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# Inspector's Matters Issues and Questions

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Examination of the Darlington Local Plan

Part 1 Hearings (Matter 3)



## Contents

Introduction	1
Matter 3 – Vision, Aims and Spatial Strategy	3



## Introduction

We have been instructed on behalf of our clients, Story Homes, to submit a response to the Examination of the Darlington Local Plan: Inspector's Matters, Issues and Questions.

Story Homes are a medium-sized housebuilder with 30 years' experience of delivering high quality aspirational housing in the North East, Cumbria, Lancashire and Scotland. Story Homes have successfully delivered several schemes in the Borough of Darlington including Paddocks View in Middleton St George and The Willows in Blackwell.

Story Homes continues to invest in the Borough and the representations made to the emerging Darlington Local Plan ('eDLP') provide constructive comments necessary to ensure the Borough continues to grow.

Story Homes is promoting three sites through this local plan process; Great Burdon (Allocation 020); Middleton St George (Allocation 099) and Hurworth on Tees (Unallocated).

This Statement should be read in conjunction with all previous representations made on behalf of our clients.

Our clients are committed to ensuring the promoted allocations and the eDLP are sound and robust. Our comments will therefore focus on the following Matters:

- Matter 1: - Legal and Procedural Requirements and other General Matters
- Matter 2: Amount of development needed in the Borough
- Matter 3: Vision, aims, objectives and spatial strategy
- Matter 4: Housing development
- Matter 5: Meeting particular housing needs
- Matter 9- – Transport and other infrastructure
- Matter 10 - Other strategic and development management policies

# Inspector's Matters Issues and Questions

Story Homes

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This statement addresses a number of questions raised by the Inspector under Matter 3: Vision Aims and Spatial Strategy

## Matter 3 – Vision, Aims and Spatial Strategy

### 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?**

Policy SH1 is the strategic policy which describes the role of the different settlements in the Borough of Darlington and the hierarchy in which they sit. It describes three tiers within the hierarchy; Darlington Urban Area, Service Villages and Rural Villages.

Policy SH1 is based on up to date evidence, most recently the Spatial Distribution of Development Topic Paper (February 2021) which summarises the Council's position in this respect.

Our client is promoting three sites in the Borough.

The first site at Great Burdon sits adjacent to the built up area of Darlington itself (allocation 020) and once developed would become part of the Darlington Urban Area, maintaining the town's 'role as a leading sub-regional centre for transport connectivity, services, employment and retail and leisure.' This site therefore fully accords with the settlement hierarchy and as one of the largest allocations in the plan, is consistent with the primacy of the urban area in terms of the distribution of growth.

The other sites are located on the edge of the Service Villages of Hurworth (an unallocated site) and Middleton St George (allocation 099).

Policy SH1 states that Service Villages should be "maintained" to ensure that they continue to *"offer a range of facilities and services" that "meet local needs and facilitate the economic diversification of rural areas."* Our client supports the recognition of the valuable role that Service Villages play in supporting the sustainability of local communities. Hurworth and Middleton St George have most of the services which local people need on a day to day basis including schools, convenience retail, restaurants, cafes, formal parks, churches, village halls, doctors, dentists and public transport (Middleton St George also has a train station). The future success of these settlements is critical to the future viability of these services and the future sustainability of the communities that rely on them.

The NPPF (paragraph 78) advises that *"housing should be located where it will enhance or maintain the vitality of rural communities"* (Savills emphasis). It states that *"Planning policies should identify opportunities for villages to grow and thrive, especially where this will support local services. Where there are groups of smaller settlements, development in one village may support services in a village nearby."* (Savills emphasis)

Story Homes considers that the villages of Hurworth and Middleton St George can play an important role in meeting the housing needs of the wider rural hinterland in Darlington in a sustainable manner which protects the vitality of these settlements as well as their services and facilities. Any shortfall in market and affordable housing in the rural areas can be met within these Service Villages.

Our client considers that the wording of Policy SH1 could be stronger to recognise the importance of growth in these settlements and to put in place a requirement for the local authority to maintain the vitality and services of these villages specifically. Paragraph 4.0.9 of the Regulation 19 Local Plan recognises that the Borough's villages need growth to survive, "*whether it be by retaining services or supporting new development, such as affordable housing, that help to maintain sustainable communities*". Furthermore, the 'Proposed Submission Local Plan Sustainability Appraisal (August 2020) confirms (Table 3.3) that a shortfall of housing and affordable housing provision in rural areas is a key sustainability issue.

It should also be recognised that whilst Middleton St George, Hurworth and Heighington are all Service Villages and therefore in the same tier, each of these villages has a different role in the Borough both in terms of scale and function. Middleton St George is roughly 50% bigger than Hurworth and twice as large as Heighington, so in the pool of Service Villages it clearly sits at the top in terms of scale, but also in terms of services, transport (rail and air travel) and access to employment (existing and planned). One example is that in the adopted Core Strategy Middleton St George is the only settlement outside of the Main Urban Area of Darlington to have a designated Local Centre (Policy CS9, page 41). Another example is that the village is the only Service Village to have its own railway station in the village. There is a recognition of this in Policy SH1 which states that "*The broad distribution of development in the Local Plan area will be shaped by the **role and function of places***" (Savills' emphasis). This shows that whilst there is a hierarchy in place, the distribution of development will be shaped by the specific role and function of the towns and villages in the Borough. Given the role and function of Middleton St George, and its strategic location next to the airport and the gateway to Teesside, it is justified and positively prepared that it has a heightened role for housing growth than the other Service Villages, accommodating a greater level of growth across the plan period.

Following the Issues and Scoping Sustainability Appraisal report in 2016, broad strategic development options were identified with potential to accommodate growth in the Local Plan. The Reg 19 Sustainability Appraisal assessed 9 of these potential growth strategies:

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

Middleton St George is therefore the only Service Village to be considered as part of the Council's "broad strategic development options", demonstrating its elevated status. Furthermore, the conclusion of the Sustainability Appraisal's assessment of growth options was that growth around Middleton St George delivered positive sustainability outcomes comparable with those of other strategic growth options including North West Darlington and East Darlington:

*"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."*

Finally, the decision for housing growth in Middleton St George and in the other service villages is discussed in paragraph 7.26 of the Council's distribution Topic Paper states:

*"Distribution of sites across the main urban area and service villages was not set by specific percentage requirements, due to the compact nature of the borough and reasonably straight forward settlement hierarchy. The approach was simply to allocate the most suitable and sustainable sites for development. This did result in a greater proportion of housing growth at Middleton St George, as sites put forward for allocation at Hurworth and Heighington did have more constraints. The existing settlement layout of Middleton St George also meant there were more logical options for expansion. The amount of development planned for this service village was not considered to be inappropriate and the settlement had the existing service provision to support this growth."*

Overall, the Council's decision to define Middleton St George as a Service Village but locate a level of housing and employment growth in Middleton St George above that in other Service Village is justified and positive prepared. The level of growth delivered through commitments and allocations in Middleton St George is commensurate with its role, function and size and the findings of the Sustainability Appraisal process.

### **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?**

The broad distribution of housing and employment is consistent with the settlement hierarchy, recognising of course that the hierarchy is a broad framework and within it Policy SH1 requires the distribution of development to take into account of the role and function of specific places. There can therefore be no simple arithmetic solution to the distribution of growth. Instead one must look at the role of a settlement at the Borough-level and locally and how that settlement functions. Furthermore, Policy SH1 states that other considerations affecting the broad distribution of growth includes the level required to maintain "facilities and services" and safeguard "the distinctive character of each settlement". Each settlement will of course have different services and different sensitivities which will mean greater or fewer opportunities / requirements for growth.

Middleton St George has a significant level of services and facilities including:

### Transportation

1. A train station which provide services into Darlington, Redcar, Stockton, Middlesbrough and Newton Aycliffe and Bishop Auckland.
2. Regular bus services into Darlington and the airport with the village benefitting from this frequent airport service.
3. Proximity to the airport offering national and international travel options
4. Middleton St George occupies a strategic location between Darlington and Teesside (located on the A67 one of the main routes between the Stockton and Darlington).

### Employment

1. Middleton St George has direct access to the Teesside International Airport and the Airport Employment Park (circa 55ha of industrial and airport related uses).
2. A further 40ha of employment space is proposed to be allocated to the south of the Airport for more industrial and airport uses.

### Services

1. Community Centre with clubs including fitness, crafts and interest groups.
2. Pub, bookmakers, restaurants, takeaways, vets, barbers, pet shop, convenience store, hair salon, cash machine, post office, pharmacy, off licence, care homes
3. St George's Academy – Primary school with nurse
4. Land reserved for a new school in the Local Plan
5. Doctors and dentists
6. Cricket club and social club
7. Water Park for leisure and angling
8. Allotment gardens at Sadberge Rd/A67 junction
9. Multi Use Games Area
10. Park and playing fields
11. Hotel (Devonport in Middleton One Row)

Middleton St George has commitments and allocations totalling 906 dwellings (Hurworth has around 839 dwellings with Heighington around 138). Given Middleton St George's role in the Borough, with its own train station and its proximity to Tees Valley Airport, Airport Industrial Estate and the wider Teesside area, the level of growth attributed to it is commensurate with its status in the settlement hierarchy and the requirements of Policy SH1 to consider a range of matters including opportunities for and constraints to growth.

### 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?**

Our client supports the development limits to the Darlington urban area and Middleton St George.