Rutland Retail Capacity Assessment (2016 Update)

Executive Summary | April 2016

on behalf of Rutland County Council

CONTENTS – EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Bilfinger GVA have been instructed by Rutland County Council ('the Council') to undertake a Retail Capacity Assessment Update, which will form part of the evidence base for the Council's Local Plan review. The report updates the previous retail capacity evidence base for the County, which comprises the Rutland Retail Capacity Assessment (RRCA) (Roger Tym & Partners, 2010) and the Rutland Retail Capacity Assessment Update (RRCAU) (Peter Brett Associates, 2013).

The purpose of the study is to:

- **Provide an updated assessment of the vitality and viability of the two main centres of Oakham and Uppingham;**
- **Provide an updated assessment of the quantitative and qualitative 'need' for additional retail floorspace in the County over the period to 2036; and**
- **Make recommendations to the Council in respect of its future approach to retail provision in its Local Plan.**

The findings set out in this study have been underpinned by a new household telephone survey of shopping patterns, superseding the previous survey work which dates from 2009, having been undertaken in support of the RRCA. In order to ensure continuity with the previous studies, the boundaries of the 'survey area', and the subdivision of this survey area into zones (which allows for a more localised analysis of shopping patterns to be undertaken), are all unchanged.

The study has been prepared at a time of considerable change for the retail and leisure sector in the UK, and town centres need to offer an increasingly diverse, compelling offer, rather than just being foci of retail activity.

THE POLICY CONTEXT

The study has been prepared having full regard to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), which was adopted in March 2012 and replaces the suite of national planning policy statements, including PPS4. The NPPF maintains the general thrust of PPS4 and advocates a 'town centres first' approach. It requires planning policies to positively promote competitive town centre environments and manage the growth of centres over the plan period. It also requires local planning authorities to define the extent of the town centres and primary shopping areas, based on a clear definition of primary and secondary frontages.

At the local level, the Rutland Core Strategy was adopted in 2011 and was therefore adopted at the time of preparation of the RRCAU; it remains the extant local planning policy document for the County. Policy CS17 ('Town Centres and Retailing') sets out a hierarchy of centres identifying Oakham as the 'main town centre' serving the whole of Rutland, and Uppingham as a 'town centre', serving the surrounding rural catchment. Policy CS17 directs 'main town centre uses' to these defined centres, and where developments cannot be accommodated within defined town centres a sequential approach will be followed.

The Core Strategy sets out the amount of comparison and convenience goods floorspace which should be accommodated in Rutland over the course of the Core Strategy period; these figures were based on the recommendations of the RRCA, and the purpose of this study is to update these figures. The Core Strategy also puts forward initiatives for the regeneration of the West End area in Oakham town centre over the course of the Plan period.

The Council has also adopted a Site Allocations and Policies DPD (October 2014). This DPD allocates sites for development in the County, and sets out policies for determining planning applications. The DPD allocates two sites in Oakham for retail development — the Tim Norton garage site at Long Row (0.69ha) and a small site (0.29ha) to the rear of the White Lion public house. The latter site is located within the boundary of Oakham town centre, and the Long Row site is on the edge of the town centre, but divorced from the town centre by a railway line. Both sites are identified as only being suitable for comparison goods retail development, with other appropriate town centre uses on upper floors. A Neighbourhood Plan for Uppingham was also 'made' by the Council in January 2016.

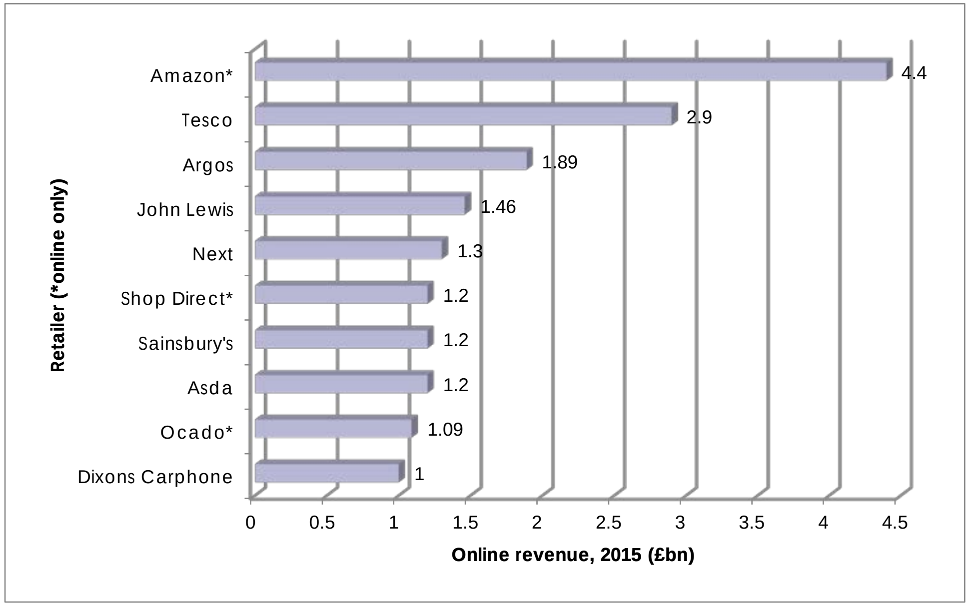
The Council is carrying out a review of its Local Plan, in order to extend the time period to 2036, and replace a number of existing development plan documents (including those summarised above) with a single Local Plan. This study therefore forms part of the evidence base for the Council's new Local Plan. Initial consultation on the 'Issues and Options' version of this document was undertaken in November 2015.

NATIONAL RETAIL & LEISURE MARKET TRENDS

The 'traditional' high street continues to face a number of challenges stemming from the impacts of the recent economic downturn, the tightening of retail spending in recent years, and continued significant changes in consumer shopping behaviour. The **growth in online shopping**, including multi-channel retailing, acts as tough competition for the high street, but also presents an opportunity for the high street to capitalise, by maximising the opportunities arising from services like 'Click & Collect', and retailers moving towards a seamless transition between store-based and virtual shopping experiences. A number of retailers in Oakham town centre now offer 'Click & Collect' facilities, including Boots (which also trades in Uppingham), Tesco and Fat Face.

It is noteworthy that of the top ten online retailers in 2015, seven have a physical presence on the UK High Street, and all of these offer ''Click & Collect'' facilities (**Figure 4.1**), although only two of these ten retailers (Tesco and Dixons Carphone) currently have a trading presence in Oakham. Despite being a relatively new concept for the retail sector to embrace, 'Click & Collect' is therefore affirming that physical stores can continue to have a role in the multichannel shopping environment.

Top ten UK retailers by online revenue, 2015



*Source: Retail Week/Prospect, January 2016. *denotes online only stores. Note: John Lewis also have 'Click & Collect' facilities available via Waitrose stores*

Out-of-centre retailing remains an ever-present source of competition, and market evidence suggests that many retail parks have performed well during the economic downturn, and are becoming increasingly attractive to 'high street' retailers. Many out-of-centre developments are seeking to increase footfall through a greater product offer and mix of uses (including introduction of coffee shops and casual dining) to encourage footfall and longer dwell times. Rutland is in an almost unique position of having very little in the way of out-of-centre retailing, and therefore has remained relatively immune from this trend.

The **convenience goods sector** is in the middle of a considerable period of change. The main foodstores (i.e. the 'big four' - Sainsbury's, Tesco, Asda, Morrisons) have reigned in substantial expansion and the roll-out of super-sized stores. The combined spread of convenience store openings, online grocery sales, and the expansion of 'deep discount' retailers such as Aldi and Lidl has fundamentally changed consumer shopping behaviour. These trends have encouraged repetitive top-up shopping that in turn diminishes main grocery sales and renders large-format stores less profitable.

The 'main' supermarket operators are continuing to invest in new stores, although new store openings are becoming a less frequent occurrence. It has been confirmed that the permission for an extension to the Tesco store in Oakham town centre will not be proceeding. The Council have also granted planning permission for a new Sainsbury's supermarket in Oakham, however in summer 2015 it was confirmed that this development would also not be proceeding. These developments confirm the greater reluctance among the major supermarket retailers to commit to new store openings, preferring in many cases to invest in upgrading existing stores to improve the shopping experience for customers.

Data from the Institute of Grocery Distribution (IGD) estimates that the UK grocery market was worth £177.5bn in 2015, and of this 'convenience stores' (defined by IGD as stores under 3,000 sq.ft net) claim £37.7bn of this (21.2%). Therefore, notwithstanding the unquestionable growth in the popularity of 'convenience' stores, most food shopping spend is still accounted for by larger-format stores — £71.7bn was spent in 'hypermarkets and superstores' (stores over 25,000 sq.ft net), and a further £35.4bn in 'small supermarkets' (stores between 3,000 and 25,000 sq.ft net). There is therefore still an important role for larger-format stores to play in meeting residents' food shopping needs. Operators with 'hyper-market' format stores (over 60,000 sq.ft net) are seeking to introduce concessions or sub-lets to make better use of excess space. For example, some branches of Sainsbury's are trialling Argos concessions, and branches of Tesco Extra include either concessions from other Tesco-owned brands, or other fashion retailers.

As the nature of retail and high-street shopping continues to change over time, the **commercial leisure sector** is becoming an increasingly important contributor to the vitality and viability of town centres. Leisure time is a precious commodity to consumers and in order to maximise free time, research suggests that town centre visitors often combine leisure activities as part of an overall going out experience. Reflecting this trend, leisure is becoming an increasingly important component in town centre regeneration schemes, particularly in secondary towns which, reflecting the wider trends in the retail sector previously identified, are in some cases becoming less attractive as retail destinations.

Town centre strategies which support the continued evolution of the high street are now vital. This should involve providing a high quality shopping 'experience', maximising the benefits of tourist trade, and improving the mix of retail and non-retail outlets to increase length of stay and spend. Both Oakham and Uppingham town centres are well-positioned to take advantage of this trend (particularly Oakham with its proximity to Rutland Water), and the number of cafes in Oakham town centre appears to have increased in recent years. The growth of the café/restaurant sector is important to the future vitality and viability of the town centre but this should not come at the expense of its core shopping function.

It will be important for town centres to continue to be well positioned to be able to adapt to on-going changes in the retail and leisure sector over the local plan period and to reaffirm their unique selling points which differentiate their retail offer from other centres, allowing them to differentiate themselves from – rather than directly compete with – higher order centres. This is particularly important for Rutland's town centres, which do not have any centres with the scale of retail and leisure offer to compete with nearby higher order centres, but do have heritage and tourism assets and other 'unique selling points' which can be capitalised on. Robust place-marketing strategies put in place to further support and develop the centres as visitor destinations.

Rutland is surrounded by a number of larger centres — Leicester, Peterborough, Corby, Stamford and Melton Mowbray — which exert an influence over shopping patterns and commercial leisure visits to varying degrees. There is no reason to suspect that the 'higher order' centres which surround the County will lessen their influence over the comparison goods shopping patterns of residents in the County over the Council's Local Plan period, and it is for this reason our capacity forecasts (discussed below) are based on a 'constant market share' approach; i.e. we have not planned for the overall proportion of comparison goods expenditure which is retained in the catchment area to increase.

The most popular comparison goods shopping destination for residents in the survey area is **Leicester.** Leicester accounts for 22.0% of all comparison goods spend available to the survey area, an increase from 15.8% in the 2009 household telephone survey (the data of which informed the RRCA and RRCAU). It is now the most popular comparison goods shopping destination for residents in the survey area (in the 2009 survey, Oakham had the highest overall market share at 19.1%). Leicester's increased popularity as a comparison goods shopping destination has not come at the expense of Oakham, but rather from other 'higher-order' shopping destinations such as Peterborough and Nottingham, both of which have lost market share from the survey area relative to the 2009 survey results.

Leicester is a UK top 20 comparison goods shopping destination and the John Lewis-anchored Highcross shopping centre is now firmly established as the shopping focus in the city centre following its opening in 2008. Leicester is performing well both as location for comparison goods shopping destination and also leisure / cultural uses, and its 'casual dining' offer in particular has evolved substantially in recent years, particularly at Highcross. There is a (currently undetermined) planning application for significant expansion of the out-of-town Fosse Park shopping centre on the western edge of Leicester, which if permitted, would deliver 32,200 sq.m of new comparison goods and could potentially draw trade from the survey area if a strong tenant mix is secured.

Peterborough has lost market share from the survey area relative to the previous household survey but could potentially recapture some of this lost market share if proposals for the redevelopment of the Queensgate Centre are approved and implemented. The proposals seek the creation of new large-format retail units, restaurants and a multi-screen digital Odeon cinema; these proposals will, if implemented, help Peterborough to diversify its town centre offer, replicating what has been successfully achieved in Leicester.

Corby town centre has also increased its market share from the survey area relative to the 2009 survey, and its regeneration has continued strongly in recent years, again largely through the enhancement of its leisure offer. **Stamford** is an attractive town centre which continues to attract representation from upmarket comparison goods operators. Many residents on the eastern side of Rutland are located closer to Stamford than they are to any centres in the County itself, and the scope for expenditure 'clawback' from residents in this part of the survey area. **Melton Mowbray** has seen more limited enhancements to its comparison goods offer but has a much-strengthened convenience goods offer following the opening of new Sainsbury's and Lidl stores.

THE PERFORMANCE OF RUTLAND'S CENTRES

The study has undertaken an updated 'health check' assessment of the two principal centres in the County. Oakham is defined in the Council's adopted Core Strategy as a 'main town centre', and Uppingham is a 'town centre'. We have assessed the performance of each centre against the criteria for undertaking 'health check' assessments set out in the National Planning Practice Guidance (NPPG).

Rutland's centres have benefited from consistently good levels of 'vitality and viability' in recent years, including throughout the economic downturn, and current indications are that Oakham town centre in particular is performing strongly at present. However, neither Oakham nor Uppingham town centre can afford to be complacent: in light of the strong competition from surrounding centres, there will be a need for continued investment in, and promotion of, the centres, to enable them to offer a credible alternative to the surrounding higher-order locations.

Oakham town centre

Oakham is the highest-order town centre in Rutland, and the focus for convenience and comparison goods shopping and Council services. The centre also has an important tourism role, with Oakham Castle located within the town centre (which is currently being renovated following £2m of Lottery grant funding), and Rutland Water – a popular destination for water sports, walking and cycling – is located to the south of the town. The town centre contains a number of national multiple retailers including Tesco, Boots, Wilko, Caffe Nero and Costa, but also has a noticeably strong independent retail and leisure sector, with a number of boutiques, cafes and tea rooms, particularly in the Mill Street area. Oakham's retail mix is generally in line with national averages, although though some categories such as clothing continued to be under-represented in the town. There is evidence of increasing interest from national operators in the town. The vacancy rate in the centre is low and not of cause for concern. The proportion of charity shops is below the UK average, and also is proportionately lower than surrounding centres such as Corby, Stamford and Melton Mowbray.

Historically, commercial leisure uses such as cafes, restaurants, public houses etc have been under-represented in Oakham when compared to national averages, but the centre is becoming an increasingly popular destination for these type of uses, with a number of recent openings from national operators (Wetherspoon, Caffe Nero, Wildwood) and local operators. These uses are important in diversifying the mix of uses in the town centre and increasing dwell-time, and therefore this development can be seen as having a positive impact on the vitality and viability of the town centre.

Mill Street, Oakham (picture credit: Rutland County Council)

The environmental quality of the centre remains, for the most part, strong. Most buildings are of good quality and make a positive contribution to the overall environment of the centre. Previous retail evidence studies, and the Council's adopted Core Strategy, have all identified that the West End area of Oakham town centre requires improvement, and this remains the case. The environmental quality of this part of the centre remains underwhelming compared to the rest of the centre, which is not aided by disconnected retail frontages and the lack of any key attractors. There is also a need to improve the physical environment in the Gaol Street area, which despite the proximity to the Tesco store and the inclusion of a number of upmarket stores, has low footfall, a number of vacant units and a generally 'tired' appearance. There is clear scope for improvement, and, making use of the pedestrianised space, encouragement of development of a 'café culture'. There is scope for the Market Place to make a wider contribution to the vitality and viability of the centre, and the Council may wish to consider the removal of car parking in the Market Place in order to enhance the setting of the area.

The household telephone survey results identified that Oakham's comparison goods market share has remained virtually unchanged: at the time of the 2009 survey, Oakham town centre attracted 19.1% of the total comparison goods market share available to the survey area; based on the new survey results, this has increased to 19.2%. This shows Oakham town centre has managed to maintain its market share, and whilst on paper the figure may appear relatively low, in light of the competition from surrounding centres and the considerable differences these centres offer in terms of the amount and range of comparison goods shopping provision, we consider this to be a credible result. In between 2019 and 2015 there have been improvements to the comparison goods offer in Oakham, including a move towards more upmarket, specialist retailers and the attraction of national retailers; however these have only translated to a minor improvement in the market share. This confirms that Oakham town centre will need to work hard to ensure it retains the 19.2% market share it currently attracts over the course of the Council's Local Plan period.

Uppingham town centre

Uppingham is a significantly smaller town centre when compared to Oakham, containing just 89 units, and therefore has a much more limited influence over shopping patterns in residents of the County. The retail offer in the centre is anchored by a small Co-Operative foodstore on North Street East; complementing this are a handful of day-to-day shopping and retail service facilities, including two pharmacies, a newsagent, a bank, a dental surgery and so on – however for the most part the offer in the centre is devoted to a mixture of specialist boutiques and art galleries/showrooms. The presence of four hotels in the town centre also suggests the role and function of this centre is slightly atypical and that it caters as much towards a tourism/visitor market as it does to meeting local shopping needs.

The Co-Operative store is the only foodstore currently serving the town and appears clearly constrained, and there is a clear policy case for supporting the expansion of this store in order to reduce the amount convenience goods expenditure which is lost to surrounding centres. There are also small Spar and One Stop stores in the town centre, but these are only of a size suited to limited ‘basket’ shopping. Positively, the independent convenience goods sector in the town is strong, and a small market held every Friday helps to further diversify the offer of the centre. Overall, for the size of the town the diversity of uses is reasonable, and the vacancy rate does not present cause for concern. A large vacant unit at the junction of North Street East and Orange Street appears to represent a site well suited for commercial leisure uses such as a café or restaurant.

Uppingham market (picture credit: Rutland County Council)

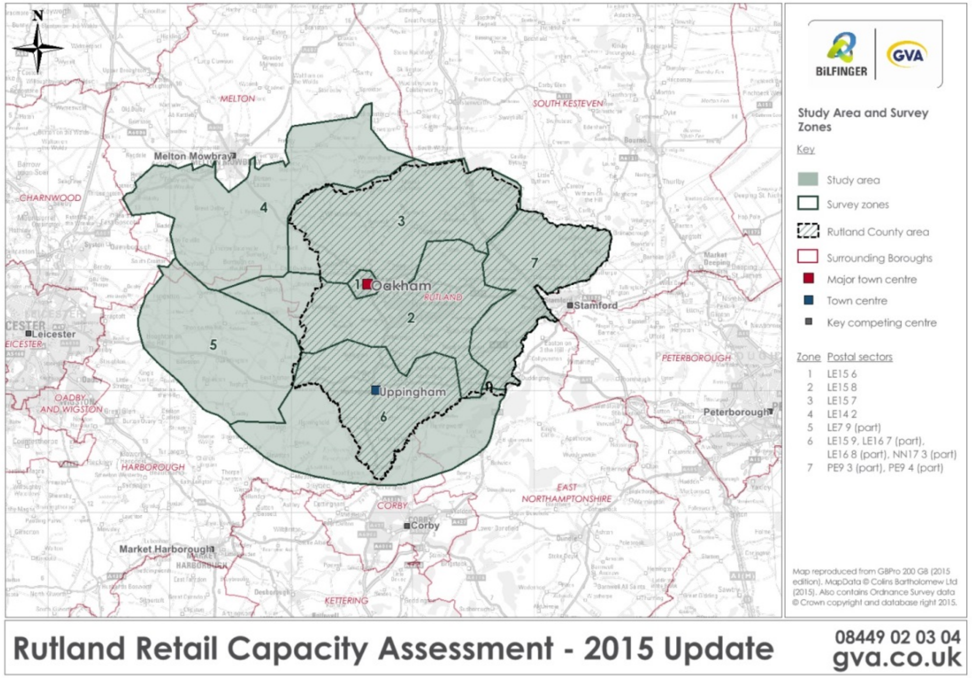
The environmental quality of the centre is generally strong, with most of the historic buildings which make up the centre in excellent condition. There is a need to improve bus stops and bus departure information in the centre.

Although the comparison goods function of Uppingham is unquestionably limited, it is positive to note that Uppingham has increased its comparison goods market share from 1.9% (2009) to 3.4% (2015), although we are not aware of any major changes to its comparison goods offer in this time.

THE ‘NEED’ FOR NEW RETAIL FLOORSPACE

As stated above, the findings of this study have been informed by a new household telephone survey of shopping patterns, which have established where residents in the defined ‘survey area’ (see plan below) are undertaking their comparison and convenience goods shopping, and patterns of commercial leisure visits. A full discussion of our methodological approach in this respect is set out in Section 6. In identifying capacity it is important to note that forecasts can become increasingly open to margins of error over time, and accordingly should be refreshed throughout the Council’s Local Plan period. The ‘need’ figures which arise should also be considered alongside the qualitative recommendations which we set out below, as identification of low/negligible capacity does not, in itself, mean that there is no ‘need’ for additional floorspace.

Survey area



Both the convenience and comparison goods capacity forecasts are based on a ‘constant market share’ approach, i.e. assuming that current patterns of shopping remain unchanged. We also have regard to ‘commitments’ for new retail floorspace in the County — where planning permission for new retail developments have been granted but not yet commenced trading — as these act as a 'claim' on the amount of expenditure which is available to support new floorspace. The only 'commitment' we are aware of is the permission for a new Aldi foodstore at Land's End Way, Oakham, and we have incorporated this commitment into the capacity forecasts set out below.

Our analysis has also identified that many of the principle foodstores in the County are trading at above company average levels, or 'over-trading'. In particular, the Tesco store in Oakham is trading at +£6.7m above company average levels; both Co-Operative stores in Oakham are trading slightly above company average levels; and the Co-Operative store in Uppingham is trading at +£1.9m above company average levels. This can in itself be an indication of 'need', although it would be expected that the level of 'over-trading' at these stores would likely be reduced once the approved Aldi store commences trading. The retail impact of the proposed Aldi store has been considered by GVA under separate instruction and considered to be acceptable.

Based on a 'constant market share' approach, we have identified **a quantitative 'need' for up to 4,700 sq.m net additional comparison goods floorspace for the County for the period to 2036,** the majority of which arises post-2025. There is a very **limited quantitative 'need' for new convenience goods floorspace, with a negative requirement up to 2030 and a requirement for only 100 sq.m net at 2036**. The convenience goods requirement has decreased since the RRCAU on account of the fact that Experian are now forecasting very limited growth in convenience goods spending over the duration of the period to 2036, and forecasts over the proportion of convenience goods shopping which will be undertaken online have increased relative to the position at the time of the RRCAU. The limited growth in convenience goods spending which will come forward will largely be met by the approved Aldi scheme. However, as this study has identified, there are qualitative arguments for the development of further convenience goods floorspace in the County, particularly in Uppingham.

COMMERCIAL LEISURE

Our study has also undertaken an assessment of commercial leisure provision in the County, and the expenditure growth which is expected to come forward over the course of the period to 2036. As we have identified above, commercial leisure is becoming an increasingly important contributor to the overall vitality and viability of town centres, 77.2% of residents in the survey area visit restaurants, and 65.5% visit cafes.

Oakham town centre captures a 39.4% market share for spending in restaurants, and 43.5% market share for spending in cafes. Nine out of ten residents who live in the Oakham area (zone 1 of our survey area) visit facilities in Oakham for spending on restaurants and cafes. This confirms the importance of this sector to the wider vitality and viability of the town centre. Our qualitative assessment set out that Oakham has seen improved levels of representation from both independent and national café/restaurant operators in recent years, and this can be expected to have translated to the strong market shares seen here. Uppingham town centre also draws nearly two-thirds of spending on cafes from its local survey zone (zone 6), and one-third of spending on restaurants, but its appeal is limited beyond its immediate catchment and there is strong competition for market share with Market Harborough, Leicester and Stamford.

Caffe Nero, Oakham (picture credit: Rutland County Council)

Experian forecast that spending on restaurants and cafes in the survey area will increase by £30.7m over the period to 2036 and this therefore represents an opportunity for Oakham and Uppingham town centres to further develop and enhance their offer, although, as stated previously, this should not come at the expense of the centres' ability to meet local residents' shopping needs.

There are qualitative gaps in the commercial leisure offer in the County, most specifically in terms of the absence of a cinema or entertainment facilities such as ten-pin bowling and ice skating. The proportion of residents who participate in the latter type of activities is generally low, which may in part reflect the lack of provision in the County. It is questionable whether there is a sufficiently large resident population to support the development of either cinema or entertainment facilities in the County, although this study has not undertaken any detailed demand analysis in respect of this. However, the development of small-scale cinema facilities in particular would, if appropriately located within Oakham town centre, support its vitality and viability, particularly in the evening, and any applications of this nature which come forward should be therefore considered favourably in principle.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Having summarised the key findings of the study below we set out our recommendations for the strategic approach to the development of new 'town centre' uses in the County, followed by recommendations specifically for Oakham and Uppingham town centres. As part of this, we update the recommendations set out in the Council's Site Allocations DPD in respect of town centre boundaries and primary/secondary shopping frontages.

General recommendations

In terms of the general approach to the future planning of retail and town centre uses, we make the following recommendations:

- **RCC1:** The Council should have regard to the requirements of adopted national policy when developing its retail and town centre policies for the County. The NPPF directs the development of retail and other town centre uses towards town centres in the first instance, and for development outside town centres compliance with the sequential and impact 'tests' needs to be demonstrated. Any new applications for retail or other town centre uses on the edge of, our outside of, the defined town centres in the County should therefore demonstrate that there are no sequentially preferable sites available, and that no 'significant adverse' impacts will arise on existing defined centres. This approach reflects guidance in the NPPF and Policy CS17 of the adopted Core Strategy.
- **RCC2:** It is recommended that the comparison goods capacity requirements (a quantitative requirement of 4,700 sq.m net by 2036) which this study has identified should be directed towards Oakham town centre in the first instance, however applications for development in Uppingham town centre should be considered on the merits of the application, providing the development is of an appropriate scale.
- **RCC3:** It is not considered that other centres in the County are suitable locations for new retail and town centre uses, although applications which seek to deliver local-scale enhancements to shopping provision (we would typically expect this to be under 300 sq.m net floorspace) may be acceptable.
- **RCC4:** The RRCA recommended the adoption of a threshold of 500 sq.m gross for proposed retail developments in edge and out-of-centre locations. This approach was carried forward into the RRCAU, and the adopted Core Strategy and Site Allocations and Policies DPDs. We recommend that the Council continue to adopt this threshold in its new Local Plan.
- **RCC5:** The identified quantitative capacity requirements set out in this study should be kept under regular review throughout the Council's Local Plan period.

Site allocations, boundaries & frontages recommendations

The Site Allocations and Policies DPD (adopted 2014) allocates sites for development and sets out policies for determining planning applications. The accompanying proposals map also sets out town centre boundaries and primary and secondary shopping frontages in Oakham and Uppingham town centres. Policy SP3 of the DPD allocates two sites for retail development in Oakham town centre — the Tim Norton site on Long Row (Site R1) and land to the rear of the White Lion, Melton Road (Site R2).

- **RCC6:** It is recommended that Site Allocations R1 and R2 are carried forward as retail allocations in future Local Plan documents, although as identified in our recommendations Site R1 is only considered suitable for 'bulky goods' comparison goods retail.
- **RCC7:** We also recommend that the Esso Petrol Filling Station site on High Street, Oakham is identified as further retail allocations in future Local Plan documents.
- **RCC8:** In all of the sites identified in Recommendations RCC5 and RCC6, other 'town centre uses' or residential uses are appropriate on upper floors.
- **RCC9:** We have reviewed the town centre boundaries and primary and secondary shopping frontages identified in the Site Allocations DPD. The boundary of Oakham town centre should be revised to remove the area previously earmarked for the proposed extension of the Tesco store as we understand this site is now unlikely to come forward for 'town centre' uses. No changes are required to the primary or secondary shopping frontages in Oakham town centre. In Uppingham, we recommend the town centre boundary remains unchanged and a minor amendment to secondary shopping frontage on Queen Street.

Policy wording recommendations

The Council have also asked us to provide comment on the continued suitability of the retail/town centre policies in the adopted Core Strategy and Site Allocations & Policies DPDs. Our recommendation RCC10 sets out a number of suggested amendments to the wording of relevant policies in these documents.

The implications of changes to permitted development

In considering future revisions to Policy SP12, we draw attention to the fact that the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015 has introduced greater flexibility to enable a more straightforward change of use within shopping frontages.

Of particular relevance, the amendments allow permitted change from retail premises (A1) to financial services (A2), and restaurants and cafes (A3) without a time limit on that change of use. The move is designed to reduce vacancies on high streets. This will however serve to bypass the retail policies of many Local Authorities, such as Policy SP12 of the Site Allocations & Policies DPD (as discussed above) which restrict the amount of non-A1 units in a retail centre or frontage.

- **RCC11:** The Council's policy framework has effectively protected and enhanced the primary shopping area in recent years, and we recommend the proactive consideration of legislative controls to prevent such a change of use where considered inappropriate and harmful to the vitality and viability of the shopping frontage – i.e. the dilution of A1 uses underpinning footfall and connectivity across a centre. This recommendation is applicable to both Oakham and Uppingham town centres. Consideration should be given to the use of Article 4 directions to assist in the protection of primary shopping frontages.

Recommendations – Oakham

Our key recommendations for Oakham are as follows:

- **OAK1:** Oakham town centre should continue to be the highest-order centre in Rutland, and the focus for the identified comparison goods capacity of 4,700 sq.m net by 2036. Whilst the majority of the comparison goods requirements do not arise until later in the Plan period (post-2025), this should not prevent appropriate development coming forward prior to this. It is important that any new development is of a scale appropriate to the role and function of Oakham as a small market town.
- **OAK2:** There is no quantitative or qualitative need to provide for any additional convenience goods provision in Oakham, provided that the planning permission for Aldi foodstore at Land's End Way, Oakham, is implemented. The development of the Aldi store will provide improved consumer choice and competition with the town centre Tesco store. However, applications which seek to develop further convenience goods provision (either extensions to existing stores or provision of new retail facilities) may be supported in principle provided that proposals are of an appropriate scale and can demonstrate compliance with relevant national policy 'sequential' and 'impact' tests.
- **OAK3:** This study has identified that commercial leisure uses, particularly cafes and restaurants, are making an increasingly important contribution to the vitality and viability of Oakham town centre, and applications which seek to further enhance provision should be supported in principle. However, it is important for the primary shopping area to retain a critical mass of retailing activity, in order to ensure strong levels of footfall and complement what appears to be a diversification of uses towards the café/restaurant sector in secondary parts of the centre. The need to retain a critical mass of retail activity in the primary shopping area is also important in ensuring that local residents' day-to-day shopping needs are met, thereby ensuring sustainable patterns of shopping. Applications for change of use away from Class A1 use in the primary shopping frontage should therefore be resisted. The Council has a strong policy in its Site Allocation DPD to this effect and we recommend this approach is carried forward into the new Local Plan.
- **OAK4:** The RRCA identified a qualitative shortfall in 'bulky goods' comparison goods floorspace in the County, and recommended that a proportion of the identified comparison goods floorspace capacity be allocated to meeting this qualitative deficiency. Subsequently, the Site Allocations DPD identified a site on the edge of Oakham town centre (the Tim Norton garage site on Long Row) as being suitable for 'bulky goods' comparison floorspace. We consider that this remains a sensible approach, although we understand that redevelopment of this site would be subject to an alternative location for the garage premises being identified.
- **OAK5:** We do not consider the Tim Norton site to be suitable for either unrestricted Class A1 comparison goods floorspace, or Class A1 convenience goods floorspace, as we understand there are potential issues with traffic congestion related to the expected increased closure periods of the adjacent level crossing. 'Bulky goods' comparison goods uses generally generate lower levels of trip generation, and are likely to be more acceptable in principle, although any development should be subject to undertaking of a Transport Assessment. Should development of this site come forward, the Council should work with the applicants and Network Rail to secure the provision of enhanced pedestrian crossing facilities across the railway line.
- **OAK6:** Oakham is, for the most part, an attractive town centre and the historic quality of the centre should be preserved and enhanced where possible. There are clear opportunities for improvement in certain parts of the town centre however. The Council should carry forward its long-standing aspiration to improve the West End of the town centre (as currently identified in the Core Strategy) in order to enhance footfall and improve the gateway to the town centre for those arriving by rail. Improvements should include enhancements of the public realm, such as paving, as well as enhancements to shopfronts. There is a particular need to improve the gateway to the centre at the Melton Road / Station Road junction, which could incorporate improved pedestrian crossing facilities and better directional signage leading visitors to the town centre.
- **OAK7:** There is an opportunity site within this area, the Esso Petrol Filling Station site at the junction of High Street / Dean's Street, which provides an important opportunity to extend footfall west of the Wilko store to the benefit of businesses at the western end of the centre. The petrol filling station does not make a significant contribution to the wider vitality and viability of the town centre, and breaks up the retail frontage. The redevelopment of this site should therefore be considered an aspiration for the Council. Any redevelopment should incorporate flexible class A1/A3/A4 floorspace at ground floor level.

- **OAK8:** Elsewhere in the town centre, it is recommended that the Council seek to develop a strategy for the improvement of the environmental quality and overall vitality and viability of the Gaol Street area. This area appears to be suffering from a decline in pedestrian footfall and has a number of vacant units, but plays an important role in linking the High Street with the Tesco store on South Street. As one of the few pedestrainised areas in the town centre there is scope for the development of a 'café culture' with pavement seating in this area, particularly in the under-used Knights Yard, and the Council should support applications for the development of Class A3 / A4 uses along Gaol Street / Knight's Yard. Applications for Class A5 (hot food takeaway) uses should be resisted.
- **OAK9:** The market makes an important contribution to the vitality and viability of the town centre and support should be given to its continued development and growth. The removal of vehicular parking from the Market Place presents an opportunity for alternative seasonal / speciality markets to be introduced, further stimulating footfall and diversifying the offer of the centre, as well as improving the environmental quality of the area.
- **OAK10:** Tourism is an important industry in Rutland and Oakham benefits from close proximity to one of the area's key attractors, Rutland Water. Support should be given to place-marketing and tourism strategies which seek to enhance Oakham's role as the 'gateway' to Rutland Water.
- **OAK11:** Allied to the above, encouragement should be given to support initiatives which will further enhance the vitality and viability of the town centre, which could include encouragement of 'click & collect' facilities, development of an online hub for the independent retail sector, or encouraging a greater number of retailers in Oakham town centre to trade on a Sunday.
- **OAK12:** The potential for a direct bus, regular bus route between Oakham and Leicester should be investigated.
- **OAK13:** The key qualitative gap in commercial leisure provision is the absence of a cinema. Whilst it is possible that there is limited expenditure capacity available to support the development of facilities of this nature in the County, should any proposals come forward they should be considered positively. Any proposed development should ideally be focussed on Oakham town centre, and if not within the town centre, would need to demonstrate compliance with the sequential approach.
- **OAK14:** The development of a new residential community at Oakham North will require the provision of day-to-day shopping and services, likely to be in the form of a local centre. We understand that provision has been made for this as part of the Oakham North development and therefore, assuming this permission is implemented, we do not foresee a requirement for development of any further floorspace for retail/other town centre uses at this location.

Recommendations – Uppingham

Our key recommendations for Uppingham are as follows:

- **UPP1:** Uppingham should continue to form a second-tier 'town centre' in the County; its more limited size and opportunities for development in the town centre make it unsuitable for development of a significant scale. Therefore, is not recommended that any of the identified comparison goods floorspace capacity (4,700 sq.m net by 2036) is directed towards Uppingham town centre.
- **UPP2:** Applications for new comparison goods or convenience goods retail development which are of an appropriate scale should nevertheless be considered on their merits and, if not within the primary shopping frontage, demonstrate compliance with the sequential and impact 'tests' as set out in the NPPF.
- **UPP3:** Although this study has identified there is no quantitative need for additional convenience goods floorspace in the County until the end of the Plan period (i.e. at 2036), there is a qualitative need to improve convenience goods provision in Uppingham, to reduce the amount of convenience goods expenditure which is spent outside the town and facilitate more sustainable patterns of shopping. Enhancement of linkages between the existing Co-Operative store and primary shopping frontage should also be supported.
- **UPP4:** Our 'health check' assessment of Uppingham town centre has confirmed that the café and restaurant sector makes an important contribution to the vitality and viability of Uppingham town centre, and indeed is under-represented against national averages. Applications which seek to further enhance provision should be therefore supported in principle. However, as with Oakham, it is important for the primary shopping area to retain a critical mass of retailing activity, in order to ensure local residents' day-to-day shopping needs can be met. Applications for change of use away from Class A1 use in the primary shopping frontage should therefore be resisted. The Council has a strong policy in its Site Allocation DPD to this effect and we recommend this approach is carried forward into the new Local Plan.
- **UPP5:** The environmental quality of the centre is generally strong and there are no major areas of concern. The Council should continue to invest in public realm in the centre to help define a sense of place and ensure the centre maintains its smart, well-kept appearance.
- **UPP6:** Continued support and promotion should be given to the market and other unique selling points which the town centre offers, such as its hotels and art dealerships, in order to maximise the potential customer base of the town and promote its 'unique selling points'. This may form part of a joint place marketing strategy with Oakham town centre, and potentially Rutland Water.

- **UPP7:** Although accessibility by public transport is considered adequate for the size of the town, there is a need to improve the provision of bus timetabling / bus departure information (which should be updated to be based on live timing). Improvements to bus shelters / waiting areas would also be beneficial.

Monitoring and next steps

The study has identified that the centres in the County are performing well, and there are no fundamental areas of concern in respect of any individual centre's vitality and viability, although there is clear scope for environmental improvements to Oakham town centre. Nevertheless, it is recommended that the Council continues to monitor the vitality and viability of its centres over future years, using the NPPG indicators as set out in Section 5 of the main report.

It is also recommended that the retail capacity figures identified in this report are subject to regular review throughout the Council's Plan period, particularly if the proposed Aldi store at Lands End Way commences trading, and if any large-scale comparison goods shopping developments come forward in the key surrounding centres. Forecasts of expenditure growth and 'special forms of trading' such as online shopping are also subject to change, and updates to capacity forecasts will therefore also be required to reflect this.