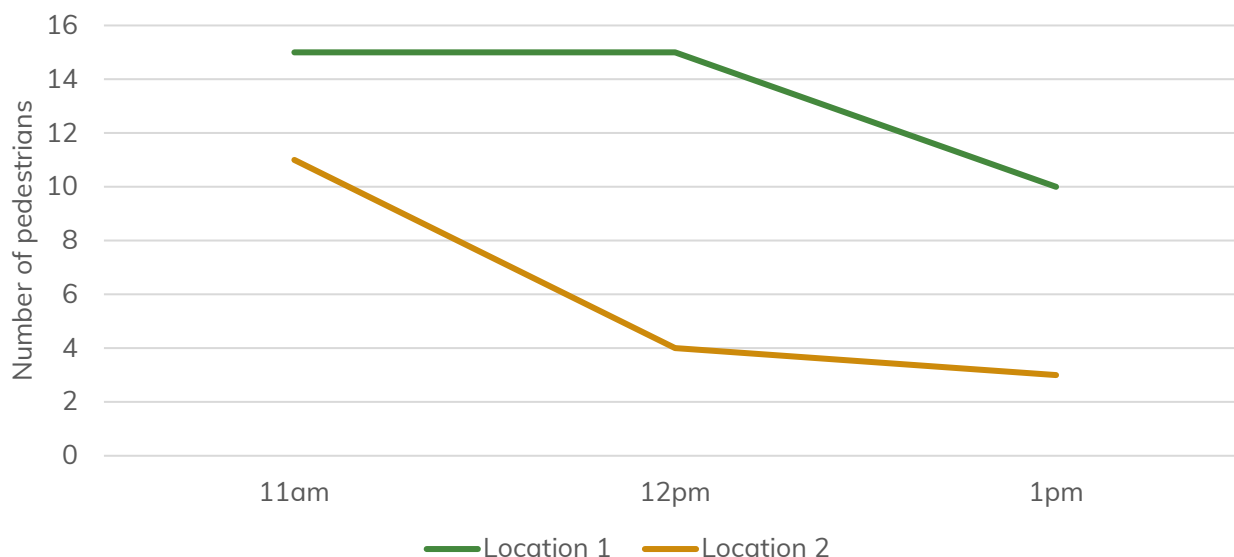

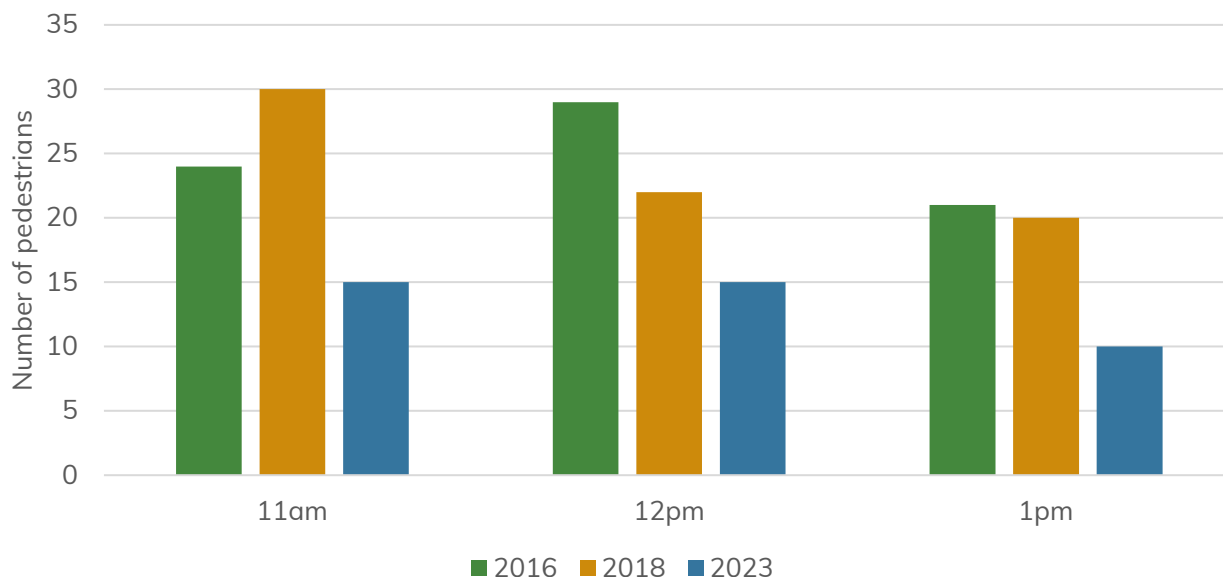Figure 66 Pedestrian counts at locations 1 and 2 (see Figure 87) in Kingussie town centre, August 2023.

Figure 67 Comparison between pedestrian counts at location 1 in Kingussie town centre in 2016, 2018 and 2023 at 11am, 12pm and 1pm.
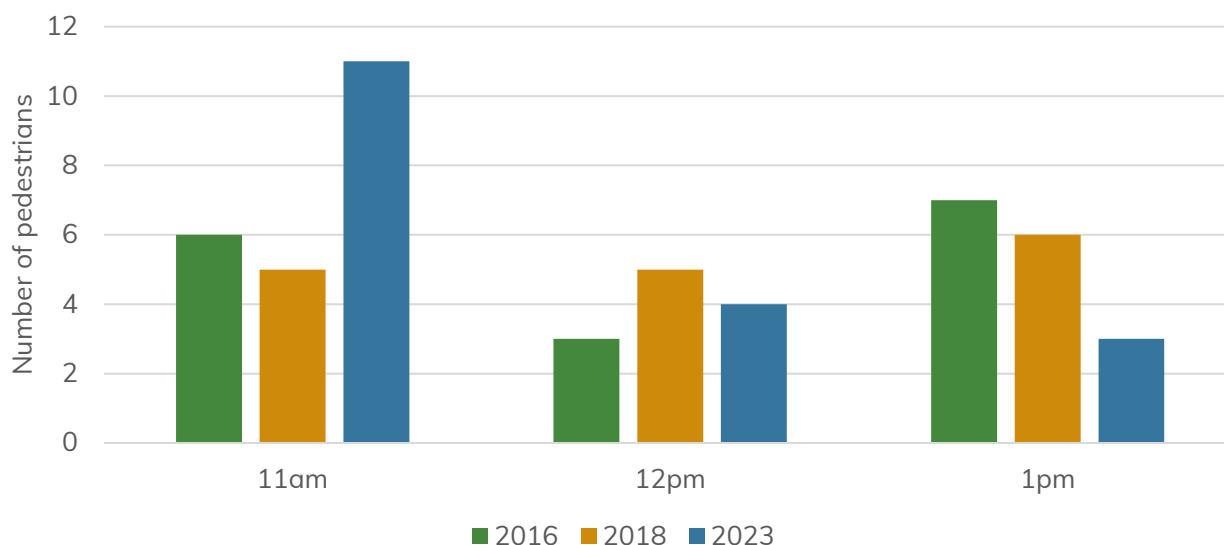
Figure 68 Comparison between pedestrian counts at location 1 in Kingussie town centre in 2016, 2018 and 2023 at 11am, 12pm and 1pm.

Physical environment

Overall, the town centre is well presented, clean and of good quality. Typical of Badenoch and Strathspey the town has a strong historic character and long linear layout. Most of the town centre is Victorian architecture, with some smaller more contemporary developments. The shop fronts are generally in good condition apart from some vacant properties. The town centre provides a pleasant environment, particularly around the park area. However, traffic does dominate the high street. Examples of well-kept historic buildings that enhance the setting include the Old Bank and Court House buildings.

Figure 69 strong Historic Character of Kingussie evident on High Street (above left). Buildings in good condition with few vacant properties (right). August 2023.

Sense of place (distinctiveness and local identity)

Kingussie has a strong sense of place and identity strengthened by its historic architecture, central green public park and linear High Street. There is a strong community presence in the town visually evident through the Caberfeidh Horizons (community charity and social enterprise) community hub and shops in the old bank and opposite. There is a strong cycling presence delivered by the cycle shops and during the visit people were seen to be cycling around the town.

Public realm and green infrastructure

The public realm in the town centre is well maintained and feels cohesive (not fragmented). That said there is a strong vehicle presence on the High Street. There is limited space on the High Street for social interaction or gatherings, however Gynack Park (Figure 70) provides an excellent space for social gathering and outdoor events. During the visit it was noted the town centre is well presented, with hanging baskets of flowers and a well-cared for centrally located park.

Figure 70 Above left: Gynack Park offers residents and visitors access to a large open green space within the town centre. Planting along the streets are well-maintained and compliment the historic public realm.

Accessibility: Ease of pedestrian movement

The main town centre retail offerings are mainly focused along linear High Street which whilst is easy to navigate, contains a steady flow of traffic. There is only one formal crossing point which can make movement across the street difficult – particularly for those with mobility impairments. At the eastern end of the town centre the lack of crossing could also impair pedestrian movement. This said visibility was good and there were no visible obstructions along the pavements which along with the recently introduced 20mph zone made crossing relatively easy. Narrower pavements were noted on King Street, Gynack Street and on Duke Street there was only a pavement on one side of the road, which could impair and limit pedestrian movement.

Traffic and Parking

There is on-street parking along the High Street as well as free public car parks which appears to be sufficient to meet parking need. There appears to be a preference to park along the High Street, but on the day of the visit both the on-street parking and car parks were fairly under-utilised.

Cycle facilities and ease of movements

There is limited bike parking available at Gynack Park (Figure 71), however a distinct lack of cycling parking facilities on the High Street. This meant there were bikes parked in an ad hoc manner, chained to sign posts and lamp posts on the day of the visit. An opportunity for cycle parking provision would certainly be at the Co-op which appears busy but with no cycle parking provision. There is public cycle parking outside the leisure centre on Spey Street, however it would not be clear from the Main Street that it was available.

Figure 71 Cycle parking and facilities next to Gynack Park are centrally located. However, the town would benefit from additional cycle parking near the Co-op.

Public toilets

There are no public toilets within the town centre boundary however there are facilities available a short walk away at the Ardvonie Car Park. The toilets there incur a 50p charge and are well maintained with a person overseeing use. It was noted that, although in good condition and pleasant to use, they are not easily accessible from the High Street.

Public transport

Kingussie is well served by public transport for its size with both bus and rail services heading north and south, however they do not connect so there is a potential

opportunity to better integrate services. The rail station is close to the town centre and is manned during the day. There are bus services to Newtonmore and Aviemore, but there was no visible timetable (Figure 72) which could present problems in terms of accessibility for those not using a smart phone or internet prior to arranging travel. Furthermore, the lack of digital bus board means that bus users would be 'left in the dark' if a service was cancelled or delayed.

Figure 72 Lack of public transport information at the main bus stop in Kingussie. August 2023.

Signage and ease of navigation

There is good signage in and around the town centre, which in itself has a simple layout which is easy to navigate. There is also good signage for cyclists looking to connect to sounding routes or passing through.

Figure 73 There is good signage and public information within the town centre that provide and support connections to active travel networks to and around Kingussie. August 2023.

SWOT analysis

Overall, the Town Centre Health Check identified the following:

Strengths
- High quality of built environment with historic value of Victorian architecture.
- Attractive well-presented green open space at Gynack Park and planting on the High Street.
- Good range of shops in town centre.

Weaknesses
- Traffic dominated town centre.
- Lack of obvious cycling facilities.
- Lack of visible public bus timetables.
- Lack of cycle parking next to the Co-op.
- Only one pedestrian crossing.

Opportunities
- Digital bus timetables serving the town centre stops.
- Cycle lanes, further cycle parking and active travel promotion.
- Integration of bus and rail services.

Threats
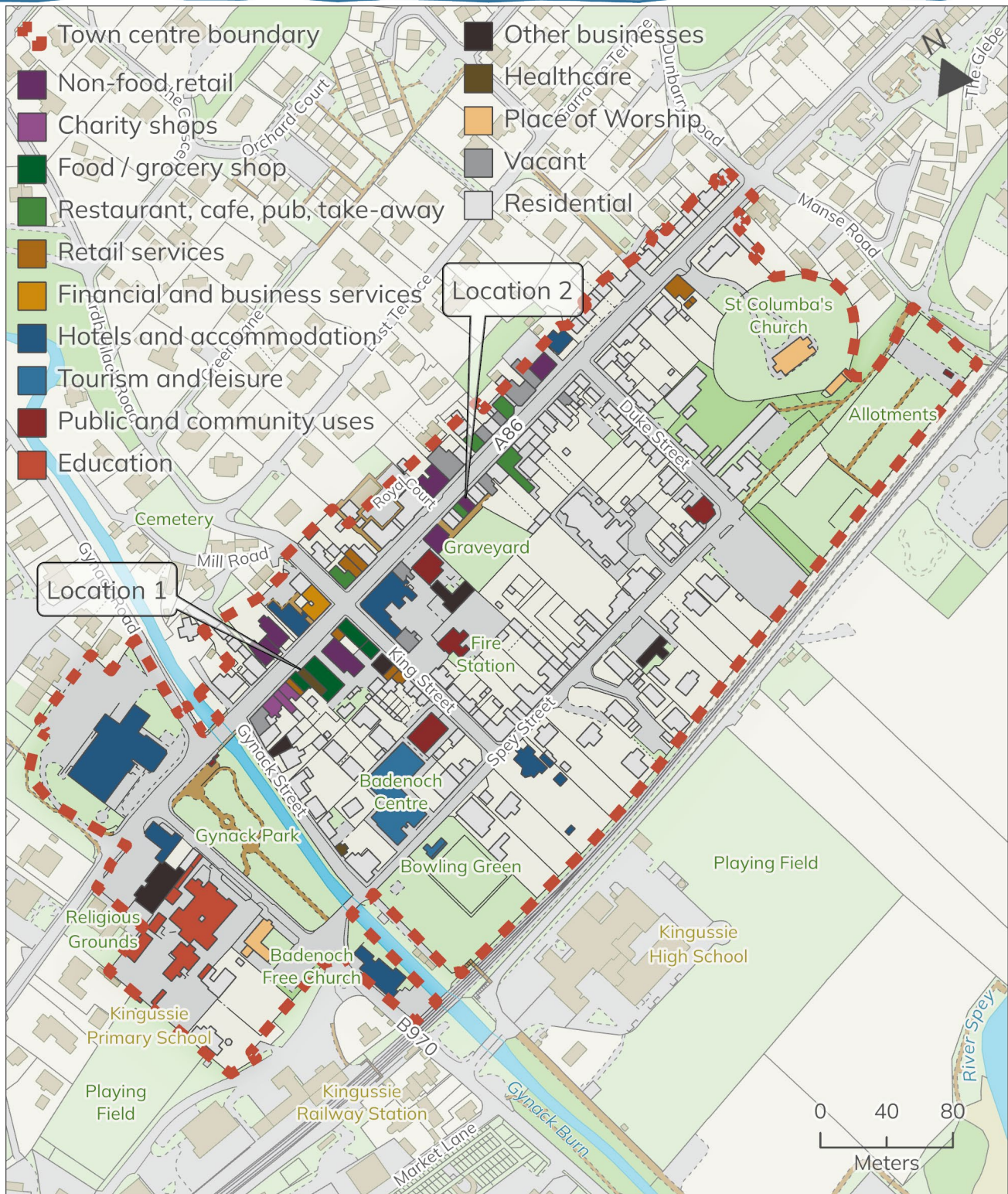- Surface water flooding.
- Vacant premises.

Figure 74 Kingussie town centre uses and pedestrian count locations, August 2023.

Reproduced by permission of Ordnance Survey on behalf of HMSO. © Crown copyright and database right 2023. All rights reserved. Ordnance Survey Licence number 100040965 Cairngorms National Park Authority.

Newtonmore

Newtonmore is a village which lies on the western edge of the National Park, around 3 miles southwest of Kingussie and approximately 17 miles southwest of Aviemore. It is a popular destination for anglers and grouse shooting tourists. It is also home to the Highland Folk Museum which is popular with visitors in the summer season. The area also hosts the Wild Cat Trail and Wild Cat Experience and there is a dedicated Wildcat Centre in the town centre. Surrounding the town there are also a number of bike and walking trails. It also has a long linear village centre typical of the area with a strong historic character. It has a population of just over 1,000[6].

Town Centre Businesses

In Newtonmore the majority (73%) of the buildings within the town centre boundary are designated for residential use (Figure 75). This represents a significantly different town centre composition compared to Aviemore (Figure 1) where the majority of premises in the town centre are designated for business use, and to a lesser degree but just as significant difference from to Grantown on Spey and Ballater where the distribution is more equally weighted. In Newtonmore proportionally 86% of the non-residential premises are independent retailers – representing 13 premises.
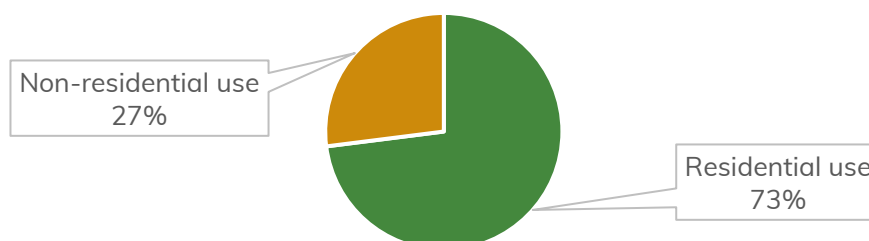

Figure 75 Proportion of buildings within the town centre boundary used for residential use compared to non-residential use in Newtonmore in 2023.

Figure 76 shows the largest proportion of premises for non-residential use in Newtonmore are recorded as restaurants, cafes, pubs and take-aways and hotels and accommodation both 28% (representing 4 establishments each). Food and grocery shops make up 7% with the remaining 37% of the non-residential premises comprising of retail services (1), vacant properties (1), non-food retail (1), other businesses (1) and public and community uses (13% but only equating to two units – the town hall and public toilets). It should be noted that there are a far lower number of buildings within the town of Newtonmore with a much higher proportion of buildings designated as

---

[6] Understanding Scottish Places, http://www.usp.scot/

residential dwellings meaning the actual numbers of each type of business are relatively low, thus meaning the proportional figures have less significance than some of the other towns.
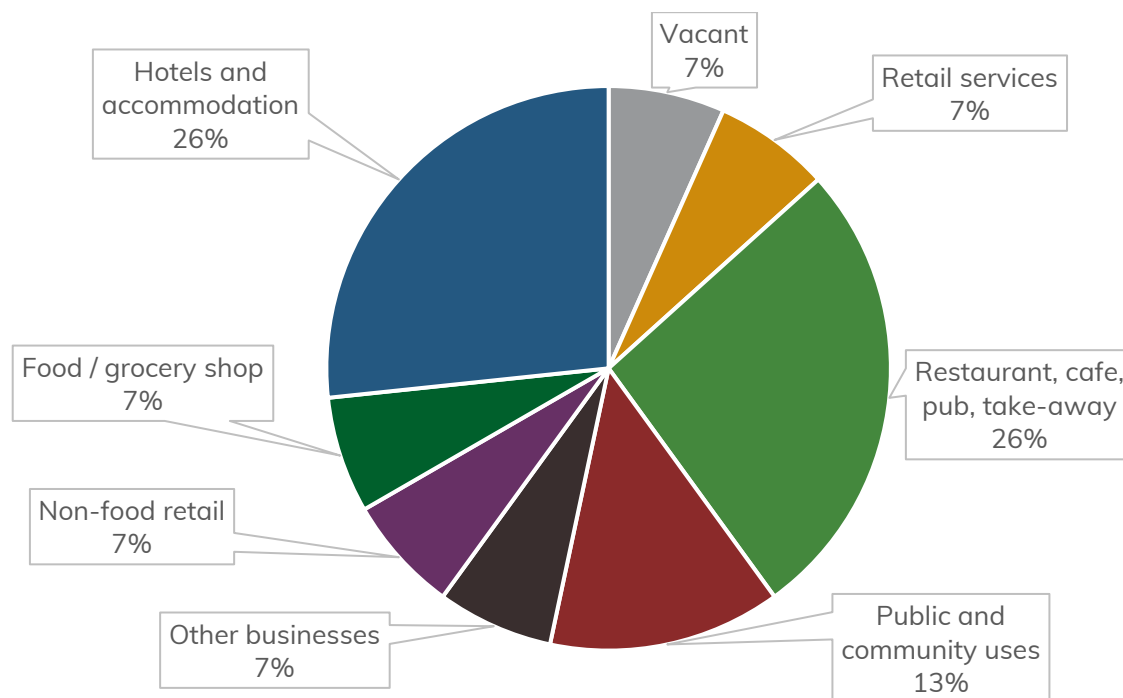

Figure 76 Composition of town centre premises with a non-residential use in Newtonmore, August 2023.

Composition of town centre business

Newtonmore is by far the smallest town in terms of numbers of businesses with only 14 businesses operating in the town centre. This makes meaningful analysis difficult in terms of proportions attributed to each business type (Figure 78). Instead, it is better to talk directly in terms of number of businesses (Figure 77) to give a clearer picture of change. Overall, there has been little change in the composition of the town centre from 2016 – 2023.

The numbers of vacant properties have decreased from 3 in 2016 to 1 in 2023, however it should be noted there was 1 recorded in 2018, so any meaningful trend at this point is not evident. Hotels and accommodation and restaurant, cafes, pubs and take-away businesses have been fairly stable with the same figures reported for 2023 as 2016. Across all years three has been no-change in the number of food / grocery shops remaining constant at 1 (Figure 77).

Public and community uses have increased by one, and tourism and leisure decreased by one, with one extra other business type recorded (2016 - 2023). These small discrepancies may be changes occurring as a consequence to the recording method,

which with the introduction of spatial data capture should produce more accurate and consistent results going forward. Overall, there has been little change in the business composition, with the exception of vacant buildings, since 2016.
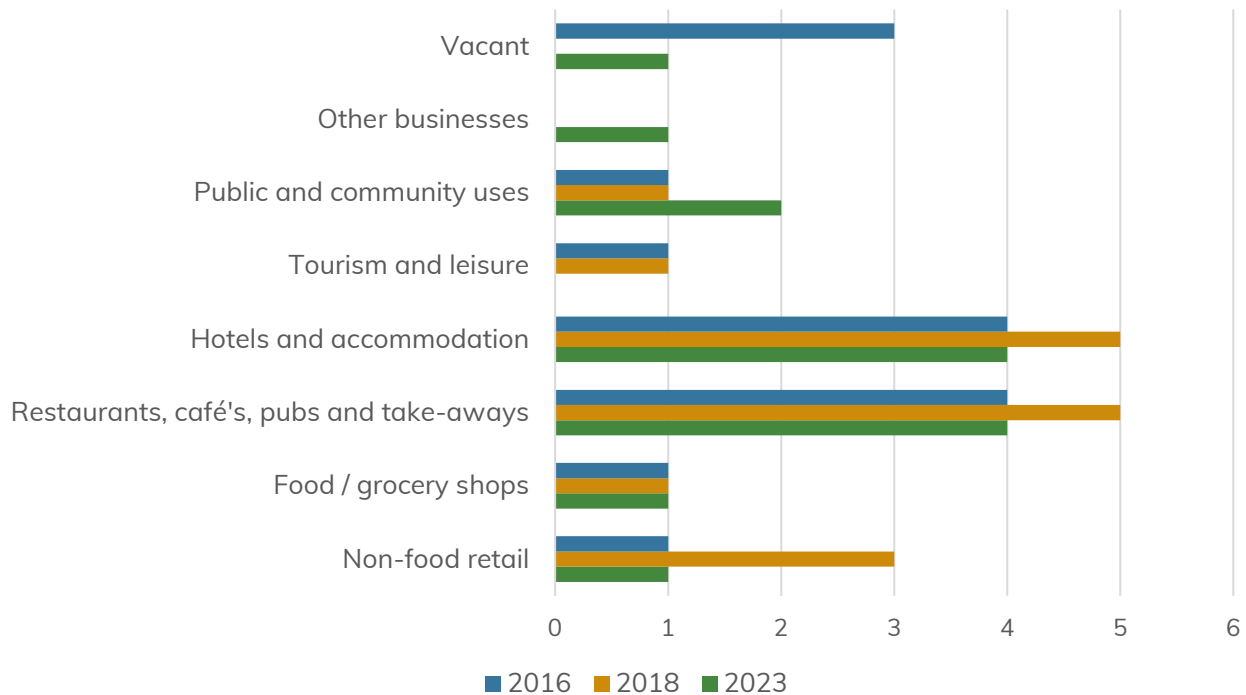

Figure 77 Number of business premises by business type in Newtonmore town centre for 2016, 2018 and 2023.
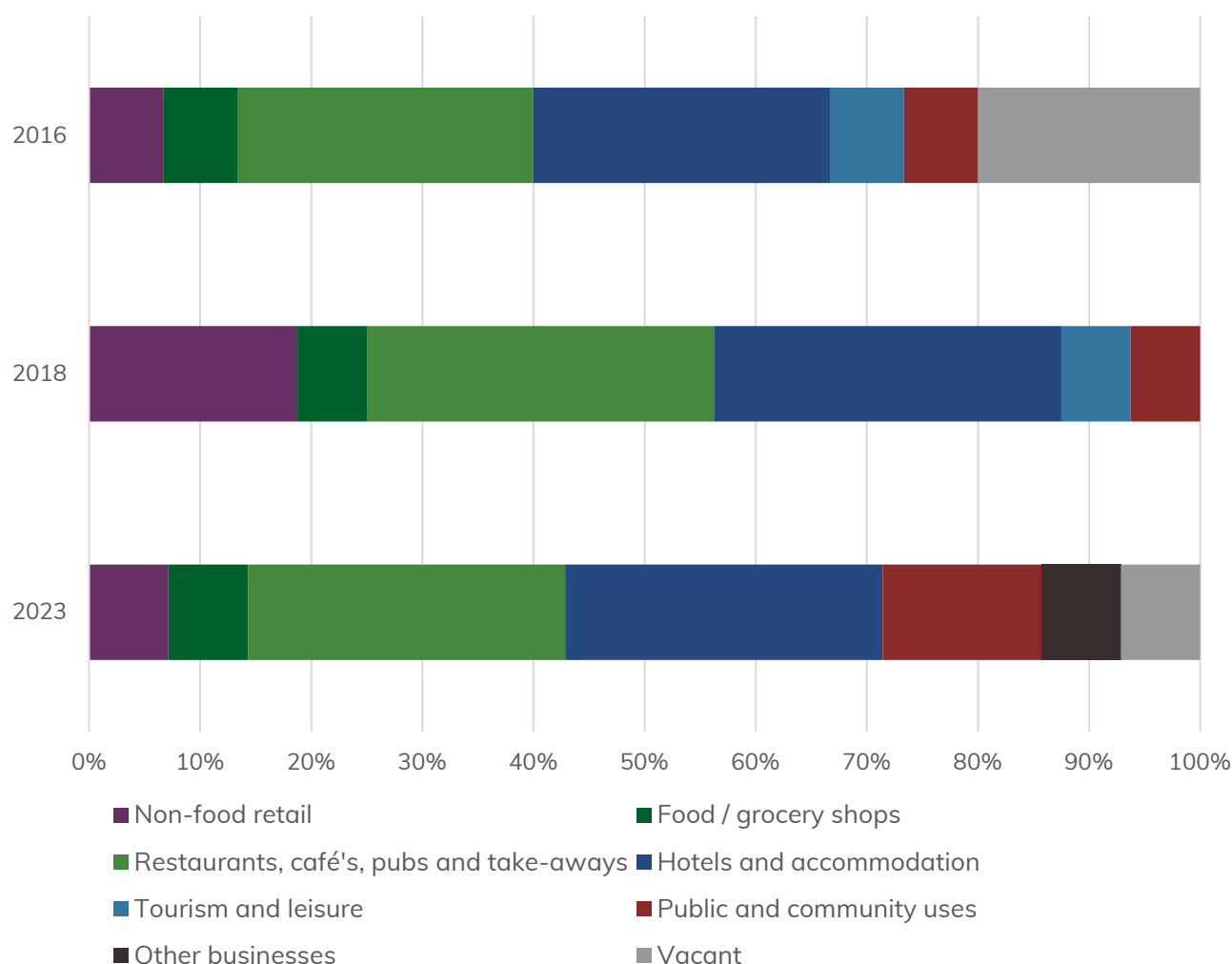
Figure 78 Composition of town centre businesses in Newtonmore town centre, 2016, 2018 and 2023.

Pedestrian count results

Newtonmore is considerably less busy in terms of pedestrian footfall that the other towns served in this report. Given the size of Newtonmore, pedestrian counts provide limited information. During the 2023 survey the busiest time at both locations was at 11am (Figure 79), which also differs from some of the larger town centres in the Cairngorms National Park (Aviemore and Grantown on Spey). Location one had significantly less footfall than location two. This can be attributed to the fact that location two was adjacent to the Post office which on the day represented the destination for much of the footfall passing that location. It was also next to the only pedestrian crossing in the town centre.

Less meaningful analysis can be drawn about the differences in pedestrian counts across the different times as in 2018 only data for 11am and 12pm was available. However, comparing the data for those two times at location one the footfall was

significantly higher in 2023 compared to 2018 and 2016 (Figure 80 and Figure 81). In 2023 across both locations the sum total of pedestrian footfall was recorded as 37, which represents a 43% increase on the 2016 figures (24 people).

The weather during the 2023 pedestrian count, in Newtonmore, was recorded as 17°C, overcast and warm, with evidence of recent rain (earlier that morning).
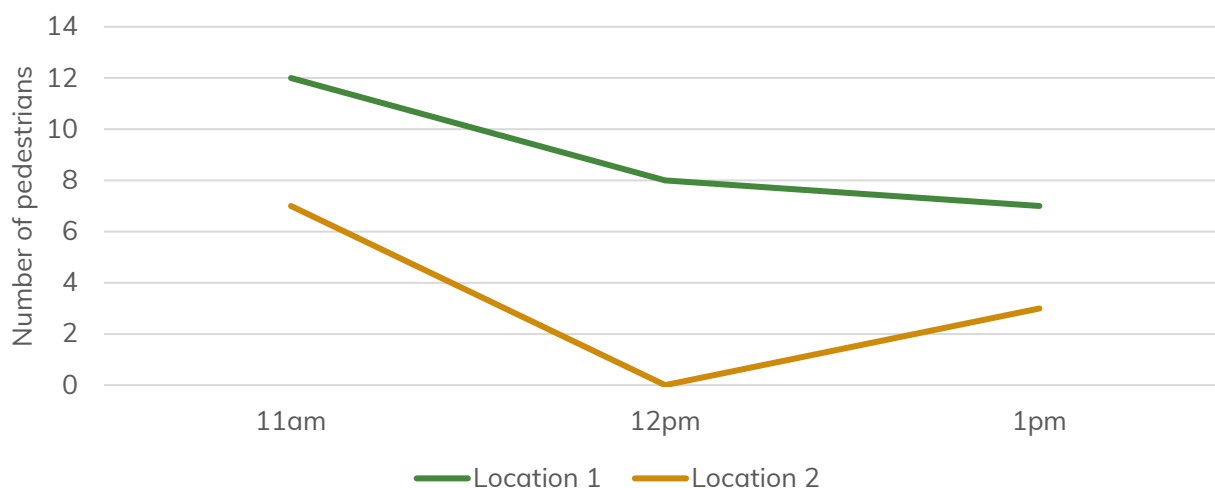

Figure 79 Pedestrian counts at locations 1 and 2 (see Figure 74) in Newtonmore town centre, August 2023.
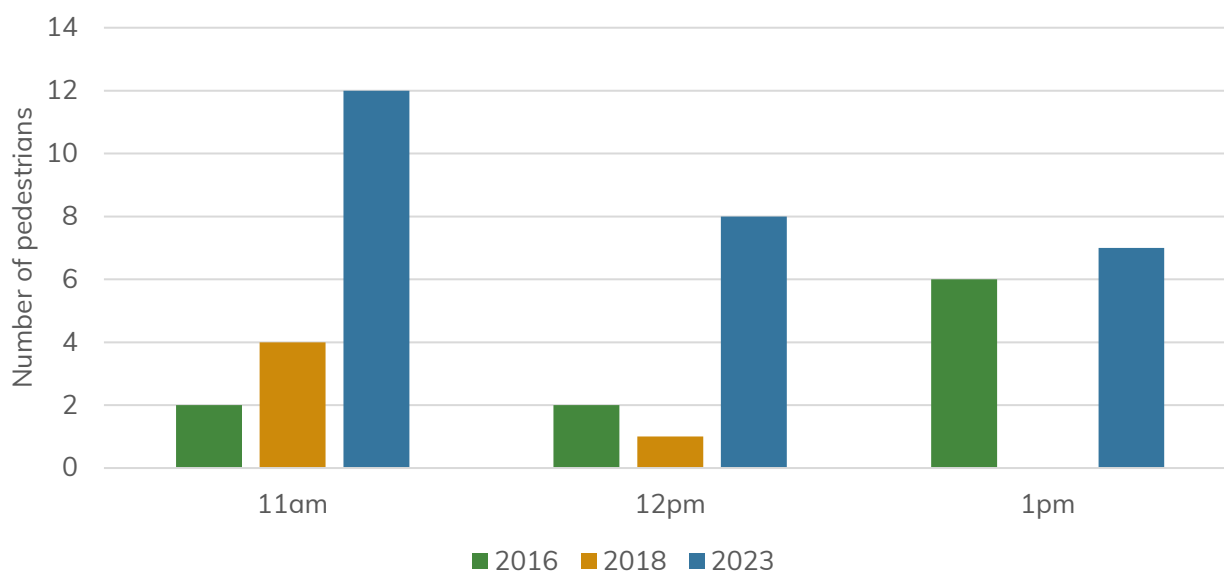

Figure 80 Comparison between pedestrian counts at location 1 in Newtonmore town centre in 2016, 2018 and 2023 at 11am, 12pm and 1pm.
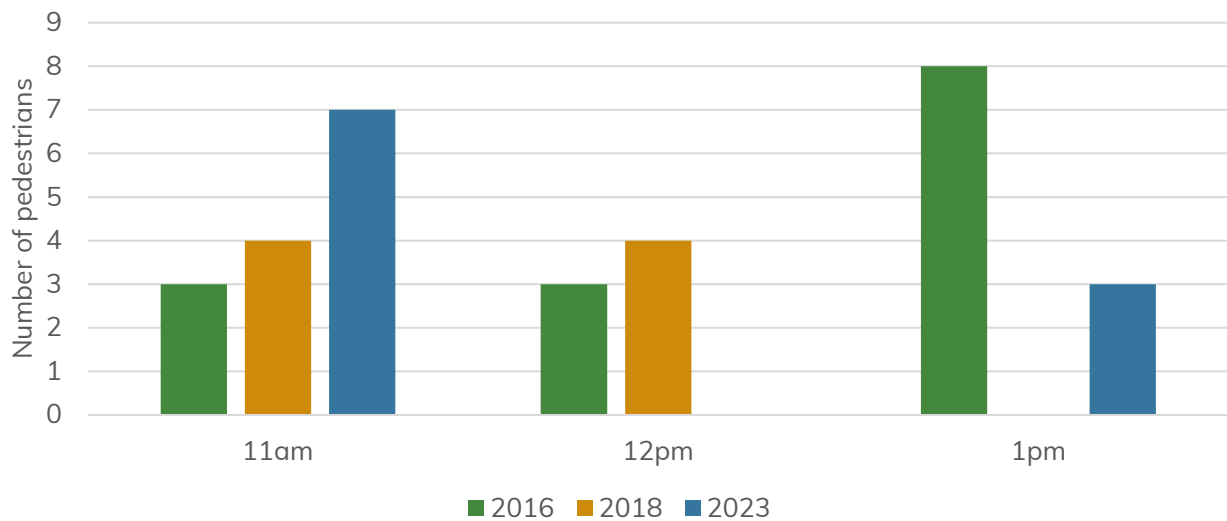
Figure 81 Comparison between pedestrian counts at location two in Grantown on Spey town centre in 2016, 2018 and 2023 at 11am, 12pm and 1pm.

Physical environment

The village centre is well maintained and clean with hanging baskets on traditional lamp posts and tub planters along the pavements. The village contains a linear street pattern with properties mostly on the street edge, and some more modern back-land development.

Figure 82 Newtonmore High Street – well maintained, tidy with planters and flowers along the pavement. August 2023.

There is easily identifiable defined 'High Street' with any shops being interspersed with residential properties (and in places, dominating). There are no traditional local shops

(for example butcher, baker), however there are a few tourist shops / cafes. There is a high occupancy rate although not many units available for commercial use. It was noted there was a lack of public bins available in the town centre, with the one at the community centre overflowing at the time of the visit.

Figure 83 Newtonmore Town Hall, with cash machine and public toilets.

There was a strong historic feel to the main street in the town centre, with traditional granite stone buildings with slate roofs. It was noted that plastic windows had been used to replace some timber frames and there was paint peeling on some of the frames and shop fronts but nothing to indicate decay. Generally, however the buildings were in good condition and looked well maintained.

Sense of place (distinctiveness and local identity)

There exists a strong sense of place and local identity, with most of the buildings being unaltered and retaining their original historic architectural features (with the exception of the previously mentioned isolated cases of plastic windows). There was a strong sense of rhythm to the facades facing the main street, with many retaining period features representing the local vernacular building style. From multiple vantage points there are good vistas and views of the surrounding countryside which strengthen the sense of place and siting of the town in the wider landscape. Similar to Kingussie, Grantown on Spey and Ballater, the retail offerings are from mainly independent businesses, giving the town a somewhat romanticised, idyllic feel given its setting.

Public realm and green infrastructure

The public realm is well maintained and cared for with a dedicated community space adjacent to the post office and a further one surrounding the war memorial. The community space next to the post office offers information boards relating to the town's

history, places to sit and planting and flowers which create a pleasant space (Figure 84).

Figure 84 Accessible, clean and welcoming community space in Newtonmore with information boards and places to stop and sit. Well located next to the Post Office (left)

Overall, there is an apparent sense of pride of place and community evident through the well-maintained flower planters, the streets are well maintained, clean and tidy. There are mature trees in the green space surrounding the war memorial (Figure 85), and places to sit offering usable green space in the heart of the town. Both spaces are well located and in close proximity to the school, businesses and community hall. The community hall is well used by the community for local events and gatherings.

Figure 85 War Memorial site in Newtonmore is well-maintained and offers accessible, pleasant green infrastructure in the town centre.

Accessibility: Ease of pedestrian movement

As with other centres in Badenoch, Newtonmore is based on a linear pattern which is easy to navigate. The main street in the town centre is relatively flat and even, with wide pavements that are in good condition (Figure 86). The pavements do get narrower at the

southern end of the main street, however given the low footfall in the town this is not seen to pose any significant risks to accessibility for the mobility impaired. There is one pedestrian crossing however this is adequate given the limited footfall and the facilities available. The crossing is well positioned next to key services such as the Community Hall, Post Office and pharmacy. There is good signage however is sometimes cluttered.

Figure 86 Wide accessible pavements make moving around Newtonmore easy for people of all ages and abilities. August 2023.

Traffic and Parking

There is constant through traffic however there is adequate parking on-street and parking areas. If overused the street parking could potentially distract from the sense of place created by the main 'High Street'. There are free public car parks just off the main street, just outwith the town centre boundary. Parking is also available at the Co-op with accessible parking. At the time of the visit traffic was very low and vehicles moved through the town centre within the 20mph speed limit. There is no electric vehicle charging available within the town centre boundary, though there are charging points available just a short distance outwith it.

Cycle facilities and ease of movements

There are no obvious links to cycle paths or facilities, despite it being on the National cycle route. No issues with pedestrian movement could be identified, however there was only one crossing, and no safe crossing available near the co-op which is also where a bus stop is located. The school is however connected to a 'safe route to school' with the pedestrian crossing suitably located.

Public toilets

The public toilets are located centrally, adjacent to the Community Hall, close to the Post Office and pharmacy. They appeared in adequate condition, however, could benefit from some maintenance, especially to the hand standing and exterior. They are located near the rear of the plot and would benefit from signage directing the public from the main street. The public realm surrounding them is poor, cluttered and un-cared for and as mentioned would benefit from improvements and regular maintenance.

Figure 87 Public toilets in Newtonmore are centrally located next to the Community Hall, look tired and access/ hardstanding would benefit from attention. August 2023.

Public transport

Newtonmore's town centre has limited public transport - bus services are limited which may not attract people to the village and the rail station is not within walking distance. During the site visit it was noted that the bus stop at the Co-op seemed busy and well used. Its location next to the Co-op is also beneficial for those using public transport to access the shop.

Signage and ease of navigation

Signage in the centre is adequate. There are information boards at key points and information about the town on display at the community space next to the Post office.

SWOT analysis

Overall, the Town Centre Health Check identified the following:

Strengths
- Strong historic character / architecture.
- High proportion of independent shops.
- Attractive public space in centre of high street and good street lighting.
- Streets well maintained and tidy, with attractive flower planting.
- Well maintained War Memorial and surrounding garden.

Weaknesses
- Lack of obvious cycling facilities.
- Shops are dispersed along the high street.
- Town centre boundary doesn't include the Post Office or pharmacy or parking serving the area.
- Limited signage to railway station, parking and none to public toilets.

Opportunities
- Future cycle path connection and opportunity to promote cycling in the town.
- Utilising other vacant shop fronts for aesthetic improvement – i.e. Art displays, window graphics.
- The disused/ vacant old bank could be used for either commercial or residential purposes.

Threats
- Infrequent transport services and train station some distance from the High Street.
- The Co-op is on the edge of the centre, drawing focus away from the High Street. It has own parking/bus stop etc, which potentially reduces footfall in the centre.
- Lack of dedicated cycle infrastructure could hinder move to active/ sustainable travel changes.
- On-street parking detracts from visual quality of street scape.
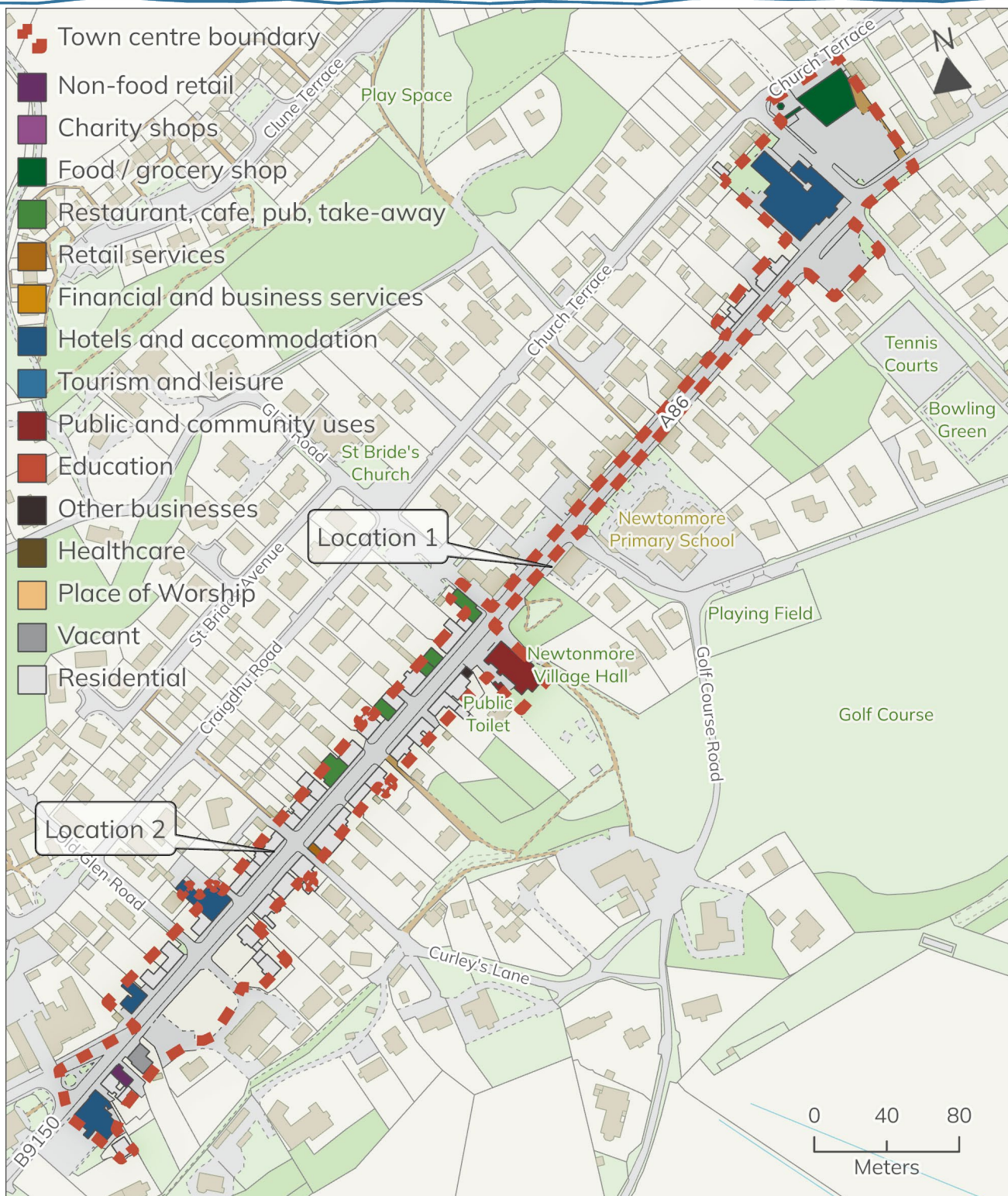
Figure 88 Newtonmore town centre uses and pedestrian count locations, August 2023.

Implications for Proposed Plan

Based on the evidence gathered in the assessment, this section provides a summary of the implications for the preparation of the Proposed Plan.

Vacant and derelict land and buildings

Vacant and derelict land and buildings should be appraised for allocation for various uses, including residential development to support the local need for housing. This will support National Planning Framework 4 Policy 27 of supporting an increase in the mix of town centre uses and supporting residential development on vacant or derelict sites. It will also meet Policy 9's requirement for local development plans to set out opportunities for the sustainable reuse of brownfield land including vacant and derelict land and empty buildings.

Electric vehicle charging

With the transition to electric vehicles, additional charging sites and / or infrastructure will be required and should be supported by the Proposed Plan.

Active travel infrastructure

The Proposed Plan should seek to support additional active travel infrastructure in town centres, for example cycle parking and changes to road layouts to support wheeling in the town centres, supporting National Planning Framework's strategy for creating sustainable places.

The Proposed Plan should reflect any local and emerging traffic and parking schemes by community groups in the town centres that support better pedestrian movement and minimise the negative effects of vehicle traffic.

Strathspey Railway

The Proposed Plan should support the development of the extension of the railway from Aviemore to Grantown, supporting the visitor economy.

Town centre boundaries

This report makes the following recommendations to review to the current town centre boundaries of the following settlements:

Grantown on Spey

An extension of the town centre boundary to include the library and adjoining car park and toilets, as well as the Garth Hotel and public gardens adjoining the square. The rational for this is that the current boundary does not include the whole square, which is to many residents and visitors seen as the main focus if the town. The library and gardens opposite form an important part of the public space and amenities of the town.

Kingussie

A review of the boundary to reduce its size given the high proportion of residential premises in the southern half of the current area.

Newtonmore

An extension of the boundary to include the buildings adjacent to the Community Hall, including the primary school and pharmacy, two key building uses in the town centre.

Further evidence gathering

The work undertaken for this report will inform the Evidence Report for the next Local Development Plan. Further uses and complementary evidence gathering may include:

- Informing the preparation of community action plans and local place plans.
- Informing work to define 20-minute neighbourhoods.
- Informing business and industrial land audits.
- Provide baseline information on healthy eating options to respond to national Planning Framework 4 Policy 23.
- Inform development management decisions about future retail development in the town centres, when making decisions in accordance with to national Planning Framework 4 Policy 28.

The next Town Centre Health Check is scheduled to be carried out in the summer of 2025.

Appendix : Supporting documents

2018 Town Centre Health Check

Found in Appendix 2 of the Cairngorms National Park Local Development Plan 2020
Proposed Local Development Plan Evidence Paper: Rural Development – Part 3
Economic Development January 2019
Available at: https://cairngorms.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/CD014-Economic-Development-Evidence-Report.pdf

A new Future for Scotland's Town Centres, Scottish Government, 2021
Available at: https://www.gov.scot/publications/new-future-scotlands-town-centres/

National Planning Framework 4
Available at: https://www.gov.scot/publications/national-planning-framework-4/documents/

Town Centres Toolkit
Available at: https://towntoolkit.scot/streets/resources

Grantown Conservation Area Appraisal
A character appraisal was carried out in 2018-19 undertaken on behalf of The Highland Council.
Available at:
https://her.highland.gov.uk/api/LibraryLink5WebServiceProxy/FetchResourceFromStub/1-2-2-5-0-8_d88f5522f651305-122508_b8de4120f7f71fd.pdf

Grantown Conservation Area Masterplan
Post consultation draft available at:
https://her.highland.gov.uk/api/LibraryLink5WebServiceProxy/FetchResource/123983
Awaiting final publication of approved Plan.

Town Centre Action Plan 2013
Scottish Government's response to the National Review of Town Centres.
Available at: https://www.gov.scot/publications/town-centre-action-plan-scottish-government-response/

Scotland's National Outcomes

Available at: https://nationalperformance.gov.scot/national-outcomes

United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

Available at: https://www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals