Decision Report

Meeting: Community Development Committee

Date of Meeting: 24 November 2026

Subject: Blyth Market

Recommendation

It is recommended that Members do not pursue the transfer of operational responsibility for Blyth Market at this time, given the significant financial commitment, limited existing trader base, operational constraints and uncertainty surrounding future growth. Instead, BTC should continue work to explore alternative, lower-risk opportunities to support and revitalise the market.

Ward

Croft

Risk Management

The financial commitment required in relation to the market's current scale and income is a significant risk. With approximately five regular traders and annual income of around £5,000, BTC could be committing in the region of £55,000 in annual staffing costs, in addition to operational and development expenditure at an estimated total cost of £100,000, without any guarantee of increased trader numbers, footfall or income. There is also a risk that the market's limited physical capacity and wider challenges facing traditional markets will restrict opportunities for growth, making it difficult to achieve a sustainable return on the investment. A £100,000 increase on budget is the equivalent of approx. £9 per annum for council Tax payers

There are also significant operational and reputational considerations. BTC would assume responsibility for managing and developing the market without having full control of the Market Place, which would remain under NCC's ownership and control. Outstanding issues relating to market locations, traffic management, legal arrangements, and access would need to be resolved, while the success of the proposal would depend heavily on recruiting and retaining a dedicated Market Officer. If the Council is unable to deliver meaningful improvements or attract sufficient demand, it

risks committing substantial public resources to an initiative that fails to achieve its intended regeneration benefits

Objective

Promoting the environmental, social, and economic wellbeing of the town and its community.

Crime Prevention

None at this stage.

Public Sector Equality Duty

Any future proposals should seek to ensure that the market is accessible and inclusive for traders and visitors, including disabled people, older residents and other groups who may experience barriers to participation. Consideration should also be given to accessible trading locations, pedestrian routes, facilities and opportunities for a diverse range of traders.

Report

At the Community Development Committee meeting on 24 September 2026, Members agreed that Officers should investigate the feasibility of Blyth Town Council (BTC) assuming responsibility for the management and strategic development of Blyth Market, including the potential transfer of the Market Place.

This report presents the findings of that initial investigation, including discussions with Northumberland County Council (NCC), the potential scope of a management arrangement, and the operational, financial and staffing implications for BTC. It also considers the opportunities and limitations associated with developing the market into a more attractive, sustainable and commercially viable town centre asset.

This is not the first time BTC has intervened in the operation and development of the market. In 2017, BTC and NCC worked in partnership on the Blyth Market Regeneration Programme, with a total project budget of £91,500. BTC contributed £69,000, primarily towards trader incentives, staffing, events and marketing. The programme was considered successful at the time, and a copy of the original report is attached as Appendix 1.

However, the operating environment for traditional town centre markets has changed since 2017. The growth of online shopping, competition from supermarkets and out-of-town retail, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and cost-of-living pressures have all affected the viability of traditional markets. Blyth has also experienced significant changes to its town centre, including the closure and subsequent demolition of the Keel Row Shopping Centre and increasing commercial property vacancy rates, which rose from 9% in 2013 to 13% in 2017 and 16.8% in 2025. Blyth's unemployment rate was reported at 6.3% in 2025, which may also influence household disposable income and spending patterns.

These changes present a different context from that in which the previous regeneration programme was undertaken. With approximately five regular traders currently operating from the market, there is a clear need to consider how its offer can be strengthened, how additional traders and customers can be attracted, and what level of investment and management resource would be required to secure its long-term sustainability.

Officers met with NCC's Neighbourhood Services Manager to discuss the potential future management arrangements for Blyth Market.

NCC has indicated that it would be willing to consider BTC assuming responsibility for the operational management of the regular market, potentially through an initial trial arrangement. However, this would not include the transfer of ownership or control of the physical Market Place. NCC would retain responsibility for the space itself, including its use as a bookable events venue.

NCC has highlighted the significant investment made in and around the Market Place to improve and regenerate Blyth town centre. This includes public realm and infrastructure improvements, supported by a wider programme of cultural activity and place-making. The Market Place has also become an important venue for significant events, with BTC taking a leading role in delivering activity that has enhanced the town's reputation.

NCC is keen to protect this investment and ensure that any future market arrangements do not adversely affect the appearance, character or overall 'look and feel' of the Market Place or compromise its ability to accommodate events and other place-making activities.

Consequently, NCC would wish to retain control over the location and operation of the regular market, including the rules governing trading activity. These could include restrictions on the types of goods sold and arrangements for trader vehicle parking. NCC would also retain control of the designated events space, including decisions relating to events and specialty markets.

The respective responsibilities of both councils would therefore need to be clearly established within any management agreement. In practical terms, the proposed arrangement would mean:

- BTC would potentially assume responsibility for the operational management and development of the regular market.
- NCC would retain ownership and control of the physical Market Place.
- NCC would retain control of event bookings, specialty markets and the designated events space.
- BTC would be required to operate within the market rules, restrictions and conditions established by NCC.

Any agreement would also need to ensure that the regular market operates compatibly with existing event bookings and the wider programme of town centre activity.

The income currently generated by Blyth Market is approximately £5,000 per annum, collected by NCC through market fees. The treatment of this income would need to be resolved as part of any future management agreement.

This should take account of the existing arrangement whereby BTC funds the hours of the cleansing operative who undertakes the collection of market fees. The councils would need to agree an appropriate financial mechanism, including whether any payment, adjustment or alternative arrangement should be made to recognise the transfer of operational responsibility and the loss of income to NCC.

These matters remain subject to negotiation and mutual agreement and should be settled before any handover takes place.

It should also be recognised that traders provide their own market stalls, with no dedicated stalls currently available for use by either council. NCC's existing Market Officer covers the whole of Northumberland and is not directly costed to Blyth. Any future arrangement would therefore need to consider the additional staffing and operational resources required by BTC.

The current market operates primarily from Church Street, where approximately five regular traders are established. Traders appear to use the High Street car park for vehicle parking, allowing them to maintain visibility of their vehicles from their stalls. Any changes to the market's location or layout, in consultation with NCC) would need to consider these established working arrangements and the practical requirements of existing traders.

There may be opportunities to expand the market into surrounding areas if demand increases. However, the available space presents some physical and operational constraints:

- Church Street: The street is approaching capacity, with only two additional trading spaces available due to traffic access requirements, public footpaths and existing street furniture.

- Market Street: Its suitability for market use requires further investigation, particularly in relation to existing traffic regulations and the need to maintain appropriate access for emergency vehicles – a response from NCC Legal received 16 November regarding the measures and costs required to create temp or permanent rights for regular markets was requested but was not received at the time of writing this report.

- The Market Place: Any use would be as an overflow only and would be subject to existing event bookings, NCC's retained control of the space and the restrictions applicable to its use.

- Commercial Way: Potential future expansion into this area would require the agreement, coordination and potentially significant investment of a third party. This has not been discussed with the relevant party and cannot currently be assumed to be achievable.

There may be merit in developing a more coordinated approach to trading locations, with the potential to create a route that encourages visitors to move between different parts of the town centre. However, poorly planned expansion could result in a fragmented market offer rather than a connected visitor experience. Any proposals would need to be assessed against their practical feasibility and potential to generate additional footfall. These ideas are shown in Appendix 2.

It is therefore important to recognise that there may be a practical ceiling on the physical expansion of the town centre market, particularly in the short to medium term. Its future development should not be measured solely by the number of pitches or the amount of additional space occupied. There is also considerable scope to improve the quality, variety and attractiveness of the existing offer.

With only approximately five regular traders, the priority should be to establish a stronger market proposition capable of attracting both new traders and customers. This will require a proactive approach to trader recruitment, broadening the range and diversity of goods and services available, and attracting specialist, independent and local traders who can complement existing town centre businesses. There may also be opportunities to introduce themed, seasonal and occasional markets to attract different audiences and encourage repeat visits, while developing stronger links between market

traders and independent businesses across the town centre. Alongside this, improved promotion and marketing, including greater use of social media and other communication channels, could raise the market's profile and help coordinate trading activity with events and other activities taking place in Blyth.

A dedicated and proactive approach to market development could help create a more distinctive offer, improve the visitor experience and encourage greater use of the wider town centre. However, any changes would need to take account of highway requirements, pedestrian access, existing event arrangements and NCC's retained control of the Market Place.

The interim findings from the Your Voice Blyth's Future survey provide an indication of the wider community priorities that a successful market could help support.

Of the 442 respondents:

361 (81.7%) identified a welcoming town centre and local shops as something that would encourage them to spend more time in Blyth.

287 (64.9%) identified support for markets, independent businesses and community enterprise.

Although these findings do not establish direct demand for an expanded market, they demonstrate considerable support for the wider town centre environment and independent business offer. A well-managed and attractive market could contribute to these priorities by providing additional reasons to visit the town centre, supporting independent traders and complementing existing businesses and events.

The objective should therefore be to develop a market that offers greater variety, attracts more traders and customers, supports independent businesses and contributes to increased footfall and the wider vitality of Blyth town centre. This will require a realistic approach that recognises the physical limitations of the available space and is supported by an understanding of customer demand, operational requirements and the financial resources needed.

Protecting the interests of existing traders would be a priority in any transition to BTC management. This would include recognising established pitches, trading arrangements, and ensuring that any proposed changes to the market's location, layout or operation are developed in consultation with those currently trading.

NCC has indicated that a handover could be facilitated with support from its Markets Officer. Subject to agreement on the respective responsibilities of both councils, the necessary operational arrangements and the resolution of outstanding issues, implementation could potentially be achieved by 1 April.

Before confirming a handover date, however, a number of matters would need to be agreed. These include the respective operating responsibilities of BTC and NCC; the financial arrangements, including how NCC would be compensated for the loss of market income; and the location, layout and operating rules of the regular market. It would also be necessary to resolve traffic management, vehicle parking and emergency access requirements, alongside arrangements to protect the appearance and character of the Market Place and its wider place-making role. NCC's continued control of the designated events space, event bookings and speciality markets would also need to be reflected in the agreement, together with the terms and review arrangements for any initial trial period.

These matters would need to be incorporated into a formal management agreement to provide clarity for both councils, existing traders and prospective new traders.

Members should consider the proposal in broader terms than simply taking over the day-to-day operation of the existing market. A dedicated Market Officer could be central to its rejuvenation and longer-term development, providing the capacity to recruit traders, improve the market offer and establish a more strategic approach to its management.

If BTC were to pursue a trial transfer, additional staffing resource would be essential, as there is currently insufficient capacity within the existing staffing structure to undertake these responsibilities. Consideration would need to be given to employing a dedicated Market Officer on an initial fixed-term contract aligned with the proposed trial period.

The role would need to combine operational management with strategic development. This would include preparing and implementing a market business plan, recruiting new traders and maintaining relationships with existing traders, developing links with independent businesses and other town centre stakeholders, and exploring opportunities for themed, seasonal and specialist markets. The postholder would also be responsible for promoting the market, coordinating activity with the wider programme of town centre events, overseeing day-to-day administration and monitoring performance, income and expenditure against agreed objectives.

The market currently operates on Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays. Given the need for the postholder to be actively involved in market operations while also undertaking the strategic work required to develop the market, the role is likely to require full-time hours, including attendance on market days. It will be important to ensure that sufficient time is allocated to business development and trader recruitment, rather than the position becoming administrative or operational.

Comparative Town Council positions benchmark Markets Officer salaries within the LC2 scale, with indicative salary ranges of £32,578–£35,570 or £36,581–£40,444, plus

employer National Insurance and pension contributions. Taking account of these costs, together with uniform and personal protective equipment (PPE), an indicative staffing budget of approximately £55,000 would be required.

In addition to staffing, a separate operational and development budget would be necessary to support the market's growth. This would need to cover marketing and promotional activity, themed and specialist markets, trader incentives and recruitment initiatives, and engagement with local businesses and the wider community. Provision would also be required for equipment, such as a tablet or computer, software to support trader bookings and payments, and cover for planned and unplanned staff absence.

The overall financial commitment would therefore extend beyond the current market income of approximately £5,000 per annum. Members would need to consider the level of investment they are prepared to make and the extent to which the market should be viewed as a town centre regeneration initiative, rather than an activity expected to operate on a purely commercial basis.

If BTC proceeds with an initial trial, it will be important to establish clear performance measures from the outset to assess whether the additional investment and transfer of responsibility are delivering the intended benefits. These should include growth in the number of regular and occasional traders, occupancy of available pitches, market income and operating costs, visitor footfall, trader retention and satisfaction, and customer feedback. Consideration should also be given to the range and diversity of goods and services available and the market's wider contribution to town centre vitality and activity.

Clear targets and a formal review process should be agreed at the beginning of the trial period, with regular reporting to Members. This would provide an evidence base for determining whether the management arrangement should continue, be amended or be brought to an end, and whether the market is making sufficient progress to justify the ongoing financial commitment.

Direct management by BTC is not the only potential delivery model. Alternative approaches could also be explored, including working in partnership with an established market operator or commissioning an external market management company to undertake some or all the operational responsibilities. An external operator may provide access to specialist expertise, established trader networks and experience in developing successful markets. This could be explored in line with any reached with NCC.

Rather than BTC assuming full operational responsibility for Blyth Market, there may be merit in exploring a further joint project with NCC, building on the previous successful Blyth Market Regeneration Programme undertaken in 2017.

A renewed partnership could focus on improving the existing market offer, recruiting additional traders, introducing themed and specialist markets, increasing promotion and marketing, and developing stronger links with independent businesses and wider town centre activities.

This approach would allow both councils to contribute towards agreed objectives, with responsibilities, staffing and financial contributions established through a jointly developed project plan. It would also provide an opportunity to test demand, demonstrate what can be achieved through targeted investment and assess the market's potential for longer-term growth without BTC taking on the full financial and operational risks associated with a transfer.

These alternatives should be considered alongside direct Town Council management to establish which approach offers the best balance of cost, expertise, local control and potential for sustainable growth.

Elaine Brown
Deputy Town Clerk
16 November 2026

Appendix A –2017 Blyth Market Revitalisation Programme
Appendix B - Trading locations and Market Place map