East Lothian Council

LOCAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN 2

Topic Paper - Town Centres and Retailing

ELC 016

Context: NPF Spatial Strategy, NPF 4 Policy 27 City, Town, Local and Commercial Centres, Policy 28 Retail

16.1 This section deals with East Lothian's town centres and local centres and any retail development in general. With particular focus on:

- Town centre hierarchy
- Health of town centres
- Health and well- being
- Future retail capacity
- Residential use in town centres

LINKS TO EVIDENCE

ELC 411	Town Centre Audit 2023 (East Lothian Council)
ELC 412	Retail Capacity Study 2021 (Roderick Mclean for Ryden)
ELC 413	Footfall up to 2022 (PMRS)
ELC 427	Vacant and Derelict Land Survey 2023
ELC 415	Scottish Retail Consortium
ELC 051	East Lothian Local Economy Strategy 2024

SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE

Town Centre Hierarchy

16.2 There are currently 6 designated town centres and 17 Local Centres in East Lothian, both afforded the same level of protection in the sequential approach, under current Local Development Plan (Policy TC1).

16.3 The current town centre boundaries encompass a wide variety of uses, however, they do not give much focus on opportunities to concentrate retail and non-retail service uses together in primary pitches. The advantage of establishing 'core commercial frontage areas' is that shoppers and visitors are presented with the town's retail and non-retail service offer in a relatively small area providing the best choice and increased generation of footfall. In particular Musselburgh and Prestonpans could be truncated – or core commercial frontages could benefit some centres.

16.4 Commercial centres are low on the hierarchy of preference under sequential test and do not need planning policy protection to the extent of town centres and local centres.

Vacancy Rates

16.5 East Lothian has below national average vacancy rates for all 6 of the main town centres.

16.6 Footfall in each town centre is rising again, following the Covid pandemic. National retail trends indicate the probability that shoppers will visit fewer centres in the future and weaker parts of town centres are unlikely to meet future market demand. The trend is for shoppers to visit the largest centres, malls and retail parks, combined with higher levels of online shopping (Ryden, 2021).

16.7 Whilst class 1 uses predominate (de-defined as Class 1A in 2023), some centres host concentrations of hot food takeaways or other sui generis uses, such as book makers, often these are within the central shopping area, and often these are in our more disadvantaged areas – such as Tranent and Prestonpans, some are close to schools e.g Tranent.

16.8 Site opportunities for significant new retail in the 6 town centres are very limited. Mapping showing footfall can be found in the Local Issues section and the Spatial Strategy section of the Storymap.

Health and well-being

16.9 Concentrations of certain uses are found within some East Lothian town centres. It can be surmised that some concentrations e.g shops selling 'unhealthy' foods, in close proximity to schools, can be harmful to the well being of the community. However, there is no data available in East Lothian at the town centre level to allow for quantitative correlation. This is something that will be sought going forward, through collaborative working with the NHS.

Future Retail Capacity

16.10 The forecast spare convenience expenditure capacity to 2030 ranges from none to £10 million (which is not large). It would support a notional additional 700 sq m net of convenience floorspace. Scope for servicing further new convenience floorspace will mostly be in the form of trade diversion from existing stores, to improve the quality, range and choice of convenience stores generally.

16.11 Comparison expenditure is projected to rise. Forecast spare expenditure capacity in East Lothian to 2030 is within the range of £18 million to nearly $44 million. This could support between 3500 – 7400 sq m net of comparison retail floorspace. Realisation of this potential will depend on provision of an attractive and continually improving offer from retailers in East Lothian. Without this, expenditure leakage will almost certainly increase further and there will be more online spending.

16.12 There are currently three drive through facilities in East Lothian, built and operating, and a further four units with planning permission in place. Collectively, these are spread geographically across East Lothian with two in Dunbar, two in Haddington, two at A1 roadside (outside Macmerry) one on the edge of Musselburgh (A1 roadside). Future market demand will be tested through a Call for Sites process in 2024 and consideration will be given to any proposed drive-through locations with a particular focus on impacts and effects on the existing road network, climate impact, the existing retail offer and distribution and compatibility of drive throughs with the wider area. Consideration must also be given to the health and well-being of local communities with awareness to the offer of healthy food and drink in the district and on sale within the town and local centres, particularly those centres, and locations, within close proximity to schools.

Residential in Town Centres

16.13 East Lothian's town centres are small, residential use is currently encouraged, but not within the main shopping areas. All 6 town centres serve a residential hinterland, much of which is accessible within 20 minutes. Where there is capacity or opportunities to develop new housing and flats without compromising active use of ground floors and public spaces, this has been supported. The Housing Topic Papers deal with housing need, demand and affordability and will look at gaps in supply relative to demand, including within town centres. There is no need to undertake an urban capacity study given the nature of East Lothian's town centres and the lack of potential redevelopment sites; those very few, small opportunity sites were highlighted in current town centre strategies with some coming forward for a mix of residential and other uses. With limited scope for new housing in town centres it will not be appropriate or possible to set part of the housing land requirement aside for town centre allocations. Delivery of any opportunities in these areas will be better served through a policy framework which protects the primacy of retail while providing the flexibility to accommodate residential opportunities.

SUMMARY OF STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION

16.14 The Statement of Community Involvement details the process and the comments received. Key comments received with respect to town centres and retailing are highlighted below:

General Public

- 86% of respondents want no new out-of-town retail development
- Support for enhancing existing town centres 77%
- 76% of respondents support restriction of some uses in town centres, with most support for restricting hot food take-aways and bookmakers

Children and Young People

- Only 9% of secondary aged respondents think there are good shops in their area, but 12% think there are good places to buy food and drink.
- 25% of respondents buy their lunch form the high street or local shops – this is primarily unhealthy type food (72% purchase fast food, crisps, sweets or juice)
- In secondary schools, using the Place Standard tool, young people scored schools, libraries, shops and services as 'better than ok' (5)
- Primary aged children like having sports facilities, parks, school, shops and community centres close by. Not having to drive to these facilities is important. They would like to see a variety of shops and cafes in their local areas.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR THE PROPOSED PLAN?

16.15 The existing town centre boundaries encompass a wide range of town centre uses, however without defined core commercial frontages, the retail offer in some centres is quite dispersed e.g. Musselburgh and Prestonpans. Furthermore, this can lead to clustering of non-shop uses within core areas – see below. Young people are particularly keen to see improvements in the shops in their area with only 13% of respondents believing there are good shops in the area that they live.

16.16 **Retain town centre boundaries to include and encourage a wide range of town centre uses. Consider the introduction of core commercial frontages to each town centre (primarily permitting use classes 1,2 and 3). Identify commercial centres (out of /edge of town) – these will sit lower in sequential approach.**

16.17 Vacancy rates remain stable, footfall has generally increased since the pandemic, but some centres have concentrations of non shopping uses both within the core commercial areas, and sometimes close to schools. Public engagement saw strong support for the restriction of some uses, primarily hot food take-aways and bookmakers (there is support for this in Policy 27 of NPF4). We have found through our survey, that a large proportion of those secondary aged children utilising the high street or local shops for lunch, are buying less healthy foods/drinks.

- **Restrict non retail uses where clustering is impacting the well-being of the community**
- **Identify areas where proposals for healthy food and drink outlets can be supported**

16.18 Very little spare convenience expenditure forecast to 2030. Planned local centres, including at Blindwells, can accommodate this spare expenditure. There are few site opportunities within existing town centres. 86% of adult respondents to recent engagement want no new out-of-town retail development. Children too like having shopping facilities close by.

- **Limited town centre opportunities for new retail development, there is limited surplus expenditure. Focus on regeneration and improvement, including redevelopment and improvement to urban realm where appropriate.**

16.19 There is significant spare retail comparison expenditure to 2030, plus leakage to outside of East Lothian is currently very high (70%). However, there are no large town centre opportunity sites and 86% of adult respondents to recent engagement want no new out-of-town retail development.

- **Ensuring a continued programme of maintenance and improvement to the town centres in East Lothian is the best route to support retailing and services in these centres.**
- **Call for sites will present market demand and assessment will be required on any retail sites and sites promoted for drive-through facilities.**

AREAS WHERE THERE IS AGREEMENT OR DISPUTE ON ISSUES AND POSSIBLE APPROACHES.

16.20 There is significant public support for no new out of town retail in East Lothian – this correlates with the findings of the Retail Capacity Study. There is also strong support for restricting some uses within town centres, our own evidence demonstrates some accumulations and geographical concentrations of some less desirable uses, such as hot food takeaways and bookmakers. A large proportion of children that responded are purchasing less healthy foods during their lunch break.

16.21 However, children and young people would like to see a greater variety of shops and leisure facilities, reducing the need to travel further afield and there is scope for claw back on comparison expenditure, as identified in the Retail Capacity Study. Unfortunately, there is limited scope for development within the existing town centres.

16.22 There were no disputes raised by Key Agencies on town centres and retailing.