

Response to Inspector's Matters Issues & Questions on Darlington Local Plan

Matter 8 - Town centres and retail development

Q 8.1 – Hierarchy of town centres

Policy TC4 cannot be effective as the Policy names only two centres whilst several other similarly-sized local centres - and with similar facilities - have been omitted, which are equally deserving of protection to ensure that they remain viable. The Council has produced no evidence to support the naming of only Cockerton and Mowden as District and Local Centres in the Policy. We would argue that centres at West Park, North Road (around its junction with Thompson Street East & West up to the Salters Lane roundabout; around the junction of North Road and Whessoe Road and up towards Denmark Street), Northgate from its junction with Station Road towards town, Whinfield, Yarm Road, Neasham Road, Haughton Green, and Middleton St George (and potentially more) should be included.

A succession of planning documents since the 1997 Local Plan included the 'full' list of centres and their location and composition are detailed in the Retail Technical Note No.5 2013 (Examination Library document OTH1) and confirmed in the subsequent Interim Planning Statement. The Technical Note should be reviewed, and additional centres included in 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; elsewhere food supermarkets were approved near existing shops and services, e.g. Yarm Road and North Road. Others are proposed for the Faverdale Great Park and Skerningham strategic housing allocations, yet this policy would not afford them any protection.

Removing Centres from the hierarchy will remove any protection from detrimental impact of any future retail proposals which are only required to assess impact on defined centres. The result of this could be impact on the viability and vitality of these important local facilities. This is important to ensure that adequate services are provided locally to residents so as to design for 15 or 20-minute neighbourhoods (where all day-to-day needs can be met within a 15- or 20-minute walk from home). It is 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 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 (with planning permission pending for other large retail developments on a nearby site). These out-of-centre stores reduce journeys into the town centre not only for food purchases (with footfall having dropped over the years in the covered market), but most of the large food superstores also sell other goods, particularly clothing, which impacts on 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. These restrictions should be re-imposed / strengthened to ensure the continued viability of the town centre, and to allow for more sustainable travel to shops.

- Middleton St George Local Centre

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, due to the reduction in protection this involved.

- 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. Phase 2 of the centre, includes an M&S Food Hall and an 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, due to the loss of protections involved.

- 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.

Overall, 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 every area of the town deserves to have their local 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), MacDonaldis 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 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.

Q 8.2 – Darlington Town Centre

We agree that retail development should occur primarily within the town centre area, and should meet the sequential tests. However, the Town Centre area has in recent years been contracting, so it would best support the viability of the existing town centre area to focus redevelopment in any unused units / areas within this zone rather than spreading additional development over a wider town centre extension – and would argue that this land area should better be used for easily accessible low-car housing development.

Due to increasing trends towards online purchasing, we agree that there is unlikely to be continued demand for large comparative retail units, and therefore that demand for such uses is likely to be met through smaller store units over coming years. There has been a trend towards smaller store units of independent start-ups, so these should be designed into / showcased in any town centre redevelopment, to facilitate this and ensure Darlington's offer is unique and not populated purely by national chain stores.

We suggest that inclusion of a greater mix of uses should be considered within the Primary Shopping Area including restaurants, cafes and entertainment as well as creating pleasant public green space close to shops, so people enjoy spending time within the urban area, making it feel vibrant. This should be mixed development with offices, plus car-free flats and townhouse developments above new retail development (especially around the outer edge of the town centre and continuing into the town centre fringe), as it has been shown that the best way to ensure town centres remain viable is to provide desirable accommodation within them, so that there is a ready supply of local convenience shoppers close by to maintain the viability of the stores.

As coronavirus lockdowns have resulted in many more people working from home – a trend which is likely to continue even when staff are allowed back into offices – then demand may increase for serviced mailbox services, hot-desking offices and video-conferencing facilities, so such remote working facilities should be designed into any town centre redevelopment. Done right, these changes in working patterns should result

in greater use of Darlington's town centre, as fewer people have to commute to larger urban centres for work.

All development within the town centre area should be planned to be car-free / pedestrianised, to ensure this is a pleasant, safe and desirable location for residents to enjoy spending time browsing stores, meeting friends and eating. Such properties represent a gap in the market which is not currently provided, and are likely to be popular with young people who want to be close to jobs and entertainment, and with retirees who desire easy access to the town centre shops and services. They will be close to bus, rail and taxi services for any trips they make. The town centre design must also prioritise easy permeability by walking and cycling, and with bus stop / station facilities on the town centre edge to reduce the danger of collisions.

As identified in the CSE's review of Darlington's Local Plan, there is a district heating policy – development should be prioritised in locations where this can apply, in the Town centre, or in the town centre fringe.

Q 8.3 – Retail impact assessments

The Planning Committee has over recent years permitted significant development to occur outside of the town centre, which has contributed to weakening its viability. This policy should therefore be strengthened to specify that large out of town development must not normally be accepted, since this will both cause additional vehicle journeys hence pollution and carbon emissions, as well as further damaging footfall in the town centre. In exceptional circumstances these may be permitted only providing the development is designed to serve primarily local retail needs e.g. a new village / local centre, and designed so main modes of access are via walking, cycling and local bus. Additional large out of town box store developments with vast car parking should not be permitted for reasons of being damaging to the economy and also highly environmentally damaging.

Q 8.4 – Darlington Town Centre Fringe

Darlington has a huge area (c. 70 ha) of brownfield "town centre fringe" land. Whilst we recognise that some of it may be contaminated, hence more costly to treat and develop, central government has launched the Towns Fund to facilitate town centre regeneration: such funding could be used for this purpose.

Whilst some areas may be suitable for industrial / employment use, as discussed in our responses to Matter 4, the town's demographics show increasing numbers of singles and couples living without dependent children - either because they never had them, or because they have left home – and with our aging population, there is strong demand for retirement accommodation and accessible / adapted bungalows. This town centre fringe land would be perfect for such types of housing development: highly insulated, affordable and desirable low-carbon flats, bungalows and townhouses – close to jobs, services, shops and entertainment, and also to transport routes to opportunities across the town and beyond. As mentioned in point Q 8.2, the viability of the town centre depends on having a "captive market" of users of the shops and services, and building densely packed sustainable homes close to the town centre would assist this. Had the Plan properly followed sequential tests for sustainability of housing site allocations, these brownfield sites would be earmarked first, whilst unsustainable out-of-town greenfield allocations would not be permitted.

As well as assisting town centre viability and providing dense and sustainable urban homes, such redevelopment would also revitalise what has become a "doughnut of deprivation" around the town centre – with the existing small terraced homes here seen as old, undesirable, and populated only by those who cannot afford to live elsewhere. Provision of housing *and on-site green space and green infrastructure* would render the nearby existing areas of the town more desirable, giving more pride in the area, and hence with less of a concentration of problems. Indeed, Section 106 funds should be sought specifically to help improve some of the problems in the neighbouring areas, by for example refurbishment to ensure good insulation of the old and draughty solid-walled homes. Good planning for new development should be

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used to revitalise existing neighbourhoods too, and this would be a perfect example of it. Building homes on car park areas of Commercial Street (including derelict nightclub venues), Kendrew Street, Garden Street, Chesnut Street and Brunswick Street (informal car park near Cricketers Hotel), and potentially also Park Place car park would help to revitalise the wards of Northgate, Park East and Bank Top respectively, by providing a pleasant route into the town centre (rather than an urban car-park desert as currently). Repurposing of existing – often historic – buildings for subdivision and conversion into flats would also be welcomed.

Clearly such a significant repurposing of car parking areas would require prioritisation of alternative transport provision for residents to access the town centre, such as planning physical infrastructure for safe, segregated and prioritised sustainable transport corridors, and policies such as subsidising of buses outside peak hours. These are entirely possible, and allocation of these sites for housing would focus the mind of the council to ensure adequate investment in sustainable transport provision and modal shift took place in order to free up this land which is currently an eyesore so it can generate more significant income.

The failure to prioritise the redevelopment of land within the Town Centre Fringe contravenes paragraph 117 of the NPPF, which requires strategic policies to make as much use as possible of brownfield land. Furthermore, given the benefits of prioritising brownfield land in terms of reducing land-take, fostering a compact settlement pattern, and reducing car dependency, the failure to do so undermines the Council's ability to make progress towards its Climate Change Act carbon reduction targets.