

Richard Cowen for
Gillan Gibson

Representor number
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**STATEMENT OF RICHARD COWEN TO THE EXAMINATION IN PUBLIC
INTO THE
DARLINGTON LOCAL PLAN**

RELATING TO MATTER 8

In making this statement, I am aware that Mrs Gibson was particularly critical of the proposal for only 2 District and Local Centres. I represent that this is a fundamental issue with the Plan that needs to be corrected.

Q8.1. Is the hierarchy of centres defined in table 8.1 of the Plan justified, and will it be effective in helping to ensure that main town centre use developments are suitably located consistent with national policy?

I represent that it is not justified to ignore other centres in the Borough, be they within the Urban Area or in a Service or Rural Village. To believe that a town the size of Darlington has only 1 Local and 1 District Centre is illogical. Mrs Gibson's representations on this issue need to be fully addressed.

The NPPF does not directly address Local and District Centres other than in the Glossary in the definition of "Town Centre" from which it appears that they fall within the general definition of a "Town Centre".

The NPPF also defines "Main Town Centre Uses" and, while "Main Town Centre" itself is not defined in the Plan or NPPF, I represent that Darlington Town Centre must be the Main Town Centre. But I represent that other centres that are not just parades of shops (as mentioned in the definition of "Town Centre") must fall within the definition of "Town Centre" and should be included within the Policy. There is nothing in the definition of "Town Centre" to specify the types of shop that should be there, just that it should be more than a "parade". For this reason, I represent that the comments of the Council to suggest other centres should be excluded because they do not contain certain types of shops is misguided.

It is perhaps noteworthy that in paragraph 8.2.1 of the Plan, the Council states

“The District and Local Centres are important in meeting local needs, providing food shopping and a range of other local shops, services and leisure uses. They are both accessible and help reduce the need to travel. These centres are generally healthy with exceptionally low vacancy rates”

While text is not policy, the reference here to “local needs” is revealing. It suggests centres throughout the Borough. However, the only 3 centres named are

- 1) The Town Centre, clearly the main shopping area for Darlington and indeed a wider area
- 2) Cockerton, situated little more than 1 mile to the west of the Town Centre and
- 3) Mowden, situated approximately the same distance to the west of the Town Centre and less than a mile to the south of Cockerton.

In other words, there is no centre, district or local, to the north, east or south of the Town Centre or in any of the villages, be they service or rural villages. This hardly appears to the “local” for much of the Borough.

While I do not have the necessary details for various areas of Darlington, Mr Chisholm has prepared the following for inclusion in this Statement

Evidence of Mr Chisholm

The Council has produced no evidence to support the naming of only Cockerton and Mowden as District and Local Centres in the Policy.

A succession of planning documents since the 1997 Local Plan continued to include the ‘full’ list of centres and their location and composition are detailed in the Retail Technical Note No5 2013 (Examination Library document OTH1) and confirmed in the subsequent Interim Planning Statement The Technical Note should be reviewed and additional centres included to the policy with revised boundaries.

The hierarchy and distribution of District and Local centres emerged over a period of time, by extending existing centres and creating new ones; thus providing as many residents as possible with sustainably accessible local retail and other services.

Some of these, e.g. Whinfield and West Park, were specifically planned to accompany significant new residential areas of the town. Others are proposed for the Faverdale Great Park and Skerningham strategic housing allocations.

It is therefore essential that the Local Plan seeks to protect the role of these centres (for the benefit of the residents of the areas they serve) against isolated and out of centre proposals, whilst at the same time making sure that new development at these centres do not impact against the regeneration of the Town Centre.

However, opportunities for additional development at the local centres are very limited and are unlikely to have any effect on the Town Centre, if uses and permitted goods to be sold are properly controlled.

In fact, it can be argued that a number of retail outlets which have established in out of centre locations are more likely to impact the Town Centre. Examples include Dunelm at Morton Park, The Range and TK Maxx (which left the Town Centre) at the Darlington Retail Park, Argos which Sainsbury's moved from the Town Centre to its Victoria Road superstore and the recently approved Home Bargains store on Faverdale Industrial Estate. Most of the large food superstores sell other goods, particularly clothing, which impacts this traditional Town Centre function. The Darlington Retail Park was originally limited to the sale of large items which could not be sold by normal retail methods in the Town Centre. This restriction appears to have been removed and anything can be sold there now without regard to the Town Centre.

There is no evidence to support Mowden as the only Local Centre worthy of inclusion in the policy. Its composition is very much the same as in the Technical Note, with the Co-op occupying the foodstore unit, but the other centres compare well and in some cases outperform it.

Middleton St George Local Centre

This is a concentration of shops etc, centred at The Square but with others along Middleton Lane. The Note omits the pub, The Havelock Arms, from the list and chart but refers to it in the text. A new café has opened in Central Buildings. The centre has a pharmacy, which Mowden does not.

In January 2018, the Council granted planning permission for three small retail units (as part of housing and primary school development) at the eastern end of the village, to meet the growing need generated by proposed housing developments in the parish (17/01195/OUT). In the Committee Report, the Planning Officer acknowledged the existence of the Local Centre and said:

'The nearest existing centre is at Middleton St George to the west. This centre is referenced in Core Strategy policy CS9 and is mapped in the Interim Planning Position Statement. The defined retail centre is tightly drawn and comprises of two storey premises with no open land for development potential. It is not considered that a sequentially preferable site is available.'

Neasham Road Local Centre

The vacant unit referred to in the Note has since been occupied by Poundworld, otherwise the centre and the other shops on Neasham Road are as described in the Note. ASDA objected to the exclusion of Neasham Road as a Local Centre, for reasons explained in their objection.

West Park Local Centre

This must be recognised as an excellent example of a local centre, specifically designed as part of the West Park strategic housing area. A comprehensive network of footpaths and cycleways give sustainable access for residents.

Some businesses have changed names and there are a number of uses not listed in the Note. The betting shop is no more. Additional uses in phase 1 are Cooplands (bakers), West Park Financial Planning Consultants, a family pub (The White Heifer) and the B&A property shop. Most significantly is Phase 2 of the centre, with the M&S Food Hall and the Aldi foodstore.

Immediately adjoining the centre are Alderman Leach Primary School, Kids 1st children's nursery and a public park with a children's playground.

Whinfield Local Centre

Whinfield was planned and promoted by the Borough Council in the 1970s as a centre for this expanding area of town. It is connected to the residential areas by a network of footpaths and cycleways. Not mentioned in the 2013 Note are the adjoining Whinfield Medical Practice, Rowlands pharmacy, Oban Court sheltered housing, The Grange Care Home, Whinfield Primary school and the filling station. ASDA objected to the exclusion of Whinfield as a Local Centre, for reasons explained in their objection.

Yarm Road Local Centre

This centre is much as it was in 2013, with three foodstores, bakery, take-aways, betting shop and a dental surgery. With the Wheatsheaf pub opposite and the Post Office along Yarm Road, it offers an essential range of services for local people.

In general the Local Centres have performed well and there are no To Let or For Sale notices, unlike in the Town Centre. If Darlington is to have a sustainable future then everyone deserves to have their centres protected, not just those people fortunate enough to live in Cockerton or Mowden.

North Road District Centre

This was created out of the redevelopment of the former North Road Railway Works, with the intention of providing a modern retail focus for the regenerating older northern part of the urban area opposite the established small shops on North Road.. The extent and composition of this centre is larger than as described in the 2013 Technical Note, Morrisons and almost 100 other shops, services and community activities offering a wide range of amenities to the public. To the west is the Trade Park (serving both trade and public) and the retail etc units on Meynell Road, including B&M Home Bargains (with garden centre), MacDonalds and car repair workshops and more trade outlets open to the public. The former B&Q DIY store is now occupied by Poundstretcher. On the other side of North Road, the Albert Road Retail Park contains Aldi, Iceland, KFC, Greggs, Subway, Card Factory, Barnardos and Jollyes Pet superstore. There have been changes in occupancy in the older small retail and other services units on North Road and Whessoe Road and, although there are some vacancies, there are no For Sale or To Let signs.

Instead of recognising the reality of this extensive centre and extending its boundary to encompass the uses described above, the emerging plan behaves as though the North Road centre does not exist. Part of the area within the District Centre

boundary has been combined with the area to the west to create the Meynell Road West Employment Area (site 346). This is a strange situation as most of the uses there fall outside the suggested uses permitted by emerging policy E1 and there are few vacancies to allow those uses to establish. A similar anomaly exists at the Albert Road retail park, which is included in the oddly named Meynell Road East Employment Area (site 366).

North Road should be reinstated as a District Centre, with extended boundaries.

Conclusion

The Retail Technical Note should be brought up to date (and periodically reviewed in future) so that its findings can inform the emerging Local Plan after meaningful public consultation. Without such a review, the emerging Local Plan is ill-informed and is not sound.

I therefore represent that Policy TC4 is not justified and is not consistent with national policy. To do this, the Council must consider adding more centres to this Policy so that there are recognised local centres around the Borough, including in villages.

Q8.3. Is the threshold of 500 sqm for retail impact assessments in policy TC5 justified and consistent with national policy?

Mrs Gibson raised the point that Policy T5 uses the word “additional”, which could mean that it only applies to extensions.

While I do not wish to make representations about the 500 sqm threshold or national policy, I represent that this is an important point for consideration. There can be no implied situations in planning so if it is intended that this policy should apply to all such developments over 500 sqm, it should say so. I represent that the word “additional” should be deleted.