

Stevenage Borough Local Plan

# Public Examination

Matter 19 Statement

February 2017



## Stevenage Borough Local Plan 2011 – 2031 - Public Examination

### Statement by Stevenage Borough Council (SBC)

#### Matter 19 – Retailing and town centres

##### NB: SBC responses set out in blue font

- 1. *Is the evidence on retail provision up-to-date and robust? How do current retail proposals fit within the overall strategy for retail development?***
- 1.1. All retail studies are underpinned by a mathematical model which seeks to quantify spending capacities and flows and compares this with available and planned capacity. The model is subject to a number of parameters such as population within the catchment area, the spending propensity of that population, levels of competition etc., all of which will change over time.
- 1.2. Studies minimise the risk of becoming out of date by using long-term projections which smooth short term fluctuations. Retailing is a dynamic environment and shopping trends will fluctuate. The evidence remains sufficiently up to date to provide an appropriate basis for the retail policies of the plan.
- 1.3. In recent years most of the 'major' supermarkets have scaled back their development programmes and the smaller discount stores have recorded high levels of growth. Time will tell whether this is a new market equilibrium or whether the market will become saturated and shoppers will return to the larger format stores. However, there are signs that the large format operators are recovering and in January 2017 Tesco posted its strongest quarterly sales growth in more than 5 years and Morrisons reported its strongest Christmas trading performance for 7 years.
- 1.4. Despite competition, expenditure will continue to grow due to population increases and per capita incomes. Retailers will seek to service this available trade in various formats and SBLP Policies SP4 and TC11 distribute the identified convenience floorspace need to allow for a range of floorspace formats to be delivered to meet this market demand.
- 1.5. Allocations follow established NPPF and reflect the local retail hierarchy where need is identified and guidance requires provision, then provision has been made.

**2. *Is the town centre boundary correctly defined?***

- 2.1. The town centre boundary is correctly defined in Policy TC1 and shown on the Stevenage Central Inset map.
- 2.2. A relatively tight town centre boundary is considered appropriate in order to focus the regeneration activity planned for Stevenage Central. No persuasive argument has been advanced for extending the town centre boundary to include retailing uses that are clearly beyond the town centre. Such an action would lead to fragmentation and a movement away from the core retail area, contrary to the intentions of the NPPF.
- 2.3. At the same time, the boundary as defined allows for the planned expansion of the town centre, specifically to encompass the Leisure Park. This will enable the redevelopment of this area and its effective integration with the remainder of the town centre, as set out in Policy TC3.

### **3. What is the basis for the retail allocations?**

- 3.1. Planning Practice Guidance (PPG) states that planning authorities should assess and plan to meet the needs of town centre uses in full, adopting a 'town centre first' approach and taking account of specific town centre first policy.
- 3.2. To identify the need for convenience and comparison floorspace over the plan period SBC commissioned the Stevenage Retail Study ([ER7](#) and [ER5](#)) which identified the need for convenience and comparison goods floorspace within the Borough using CACI's ProVision and Retail Footprint models respectively. The methodology for calculating the identified need is summarised in SBC's responses to questions 6 and 10 of the Matter 9 Statement. The Retail Study identified a need for:
  - 4,600 sq m net of comparison goods floorspace
  - 7,600 sq m net of convenience goods floorspace
- 3.3. The NPPF states that planning policies should be positive, promote competitive town centre environments and set out policies for the management and growth of centres over the plan period. In drawing up Local Plans, local planning authorities should allocate a range of suitable sites to meet the scale and type of retail development needed in town centres. It is important that the needs are met in full and not compromised by limited site availability.
- 3.4. The PPG states that strategies to identify opportunities to meet the development needs should be based on evidence of the current state of town centres, to meet their development needs. The strategy for retail allocations should follow a sequential approach and should consider whether the town centre can accommodate the scale of assessed need for town centre uses, including opportunities to expand centres or redevelop existing under-utilised space.
- 3.5. When it is not possible, or it is inappropriate to accommodate all forecast need in a town centre, edge-of-centre sites should be considered that are well connected to the town centre. If sufficient edge of centre sites cannot be identified other sites should be considered having regard to the impact and sequential test to ensure retail uses are in the best locations to support the vitality and vibrancy of town centres.
- 3.6. The basis for SBC's retail allocations follows this approach.
- 3.7. With regard to the identified need for comparison goods floorspace, SBC consider that there is physical capacity within Stevenage town centre to accommodate the projected need for comparison goods floorspace. This is most likely to take the form of a major extension to the existing Westgate Centre, but may, alternatively, come from a series of smaller proposals. The Retail Study identifies that there is a case for a qualitative improvement in the retail offer in the town centre and the allocation is in accordance with the 'town centre first' approach and appropriate to support the regeneration of the town centre.

- 3.8. With regard to the identified need for 7,600 sq m of convenience goods across the Borough, a sequential approach has been applied to identify a range of suitable sites. A total of 20% of the identified need, 1,500sqm net, has been reserved for the new Local Centres at Stevenage West, North of Stevenage and South East Stevenage. A 500sqm net convenience store would typically provide a top-up shopping offer in addition to an occasional main food shopping offer and is considered an appropriate size allocation for the role and function of the new Local Centres.
- 3.9. A further 20% of the identified need, 1500sqm net, is reserved to provide extensions to existing stores in the retail hierarchy, particularly the Town Centre, Old Town Major Centre, Poplar District Centre and Neighbourhood Centres. Whilst no sites are specifically allocated, the delivery of this quantum of floorspace is considered realistic given the established retail hierarchy and the requirement that needs are to be met in full and not compromised by limited site availability.
- 3.10. To accommodate the remaining identified need SBC have identified a site for a major new foodstore which would deliver 7,900sqm, allowing for a 70% gross/net ratio (as set out in para 6.5 – 6.7 of question 6, Matter 9), at Graveley Road. There are no suitable and available sequentially preferable sites on which this need could be met.

#### **4. *Are they justified and effective?***

- 4.1. The retail allocations are justified and they accommodate the scale of assessed need for retail floorspace identified in the Stevenage Retail Study, 2014. The strategy for retail allocations is effective and follows a sequential 'town centre first' approach, identifying opportunities which are deliverable so that the needs are met in full and not compromised by limited site availability.

## **Additional questions relating to specific sites/areas**

### **TC2 – Southgate Park Major Opportunity Area**

- 1. *Does the policy need to be more prescriptive about what is expected to go into the public sector hub?***
  - 1.1. The principle of the relocation of existing facilities into a new public sector hub has been agreed with partners. It is, however, important to maintain flexibility around the exact scope and specification of the public sector hub, as discussions with the NHS and other providers are continuing as to the precise nature of the provision that they might require.
  - 1.2. In this context, Policy TC2 makes clear the commitment and requirement for the provision of the Public Sector Hub whilst the supporting text at Para 7.25 provides some additional context / explanation.
  - 1.3. The Council considers that this strikes the right balance.



## **TC3 – Centre West Major Opportunity Area**

### ***1. Is the redevelopment of the leisure park justified?***

- 1.1. The current layout of the leisure park is an inefficient use of a key major site at the heart of Stevenage Central. It links the current town centre area with the thriving employment areas in the west of the town at Gunnels Wood.
- 1.2. This area is capable of redevelopment at higher intensity, exploiting its location adjacent to the town centre and railway station. The potential of the site is clearly recognised by its owners (Legal & General) who have employed their own design team and have been in and are continuing to be in, discussions with the Council to deliver the planned redevelopment.
- 1.3. It is important that the plans for Stevenage Central encourage private investment wherever it is consistent with wider objectives. Leisure attractions also need to be constantly updated to ensure that they maintain and increase market share and in the case of Stevenage accommodate an identified need for more evening economy type uses into the town centre.
- 1.4. Redevelopment provides the opportunity for the new development form to align with the improved east west connections to be incorporated within the railway station regeneration.

### ***2. Is the loss of car parking justified?***

- 2.1. The existing car park is a very large surface level car park providing some 1330 spaces. It is not well used, even at peak times. The owners of the site L&G has undertaken surveys (in 2013) which suggest that the busiest that the car park becomes is 49% occupied on weekdays and 51% at weekends.
- 2.2. The redevelopment of the site in the manner proposed by policy TC3 would not result in any net decrease in car parking. Care clearly needs to be taken in terms of the provision of car parking in this central location to reflect the ambitions to increase modal shift, through the use of public transport and other non-car modes.
- 2.3. However, the Stevenage Central Framework is predicated on re-providing car parking spaces and securing appropriate parking for new uses. This suggests the provision of some 1,961 spaces might be provided.

- 2.4. In their representations on the Local Plan, the owners of the site, Legal & General, suggest that the redevelopment of this location could provide up to 2,450 spaces to meet the needs generated by the development.

## **TC4 – Station Gateway Major Opportunity Area**

### ***1. Is the relocation of the bus station justified?***

- 1.1. The bus station occupies a site that is a prime redevelopment opportunity, is poorly located in relation to the railway station and inhibits the sensible regeneration of the town centre.
- 1.2. The SBLP provides the opportunity to locate the bus station where it can contribute to the overall regeneration of the town centre and upgrade both the experience and perception of sustainable bus travel in the town. Importantly it will make the interchange between rail and bus journeys much more convenient.

### ***2. Are the railway station proposals justified?***

- 2.1. Stevenage Station was designed in the early 1970's in an era of declining rail usage. Today it represents a very poor entrance for rail travellers arriving in Stevenage whether they are visiting the town centre, or the adjacent employment areas.
- 2.2. It hinders the perception of the town in the eyes of investors and is simply inconsistent with the leading-edge research & development activity being undertaken. In addition, it is operationally outdated with short, narrow platforms, a cramped concourse and circulatory spaces and inadequate refreshment facilities. Importantly, its current configuration severely limits the creation of potential development sites adjacent to station.
- 2.3. Good rail accessibility is increasingly at the heart of major regeneration projects. In London Kings Cross/St Pancras and Liverpool Street are outstanding exemplars. Outside London, the new Reading Station is the catalyst for major commercial investment in development projects and the public realm. A regenerated station offers the opportunity to provide the town with a new public transport gateway, a station that is fit for purpose and a physical form that allows the town to attract major commercial development.
- 2.4. In addition, the current connection between the west and east sides of the rail track is poor and does not encourage expenditure in the town centre from the growing employment areas in the west of the town. It is significant that Legal and General, who own the Leisure Park, are firmly supportive of the station proposals which will radically enhance this east/west linkage.

- 2.5. Government policy seeks to encourage dense development around stations to create new sustainable development locations. Both Network Rail and the Homes and Communities Agency are taking forward an initiative to deliver regeneration and growth focused on rail stations. This is exactly what the station proposals will achieve.

**3. *Should a specific new site for a replacement theatre and a new sports centre be allocated in the Plan?***

- 3.1. Specific provision for a replacement theatre is made in policy TC5 the Central Core Major Development Area in one of the prime locations within the new town centre, adjacent to a proposed new central square.
- 3.2. Replacement sports facilities will be provided in the area of Policy TC7, the Marshgate MOA, adjacent to the existing swimming centre. Paragraph 7.56 sets out the expectations.

## **TC7 – Marshgate Major Opportunity Area**

### **1. *Should the policy make reference to youth facilities?***

- 1.1. The wording of policy TC7 sets out the design and land use requirements for the development for the Marshgate Major Opportunity Area which includes new D1 and D2 leisure, cultural and civic uses.
- 1.2. The supporting text at para 7.56 provides further expansion/guidance as to how the proposed uses and design ambitions might be achieved. This para specifically references the need for enhanced youth facilities at the Bowes-Lyon House.