



MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD

Section 6

Retail and

Town Centres



RETAIL AND TOWN CENTRES

6.1 Town centres play an essential role in community life and are intrinsic to perceptions of places. Centres bring people together to shop, do business, and enjoy leisure time, and can also be a place to live. Changes in how people shop have brought about changes on the High Street, with the closure of many retailers. Changes to permitted development rights have extended the ability to change the use of buildings in town centres, such as from shops to restaurants and homes. Medway has a complex geography with five towns, and many neighbourhood, local and village centres at a smaller scale. There is also a district centre at Hempstead Valley, which has a good presence of major retailers. Medway Council commissioned a North Kent Retail Study in collaboration with Gravesham Council. The findings for Medway reveal the following:

- A need for 46,100m² comparison floorspace by 2031 and 70,500m² by 2037
- A need for 12,300m² of convenience retail floorspace by 2031 and 13,200m² by 2037
- There is anticipated to be a growing spend in leisure (£237million), predominantly commercial leisure (restaurants and cafes) over the plan period. Medway's centres should focus on developing their evening economy to capture some of this spend.

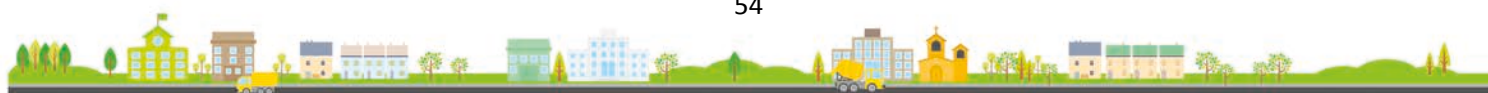
6.2 In addition to the work commissioned in the Medway Retail Needs Assessment, the council has surveyed town, neighbourhood, local and village centres across Medway to inform policies and allocations in the new Local Plan.

6.3 In terms of specific advice for each of the centres, the North Kent Study advised that Chatham remains at the top of the hierarchy and should be the main location for additional comparison retail growth. No further comparison retail was recommended for any of the other centres. In order to improve Chatham it is recommended that:

- public realm works be undertaken to improve its appearance,
- sites are actively brought forward,
- further opportunities for convenience retail are explored,
- improve and plan for a stronger evening economy through commercial leisure provision
- resist out-of-centre proposals

6.4 More specifically, the following recommendations were made for the remaining centres on the back of retaining the hierarchy of centres with Chatham at the top:

- Hempstead Valley: modernise and support day-to-day uses
- Rochester: consolidate rather than expand. Protect the primary shopping area (PSA) and provide a small foodstore if a site becomes available. Consider a cap on the provision of restaurants and cafes in order to protect the retail core.



- Strood: improve integration between the retail park and District Centre, and improve the public realm. No further expansion is recommended.
 - Gillingham: Consider redevelopment of the Budgens store.
 - Rainham: Focus on refurbishing and/or redevelopment. Consider an additional foodstore if a site should become available.
- 6.5 Responses to the Issues and Options consultation were split, with some support for investment in Chatham to consolidate its position at the top of the hierarchy. There were few responses in support of increasing the market share in Chatham, implying that a standard market share approach is desirable. Respondents supported a good mix of uses including residential as a main component followed by food and drink and employment. The consideration of out of centre retail received a mixture of responses, the majority of which were either in support of assessing out of centre provision on a case by case basis, or of discouraging it.

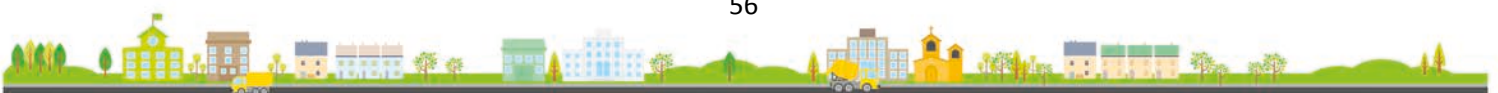
Town Centre Boundaries and Designations

- 6.6 Town centres provide important cultural destinations and supportive environments for business to prosper. Town centres are therefore recognised as the heart of local communities and local planning authorities are required to plan positively through a ‘town centre first’ approach and pursue policies in support of their vitality and viability.
- 6.7 Government planning guidance highlights the importance of a “town centre first” approach but recognises that it may not be possible to accommodate all forecasted needs within town centres due to physical or other constraints. In these circumstances, planning authorities should plan positively to identify the most appropriate alternative strategy having regard to the sequential and impact tests.
- 6.8 Part of the methodology in following a ‘town centre first’ policy involves defining the boundaries for town centres, those parts of the town centre which form the primary shopping area, and primary and secondary shopping frontages. Policies to protect our centres will be based on these designations. They will also provide the basis to manage appropriate uses in the retail core, which is fundamental to supporting the health, vitality and vibrancy of our centres.
- 6.9 The council will consider the need to review the town centre boundaries set in the 2003 Medway Local Plan and present proposals for consultation as part of the process of preparing the new Local Plan. The council will also seek views on the definitions of primary and secondary frontage areas, and primary shopping areas.
- 6.10 Medway’s 2003 Local Plan does not have primary or secondary frontages. It has a retail core designation which could be interpreted as performing a primary shopping area function. The North Kent study undertook an audit of uses (GOAD categories) in each of Medway’s centres and made recommendations for primary and secondary frontages.



Town Centre Character

- 6.11 As major changes have taken place in retail trends since the Medway Local Plan was adopted in 2003, the council needs to consider reviewing its policy approach to take account of market trends, viability and new opportunities for town centres.
- 6.12 Out of centre locations tend to be a more viable format for retailers, resulting in a threat to the viability and health of our centres. The relocation of main anchors coupled with online shopping have left our high streets in a vulnerable position forcing a refocus of the role and function of our centres. It is likely that further out of centre permissions will exacerbate the vulnerability of Medway's centres and could have a lasting detrimental impact. In revisiting the role of our centres to ensure sustainability in the longer term, key assets and characteristics will be identified and supported.
- 6.13 However, the North Kent Retail Study reveals that current trends focus on leisure provision in support of the evening economy. Commercial leisure (restaurants and cafes) tend to be a complimentary offer to tourist attractions, which increase dwell time and thereby support local spend and the health of our centres. Some centres have heritage assets, which form the basis for tourism. The council's tourism opportunities in centres will link to the heritage assets and providing the suitable uses in support. Links to the regeneration programme for waterfront and urban sites should provide opportunities to strengthen the role of our town centres, boosting spend, vitality and vibrancy.
- 6.14 The North Kent Retail Study presented some initial findings on the health of Medway's centres. Having undertaken a health check the study concluded Chatham is underperforming and Rainham, Strood and Gillingham have some vulnerabilities. Hempstead Valley and Rochester, by contrast, are performing well at present. This can be attributed to these centres being destinations based on a unique offer. Hempstead Valley is the preferred location within Medway of national retailers, which is of benefit to its continued investment and health. It provides an attractive tree covered area of free parking and recent years have seen expansion of its leisure offer including cafes and restaurants, responding directly to the changing market's interests in shopping as a leisure activity. Rochester's unique offer reflects its historic setting. The offer in the centre has evolved to support the historic attractions through the provision of commercial leisure (restaurants and cafes), reinforcing its attractiveness for day and evening activities.
- 6.15 There is potential for the role of centres to evolve reflecting the character as set out here:
- Chatham: location for community uses and services and tourism based uses in support of local heritage assets
 - Rochester: continue as the location as a leisure destination focussed around the heritage assets
 - Rainham: continue to support its local function



- Strood: remains a convenience retail destination and local function. It could potentially be supported by small scale employment for SME businesses and start-up units, and a strengthened employment area on the edge of the centre.
- Gillingham: has potential to become a student district centre with a focus on some small scale employment provision, working in collaboration with the higher and further education providers in Medway
- Hempstead Valley Shopping Centre: continue to perform a local function and high value shopping and leisure destination

Local Centres and Shopping

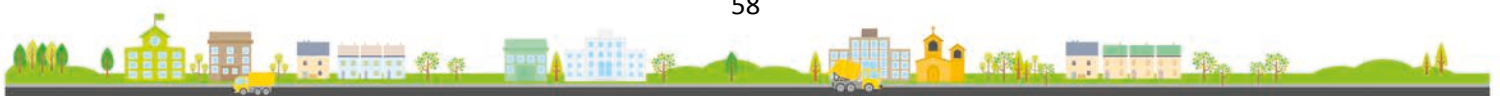
- 6.16 Local centres are valued by communities for retail, services such as hairdressers and cash machines, and community facilities including community halls, churches and libraries. Government planning policy requires local planning authorities to plan positively for local shops to enhance the sustainability of communities and guard against unnecessary loss of valued facilities and services. Local centres support the social dimension of sustainable development by ensuring local services are accessible and reflect the community's needs. These centres play an important role in meeting aspirations for a high quality built environment and strong, vibrant and healthy communities. Smaller centres have a strong community function in addition to providing convenience shopping, and are of particular importance in rural areas, where villagers can be dependent on local services.
- 6.17 Survey work on local, neighbourhood and village centres carried out by the council has confirmed a number of changes since the 2003 Medway Local Plan. This research will inform the content of updated policy in the new Local Plan, differentiating between the characteristics and needs of urban and rural communities, and development of specialist retail, such as farm shops.

Retail Warehousing and Retail Parks

- 6.18 Retail warehouse areas have predominantly been in out of centre locations but where located in edge of centre locations can support the vitality, vibrancy and viability of the town centre. Specifically, they can provide for those retail uses that are not commonly provided, or able to be provided, in town centres and local centres. In particular, such uses include those with a specific range of goods (often larger/bulky goods) which require a unique format in terms of their display and sale and attract car borne customers who require dedicated and immediate access to parking.
- 6.19 The type of goods predominantly sold in retail warehouse areas (i.e. bulky goods) tend to draw trade from a wider area due to limited availability of such outlets compared to the type of uses catered for in town centre locations. Retail warehouse areas in edge of centre locations can therefore be beneficial for town centres by drawing in trade from further afield, facilitating linked trips by bringing in visitors who may otherwise not come to town. Retail warehouse areas in out of centre locations will tend to function more independently and thereby have reduced opportunities for linked trips.
- 6.20 The findings of the Retail Needs Assessment for Medway revealed that:



- Retail locations outside of Gillingham District Centre are performing much better than the District Centre itself. This includes retail provision in Gillingham Business Park and the nearby Tesco store.
 - Strood Retail Park is functioning separately from the District Centre, despite being located immediately across the road. The study recommended that linkage between the two areas be improved to encourage linked trips. Again, the retail park appears to be performing better than the District Centre.
 - The third major retail park in Medway is at Horsted, is accessed off a main road, and has retained more specialised uses, with a larger catchment area.
- 6.21 Recent years have seen many more out of centre retailers seeking permission and securing approval compared to in-centre locations. This underlines the relevance of providing updated policy on retail warehousing and retail parks in the new Local Plan. This could include consideration of the role of edge of centre sites where there is evidence that the vitality and viability of centres could be boosted through linked trips, and appropriate provision is made for a good quality public realm, access and parking.



Policy Approach: Retail and Town Centres

The council will seek to strengthen and enhance its network of town, neighbourhood, local and village centres to provide a focus for retail, leisure, cultural and community activities.

The Local Plan will make provision for the allocation of retail floorspace for comparison and convenience shopping in line with the needs of Medway's growing communities.

The Local Plan will establish a retail hierarchy, set out defined town centre boundaries and establish primary shopping areas, primary and secondary frontages to inform a town centre first policy approach to secure the vitality and performance of centres, and its sequential approach.

The Local Plan will provide policy to inform a retail impact assessment threshold approach.

The council will seek to retain the retail core and strengthen the character and unique offer of each town and district centre through management of uses, assessed through satisfaction of an A1 retail percentage threshold, or defined appropriate uses.

The council will consider the introduction of policy on temporary uses to address vacancies to boost the vibrancy and vitality of the centre.

The council will set out policy on the uses considered to be appropriate in local centres and smaller shopping parades, including: retail, community facilities and services, and convenience shopping.

The council expects that new residential development will be accessible to local centres, providing for the community and social needs of residents and workers. It will seek the use of accessibility thresholds in promoting sustainability.

There will be a presumption against the loss of facilities and services where this could damage the function of a local centre.

The council will have regard to the uses, format and scale, location, access and parking offered by retail warehouses/parks to define policy, with the aim of securing the role, vitality and vibrancy of town centres.

