

EAST HERTS COUNCIL

DISTRICT PLANNING EXECUTIVE PANEL – 8 DECEMBER 2014
EXECUTIVE – 6 JANUARY 2015

REPORT BY EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR STRATEGIC PLANNING AND
TRANSPORT

DRAFT DISTRICT PLAN - RETAIL AND TOWN CENTRES POLICY
CRITICAL FRIEND APPRAISAL (NOVEMBER 2014)

WARD(S) AFFECTED: ALL

Purpose/Summary of Report

- This report summarises the findings of the Critical Friend Appraisal of the Draft District Plan policies on retail and town centres contained within Chapter 15 and seeks agreement to use the Appraisal to inform the preparation of the East Herts District Plan.

<u>RECOMMENDATION FOR DISTRICT PLANNING EXECUTIVE PANEL AND EXECUTIVE: That:</u>	
(A)	the Retail and Town Centres Policy Critical Friend Appraisal (November 2014), be supported as part of the evidence base to inform and support the East Herts District Plan.
<u>RECOMMENDATION FOR COUNCIL: That:</u>	
(A)	the Retail and Town Centres Policy Critical Friend Appraisal (November 2014), be agreed as part of the evidence base to inform and support the East Herts District Plan.

1.0 Background

- 1.1 Several studies have been undertaken which consider the future needs of the District in retail floorspace terms covering the period of the District Plan. However, what these studies have not covered in depth is how retail centres may need to change in physical terms over the same period in order to accommodate these needs and

reflect changing patterns of retail behaviour. To this end, the Council sought advice from the Planning Advisory Service who agreed to fund a consultant to provide a critical friend appraisal of the Draft District Plan policies on retail and town centres.

- 1.2 Recent policy directions coming from the Government appear to be based upon the desire to achieve short term economic gains by allowing changes of use to non-retail uses. These allowances are attempting to encourage a revival of activity within town centres. However, these allowances, albeit temporary ones, remove the remaining controls used by Local Planning Authorities to retain a high proportion of retail (Class A1) units. What these changes do not do is deal with the longer term issues of contraction and the evolving role of retail centres. If this is what is anticipated then it would be more appropriate to seek to plan effectively for this change than to lose control over changes which may have a detrimental impact on remaining retail and town centre uses.
- 1.3 East Herts Council wants to deliver sustainable communities, which includes ensuring that adequate jobs are provided and the economic needs of the district are met. Part of this involves ensuring that communities have adequate opportunities to fulfil their day-to-day retail needs. Indeed, the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) is clear that planning should support economic growth. The NPPF also makes it clear that planning should take a positive approach to retail, promote competitive town centre environments and prepare policies to manage and grow centres.
- 1.4 This report presents the advice of Peter Brett Associates in the form of a critical friend appraisal of the Draft District Plan policies on retail and town centres. It is recommended that the appraisal is used to inform the preparation of the emerging Amendments Draft District Plan, in particular the preparation of Chapter 15 on Retail.

2.0 Report

- 2.1 Consisting of 5 sections, the appraisal introduces the scope of the appraisal in section 1. Section 2 considers the drivers of town centre change. It describes how national economic circumstances have impacted on the success of the retail market. It discusses how the retail market itself is changing, and how this is affecting UK town centres.
- 2.2 Section 3 of the appraisal describes the national approach to retail planning and considers the current position of retail centres in East

Herts. Town centres in the district have not suffered as badly as other centres during the recession but have experienced significant numbers of closures and long term vacancies. The key message arising from this section is that without restrictive retail policies, the trend towards diversification in the high street will continue. However, at the same time, should restrictive policies remain, it is predicted that the number of vacant units could increase. The appraisal recommends that retail policies take account of changing trends as well as changing retailer and consumer requirements, in order to ensure that centres remain vital and viable.

- 2.3 Section 4 of the appraisal critiques the draft retail policies and makes suggestions. The key messages from this section are that the existing draft policies are restrictive and could stifle market demand. Restrictive policies do, however, have a role and the appraisal recommends that the primary frontage boundaries are tightened, wherein a restriction to only A1 and A2 uses would be justified. Coupled with this, the appraisal recommends reducing the size of the secondary frontages to allow peripheral units to change to alternative uses, including housing. This approach should be considered for Bishop's Stortford in particular, where the secondary frontage vacancy rate is at 20%.
- 2.4 The appraisal further recommends that the Council adopts a policy that supports, in principle, all A Use Classes within primary frontages, provided they have an active frontage. Offices and residential units should be encouraged above ground floor level. With regard to secondary frontages, the appraisal recommends that all 'town centre uses' are supported in principle. The appraisal notes that although a unit may change to another town centre use, if the market demand increases, there is nothing to stop it reverting back to A1 uses in time. Indeed, such changes are facilitated by the General Permitted Development Order.
- 2.5 The appraisal provides advice about Hertford town centre given recent interest from landowners and other stakeholders in developing the town centre. The appraisal recommends that the Council seeks to act as a facilitator in preparing a vision for the regeneration of the town centre, which would identify key opportunity sites, environmental improvements, a movement strategy and a plan to achieve the optimum mix of tenants.
- 2.6 The appraisal recommends that the Council updates the forecasts for convenience and comparison floorspace needs in line with the anticipated housing growth across the District. The appraisal acknowledges that the district's town centres will not compete with

larger centres outside of East Herts unless major additional retail floorspace is provided. Instead, the appraisal suggests that it would be more appropriate to accommodate additional floorspace demands within proposed strategic developments in the form of neighbourhood centres. The appraisal also suggests changes to the policies concerning district, neighbourhood and local centres that make them more restrictive.

- 2.7 The appraisal also recommends that an additional piece of work is undertaken that derives the average size of retail units in order to make the policy approach on thresholds more robust.
- 2.8 Section 5 of the appraisal concludes that controlling what uses go where will be difficult for the Council but creating a single vision and a strategy for each town will help to manage changes in the retail market. The focus should not be on expanding the floorspace of town centres but expanding their offer in order to sustain their vitality and viability during the day and night. New floorspace demands should be met within planned urban extensions in a way that does not compete with existing town centres.
- 2.9 To conclude, this appraisal makes various suggestions and recommendations. It is proposed that these recommendations should be used to inform amendments to the retail chapter within the Amendments Draft District Plan.
- 3.0 Implications/Consultations
- 3.1 Information on any corporate issues and consultation associated with this report can be found within **Essential Reference Paper 'A'**.

Background Papers

None

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