



WHAT THE LOCAL PLAN SETS OUT TO DO

- Safeguard and enhance the vitality and viability of Darlington Town Centre by protecting and promoting its role as a Sub-regional centre and market town within the Tees Valley and neighbouring North Yorkshire and South and West Durham.
- Ensure the need for additional comparison retail floor space by 2016 will be provided mainly or wholly by a retail-led scheme at Commercial Street.
- Safeguard and enhance the role of the District and Local Centres in providing food shopping and a range of other shops, leisure uses and services to meet people's day-to-day needs in accessible locations.

WHAT HAS BEEN ACHIEVED?

In November 2013, the Council commissioned consultants to undertake a **Retail and Town Centre Study** for Darlington Borough. This was published in September 2014. The Study replaces the 2010 Darlington Retail Study. The new study provides an assessment of retail and leisure needs and capacity in the period to 2026, and reviews the current performance of Darlington Town Centre, Cockerton and North Road district centres, as well as six further local centres across the Borough.

This study provides an evidence base to assist in the formulation of planning policy in the emerging Making and Growing Places Development Plan Document (DPD), as well as assisting in the determination of planning applications for retail development. It also provides recommendations to inform the future strategy for Darlington Town Centre with particular focus on safeguarding its vitality and viability.

The **Town Centre Strategy** (2012) provides a strategic direction for the development of the Town. It seeks to capitalise on Darlington's success as a retail centre and as part of this identifies key opportunities for investment within the Town. The **cinema and leisure development** which will sit on the site of the former Bus Station at **Feethams** is a prime example of investment in the Town Centre, which is underway and on target for completion in early 2016. The scheme encompasses 9,711 square metres of mixed use development, comprising a nine-screen Vue cinema, 80 bed Premier Inn hotel and a number of commercial units for restaurants, bars and leisure uses.

Planning permission for a substantial new **multi-storey car park** at Beaumont Street was granted in June 2014. The new facility will provide 650 spaces across five levels. Construction is underway and the car park is scheduled for completion in Spring 2016. Work has recently been completed on a new office building adjacent to the Town Hall. The Department for Education successfully completed its relocation to this building, known as **Bishopsgate House**, in February 2015.

Improvements and investment in the Covered Market are part of the agreed vision for the Town Centre. Work is ongoing to bring forward a refurbishment project for the Covered Market that refreshes the offer of this key Town Centre building. Subject to a funded business plan, improvements will take place over the next 5 years.

In terms of additions to **retail floor space**, there has been relatively little activity over the last few years.



Following no additions in 2011/12, there was a substantial addition in 2012/13 as a result of an extension to Sainsbury's supermarket which completed and opened 2,323 square metres of additional retail floor space in August 2012. There was a small further addition of 141.8 square metres in the same year as a result of other activity. There has been no recorded completion of additional retail floor space in 2013/14 or 2014/15. In terms of leisure floor space, there was an addition of 1600 square metres in 2012/13 but there has not been any completed **leisure floor space** in the last two years. Finally, there has been a limited amount of activity in terms of completion of new **office floor space**. While there were no completions in 2011/12 and 2012/13, there have been completions in the last 2 years as shown below.

Office Floor Space

	2013/14	2014/15	2013/15
	Total Gross (net) m2	Total Gross (net) m2	% increase
Office floor space	350	929	65

Vacancy Rates: Encouragingly, vacancy rates for retail units in the Town Centre have remained fairly stable overall. Health checks completed in December 2013 as part of the recent Retail and Town Centre Study (2014) identified 9,449 square metres of vacant floorspace across 46 units within the centre. This is only a marginal increase from 43 in June 2011. Whilst the number and proportion of town centre vacancies is not considered particularly problematic given recent wider economic conditions, the study does conclude that certain units have been vacant for a considerable period. The health checks also extended to the District and local centres. Four vacant premises were recorded in Cockerton District Centre (January 2014) and seven vacant properties in North Road District Centre. The Study notes that the level of vacancies in these locations is not a cause for concern, for example, in North Road, the vacancies account for a very limited proportion of floorspace (4.2%). The health checks reveal that the majority of local centres do not have a single vacancy. Indeed, only Whinfield had a vacancy at the time of the survey in January 2014.

The Town Centre was declared a **Business Improvement District** in April 2012. The Bid is run by a private sector led, not-for profit company, 'Distinct Darlington' which has been formed to oversee the delivery of over £1.5 million of projects and objectives from its Business Plan over the next five years. The investment is designed to improve the vitality and viability of the Town Centre. The Council is committed to working in partnership with Distinct Darlington to support the programme of improvements to the Town Centre. Examples of projects undertaken since the launch of the BID include:

A Little Book of Offers – this contains discounts on purchases and services and has given a record business boost to traders. The two day **Distinctly Delicious Darlington Festival of Food** was held in the town centre on 9 and 10 May 2015. Shoppers can now **park for longer** on one of Darlington's most popular streets, **Grange Road** following a successful collaboration between traders, the Borough Council and Distinct Darlington. Parking has been extended from 2 hours to 3 hours. Distinct Darlington has launched a **mobile app** to provide information about local events, news and offers, in order to engage with visitors to Darlington and ultimately increase footfall within the town. Items that will be available on the Distinct Darlington app include, A-Z Directory, mapping to allow users to identify the location of local events and retailers, Shopper Loyalty Scheme and pay for parking system.



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

The lack of significant completed retail and related office and leisure development in the Borough over the last few years is a reflection of the economic position over recent years. However, there is a considerable amount of activity taking place in Darlington Town Centre which will create the foundations for future growth and development and which will bring forward additional retail and leisure space over the next few years. Further development will also come about as a result of the Business Improvement District which provides the foundations for strong partnership working between businesses, Darlington Council and other stakeholders.

MOVING THINGS FORWARD: KEY ACTIONS

- Allocate specific sites for main town centre uses in Making and Growing Places Development Plan Document (DPD).
- The results of the Darlington Retail Study (2014) will inform retail policy in Making and Growing Places DPD.
- Continue to monitor vacancy rates and composition of uses within primary and secondary frontages and local and district centres.

Contact Us: You can access more information on planning policy in Darlington at:
www.darlington.gov.uk/planningpolicy

If you are particularly interested in statistics and data for Darlington borough, you can view these at:
<http://lis.darlington.gov.uk/>

Alternatively, contact the Planning Policy Team on **01325 388644** or email planning.policy@darlington.gov.uk

This document is available in different formats on request.