



Climate Emergency Development Plan Document

Topic Paper: Town Centre Design and Density

V2 July 2020



This is one in a series of topic papers produced to inform the preparation of the Council's Climate Emergency Development Plan Document (DPD)

Topic Paper
Renewable energy
Natural climate solutions
Town Centres
Mine water energy and deep geothermal
Energy and Sustainable Construction
Coastal Change and flood management
One Planet Development/Alternative living
Transport
Agriculture and Rural Sustainability

Contents

Executive Summary	4
What is this topic paper about?	5
Can I comment on this topic paper?	5
Introduction	6
Policy Context and Evidence	7
National Planning Policy	7
Local Planning Policy	7
Evidence	8
Future Approach – Policy Development	9

Executive Summary

Town centres are in decline, the primary shopping area is changing, retail stores are closing, and the vitality of town centres is under threat. This recognised through the country and is not unique to Cornwall. Government changes to permitted development have sought to address the issue of town centre decline. Increasing the density in town centres could also help to mitigate impacts of climate change.

National policy sets out some principles for development densities; in particular stating that local authorities should optimise the use of land. There should be minimum densities for city and town centres especially where they are well-served by public transport. It goes on to say that there should be a significant uplift in average densities of residential development in these areas.

Some permitted development rights and the Use Class Order allow the change of use without any application process, including retail to other uses. The Government recognises the issue facing towns and has prepared further guidance on planning for town centres.

There is considerable evidence available on the decline of town centres and other issues facing our towns. Whilst it is recognised that increasing density and encouraging other uses into towns can assist their vitality, it has also been acknowledged that this could assist mitigate the impacts of climate change. There needs to be investment in public transport and cycling infrastructure to change behaviour, reduce car usage and connect people to jobs. Mixed-use buildings which are well served by public transport and with green spaces interspersed create a more vibrant town.

The policy has been developed to include considerations of:

- Permitted development rights – rights exist to change from certain uses to residential in an aim to encourage greater diversity in town centres;
- The Use Class Order allows changes of use within a particular use;
- Need for a variety of uses in towns;
- Reduced car travel;
- Improved public transport – making it easier for people to access services;
- Flexible approach to uses;
- Provision of green spaces.

Policy wording gives support for the intensification of uses through redevelopment, enhancing the public realm and promoting sustainable lifestyles.

Whilst a policy approach has been developed, it is important to recognise that other planning tools can also drive development in town centres; such as Local Development Orders (LDOs), Neighbourhood Development Orders and Plans, master planning for particular sites. These can sit alongside the DPD and any Town Centre Strategies which are developed by individual places.

What is this topic paper about?

The Council is preparing a new Plan to set the framework for dealing with climate change. This will sit underneath the Local Plan and forms the strategic framework for planning decisions. This topic paper summarises the latest available evidence on town centres density and design. Reflecting the wide scope of this topic there are a number of overlaps between this paper and the other papers.

To view all the topic papers and the latest update on the Climate Emergency DPD, please visit www.cornwall.gov.uk/climatechangedpd

Can I comment on this topic paper?

The Climate Emergency DPD topic papers are factual in nature and set out the planning policy context and current issues in Cornwall, along with potential future approach to inform policy development. There will be opportunities to comment on the content of the Climate Emergency DPD at various stages of its development. As such we are currently seeking views on these topic papers, in particular any gaps in evidence.

If you wish to be kept informed of any forthcoming consultation, please email climateemergencydpd@cornwall.gov.uk with your contact details.

Introduction

Our town centres have long been the focus of community and commercial life and are often the focus of public transport routes and community facilities. In the past decades the focus of town centres has been changed as travel patterns have shifted and retail models have changed. A move to out of town retail sheds and internet shopping has changed the dominance of shopping as a main focus of activity in town centres. The function of our primary shopping area is changing as retail stores close with many national companies downsizing or ceasing to trade. The vitality of many town centres is under threat. Government changes to the Use Class Order and permitted development have sought to address the issue of town centre decline. Increasing the density in town centres could also help to mitigate impacts of climate change.

There is considerable evidence available regarding the decline of town centres. Whilst it is recognised that increasing density and encouraging other uses into towns can assist their vitality, it has also been acknowledged that this could assist mitigate the impacts of climate change. Evidence suggests that compact, connected and co-ordinated places are more productive, socially inclusive, resilient, cleaner and have lower greenhouse gas emissions.

Cornwall's settlement pattern is made up of one small city and a large number of dispersed market towns. The spread of Cornish towns is linked to the historic economic focus of particular roles and industries. The challenges faced by Cornwall's towns and high streets and their rural hinterlands are not unusual in the UK, but they are exacerbated by additional economic challenges including lower than average pay, geographical remoteness and the seasonality of tourism. The changes are leading to an increasing number of empty shops which in turn is leading to reduced foot fall in most of our towns.

Locally, the vitality of towns is an area of concern for Cornwall Council. In 2019, the Members' held an inquiry¹ into the vitality of towns in Cornwall, gathering evidence from a number of experts and forming recommendations for Cabinet to consider. The recommendations which are most relevant to planning are:

- Increasing the use of Compulsory Purchase Orders for strategic buildings;
- Promoting management hubs and share community facilities in towns;
- Preparing informal town frameworks;
- Ensuring future planning policy moves away from outdated zoning of A1/A2; retail space to more mixed use;
- Directing delivery of housing to support high streets and tackle climate change;
- Increasing the provision of electric charging points in car parks.

¹ <https://democracy.cornwall.gov.uk/mgCommitteeDetails.aspx?ID=1271>

Policy Context and Evidence

National Planning Policy

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) retains the ‘town centre first’ principle and the sequential approach to site selection. The NPPF sets out some principles for development densities; in particular stating that local authorities should optimise the use of land. There should be minimum densities for city and town centres especially where they are well-served by public transport. It goes on to say that there should be a significant uplift in average densities of residential development in these areas. Whilst there is a chapter specifically on planning for climate change, there is no mention of using increased densities in town centres to mitigate climate change.

The Government has announced a series of changes to enable changes of use and redevelopment to residential of redundant buildings in the hope that it will drive the recovery of our towns, published in July 2020, the provisions will be in force from 1st September 2020. There are changes to the General Permitted Development Order² which enables the demolition of a single purpose-built detached block of flats or other single detached building (office, research or industrial building) together with its replacement by a single building for a purpose-built detached block of flats or detached dwelling house. The other amendment made changes to the Use Class Order³, creating a new class (Class E) taking in A1 (shops), A2 (financial and professional services), A3 (restaurants and cafes) and B1 (business) and allowing changes of use between these types without consent. New classes relating to local community and learning uses includes some protection for community uses.

Further permitted development rights allow for a change of use including to residential dwellings subject to prior approval by the local planning authority on specific planning matters.

A guide to the Use Class Order is available on the Planning Portal

https://www.planningportal.co.uk/info/200130/common_projects/9/change_of_use

The Government recognises the issue facing towns and has prepared further guidance on planning for town centres <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ensuring-the-vitality-of-town-centres>.

Local Planning Policy

The Local Plan sets out the spatial strategy for development; stating that Cornwall’s main towns are the focus for strategic development. Policy 2 sets out the spatial strategy for Cornwall. Policy 4 specifically relates to shopping, services and community facilities.

² Changes to the General Permitted Development Order

https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2020/756/pdfs/uksi_20200756_en.pdf

³ Use Class Order https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2020/757/pdfs/uksi_20200757_en.pdf

<https://www.cornwall.gov.uk/media/22936789/adopted-local-plan-strategic-policies-2016.pdf>

Evidence

There is considerable evidence available on the decline of town centres and other issues facing our towns. Whilst it is recognised that increasing density and encouraging other uses into towns can assist their vitality, it has also been acknowledged that this could assist mitigate the impacts of climate change.

The Global Commission on the Economy and Climate New Climate project suggests that compact, connected and co-ordinated cities are more productive, socially inclusive, resilient, cleaner and have lower greenhouse gas emissions.

There needs to be investment in public transport and cycling infrastructure to change behaviour, reduce car usage and connect people to jobs. Mixed-use buildings which are well served by public transport and with green spaces interspersed create a more vibrant town. Copenhagen has been cited as an example where the increasing strategic density is focused around public transport networks; no employer is further than 600m from a public transport station. There is green space, 200 miles of bike lanes and it is reported that 1/3 of commuters use public transport and 40% use bikes to commute.

The Town Fund⁴ and other initiatives⁵ are creating strategies to help Cornwall's town centres adapt to new uses and functions for town centres that move away from a pure retail model. This has been discussed for a considerable time and highlighted in the Grimsey⁶ and Portas⁷ Reviews.

Cornwall Council has developed a Place Shaping Framework to identify particular issues, understand the physical, social and economic improvements required to meet present and future needs. This will enable communities to identify the priorities and ambitions for their area. Place shaping is far broader than physical change and assets, it includes service delivery, skills development, education and employment opportunities delivered in a way that meets the needs of the communities' future growth. There are four themes that the Council have identified for place shaping, of which town centre renewal is one such theme. Cornwall Council's Cabinet have endorsed the Place Shaping Framework⁸. The resultant Town Centre Renewal strategies will form material considerations for changes of use and development in towns.

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/towns-fund-prospectus>

⁵ Future High Streets Fund <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/future-high-streets-fund>

⁶ <http://www.vanishinghighstreet.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/GrimseyReview04.092.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-portas-review-the-future-of-our-high-streets>

⁸ Cornwall Council's Place Shaping Framework

<https://democracy.cornwall.gov.uk/documents/s136834/Place%20Shaping%20Framework%20and%20Town%20Regeneration%20-%20Report.pdf>

Future Approach – Policy Development

The policy has been developed to include considerations of:

- Permitted development rights – rights exist to change from certain uses to residential in an aim to encourage greater diversity in town centres;
- The Use Class Order allows changes of use within a particular use;
- Need for a variety of uses in towns;
- Reduced car travel;
- Improved public transport – making it easier for people to access services;
- Flexible approach to uses;
- Provision of green spaces.

Policy wording gives support for the intensification of uses through redevelopment, enhancing the public realm and promoting sustainable lifestyles. It is worth noting that the Government is currently proposing reform of the planning system to enable recovery and the vitality of towns, as described above a number of changes have recently been introduced and further changes are expected in the coming months.

Whilst a policy approach has been development, it is important to recognise that other planning tools can also drive development in town centres; such as Local Development Orders (LDOs), Neighbourhood Development Orders and Plans, master planning for particular sites. These can sit alongside the DPD and any Town Centre Strategies which are developed by individual places.

Future decisions in the context of town centres and climate change would need to consider the contribution of urban areas to climate change impacts such as flooding as a result of more impermeable surfaces, increased urban heat due to higher buildings etc.