



Response to Inspector's Matters, Issues and Questions on the Darlington Local Plan

Blue Kayak Planning for Darlington Green Party

M3 Vision, aims, objectives and spatial strategy

Q3.1

The proposed changes to policy SD.1 represent a weakening of the policy position and as such, reduce DBC's ability to ensure that sustainable development is achieved in the Borough.

The removal of the line "Proposed development that conflicts with the development plan will be refused" is concerning. If development which conflicts with the development plan is *not* to be refused, it calls into question the rationale for having a Plan at all. Meanwhile, the line "proposed development that accord with the policies in the ..Plan..will be approved" is superfluous, since development *must* be approved if there is no reason for its refusal, based on policy or other material considerations.

The removal of the line "[permission will be granted unless] specific policies in that Framework indicate that development should be restricted" and its effective replacement with "[permission will be granted unless] policies in the NPPF that protect areas or assets of importance provide a clear reason for refusing [it]" is deeply concerning. The implication is that reasons for refusal in the NPPF or PPG which do *not* pertain to the protection of assets or areas are not valid. This would mean that, for example, sprawl and car dependency, carbon-heavy construction or energy-inefficient buildings, or the cumulative erosion of habitats and landscape quality, design which failed to take into consideration the needs of current and future residents, were not valid reasons for resisting a development.

Q3.2

The settlement hierarchy set out in SH.1 does not appear to be based on very much information. To some extent it is logical insofar as the Service Villages (Heighington, Hurworth-on-Tees and Middleton St George) are larger than the Rural Villages¹. But no detailed assessment appears to have been made of each settlement prior to the Plan being developed which would provide guidance as to its capacity and the impacts of accommodating development there. Such assessments are commonplace in Plan preparation and commonly consider: settlements' population and demographics; the facilities and services that they already possess, whether they are sufficient for the village's population at present, and their capacity for expansion; employment opportunities; distance and access to larger centres, including public transport links; and consideration of landscape, habitats and heritage. A tally of facilities and services in each settlement has been belatedly produced (in the Spatial Distribution of Development Topic Paper, February 2021) but it is cursory, without consideration of the size or quality of any facility or the relationship of the stock of facilities to the population of the settlement. In any case, it cannot possibly have informed the distribution of development.

¹ <https://citypopulation.de/en/uk/northeastengland/>



As we state below, whatever the merits of the settlement hierarchy as set out in policy SH.1, it is undermined by subsequent policies and allocations which contradict it.

Q3.3

As we discuss in our response to Matter 2, the amount of housing development proposed for the Borough as a whole is very much exaggerated; and as we state in our response to Q3.4 and Matter 4, the development limits and allocations are further unjustified because of the very low density of development upon them, which means that much more land has been allocated for development than would be necessary even if the housing predictions were justified, which they are not.

Those points aside, the broad distribution of development is flawed in two major respects. Firstly, while most allocated sites are in and around the town of Darlington itself, there are a few villages to which large allocations of development have been made. In two cases – Heighington and Hurworth-on-Tees – the proposed allocations, of 97 and 214 dwellings respectively – are almost as great, in terms of percentage increase, as the increase in the population of Darlington itself. Therefore it is hard to claim that development here has been allocated merely to “meet local needs and facilitate economic diversification”; these villages have been treated, in effect, as if they were main settlements. But this discrepancy between principle and action is small in comparison with the treatment of Middleton St George. This village has been allocated development which would lead to a 53.9% increase in the population – this is certainly not proportionate. No consideration appears to have been given to the idea that this settlement’s facilities and transport networks might be overloaded by too great an allocation, or that its character might be affected. Furthermore, there is no reference in the plan to additional services and social infrastructure requirements to support the additional population, meaning that existing and new residents are likely to end up relying on cars for all but essential needs. There is no clustering of services and, although policy IN 10 allocates a site (site 247) for educational purposes, this is not defined in the Policies Map. It also does not take into account the developing evidence base of MSG’s Neighbourhood Plan, which whilst not yet adopted, has been independently evidenced and is publicly available.

Settlement	Darlington	Heighington	Hurworth on Tees	Middleton St George
Dwellings allocated	8029	97	214	906
People (2.4 per dwelling)	19269.6	232.8	513.6	2174.4
Current population	104014	1347	2814	4035
Percentage increase	18.5	17.3	18.3	53.9

Secondly, the pattern of distribution, both in theory in policy SH1, and in practice in later policies, is contradicted by the stated housing requirements for neighbourhood areas in policy H1. In this policy:



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- Low Coniscliffe and Merrybent are given a housing requirement of 1520, although they are supposed to be Rural Villages in which development quantities will be tailored to meet “clearly identified local needs” – which, according to the Neighbourhood Plan, would mean an addition of 23 dwellings. The housing requirement apparently refers to the large allocations in between Low Coniscliffe and Darlington itself, which look set to subsume it within the larger settlement. There is no clear narrative around local services and social infrastructure etc. The nearest shops, at Mowden Shops are, at their closest, 500m across the Baydale Beck valley; from the furthest reaches of the site, facilities and services are much more distant.
- Sadberge is given a null housing requirement (no dwellings), although a site is allocated to it in the Plan.
- Hurworth is given a housing requirement of 625 dwellings which, if built, would increase its population by 53.3%, almost as much as Middleton St George. Again, little consideration is given to accessibility and location and the ability of local services to meet augmented local needs.
- Middleton St George is given a housing requirement of 260; since this obviously contradicts with the allocations, it is proposed that this be amended to 906 – the total number of dwellings proposed in allocations. Clearly, this housing requirement has not been calculated with reference to local need, but with reference to demand for sites.

Q3.4

If development limits had been set in order to direct development towards the most sustainable locations – those whose development would maximise the benefits to Darlington and its people, while minimising environmental, social and other impacts – they might be expected to:

- a. Base their decisions upon a thorough, rigorous and impartial assessment of the characteristics of proposed development sites, and the impacts, positive and negative, of developing each one.* This has only been completed in part. A Landscape Character Assessment of the Borough and of some larger proposed development sites has been completed. However, there has been no separate biodiversity assessment of the sites, not even on a desktop basis (the Habitats Regulations Assessment, quite rightly, only considers Natura 2000 sites). There is no analysis of flood risk – although several of the sites have extensive areas of fluvial or surface water flood risk. The Local Plan microsite does not contain a description of the Borough’s Local Wildlife Sites, Local Geological Sites and Local Nature Reserves, and the Borough’s Sites of Special Scientific Interest do not even feature on the Proposals Map. The Heritage Impact Assessment only covers four allocated sites – the Cattle Mart, Great Burdon, Skerningham and Faverdale - plus Commercial/Kendrew St, which is mentioned as a regeneration site within the town centre but is not an allocated housing site; and another two sites, Ingenium Parc, and DVTA South, which do not feature in the current Plan. An additional HIA carried out in December 2020, long after the consultation period on the draft Plan, only considers two more, Beech Crescent East and Blackwell Grange East. The HELAA covers these constraints only insofar as it provides the assessor with “yes/ no” boxes to tick against each category of constraint but does not require any evidence to back this up. There has been no assessment of sites which would be



suitable for (and which should potentially be reserved for) large scale renewable energy generation such as wind.

- b. *Exclude sites known to have value in terms of landscape, townscape, biodiversity, heritage or cultural assets.* Because the information collected with regard to each allocated site is so deficient, it is not possible to establish the extent of features of value upon each site. However, as we discuss in our responses to Matter 4, it is very likely that most of the proposed development sites are, or contain, features of value in their undeveloped state. Apart from the smaller urban infill sites, they are large greenfield sites within an established agricultural landscape, containing hedgerows, mature trees and deciduous woodlands, public rights of way and ancient tracks. Great crested newts are known to be present on the Skerningham site, as the HELAA admits, and local naturalists have records of red- and amber-listed species on site. The Landscape Sensitivity Study found that several of the allocated development sites had “medium” or “medium-high” landscape or visual sensitivity. The (incomplete) Heritage Impact Assessment pointed out the existence of features including deserted mediaeval villages, a ruined manor house, early industrial installations and World War II artefacts upon several sites (as we discuss with regard to Matter 4), but also noted the potential for further cultural and historic artefacts to be discovered on many of the sites. What is more, an earlier version of the HELAA – the 2015 SHLAA – found the Skerningham site to be unsuitable for development because of its landscape and biodiversity value.
- c. *Exclude sites whose development might increase flood risk, to existing or future residents or visitors.* All of the large greenfield sites contain quite extensive areas of surface water flood risk; some, notably Greater Faverdale and Skerningham, contain areas of fluvial flood risk, too.
- d. *Reflect a pattern of development that promotes the efficient use of land, with compact and walkable neighbourhoods (compatible with the Healthy New Towns principles) and the ability to maintain good public transport networks; exclude sites whose development would lead to sprawl and car dependency.* The large greenfield site allocations in the Plan are, almost without exception, largely severed from the existing urban fabric by barriers such as impermeable development (Skerningham, Low Coniscliffe, Great Burdon) railway lines (Hurworth Moor), industrial estates (Faverdale, Lingfield Point East), and watercourses (Low Coniscliffe, Great Burdon). Although many are much larger than some of the villages within the Borough, only Faverdale and Skerningham are expected to incorporate local facilities and services; in both cases, a “neighbourhood centre” is required, but both sites are far too big for any centre to be within walking distance of all but a small proportion of new residents. Worst of all, with the exception of Central Park, all sites with over 200 dwellings are planned to be built at extremely low densities: Hall Farm achieves the highest densities at 23 dwellings per hectare (dph) but Faverdale’s density is 11 dph, and Skerningham’s only 9. (The claim will be made that these sites are not intended to be built out in full as housing; but the policy and masterplan diagrams associated with these sites are too vague for it to be clear exactly how much of land is to be allocated for housing, and in what configuration.) Governmental guidance instructs local authorities to plan for higher densities²: the NPPF

² <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/effective-use-of-land#planning-for-higher-density-development>; also see the NPPF,



discusses it at length (paras 122-3). As well as constituting efficient use of land, higher-density development is known to have benefits in terms of supporting the growth of local businesses and community facilities, making public transport services viable, reducing carbon emissions and air pollution, and facilitating active travel. If a minimum density for suburban development is 35 dwellings³ then the amount of land on allocated or committed housing sites in the Plan would be sufficient to accommodate 41,479 houses.

- e. *Establish a pattern of development which would meet the needs of current and future residents.* The very dispersed pattern of development established by the Plan's development limits fails to meet the needs of a town with an ageing population. This demographic tends to live in smaller households than the population at large, and has a greater incidence of health issues which preclude driving. Very low-density development, made of larger dwellings, with little or no facilities and services within walking distance, and poorly-designed for public transport, is unlikely to be suitable for these older residents of Darlington.
- f. *Avoid a pattern of development that would cause severe traffic and transport issues.* As we discuss with regard to Matter 4, many of the allocated housing sites were deemed unsuitable for development in the 2015 SHLAA because of the predicted impacts in terms of traffic generation and therefore congestion on the highway network as a whole, including strategic roads. Elsewhere, the cumulative effect of multiple developments is already having an impact – most obviously in Middleton St George, where local road networks are already struggling to cope and there is little opportunity to improve local public transport.
- g. *Foster the redevelopment of brownfield land.* All but a few small infill sites are on greenfield sites in the countryside which have never been developed. Although some smaller infill sites are included in the Plan, mostly because permission has already been granted for development upon them, the Plan's general strategy is to maximise greenfield development. Indeed, brownfield sites mentioned within the Plan do not always feature as housing allocations: the Town Centre Fringe is described as an area for "mixed-use development" but no figure is put upon the number of dwellings to be accommodated there; and the Commercial St/ Kendrew Street site is only mentioned rather than allocated. Although a number of windfall sites have come forward within the urban area over the period of Plan formulation, the fact that the development limits have been set so broadly, and so much greenfield land included within them, may actually disincentivise brownfield development.
- h. *Include all sites allocated within the Local Plan.* A few sites are allocated outside settlement limits, notably site 394, near Hurworth Moor; site 016 and 384, at Middleton St George; and site 078, at Sadberge. This is illogical: when development limits can be transgressed even within the Plan itself, their robustness is called into question.
- i. *Avoid the creation of small areas of "white land" in between development limits and severance factors such as roads, railways and watercourses.* A pocket of "white land" is left in between the A67 and sites 249 and 041, to the north of Low Coniscliffe.

In many respects the development limits are a reflection of land ownership (and hence the aspiration to develop) rather than of an assessment of development needs set against the potential

³ There is no standard, but 35 dph is low – see, for example, <https://www.building.co.uk/technical-case-studies/housing-density-does-it-stack-up/5092832.article> and <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/specification/planning-suburban-housing-density>



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environmental impacts of that development. They are a reflection of a strategy which is not so much to plan for future development, but to set the rules as loosely as possible so that future development in whatever form will always be permissible. This is contrary to DBC's legal obligations to protect the natural and built environment and minimise carbon emissions, and its obligations to its citizens to create better places. It also undermines the very purpose of planning, whose only power lies in resisting bad-quality development, or development in the wrong places, in the hope that what is proposed instead becomes good-quality development in the right places.

We note that one of the Plan's four main Overarching Aims is "Deliver new development that is capable of facilitating local or strategic infrastructure." As we have said elsewhere, this is a major concern because it implies that the Plan strategy has been directed, not by need, but by the desire to fund the eight new roads listed in policy IN1. If this is so, the very broad development limits – which have significant implications for the local and global environment, and for the quality of place within new development – are determined by an aspiration which directly contradicts the NPPF's requirement (para 103) to actively manage patterns of growth in support of sustainable transport.