

**ECONOMY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
30 JANUARY 2025**

FOOTFALL CAUSES AND IMPACTS STUDY

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. This report covers the factors that can impact on footfall within the town centre.

Summary

2. Darlington is the largest conurbation in County Durham with a retail catchment of 400,300 (Experian) extending to 586,000 within a 30-minute drive time. Both the level of home ownership and car ownership are above the UK average. The town has excellent road connections, located 3 miles east of the A1M.
3. Town centre footfall is influenced by a number of factors which this report provides an overview of. Members may wish to explore the key factors outlined in further detail through a Task and Finish Review.

Recommendation

4. It is recommended that:
 - (a) Members note the content of the report and give consideration to whether the information outlined, and any additional factors, should be explored in greater depth as part of a Task and Finish Review.

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Background Papers

Background papers have been summarised and attached at **Appendix 1**.

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Council Plan	Ensuring good footfall into the town centre helps to build a strong, sustainable economy with opportunities for all.
Addressing inequalities	Increased partnership working with key stakeholders and the voluntary and community sector to understand their needs to create a safe and welcoming town for people to enjoy.
Tackling Climate Change	Working with service operators to deliver good affordable transport options into Darlington and provide bike parking and safe walking routes to access the town centre.
Efficient and effective use of resources	Budgets are closely monitored and spent as efficiently as possible to ensure maximum impact and delivery for best possible costs.
Health and Wellbeing	Events welcome visitors into Darlington providing activities and animation help engage with people from across the community and offer a better quality of life.
S17 Crime and Disorder	<p>The Purple Flag Award contributes towards a Safe Evening Economy.</p> <p>Cultural activities can have a positive impact on crime and disorder by engaging individuals in positive activity.</p> <p>Northumbrian and Britian in Bloom Awards showcase the vibrant and welcoming town centre. This helps to create a clean and sustainable town centre.</p> <p>Ensuring that the borough is safe, clean and maintained to levels that support the economy and encourage inward investment.</p> <p>Support communities to remain safe and work with key agencies and communities.</p>
Wards Affected	All Wards
Groups Affected	All people can visit Darlington to shop, work and live.
Budget and Policy Framework	No impact
Key Decision	No
Urgent Decision	No
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	This report has no impact on Looked After Children or Care Leavers

MAIN REPORT

Footfall

5. Footfall in Darlington is recorded by the Springboard, a recognised footfall counting company, utilising 8 footfall counters, which count persons passing the counters. Each month, MRI OnLocation provides insights into the performance of retail destinations across the UK.
6. The locations of the counters were determined by Springboard and are located as follows:
 - (b) Beaumont Street
 - (c) Blackwellgate
 - (d) Feethams
 - (e) Grange Road
 - (f) High Row
 - (g) Northgate
 - (h) Tubwell Row
7. Prior to 2020, footfall data was provided by a different system, therefore comparisons need to be considered with caution when comparing the two data sources. Table 1 below shows the footfall trend for the past 8 years.

Table 1

Town Centre Monthly Footfall Data												
	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December	January	February	March
2017/18	1,458,992	1,478,441	1,448,766	1,514,589	1,535,216	1,513,228	1,471,269	1,404,148	1,574,154	1,248,629	1,169,912	1,327,197
2018/19	1,261,040	1,480,261	1,449,910	1,471,601	1,484,566	1,382,516	1,368,883	1,362,619	1,521,244	1,221,860	1,123,094	1,303,202
2019/20	1,215,796	1,297,421	1,243,508	1,325,681	1,376,588	1,285,505	1,250,278	1,227,733	1,414,979	1,129,939	1,019,049	
2020/21	186,948	239,467	492,429	642,793	876,701	1,123,010	784,734	535,000	962,702	410,291	454,383	706,627
2021/22	986,451	982,773	1,373,002	1,097,421	1,218,718	1,415,832	1,149,794	1,130,974	1,387,981	1,009,289	1,063,726	1,372,224
2022/23	1,157,067	1,148,291	1,249,224	1,343,709	1,358,903	1,487,482	1,139,447	1,087,960	1,336,079	990,086	1,028,527	1,258,459
2023/24	1,107,595	1,153,245	1,494,423	1,228,359	1,142,405	1,403,414	1,062,210	1,123,173	1,110,622	880,464	1,002,815	1,188,655
2024/25	973,552	976,890	1,410,059	1,151,682	1,290,600	1,460,936	1,089,257	1,143,042	1,377,198			

**PFM FOOTFALL
DATA
LOCKDOWN NO1**

8. Whilst there are variations in months, which the weather can influence, generally, since COVID-19, town centre footfall is relatively stable. Towns and cities do not share footfall data, therefore the information available to compare is very limited.

Articles and publications from data analytics companies share some national statistics, however, more focused information is not readily available.

9. There are a number of factors (both positive and negative) that have had an impact on footfall within the town centre. The main influencing factors are outlined below.

Retail, Leisure and Events Offering

10. Events within the town centre attract thousands of extra visitors into the high street, examples of which are outlined at **Appendix 2**.
11. Many of the events are designed to encourage longer dwell time and movement around Darlington. This increase in footfall benefits the town centre businesses. Footfall data relating to events is attached at **Appendix 3**.
12. Promotional activities such as Restaurant Week in February and October half term, help to attract new visitors to venues. The feedback from these weeks is positive with many venues extending promotional offers due to their popularity.

Perception of public spaces - safe, clean, accessible, walkable

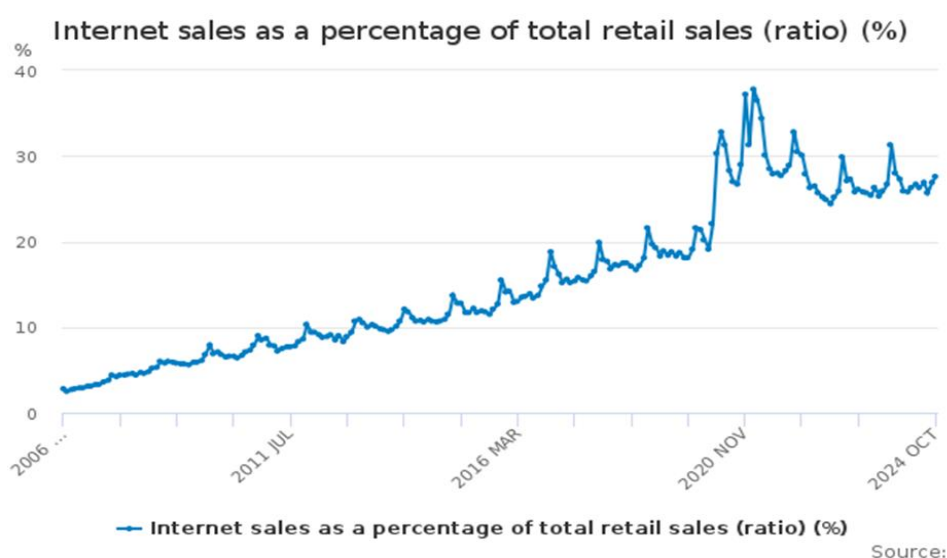
13. Darlington has been awarded the Purple Flag Award for a number of years, which demonstrates a safe evening economy and highlights many areas of the town centre as a safe environment. This Award focuses on the night-time economy looking at CCTV, safety, lighting, parking, walking routes and travel options. The town has achieved Purple Flag Status for over 6 years and has submitted the renewal report for inspection, which is carried out each year.
14. In addition to the Purple Flag Award, the town centre and South Park have been awarded GOLD from Northumbria in Bloom and won the 'Best City' category at the National Britain in Bloom Awards 2023, with preparations currently underway for 2025.
15. Findings from Darlington perceptions survey is attached at **Appendix 4**. The survey carried out in Summer 2024 received over 1000 submissions, with the key findings outlined below.
 - (a) People visit the town centre for a variety of reasons, demonstrating that the town centre has a lot to offer; including, retail, leisure, events and professional services.
 - (b) Information gathered from the survey suggests over 45% of visitors visit every week, with 17% visiting every day during the day and 24% visiting weekly on an evening, mainly on weekends.
 - (c) Travelling into the town centre during the day is mainly via car (62%), walking (47%) and on the bus (25%). On an evening, taxis are used (30%), which may be due to less bus options being available later into the night.
 - (d) The results of the following statements about the town centre:
 - 'Store opening hours are suitable' - 84% agree
 - 'There is adequate car parking' - 66% agree
 - 'It is clear and tidy' - 61% agree

- 'It is a good place to shop' - 33% agree
- 'It is good for a night out' - 71% agree
- 'It is inclusive' - 75% agree
- 'Overall, it is a good place to visit' - 68% agree

- (e) 78% of survey respondents find out about the town centre events via Facebook.
- (f) 66% of persons asked said that the reason for not visiting the town centre was the choice of shops. *(Lots of national brands are opting out of town shopping centres and cities for their stores. A large number of Arcadia Group brands and department stores have closed down nationally. 69% visit Teesside Park to go shopping.)*

Shopping from Home (Online)

16. The Office of National Statistics graph below shows that internet shopping totals around 25-30% of total retail sales. Source dataset: Retail Sales Index time series (DRSI).



Entertaining from Home

17. Since COVID, many people have altered their lifestyle and host friends and family from home. The evening economy has also seen a change in how people socialise, with some of Darlington's town centre venues responding by reducing their opening days to Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday, which reflects the drop in demand. This strategy is also linked to the cost of electricity and staffing, with businesses only opening on days where it is profitable to be operating.
18. Younger people drink at home and go out at a much later time of night. This change in socialising has also been affected by social media and there affects following the pandemic.

Cost of Living

19. Many visitors are looking for reasons to come into Darlington and the year-round events programme offers people free activity, which encourages them to visit the town centre and dwell longer and this means secondary spend occurs.
20. Many retailers and venues are finding that their shoppers are visiting less frequently, however, when they do come shopping, it is more purposeful and targeted; sometimes spending more in one transaction but less regularly. It is also evident that footfall is affected by payday weekends.

Changes to Bus Network

21. The bus network remains smaller than it was pre-pandemic. Frequencies on all routes are lower than they were in 2019, and Arriva made several cuts to the network in 2023; these were mostly restored using Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA) funding. There have been a few incremental improvements in 2024: notably, service 3 on Saturdays has had its frequency increased to every 15 mins.
22. In 2023, there were just over four million bus journeys in Darlington, which as evidenced in the graphs attached at **Appendix 5** is more than the year prior, but still below pre-pandemic levels. Data from 2024 suggests passenger numbers are growing by 4%, which, if continues, will take bus patronage to approximately 4.2 million journeys. We are seeing a healthy growth of 6% among those travelling under the English National Concessionary Travel Scheme, and also among those who are under 22. TVCA have recently brought in a new flat fare of £1 for a single journey or £3 for an all-day ticket, valid on all buses in the Tees Valley. This mirrors the scheme that's been working in the north of the region for a couple of years now and is available to anyone 21 or under.
23. The economy benefit of buses is examined in depth at **Appendix 6**, a report commissioned in 2024 by KPMG.

Changes to Car Parking Charges

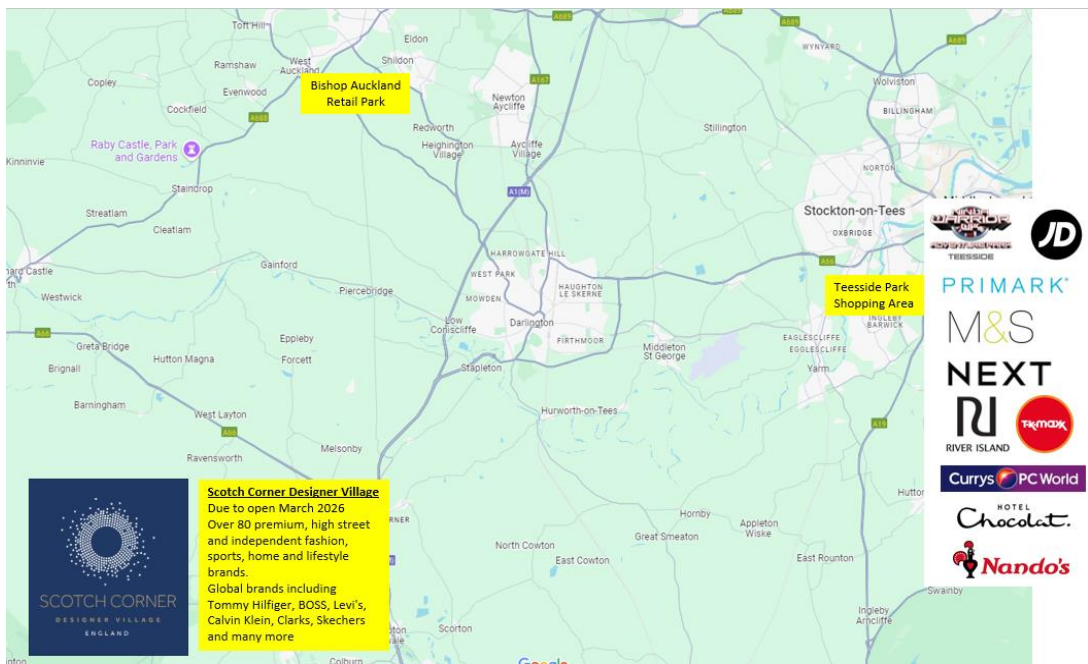
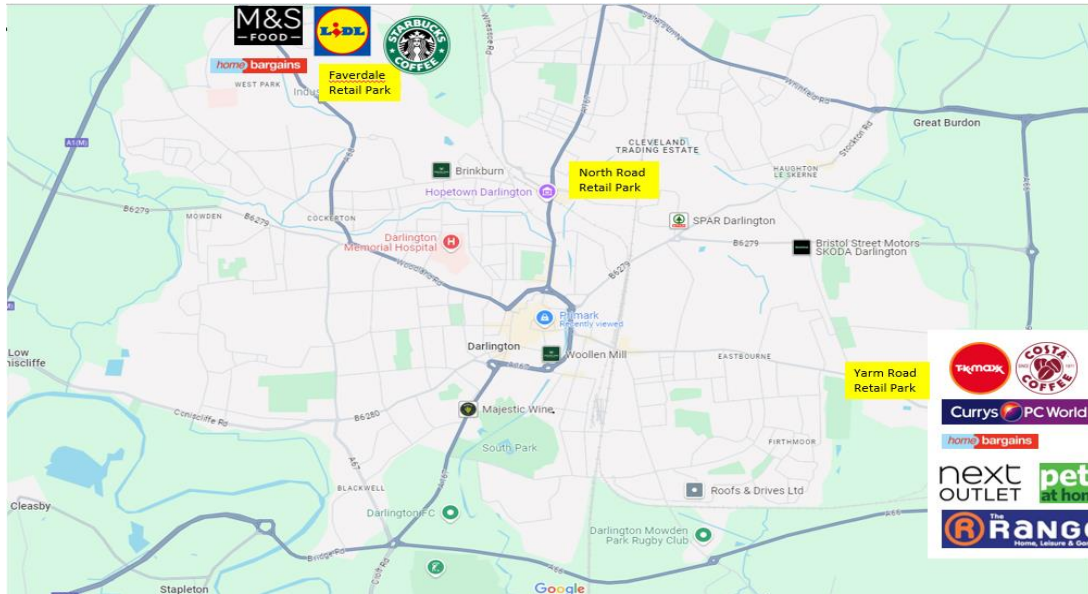
24. The car parking figures attached at **Appendix 7** give totals of people using the car parks, however, no research has been done to evaluate what percentage of the users are working or shopping.

Retail Parks

25. Retail Parks do have an impact on the number of visitors coming into the town centre; the visitor experience to a retail park is quick and easy. This is a more efficient rather than experiential; for example, carrying shopping to the car is much simpler. Additional out of town locations mean consumers have more choice and availability to find what they are looking for without having to come into the town centre.
26. Darlington town centre has more independent retail and hospitality venues but there is a parking charge to pay to visit and sometimes this is less convenient for shoppers.

27. Teesside Park and other out of town retail parks like West Auckland are much more appealing for national retailers: more accessible with cheaper rates. Many brands will only consider these out-of-town locations.

28. Locations of nearby retail parks are shown below on the following maps.



Conclusion

29. Attracting footfall into Darlington town centre is essential for the High Street economy. Events and animation programmes help to bring visitors into Darlington, increase dwell time and opportunities to spend within the local economy. The events programme offers people an opportunity to explore the town centre and brings new visitors to the area.

There are many families seen each year at numerous events who return visit to experience and enjoy what is programmed.

30. The town centre animation programme takes visitors to new locations so they can experience and see the great variety of retailers and businesses located in Darlington. We do see many return visitors to the town centre who will come and enjoy time with friends and family. Events also offer businesses the opportunity to get involved and help to promote their goods and services, this involvement continues to develop and build as we work in partnership with businesses to create more events to support them and attract visitors to their venues.
31. Out of town shopping centres do have advantages, often offering bigger national brands. The experiential offering in the town centre provides an extra reason to visit the town centre and enjoy a day in Darlington. It is essential to supporting the high street and encouraging people to shop locally and support their town.