Alnwick Civic Society

# Newsletter

November 2026



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## For your diary:

**17th November**: The Mayor Meets Alnwick Civic Society: with Kim McGuinness, the North East Mayor. St James's Church. Note the time: Doors open at 6:00 p.m for 6:30 start. Use this link to reserve your place: https://tinyurl.com/r8w5dbuk

**26th January**: The Graffiti Project at St Michael's Church, with Jean Darby. This is a joint meeting with Alnwick Local History Society. Note the venue: Alnwick Cricket Club. 7:30 start.

**11th February**: Dr. Rosemary Hayes on William Alnwick. Online or Livestream. To request a link to join online please eMail contact@alnwickcivicsociety.org.uk , or come along to view the live-stream at St James's Church. Doors open at 7:00 p.m for 7:30 start.

**17th March**: AGM. St James's Church. Doors open at 7:00 p.m for 7:30 start. Followed by a Q&A session with the makers of two videos featuring memories of the Duke's School: Dennis Sisterson and Harry Henderson.

**21st April**: Energy Efficiency in Traditional Buildings. With Jules Brown and Maria Carballeira from Historic England. St James's Church. Doors open at 7:00 p.m for 7:30 start.

# Who choses the decision takers?

*Each local planning authority used to set their own policy on which planning decisions could be delegated to officers and which went to a committee of elected members. The Secretary of State never used their power to set a national policy, but now they have. The government thinks a National Scheme of Delegation will ensure greater clarity and consistency. But how will it affect Alnwick?*

## The new scheme

The government believes that planning committees add to the time taken to determine an application. Sometimes a committee will refuse an application that planning officers have recommended for approval. Many of those refusals are later overturned on appeal. This delays the outcome and wastes time. Government wants officers to decide minor and technical applications while while elected members focus on the key proposals that matter most to an area.

The new regulations come into force on 31st October without a transition period. From then on they apply to all planning applications, including those already in the system.

Under the new regulations some decisions MUST be delegated to officers. Others are PRESUMED to be delegated to officers unless they satisfy a "Gateway" test. The types of development that must be delegated to officers include householder, minor commercial and minor residential developments. The types of application that must be delegated to officers include a Discharge of Conditions or Prior Approval for Permitted Development Rights. An application where the local authority itself (or an associated entity) has an interest does not have to be delegated - any of these can be referred to the planning committee.

For other applications the presumption is that most will be delegated to officers. However, these can be referred to a planning committee if the Chief Planning Officer and Chair of the Planning Committee agree that the application raises a significant planning matter. This category includes larger developments, and some others, including applications for development that has already been carried out without permission, and applications for listed building consent. It seems likely that most of these will also be delegated to officers as long as they broadly comply with the local plan and address any technical concerns (such as matters related to highways or flooding).

There is special provision for an application that raises no significant planning issue, but does raise a significant economic, social or environmental issue. These can be referred to committee for local democratic oversight. The key word here is "significant" and the guidance gives a couple of examples of an application that might be straightforward in planning terms but could raise significant economic, social or environmental issues in a town like Alnwick:

• An application for outline planning permission for a large multi-phase residential development allocated in the local plan.
• An application for planning permission or listed building consent for changes to a notable listed building in a town centre.

Our planning authority is Northumberland County Council. In the past their constitution allowed Planning Committees to consider applications where there were five or more expressions of support or valid objections; where a statutory consultee objected; where an elected member requested that the application be considered by committee; or where there were special planning issues or considerations that officers believed should be considered in committee. These former rules no longer apply, and the NCC Constitution will need to be amended to align with the new national scheme.

## Outcomes expected

The changes have been welcomed by some. Savills PLC is a global real estate services provider. They describe this as "*one of the most significant procedural reforms to local planning decision making in recent years*". They anticipate that the changes should allow elected members more time to scrutinise the most important proposals within their area, that there is potential to significantly improve certainty and consistency for minor applications and to reduce the risk of political uncertainty. For applicants, they believe these changes can provide greater certainty and potentially reduce delays.

*"If we genuinely want to build more homes, better infrastructure and stronger communities, then rebuilding public confidence in how people participate in planning is not peripheral to that ambition; it is central to it".*

Nikki Davies
Chief Executive at Meeting Place

The impact assessment by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government anticipates a number of short-term outcomes: Fewer unjustified refusals delaying development • Fewer appeals resulting in lower costs • Quicker times for determining applications due to lower volume dealt with by committees • A degree of uniformity, consistency and predictability in decision making. They also anticipate long-term outcomes: Improved focus on local plans and improved quality of developer proposals • Improved confidence stimulates investment • Less wastage of taxpayer money on appeals • Improved viability on marginal sites • Reduced inefficiency in the system as a result of minimising unjustified refusals • Improved quality of decision making

On the other hand, the Town and Country Planning Association has described this new National Scheme of Delegation as "*draconian*" and "*a threat to local democracy*". The reflections of their Director of Policy, Dr. Hugh Ellis, can be found here: https://tinyurl.com/32bt854d. The theme highlighted through his piece is that "*excluding elected representatives from decision making leaves communities and councillors as bystanders in the development of their own neighbourhoods*". "*Central government needs to start thinking differently if it wants to avoid the bitter resistance of communities who have no trust in the planning system*".

Reversing decisions on appeal must represent both a cost to the public and a delay to developers. Thankfully, this is an area where Northumberland performs relatively well. The proportion of applications that are overturned on appeal in Northumberland is lower than average and comfortably within the expected level. In other places the system doesn't work so well, and this may explain some of the government's thinking. Nationally, a refusal is overturned in a third of all planning appeals. The rate on larger developments is even higher. Officials in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government have examined applications for major developments that were refused by a planning committees then allowed on appeal. They found that 40% had been refused by the planning committee even though they were included in the local plan.

Under the new scheme officers are expected to take more of these decisions. It seems widely accepted that if more decisions

are made by officers under delegated powers, then the system will be more predictable and streamlined. It would be unrealistic to expect the new system to avoid appeals altogether, but Civil Servants have estimated that there could be a 20% reduction in the number of major appeals.

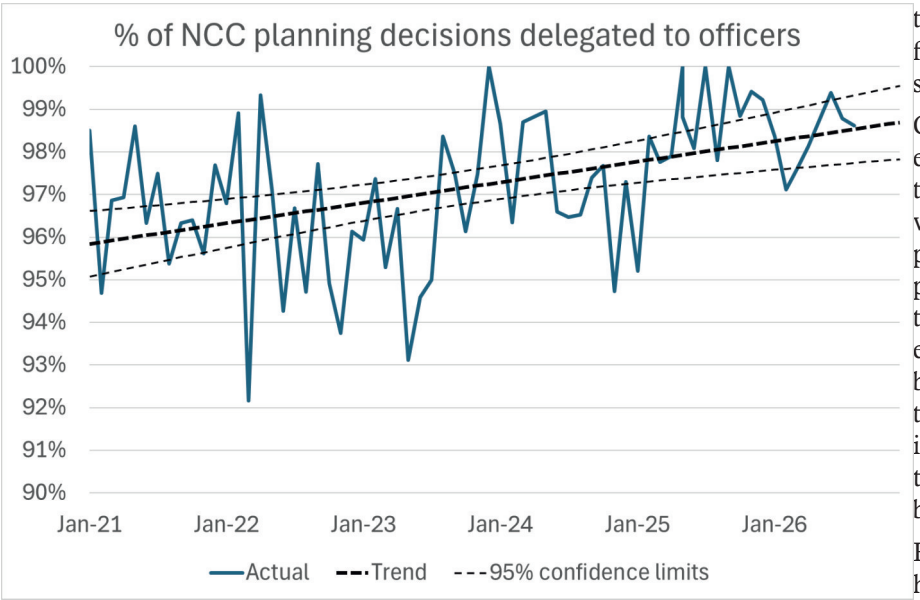
## Impact on Alnwick

Some might expect the new system to dramatically increase the number of decisions in Northumberland that are delegated. That seems unlikely. Five years ago Northumberland County Council was delegating around 96% of planning decisions to officers. At the time that figure was close to the national average. Over the last five years the national figure has changed little, but the figure in Northumberland has risen steadily (see chart). So far this year, more than 98% of planning decisions in Northumberland have been delegated to officers. That's before the new national policy was introduced. It seems unlikely that Northumberland will see a further increase in the number of delegated decisions. Other planning authorities are facing more of a step change.

It's an open question whether this new system will lead to faster decision-making and there's no shortage of reasons to anticipate further delay. A recent survey of Local Planning Authorities found persistent issues with recruiting and retaining staff, skill shortages in 93% of LPAs, low staff morale in 61% of LPAs and difficulties managing workloads in 80% of LPAs. Such issues are not easily resolved and change takes time to bed in. There is already difficulty in filling senior planning roles. Developers are likely to challenge any decisions that have not followed the new process. Senior officers may have to get involved in more detail.

Will the new scheme result in different outcomes? Any application that is refused can already be appealed or re-submitted. So even if the new system results in the initial decision being different, it seems unlikely that we see much change in the outcomes for major projects. If the government is right about increased confidence in decision making, reduced risk and greater viability: then these factors that could encourage more investment. So we may see more proposals coming forward.

Will public trust be eroded as people realise that so much decision-taking has transferred from elected councillors to unelected officers? Across the whole of Northumberland planning committees are now only dealing with a couple of applications a month. Five years ago they were dealing with seven a month on average. This is a trend that has been building for some time. The planning system has not collapsed, but there are legitimate questions about public confidence, and no reasons to think that these changes will do anything to address them. Local Government claims to broadly support the Government's objective of creating a more efficient and effective planning system, but there is real concern that efficiency could come at the expense of environmental protections, democratic accountability and local decision-making.




## Looking to the future

The government expects this new model to be more efficient. Many fear it will be less democratic. Both of those positions can be true, and there's an obvious risk of drifting into a position that is both less democratic AND less efficient.

By international standards the UK has a planning system with a relatively high degree of discretion. Whether we like it or not, what is under way is a transition to a planning system that is more Rules-Based. There are pros and cons to each approach and there will always be some planning decisions that rely on judgement to balance opposing pressures. However, as the balance shifts, it will become increasingly important for policies to be aligned with what communities want.

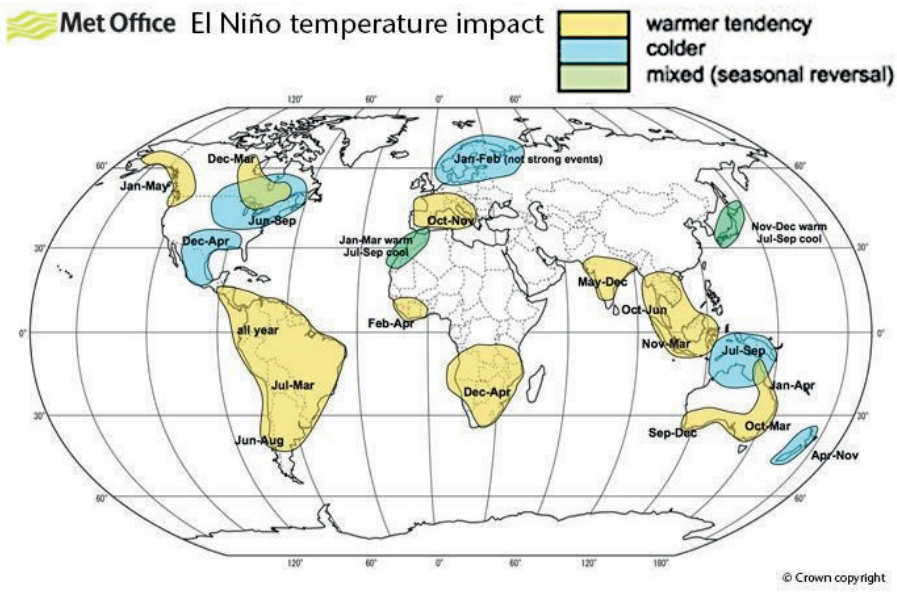
This is an issue that needs to be more widely discussed because the omens are not good. Opposition will be difficult when an application comes forward for a large housing development that has already been included in the Local Plan. Yet the Royal Town Planning Institute has estimated that on average only one in every 180 members of the public engage with development of a Local Plan. Half of local authorities report levels of engagement lower than one in 300. That's equivalent to a few dozen people in Alnwick. Much less than the membership of Alnwick Civic Society. And public engagement across the North-East is lower than in any other part of England.

It's hard to see how a planning issue of any substance can be resolved on a superficial level. Yet the recent Community and Engagement Survey (see page 6) implies that very few people are prepared to engage in any depth with decisions that affect the future of their community. There is surely a need to build trust, counter fears that change is imposed from elsewhere and encourage engagement by sections of the community that feel powerless.

One thing is certain. A system without public engagement will become less democratic and if the rules of the game are changing then the way that communities engage with the planning system needs to adapt as well. If people feel distanced from planning decisions then they need to be offered other ways to engage. The ongoing review of the Northumberland Local Plan, the remaining stages of the Neighbourhood Plan refresh and changes in national policy ought to provide an opportunity for a fresh look at the relationship between planners and the community.

How do you rate the chances of that happening?

# Preparing for El Niño




*El Niño conditions form when warmer waters spread across the central and eastern Pacific Ocean, resulting in global changes to weather and climate. Several forecasts from national weather agencies indicate that the next El Niño could be one of the strongest on record.*

The warming caused by an El Niño event in 2026 is likely to be greater than previous El Niño events because it will sit on top of a long-term warming trend. The World Meteorological Organization says that almost all regions are likely to experience above-normal temperatures, with an increase in drought in some areas and an increase in extreme rainfall in others.

The European weather system is far away from El Niño, and the links are hard to predict. The effects of El Niño on Europe lag behind the actual event, and could result in more extreme winter weather in 2027. In the UK, the Meteorological Office expects El Niño to increase the chances of wetter, stormier conditions in the autumn and early winter. Previous El Niño events have increased the risk of mild, wet and windy weather in early winter, and drier, colder conditions in late winter.

Flooding, storms, wildfires and droughts across the world could lead to crop losses and supply chain disruption, which would affect the UK. The government has recognised the risks for food security and severe weather. The Cabinet Office is responsible for coordinating both preparations and response to these events. If needed, the COBR Directorate will convene the cross-Government Severe Weather Resilience Network to assess preparedness and raise any concerns.

For the rest of us, the Association for British Insurers has published general advice on how we should prepare our homes ahead of the 'unprecedented' El Niño this autumn and winter.

Simple steps now can make a difference.

• Unblocking gutters and drains • Checking roof tiles • Removing overhanging or loose branches of nearby trees • Identifying leaks • Servicing the boiler and taking steps to reduce the risk of frozen pipes.

With wet weather expected, the ABI also encourages us to check the flood risk in our local area and sign up to flood alerts. They recommend having contact details of our home insurer to hand, Listening out for bad weather warnings, and Keeping a mobile phone close.

Environmental impacts on the historic environment include extreme weather events, flooding, coastal change, and changes in the distribution of species. Both Historic England and Historic Environment Scotland have published checklists for anyone who is involved with maintenance of traditional buildings. They can be found at https://tinyurl.com/fmdh6npf and https://tinyurl.com/ye26eh7k

# An Artificial Intelligence arms race?

*The Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors reports that Artificial Intelligence is already embedded in the planning system on both sides of the table. Applicants are using AI to help draft planning documents. Residents are using AI to generate objections. Local Planning Authorities are hoping AI can improve efficiency in the way casework is processed. See* https://tinyurl.com/4wumfvmf.

AI is already used by applicants and their advisors to develop supporting materials including planning statements, access statements, heritage assessments and financial viability documents. In June, Planning Authorities at Barnet, Camden and Dorset began using AI to triage applications, summarise key information and provide officers with an initial assessment. National roll-out of this system is expected in 2027 after further trials.

On the other hand there have been warnings for some time that "*AI powered NIMBYism*" could bring the planning system to its knees. People who object to a planning application can easily use ChatGPT, Copilot or Claude to craft letters. Commercial services such as www.objector.ai and www.planningobjection.com are designed specifically to generate a planning objection for a fee of £45.00 - £99.00. There are fears that the planning system will be deluged with automated submissions. Apparently it's already common for planning officers to receive a large volume of nearly identical letters containing claims with little connection to the specific planning proposal. Experience from the legal profession is that AI can hallucinate and refer to cases and decisions that don't actually exist.



If a resident asks an AI tool where they can find help with responding to a planning objection they might already be advised to contact a Civic Society. However, it seems inevitable that AI will itself play a more direct role in the system. The Planning Inspectorate already accepts this, and requires that use of AI is disclosed.

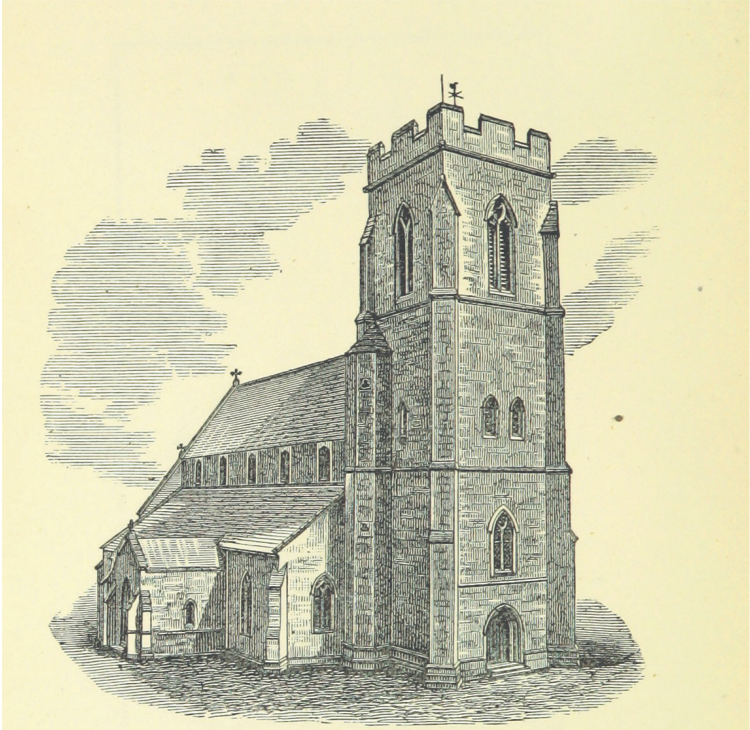
It's an open question whether the authorities, legislators and professional practice can keep pace with the rate of change.

# Bondgate and Green Batt: 1862

*The following description of Green Batt is taken from an article on the sanitary condition of Alnwick, published in the trade magazine, "The Builder" on Feb 22nd 1862.*

Leaving the Market-hill, a wide street, called Bond-gate, leads to the eastern entrance to the town - Bond-gate tower, the last of the ancient gateways surviving the demolition of the town wall. In this street are the residences of Messrs. Spours & Carr, solicitors, and T, Fender, surgeon, the Alnwick and County Bank, and the old posting. house, the White Swan. The ancient tower be-striding the road, is full of interest: it is known to have been erected by the son of Hotspur. The floor over the gateway is now used as a billiard-room. Passing beneath it we cannot but regret that a little life is not given to the old gateway by opening out the blocked-up windows. The straggling street without the tower, called Bond-gate Without, leads to the railway terminus. We would demur to the condition of the approach to the station, which being the common traffic road for goods, cattle, wood, and passengers is dreadfully cut up. The footway has been newly paved with soft brick quarls, which are already crumbling and cracking. As Caithness flagging is laid down in divers patches of the town, to the great furtherance of cleanliness, this silly piece of economy is not justified even as an experiment: the best material for a spot in which there is a concentration of traffic would have been the cheapest.

Turning out of Bond-gate, at a right angle, close by the tower, is a steep street, called Hotspur-street, which leads to an open space called the Green Bat. The north side of this is mainly occupied by the high gardens which slope down to the houses on the market hill. In one of these gardens is a newly-erected public room*. This is a parallelogram of blank masonry, with a line of sheets of rough plate-glass on either side of the roof, the only exception to utter baldness being a double entrance at one end, with a row of eight porthole windows over it, and a single entrance at the other, with three windows over that. It has been designed and carried out by a local tradesman, who, in addition to the occupations of auctioneer, cabinetmaker, upholsterer, and undertaker, dabbles in architecture, fearless of the curriculum of the Institute, under the patronage of an individual from whom his fellow-townsmen appear to have expected better things, and is an instance of the mistake of a public building being undertaken by private hands. In the centre of the Green Bat, which is the general name for a district of small and tasty houses, there is an open space, upon which towers up a colossal church with lofty nave, aisles, and chancel, seated to accommodate 1,000 persons on the ground floor,—a spacious building, erected at the expense of the late Duke of Northumberland, as the church of a new district, St. Paul's, and which has been arduously presided over by the Rev. C. Charlton since the foundation. The interior, by reason of its height and faulty construction of the roof, has proved difficult to be warmed, and several modes have been adopted without avail. At present the experiment of warming: by.gas.is being tried, and the gas burns during the day in the chandelicrs and standards with a pictorial and successful result. An addition to the chancel has been recently made by the erection of an oak reredos as a monument to a respected curate who was drowned. Over this the east window is filled with a stained glass memorial to the late duke, executed from the cartoons of Mr. Dyce, at the glasswotks at Munich, at a cost of £1,600. A recumbent effigy upon a tomb of the late duke, robed as a knight of the garter, occupies the end of the north chancel-aisle. The approaches to the church are bad and incomplete ; lamps are needed at the north-entrance gates, and the paving, generally around.about is not in a suitable condition. The Duke's School, an excellent establishment for boys, and St. Paul's Sunday School are near. There are also schools for the children of the members of dissenting congregations, whose chapels, too, are numerous, although they do not partake of any particular architectural character. There is also a Mechanics' Institute and a Savings Bank in St Michael's Lane running out of the district; but the neatness of this is debited by the proximity of a long and low slaughterhouse.



St. Paul's Church.

*The illustration of St Paul's Church is taken from "A Historical Guide to Alnwick, and the immediate neighbourhood" by George Skelly, published in 1889.*

**The reference to a 'newly erected public room' relates to the Corn Exchange, which was designed by Thomas Robertson. He rose from a humble background to become a successful local businessman. He also designed the Borough School, his own home at Castleside House and the adjoining showroom on Narrowgate.*

St Paul's is currently fund-raising for a new heating system. Anyone who is able to help towards the cost can either contact the Parish by email on stpaul.alnwick@dioceseh n.org.uk or use this DONA code for donations.

# Community and engagement survey

*The Community and Engagement Survey is carried out by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to explore how people engage with their community and with culture, media and sport.*

The latest report was published in July and the full details can be found here: https://tinyurl.com/2vz2zydc

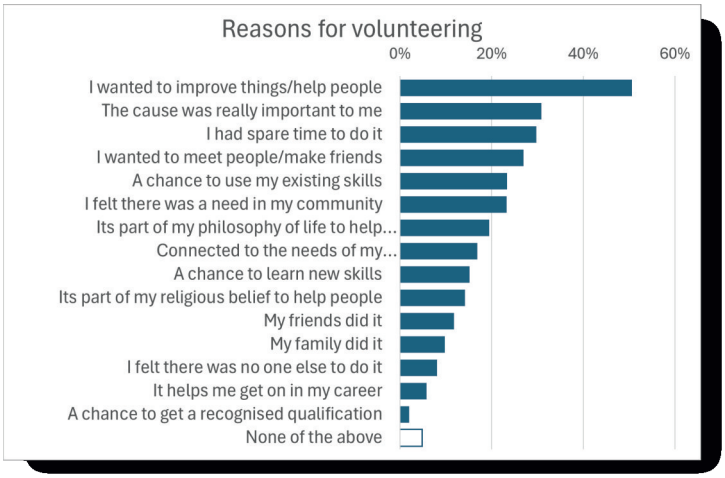
The good news is that 61% of us feel we belong "very strongly" or "fairly strongly" to our immediate neighbourhood. That percentage has remained in the low sixties for the last eight years. People aged over 50 are more likely, and those aged under 50 are less likely to feel a strong sense of belonging. People living in the North East are most likely to feel a sense of belonging. In Northumberland the percentage is 70%.

On the whole, respondents everywhere tend to feel their area is getting worse, not better, but nationally the percentage who feel pride in their area is still slightly higher than the percentage who feel they belong. In Northumberland, though, the opposite is the case. The percentage who feel they belong in their neighbourhood is higher than the percentage who feel pride in their area.

Most respondents (59%) think it's important that people can influence decisions in their local area, and almost half say that they have engaged in some form of civic participation, civic consultation, or civic activism in the last 12 months. Something is going wrong, though. Despite those efforts people don't seem to feel that they are making an impact. Only 26% feel they are able to influence decisions, and only 29% want to be more involved. The figures for Northumberland are slightly lower than average.

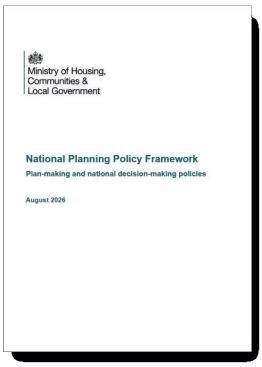
Respondents were asked what would make it easier to influence decisions in their local area. The answers suggest that there is a proportion of the population that is willing and able to invest time to engage with some of the more complex issues that communities face. However, that proportion is quite small. Most are looking for engagement to be simplified. Ranked in order the factors that people said would make it easier for them to influence decisions were:
1) If I knew what issues were being considered (47%)
2) If I could give my opinion online/ by email (41%)
3) If the council got in touch with me and asked me (34%)
4) If I had more time (32%)
5) If it was easy to contact my local councillor (18%)
6) If I knew who my local councillor was (17%)
7) If I could get involved in an online group making decisions about my local area (16%)
8) If I could get involved in a group (not online) making decisions about my local area (9%).

In some specific areas the level of community engagement is more encouraging. For example, 66% of respondents in Northumberland reported that they have engaged with heritage at least once in the last 12 months and nationally the proportion of respondents involved in some form of volunteering in the last year is 56%, and rising. The most common reason for volunteering is wanting to to improve things, and help people.




# New National Planning Policy Framework

*A new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) was issued in August. This sets out the government's policies for plan-making and for making decisions on development proposals.*




There has been much emphasis on changes designed to encourage delivery of homes, but the new NPPF introduces other major changes. These affect infrastructure, local plans, and economic growth as well as housing delivery.

The range of media coverage illustrated the scope of the changes. Different outlets emphasised reforms designed to encourage housing development, reduce car dependency, protect pubs, support economic growth, help people live near to jobs, schools and services, protect community assets and support high streets.

The reforms have been described as the biggest rewrite of planning rules in more than a decade. So there's far too much to summarise here. The full NPPF document can be found at:
https://tinyurl.com/49mrky88

FamilySearch

Would you like help with your family tree? Whether you are a beginner or have a family tree where you have hit a brick wall, the volunteers at Alnwick FamilySearch centre may be able to help.

In addition to all the records available on the FamilySearch website we have access to premium content on other sites such as Ancestry and FindMyPast. If you bring your own laptop, you can download the extensions to work on these sites while at the centre so you can download any relevant records you find directly to your own device.

Our current opening hours are term time Tuesdays 7-9pm and Sundays 1-3pm. During school holidays we may be able to open via appointment – please email with your preferred dates and times and we will do our best to accommodate you:
uk_alnwick@familyhistorymail.org

You can find us at:
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,
9 Linnet Court, Alnwick NE66 2GD

# News in Brief




"*Communications in planning*" is a collection of essays, interviews, advice notes and practical tips on the theme of communication and community engagement in planning. It features the work of practitioners from within planning and without and deals extensively with the communications challenges faced by planners, offering a range of practical approaches and solutions to enable planners to engage with communities more effectively and more meaningfully. https://tinyurl.com/52nzmj87

National Parks UK and their partners have issued a joint statement about their shared commitment to further the sustainable management of the historic environment in UK National Parks and make opportunities for all to understand, appreciate, enjoy, and engage creatively with it. The statement includes a shared vision, and commitments to work together, to conserve and enhance the cultural heritage of National Parks; and promote the contribution that the historic environment makes to people's lives and our National Park landscapes.

See: https://tinyurl.com/39526dpd

In August the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government announced the outcome of their consultation on reforms to the statutory consultee system. They have decided to remove statutory consultee status from The Gardens Trust and Theatres Trust, but retain Sport England as a statutory consultee.

There was strong opposition to removing statutory consultee status. Parks and Theatres have public value. There are concerns over loss of specialist expertise and doubts whether Local Authorities and Historic England have the capacity to replace their contributions. The government has promised to adapt requirements for notification of developments that affect registered parks and gardens, and introduce a duty to have special regard for the impact of development on registered parks and gardens. The Theatres Trust will continue to be notified of relevant applications, but will not be required to provide a formal statutory response. Concerns remain that these concessions may prove insufficient.

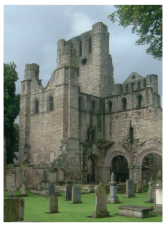



Damp is harmful to buildings. It damages their fabric, reduces energy efficiency and adversely affects the health and comfort of occupants. A variety of techniques and devices for assessing and monitoring moisture have been developed. But what do these techniques and devices actually tell us? Are they accurate? And how should we interpret the data they provide? Historic England has published new guidance on Assessing Damp in Historic Buildings.

See https://tinyurl.com/58e9ynay/

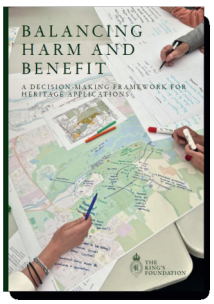
It will be months before we see figures on the number of visitors to Northumberland in 2026, but figures from 2025 suggest that the visitor economy is not only increasing in value, but also in resilience. The county welcomed 11 million visitors in 2025 and the value of their spend has doubled in the last decade. The sector contributed £1.582bn to the Northumberland economy in 2025 and supported nearly 15,000 jobs. Day visitors account for around a third of spend and although visitors who stay overnight represent only 17% of visits they account for two-thirds of spend. Importantly, visitors are staying longer, and spending more. The trend towards higher value and a longer season, with growth concentrated in spring, late autumn and early winter should benefit business resilience, and enhance the quality of opportunity for employees.



The four great abbeys of Melrose, Jedburgh, Dryburgh and Kelso are monuments to the power of religion under King David I of Scotland in the 12th century. But Kelso Abbey has been closed to the public since 2022, due to concerns about the condition of the stonework. Historic Environment Scotland has been carrying out extensive repairs, including masonry consolidation, netting and re-pointing, and the abbey has now re-opened to visitors.

Members of Civic Voice have approved updated Articles of Association. The Articles are the formal governing document for Civic Voice. They set out the charitable purpose, how the organisation is governed, the role and rights of member civic societies, how Trustees are appointed and elected, and how members can participate in the organisation's decision-making. The updated Articles can be found here: https://tinyurl.com/2usf84hp.




In August the King's Foundation and The Georgian Group launched a new framework for navigating complex planning applications that affect heritage assets. They propose a collaborative way for stakeholders to develop a shared understanding of heritage significance, explore options, test trade-offs and build consensus. The implication is that if we want to secure better outcomes for heritage assets and communities then the decision-making process needs as much attention as the quality of the proposal.

The report is titled "*Balancing Harm and Benefit: A decision-making framework for heritage applications*". It can be found here: https://tinyurl.com/4jh7kc28

Many members will remember Kevin Thompson, a long-standing and valued supporter of the Civic Society who passed away on September 1st.

Kevin opened the first branch of Thompson Opticians in Alnwick in 1984 and would grow the business to 32 branches. As well as achieving business success, Kevin is remembered in Alnwick as a really nice man with a keen sense of humour and a range of interests that included roles as sub-postmaster, musician, founder of community radio, school governor, owner of listed buildings and Alnwick Mayor. Nationally, Kevin was a recognised advocate for Optometry, and served on the Council of the Association of Optometrists for 18 years, including a spell as chair. He was recently awarded the Association's Peter Yeo Award for his extraordinary contributions to the profession.

# Protecting built heritage - Conclusions




*Parliament's cross-party Culture, Media and Sport Committee scrutinises the work of the Department and its associated public bodies. They launched an inquiry into Protecting built heritage in December 2024 and the report was published in July. It explores how the potential of built heritage can be unlocked; the financial framework; government's role in managing the public estate; workforce and skills challenges; and the impact of the planning system.*

*There's a Video of Jo Platt MP summarising the report on Parliament TV at* https://tinyurl.com/2s37hf8v *. The full report can be found at:* https://tinyurl.com/58jzjht7.

*Chair of the Committee, Caroline Dinenage, has said that "the government's approach reveals a deep complacency, is devoid of ambition and shows a complete lack of imagination". So it will be interesting to see the formal response from the Department. Here we extract some conclusions that seem particularly pertinent in Alnwick.*

## Unlocking the potential of built heritage

The deterioration of heritage assets represents a major missed opportunity. Their significant potential to support economic growth and tourism is being systematically constrained by a combination of financial, structural and policy pressures. Without a more coherent and proactive approach, increasing numbers of historic buildings will fall into disuse or managed decline, representing a loss not only to the historic environment but to growth and regeneration. The government must take sustained action to prioritise active use and remove the structural barriers that continue to hold the sector back.

## Housing

Heritage-led housing is no longer a niche or peripheral opportunity, but a major and under-recognised means of addressing the country's acute housing shortage. Historic England's estimate that up to 670,000 homes could be delivered through the reuse of vacant or under-used heritage buildings is equivalent to almost half of the government's current housebuilding target. However, the government is failing to prioritise the reuse of heritage buildings in a way that will enable its huge potential to be fulfilled.

## Data

Evidence points to a systematic weakness in how government collects data on its heritage assets. Without fully understanding the current state of the sector, the government will not be able to unlock the value of built heritage.

## Inclusion and under-recognised heritage

Existing frameworks for protecting built heritage do not adequately capture contemporary cultural heritage, leaving many culturally significant spaces vulnerable despite their clear value to communities. Without a broader definition of heritage, there is a risk that important aspects of the UK's cultural life will continue to be overlooked, and in some cases, lost.

## Place-based approaches

Place-based approaches offer an effective way of aligning investment with local need, strengthening partnerships and embedding community involvement. However, their impact is uneven. Areas with less capacity, particularly rural and deprived parts of the country, face barriers such as limited funding, skills and institutional support, which restrict their ability to deliver support effectively.

## VAT

The current VAT regime creates a structural disincentive to repair, maintain and reuse historic buildings. Sector bodies have told us that changes, such as rebate schemes or equalisation with new-build rates, could unlock stalled housing schemes, prevent managed decline and generate wider economic benefits. The current approach is out of step with the government's ambition to promote adaptive reuse and safeguard the UK's historic environment. The government's reluctance to introduce tax relief in a time of fiscal constraint is understandable,, but given the potentially huge contribution that built heritage can make to meeting housing targets, it is clear that the returns would be more than worth the investment.

## The deterioration of public heritage assets

Publicly owned heritage assets are too often allowed to deteriorate, with responsibility spread across departments, weak compliance with existing protocols and no effective mechanism to enforce minimum standards. While the government has acknowledged the need to improve oversight, this must now be matched by a more robust and accountable framework. The government must lead by example by ensuring that the buildings it owns and is responsible for are properly maintained, actively managed and, where appropriate, brought back into beneficial use.

## Workforce and skills

Workforce and skills shortages now pose one of the most serious risks to the long-term protection of the UK's built heritage. An ageing workforce, limited training routes, insecure funding and declining local authority expertise are combining to create a fragile skills pipeline that is unable to meet current demand. Additionally, delivery remains fragmented, short-term and insufficiently coordinated. Without sustained intervention, these gaps in capacity will continue to drive up costs, delay essential works and accelerate the deterioration of historic buildings.

## The planning system

While the government's proposed reforms to the National Planning Policy Framework are welcome, they must go further to address the persistent delays, inconsistency and administrative burden experienced by developers, owners and community organisations. Without change in how the system operates in practice, there is a risk that well-intentioned policy reforms will fail to deliver the intended outcomes on the ground, leaving historic buildings to deteriorate rather than be brought back into beneficial use.

## Listed Building Consent

Where Local Listed Building Consent Orders have been used, they have reduced administrative burdens, lowered costs and provided greater clarity for applicants and authorities alike, enabling straightforward and low-risk works to proceed efficiently. However, their implementation remains uneven and the unused potential of National Listed Building Consent Orders points to a failure to fully utilise existing tools.

# Trafalgar, Collingwood and Nelson

*We congratulate North East Museums on acquisition of the Union Flag flown from HMS Royal Sovereign at the Battle of Trafalgar on October 21st, 1805.*

HMS Royal Sovereign was the flagship of Newcastle-born Vice-Admiral Cuthbert Collingwood. So it is fitting that the flag will have a permanent home at the Discovery Museum in Newcastle. But locally we also have connections with the Battle of Trafalgar.

The Nelson Memorial at Swarland (pictured) is an obelisk erected in 1807, two years after Nelson's death. It was placed there by Nelson's friend, Alexander Davison, who owned the former Swarland Hall. They met in Quebec, when Nelson commanded HMS Albemarle, docked there during the American War of Independence. Later, Nelson engaged Davison to represent him at tribunals dealing with the distribution of the spoils of battle.



The Nelson Memorial can be seen beside a layby, just off the A1 near Swarland. It's said that a nearby line of trees on Davison's estate represented the Nile delta, and other groups of trees represented the positions of French and British ships during the Battle of the Nile.

Even closer to Alnwick we have the Camphill Column on the Golf Course. This was erected by Henry Collingwood Selby in 1814. There were family connections between the Collingwoods and the Selbys. The column carries inscriptions to Pitt and Wellington, as well as Nelson. Nominally it celebrates the restoration of peace to Europe. However, there's probably a bit more to it than that. Selby was well-known to be "*a keen defender of the status quo against those locally who were sympathetic to the principles of the French Revolution*". He was making a wider point.

# Heritage Open Days 2026

*Alnwick's celebration of Heritage Open Days in 2026 was our most ambitious yet.*

Heritage Open Days were founded on the principle that by raising awareness and understanding of our heritage we can help to ensure that it will be protected for future generations. By every measure this was a record year, with 24 different venues and events (half of them new this year), more than fifty volunteers and around 1,500 free visits by members of the public to different aspects of Alnwick's Heritage that were specially laid on, or not normally open to the public. It's difficult to measure the economic impact of an event like this, but we can be confident that it brought hundreds of people into town, and thousands of pounds into the local economy. Every year the festival brings people together to celebrate our heritage, strengthen networks and build capacity. Most importantly, everyone seems to have enjoyed themselves. So we thank all who participated: as visitors, volunteers, opening venues, and leading walks. Alnwick Lions and the Town Council for sponsorship, Bradley Hall and Alnwick Markets for helping to find venues for our pop-up exhibition and Information Point, and all who contributed in kind by lending their equipment, furniture, facilities, time and expertise.

# Weather resilience of homes

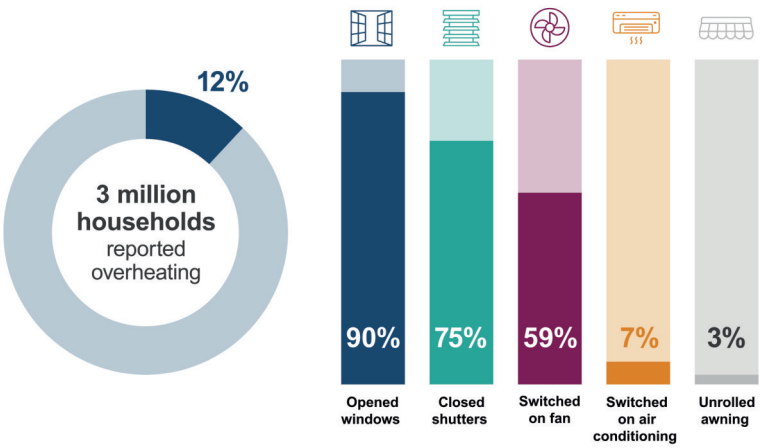
*Understanding the weather resilience of homes is crucial for maintaining the safety and comfort of households. The English Housing Survey is a national survey of people's housing circumstances. It recently reported on how resilient English homes are to extreme weather conditions, including overheating in summer and inability to keep warm in winter.*

Around 3.1 million occupied dwellings are unable to keep warm in winter. This is relatively common among social rented (23%) and private rented (21%) homes. Less common for owner occupied dwellings (8%). The number of homes reported as overheating in hot weather has almost doubled in the last five years to 3.0 million. The number is now almost as high as the number unable to keep warm in winter. Here, 13% of owner occupied dwellings are affected - a similar proportion to both private and social rented dwellings (11%). Around 395,000 homes can be both uncomfortably hot in summer and unable to keep warm in winter.

Detached houses (15%) and bungalows (14%) are most likely to be uncomfortably hot, followed by semi-detached houses (12%), terraced houses (11%) and purpose built flats (9-10%). In comparison, flats were typically the most likely to be reported as unable to keep warm during cold winter weather. This was particularly true of converted flats where 27% were reported as unable to keep warm: higher than any other type of dwelling, apart from terraced houses.

Of the 3 million households who reported overheating, the most common methods of keeping cool in the summer were opening windows, closing shutters and switching on a fan. Air conditioning was used by 7%.

The English Housing Survey on weather resilience in housing is here: https://tinyurl.com/3xw63zm7



# Planning Matters

We have considered, but chose not to comment on a number of changes to listed buildings, where we felt we had nothing to add. These have since been approved. • To dismantle and rebuild a chimney at 60 Bondgate Within. This is at the North end of T.G. Jones (next to Hays Travel) • To fit an internal temporary stairlift at 4, Chapel Lane • Amended plans for a Garden room at 4 Grosvenor Terrace • A retrospective application for a porch extension at The Coach House, on Belvedere Terrace • To combine a bathroom and WC into a larger bathroom at 2 Denwick Court.

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The most significant plans we have considered propose converting Narrowgate House to ten holiday apartments. We felt that this application deserves support, but the response from Historic England expresses concerns. They describe this as one of Alnwick's finest Georgian townhouses, but take the view that the proposal would crowd the interior, harming the building's historic and architectural significance. They advise that NCC should explore whether less damaging options are available. This advice has been followed in the response from the NCC Built Heritage and Design team.

Our response explained why we felt the proposed development deserved support. It will have a positive impact on an important designated heritage asset, secure reuse of a vacant building, and offer a sustainable future for heritage at risk. It is therefore well-aligned with NPPF Paragraph HE6 (Proposals affecting designated heritage assets), Northumberland Local Plan Policy ENV 7 (Historic environment and heritage assets), and Alnwick and Denwick Neighbourhood Plan policy HD2 (Heritage Assets at Risk).

Narrowgate House is not only a Grade II* listed building of National Significance and a prominent feature of Alnwick Conservation Area. Because of its long history as a Solicitor's Practice and its connection to a number of influential local figures it also has considerable local significance.

The building has been vacant since 2003 and on Historic England's Heritage at Risk Register since 2007. In its current condition it is a blight on Alnwick Conservation Area. The site is close to important visitor attractions and surrounded by a variety of visitor accommodation. A handsome building in this location should be well-placed to support the local economy by enhancing the neighbourhood and encouraging inward investment. In its present condition it undermines Alnwick's appeal as a visitor destination.

This is a complex application and in order to support re-purposing of Narrowgate House we anticipate that decision takers will need to weigh the considerable public benefits of the proposal against an assessment of the impact on heritage significance and any problems that might arise as a result of increased parking demand in the area.

Over the years a number of different proposals have been put forward for this site, but to date none has proved viable. The building and its history is well-known across the Alnwick community and there is considerable local interest in seeing this project move forward. There is also justifiable concern that onerous conditions or further delay could exacerbate the current position and leave a prominent derelict building in the heart of Alnwick for decades to come.



It is possible that officers find that they are unable to support a way forward that the applicant judges to be commercially viable. If that does prove to be the case then it will be necessary to consider economic and social implications for the wider community as well as the planning considerations associated with re-purposing a notable listed building in the town centre. In our view, should that situation arise, a decision on this application should not be delegated to officers, but referred to a planning committee for democratic oversight.



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We expressed support for a proposal from the Royal British Legion to replace the wooden bench overlooking the War Memorial with a metal seat incorporating a seated figure of a soldier. The design is restrained and appropriate for the location between Column Field and Alnwick War Memorial. The application has since been approved.

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We have considered two other applications that relate to conversions in the Conservation area. Neither building is listed. One will convert the offices above Baileys into two flats, and the other will convert upper floors of the former Halifax bank (now Alnwick Auctions) to create a three-bed maisonette and the former stables block at the rear to commercial use. We had no concerns with either proposal. However, several members raised concerns about the metal shutter on the new ice cream counter on the ground floor of 26 Bondgate Within. The Alnwick Shopfront Design Guide states that Planning Permission is required for all types of external security shutters so this is an enforcement issue. We understand that this has already been raised with NCC Enforcement.

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There has been an application for Listed Building Consent to install solar panels on St Michaels Church. However, Historic England have pointed out that Listed Building Consent is not required in this case. The proposal needs to be considered under the Ecclesiastical Exemption. Historic England have also commented that the panels would be largely hidden from view and so have a very limited impact on the architectural quality of the Church. We can take this into account if we have an opportunity to comment through the Church of England Faculty system.

# Quiz: Alnwick's Pants

Alnwick's water was originally supplied by streams and a couple of wells. As the streams were covered over water was piped to public water fountains called pants.

The earliest record of a pant in Alnwick dates from 1611. It stood at the foot of Pottergate. More pants were constructed during the 18th century, but by the middle of the 19th century the pants were unable to provide sufficient clean water for a growing population. After the Cholera outbreak in 1849 piped water was introduced and soon this was supplying most of the town's needs. Since then, some of the old pants have been destroyed, and some replaced, but many can still be appreciated as important features of our townscape.

How many of these do you recognise? You will find the answers on the last page.

A



B



C



D



E



F



G



## For your diary



**17th November**: The Mayor Meets Alnwick Civic Society: with Kim McGuinness, the North East Mayor. St James's Church. Note the time: Doors open at 6:00 p.m for 6:30 start. Use this link to reserve your place: https://tinyurl.com/r8w5dbuk.

**26th January**: The Graffiti Project at St Michael's Church, with Jean Darby. This is a joint meeting with Alnwick Local History Society. Note the venue: Alnwick Cricket Club. 7:30 start.

**11th February**: Dr. Rosemary Hayes on William Alnwick. Online or Livestream. To request a link to join online please eMail contact@alnwickcivicsociety.org.uk , or come along to view the live-stream at St James's Church. Doors open at 7:00 p.m for 7:30 start.

**17th March**: AGM. St James's Church. Doors open at 7:00 p.m for 7:30 start. Followed by a Q&A session with the makers of two videos featuring memories of the Duke's School: Dennis Sisterson and Harry Henderson.

**21st April**: Energy Efficiency in Traditional Buildings. With Jules Brown and Maria Carballeira from Historic England. St James's Church. Doors open at 7:00 p.m for 7:30 start.

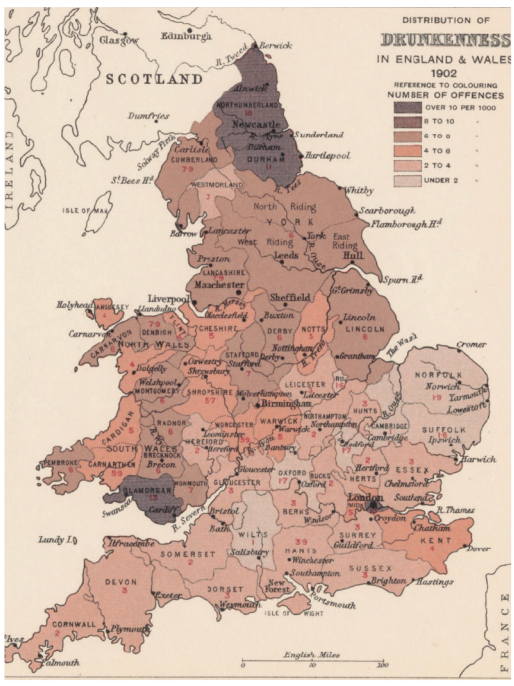
## ...and more

**20th Nov**: Alnwick Christmas Lights switch on.

**12th Nov** Northumberland Archives Online Talk. Take a deep dive into the Northumberland Quarter Sessions records to discover a tale of bloody betrayal, revenge and corruption with Senior Archivist, Jo March. Book via Eventbrite: https://tinyurl.com/33tyfthb

**17th Oct - 13th Feb 2027**: Pre-Raphaelites: Art and Poetry: Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne. The first major exhibition to explore the connection between Pre-Raphaelite art and poetry in depth. This innovative exhibition will visually demonstrate the interconnections between fine and decorative art and the written word.

**20th Nov 2026 - 3rd Jan** Winter Lights at Alnwick Garden and Lilidorei.




This image is extracted from a pair of maps published by John Bartholomew in 1904 as part of "*The Survey Gazetteer of the British Isles Topographical, Statistical and Commercial Compiled From the 1901 Census and the Latest Official Returns*". They were designed to illustrate a correlation between crime and drunkenness. The areas with the highest incidence of drunkenness are Glamorgan, London, Northumberland and Durham. From the Cornell University – PJ Mode Collection of Persuasive Cartography.
https://digital.library.cornell.edu/catalog/ss:19343585

## About Alnwick Civic Society

Alnwick Civic Society was formed in 1974, following the defeat of proposals to re-develop the town centre with a modern shopping area and amid growing concerns about the future of our town. Since then we have sought to influence developments, especially in the town centre and conservation area, to ensure that proposals protect and enhance our heritage.

The Society pursues its objectives through a variety of activities. We provide a voice for members through dialogue with planning and conservation professionals and like-minded organisations. We offer advice, scrutinise and comment on development proposals; recognise excellence; and organise public meetings. Members were heavily involved in development of the Alnwick and Denwick Neighbourhood Plan, and we work with local partners to influence policy at a county level. We seek to influence national policy by co-operating with other bodies in the civic movement, and the Society was a founding member of Civic Voice.

All who share our aims can support the work of the society: by joining as an individual, family, student, or business member; by participating in activities, sharing ideas, raising areas of concern and pointing out examples of good practice. Or simply by demonstrating pride in our town and spreading the word about the value of our work.

CIVIC VOICE
talking civic sense
Founding Member

## Who's Who?

**President**: Brian Lamb
**Trustees**: Chair: Peter Reed; Membership: Gill Parker; Honorary Secretary: Sue Smith; Treasurer: Tim Smith.
**Web**: www.alnwickcivicsociety.org.uk
**Email**: contact@alnwickcivicsociety.org.uk
**Bluesky**: @alnwickcivicsoc.bsky.social
**Facebook**: AlnwickCivicSociety
**Instagram**: alnwickcivicsociety
**Substack**: alnwickcivicsociety.substack.com
**Charity registration number**: 1197235
**Heritage at risk**: report your concerns here: https://alnwickcivicsociety.org.uk/heritage-at-risk/

## Quiz Answers

A) St Michael's Pant (1759).
B) Jimmy's Dribble (1993). A replica of the earlier Fleece Pant (c.1870).
C) Robertson's Fountain (1890).
D) Denwick Lane Pant (originally early C19th, moved here in 1816).
E) Clayport Pant (1755) outside Westgate House. Described by Tate as "Clayport High Pant formerly Kidland's Well".
F) Church Pant (1778) Used elements from an earlier pant on the opposite site of the road, which dated from before 1737)
G) Pottergate Pant (1873) Replaced previous pant of 1790. The earliest pant in this location dated from 1611.