



**Rochford District  
Council**

<b>REPORT TITLE:</b>	<b>NEW LOCAL PLAN EVIDENCE BASE: RETAIL AND LEISURE NEEDS ASSESMENT (RLNA) UPDATE 2023</b>
<b>REPORT OF:</b>	<b>Director of Place</b>

## **REPORT SUMMARY**

A Retail and Leisure Needs Assessment (RLNA) Update has been prepared to provide an up-to-date assessment of the need for future retail and leisure floorspace during the New Local Plan period.

## **SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

### **1.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

#### **Context**

- 1.1 National planning policy requires local plans to be informed and justified by technical evidence.
- 1.2 Furthermore, national planning policy requires Local Plans to provide an overall strategy for the pattern, scale and design quality of places, and make sufficient provision for (inter alia): housing (including affordable housing), employment, retail, leisure and other commercial development
- 1.3 Having sufficient access to retail and leisure is a fundamental component of sustainable communities. It is also an area of continuing change, due to the rise of e-commerce, ongoing challenges within town centres and wider structural issues accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

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- 1.4 In the planning context, recent changes to the Use Class Order which mean that one no longer requires planning permission to change a building between different town centre uses (e.g. retail, cafes, restaurants and offices), accompanied by a wide-ranging expansion of Permitted Development Rights which make it easier for buildings to be converted away from town centre uses to other uses (e.g. housing), have together weakened the ability for local authorities to exercise close control over the types of business that can operate in town centres and other commercial areas. On the other hand, these changes have created flexibility that may mean that vacancies can be avoided or reduced.
- 1.5 The Council's previous source of evidence on retail and leisure needs was the South Essex Retail Study, published in 2017. This study required updating to reflect retail trends that have emerged and accelerated since its publication, and due to the fact it only identified need to 2037, as opposed to the new standard of 2040.
- 1.6 The RLNA was therefore commissioned to provide an update to this previous study that the Council could rely upon as a measure of the future need for retail and leisure floorspace.
- 1.7 The extent to which existing land or allocations are meeting short- and long-term As set out above, the fundamental purpose of the RLNA is to provide a predominantly quantitative source of evidence on the future need for retail and leisure floorspace within the District. This would allow the Council to develop a strategy and planning policies which accommodate the floorspace required, while attempting to safeguard or replace any floorspace at threat of being lost to alternative uses, e.g. housing.
- 1.8 The RLNA utilises two scenarios (low growth and high growth). The purpose of including two scenarios is to consider the differences in need for additional retail and leisure floorspace based on different rates of assumed population growth. The high growth scenario assumes that the District grows at an average rate of 360 homes per year as suggested by the Government's standard method. The low growth scenario instead uses the Experian model to consider growth.
- 1.9 Experian data is zone based and these zones do not neatly conform to local authority boundaries. However, it should also be accepted that retail behaviour does not neatly conform to local authority boundaries and many of the District's residents will cross local authority boundaries every day to access retail or leisure floorspace. The consultant has undertaken some analysis to consider the attribution of growth to different zones.
- 1.10 In summary, the RLNA has found:
- A need for an additional 5,284 to 5,999 m<sup>2</sup> of food and beverage retail floorspace by 2040

- A need for an additional 654 to 1,864m<sup>2</sup> of comparison retail floorspace by 2040, which is projected to be negative (i.e. over supplied) until 2030 under either scenario
- A need for an additional 506 to 734m<sup>2</sup> of convenience retail floorspace by 2040, which is projected to be negative (i.e. over supplied) until 2030 under either scenario
- A need for an additional 3,270 to 3,960m<sup>2</sup> of commercial leisure floorspace by 2040

1.11 The RLNA provides a disaggregation of need by settlement area within the report.

1.12 The RLNA further recognises that an existing pipeline of retail and leisure space may well help to support the achievement of some of this floorspace. However, in the same vein, it may be that further losses to retail and leisure floorspace in coming years creates a larger deficit that will need to be met. These losses and gains will be monitored through the Authority Monitoring Report to allow an ongoing comparison to identified long-term needs.

#### **Implications for Plan-Making and Decision-Taking**

1.13 As stated above, recent changes to national planning policy and wider legislation have made it challenging for local authorities to exercise close control on traditional “town centre uses”, meaning that many changes of use no longer require planning permission.

1.14 This in turn makes it harder for local plans to ensure that long-term retail and leisure needs can be met, as it may be that the Council can often not avoid the loss of existing floorspace where its conversion away from a retail or leisure use does not require permission. Furthermore, any new space created or allocated through the new Local Plan for retail or leisure could be lost in subsequent years to an alternative use without requiring permission.

1.15 However, the RLNA concludes that the updated projections confirm there is a need for town centres to maintain their primary retail function, whilst increasing their diversity with a range of complementary uses. The importance of a mix of retail and other town centre activity has increased in recent years and town centres increasingly need to compete with on-line shopping. Town centres need a better mix of uses that extend activity throughout the daytime and into the evenings.

1.16 Furthermore, the projections suggest there is no pressing need to bring forward major new allocations for retail and food/beverage development before 2030. The short term projections to 2030 suggest there is likely to be limited demand to reoccupy vacant retail floorspace. However, the need to retain and grow retail floorspace in the longer term (up to 2035 and 2040) needs to be considered. In the longer term development opportunities will

need to be identified to accommodate residual capacity for retail, food/beverage and leisure uses within town centres.

- 1.17 Notwithstanding the challenges local authorities face in exercising close control on “town centre uses”, the Local Plan could utilise specific allocations for new retail or leisure floorspace where required, e.g. a new convenience store or supermarket, and then utilise conditions or planning obligations to safeguard it in perpetuity. In this context, having an up-to-date source of evidence on the scale and distribution of retail and leisure need remains useful to ensure that strategy decisions within the Local Plan, and specific decisions in relation to planning applications, are well informed by an understanding of both short-term and long-term need.
- 1.18 Within town centres, it is clear that the new Local Plan will need to strike the right balance between safeguarding the most important retail and leisure uses, whilst acknowledging that some degree of change to alternative uses is likely to be required. Residential development within town centres, whilst previously considered unfavourable, may now have an important role in increasing footfall and the viability of businesses within the centres. The Council may be able to use Article 4 directions, conditions and planning policies (e.g. protecting primary shopping frontages) to enact degree of control.
- 1.19 Whilst the RLNA has been prepared as a predominantly quantitative assessment of future retail and leisure needs, it is recognised that a complementary qualitative assessment of the performance and future outlook for local town centres will be required to inform the Local Plan as it progresses.

## **2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

- 2.1 National policy requires Local Plans to be supported by a robust and proportionate evidence base. This evidence base is intended to inform, rather than bind, the development of appropriate strategies and policies within Local Plans. In this context, whilst the Council was not obliged to prepare an update to its retail and leisure needs evidence base, a decision to not do so would risk relying on out-of-date information which is less likely to satisfy an Inspector that any policies informed by the evidence base are sound.

## **3.0 RELEVANT RISKS**

- 3.1 There are no direct risks arising from noting this report.
- 3.2 As a general principle, by building a comprehensive and robust evidence base, the Council will help to ensure that its New Local Plan provides an appropriate and sound strategy for future planning decisions, which help to avoid risks that may otherwise arise from poor or less-informed decisions.

## **4.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION**

- 4.1 There is no engagement or consultation as part of this report.

**5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

5.1 The RLNA was completed within agreed budgets and resources.

**6.0 LEGAL/GOVERNANCE IMPLICATIONS**

6.1 There are no legal or governance implications arising from this report.

**7.0 EQUALITY & HEALTH IMPLICATIONS**

7.1 There are no direct equality and health implications arising from this report.

**8.0 ENVIRONMENT & CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS**

8.1 There are no direct environmental or climate implications arising from this report.

**9.0 ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS**

9.1 There are no direct economic implications arising from this report. However, by preparing the RLNA the Council is able to access up-to-date and robust information on long-term retail and leisure needs from which it can make sounder planning decisions.

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**APPENDICES**

Appendix A – Rochford Retail and Leisure Needs Assessment (RLNA) Update 2022 by Lichfields

**BACKGROUND PAPERS**

None

**SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)**

<b>Council Meeting</b>	<b>Date</b>
None	