



Document Reference

PS.EVR15

East Cambridgeshire
District Council

Policy LP15 – Retail Uses in Town Centres

November 2017

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1. Introduction and Policy Context

Introduction

- 1.1 East Cambridgeshire District Council is reviewing its Local Plan, which was last adopted in April 2015. The new Local Plan, which is hoped to be adopted in 2018, will provide a framework for development in the district until 2036 and beyond.
- 1.2 This Evidence Report (which is one of a collection) provides background information and justification for policy LP15 (of the Proposed Submission Local Plan, November 2017), which relates to the location of retail uses in town centres.

National policy

- 1.3 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) was published in March 2012 and the National Planning Practice Guidance (NPPG) was introduced in 2014 which offers 'live' government guidance.
- 1.4 Section 2 of the NPPF concerns "ensuring the vitality of town centres", section 3 provides advice for "supporting a prosperous rural economy" and there is a separate section on "Plan-making". The following points are particularly relevant:
 - Paragraph 23 of section 2 states that in drawing up Local Plans, planning authorities should: "*define a network and hierarchy of centres that is resilient to anticipated future economic changes;*" and "*define the extent of town centres and primary shopping areas, based on a clear definition of primary and secondary frontages in designated centres, and set policies that make clear which uses will be permitted in such locations;*" and requires suitable sites to be allocated in town centres and edge of centre sites.
 - Paragraph 24 - 27 of section 2 concerns the application of the sequential test to town centre uses which should be applied to a proportionate, locally set floorspace threshold (or default threshold where one is not set locally).
 - Paragraph 28 of section 3 states that Local Plans should support rural tourism and leisure development and "*promote the retention and development of local services and community facilities in villages, such as local shops, meeting places, sports venues, cultural buildings, public houses and places of worship.*"
 - Paragraph 156 - 157 of the section on plan-making states that the Local Plan should include strategic policies to deliver "*the provision of retail, leisure and other commercial development*" and "*the provision of health, security, community and cultural infrastructure and other local facilities*" and to indicate "*land use designations on a proposals map*"
- 1.5 The NPPG contains a large volume of guidance under the title "ensuring the vitality of town centres" (reference 2b-001 to 2b019). Of this, the following are particularly relevant:
 - *A positive vision or strategy for town centres, articulated through the Local Plan, is key to ensuring successful town centres which enable sustainable economic growth and provide a wide range of social and environmental benefits.* Reference ID: 2b-002-20140306
 - *Strategies should answer the following questions:*
 - *what is the appropriate and realistic role, function and hierarchy of town centres in the area over the plan period? This will involve auditing existing*

centres to assess their role, vitality, viability and potential to accommodate new development and different types of development. This assessment should cover a three-five year period, but should also take the lifetime of the Local Plan into account and be regularly reviewed

- *what is the vision for the future of each town centre? This should consider what the most appropriate mix of uses would be to enhance overall vitality and viability*
- *can the town centre accommodate the scale of assessed need for main town centre uses? This should include considering expanding centres, or development opportunities to enable new development or redevelop existing under-utilised space. It should involve evaluating different policy options (for example expanding the market share of a particular centre) or the implications of wider policy such as infrastructure delivery and demographic or economic change*
- *in what timeframe should new retail floorspace be provided?*
- *what complementary strategies are necessary or appropriate to enhance the town centre and help deliver the vision for its future, and how can these be planned and delivered?*
- *how can parking provision be enhanced and both parking charges and enforcement be made proportionate, in order to encourage town centre vitality?*

Strategies should identify changes in the hierarchy of town centres, including where a town centre is in decline. In these cases, strategies should seek to manage decline positively to encourage economic activity and achieve an appropriate mix of uses commensurate with a realistic future for that town centre.

Ref ID: 2b-003-20140306

- *Local Plans should contain policies to apply the sequential test to proposals for main town centre uses that may come forward outside the sites or locations allocated in the Local Plan. Reference ID: 2b-009-20140306*
- *The impact test only applies to proposals exceeding 2,500 square metres gross of floorspace unless a different locally appropriate threshold is set by the local planning authority. In setting a locally appropriate threshold it will be important to consider the:*
 - *scale of proposals relative to town centres*
 - *the existing viability and vitality of town centres*
 - *cumulative effects of recent developments*
 - *whether local town centres are vulnerable*
 - *likely effects of development on any town centre strategy*
 - *impact on any other planned investment*

As a guiding principle impact should be assessed on a like-for-like basis in respect of that particular sector (e.g. it may not be appropriate to compare the impact of an out of centre DIY store with small scale town-centre stores as they would normally not compete directly). Retail uses tend to compete with their most comparable competitive facilities. Conditions may be attached to appropriately control the impact of a particular use.

Where wider town centre developments or investments are in progress, it will also be appropriate to assess the impact of relevant applications on that investment. Key considerations will include:

- the policy status of the investment (i.e. whether it is outlined in the Development Plan)*
- the progress made towards securing the investment (for example if contracts are established)*
- the extent to which an application is likely to undermine planned developments or investments based on the effects on current/ forecast turnovers, operator demand and investor confidence*

Reference ID: 2b-016-20140306

- 1.6 The above NPPF and NPPG policy has been taken into account in preparing the Local Plan as a whole, and policy LP15 in particular.

2 East Cambridgeshire Context in Relation to Policy LP15

- 2.1 Town and village centres are at the heart of our community, and provide a focus for retail and other town centre uses, including, leisure, commercial, office, tourism, cultural and community facilities. The Government is committed to sustaining and enhancing the vitality and viability of these centres, and making town centres a particular focus for development.
- 2.2 A district wide retail study updated was produced in 2012, for the subsequently adopted 2015 Local Plan. We have no evidence to suggest the broad conclusions of that study do not remain valid, and therefore in the interests of preparing the Local Plan as quickly as possible, and within the resources available, no further update of the study was deemed necessary. Its broad conclusions are:
- The focus for comparison goods retailing should continue to be within Ely.
 - It will be important to restrict the spread of high street retailing to out of centre locations.
 - consideration could be given to locating...floorspace in just one or two of the market towns.
 - Although below the national average for vacancy rates there is underlying vulnerability within Soham and Littleport town centres and a need for ongoing monitoring and careful management of future retail development for Ely.
 - Robust retail impact assessments for any future edge of town/out to town developments will continue to be essential.
 - The town centre boundary, and primary shopping frontage within Ely should remain unchanged.
 - The town centre boundary, and primary and secondary shopping frontage within Soham should remain unchanged.
 - The local plan should consider proposals within the Littleport Masterplan to amend the town centre boundary.
- 2.3 Generally speaking, for the Further Draft Local Plan, the policy approach seeks to focus main town centre uses within the identified town centres in the district, wherever possible, in line with national policy.
- 2.4 Broadly speaking, and as suggested by the 2012 study, the focus for retail demand and expansion is Ely, whereas elsewhere, including the market towns, the focus is primarily one around retaining retail floorspace and town centre viability and vitality within the same footprint as at present. The challenge across East Cambridgeshire, with the exception of

Ely, is not one of how to accommodate more retail or other town centre use floorspace, but rather how can we retain existing floorspace.

- 2.5 The town centres of Ely, Soham, and Littleport are key areas for shopping, leisure and business activity in the district. The current boundaries of the town centres are defined in the adopted Local Plan (2015), as are 'primary shopping frontage' and 'secondary shopping frontage' for the larger centre of Ely, where the retail shops are concentrated.

3 Local Plan Policy: Preliminary Draft

- 3.1 The Preliminary Draft Local Plan (February 2016) contained a policy entitled "Retail uses in the town centres". During the Preliminary Draft consultation on the Local Plan, no comments were received in response to this policy. Similarly, no new evidence was brought to our attention which warranted the policy to be amended for the Further Draft Local Plan.
- 3.2 Policy LP15 was, therefore, carried forward into the Further Draft Local Plan.

4 Local Plan Policy: Further Draft

- 4.1 The wording of the policy and supporting text in the Further Draft was unchanged from that consulted on during the Preliminary Draft stage, as set out above. The Further Draft was published for consultation during January – February 2017.
- 4.2 During the Further Draft consultation, no comments were received in response to this policy. Similarly, no new evidence has been brought to our attention which has warranted the policy to be amended for the Proposed Submission Local Plan.
- 4.3 Policy LP15 has, therefore, been carried forward unchanged into the next version of the Local Plan.

5 Alternative Reasonable Options

- 5.1 The following alternative options have been considered for this policy. (Option 1 is the preferred policy approach which has been included in the Further Draft.)
- 5.2 **Option 2:** No policy, and rely on national policy for this subject area. This has been rejected, as there is an expectation in the NPPF to set local policy on retail uses in town centres, town centre boundaries and shopping frontages. Such a policy will ensure a clear policy framework for subsequent planning applications. As such, the option to rely on national policy has been rejected.

6 Conclusion

- 6.1 This Evidence Report demonstrates the rationale for the policy as contained in the Proposed Submission Draft Local Plan (November 2017). It is hoped this helps demonstrate how we have responded to comments received during the consultation stages, as well as how the latest evidence and national guidance has been taken into account.