

PO9 Retailing & Town Centres**Full version Whole District****OBJECT**

Regarding town centres, the Local Plan is based on the following key principles and policy objectives:

- ❖ Ensuring that communities have access to “sustainable” destinations for their shopping needs.
- ❖ Focusing on the town centres to satisfy those needs, while strongly resisting any further out-of-town retail development.
- ❖ Providing a major retail-led development in Leamington town centre.

Whilst the Leamington Society fully supports the “town centres first” principle we believe that the PO9 policy outlined does not reflect the needs, or indeed the views, of the citizens of the district. Neither does it respect or enhance the individuality, historic and cultural nature of our existing town centres.

We therefore urge that the following comments are taken into account before the local plan is finalised.

1. The Leamington town centre and Clarendon Arcade.

The Local Plan’s preferred option for retailing and town centres (PO9, p.46), contains only one proposal of any substance: “...the addition of a major retail-led development scheme in Leamington Town Centre.” This we assume refers to the project to redevelop the Chandos Street area project, known as the Clarendon Arcade, which was rejected by the Planning Committee in November 2011.

In justifying its preferred option for retailing and town centres, the Plan cites (p.47) almost a page of recommendations taken from The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), para. 23.

However, it is by no means clear that the NPPF provides unequivocal support for the Clarendon Arcade proposal in its present published form. Of course the Plan echoes the NPPF in its desire to promote the “vitality” of town centres, but this term is undefined and thus cannot in itself serve as a guide to action. Moreover it is hard to imagine how anyone could oppose such an objective; the real issue is not whether town centre vitality is desirable, but how best to promote it.

On this question the NPPF is somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand it urges local authorities to “promote competitive town centres that promote consumer choice and a diverse retail offer” – a sentence which has been seized upon by supporters of the Clarendon Arcade project as justification

for it. However the very same sentence in the NPPF also urges that development should “reflect the individuality of town centres” (see Plan, p.47). It is highly questionable whether the Clarendon Arcade proposal satisfies this criterion.

Further, the same paragraph requires local authorities to “recognise that residential development can play an important role in ensuring the vitality of town centres and set policies to encourage residential development on suitable sites...”. Of course, the relevance of this sentence to Clarendon Arcade hinges entirely on whether the site is considered suitable for residential development. The Leamington Society, noting that the site’s previous use was largely residential, takes the view that it would be appropriate to use a good proportion of the site for residential purposes. This would, as the NPPF states, contribute importantly to the vitality of the town centre – especially in the evenings, when Clarendon Arcade as presently proposed would be closed. Some residential use of the site would also significantly reduce the commercial risk of the development. Given the rapid structural change now occurring in retailing, to devote the entire site to retail development would be risky to the point of folly. We return to this question of risk below.

It is worth noting that such a mixed development of residential and retail use is also in accordance with the NPPF guidelines, which state (para. 24) that “applicants and local planning authorities should demonstrate flexibility on issues such as format and scale.” Further, the NPPF points (para. 131) to the “desirability of new developments making a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness.” This advice also supports the view of many of the critics of the Clarendon Arcade proposal, including the Leamington Society, that the proposed development is oppressive in its bulk, is without aesthetic merit, and by no stretch of the imagination would make a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness.

The Leamington Society believes that any development of a mall type on the Chandos Street site or elsewhere would, far from promoting the vitality of Leamington town centre, be actually destructive of its vitality. This is because shopping malls typically involve the privatisation of hitherto public space. In the case of Clarendon Arcade, three streets would be lost, which is not only objectionable in itself but is also destructive of the grid pattern of streets which is such a distinctive feature of Leamington town centre. Malls also result in “gated communities” where security and law enforcement is passed to private companies, with loss of accountability to the larger community. There is more loss of public rights in the fact that malls are typically open only during shopping hours. The presence of dark, shuttered malls in the town centre saps vitality by damaging the “evening economy”, upon which town centres are becoming increasingly dependent as the traditional town centre retailing model fades.

Yet another feature of the Clarendon Arcade proposal which conflicts with advice given in the NPPF concerns traffic management and parking in Leamington town centre. The NPPF advises (para. 39) that “parking policies should take into account the need to reduce the use of high-emission vehicles.” This refers of course to private cars, and clearly the provision in the Clarendon Arcade proposal for parking on the two highest levels for 340 cars is in complete opposition to para. 39. Indeed, more generally, even if the Clarendon Arcade proposal contained no provision for parking whatever, the core of the argument that is used to justify Clarendon Arcade is the perceived “need” to attract shoppers from other centres such as Solihull and Banbury. There can be no doubt therefore that, if successful in its own terms, Clarendon Arcade would increase rather than reduce the use of high-emission vehicles.

More generally, there is a clear tension, not to say contradiction, both in the NPPF and in the Local Plan between appropriate policies for town centres and policies for transport. The Plan's transport policies are discussed in more detail elsewhere in the Leamington Society's submission, but one key point is worth noting here. The general objective of the Plan's transport policy is to promote "sustainable modes of transport, such as walking, cycling and public transport" (see PO 14, p. 74). One important element of this is the development of two park-and-ride schemes (see map 5 in the Plan). However, at the same time the Plan proposes to "maintain sufficient parking in town centres so as not to undermine their vitality, whilst ensuring that effective alternatives to the car for access to town centres are provided." This is perhaps the most blatant contradiction in the entire Plan; for as common sense tells us, and is borne out by the experience of towns such as Oxford, it is only when parking in town centres becomes difficult and expensive that motorists begin to explore other options such as park-and-ride. Conversely Southampton's policy of providing abundant town-centre parking at its West Key development shows clearly that this creates enormous problems of traffic congestion.

The evidence base for Clarendon Arcade

The Plan states that its preferred option of "a major retail –led development scheme in Leamington town centre" is "in accordance with the identified need/evidence within the retail study." (PO9, p.46) The study referred to is presumably The Retail and Leisure Study commissioned by the District Council from the consultants Strategic Perspectives LLP (sic) and delivered in 2009. It updated an earlier study, delivered in 2004. The Study concluded that there was already in 2009 a large existing "need" for additional shopping facilities in Leamington and that this need would increase greatly in the future unless new shopping area was provided on a massive scale.

The requirement for such evidence is specified in the NPPF, where paras. 160-1 state that "local planning authorities should have a clear understanding of business needs within the economic markets operating in and across their area. To achieve this, they should...prepare and maintain a robust evidence base to understand both existing business needs and likely changes in the market. ...Local planning authorities should use this evidence base to assess ... the role and function of town centres and the relationship between them, including any trends in the performance of centres..."

Regrettably, the Retail and Leisure Study does not constitute a "robust evidence base". It contains a number of serious errors which render its conclusions valueless. (A detailed analysis in support of this contention is available from the Leamington Society).

Another source of evidence cited in the Plan (p. 49, para. 9.20) in support of Clarendon Arcade or similar mall development is Leamington's position in the Venuescore ranking, which has slipped slightly, from a ranking of 101 in 2006 to 108 in 2007, out of over 2000 shopping locations. Venuescore is a research report on retailing published annually by Javelin Group. Venuescore awards points for each retail multiple store that is present in a shopping centre. A store classified as a "premier department store" scores 20 points; a store classified as a "major department store" scores 10 points; and so on, down to a minimum of 2 points for a "leisure destination". Shopping centres throughout Britain are then ranked according to their total points score. There is obviously a strong element of arbitrariness both in the classification of stores and in the number of points awarded to each class. The scoring system will automatically favour large towns since their centres will contain more shops. For example, Coventry has a far higher score than Leamington, and Doncaster ranks higher than Harrogate. Moreover, local shops carry no weight at all, which particularly penalises a town such as Leamington with its exceptional number and range of solo

shops. For these reasons, the Society feels that a small change in Leamington's position in the Venuescore ranking is not a firm basis for policy.

In support of Clarendon Arcade the Plan also cites in the same paragraph a decline in "footfall" in the northern section of Leamington town centre. The Retail Study reports footfall counts in The Parade and adjacent streets recorded annually between 1999 and 2007, noting that footfall fell by 11.8% over this period and by 1.7% in 2007-08. However, we are not given any information about the date or dates on which the count was taken. This is important because, for example, variation in the weather can obviously affect footfall dramatically. Also, there is enormous month-to-month variation in footfall counts. A footfall count over a period of one week, or even one month, is an extremely unreliable indicator.

Moreover, the significance of any alleged decline in footfall in Leamington should be assessed by comparison with changes in footfall elsewhere. National footfall as published by Experian, a market research company, fell by 2% between June 2007 and June 2008, which makes the fall of 1.7% in Leamington reported above look good. Indeed, national footfall has fallen in most years since 2003 when the data was first collected. If footfall in Leamington is in fact declining – which is highly questionable on the evidence published by WDC – this is simply following a national trend, a further reflection of the demise of the traditional model of high street shopping.

In addition to these many shortcomings of the evidence base on which the case for Clarendon Arcade is founded, the idea that Leamington needs another shopping mall, which may have been plausible ten years ago, has now been overtaken by the rapidly changing retail scene in the UK. In addition to the effects of the current recession, which most observers expect to last for several years more (and even indefinitely, in some views), retailing is undergoing very rapid structural change, due partly to the rapid switch to internet shopping and partly to the consolidation of retail chains into a smaller number of larger stores, predominantly out-of-town.

The recent Ofcom annual report (2010-2011) published in July 2012 reported 30% growth in the full year to February 2012 in on-line sales; see page 13 of the summary of the full report

http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/cmr/cmr12/UK_0.pdf

This is being driven, even accelerated, by the adoption of smartphones that enable their users to "robo shop", i.e. research purchases in shops by scanning bar-codes or now QR codes, then visit price comparison web sites before making an on-line purchase. (See page 11 of the Ofcom report.)

While the Ofcom noted out that "The high street still accounts for the majority of revenues, but its growth has been much less", such growth rates will eventually threaten even the high street, unless it modifies what it offers. The Javelin consultancy now predicts that retailing as a whole will grow only by 1% per year between now and 2020. Within this total, internet shopping will continue to grow very rapidly, but by 2020 there will be 20% less chain store space needed in town centres, and chain store numbers will fall by 31%. Stores will be bigger in size and located in key locations such as Bicester Village, the Bullring in Birmingham and Touchwood in Solihull. To continue to pursue the Clarendon Arcade project is to close one's eyes to these hard facts. If Clarendon Arcade is built, yet fails, this would be very damaging to the town. Leamington cannot expect to swim successfully against the tide of national trends in retailing.

2. The way forward for retail in the historic towns of Warwick district

The town of Leamington Spa is described as an important sub-regional shopping destination containing a department store (HOF) and other branded outlets and High Street chains together with many independent shops. It acknowledges the town's unique intrinsic Regency character and its importance as a location of fine houses and as a residential centre with major offices, civic buildings, "Old Town" and a diverse range of restaurants, hotel and leisure facilities.

The other two main town centres (Warwick and Kenilworth) are also clearly described in relation to their unique specialist retailing activities, including the recent addition of Waitrose regarded as a rather special form of food outlet.

Out-of-town retail parks have a role in that they provide the opportunity for families to make weekly/monthly purchases of bulky or heavy items and use trolleys to easily wheel the purchases to their cars in ground level car parks. This ingredient is not easily deliverable in historic town centres.

Out of town shopping centres also allow viewing of bulky or major budget items such as white goods, TV and electronics, home furnishings, motor accessories, DIY and gardening goods etc. These goods may then be purchased and take away immediately, delivered later, or even ordered subsequently on-line.

Therefore, whilst the policy of strict control of the expansion of these outlets is essential, it is important to recognise that do have a role for our community and will continue to exist.

3. The real needs of the Leamington Spa town centre.

The Mary Portas report suggests possible ways to address these issues, and the Leamington Society believes WDC needs to consider how this can be done.

Town Centres, particularly those contained within the WDC have enormous historic and cultural significance and both residents and visitors appreciate the small, local, artisan type of business, visitor attractions, shops and local markets. This loyalty, and the thousands of visitors that this will attract, will help them to flourish and grow naturally.

PO9 sets out the principle of strongly resisting out of centre development in order to protect town centre activities. This should not imply that such "mega stores" should be introduced to our town centres for reasons already given. The town centre should not seek to compete head-on with out-of-town developments.

Our town centre will be better served by this approach rather than introducing shopping malls with large "anchor" stores in the historic town centre of Leamington Spa; this will not ensure the vitality of the town centre in the rapidly changing retail environment (see PO9).

Old Town

In PO9 there is no specific policy for Old Town (para 9.4) and this is a serious omission. Previously the area was clearly identified as a “second focus” in Leamington (e.g. Core Topic Paper 8 – 2006, para. 2.4). While there has been some investment and regeneration work in recent years, the task is by no means complete. WDC should seize the opportunity offered by the successful Mary Portas bid for the Old Town Business Association

While the sum of new money is modest, in terms of regeneration, with carefully matched funding it could herald major improvements in Old Town.