

Greater Norwich Local Plan (GNLP) Examination

Hearing Statement

Matter 7, Issue 1 – The Economy (Policy 6)

Prepared on behalf of Columbia Threadneedle Investments and Weston Homes Plc

14 January 2022

Introduction

1. This Statement has been prepared on behalf of Columbia Threadneedle Investments (CTI), the owners of Anglia Square Shopping Centre and surrounding vacant land, and is submitted in addition to the representations made by their developer partner, Weston Homes Plc (WH), in relation to Policy 7.1 and Policy 0506 (Anglia Square).
2. This Statement makes reference to the following examination documents:
 - Greater Norwich Town Centres & Retail Study – Volume 1 (October 2017) [B3.5]
 - Greater Norwich Town Centres & Retail Study Update (December 2020) [B3.9]

Question 2: Is it justified for Policy 6 to seek to “avoid the loss of commercial premises” in centres? What definition of “commercial premises” is proposed? Is such an approach likely to be effective given the introduction of Class E and the availability of permitted development rights?

3. CTI and WH support the identification of the large district centre at Anglia Square/Magdalen Street as a town centre in NPPF terms and where the development of new retailing, leisure, offices and other main town centre uses will be encouraged at a scale appropriate to the function of the centre. This position is supported by the evidence set out within B3.5¹ and as an approach, is consistent with the NPPF requirement that planning policies should ‘define a network and hierarchy of town centres and promote their long-term vitality and viability’ (paragraph 86a).
4. In describing that new development should ‘avoid the loss of commercial premises or local services’, Policy 6 is ambiguous notwithstanding neither the GNLP nor the NPPF contains a definition of *commercial premises* or *local services*. The policy wording, taken at face value, overlooks that development often involves the replacement of existing buildings (e.g. commercial premises), which would be ‘lost’ as a result, but such a loss should generally not be precluded. It also fails to recognise the availability of permitted development rights, which permit (for example and subject to the specific limitations and conditions) a permanent change of use from launderettes to Class C3 dwellinghouses.
5. We further submit that this policy wording appears in tension with the evidence set out within B3.9, notably:
 - i. changing retailer requirements (due to the economic downturn and the growth of internet shopping) have resulted in ‘the secondary and tertiary pitches contracting and deteriorating in some centres due to limited demand’ (emphasised)²; and
 - ii. ‘projects involving retail floorspace provision are likely to be driven towards qualitative improvements which could involve ... re-purpos[ing] sites with existing floorspace in order to

¹ Paragraphs 2.26-2.30, page 12.

² Paragraph 3.52, page 21.

allow for a wider range of active land uses to maintain and enhance town centre health (including, in appropriate circumstances, the down-sizing of retail space)’ (emphasised)³.

6. Insofar as the wording ‘*avoid the loss of commercial premises or local services*’ is, or reads as, a quantitative measure of whether development proposals will be supported, we would point out that the evidence and policy advice contained within **B3.9**⁴ specifically warns against such an approach⁵, stating that ‘*a move towards more qualitative assessment factors would now be more appropriate, focusing upon the character of the proposed use, its contribution to active street frontages, its contribution to the overall health of the centre.*’
7. For the reasons set out above, this part of the policy is neither effective nor justified. It is negatively worded and could be construed as a restriction on town centre development involving the loss or replacement of commercial premises or local services when there may be reasonable grounds for doing so. We therefore recommend that amendments are necessary to make Policy 6 sound, with the replacement of ‘*avoid the loss of commercial premises or local services*’ with broader and clearer support for an appropriate range of uses which will help to ensure the vitality and viability of centres (as Policy 7.1 identifies). This would be consistent with the NPPF requirement that town centres should be allowed to ‘*grow and diversify in a way that can respond to rapid changes in the retail and leisure industries, allows a suitable mix of uses (including housing) and reflects their distinctive characters*’ (paragraph 86a).
8. We would further comment that the policy requires amendment to make it clear that the NPPF impact test applies only to retail and leisure development.

Recommended policy changes

9. We set out below our recommended changes to (parts of) the *Town Centres* section of Policy 6 to ensure it is justified, effective and consistent with the NPPF. These changes are shown in **red**.

The development of new retailing, leisure, offices and other main town centre uses will be subject to the sequential approach ~~and out-of-centre impact assessment~~, as defined by Government policy and guidance, and will be encouraged at a scale appropriate to the form and functions of the following hierarchy of defined centres:

1. *Norwich city centre;*
2. *The town centres of Aylsham, Diss, Harleston and Wymondham, and within the Norwich urban area, the large district centres at Anglia Square/Magdalen Street and Riverside;*
3. *The large village and district centres of: Acle, Coltishall, Hethersett, Hingham, Loddon, Long Stratton, Poringland and Reepham, and within the Norwich urban area at Aylsham Road, Drayton Road, Bowthorpe, Dereham Road, Eaton centre, Earlham House, Harford Place (Hall Road/Sandy Lane), Larkman centre, Plumstead Road, Sprowston Road, Old Catton and Dussindale (Thorpe St Andrew). New district centres to be established in accordance with the Growth Triangle Area Action Plan;*
4. *Local centres, including new and enhanced local centres serving major growth locations.*

Proposals for retail and leisure development outside town centres will also be subject to the impact test, as defined by Government policy and guidance.

*Development and investment consistent in scale with the function of the centre are encouraged at all levels of the hierarchy to enhance the range of businesses and facilities available locally. Development should seek to enhance the environment and economy of centres, and of villages with more dispersed services, to protect their function ~~and avoid the loss of commercial premises or local services~~.
*Proposals for an appropriate range of uses (including those set out in Policy 7.1) which will help to ensure the vitality and viability of centres will be supported.**

Ends.

³ Paragraph 4.54 (first bullet), page 35.

⁴ Paragraph 5.5, page 38.

⁵ Although this policy advice is made in the context of the Norwich Development Management Policies Document (Policy DM20), in particular ‘*the use of quantitative thresholds within town centre development management policies was becoming a blunt instrument*’, it is also applicable to the provisions of Policy 6.