

Darlington Borough Council Hearing Statement

May 2021

Matter 8 - Town centres and retail development

Hierarchy of town centres

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?

Darlington Borough has one main town centre which has an indoor and outdoor market. It is important that the vitality and viability of that main centre is maintained especially considering the current climate. The Borough also has a number of retail parks all located within the urban area of Darlington, these have multiple retailers and cannot be claimed to serve the day to day needs of local residents.

The district and local centres identified can truly be described as serving local communities and should be protected to ensure residents can provide daily shopping without having to use motorised transport.

If we were to designate the retail parks as district or local centres that could lead to the sequential test being assessed against those centres which could lead to more out of town retail to the detriment of the Town Centre. The Council with the addition of Government funding is investing heavily in the Town Centre including the indoor market, street furniture and free Wifi. Any policies which allowed further expansion of out of town retail would be to the detriment of the Town Centre and the investment being carried out.

Darlington town centre (policies TC1-TC3)

Q8.2. Subject to the Council's proposed modification, do policies TC1 to TC3 set out a sound approach to Darlington town centre?

Policies TC1 to TC3 aim to protect Darlington Town Centre, allow it to grow and offer a better convenience choice as well as allow the centre itself to diversify, therefore we believe this is a sound approach.

Retail impact assessments (policy TC5)

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

The Retail Study identified there was limited scope for further retail floorspace in the Borough and we suspect the pandemic has only reduced the need due to online shopping trends. There is a need to offer more choice for convenience shopping in the town centre given that there is only one large convenience store

at the edge of centre. Many of the deprived wards are near the centre, those people with less access to motorised travel and therefore dependant on walking or public transport, so a good convenience offer in the centre is critical.

Against the increase in online shopping the vitality of Darlington town centre remains precarious and any increase of out of town shopping could be devastating for the town centre.

The 'discounter' (such as Aldi and Lidl) occupies shops of approximately 1,000 sq. metres, whilst a 'neighbourhood' top up shop is typically around 250 sq. metres. The discounters are taking an increasing share of the convenience goods market and can no longer be seen as top up shops. There is an increasing interest in this format and size of unit with Iceland launching its Food Warehouse brand and other players such as Farmfoods and Fulton Foods.

Town centres should remain the main focus for shopping including convenience shopping especially for the less mobile such as the elderly and low wage earners.

As mentioned previously the Retail Study concluded that there is limited capacity for additional retail space. Any developments for retail outside of main centres therefore need to be carefully considered against the impact that it may have on those centres. It is considered that a store of over 500 sq. metres gross floorspace could have a negative impact on the vitality and viability of existing centres and therefore any proposals should be required to submit an impact assessment. The 500 sq. metre threshold would exclude the need for the typical neighbourhood store to undergo an impact assessment but include the typical discounters unit.

Darlington town centre fringe (policy T6)

<p>Q8.4. Subject to the Council's proposed modifications, does policy TC6 set out a sound approach for considering development proposals that may come forward in the town centre fringe during the plan period?</p>
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The town centre fringe is a mixed commercial/industrial area which could benefit from environmental improvements. The Council believe that by allowing a flexibility in the uses in this area whilst protecting the town centre would have environmental and economic benefits whilst being a sound approach.