

WESTHILL TOWN CENTRE DEVELOPMENT BRIEF



Planning and Environmental Services
March 2005

1. Purpose and Proposals

1.1 The purpose of this development brief is to provide guidance for the redevelopment of the Westhill Town Centre. This brief seeks to promote a comprehensive approach to a high standard of design and material quality in buildings and spaces; ensure safety and security; provide equal access for all; encourage environmental sustainability and provide effective long – term maintenance in order to retain quality of character. This brief considers the redevelopment of the town centre as a single entity, albeit that the redevelopment will be in phases.

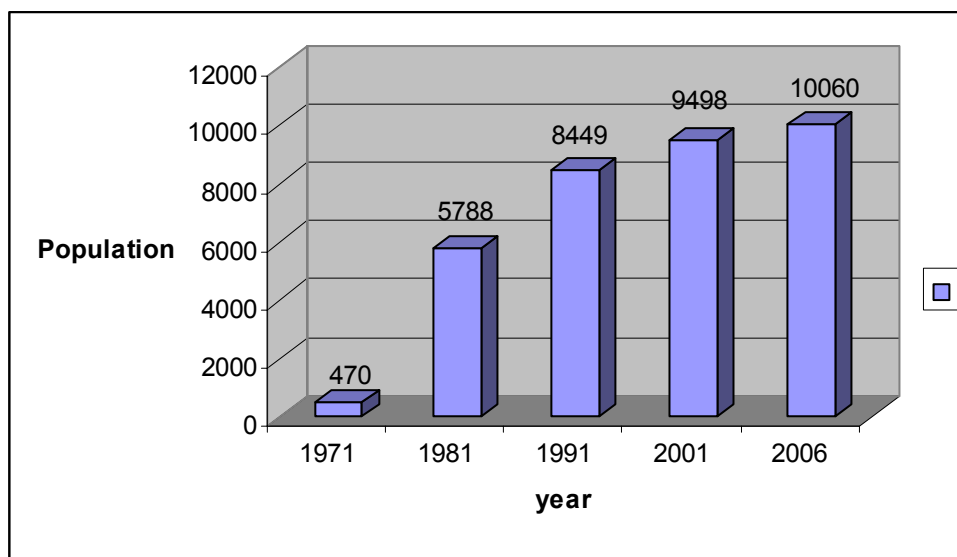
1.2 There is substantial community support for the redevelopment of the town centre. Michael Gilmour Associates and Aberdeenshire Council have worked along side the Westhill Residents Planning for Real Initiative in involving the community in this project. Public consultations on a feasibility study were held on the 26 April and 6 December 2004. A Planning For Real event was held in November 2004. These consultations lead to the production of the “Westhill Commercial Feasibility Study: Analysis Report August 2004” by the Westhill Residents Planning for Real Group and the follow up “Westhill Town Centre Planning and Development Framework Brief in October 2004”, by Aberdeenshire Council. Both of these documents provide background information for this brief.

1.3 The proposed redevelopment will include high density mixed uses, incorporating retail, leisure and residential uses. Preference is for one planning application that would cover the whole site and its uses.

2. Planning History and Context

2.1 Westhill is in effect the only planned new town in Aberdeenshire, having been created in 1968, out of the existing villages of Westhill and Elrick, as an overspill town for Aberdeen. Westhill shopping centre was planned in the mid – 1970s for completion in five phases to suit the towns growing population. Work started with an arcade of nine shop units, plus associated offices above which was completed in 1980; Phase 2 included the bank at the eastern end of the centre, plus a return leg of seven more shop units; Phase 3 marked the construction of a supermarket, with four additional shop units, and associated car parking; Phases 4 and 5 subsequently added small extensions. The centre was designed by the Cunningham Glass Partnership in the prevailing “rationalised vernacular” style of the 1970’s, using concrete block work walls with concrete interlocking tiles on monopitch roofs.

2.2 The population has grown rapidly over that time, from 470 in 1971 to 5788 in 1981, and from 8449 in the 1991 to 9498 in the 2001 census.



2.3 The current Structure and Local Plans (see below) provide for an expected continuing high rate of growth for Westhill. These plans allocate some 400 houses for the period up to 2006 and a further 500 houses in the period 2006 – 2010. Growth to a similar scale is anticipated for the 5-year period beyond that.

2.4 The Finalised Aberdeenshire Local Plan shows the designated town centre, which includes the site covered by this brief. The Westhill town centre, in the Local Plan, has a project area (P10) proposal attached to it, identifying the need for a town centre master plan. This brief would fulfil that proposal.

2.5 The Westhill Town Centre Feasibility Study and the follow up Westhill Town Centre Planning and Development Framework Brief both acknowledge Westhill's importance as a sub-regional service and shopping centre, particularly for the A944 Aberdeen to Alford corridor.

3 Development Plan Polices and National Guidelines

3.1 Redevelopment of the town centre will have to take account of NPPG 8 (revised 1998) "Town Centres and Retailing". NPPG 8 gives guidance to the protection and enhancement of the vitality and viability of town centres. The guidance states that diversity of uses and mixed use development should be encouraged, to offer variety in the town centre and to keep the centre active throughout the day and night. NPPG 8 also advises that when a town centre has been identified for redevelopment that a "strategic approach should consider the centre as a whole". Planning Advice Notes, PAN 52 Planning in Small Towns and PAN 59 Improving Town Centres, set out in more detail the issues in NPPG 8. PAN 52 aims to reinforce the character and identity of town centres. PAN 59 underlines the importance of promoting lively, vibrant and viable town

centres, where people can live, feel safe and business can prosper with opportunities for new activities.

3.2 The Finalised Aberdeenshire Local Plan (ALP) defines the town centre, taking in the existing shopping centre, the former medical centre, vets, police station, church, library and vacant land (a recent application on the site for a retail development has been approved). The Structure Plan, NEST Policy 15, Retailing and Town Centres, favours new retail facilities being provided in town centres where there are opportunities to enhance existing facilities which will serve and help connect communities. NEST Identifies scope for improving convenience and comparison shopping provisions within Aberdeenshire towns and the importance of protecting the vitality and viability of town centres.

A number of development policies and appendices are relevant, namely:

Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire Structure Plan (NEST)

Policy 11	General Housing Considerations
Policy 13	Developer Contributions
Policy 15	Retailing and Town Centres
Policy 21	Design

Finalised Aberdeenshire Local Plan

Policy Gen\1	Sustainability Principles
Policy Gen\2	The Layout, Siting and design of new development
Policy Gen\3	Developer Contributions
Policy Gen\4	Infill development.
Policy Gen\5	Landscape Standards
Policy Gen\11	Redevelopment and Mixed Use Areas
Policy Gen\12	Project Areas
Policy Emp\5	Defined Town Centres
Policy Emp\6	Retail Development in the Larger Settlements – The Sequential Test
Policy Emp\8	Office Development
Policy Inf\2	Parking, Servicing and Accessibility
Policy Inf\3	Access for the less mobile
Policy Inf\5	Additional Drainage Standards: Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SUDS)
Policy Inf\9	Community Facilities

4. Town Centre Planning and Development issues

4.1 This development brief seeks to address the following issues:

- 1) A lack of retail diversity.

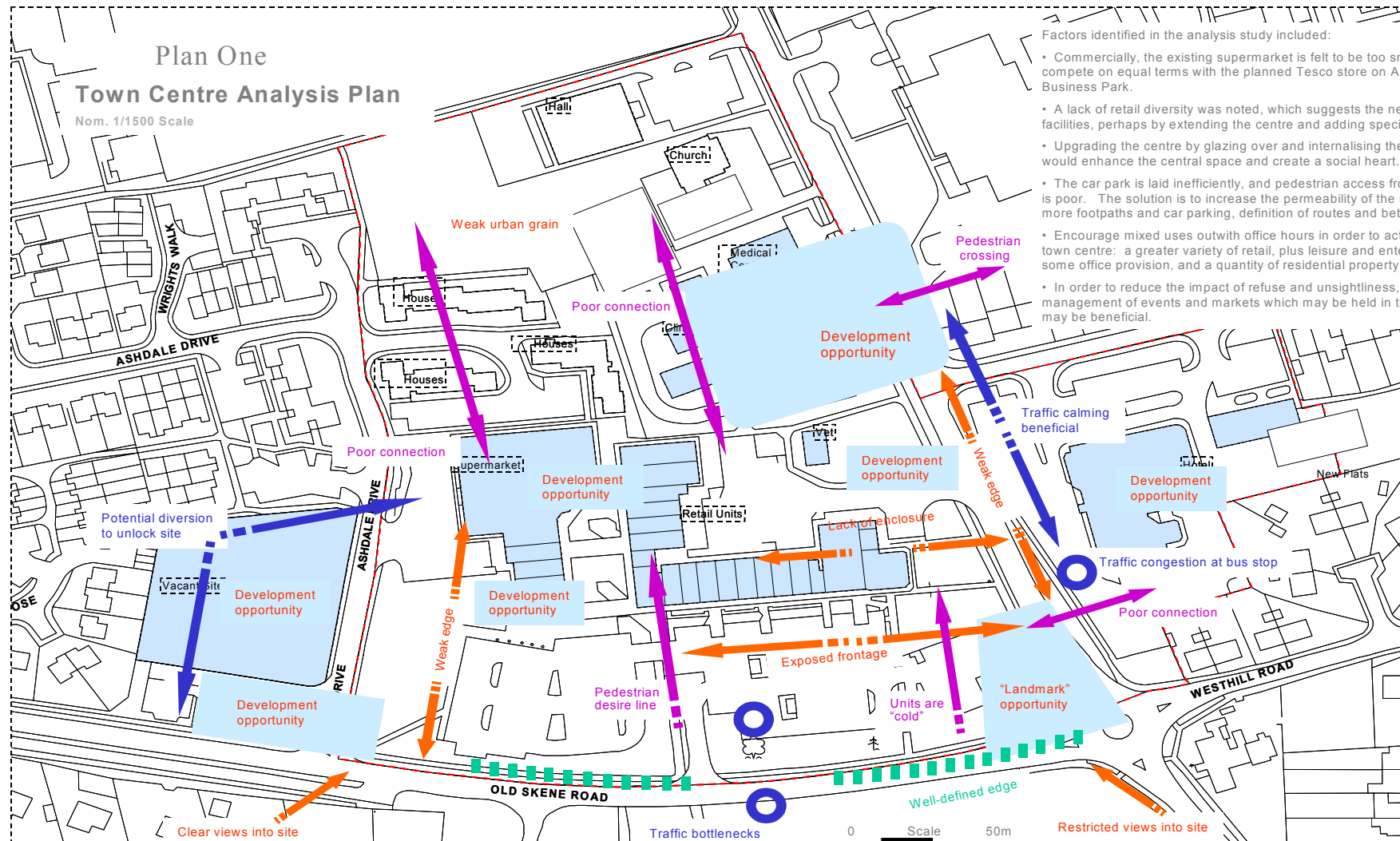
- 2) Centre requires upgrading. Existing buildings seem “tired”. There is no clear retail frontage and courtyard is cold and unwelcoming.
- 3) The car park is not laid out in terms of a modern shopping centre car park, and pedestrian access from the north is poor.
- 4) The town centre seems to close down in the evening. The centre has no “out of office hours” activities. Poor lighting and shutters makes the centre look unsafe.
- 5) Improve traffic management, especially at the car park entrance.
- 6) Comprehensive redevelopment of the supermarket is needed, which will lead the regeneration of the whole site.
- 7) Provide community facilities such as cafes, drop-in centre and crèche, in addition to retail uses.
- 8) Pedestrian routes should be improved, and pedestrians should have priority over cars.
- 9) Westhill’s town centre is not a traditional centre and does not have a high street, square or distinctive town hall to give it an identity as a town centre.
- 10) Improve landscaping, especially of “dead” areas, to form sympathetic open space.

4.2 Retail study

The 2004 Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire Retail Study identifies Westhill town centre as providing a key retail provision for Westhill and rural areas to the west. Over the past 5 years vacancies within the town centre have remained at or close to zero. Currently the turnover rates are considered average to above average for convenience and comparison goods. Although the appearance of the town centre is a bit “tired” it has good vitality and viability. The study forecasts an increase of 27% in comparison spend and 13% in convenience spend over the period to 2011.

There is a proposal to develop a superstore on an out of centre site in Westhill. If nothing is done to improve the town centre, the retail study shows that the turnover of the centre is anticipated to decline substantially. However, this proposed out of centre superstore at Arnhall Business Park, and a redeveloped town centres are expected to draw on this anticipated increase in retail expenditure, as well as claw back existing leakage to Aberdeen City.

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Factors identified in the analysis study included:

- Commercially, the existing supermarket is felt to be too small to compete on equal terms with the planned Tesco store on Arnhall Business Park.
- A lack of retail diversity was noted, which suggests the need to add facilities, perhaps by extending the centre and adding speciality shops.
- Upgrading the centre by glazing over and internalising the forecourt, would enhance the central space and create a social heart.
- The car park is laid inefficiently, and pedestrian access from the north is poor. The solution is to increase the permeability of the study area: more footpaths and car parking, definition of routes and better lighting.
- Encourage mixed uses outwith office hours in order to activate the town centre: a greater variety of retail, plus leisure and entertainment, some office provision, and a quantity of residential property.
- In order to reduce the impact of refuse and unsightliness, active management of events and markets which may be held in the atrium may be beneficial.

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5 The Site analysis

5.1 The site is within the defined town centre identified in the Finalised Aberdeenshire Local Plan. The town centre is located on the eastern side of the current footprint of the settlement. Although the buildings are approaching 25 years old, the town centre is still seen as being very relevant to the town. The site (shown at Plan One) contains the supermarket, 20 small retail units (all occupied), Royal Bank of Scotland, service yard, car park, Veterinary Surgery, and Medical Centre and clinic. The site is bound by Old Skene Road to the south, Ashdale Drive to the west, Westhill Drive to the east, and residential development, the church and hall to the north, with residential development and schools beyond on three sides and the Arnhall Moss Local Nature Reserve/ Denman Park to the south. (See Plan Two below)

5.2 The urban form of the defined town centre is a contemporary mix of single and two storey 1970's and 1980's buildings, designed specifically for retail and town centre uses. The density of buildings is low for a town centre. The lower floors of the shopping centre are fully occupied, with vacant office space above. The medical centre neighbours the shopping centre to the south and is built to a similar style to the shopping centre, however due to poor pedestrian links each town centre use appears very separate. This form of the adjoining residential development is medium to low density in largely rectangular layouts and suburban in character.

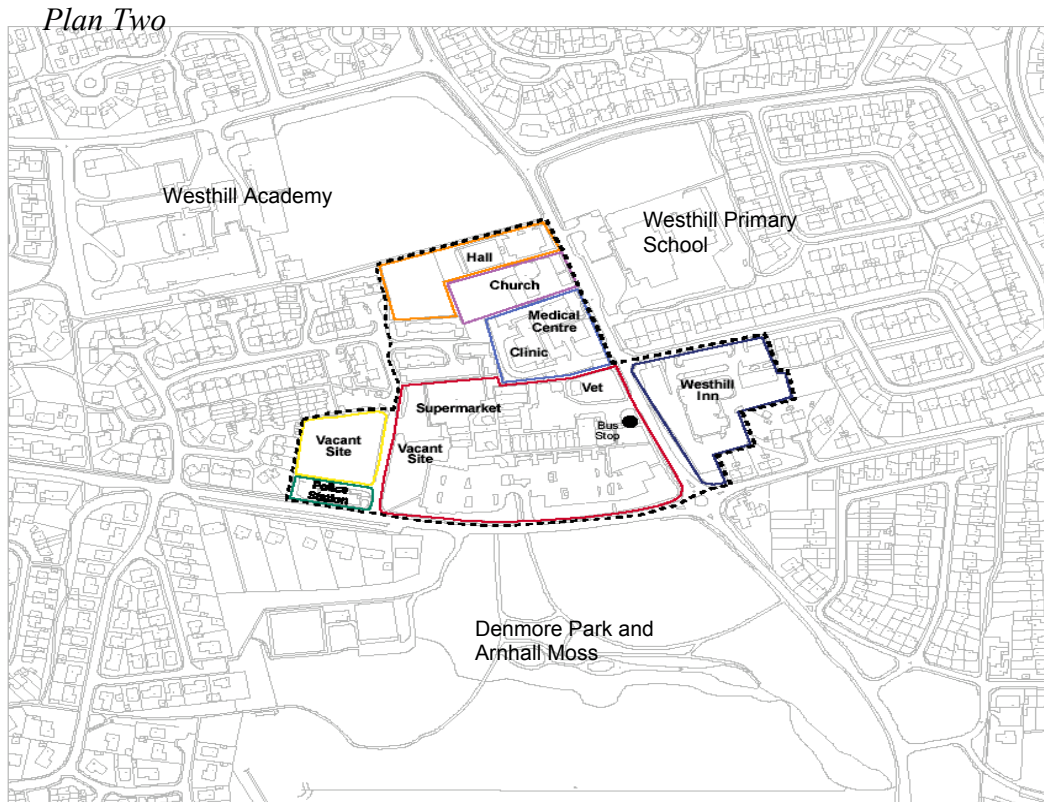
5.3 The site is accessible by all forms of transport. Westhill Drive is on the main bus service from Aberdeen to Westhill, with buses running every 20 minutes into the City Centre, as well as several other minor services running to smaller settlements. The large car park at the front of the shopping centre allows for vehicular access to the site. There is only one entrance and exit for the car park which can cause traffic problems on Old Skene Road and the roundabout at the junction of Old Skene Road and Westhill Drive. There are cycle lanes in place along Westhill Drive and Old Skene Road. The site is accessible by pedestrians, however there is no footpath in place integrating the shopping centre to the other town centre services. Lighting in and around the shopping centre is poor making the area unappealing for pedestrians at night.

5.4 The site itself has no nature designation. However, immediately south of the site there is Denman Park and Arnhall Moss. Denman Park has no nature designation on it, however it is protected as an open area in the Finalised Aberdeenshire Local Plan. Arnhall Moss is a designated as a Local Nature reserve with a significant area of lowland raised peat bog.

5.5 The current ownership of the existing shopping centre is under third party freehold, Sommerfield are currently the leaseholders of the supermarket and 20 retail units within the town centre. The medical centre and clinic are under NHS Grampian ownership. The medical centre is to

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be relocated to new premises at Arnhall Business Park, which are currently under construction. The medical centre within the town centre will therefore become vacant within the next few months. Plan Two indicates ownership of the town centre.



Westhill Town Centre Planning and Development Framework Brief
Land Ownership Plan

- Police station, Grampian police.
- Sommerfield leasehold
- Queens Road Development Company & Carlton Rock
- Ashdale Hall, Aberdeenshire Council Property
- Skene Medical Group, Grampian Healthcare Trust
- Trinity Church, Skene Parish Church, Church of Scotland
- Westhill Inn
- Town Centre Boundary

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6. Development proposals

6.1 This development brief proposes that the redevelopment of Westhill Town Centre should include high density mixed uses, incorporating retail, leisure and residential uses in accordance with national planning policy guidance and the Westhill Town Centre Planning and Development Framework Brief 2004. A single planning application for the redevelopment of the whole site identified in Plan 3 is required.

6.2 General approach

6.2.1 Resource Efficiency – The existing buildings on the site are dated and the current layout is not suitable for the modern needs of a rapidly expanding Westhill. Existing building should be retained where possible. The existing location of the car park is suitable but its function should be reassessed, particularly to improve pedestrian flow.

6.2.2 Social Sustainability – As this site is within the defined town centre, improved pedestrian links within the site and to the surrounding areas are encouraged. Leisure facilities could be incorporated into the redevelopment of the town centre promoting, social sustainability.

6.2.3 Landscaping - There are small areas of decorative planting within the shopping centre and a strip of tree and shrubs on the site boundary. Its assumed that the small areas of planting within the shopping centre will be lost during the redevelopment, and will be replaced in the context of the new design for the town centre. The strip of trees and shrubs should be retained. Additional landscaping is encouraged when the site is redeveloped, contributing to the area's sense of place.

6.3 In order to address the planning and development issues described in Section 4, the redevelopment of the town centre requires to provide the following development structure:

- 1) High density mixed use development including retail, leisure, and residential
- 2) Better public spaces, providing sheltered areas and walkways.
- 3) Improved retail layout, drawing shoppers to all areas
- 4) Better lighting within the shopping centre and footpaths leading to the town centre.
- 5) Improved pedestrian links
- 6) More active town centre, both during the day and night.
- 7) Improved security systems, which don't leave the centre looking cold and lifeless after the shops have closed.
- 8) Landmark/focal point giving the site the identity of a town centre that can be seen on the approach into Westhill.
- 9) Improved car parking, allowing safer pedestrian route through the car park
- 10) Improved service yard, servicing all the retail units.
- 11) Improved public transport accessibility.
- 12) Improve access to town centre by cyclists.

6.4 Distribution of Land Uses

A number of options were considered for the town centre redevelopment. The layout shown on Plan Three is the preferred option. An alternative layout, attached to this brief as plan Six in appendix 1, and could be considered a for the town centre redevelopment.

Retail

As this site is within the defined town centre, retail uses are required. A higher density of retail units would be essential to maintain and enhance the vitality and viability of the town centre, this can be achieved by extending the shopping centre into the existing medical site. Introducing a wider variety of floor spaces, with the opportunity to combine retail units, would attract a wider selection of retailers, for example clothing stores, café etc to the town centre.

Having an anchor store within the centre would greatly improve attraction to the town centre and draw people to other shops in the centre.

Developing an atrium (see Plan Three), would allow the option of having small retail karts, these could be used for “start up” business for retailers who do not require an actual shop.

There may be potential, at a later date, to develop the second floor of the shopping centre to create further retail opportunities or accommodate appropriate town uses. It has the potential to be an open plan space, second floor of mixed uses, including retail, restaurants, office or leisure.

Commercial

As described above, there is opportunity to create office space on the second floor of the shopping centre, or in the proposed landmark building to the south east of the site.

Residential

Encouraging high-density residential use in the form of flats above the shops or around the edges of the anchor store, as an integral part of a mixed use development, would help keep the town centre active after office hours. This brief does not propose a stand alone residential scheme within the town centre, but an integrated development similar to what is shown on Plans Three and Six. This layout skims the retail uses, preventing live frontages on Westhill Drive, which may create traffic problems. Providing flats within the town centre could provide rented housing, of which there is a lack in Westhill.

Leisure

There is the potential to provide the community with additional leisure facilities. These may include a gym, small sports hall, youth club, and other similar facilities. This would achieve the brief’s aim to keep the centre active after office hours.

Atrium

The favoured option is to concentrate the building around an atrium. This would produce a defined gateway, emphasising the sense of arrival into an urban space. The introduction of a glazed canopy over the whole courtyard area, and the upgrading of the centre's groundscape into an internal floor would improve the weather protection of the space.

There is also an opportunity to create a social space, which could host social events or local markets. Creating this covered shopping atrium would also enhance the environment of the centre by improving its ambience, micro-climate, security and lighting.

Gateway/landmark

Proposals for the redevelopment of the town centre should be designed to add visual interest and improve the town centre environment. The roundabout at the junction of Westhill Drive and Old Skene Road is the "gateway" to the town centre, yet it lacks strongly-defined edges or markers: therefore extending a building, a line of planting or landscaping, or creating an edge running southwards from the existing shopping centre could work to create a landmark and signal the centre of Westhill.

Particular attention should be paid to the need to enhance the main approaches to the centre, and to reinforce the visual significance of the "gateway", by means of creating a landmark building. This could take the form of a tower, perhaps three to four storeys high, and perhaps crowned with a clock or similar.

6.5 Other Development Issues

6.5.1 Strategic Landscaping

Landscaping should be used to strengthen the main pedestrian routes into the centre area, and also to screen areas of car parking. The existing shelter belt along the site's southern edge should be retained, but the eastern edge should be reconfigured, to make more effective use of space, and allow more efficient car parking. Hedgerows and shrubbery should be used to block cold winds in the car park, and these will also help to reinforce the linear pedestrian routes through the car park, and also serve to break it down visually.

The plants should be low maintenance, forming a combination of visual screen and shelter belt: the existing Scots Pine trees are effective, and should be reinforced with additional planting, and combined with deciduous trees such as Hazel, Silver Birch and Rowan, to provide a variety of shading, appearance and screening from winds. Low-growing ground cover plants would be appropriate although regular litter-picking should be carried out to ensure there are no "litter traps".

6.5.2 Lighting

Lighting intensity should be used as a means to attract users through the town centre, since people are drawn to comparatively brighter areas. Any lighting scheme should be considered over the centre as a whole, and this should maintain a contrast between the principal and subsidiary spaces; shops compared to common areas.

Street and area lights should be provided throughout to a level of 20 lux, as recommended for use with CCTV camera systems.

6.5.3 Retaining Buildings

The existing buildings, although somewhat dated, are structurally sound and should be retained where possible.

6.5.4 Car parking

Although the use of green travel is promoted, car parking will be required on this site. The existing car park should be retained, with scope to extend and reassess the layout to incorporate traffic calming measures and pedestrian links.

Plan Four

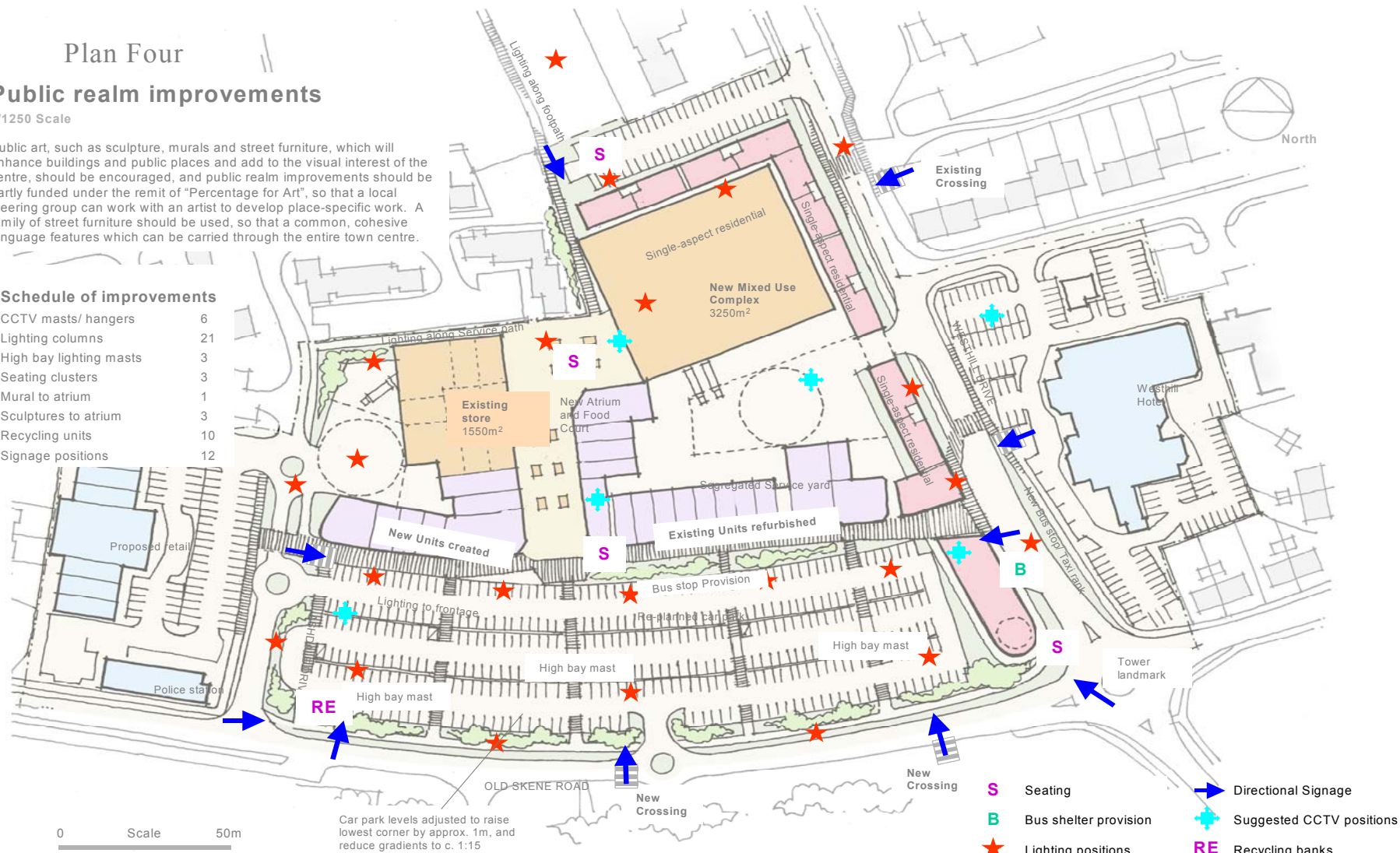
Public realm improvements

1/1250 Scale

Public art, such as sculpture, murals and street furniture, which will enhance buildings and public places and add to the visual interest of the centre, should be encouraged, and public realm improvements should be partly funded under the remit of "Percentage for Art", so that a local steering group can work with an artist to develop place-specific work. A family of street furniture should be used, so that a common, cohesive language features which can be carried through the entire town centre.

Schedule of improvements

CCTV masts/ hangers	6
Lighting columns	21
High bay lighting masts	3
Seating clusters	3
Mural to atrium	1
Sculptures to atrium	3
Recycling units	10
Signage positions	12



- S Seating
- B Bus shelter provision
- ★ Lighting positions
- ➔ Directional Signage
- Suggested CCTV positions
- RE Recycling banks

6.6 Access

6.6.1 Public transport

National planning guidance promotes the need to reduce car dependency. At present the bus stops on Westhill Drive cause traffic to back up when in use. Creating a small bay to allow the bus to stop on Westhill Drive without causing traffic problems should be incorporated into the redevelopment. A high grade shelter and information point should be provided at this bay.

6.6.2 Vehicle access

The majority of shoppers will arrive by car so that, although the provision of public transport is important, the car park fulfils a vital role. Any significant redevelopment of the town centre will require a Transport Assessment that will need to be agreed with Aberdeenshire Council's Transport and Infrastructure Service. All new junction layouts will require safety auditing. Vehicle access improvements are required to help the flow of traffic. Westhill Drive and Old Skene Road take the majority of traffic in Westhill and at peak times traffic builds up forming a bottleneck at the entrance to the existing car park. An additional access to the site from Ashdale Drive, as shown on Plan Five, and the introduction of a one-way system should mitigate the traffic problems. The location of the existing car park is incorporated in the proposals for the town centre, however, the existing car park should be replanned, as shown in plan Five, to maximise its effective operations and provide safe routes for pedestrians.

6.6.3 Traffic Calming measures

Traffic Calming measures are required to be incorporated into the design of the redevelopment. The suggested new layout of the car park, set out in Plan Five, incorporates pedestrian paths through the car park. Priority would be given to pedestrians in the car park and therefore keeping traffic speeds low.

6.6.4 Cycle provision

Cycle lanes are currently in place along Westhill Drive and Old Skene Road. The redevelopment should include provision for cycle lockers/parking. A minimum of 4% of the total car parking provision should be made available for the provision of cycle parking facilities, in accordance with Aberdeenshire's Parking Standards.

6.6.5 Pedestrian access

An improvement in pedestrian access is required to be incorporating into the redevelopment. The current access to the town centre is poor. There is a need to provide well-lit, safe footpaths from all sides, linking the town centre to the library, church, hotel, residential area, the bus stop, swimming pool and the schools. Pedestrian crossings should be provided on Westhill Drive, Old Skene Road, and Ashdale Drive. Good pedestrian and cycle paths from all sides, shown in plan Five, will mitigate the impact of the large car park between the shop frontage and pedestrian and cycle access points.

Plan Five Traffic Management Strategy

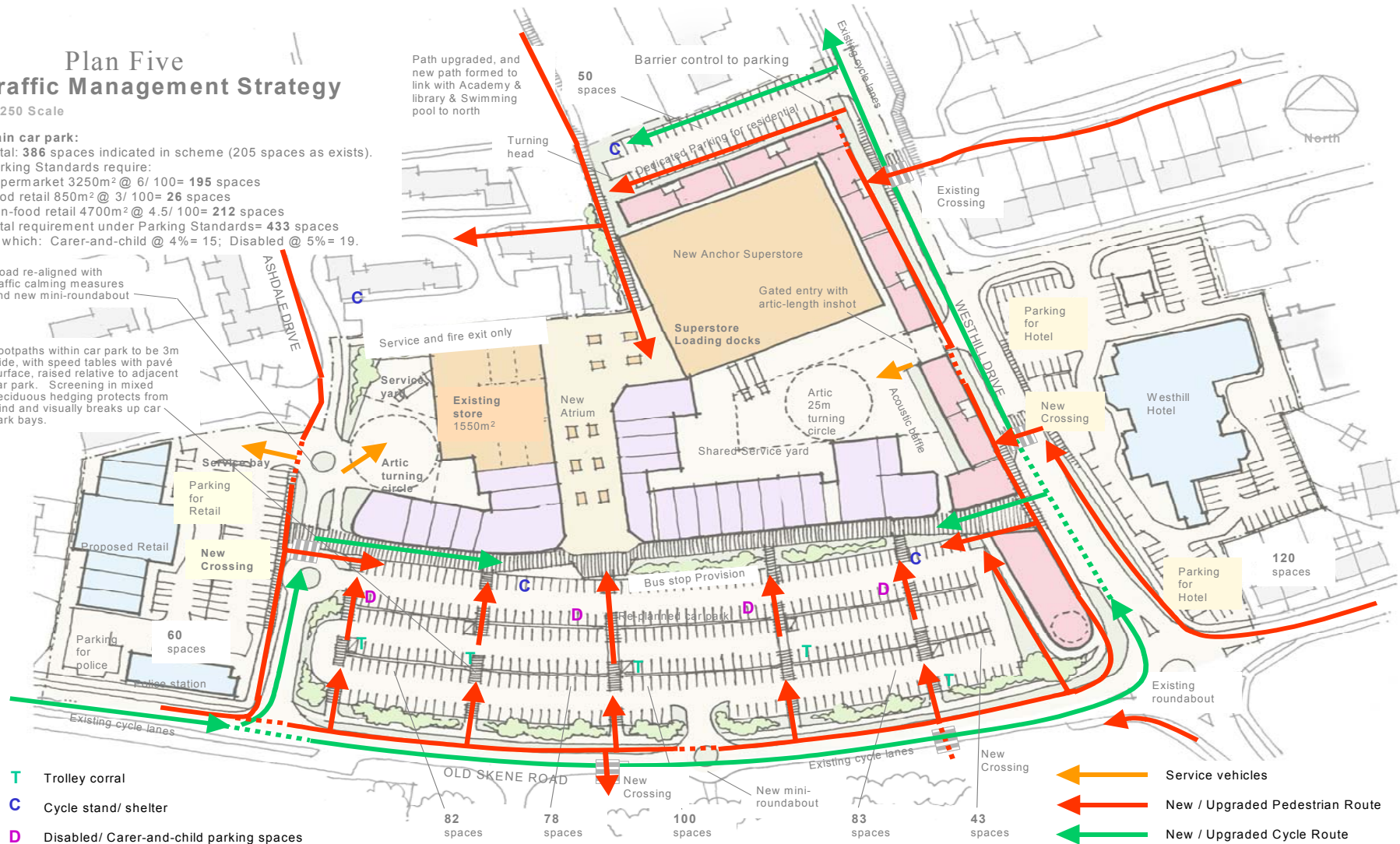
1/1250 Scale

Main car park:

Total: **386** spaces indicated in scheme (205 spaces as exists).
 Parking Standards require:
 Supermarket 3250m² @ 6/ 100= **195** spaces
 Food retail 850m² @ 3/ 100= **26** spaces
 Non-food retail 4700m² @ 4.5/ 100= **212** spaces
 Total requirement under Parking Standards= **433** spaces
 Of which: Carer-and-child @ 4%= 15; Disabled @ 5%= 19.

Road re-aligned with traffic calming measures and new mini-roundabout

Footpaths within car park to be 3m wide, with speed tables with pavé surface, raised relative to adjacent car park. Screening in mixed deciduous hedging protects from wind and visually breaks up car park bays.



- T Trolley corral
- C Cycle stand / shelter
- D Disabled / Carer-and-child parking spaces

- ← Service vehicles
- ← New / Upgraded Pedestrian Route
- ← New / Upgraded Cycle Route

6.7 Infrastructure

6.7.1 Drainage

A Sustainable Urban Drainage System (SUDS) Scheme would be required. Large storage units would be required for any large car park. Porous paving would be required to fulfil the CIRIA manual requirements. A developer is required to discuss suitable SUDS provision with Aberdeenshire Council. SEPA and Scottish Water should also be consulted on any proposed development.

The site will already be connected to the existing WWTP.

6.7.2 Supply and distribution of water

All water will be supplied by the public water main.

6.7.3 Supply and distribution of power/heating

The site will be connected to the nearest server, check with service provider.

6.7.4 Waste management facilities

A Community recycling facility should be provided within the site, in order to collect glass, aluminium and steel cans, plastics, textiles, garden waste, and paper. It is anticipated that 3 collection containers are required for paper and eventually 3 for plastic bottles in addition to the 7 recycling containers that are situated at the shopping centre. Therefore space for around 13 containers would be needed, with additional space for expansion. Litterbins would also need to be provided. Road markings next to the recycling points will be required to prevent long-stay car parking to allow vehicular access for both users and servicing.

6.8 Planning Agreements will be needed for offsite infrastructure works particularly the road crossings and related public realm improvements. The Planning Gain Co-ordinator, Stuart Robertson, will confirm developer contributions.

7 Further Advice

Developers are encouraged to contact the Planning Service of Aberdeenshire Council at the earliest opportunity to discuss the details of any application. Any application will be dealt with primarily by the Garioch Area Development Control Team, based at the following address,

Planning and Building Control
Gordon House
Blackhall Road
INVERURIE
AB51 3WA

Westhill Town Centre Brief

Tel: 01467 628576

Fax: 01467 628469

Other useful Numbers:

Planning and Environmental Services (Environmental planner) 01467 628381

Transportation & Infrastructure Service 01467 624558

Scottish Water 01224 675107

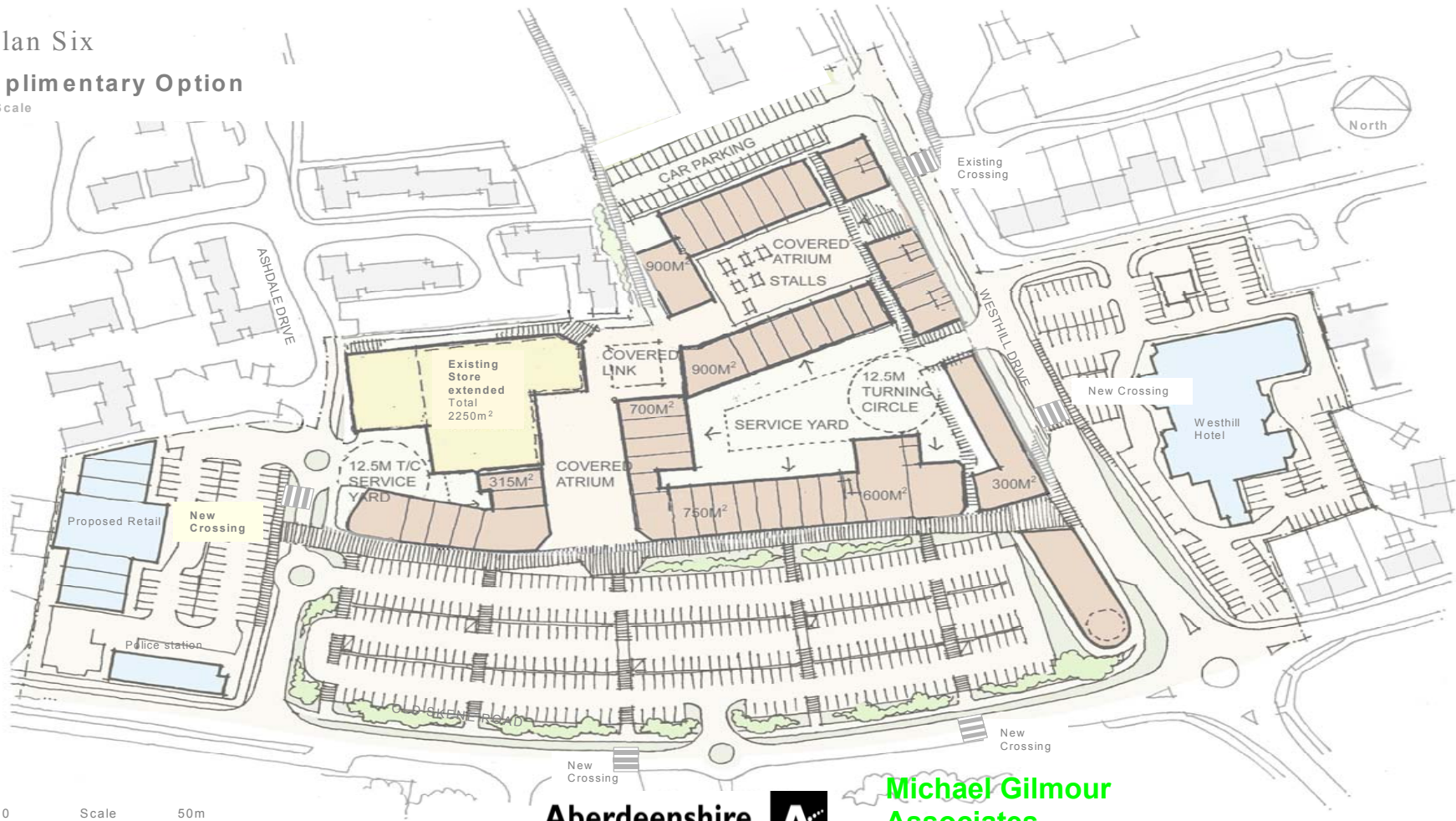
SEPA 01224 424609

Planning Gain Co-ordinator 01330 825518

Planning and Environmental services - Waste Management 01467 620981

Appendix 1

Plan Six
Complimentary Option
1/1250 Scale



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