

Darlington Borough Council Hearing Statement

April 2021

Matter 3 - Vision, aims, objectives and spatial strategy

Presumption in favour of sustainable development (policy SD1)

SQ3.1. Subject to the Council's proposed modification, is policy SD1 consistent with national policy and would it be effective in helping decision makers know how to react to development proposals?

Yes. Subject to the proposed modification, policy SD1 is consistent with national policy and would be effective in helping decision makers know how to react to development proposals. In the Council's response to PQ11 it was acknowledged that there were inconsistencies with policy SD1 and paragraph 11 of the NPPF. The related paragraph to the presumption in favour of sustainable development was revised in the 2018 version of the NPPF and these changes were not reflected in policy SD1. Modifications are suggested to the policy to resolve these issues and ensure consistency with the framework.

Although policy SD1 replicates parts of paragraph 11 of the NPPF the intention was to assist in making local communities, developers and stakeholders more aware of the presumption and how it is applied. The Council would however be open to further discussion on this policy.

Settlement hierarchy (policy SH1) and the distribution of housing and employment development allocations

Q3.2. Is the settlement hierarchy set out in policy SH1 based on evidence that is relevant, up to date, adequate and proportionate? Is the hierarchy and associated broad distribution of development reasonable, having regard to alternatives that were considered during the preparation of the Plan and the findings of the sustainability appraisal?

With regards to the first part of the question; yes, it is considered that the settlement hierarchy set out in policy SH1 is based on evidence that is relevant, up to date, adequate and proportionate. The background and evidence to the settlement hierarchy is set out in the Council's Spatial Distribution of Development Topic Paper, however an overview is provided below. The settlement hierarchy within policy SH1 is as follows:

- *Darlington Urban Area*
- *Service Villages (Heighington, Hurworth, and Middleton St George)*
- *Rural Villages (Bishopton, Brafferton, High Coniscliffe, Low Coniscliffe, Merrybent, Neasham, Piercebridge, Sadberge)*

The hierarchy of settlements within the borough is relatively straight forward given the geographical context; a compact main urban area surrounded by a

number of villages, some of which are larger than others. The approach taken in the previous and current development plan (Local Plan 1997 and Core Strategy 2011) was/is to focus development within the main urban area with limited growth in the villages. The Core Strategy did set out that the larger villages of Hurworth/Hurworth Place, Middleton St. George and Heighington should be the focus for the provision of services, employment and facilities to sustain the rural community.

The above approach to the settlement hierarchy has been carried forward into the new Local Plan, although with some changes which are set out in the Topic Paper. It is considered that the longevity of the established hierarchy is evidence that it provides a robust, appropriate spatial approach to the location of development. The responses to the Issues and Scoping Stage of plan preparation also supported this approach.

A recent audit was carried out of all the borough's villages in 2019 to establish levels of services and facilities (appendix 1 in the Spatial Distribution of Development Topic Paper). This built on existing information and knowledge of the settlements. The evidence was important to inform and justify the proposed settlement hierarchy and the distribution of development. Directing development to locations which are sustainable or can be made sustainable is a key planning principle set out in national policy. The evidence in the audit is considered to be relevant, adequate and proportionate to justify the policy which identifies the settlements in order of priority for development.

The above evidence was also crucial as it was recognised early on in the preparation of the Local Plan that the large service villages could assist with housing delivery in the short and medium term. The information was key in supporting the Council's approach that these villages are sustainable locations for new development, particularly housing, given the level of services provision now within them.

In terms of the second part of the question. Yes, it is the Council's view that the hierarchy and associated broad distribution of development is reasonable, having regard to alternatives that were considered during the preparation of the Plan and the findings of the sustainability appraisal.

As set out above the hierarchy of settlements within the borough is relatively straight forward given the geographical context. In view of this the approach in policy SH1 is considered to be appropriate. Three options for the policy were however considered in the Sustainability Appraisal (CD03), the full assessment can be found in appendix D (page 150), an overview is provided below. Variations of the hierarchy considered were:

- a) a settlement hierarchy based on the urban area and service villages.*
- b) a settlement hierarchy based on the urban area, service villages and other medium sized rural villages with development limits.*
- c) a settlement hierarchy based on the urban area, service villages and all rural villages/hamlets.*

The view was taken that option b would provide the most positive potential effects and is considered the most appropriate approach for the Borough.

Development would be focused on the main urban area of Darlington but also allowing an amount of growth in the service villages and medium sized villages (those with settlement limits) to support and enhance the vitality of rural communities. Option A could have potential negative impacts on the medium sized rural villages as new development would be discouraged in these settlements. As such the needs of more rural communities may not be met. Option C could result in unsustainable development in the countryside. This approach would be likely to place increasing pressure on development in smaller rural settlements which has the potential to result in negative environmental and social effects.

The broad distribution of development in the Plan is also considered reasonable and follows the priority of the settlement hierarchy in policy SH1. The Spatial Distribution of Development Topic Paper describes and justifies the distribution of development. Background information and detail are provided, outlining how the approach to distributing the identified development needs has been established. Key factors include the settlement hierarchy, economic factors, transport and infrastructure, physical and environmental constraints, site selection process and development limits methodology.

Regard was had to alternative options for the distribution of development during the preparation of the Plan and options were assessed through the Sustainability Appraisal (CD03), chapter 7 and Appendix E. The details are summarised in the Council's Spatial Distribution of Development Topic Paper but an overview provided below.

Options were initially considered in the Council's Issues and Scoping Paper which was consulted on in May 2016. The consultation document set out the Council's initial ideas for the new Local Plan, including identifying a number of potential locations for strategic development around the Borough. Potential areas for strategic scale development were then assessed against a number of criteria to determine whether they would be taken forward into the next stage of the Local Plan process. The criteria used to assess the locations were based on draft Local Plan Vision, Aims and Objectives and the issues and objectives identified in the Sustainability Appraisal Framework.

As a result of the Issues and Scoping consultation in 2016, the response to the Call for Sites and the HELAA process, twelve broad strategic development options presented themselves to be considered by the Sustainability Appraisal for the emerging Local Plan which would influence the distribution of development. No single option was sufficient to deliver the level of growth required to meet the Borough's full housing and employment land requirements for the period to 2036. Therefore, the final development strategy needed to be made up of an appropriate combination of the options available to deliver a sustainable pattern of growth for the plan period.

Three options were considered but were discounted due to a lack of suitable and/or available sites based on a consideration of the sites submitted to the Council through the 'call for sites' process and a desk top survey. These options are listed below:

- *Newton Aycliffe*

- *Extend existing smaller villages*
- *A new settlement in the north east of the Borough*

This left nine potential strategic development options considered in the Sustainability Appraisal which were:

- 1. North West Darlington*
- 2. North and North East Darlington*
- 3. East Darlington*
- 4. South Darlington*
- 5. South West Darlington*
- 6. Central Darlington*
- 7. Create a new settlement to the West of the A1(M)*
- 8. Middleton St George*
- 9. Export an element of housing to neighbouring authorities*

Overall it was considered that potential strategic development options 1-6 (relating to development within and around Darlington town) and 8 (growth in the village of Middleton St George) would have broadly positive implications for the borough in meeting housing needs in existing settlements with a good range of services, facilities and employment opportunities, strong established communities and with generally better access to more sustainable transport options. In all options it will be important to manage the potential negative effects of development through the appropriate location, design, and mitigation of development pressures as required by specific sites.

Strategic development options 7 and 9, relating to the potential creation of a new settlement to the West of the A1(M) and the option to seek to export an element of housing to neighbouring authorities respectively, are considered to be more likely have negative implications for the borough. Full details are set out in the Topic Paper and Sustainability Appraisal (CD03).

The distribution of housing and employment growth in the Plan follows the settlement hierarchy, ensuring that development is located in the most accessible and sustainable locations to meet the needs of local communities. Out of the nine potential strategic development options considered in the Sustainability Appraisal process a combination of these approaches were utilised to deliver the employment land and housing requirements (options 1 – 6 and 8). Options chosen were considered more likely to have positive implications for the sustainability objectives.

In view of the above, the hierarchy and associated distribution of development is considered appropriate and reasonable. Both stem from the previous development plan approach which is largely dictated by constrained physical geography and existing development constraints. The strategy has evolved through the various stages of plan preparation, involving consideration of a wide range of options that have been tested through the sustainability appraisal and public consultation. It is considered that growth is planned in a way that delivers the development requirements and local ambitions yet respects the character of the borough and delivers sustainable communities.

Q3.3. Is the broad distribution of housing and employment development proposed through commitments and allocations in the Plan consistent with the settlement hierarchy set out in policy SH1?

Yes. It is the Council's view that the broad distribution of housing and employment development proposed through commitments and allocations in the Plan are consistent with the settlement hierarchy set out in policy SH1. Evidence to support this is set out in the Spatial Distribution of Development Topic Paper however an overview is provided below.

The Council has adopted a balanced strategy to meeting its housing requirement. Housing allocations are proposed which are considered to be the most suitable and sustainable for development over the plan period. A mix of sites are put forward in terms of size. Furthermore, they are appropriately spread across urban extensions, the urban area and the Borough's service villages in accordance with the settlement hierarchy set out in policy SH1.

Historically the Borough has grown from the main urban area outwards. Sites within the main urban area alone would not be sufficient to meet quantitative housing needs. Consequently, urban extensions are the next most logical approach to delivering new homes. These sites are adjacent to existing services and transport routes and provide opportunities to deliver new infrastructure and facilities. A number of sites are also proposed in the service villages as these settlements already have a number of facilities/services and good sustainable transport links, therefore they are considered sustainable locations for housing development. Sites in these locations would assist with housing delivery in the short and medium term as they do not require large scale infrastructure. Development is restricted in rural villages due to the very limited level of services and facilities available and other small villages, hamlets and other groups of buildings are treated as part of the countryside.

The Council considers that the Plan provides a continuous and diverse supply of employment land to meet the needs of existing and future economic development. The employment allocations follow the same locational strategy and settlement hierarchy as the housing allocations. Sites are largely focused within and adjacent to the main urban area with only a small number of allocations in more remote areas which have alternative justification for their locations.

The main areas for employment development in the borough are located in three areas; firstly within a central area of the main conurbation (including the town centre and Central Park), to the North West of the main urban area in close proximity to the A1(M) and junction 58 and to the South East of the conurbation adjacent to the A66 circular route. The employment sites which are in more remote locations not within or adjacent to the main urban area have alternative justification, such as they form part of a wider employment area within a neighbouring borough or they are related to Teesside International Airport.

Development limits

Q3.4. Are the development limits to the Darlington urban area, three service villages, and eight rural villages defined on the policies map based on evidence that is relevant, up to date, adequate and proportionate?

Yes. The Council considers that the development limits to the Darlington urban area, three service villages and eight rural villages are based on evidence that is relevant, up to date, adequate and proportionate.

Appendix 3 of the Spatial Distribution of Development Topic Paper sets out the methodology of how the Council have drawn the development limits for the Proposed Submission Local Plan and the information and evidence utilised in the approach. As set out in the Council's response to PQ 12, the limits of the Local Plan 1997 were used as a starting point and a number of criteria and principles applied to set the development limits for the new Plan.

Development limits were drawn around the 'main built form' of a settlement whilst also incorporating the proposed housing and employment development sites. Beyond the development limit, land will be generally used for agriculture, outdoor sport, woodland or other open uses and will include farm buildings. Wherever possible, the development limit follows clearly defined permanent features. In areas where separate limits to development are within close proximity to one another analysis has been undertaken as to the role and significance of the area not included within development limits.

It is considered that the methodology followed and evidence utilised is appropriate, relevant and justifies the detailed boundaries set.

Q3.5. Are the Council's proposed changes to the development limits to Low Coniscliffe and Merrybent villages necessary to make the Plan sound?

Yes. It is considered that the proposed changes to the development limits to Low Coniscliffe and Merrybent villages are necessary to make the Plan sound. The changes are required to resolve a number of conflicts between the development limits (policy H3) of the Proposed Submission Local Plan and the settlement boundaries of the made/adopted Low Coniscliffe & Merrybent Neighbourhood Plan (SD55 – Policy LCM 11) which forms part of the development plan.

The main differences are at the village of Merrybent where firstly the Local Plan has not reflected two proposed housing allocations in the development limits, which are allocated in the Neighbourhood Plan. Secondly the Neighbourhood Plan incorporates the existing residential development at Merrybent Drive into the settlement boundaries, whereas the Local Plan does not. A modification is proposed to alter the policies map and development limits of the Local Plan so that it reflects the settlement boundaries of the Neighbourhood Plan. This is to ensure that the Plan is effective and consistent with the NPPF on neighbourhood planning.

Notwithstanding the above, one difference which is proposed to be retained in the Local Plan development limits is at the village of Low Coniscliffe where the limits incorporate site 340 East of Gate Lane, Low Coniscliffe a housing commitment. The site was not included within the settlement boundaries of the Neighbourhood Plan as it was not yet under construction. Since the Neighbourhood Plan was made/adopted by the Council in 2019 construction has commenced and the development is well underway. As such it is logical to include the site within the development limits of the Local Plan as they would become out of date quite quickly once the scheme is complete. The Council's proposed policies map amends (DBC4) can be updated to make this clear if considered acceptable.