

# Retail Topic Paper

## St Albans City and District Council – November 2024

### 1. Introduction

- 1.1 This paper sets out to explain the Council's approach to understanding retail requirements in the new Local Plan.
- 1.2 The NPPF requires that planning policies and decisions should support the role that town centres play at the heart of local communities, by taking a positive approach to their growth, management and adaptation.
- 1.3 The new Local Plan includes policies for town centres and retail policies in Chapter 6 of the document.

### 2. Local Plan Retail Evidence Base

- 2.1 Shopping habits have altered significantly in recent years, leading to changing requirements for the provision of retail and town centre uses. The rise of internet retailing in particular has caused significant shifts in the way that people shop, with online ordering and home delivery taking a significant proportion of consumer spending away from traditional town centres and even retail parks.
- 2.2 Furthermore, the Covid-19 lockdowns led to further changes in shopping habits, partly driving more people to shop online, and partly to shop locally as more people became accustomed to working from home.
- 2.3 The impact of these changes means that recent years have seen a state of flux for retail and town centre uses, and this has formed the context for preparation of the Local Plan.
- 2.2 St Albans Council undertook a joint study with other nearby local authorities to prepare the South West Hertfordshire Retail and Leisure Study that was published in 2018. This Study provides retail evidence for the new Local Plan, and it is notable that it did not recommend significant increases in town centre or retail floorspace, as can be seen from the following:

*'9.8 As a conclusion, there has rarely been a less certain time to forecast retail and leisure needs into the future. We therefore recommend that the Councils take a short/medium-term view on meeting the evolving requirements of their resident populations' retail and leisure needs. We therefore recommend that the Council's place the greatest weight on our forecasts to 2031. ... Validation of this thought-process comes in the revised NPPF, which advocates allocating sites for town centre uses to meet capacity for a minimum of "at least ten years" rather than over the full plan period '...'*

*'9.86 Our forecasts for St Albans show only modest convenience goods capacity at 2026 of up to 2,900 sq m under the most populous forecast, increasing to up to 4,800 sq m net by 2031. The District is characterised by a very large proportion of its convenience (and comparison) goods floorspace being met within St Albans and Harpenden, as well as at a range of Local Centres. ... We consider that there is therefore no pressing qualitative need to allocate specific large sites for convenience retail development in St Albans over the next 10 years, and that the capacity identified should be envisaged to support the day-to-day requirements of smaller convenience goods retailers, together perhaps, with providing small-scale Local Centre type floorspace to accompany any major planned urban extensions.'*...

*'9.87 Turning to comparison goods capacity, we show there to be no capacity headroom for additional floorspace until 2031 under each of the population scenarios. This is due to a combination of the sizable commitment for a further 4,800 sq m net of comparison goods floorspace at Griffiths Way South, together with our reduced market share assumption (as with Hertsmere), that St Albans is likely to experience a reduction of around 9% of its current comparison goods market share as a result of its proximity to a range of planned developments in Luton, and permitted developments at Brent Cross. Accordingly, we recommend that the Council adopts a cautious approach to comparison goods capacity.'*...

- 2.4 While the Study was completed in 2018 it nevertheless aligns with the ongoing changes to shopping habits due to the Covid-19 Lockdowns and increase in online shopping. Due to these factors, SADC decided that a new study was not necessary.
- 2.5 The decision not to commission a new study was reinforced by the findings of the detailed Town Centre Boundaries Study (2023) that significant boundary changes were not required, indicating no great pressure for additional floorspace. This Study also forms part of the evidence base and fulfils the NPPF requirements to define town centres and primary shopping areas.
- 2.6 SADCs approach is further supported by the responses to the Regulation 18 and 19 consultations which did not result in landowner or retailer requests for significant new retail floorspace. In addition, the Council has not received any planning applications for major new retail developments during the period 2018 – 2024 since the Retail Study was completed.
- 2.7 It should also be noted that the Local Plan responds to the SWH Retail and Leisure Study 2018 advice 'to support the day-to-day requirements of smaller convenience goods retailers, ...with providing small-scale Local Centre type floorspace to accompany any major planned urban extensions.' Therefore, Local Plan policy requires new local centres in the larger strategic sites to meet local needs and support sustainable new communities.