CENTRE	**Darlington Town Centre**
OVERVIEW	Darlington town centre is the principal retail, commercial and administrative centre in Darlington Borough. Darlington was historically a small market town which grew substantially in the 19th Century, partly as a consequence of the growth of the railways. Much of the town's industrial past has now gone but Darlington's former Victorian grandeur can still be seen today and the town retains a diverse mix of historic and modern architecture. In terms of its geographical location, Darlington is located approximately 26km (driving distance) west of Middlesbrough, 60km (driving distance) south of Newcastle and 103km (driving distance) north of Leeds. The settlement lies immediately to the east of the northern stretch of the A1(M) Motorway between Junctions 57 and 58. As such, the settlement is well connected with the national strategic road network with journey times to Newcastle city centre or the Metro Centre taking approximately 50 minutes via the A1(M). The town centre's core was pedestrianised in 2007 through the £8m 'Pedestrian Heart' project. This restricted vehicular movements in principal shopping streets and incorporated areas of high quality public realm with planting and seating, which continues to provide a pedestrian friendly shopping environment today. The town centre boundary and primary shopping frontages are currently defined by the Darlington Borough Local Plan Proposals Map (Adopted 1997, alterations 2001) although this will be superseded by the new Local Plan in due course. The primary shopping frontages comprise the Cornmill Shopping Centre, the Queen Street Shopping Centre, High Row, Northgate, Prebend Row and the northern section of Blackwellgate. This area is mainly pedestrianised and contains the highest concentration of national multiple retailers, which amongst others includes House of Fraser, Marks & Spencer and Primark. The secondary shopping frontages comprise Duke Street, Grange Road, Horsemarket, Post House Wynd, Skinnergate, the old town hall (which accommodates the indoor market) and Tubwell Row. No primary shopping area is defined by the Proposals Map although in accordance with Annex 2 of the NPPF, which states that a primary shopping area will generally be comprised of primary shopping frontages and those secondary frontages which are adjoining and closely related to the primary frontage, we consider the primary and secondary shopping frontages to comprise Darlington's de facto primary shopping area. This health check seeks to update our previous health checks of Darlington town centre undertaken in 2013 and 2016 respectively. This health check identifies and considers any changes that have occurred since the previous surveys and highlights the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for the town centre going forward.

The methodology employed by WYG has drawn on national planning policy, guidance and best practice, as well as our experience from similar commissions. The health check has principally followed the indicators set out in the National Planning Practice Guidance. Relevant information has been obtained from outside sources where necessary, otherwise the health check has been informed by a site visit undertaken by WYG in July 2017.

SUB-REGIONAL SHOPPING HIERARCHY

Venuescore provides a ranking system of centres, which draws from the number of national multiples and anchor stores, as well as units within the food service, convenience and comparison sectors. The score attached to each operator is weighted to reflect its overall impact on shopping patterns.

Darlington town centre has a Venuescore 2016-17 UK Shopping Venue Rankings 'score' of 228 and is ranked 58th retail venue in the UK. It is the third highest ranked retail venue in the North-East region behind Newcastle city centre and the Metrocentre at Gateshead. Since 2014, Darlington's Venuescore has increased by two points and its ranking has increased by 5 places, overtaking Middlesbrough which was previously the third highest ranked retail venue in the region. This shows a positive improvement against the data that was available at the time of our previous health check undertaken in 2016 (Venuescore 2015-16 UK Shopping Venue Rankings). Darlington town centre is classified as a 'Regional' shopping destination, indicating its significance across the wider area. Table 1 (below) sets out Darlington's ranking in the regional context. Since 2014, Darlington, Bishop Auckland and Washington are the only regional and sub-regional centres to have increased in ranking.

Table 1: Sub-Regional Shopping Hierarchy

Venue	Score 2016	Classification 2016	Rank		Change in rank between 2014/15 and 2016/17
			2014	2016	
Newcastle-upon-Tyne	450	Major City	11	11	-
Gateshead, Metrocentre	247	Major Regional	46	49	-3
Darlington	**228**	**Regional**	**63**	**58**	+5
Middlesborough	225	Regional	58	61	-3
Sunderland	195	Regional	79	86	-7
Durham	146	Regional	149	154	-5
Stockton	128	Sub-Regional	179	188	-9
South Shields	114	Sub-Regional	187	215	-28
Bishop Auckland	107	Sub-Regional	270	232	+38
Washington	107	Sub-Regional	242	232	+10
Redcar	106	Sub-Regional	221	236	-15

PHOTOGRAPHS OF DARLINGTON TOWN CENTRE

Photograph 1: House of Fraser, High Row

Photograph 2: Public Realm, High Row

Photograph 3: Cornmill Shopping Centre

Photograph 4: Vue Cinema, Feethams

Photograph 5: Ground Floor, Feethams

Photograph 6: Pizza Express, Skinnergate

Photograph 7: Post House Wynd

Photograph 8: Next & Costa, Northgate

DIVERSITY OF USE ANALYSIS

WYG undertook a survey of Darlington town centre in July 2017, which provides a basis for this health check assessment. Consideration has also been given to WYG's previous health check of Darlington town centre, the survey work for which was undertaken in February 2016. The previous health check was undertaken to inform a Public Inquiry into proposals for the Scotch Corner Designer Outlet, which were subsequently approved by the Secretary of State in December 2016 (Planning Inspectorate Ref. APP/V2723/V/15/3132873.

A new survey of the town centre's commercial stock has been undertaken by WYG to inform the 2017 Retail Study Update. This is based on the area defined by the April 2015 Darlington town centre Experian Goad plan, which was updated by WYG in February 2016 and again in July 2017 to reflect the position 'on the ground'. It should be noted that the Experian Goad boundary does not correspond directly with the adopted town centre boundary, with the Goad boundary incorporating the Duke Street, Bondgate and part of the Northgate town centre 'Fringe Areas', as defined by Policy S9 of the Darlington Borough Local Plan (Adopted 1997, alterations 2001). However, using the Goad plan allows a like-for-like comparison with the February 2016 survey, as well as Experian Goad's national average figures and as such is considered to be the most appropriate and robust approach. The Goad Category Report categorisation system has been used as a basis for the analysis. The survey data from the 2016 health check has been re-categorised in accordance with Goad categories to align the methodologies of the two health checks.

Our July 2017 survey of the Goad boundary identified 555 retail and service units, providing a total gross floorspace of 118,190 sq.m. Table 2 below sets out the composition of uses identified in accordance with the Goad categorisation system:

Table 2: Diversity of Use, Goad Area, July 2017

	Darlington Town Centre - July 2017					
	No of Units	%	UK	Floorspace	%	UK
Convenience	39	7.0%	8.7%	9,390	7.9%	15.2%
Comparison	176	31.7%	31.4%	46,890	39.7%	35.3%
Retail Service	79	14.2%	14.3%	8,270	7.0%	6.8%
Leisure Service	123	22.2%	23.8%	25,370	21.5%	24.8%
Financial and Business Service	53	9.5%	10.4%	10,070	8.5%	7.8%
Vacant	85	15.3%	11.1%	18,200	15.4%	9.5%
Total	**555**	**100%**	**100%**	**118,190**	**100%**	**100%**
Other Uses	34	-	-	15,200	-	-
Vacant Other Uses	5	-	-	1,330	-	-

Source: WYG Site Visit July 2017 | *UK Average, Goad, June 2017 | *Figures Recorded from Goad boundary

Table 3: Diversity of Use, Goad Area, February 2016

	Darlington Town Centre - February 2016					
	No of Units	%	UK	Floorspace	%	UK
Convenience	39	6.9%	8.6%	9,390	7.9%	15.2%
Comparison	180	32.0%	32.1%	51,050	42.8%	35.9%
Retail Service	86	15.3%	14.4%	8,510	7.1%	7.5%
Leisure Service	122	21.7%	22.7%	26,110	21.9%	23.5%
Financial and Business Service	57	10.1%	10.7%	10,910	9.1%	8.1%
Vacant	79	14.0%	11.3%	13,350	11.2%	9.2%
Total	**563**	**100%**	**100%**	**119,320**	**100%**	**100%**
Other Uses	35	-	-	16,100	-	-
Vacant Other Uses	5	-	-	1,500	-	-

Source: WYG Site Visit February 2016 | *UK Average, Goad, January 2016 | *Figures Recorded from Goad boundary

Table 2 represents a like for like comparison against the previous health check undertaken in 2016 (set out in Table 3). Since the February 2016 survey, the overall number of retail and service units has reduced from 563 to 555, along with the proportion of floorspace reducing from 119,320 sq.m to 118,190 sq.m (gross). It should however be noted that the composition of the centre has not changed during this time. The slight reduction in the number of units (and consequently proportion of floorspace) is due to two factors. Firstly, it is due to the subdivision of a number of units (albeit this does not change total floorspace) and secondly due to us identifying a number of units that are no longer in use as retail/service or other main town centre uses. An example of the latter are two vacant industrial units located in Punch Bowl Yard that were previously identified by Goad as vacant retail units. Such units have been removed from our latest analysis. Overall, the diversity of uses remains broadly similar to that recorded in February 2016, the only material change in terms of the like-for-like comparison being a decrease in comparison goods floorspace and subsequent increase in vacant floorspace. This can largely be attributed to the closure of BHS and TK Maxx, both of which occupied large town centre units.

Introduction of Feethams

At the time of the 2016 town centre survey, the £30m leisure scheme at Feethams was under construction and therefore not included within the analysis. The scheme is now open to the public and whilst it is yet to be integrated into the Goad boundary, it represents a significant increase in the proportion of leisure service floorspace in Darlington town centre. Table 4 below sets out the composition of the Feethams scheme as set out in the approved planning application:

Table 4: Composition of Feethams

Use	No. Units	Floorspace	Category
9 Screen Multiplex Cinema	1	3,526	Leisure Service
80 Bed Hotel	1	3,050	Leisure Service
Restaurant/Bar/Other Leisure Uses	10	3,135	Leisure Service
Total	**12**	**9,711**	-

Source: Feethams Floorspace (Ref. 13/00750/FUL)

Given that this represents a significant material change to the composition of the town centre, we have concluded that it is appropriate to incorporate Feethams into the 2017 diversity of use health check analysis. Table 5 below sets out the diversity of use for the Goad area at July 2017 (as per table 2) incorporating Feethams into the respective totals. This represents the figures which the following detailed diversity of use analysis is based upon:

Table 5: Diversity of Use, Goad Area, July 2017 (Including Feethams)

	Darlington Town Centre - July 2017					
	No of Units	%	UK	Floorspace	%	UK
Convenience	39	6.9%	8.7%	9,390	7.3%	15.2%
Comparison	176	31.0%	31.4%	46,890	36.7%	35.3%
Retail Service	79	13.9%	14.3%	8,270	6.5%	6.8%
Leisure Service	135	23.8%	23.8%	35,081	27.4%	24.8%
Financial and Business Service	53	9.3%	10.4%	10,070	7.9%	7.8%
Vacant	85	15.0%	11.1%	18,200	14.2%	9.5%
Total	**567**	**100%**	**100%**	**127,901**	**100%**	**100%**
Other Uses	34	-	-	15,200	-	-
Vacant Other Uses	5	-	-	1,330	-	-

Convenience Goods

Table 5 indicates that Darlington's proportion of convenience goods units is currently 6.9%, which is 1.8 percentage points lower than the national average of 8.7%. Furthermore, the proportion of convenience goods floorspace is 7.3% which is significantly lower than the national average of 15.2%. The Sainsbury's supermarket, located outside of the town centre boundary to the south (but within the Goad boundary) represents 62.1% of the convenience goods floorspace identified. There is poor representation from national multiple convenience goods operators within the town centre boundary, with the only units identified being a Tesco Express and Iceland. Despite the poor convenience goods representation within the town centre, it is recognised that the wider settlement of Darlington is well provided for in terms of convenience goods, with a considerable number of national multiple operators present in out-of-centre locations.

Comparison Goods

Comparison goods traders in Darlington occupy 31.0% of all outlets in the centre, which is broadly consistent with the national average of 31.4%. In terms of the comparison goods floorspace provision in the centre, the 176 units account for 46,890 sq.m, with the percentage of floorspace (36.7%) slightly above the national average figure of 35.3%. This can be attributed to a high concentration of comparison goods units located in the Cornmill shopping centre, as well as a number of large-format comparison goods units elsewhere in the centre such as House of Fraser (3,100 sq.m gross), which we consider to anchor the town centre. Other notable comparison goods units include Marks & Spencer (2,670 sq.m gross) and Wilko (4,340 sq.m gross). The proportion of comparison goods floorspace in Darlington at the time of our previous survey was 42.8%. The decrease of 6.1 percentage points can be attributed to both the significant increase in the proportion of leisure service floorspace (Feethams) and the closure of BHS (1,540 sq.m gross) and TK Maxx (3,910 sq.m gross) which relocated from the town centre to the Darlington Retail Park in February 2017. Notwithstanding this, we consider Darlington to have a relatively healthy comparison goods offer, with good representation from national multiples. The loss of BHS is due to the company's collapse in 2016, which resulted in the closure of the retailer's entire portfolio of 165 stores across the country. BHS anchored town centres across the UK and its departure has left large-format vacant retail units in many centres, which up to this point, in many cases have not been re-let. Therefore, in the context of this health check, the loss of BHS is not a significant cause for concern due to the national circumstances associated with its departure.

We understand that the former TK Maxx unit was bought by NewRiver Retail in 2016 who also own the Cornmill shopping centre. Two planning applications have recently been submitted (Application Refs. 17/00311/CU and 17/00312/OUT) relating to this site. A change of use application has sought consent for the subdivision of the former TK Maxx unit into four individual units (use classes A1, A3, A5 and D2) and an outline application has sought consent for the storing of a collection of shipping containers for occupation by retailers in the landscaped area of the site. Both applications were approved at the July 2017 planning committee. These planning permissions, should they be implemented, will result in a further increase in the proportion of retail/service floorspace within the town centre.

Retail Services

Retail services, which comprise such uses as hairdressers, dry cleaners and petrol filling stations, account for 13.9% of outlets (79 units) and 6.5% of floorspace (8,270 sq.m) in Darlington town centre, which compares to respective national averages of 14.3% and 6.8%. 'Health and beauty' traders are particularly dominant in this sector, with a total of 58 such businesses, followed by opticians (seven) and travel agents (three). There is a large Post Office (800 sq.m gross) at Crown Street, although typically retail services tend to operate from small units in the centre, often smaller than 100 sq.m gross.

Leisure Services

In terms of leisure services in Darlington, the proportion of outlets occupied by such uses is 23.8% (135 units). This is consistent with the national average for the proportion of leisure service outlets which is also 23.8%. The provision of leisure service floorspace (35,081 sq.m gross) equates to 27.4% of Darlington's total floorspace and is 2.6 percentage points greater than the national average of 24.8%. These figures include the Feethams scheme which has increased the provision of leisure service floorspace in Darlington by 9,711 sq.m gross. At the time of our previous survey, the provision of leisure service floorspace in Darlington was lower than the national average. However, Feethams has significantly bolstered the centre's offer, providing a 9 screen Vue Cinema, Premier Inn Hotel, alongside a number of national multiple restaurateurs such as Prezzo and Bella Italia.

Financial and Business Services

There are 53 financial and business service units in Darlington which contribute 9.3% of the total units and 7.9% (10,070 sq.m gross) of the total floorspace. In terms of the number of units this is slightly lower than the national average of 10.4% although the provision of floorspace is broadly consistent with the national average of 7.8%. Both retail banks (15) and property services (17) are particularly dominant in this sector. In terms of property services, there is a high concentration of estate agents located on Duke Street. Whilst this is included within the Goad boundary, the street is identified as a 'Fringe Area' as opposed to forming part of the defined town centre boundary. However, Duke Street directly adjoins the town centre boundary and represents a continuity of retail uses/commercial. We therefore consider this area to function as part of the town centre in reality.

Non-Retail Units

In addition to the retail and services on offer in Darlington town centre, there are a number of non-retail uses, including: 16 offices, five information and advice centres, a library, a doctor's surgery, a dentist and five government buildings. The non-retail and service uses make a significant contribution to the centre's role in providing a hub for community facilities and jobs, as well as contributing to the overall vitality and viability of the town centre.

Summary

The diversity of use analysis has been undertaken based on the retail units located within the town centre boundary as defined by Experian Goad, with the addition of the leisure service floorspace provided by the Feethams scheme which is now open to the public but is yet to be surveyed by Goad. At the time of our most recent survey, we identified 567 retail and service units in Darlington with a combined gross floorspace of 127,901 sq.m. This represents an increase from our previous survey undertaken in February 2016, which identified 563 retail and service units with a combined gross floorspace of 119,320 sq.m. This substantial increase in floorspace can be attributed to the introduction of the Feethams leisure scheme. However, despite Feethams providing an additional 12 units in the town centre, the total number of retail and service units has only risen by four. This can be attributed to the sub-division of a number of existing units, as well as WYG identifying units that are recorded by Goad as being retail/service units but that no longer function as these uses, e.g. changes of use from retail to residential.

We have acknowledged the inconsistencies between the town centre boundary defined by Goad and the adopted town centre boundary (as set out in the Local Plan), with the Goad boundary incorporating the Duke Street, Bondgate and part of the Northgate town centre 'Fringe Areas'. If the retail and service units present in these locations are removed from our analysis, the diversity of use within the adopted town centre boundary (only) comprises 436 retail and service units with a gross floorspace of 100,211 sq.m. There is a significant reduction of over 100 units when assessing against the Goad boundary. However, given that historically the diversity of use analysis has been undertaken against the Goad boundary, we consider this to be the most appropriate and robust way to proceed in order to accurately assess changes in the town centre's health. Furthermore, the fringe areas incorporated within the Goad boundary directly adjoin the adopted town centre boundary and we are of the view that these

	areas, particularly in relation to the Duke Street and Bondgate fringe areas, function as part of the centre's retail and commercial offer on the ground. Overall, we found Darlington to have a strong comparison goods and leisure service offer, with limited convenience goods provision, particularly within the primary and secondary shopping frontages.
VACANCIES	The number of vacant units can provide a good indication of how a town centre is performing. However, care should be taken when interpreting figures as vacant units will be found in even the strongest of town centres because it is to be expected that there will always be some degree of 'churn' in the market with units changing representation. On other occasions properties may lay vacant because they are poorly maintained, unsuited to modern retailing requirements or are simply not being actively marketed. Conversely, a low vacancy rate does not necessarily mean that a centre is performing well. For example, if there is a proliferation of charity shops and other uses not usually associated with a town centre it may be a sign of decline, particularly where these uses are located in prime locations. Our July 2017 survey identified 85 vacant units in the town centre which account for 15.0% of the total number of units. This is 3.9 percentage points greater than the national average of 11.1%. The vacant units occupy 18,200 sq.m of floorspace, which is 14.2% of the city centre's total retail and service floorspace. This makes the proportion of vacant floorspace 4.7 percentage points above the national average of 9.5%. From the time of our previous survey (2016), the proportion of vacant floorspace has risen 3.0 percentage points from 11.2% to 14.2%. Although vacant units can be found throughout the town centre, the increase in the proportion of vacant floorspace can be largely attributed to two large units that have recently become vacant. This includes the closure of BHS (1,540 sq.m gross) and the relocation of TK Maxx (3,910 sq.m gross) to an out-of-centre location. However, we understand that there are emerging proposals to redevelop the former TK Maxx unit which would ultimately result in this floorspace returning into retail/service use. The remainder of the vacant units in the centre are less than 300 sq.m (gross) in size. Within the primary shopping frontages there is a low proportion of vacant units, excluding, most notably the former BHS and a cluster of units within the Queen Street shopping centre. The concentration of vacant units increases in peripheral parts of the town centre, particularly to the north around Commercial Street although we are aware that this area is identified as the Council's preferred location for additional comparison goods retailing and has been subject to a number of proposals for redevelopment in the past. Most recently, the 'Oval Development' has stalled due to viability issues as a result of the current economic climate. Notwithstanding this, the site remains a major opportunity for the centre, should a viable scheme come forwards in the future.

It should be noted that when removing the fringe areas incorporated within the Goad boundary from our diversity of use analysis, the proportion of vacant retail and service floorspace within the adopted town centre boundary reduces from 14.2% to 12.9%. However, this figure is still 3.4 percentage points higher than the national average.

Whilst the number and proportion of town centre vacancies is not considered particularly problematic given recent wider economic conditions and national trends, it is evident that certain units have been vacant for a considerable period, particularly within the Queen Street shopping centre. This suggests that these units may either fail to appropriately meet the needs of modern retailers or that the premises are not sufficiently visible in the centre (or are not sufficiently integrated into the centre's 'retail circuit'). Whilst the vacancy level is not considered exceptional, long term vacant units adversely impact on users perception of a centre and appropriate proposals to bring such units back into active use should be welcomed. We consider the emerging proposals to bring the former TK Maxx unit (the largest vacant unit within the centre) back into active retail/service use to be a significant positive which, once implemented, will contribute towards reducing the proportion of vacant floorspace in the centre.

In terms of mitigating against the negative impact of vacant retail stock on the town centre, particularly the larger units, applying high quality stickers in the windows of these units displaying scenes of occupied shops or restaurants, or introducing public art in the windows, would help to reduce their visual impact. Such mitigation gives the impression that the units are occupied, or at least assists with the retention of vibrant frontages. The majority of the empty units are also actively marketed on various retail websites, including EGi and Completely Retail.

Photograph 9: Former BHS unit, Northgate

Photograph 10: Former McDonalds unit, Northgate

Photograph 11: Vacant unit, Cornmill Shopping Centre

Photograph 12: Former TK Maxx unit, Crown Street

PEDESTRIAN FLOWS

Our observations on pedestrian flows were noted during our site visit to Darlington town centre, in order to identify those areas with a high or low pedestrian footfall. It was evident that the greatest levels of footfall were within parts of the designated primary shopping frontages; particularly the Cornmill Shopping Centre, High Row, Tubwell Row and Prebend Row. This is to be expected given that it represents the retail and commercial centre of Darlington and is pedestrianised. A good level of linked trips were noted between Cornmill and the main pedestrianised shopping area. Grange Road to the south of the primary shopping frontages was also observed to have relatively high levels of footfall at the time of our visit.

In contrast, the Queen Street Shopping Centre was subject to noticeably lower levels of pedestrian activity than other areas within the designated primary shopping frontages. The absence of pedestrian activity is exacerbated by the shopping centre's lack of an anchor store and its high vacancy rate. Pedestrian activity also dropped off slightly along Northgate which is contrary to the findings of the previous health check. It is possible that the recent closures of BHS and McDonalds have contributed to reducing linked trips within this part of the centre, although Northgate also marks the end of the pedestrianised area which is also considered to be a factor in the reduced level of pedestrian activity observed at this location on the day of our visit.

Skinnergate, which at the time of the previous health check was found to have relatively low levels of footfall was observed to be busier at the time of our recent visit, particularly to the north where there is a concentration of leisure service uses. This could be attributed to the differing seasons in which the visits took place (winter/summer). The side streets connecting High Row and Skinnergate (Post House Wynd, Bucktons Yard, Clarks Yard and Mechanics Yard), whilst accommodating retail/service uses were observed to have low levels of footfall indicating poor connectivity between the primary and secondary shopping frontages.

The Feethams leisure scheme was observed to have low footfall at the time of our visit (mid-morning, mid-week). However, given that the scheme comprises leisure service uses, we consider it likely to be busier at meal times (breakfast/lunch) and in particular during the evening / night time. We therefore attribute little weight to this observation.

Overall, the pedestrian footfall identified during our July 2017 survey was found to be consistent with the patterns typically observed within comparable town centres of a similar size. The streets comprising the primary shopping frontages were subject to the highest levels of pedestrian footfall, with activity decreasing around peripheral parts of the town centre. However, an identified anomaly was the Queen Street Shopping Centre, which is located within the primary shopping frontage but presented low levels of footfall as a consequence of there being a number of vacancies within this covered precinct.

ACCESSIBILITY	Darlington benefits from good road access. The A1(M) is located approximately 4.5 kilometres driving distance to the east of the town centre and provides a north to south transit corridor. The A66 also passes approximately 1.8 kilometres to the south of the town centre and provides an east to west transit corridor. The town centre is linked to these roads by the A617 and the A5110, which were both free flowing at the time of the site visit. Consequently, Darlington is well connected to its neighbouring settlements of Stockton, Middlesbrough and Newcastle. In addition, road widening is also currently underway on the A1M, which will increase this road's capacity. These works are anticipated to conclude in 2017. The introduction of a traffic light controlled junction at the former Stonebridge roundabout has also improved traffic flows on the A66/A617 ring road. The Feethams multi-storey car park has recently been completed at Beaumont Street, providing 650 off-street parking spaces and bringing the town's total provision to 4,650 off-street parking spaces. There are a further 375 on-street parking spaces within close proximity to the town centre. We understand that 100 spaces and three Blue Badge parking spaces in the Town Hall car park, behind the Department for Education offices in Bishopgate House, will be lost to a new 'Riverside Park' on the banks of the River Skerne. The project is being delivered using planning contributions from the Feethams scheme, along with funding from the Darlington Lions Club and the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA). Around two thirds of the town centre's car parks are Council operated and both short and long-stay use is provided for. Charges in the Council operated car parks typically range from between 50p and £1 per hour up to £4 for a full day with the private car parks charging a higher premium which is representative of their generally more central location. Darlington also has good public transport connections. Darlington railway station is located approximately 700 metres walking distance to the east of the town centre. Direct trains can be caught to Newcastle and York via the East Coast Main Line and to Stockton, Middlesbrough and Bishop Auckland via the Tees Valley Line. A programme has recently been announced to enhance rail connections across the North, on the East Coast Main Line, as an integral part of the HS2 network, and across the Tees Valley. This includes the remodelling of the train station and the creation of dedicated platforms for local connections and future high-speed services. The main bus stops are located within the heart of the town centre on Northgate, Prebend Row and Tubwell Row. These provide approximately 30 different bus routes providing access to surrounding communities. National Express coach services can also be caught from outside the Dolphin Centre at Feethams to regional and national destinations. Darlington has largely flat topography, which benefits cyclists, pedestrians and less able

	users. A number of traffic free cycle routes and dedicated cycle lanes connect the town centre with the surrounding communities. Several controlled crossing points provide safe access over the ring road, which link the town centre with the surrounding residential areas. Once inside the ring road, the town centre's largely pedestrianised streets are considered generally suitable for cyclists, pedestrians and less able users.
PERCEPTION OF SAFETY	There are few signs that crime is a particular issue in Darlington town centre. Whilst there has consistently been an above average number of vacant units in the town centre, the main shopping streets generally have active retail frontages, which provide adequate natural surveillance. A coordinated CCTV scheme is also in operation across the town centre, which links with the Durham Constabulary and Darlington's Pub Watch and Shop Watch schemes. The town centre is also supported by the Durham Agency Against Crime (DAAC) which supports and creates safety initiatives to help reduce crime and fear of crime to make County Durham and Darlington become a safe place to work, live and invest.
ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY	It was evident during our visit in July 2017 that the overall environmental quality and public realm quality of the town centre remains to be generally good, with little evidence of litter or other potential issues. Previously the 'Distinct Darlington' Business Improvement District (BID) appointed rangers to assist with maintaining the town centre which our previous health checks found to be having a positive impact on environmental quality. However, in March 2017 traders decided not to renew Distinct Darlington's contract following a ballot vote and the responsibility is now returned to the traders themselves, along with the council. The streetscape within the retail core, particularly along High Row comprises high-quality granite surfacing, bespoke street lighting, seating and seasonal planting schemes resulting in it being a popular focal area within the town centre. These works, which were undertaken as part of the Pedestrian Heart project have generally weathered well and continue to provide a high-quality and attractive public realm in the centre of the town. The other pedestrianised areas along the main shopping routes are generally tidy, free from litter and tree-lined, with conveniently located street furniture and well-maintained streets. However, other areas in the centre, particularly peripheral retail locations outside of the designated primary shopping frontages appear somewhat 'tired' by comparison, predominately due to having less maintained shopping frontages. There are a number of large vacant units located on, and within the vicinity of Commercial Street. These units have a cumulative detrimental effect on the overall environmental quality in this part of the town centre. We do however understand that this area has been subject to a number of proposals for redevelopment and that the council maintain long term aspirations to realise this. Ultimately the environmental quality in this part of the town centre is likely to be improved as part of a redevelopment.

Our previous health check acknowledged that public realm improvements have been completed to the east of the town centre, adjacent to the River Skerne. These improvements included the removal of the Stonebridge roundabout and an improved pedestrian and cycle route along St Cuthbert's Way. These improvements are now complemented by the Feethams leisure scheme which also sits on the bank of the River Skerne. Feethams is an attractive development, with glass fronted restaurants and a multi-storey Vue Cinema. The associated multi-storey car park is also of a high-quality build and together the developments have resulted in a significant improvement to the overall environmental quality of the southern part of the town centre.

Cornmill Shopping Centre and Queen Street Shopping Centre are covered shopping malls which are somewhat 'of their time' in terms of layout, aesthetics and unit format. Notwithstanding this, they are both well maintained and provide a relatively pleasant shopping environment for customers. Vacant units, particularly in the Queen Street Shopping Centre would benefit from window dressing or art installations to help reduce the negative visual impact.

Darlington also contains a distinct mix of modern facilities and historic features, with the majority of the centre within the designated town Conservation Area. Key landmark buildings include the covered market hall and St. Cuthbert's Church, alongside 88 listed buildings which help to retain the traditional and distinctive street pattern of the town.

COMMERCIAL RENTS

To help assess the state of the retail property market within Darlington, a review of retail units currently being marketed has been undertaken using EGi. EGi provides information on the rental values that have been achieved in the town centre. There are 12 properties currently being marketed within the defined town centre boundary and Table 6 (below) summaries the rental values attributed to each:

Table 6: Properties Currently Being Marketed

Location	Floorspace	Use Class	Tenure	Asking Price/Rent
Cornmill Shopping Centre, Priestgate, Darlington, DL1 1NH (Unit 26)	56 sq.m	Retail (A1)	Leasehold	£40,000 per annum
Cornmill Shopping Centre, Priestgate, Darlington, DL1 1NH (Unit 6I)	56 sq.m	Retail (A1)	Leasehold	£30,000 per annum
Cornmill Shopping Centre, Priestgate, Darlington, DL1 1NH (Unit 27I)	77 sq.m	Retail (A1)	Leasehold	£34,500 per annum
Cornmill Shopping Centre, Priestgate, DL1 1NH (Unit 27)	109 sq.m	Retail (A1)	Leasehold	£50,000 per annum
Cornmill Shopping Centre, Priestgate, Darlington, DL1 1NH (Unit 2)	120 sq.m	Retail (A1)	Leasehold	£37,500 per annum

Cornmill Shopping Centre, Priestgate, Darlington, DL1 1NH (Unit 61)	221 sq.m	Retail (A1)	Leasehold	£29,500 per annum
Cornmill Shopping Centre, Priestgate, Darlington, DL1 1NH (Unit 15)	221 sq.m	Retail (A1)	Leasehold	£29,500 per annum
Cornmill Shopping Centre, Priestgate, Darlington, DL1 1NH (Unit 1-2)	2,886 sq.m	Retail (A1)	Leasehold	£275,000 per annum
32-33 Tubwell Row, Darlington, DL1 1NU	94 sq.m	Mixed Use Retail (A1/2/3/4/5, B1 or D1)	Leasehold or Freehold	£10,200 per annum £250,000
42-44 Tubwell Row, Darlington, DL1 1PD	147 sq.m	Retail (A3)	Freehold	£190,000
32-33 Tubwell Row, Darlington, DL1 1NU	543 sq.m	Retail (A1)	Freehold	£370,000
54a-58 Northgate, Darlington, DL1 1PR	432 sq.m	Retail (A1)	Leasehold	£60,000 per annum

Table 6 indicates that there are currently 8 properties being marketed within the Cornmill Shopping Centre. This is greater than the number of vacancies recorded although this is likely to be due to a number of leases shortly coming to an end. The asking prices vary and appear to be based on a combination of both floorspace and prominence. For example, Unit 61 has a floorspace of 221 sq.m with an asking price of £29,500 (per annum), whilst Unit 2 has a floorspace of 120 sq.m with an asking price of £37,500 (per annum).

We are of the view that units located to the south of the shopping centre around the Tubwell Row entrance occupy a more prominent location and therefore greater rental values can be achieved. Within Cornmill Shopping Centre, seven of the units currently on the market have a floorspace smaller than 250 sq.m. The average rental value of these properties is £35,857 per annum. There is only one comparable property (that is being marketed) outside the centre which is 32-33 Tubwell Row. This has a rental value of only £10,200 per annum, indicating that values are notably lower outside of the Cornmill Shopping Centre.

RETAILER REPRESENTATION

Reviewing the retailer representation is an important sign of the vitality and viability of a centre as it demonstrates the existing and potential future level of key operators in the locality. We have reviewed the number of national and independent retailers which are present within Darlington town centre, recognising that national multiple retailers can act as anchor tenants in the centre and can add to its appeal, helping to generate additional pedestrian footfall.

Experian Goad produces a list of 28 top comparison goods retailers (such as House of Fraser, Boots and Vodafone) which acts as one measure of the vitality and viability of a centre. Darlington town centre contained 24 of the 28 top comparison goods retailers in February 2016, with the only operators not present being Burton, Debenhams, H&M and John Lewis. Burton was present in the town centre in December 2013, but has since closed its store and opened at the out-of-centre Teesside Retail Park in Stockton-On-Tees. Goad's top retailers are set out below in Table 6:

Table 6: Presence of Experian Goad's Top 28 Retailers in Darlington Town Centre

Retailer	Dec 2013	Feb 2016	July 2017
Argos	Yes	Yes	Yes
Monsoon/Accessorize	-	-	No
Boots	Yes	Yes	Yes
Burton	Yes	No	No
Carphone Warehouse	Yes	Yes	Yes
Clarks	Yes	Yes	Yes
Clintons	Yes	Yes	Yes
Debenhams	No	No	No
Dorothy Perkins	Yes	Yes	Yes
H&M	No	No	No
HMV	Yes	Yes	Yes
House of Fraser	Yes	Yes	Yes
John Lewis	No	No	No
Marks & Spencer	Yes	Yes	Yes
New Look	Yes	Yes	Yes
Next	Yes	Yes	Yes
O2	Yes	Yes	Yes
EE	-	-	Yes
Primark	Yes	Yes	Yes
River Island	Yes	Yes	Yes
Superdrug	Yes	Yes	Yes
TK Maxx	Yes	Yes	No
Topman	Yes	Yes	Yes
Topshop	Yes	Yes	Yes
Vodafone	Yes	Yes	Yes
Waterstones	Yes	Yes	Yes
WHSmith	Yes	Yes	Yes
Wilkinsons	Yes	Yes	Yes
Total	**25**	**24**	**23**

Source: WYG surveys in December 2013, February 2016 and July 2017

Our latest review (July 2017) has found that Darlington's share of Goad's top national multiple comparison retailers has declined slightly since the 2013 and 2016 health checks with the loss of BHS and TK Maxx reducing Darlington's representation to 23 of the 28 top retailers. It should be noted that Goad have recently updated their list of top comparison retailers, replacing BHS with Monsoon/Accessorize and Phones 4U with EE, following the demise of both.

TK Maxx departed the town centre in 2017 to relocate to the Darlington Retail Park on Yarm Road and therefore the retailer remains present in the borough. As discussed in the comparison foods section of the diversity of use analysis, the owner of the site (NewRiver Retail) submitted plans for the reconfiguration of the former TK Maxx unit for leisure uses. This application was approved in July 2017. Overall, given the circumstances associated with the departure of the

	two identified Goad 'top 25' retailers since our previous health check, we do not have significant concerns about the impact of these losses on the town centre's long-term vitality and viability. It should also be noted that Darlington successfully distinguishes itself from other retail destinations in the region by accommodating a significant number of independent retailers within town centre units and at the indoor and outdoor markets. The Sunday 'People's Market', which takes place on the first Sunday of every month, along with other market initiatives, help to boost visitor numbers and differentiate Darlington from other surrounding towns.
DIGITAL FACILITIES	Darlington is reasonably well adapted to the digital environment. Whilst there is no 'official' free wi-fi in the town centre, there are a number of BT wi-fi hotspots present at various location including Burger King, Starbucks, Game and a number of retail banks. In addition to this, there are 16 Cloud wi-fi hotspots present throughout the centre, predominately located within pubs and cafes. Click and collect is also becoming increasingly popular in Darlington, with many shops now offering this service. In terms of websites, 'About Darlington' (aboutdarlington.co.uk) provides information on local history, along with information on upcoming events and things to do in the town. Whilst the website has a basic design and is largely focussed on history, it is connected to a twitter feed which provides up-to-date information on upcoming events in the town. The second website, (thisisdarlington.com), appears to contain information on attractions within the town centre, where to shop and eat, upcoming events, as well as 'how to get here' and other visitor information. However, the website is of a poor-quality design and does not appear to have been updated for a number of years. For example, the last event listed on the 'what's on' page took place in 2013. This website requires significant maintenance if it is to become a beneficial resource for local residents and potential tourists. Feethams also has a dedicated website providing information on its services, offers and events, as well as information on things to do in Darlington.
CONCLUSION	Darlington town centre is the principal retail, commercial and administrative centre in Darlington Borough. At the time of our previous health check in February 2016, the latest Venuescore data identified Darlington as the fourth highest ranked retail venue in the region and the 63rd highest in the country. Since then, Darlington has overtaken Middlesbrough and increased its overall national ranking by five places making it the third highest ranked retail destination in the North-East region and the 58th highest ranked in the country. This demonstrates that Darlington has experienced positive growth since the previous health check, which found Darlington to have declined by one place in the rankings since 2010. Darlington town centre has therefore witnessed an overall net increase of four places since 2010. It is likely that the Feethams cinema and restaurant scheme has played a significant role in the centre's recent increase in the Venuescore rankings.

Darlington continues to contain a high proportion of top national retailers, most of which are located in the Cornmill Shopping Centre, along Northgate or on Prebend Row. However, since the last health check the centre has seen the departure of TK Maxx (which occupied a 3,910 sq.m unit) to Darlington Retail Park. The now vacant unit, which is one of the largest in the centre, has since secured planning permission to bring it back into use for leisure services. Whilst this, coupled with the introduction of the Feethams leisure scheme signify a decline in the share of comparison goods floorspace since the previous health check (and the 2013 health check), the increase in leisure service floorspace is consistent with national trends and demonstrates the centre's ability to adapt to the changing nature and composition of town centres.

Furthermore, our latest survey actually found the proportion of comparison goods floorspace (36.7%) to be greater than the national average of 35.3%. This had decreased from 39.7% with the addition of the leisure service floorspace generated by Feethams. So, whilst there has been a decline in comparison goods floorspace in Darlington, this can partially be attributed to an increase in leisure service floorspace, which has risen to 27.4% (as opposed to the 21.9% recorded by our 2016 survey). This figure is likely to increase further if the leisure scheme recently granted planning permission in the former TK Maxx unit goes ahead. This will also result in a relatively significant reduction in the proportion of vacant retail and service floorspace.

Whilst the town centre has experienced some high-level departures in recent years including Burton, McDonalds, BHS and TK Maxx, we do not consider this to have had a significant detrimental impact on the overall vitality and viability of the town centre, particularly when considering the introduction of the Feethams scheme and emerging leisure scheme at the former TK Maxx unit. Darlington also has strong representation from independent retailers, particularly at Grange Road. These businesses play a significant role in contributing to the vitality and viability of the town centre.

Whilst it is acknowledged that the convenience goods floorspace within Darlington town centre is relatively limited, there is a significant out-of-centre offer and the wider settlement is well provided for in terms of convenience goods. Accordingly, it is understandable that there is limited demand from convenience retailers to occupy space in the town centre.

The town centre also, on the most part, benefits from a high-quality environment which contributes towards creating a vibrant retail core. We understand that the BID promoter, Distinct Darlington previously employed wardens to assist with the maintenance of the town centre. It is yet to be established if the decision not to renew Distinct Darlington's contract in March 2017 will have any negative implications on the up keep of the town centre in the future.

	We do however recommend that this is monitored by the council in the event that future intervention is needed to help maintain the high-quality environment within the retail core. Overall, notwithstanding the high-profile departures of TK Maxx, BHS and McDonalds since the February 2016 health check, and the subsequent increase in the proportion of vacant retail/service floorspace, our latest visit identifies some positive signs of vitality and viability within Darlington town centre. The proportion of comparison goods floorspace remains above the national average and the Feethams scheme has significantly boosted the town's leisure service offer by providing an anchor cinema and high-quality restaurants. It has also had a positive impact upon environmental quality to the south of the centre. The scheme has the ability to increase footfall throughout the town centre by attracting visitors from the surrounding boroughs. In addition, the town centre is subject to a number of emerging schemes that, if delivered will further boost its vitality and viability.
SWOT	In summary, Darlington town centre presents the following strengths and opportunities: ▪ A diverse range of national and independent retailers which helps to distinguish the town from other competing destinations and is likely to attract visitors from a relatively wide catchment area; ▪ A high-quality and well-maintained town centre environment which complements its historic features; ▪ The opening of the Feethams leisure scheme which has brought additional national leisure operators (including a cinema) into the town centre, significantly boosting the offer within this sector and stimulating the lunchtime and evening economy; ▪ The potential remains to bring forward a retail led scheme on the Commercial Street site, which remains a major opportunity for the town centre; ▪ The emerging plans to reconfigure the former TK Maxx unit on Crown Street to accommodate leisure uses, including the provision of shipping container retail units (Class A1) within the curtilage of the site; ▪ Improvements to the rail network in preparation for HS2 connectivity. In contrast, the centre presents the following weaknesses and threats: ▪ The loss of longstanding comparison goods floorspace to leisure uses. The leisure offer in the town centre has been significantly boosted by Feethams and stands to be boosted further by the emerging proposals associated with the former TK Maxx unit. Beyond this, proposals for additional leisure floorspace that result in a substantial loss of comparison goods floorspace should be carefully considered, particularly within the primary shopping frontages. However, equally, it is recognised that the increase in leisure service floorspace shows Darlington's ability to adapt to a changing retail climate and that it remains attractive to national multiple operators in various sectors.

	▪ The level of vacancies in Darlington has gradually increased across the period in which the Goad survey data is available (2013 - 2017). Notwithstanding emerging proposals for national multiple led developments, more needs to be done to attract and retain local businesses into the existing retail stock within the centre. ▪ The loss of Distinct Darlington (BID) could result in less co-ordination between retailers and a deterioration of the town centre's environmental quality, which was previously maintained by the BID. There may also be a reduction in opportunities for retailers to 'have a say' in future strategies relating to the town centre and it will be important for the council and retailers to work together in order to ensure that the benefits associated with the BID are delivered through other means.