

**Byers Gill Solar
EN010139**

8.25 Applicant's comments on Darlington Borough Council ISH4 Action Points submission

Planning Act 2008

APFP Regulation 5(2)(q)

Infrastructure Planning (Applications: Prescribed Forms
and Procedure) Regulations 2009

Volume 8

Deadline 6 - December 2024

Revision C01

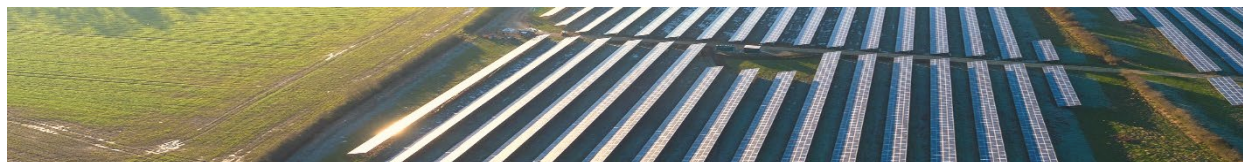


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1. Introduction

1.1. Purpose of this document

1.1.1. This document provides RWE's (the Applicant) response to the submission made by Darlington Borough Council (DBC) in respect of Action Points arising from Issue Specific Hearing 4 (ISH4), relating to Byers Gill Solar (the Proposed Development). DBC's submission [REP5-036] was made at Deadline 5 of Examination.

1.1.2. Action Points from ISH4 were issued on 1 November [EV12-008]. Two action points were responded to by DBC in REP5-036:

- Hearing Action Point 7 - DBC to provide a list of specific viewpoints which are disagreed between the Applicant and DBC.
- Hearing Action Point 5 - DBC to provide examples of other Landscape and Visual Impact Assessments (LVIA) where landscape character setting of villages/settlements has been separately assessed.

1.1.3. DBC's submission responds to the two actions in reverse numeric order. This document maintains that reversal for ease of cross-referencing.

2. Action Point 7

Table 2-1 Viewpoints which are disagreed between the Applicant and DBC

Reference	Topic summary	RWE response
Section 2 – General	DBC table of viewpoints commenting on weather conditions for photography, and whether or not they consider the view shown to represent the ‘worst case’.	<p>DBC have made no comment on whether or not they agree effects assessed in the Landscape and Visual Assessment (LVIA) [APP-030], their comments relate only to viewpoint selection and the weather conditions and/or timing of photography.</p> <p>Of the 34 viewpoints, DBC indicate that they consider only 7 to not show ‘worst case’ views. These are considered below.</p> <p>The Applicant maintains the opinion, as set out during ISH4 and in the draft Statement of Common Ground with DBC (Document Reference 8.4.2 Revision 3, DBC050), that selection of ‘worst case’ viewpoints is not required by guidance, and nor is the representation of varied weather conditions (DBC055). The location of individual viewpoints has a limited influence on the assessment outcomes as the LVIA considers all available views, whether they are selected as representative viewpoints or not as set out in the Applicant’s responses to EXQ2 [REP5-031, LSV 2.6].</p>
Section 2 – Viewpoint Agreement		<p>The Applicant would also like to stress that it has sought to agree viewpoints with all relevant statutory consultees in relation to the Proposed Development, from EIA scoping onwards. This is demonstrated in Table 7-1 of ES Chapter 7 Landscape and Visual [APP-030]. The detail now provided by DBC was specifically sought during and after the meeting between DBC and the Applicant after submission of the PEIR – during a meeting on 11 September 2023 and via subsequent correspondence. No response was received prior to the finalisation of the ES, but in order to allow DBC further time to consider, the Applicant made an offer (in February 2024) to include any additional viewpoints that DBC specifically identified as additional information. No response was received to that offer.</p>
Viewpoints DBC consider not to represent the ‘worst case’		
Viewpoint 2	DBC identify the primary receptor for viewpoint to as being Bridleway No. 14 and suggest a better viewpoint (V1) is located further south along the bridleway.	<p>Please note that throughout its response, the Applicant refers to the viewpoints used in its LVIA [APP-030] as “viewpoint [x]”. DBC’s submissions [REP5-036] use the annotation “VP[x]”. In each case “[x]” is a number – but DBC’s VP1 does not necessarily equate to the Applicant’s viewpoint 1.</p> <p>Viewpoint 2 was selected primarily to represent views from the village rather than the bridleway. Viewpoint 5 is located further south along the bridleway and is confirmed by DBC as representing ‘worst case’ views from the bridleway.</p> <p>The use of viewpoint V1 rather than Viewpoint 2 would not alter the assessments of effects in the LVIA which identify Large scale effects on the bridleway between Brafferton and East Ketton in Table 7-8 of the LVIA [APP-030].</p>

Reference	Topic summary	RWE response
Viewpoint 3	DBC accept that the central panel looking towards the Proposed Development represent worst case views from footpath, but do not consider that other panels of this view are 'worst case'.	<p>Viewpoint 3 was selected primarily for its views towards the Proposed Development to the south, which DBC have confirmed they consider to represent the 'worst case' in terms of a view from the footpaths in this area towards the Proposed Development.</p> <p>DBC argue that views in other directions do not also show the 'worst case' in relation to showing views of features other than the development and the Applicant notes that DBC have not identified another single location from which all of the conditions they reference can be seen together (views towards Brafferton and Whinfield solar farm), but have identified 3 separate locations (V2-V4).</p> <p>Depicting the visibility of Whinfield solar farm from viewpoint V2, or views towards Brafferton in viewpoints V3 and V4 would not alter the assessments of effects arising from views of the Proposed Development (for which DBC agree that the worst case view has been selected).</p> <p>It should also be noted that Whinfield solar farm was not under construction when the viewpoint photography used in the ES was undertaken.</p>
Viewpoints 17 & 18	DBC refer to previous submissions and make further comments in relation to these viewpoints.	The Applicant has already responded in relation to 'worst case' views in the vicinity of viewpoints 17 and 18 – see in the Applicant's responses to EXQ2 [REP5-031, LSV 2.6]. As can be seen from the suggested alternative locations provided by DBC (V5-V7), all are located notably further from the village and would not represent views from the edge of the village that viewpoints 17 and 18 were selected to show.
Viewpoint 21	DBC suggest alternative locations at different points along the road between Great Stainton and Bishopton (V8-V10).	<p>As is evident in the photographs provided, all of the locations suggested are on narrow road verges which would not be safe for photography and for groups of people to stand at and consider the view. For formal viewpoint photography, there needs to be a relatively level area to place a camera tripod and for a photographer to be able to safely stand on all sides of that tripod (to take multiple sweeps of 360 degree views). Formal viewpoints are also likely to be visited by several groups of people during the assessment and determination process. The locations selected are unsuitable as viewpoints.</p> <p>Using different viewpoints along the road would not alter the findings of the LVIA; effects on road users of this route are described at section 7.10.144 and 7.10.148 of the LVIA [APP-030] and identify Large and Large-medium scale effects area a result of close views of Panel Areas D and E during construction and operation.</p>
Viewpoints 31 and 32	DBC suggest alternative locations to either side of Sadberge	<p>Viewpoint 31 on Darlington Back Lane was selected in an area with open views towards panel areas D to F as it was known that panel areas A to C would be unlikely to be visible. Moving the viewpoint further west towards Sadberge as suggested by DBC would have moved the viewpoint further away from panel areas E and F, and it is not clear from DBC's photograph, which focusses towards areas A-D, whether V13 would have open views to the north-northeast.</p> <p>In selecting Viewpoint 32, the same point applies in relation to the orientation of views – location V14 is oriented towards panel areas A-D. The village green was also selected as showing the more important views from Sadberge.</p>

Reference	Topic summary	RWE response
		<p>The use of additional or alternative viewpoints at locations V13 and V14 would not have altered the findings of the LVIA Table 7-7 [APP-03] which identifies the scale of effect at viewpoints 31 and 32 as being Negligible.</p>
<p>Other comments made by DBC in relation to viewpoint selection which are not addressed above or previously by the Applicant</p>		
<p>Viewpoint 26 and Paragraph 2.5</p>	<p><i>“There are no views presented in the ES which show potential visibility of the Solar Farm from bridleway No 5 between Mill Lane and Stillington (via West House Farm) and also from the road into Bishopton, west of Bishopton Bank. See photographs V11 and V12 in this report.”</i></p>	<p>Viewpoint selection for a large project means that not all roads and footpaths have a viewpoint on them. Location V11 shows a view that was considered during the accompanied site visit. Table 7-11 of the LVIA [APP-030] identifies effects on this route as being Medium scale, reducing to Negligible as planting matures. The inclusion of an additional viewpoint at location V11 would not alter this assessment.</p> <p>Location V12 shows a glimpse through a small gap between trees, over a hedge that is both recently trimmed in the location of V12, and taller elsewhere along the road. The LVIA [APP-030] paragraph 7.10.162 indicates that “visibility from these roads would generally be restricted by buildings, terrain and/or vegetation” – the potential for a limited, glimpsed view from one point on the road at some times of year does not alter this finding.</p>
<p>Para. 2.4</p>	<p><i>“There are 12 ES photographs taken from 5 locations around or towards Brafferton from public viewpoints. Four of these photographs are considered not to represent the worst-case view although the viewpoints are in close proximity to what would be considered the worst-case location.”</i></p>	<p>This statement by DBC appears to be either a misunderstanding or an exaggeration. Each viewpoint should be considered to be a single 360 degree view – not a set of separate ‘photographs’.</p> <p>It is assumed viewpoints 1 to 5 are being referred to as the 12 ‘photographs’ (though there are 13 90 degree views – 1a, 2a, 3 a-c, 4a-d, 5a-d – See ES Figure 7.9 [APP-071]) and of those 13 sheets only 3 (not 4) are identified by DBC as being not ‘worst case’ views, and two of them relate to one viewpoint (Viewpoint 3) where the central panel is judged to show the ‘worst case’.</p> <p>It would be more accurate to state that 1 of the 5 viewpoints at Brafferton (Viewpoint 2) is identified by DBC as not being in the ‘worst case’ location.</p>

Reference	Topic summary	RWE response
<p>Para 2.7</p>	<p><i>“it may cast doubt on the (ES) assessment of magnitude of change on these receptors if the photography cannot be relied upon to guide the decision making process with regard to acceptable harm.”</i></p>	<p>The purpose of viewpoint photography is not to ‘guide the decision-making process’ – that is the purpose of the LVIA read as a whole. As set out in Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment, version 3 (‘GLVIA3’)¹ and recently clarified in LITGN-2024-01 ² in response to the question of ‘Assessing viewpoints or visual receptors?’ – “The focus of the visual assessment should be the visual receptors (i.e. the people as set out within paragraph 6.31. of GLVIA3). The purpose of viewpoints is covered at paragraph 6.19 (i.e. for illustration of the visual effects).”</p> <p>Paragraph 6.21-6.22 of GLVIA 3 advise that “ <i>The viewpoints used need to cover as wide a range of situations as is possible, reasonable and necessary to cover the likely significant effects. ... The detailed location of each viewpoint should be carefully considered and should be as typical or representative as possible of the view likely to be experienced there.</i>”</p> <p>As discussed above in relation to viewpoints 2, 17 and 18, the selection of a viewpoint location in part depends on which visual receptors are primarily represented by the viewpoint. In the case of those viewpoints, the locations used were selected more to represent public views from the edge of villages, than they were the roads and footpaths which radiate from those villages. Each of those viewpoints does show the most open public views available from the edge of the villages – mirroring the locations selected for viewpoints 23 and 24 at Bishopton, 25 at Old Stillington and 28 at Redmarshall, which have not received the same criticism.</p>

¹ Landscape Institute and Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment, Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment: Third Edition (GLVIA3), 2013.

² Landscape Institute, LITGN-2024-01 Notes and Clarifications on Aspects of Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment Third edition (GLVIA3), 2024.

3. Action Point 5

Table 3-1 Examples of other Landscape and Visual Impact Assessments (LVIA) where landscape character setting of villages/settlements has been separately assessed

Reference	Topic summary	RWE response
<p>Appendix A - Example provided</p>	<p>A single sheet has been extracted from the LVIA chapter for North Angle Solar Farm (29.4MW), prepared during 2020 by PDP associates.</p>	<p>This example is a brief assessment of effects on the settings of the villages of Wicken and Soham. The two villages are approximately 2km apart. The example provided is believed to be from East Cambridgeshire Council application 20/00761/CCA relating to North Angle Solar Farm. The Applicant notes that the extract provided by DBC differs from the published Environmental Statement on the East Cambridgeshire Council planning portal, in which the extract is in fact Table 6.9, and references to baseline paragraphs are 6.8.10 – 6.8.15.</p> <p>For the baseline description, the table refers to a section of the LVIA that describes the national and local landscape character areas and the site and its surroundings. The Applicant provides this extract in Annex A, noting the point made above that the references should in fact be to 6.8.10 to 6.8.15. Despite being referred to as the baseline, these sections contain no analysis or description of the villages or their settings. Given this lack of baseline description it is not clear where the settings are considered to extend to; or what their character, views or other qualities are deemed to be.</p> <p>The first two paragraphs of the assessment in the extract provided by DBC focus on describing an existing adjacent solar farm. The remaining text briefly considers the visibility of the development from the villages and the possibility of views to ‘key buildings’ being interrupted, but with no supporting detail, figures or viewpoints.</p> <p>Given the limitations outlined, this example does not provide the kind of detail that DBC suggests are both standard practice and required by local policy. It is a summary assessment with less detail than that provided in the Applicant’s LVIA [APP-030].</p>
<p>Appendix B - Example provided</p>	<p>A single example has been provided. It is a “<i>landscape statement in support of the appeal</i>” for a static caravan site and was prepared by Stephen Laws (example provided para. 1.1) in May 2022 (as stated in the document header).</p>	<p>The example provided is not an LVIA, does not relate to solar or infrastructure development, and was prepared by the same landscape consultant who is advising DBC.</p> <p>Moreover, it provides evidence for an appeal in which the reason for refusal of the development was that the development proposed would “<i>adversely affect the rural setting fundamentally altering the visual relationship between Swarland and its wide countryside setting.</i>” (para. 1.6 of the example provided). In such circumstances it would be expected that a landscape expert witness would provide a report focussing on those matters raised by the reason for refusal.</p>

Reference	Topic summary	RWE response
		<p>An LVIA by contrast is an objective and relatively standardised assessment – it does not seek to address specific policy matters. The main reasons for referring to policy are firstly to assist in the identification of receptors – for example local landscape designations, and secondly to sign-post the connections between policy considerations and the content of the LVIA.</p>
<p>Appendices – both examples</p>	<p>See above</p>	<p>Policy SH1 of the Darlington Local Plan is not considered to be of relevance to the Proposed Development, given that it relates to maintaining the settlement hierarchy and the spatial direction of growth across the district. The Applicant did not scope SH1 into the analysis contained in the Policy Compliance Document, and nor did DBC suggest it should be included when they were consulted on the scope of the PCD as part of the Early Adopter’s Programme.</p> <p>However, the Applicant did have regard to comments from DBC, as made during pre-application engagement, to include consideration of village character and setting as reported in ES Chapter 7 Landscape and Visual [APP-130]. The residual issue, as discussed at ISH4 and reflected in matter DBC-049 of the SoCG (Document Reference 8.4.2, Revision 3) is the approach to that assessment. Following discussion at ISH4, DBC has provided the examples discussed in this document.</p> <p>The Applicant considers that the examples provided serve to further establish that separate assessments of effects on village settings are neither required by policy SH1 of the DBC Local Plan 2016-2036 (see Annex B to this document), nor common practice in LVIA, nor covered by LVIA guidance (DBC Appendix B para. 5.1).</p> <p>If such assessments were common or best practice in LVIA as asserted by DBC during ISH4 then we would expect the examples provided to have been:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ both from an LVIA; ▪ both prepared by another landscape architect rather than Mr Laws; and ▪ more recent than 2.5 and 4 years ago. <p>Furthermore, if such assessments were a particular local requirement in relation to Darlington Policy SH1 as suggested by DBC, then we would have expected to see examples from projects in Darlington, rather than Northumberland and Cambridgeshire.</p> <p>The Applicant considers that the residual differences remaining are a point of professional opinion rather than policy compliance, as neither local policy (e.g. SH1) or national policy in the NPSs, require such an assessment or direct how it should be undertaken.</p>

A.1 Annex A - Extract from the North Angle Solar Farm LVIA

Key characteristics

- Overall, woodland cover is sparse, notably a few small woodland blocks, occasional avenues alongside roads, isolated field trees and shelterbelts of poplar, willow and occasionally *leylandii* hedges around farmsteads, and numerous orchards around Wisbech. Various alders, notably grey alder, are also used in shelterbelts and roadside avenues.
- The predominant land use is arable – wheat, root crops, bulbs, vegetables and market gardening made possible by actively draining reclaimed land areas. Associated horticultural glasshouses are a significant feature. Beef cattle graze narrow enclosures along the banks of rivers and dykes and on parts of the salt marsh and sea banks.
- Open fields, bounded by a network of drains and the distinctive hierarchy of rivers (some embanked), have a strong influence on the geometric/rectilinear landscape pattern. The structures create local enclosure and a slightly raised landform, which is mirrored in the road network that largely follows the edges of the system of large fields. The drains and ditches are also an important ecological network important for invertebrates, fish including spined loach, and macrophytes.
- The area is very rich in geodiversity and archaeology, with sediments containing evidence for past environmental and climate changes and with high potential for well-preserved waterlogged site remains at the fen edge, within some of the infilled palaeo-rivers and beneath the peat.
- Large, built structures exhibit a strong vertical visual influence, such as the 83 m-high octagonal tower of 'Boston Stump' (St Botolph's Church), Ely Cathedral on the highest part of the Isle of Ely dominating its surrounding fen, wind farms and other modern large-scale industrial and agricultural buildings, while drainage and flood storage structures and embanked rail and road routes interrupt the horizontal fen plain.
- Settlements and isolated farmsteads are mostly located on the modestly elevated 'geological islands' and the low, sinuous roddon banks (infilled ancient watercourses within fens). Elsewhere, villages tend to be dispersed ribbon settlements along the main arterial routes through the settled fens, and scattered farms remain as relics of earlier agricultural settlements. Domestic architecture mostly dates from after 1750 and comprises a mix of late Georgian-style brick houses and 20th-century bungalows.

Regional/ Local level

- 6.8.11. The landscape character of the Proposal Site and the study area is described under Planned Peat Fen in the East of England Landscape Typology- see Figure 6.5. The East of England Landscape Typology has been developed by Landscape East- a forum of professional practitioners in the private and public sector including local authorities, government agencies and non-statutory organisations. The Landscape Typology is considered to be an accurate and reliable source of information on regional/local landscape character.
- 6.8.12. Part of the study area falls within landscape character areas Lowland Village – Chalklands and Lowland Village Farmlands in the East of England Landscape Typology- see Figure 6.5, but there is no potential for significant effects on these character areas and no further study will be undertaken in this report. The following relevant descriptions have been extracted from the East of England Landscape Typology for Planned Peat Fen:

Overall description

- *A flat, low lying and sparsely populated landscape characterised by dark peaty soils, a grid like pattern of large arable fields bounded by drainage ditches and wide views to distant, often dramatic skies.*

Landform

- *An expansive, low-lying (often below sea level), landscape with a distinctively flat landform.*

Ecological character

- *A uniform and low-lying landscape, characterised by drained fenland, but supporting a mosaic of wetland habitats including fens, reedbed, wet woodland and patches of grazing marsh.*

Primary land use

- *An intensively farmed arable landscape.*

Tree cover

- *Almost no tree cover - restricted to infrequent patches of secondary woodland/scrub and discrete conifer belts around farmsteads*

Historic features

- *The area is dissected by long straight roads with 90-degree bends, often located on dykes above the arable fen fields, or following ditches. Occasional pump houses are a feature.*

Enclosure pattern

- *Planned geometric landscape with large fields defined by straight ditches. There is little apparent structural difference between the early and recent episodes of field creation.*

Settlement pattern

- *Settlement is sparse and limited mainly to isolated brick-built farmsteads on former fen islands. Most are post-medieval in origin reflecting the late reclamation of the area for agriculture. Thorney is the only historic nucleated settlement.*

Historic development

- *A landscape created by drainage from the medieval period onwards to create farmland. Most comprises recent (18/19th century) fen enclosures, but significant areas of early (16th-18th century) enclosure also exist in the south and around Thorney.*

Tranquillity

- *A quiet, remote landscape where the sky plays a particularly dominant role in creating mood and interest.*

Views

- *The flat horizontal nature of the landscape can give vertical features (e.g. church towers and more recently wind farms) unusual prominence.*

Site and adjoining land

6.8.13. The Proposal Site can be described in two parts, located to the east and west of Bracks Drove.

6.8.14. The eastern part covers two arable fields substantially enclosed by mature hedges except on the northern boundary which is open. There are views across this part of the site from local public footpaths at field gates and gaps in hedges. Were such

views occur, the western part of the site is not visible in views. Mature hedges around the site boundary and in adjoining fields are species rich and have local ecological value. These hedges restrict visibility across the wider landscape.

6.8.15. The western part of the Proposal Site can be described as typical Planned Peat Fen as characterised in East of England Landscape Typology. It is distinctly open in character except for mature hedges along Bracks Drove and around North Triangle Solar Farm. There are also random short lengths of hedge around some field boundaries. The western and northern boundaries are marked by Twelve Foot Drain and Great Drove. There are several low voltage overhead power lines and a high voltage overhead line. These overhead power lines form a distinctive and dominant feature in the landscape. Triangle Solar Farm is clearly visible in views across this part of the site, but it is often substantially screened by hedges. Within this part of the Proposal Site there are views of part of the settlement edge at Wicken and Soham and views of notable landmarks such as St. Andrew's Church in Soham and distant views of Ely Cathedral. These views are not from publicly accessible locations. There is no public access across this part of the Proposal Site. The public footpath along Bracks Drove adjoins part of the site boundary. There are occasional public views across this part of the Proposal Site from Bracks Drove and Drove Lane, across field gates and through gaps in existing hedging.

6.8.16. Summary description of the site and adjoining land

- **Key characteristics** – intensive arable farmland on drained fenland. Western part distinctly open. Eastern part substantially enclosed by hedges. Overhead lines dominate local views. Solar Farm on adjoining land at Triangle Farm is evidence of increasing farm diversification.
- **Function** – inaccessible farmland.
- **Value** – farmland has low ecological value. Boundary hedges contribute to local biodiversity and green infrastructure. Farmland forms part of wider landscape setting between the villages of Wicken and Soham.
- **Character** – typical open/enclosed arable farmland on drained fen. Eastern part of the site substantially enclosed by hedges.
- **Views** – some partial intervisibility with from local footpaths around site boundary. Western part has some intervisibility with village settlements at Wicken and Soham and sections of local highways and minor lanes.

6.9. Effects Assessment

6.9.1. The nature and magnitude of landscape and visual impacts will change during the phases of the development, through construction, at completion and after establishment of any landscape proposals i.e. the long-term residual impacts. Some types of development may generate impacts which are severe but short term, i.e. during construction, whereas others may have minor residual effects which may be of a permanent nature. In addition, some impacts could be significantly mitigated by landscape and other measures which will be of benefit in the longer term. This

A.2 Annex B – Extract of Darlington Borough Local Plan 2016-2036, Policy SH1

THE SETTLEMENT HIERARCHY 4

4 THE SETTLEMENT HIERARCHY

- 4.0.1** There is a need to make clear 'spatial' choices for the distribution of new development across the Local Plan area, thereby reflecting and supporting the specific roles and functions of different communities, helping “place-shaping” and ensuring that they are linked by sustainable patterns of transport. Failure to respect the scale and function of places can lead to inappropriate development and result in unsustainable patterns of transportation, loss of environmental quality and local character, reduced economic prosperity and be a barrier to social inclusion and the creation of balanced communities.

Policy SH 1

Settlement Hierarchy (Strategic Policy)

The broad distribution of development in the Local Plan area will be shaped by the role and function of places, based on the following hierarchy of settlements:

1. **Darlington Urban Area** - will remain the focus of future development within the Borough. As a single urban centre within the Borough it will aim to maintain its role as a leading sub-regional centre for transport connectivity, services, employment and retail and leisure. Sustainable and accessible locations will be selected to enable further development;
2. **Service Villages (Heighington, Hurworth and Middleton St George)** - will be maintained as villages that offer a range of facilities and services, where a level of development will meet local needs and facilitate the economic diversification of rural areas. Development should safeguard and reinforce the distinctive character of each settlement and not detract from their landscape setting;
3. **Rural Villages (Bishopton, Brafferton, High Coniscliffe, Low Coniscliffe, Merrybent, Neasham, Piercebridge, Sadberge)** - The character of the Rural Villages, including their relationship to and setting within the surrounding countryside, will be protected and where possible enhanced. Development in these villages will make efficient and sustainable use of existing buildings and infill opportunities. On the edges of Rural Villages, housing development will meet clearly identified local needs, recognising that an element of open market housing may be required to deliver essential affordable units.

In meeting the objectives for each level of the settlement hierarchy, development should not compromise the ability to meet the objectives for other tiers in the hierarchy.

Only those places with defined Development Limits are classified as settlements for the purposes of this Policy. All areas outside the Development Limits are to be regarded as ‘countryside’ unless specifically identified for other uses in the plan (including Policies E 1, E 2 and E 3). The Development Limits are defined on the Policies Map.

- 4.0.2** The Key Diagram shown overleaf identifies the key strategic locations for development.

THE SETTLEMENT HIERARCHY 4

Urban Area

- 4.0.3** Darlington has excellent national and international transport links, by rail (East Coast Main Line), road (A1M) and air (Teesside International Airport). Its 'gateway' location, accessibility and attractive environment make it perfectly placed within North East England and the Tees Valley to attract investment and economic activity that might not otherwise come to the region or sub-region. It is a key centre within the Tees Valley City Region, with potential to contribute significantly to regional economic growth across a range of sectors.
- 4.0.4** Darlington is an important location for employment development, a subregional centre for retail and leisure uses, and a strategic public transport hub. The town centre provides employment, shops and services for large parts of North Yorkshire and South and West Durham and the western part of the Tees Valley, and is rated third in North East England in terms of shopping venue quality⁽⁷⁾. The Borough provides housing to meet the needs of local people and many of those who work in the town, and also helps to meet some of the housing needs of a wider area, particularly those arising from those on higher incomes working across the Tees Valley.
- 4.0.5** New land will be required for the employment, services, infrastructure and new housing associated with population and economic growth. Priority will be given to land and buildings in accessible and sustainable locations, where these can accommodate the specific needs of the developments proposed, and where this does not prejudice heritage or nature conservation, or impinge on land protected for recreational purposes.
- 4.0.6** The town centre will continue to be the primary retail centre in the Borough. It will be enhanced and safeguarded as such, and will be expected to accommodate additional retailing for much of the plan period. The Council accepts that the face of retailing is changing and the roles of town centres need to change to reflect that, with a more flexible approach to uses within the high street including encouraging people to live in town centres. The town centre will also continue to be a key location and first priority for office development and other town centre uses, including an office-led scheme on previously developed land in the Beaumont Street/Feethams area.
- 4.0.7** New development and regeneration in the Town Centre Fringe will be key to delivering the vision for Darlington over the medium to longer term. The area is critical to improving links between the town centre, Central Park and the main railway station, which are all close by. It provides opportunities for new employment, leisure/cultural, recreation and housing in a highly accessible location, and for local pockets of deprivation, poor housing and environmental quality to be tackled comprehensively. Development will have to take into account constraints (such as flood risk) which will shape the eventual pattern of redevelopment there.
- 4.0.8** In selecting the broad locations for new housing development, the urban fringe has been identified as the most sustainable, suitable, available and developable, provided that appropriate community infrastructure and sustainable transport provision is made and potential adverse impacts of development there are mitigated.

Outside the Urban Area

- 4.0.9** The Borough's villages and countryside are an integral part of what makes Darlington an attractive place to live. Their vitality and viability need to be safeguarded and strengthened, whether it be by retaining services or supporting new development, such as affordable housing, that help to maintain sustainable communities. The larger villages Heighington, Hurworth/Hurworth Place and Middleton St George have a range of services which means they are well placed to accommodate some development which would also assist in providing for a range of sites within the Borough.
- 4.0.10** Service Villages are those that provide a core set of essential services for local communities. They must contain a school, village/community hall, and convenience store. It is also essential that they are well connected to higher service centres (towns) by public transport.

7 Venuescore 2016.

4 THE SETTLEMENT HIERARCHY

- 4.0.11** Given that the Service Villages are shown to contain essential facilities and services, they are considered to be locations where development opportunities may be acceptable. As centres for activity in the rural area, Service Villages can also play a role in providing small-scale employment opportunities outside of the traditional rural industries. Developments that enhance this role should be supported.
- 4.0.12** The Rural Villages are generally of a very small scale and offer limited, and in some cases, no service provision. Sustainable development opportunities within the defined Development Limits of these villages will be supported, including infill development and the conversion of existing buildings. New housing development on the edge of Rural Villages (outside the defined Development Limits) will be required to meet local and other functional needs, i.e. through the delivery of 'exception(s) sites' (affordable housing schemes), allowing for an element of open market housing where this helps the viability and deliverability of an exception(s) site as a whole. Housing development that meets a functional need includes that which provides essential accommodation for those involved in land management or other countryside activities. The development of new services will be supported, however, the growth of Rural Villages as a sole means of generating additional demand for services will not be supported where such growth would have an adverse impact on the character of the village, or on the viability of a service in a nearby village.