Rhondda Cynon Taf Revised Local Development Plan 2022 – 2037

Retail and Commercial Centre Hierarchy Paper 2023

RETAIL AND COMMERCIAL CENTRE HIERARCHY PAPER

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Local Planning Authorities are required to prepare a Retail and Commercial Centre Hierarchy for retail and commercial centres within their Local Development Plans (LDPs), as directed by national policy (Planning Policy Wales, Ed. 11). This involves defining a suitable hierarchy of retail and commercial centres, which sets out the relationship with the formal LDP Settlement Hierarchy and helps to inform the formulation of the Revised LDP Preferred Strategy. It should be noted that this is not called a 'Town Centre' hierarchy due to the range and scale of all the centres in Rhondda Cynon Taf. Although there are significant sized town centres here, (which find themselves at the top of the hierarchy), the range of size of centres goes down considerably to much smaller local or village centres.

2.0 BACKGROUND TO RETAIL CENTRE HIERARCHIES

Centres within a retail and commercial hierarchy have varying characteristics and roles at each level. Higher order centres will typically have a larger catchment area, and also have a wider range of uses, functions and services for their users. The larger centres would have a number of national retailers present also. They would also be considered destinations and places of work in themselves. This all in turn attracts footfall into their retail and commercial centres and helps to maintain their vibrancy and vitality.

Lower order centres tend to be more of a scale that meet the daily convenience needs of the communities that they serve. Their roles and functions may not go far beyond providing a number of services to the immediate community. Middle order centres would be just that; having elements of both the larger and smaller centres, but on smaller and greater scales respectively.

In identifying the hierarchy, there would also be a variety of size of centres in each of its levels; as it is necessary to make decisions on so many places, none of which are identical.

Furthermore, it should be acknowledged that this paper is undertaking a review of the existing Retail Hierarchy in the current RCT LDP 2006–2021. The current hierarchy is fundamentally related to the overall Settlement Hierarchy and in turn, to the overall Preferred Strategy and Revised LDP that we are now preparing.

In order to establish an effective hierarchy for the Revised LDP (2022-2037), we need to ensure that the retail and commercial centres are compliant with PPW 11 and continue to:

- *Fulfil their function;*
- *Consider their future roles;*
- *Recognise opportunities to achieve national objectives;*
- *Ensure that they are appropriate in terms of size, scale, form and location;*
- *Account for the characteristics of each centre; and*

- *Make a clear distinction between higher and lower order centres.*

(Welsh Government, 2021, p64).

THE ADOPTED LDP (2006–2021) RETAIL HIERARCHY

Centre Type	Centre Names
Principal Towns	Aberdare Llantrisant (including Talbot Green) Pontypridd.
Key Settlements	Ferndale; Hirwaun; Llanharan; Mountain Ash; Porth, Tonypandy, Tonyrefail; Treorchy.
Local and Neighbourhood Centres	Aberaman; Abercynon; Church Village; Gadlys; Gelli; Llantrisant Old Town; Maerdy; Penrhiwceiber; Pentre; Penygraig; Pontyclun; Rhydyfelin; Taffs Well; Ton Pentre; Tonteg; Trebanog; Trecynon; Treforest; Treherbert; Tyn-y-Nant; Tynewydd; Williamstown; Ynyshir; Ynysybwl; Ystrad.

Further details of the specifics of this Hierarchy and how it was identified, may be seen in the current LDP document, along with the associated evidence base.

3.0 CONTEXTUAL CHANGES AND ANNUAL MONITORING POST ADOPTION OF THE EXISTING LDP:

The Council has undertaken annual surveys of the retail centres since 2012, which have been reported in the Annual Monitoring Reports to determine whether the centres continue to perform as expected and indeed, whether any changes to the existing hierarchy are required. The changes within national policy and legislation, as well as relevant contextual changes, have also been a significant factor in assessing the retail hierarchy. These are reviewed below.

Since the adoption of the LDP in 2011, the economy has continued to be affected by the financial crisis of 2008 and the subsequent recession and austerity measures. This coupled with the more recent 'Brexit' and COVID-19 pandemic have led to a series of additional, significant economic concerns in recent years. The economy has therefore witnessed some of the smallest and slowest growth in history, with our retail and commercial centres feeling the full effect of this. A cost of living crisis has ensued, with far less disposable income available to many, which has impacted upon the retail and commercial sector.

The exponential rise in e-commerce (or online shopping) has had a further detrimental effect upon local businesses in many sectors, but in particular to those in retail and commercial centres. Several major and national retailers have withdrawn from our centres throughout the plan period e.g. Marks and Spencer's, River Island and Dorothy Perkins in Pontypridd. This may be in part to the rise in e-commerce but also due to the proximity of Cardiff City Centre and out of town retail locations, such as Merthyr Tydfil Retail Park. Many national banks have also left our centres in this time, from the lower levels to the highest tiers. These losses in themselves have had a clear detrimental effect, whilst also posing major challenges for RCT. Further, although some smaller retail centre businesses may not be directly linked to the higher end retail offers; these major shops and the banks would have been natural attractors of large footfall.

The Welsh Government, since 2020, have introduced new policy and guidance to specifically tackle the aftermath of the global pandemic and to ensure that places are designed to tackle the effects of the climate and biodiversity emergencies. In terms of retail centres, one of the most notable changes was contained within *Building Better Places* (Welsh Government Place-making and COVID-19 Recovery Plan), July 2020.

The paper highlights the key existing planning policies and tools that should be used to aid the recovery of Wales, as a result of the global COVID-19 pandemic. It also encourages planners to display creativity and ingenuity in devising innovative solutions and responses to the environmental, social, cultural and economic recovery of Wales, at all scales. Moreover, the Building Better Places paper sought the evolution of the retail centre from a predominant Class A focus to a commercial 'hub', whereby any suitable commercial or leisure use that contributes to the vitality and viability of a centre should be permitted. This is to ensure that our centres continue to adapt and change in order to survive in a difficult economic climate.

Future Wales (2020-2040) published in February 2021

With specific regard to the South East Wales region, *Future Wales* acknowledges the interdependence between Cardiff and the wider region. It specifically states that Cardiff is unable to continue to expand indefinitely, without major environmental consequences and therefore the economic strength of Cardiff must generate region-wide prosperity. The South East region currently accounts for 51% of the total economic output of the Welsh economy, with estimates suggesting that this proportion could increase in the future.

Furthermore, *Future Wales* reinforces the changes in *Building Better Places,* acknowledging that the next two decades will be a 'critically important period', as the country recovers from the COVID-19 global pandemic. The document seeks to embrace opportunities to *make Wales a better place – healthier, more resilient, more prosperous, more equal and more environmentally responsible* (Welsh Government, 2021, p4).

The COVID-19 pandemic particularly has emphasised how important local services and facilities are to the communities that they serve. For this reason, in assessing the existing retail hierarchy, it has been determined that all centres, irrespective of size, will be protected to ensure that residents have access to services, even if they are limited.

4.0 REVIEW OF THE RETAIL AND COMMERCIAL CENTRE HIERARCHY:

Firstly, it should be raised and acknowledged that the review of the Retail and Commercial Centre Hierarchy has highlighted just how intrinsically linked RCT's retail and settlement hierarchies are. The Retail and Commercial Hierarchy is a fundamental consideration in determining the Settlement Hierarchy. The facilities within the retail and commercial centres are a major determinant of a settlement's position and importance, and helps establish its ability to facilitate additional growth. Conversely, the identification of the Settlement Hierarchy has played a key role in determining the retail hierarchy. Principal Towns and Key Settlements are present in both hierarchies, with the Settlement Hierarchy having "Smaller Settlements" as the lowest tier and the Retail Hierarchy having "Local and Neighbourhood Centres". The Principal Towns and Key Settlements are also within the same locations in both hierarchies, although there is some divergence in the lower tiers, as many lower order centres have an interdependent relationship with higher order settlements.

The Retail and Commercial Centre Hierarchy takes into account the traditional role and function of these centres to ensure that they continue to be the most appropriate location for new retail, commercial and suitable leisure development. This type of development will continue to be directed to the designated retail and commercial centres to ensure a continued investment, as the centres evolve into 'hubs' for their communities, in line with *Building Better Places*. This evolution from traditional retail centres will help support and improve the vibrancy, vitality and viability of the centres, from both a commercial and social perspective.

At the very head of the retail hierarchy for Rhondda Cynon Taf and the southeast region is Cardiff City centre, which accounts for a significant proportion of comparison (non-food) shopping. Additionally, Cardiff offers significant employment opportunities region-wide, which are accessible utilising sustainable public transport options. The out-of-centre Cyfarthfa Retail Park within Merthyr Tydfil also witnesses a significant draw from the surrounding areas, particularly the upper Cynon Valley and to a lesser degree beyond that. The retail and commercial centres of Aberdare and Pontypridd, can no longer fully nor directly compete with these larger, more significant specific retail offers and will instead focus on increasing the offer and range of uses present, in order to increase footfall.

The Principal Towns of Aberdare in the north and Llantrisant/Talbot Green and Pontypridd in the south of the County Borough have stood at the top of the retail hierarchy within the County Borough throughout the current plan period.

The retail centres are strategically located throughout the County Borough and perform a sub-regional role, acting as the Principal shopping areas for a wide catchment of communities. The retail elements of these places, including both comparison (non-food) and convenience (food), along with large hospitality and leisure uses, are major employers in themselves. Whilst particularly in Pontypridd, there are significant amounts of office-based employment. All three Principal Towns are highly accessible, with well-located bus stations and associated frequent services, which serve the immediate and wider area. Aberdare and Pontypridd also have central train stations with services running to Treherbert, Taffs Well, Merthyr Tydfil, Bridgend, Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan. The infrastructure along the existing train lines from Cardiff to Aberdare and Treherbert are currently being upgraded, as part of the South East Wales Metro project.

Evidence over the plan period suggests that the Principal Towns have performed reasonably well in line with the Welsh and UK averages. According to Springboard (a national retail monitoring company), Pontypridd and Llantrisant/Talbot Green have consistently been under the average vacancy rate for Wales, (Welsh average c. 13% over the plan period) and lower or in line with the UK average (UK average c. 10% over the plan period). Aberdare has tended to align with the Welsh vacancy rate or has been fractionally above. All three centres have a number of national retailers present however there are a significant level of national retailers and in-centre supermarkets in Llantrisant/Talbot Green, compared to less of a national presence within Aberdare or Pontypridd. The Revised LDP will need to ensure the vitality and future of the centres.

The Principal Towns have been supported by the eight Key Settlements, which are less strategically significant than the Principal Towns whilst their retail and commercial centres (generally) have smaller catchment areas and are (generally) of a smaller scale. The emphasis of the Key Settlement retail and commercial centres is more so on convenience shopping perhaps, than comparison need, although they vary in scale and function in association with the Settlement Hierarchy and the individual centres. The Key Settlements are focal points for further growth in relation to retail, commercial and other appropriate leisure uses.

It is acknowledged that the retail and commercial centres of the Key Settlements of Hirwaun and Llanharan are smaller than the other Key Settlement centres. However, as indicated in the Settlement Hierarchy Paper, there are multiple other facilities and services throughout the settlements themselves.

With the exception of Llanharan and Treorchy, which have enjoyed traditionally low vacancy rates, the remainder of the centres have hovered around or above the Welsh average. Tonyrefail, Porth, Mountain Ash and Tonypandy particularly have historically witnessed significantly higher vacancy rates than the Welsh and UK averages.

The table below details the vacancy rates of the Principal Towns and Key Settlements since the adoption of the existing LDP (up to 2021).

	Vacancy Rates (%)											
Principal Town / Key Settlement	**2021-2022**	**2020-2021**	**2019-2020**	**2018-2019**	**2017-2018**	**2016-2017**	**2015-2016**	**2014-2015**	**2013-2014**	**2012-2013**	**2011-2012**	**Average**
Aberdare	15.91	15.91	14.54	13.51	14.09	10.40	9.00	9.00	12.70	8.18	6.00	11.75%
Pontypridd	10.71	14.36	11.33	12.20	7.31	8.70	8.70	8.70	9.20	9.22	7.28	9.79%

Llantrisant/ Talbot Green	6.08	5.22	1.5	3.41	5.30	4.30	2.60	1.70	2.70	2.68	3.57	3.55%
Ferndale	19.57	12.77	8.69	6.52	13.04	17.40	13	10.90	8.70	6.52	8.70	11.44%
Hirwaun	9.52	9.52	9.52	9.50	21.73	22.70	22	9.50	0	0	4.76	10.80%
Llanharan	0	0	0	5.00	0	5.00	0	0	10	0	0	1.82%
Mountain Ash	21.98	18.68	15.95	21.50	11.70	11.70	12.70	18.30	20.40	23.66	18.28	17.71%
Porth	18.85	23.58	23.77	15.80	11.57	14.00	10.80	14.20	15.80	11.48	10.92	15.52%
Tonypandy	15.75	17.24	18.67	18.00	16.44	16.40	20.53	19.70	18.40	23.33	18.24	18.43%
Tonyrefail	20.37	18.52	14.81	24.07	18.51	20.40	12.90	13.50	9.60	11.53	7.55	15.61%
Treorchy	1.67	5.0	5.0	6.60	7.37	5.80	9.00	6.80	4.20	6.83	5.93	5.84%
Overall Vacancy Rates	12.76%	14.25%	11.25%	12.37%	11.50%	12.40%	10.60%	10.80%	11.40%	10.80%	9.10%	**11.11%**

The lowest level of the retail and commercial centre hierarchy consists of the Local and Neighbourhood Centres, of which there are 25 within the adopted LDP for Rhondda Cynon Taf.

It is acknowledged that the Local and Neighbourhood Centres vary quite considerably in size, meaning that there are significantly more facilities within certain communities' centres in this tier than others. All however provide for the most basic of everyday needs. Some centres accommodate hospitality, leisure and other types of uses. That being said, all Local and Neighbourhood Centres have public transport links to the higher order settlements to allow individuals to fulfil the majority of their needs.

The County Borough also hosts a small number of 'out-of-centre' facilities. Whilst these centres are not recognised within the retail and commercial centre hierarchy, they nonetheless have a significant draw, albeit predominantly car-based. These out-of-centre facilities are Midway and Brown Lennox Retail Parks located within Pontypridd, Dinas Enterprise Centre in Porth and Riverside Retail Park within Aberdare.

N.B. It should be cleared noted at this point that the comprehensive Settlement Assessment and Settlement Hierarchy Paper evidence base, which was prepared in advance of this Retail Centre paper, is very much interconnected and interdependent with this. Further, to take out the need for duplication, the Settlement Assessment and Settlement Hierarchy Paper sets out a very detail overview of all the settlements in RCT, including their centres – please see Appendix 1 of that paper.

Not only does it present the wide array of services and facilities across each settlement in their entirety, it also sets out, in detail, the types of retail, commercial and leisure uses, along with public services that exist within these settlement's centres.

5.0 THE REVISED LDP RETAIL CENTRE (BECOMING THE SETTLEMENT CENTRE) HIERARCHY:

Having completed the review of the retail and commercial centres and this in line with the Settlement Assessment and Settlement Hierarchy Paper, and its detailed analysis, just a small number of changes are proposed for the Revised LDP Retail Centre Hierarchy.

The first of these is how the process and the places are now to be identified/referred to.

The Settlement Hierarchy for the RLDP has determined that there will be a more consistent 'Principal Settlement' reference instead of 'Principal Town'. Each tier of the hierarchy will be a 'settlement'. In taking this and the preparation of the Preferred Strategy forward, it became evident that there may be some confusion in terminology and between the two separate hierarchies.

The centres of our settlements can be known as many things to different people such as 'high streets', 'town centres', 'village centres', 'town', 'retail centres', 'local shops' 'precinct' etc. They would include the shops and the other commercial and leisure uses in the centres.

It is further difficult to put a consistent and clear name on all the levels in the hierarchy. Therefore, we have determined **in the Revised LDP that these centres will from here onwards be known as Settlement Centres.**

As is expected, the Settlement Centres are naturally linked to the settlements in the Settlement Hierarchy. Accordingly, the proposed Settlement Centre Hierarchy for the Revised Local Development Plan (2022-2037) is shown below, in line with the Settlement Hierarchy. It is largely the same as for the adopted LDP, although further amendments are set out below the table below.

It is noted that some of the Principal Settlements and Key Settlements have more than one centre, due to their overall size. There is a clear primary centre in these places, with some secondary centres that serve certain parts of the wider settlement on a more local scale.

The Revised LDP Settlement Centre Hierarchy

Settlement Hierarchy - Settlement Centres	
Principal Settlement Centres	
primary centre	**secondary centre**
Aberdare	Aberaman Gadlys Trecynon
Pontypridd	Treforest
Talbot Green	Pontyclun Llantrisant Old Town
Key Settlements Centres	

primary centre	secondary centre
Ferndale	
Hirwaun	
Llanharan	
Mountain Ash	
Porth	
Tonypandy	Penygraig, Williamstown
Tonyrefail	
Treorchy	
Smaller Settlement Centres	
Abercynon	Taffs Well
Church Village	Ton Pentre
Gelli	Tonteg (Main Road Precinct and Cardigan Close Precinct)
Llanharry	Trebanog
Llwydcoed	Treherbert
Maerdy	Tyn-y-Nant
Penrhiwceiber	Tynewydd
Pentre	Ynyshir
Penywaun	Ynysybwl
Rhydyfelin	Ystrad

The three Principal Settlement Primary Centres will continue to perform a sub-regional role, acting as the principal shopping, leisure, employment and wider public services centres for a wide catchment of communities.

The settlement of Pontyclun is now included within the Principal Settlement of Talbot Green, Pontyclun and Llantrisant. The Principal Settlement's Primary Centre is Talbot Green, which is supported by the Secondary Centres of Llantrisant Old Town and Pontyclun. Llantrisant Old Town and Pontyclun centres perform more local functions, unlike the large Talbot Green centre that is of a greater scale and variety of uses and has a much larger catchment. However, all three centres have an interdependent relationship with the wider (and now expanded) Principal Settlement of Talbot Green, Pontyclun and Llantrisant.

It should also be noted that Talbot Green Primary Centre now includes Glamorgan Vale Retail Park. Although directly adjacent, new pedestrian routes have been put in place during the plan period, linking them.

The interdependent relationship between Pontypridd and Treforest has been recognised within the new Settlement Centre Hierarchy. Although Treforest is a secondary centre, serving the more distinct community of Treforest, it nonetheless plays an important role in supporting the Principal Settlement of Pontypridd and vice versa.

Aberdare is similarly supported by several other secondary centres. The Principal Settlement Primary Centre of Aberdare is clearly the main, very significant centre, although the Secondary Centres of Gadlys, Aberaman and Trecynon help serve the wider settlement communities.

The Key Settlement Centres have remained unaltered with them continuing to act as centres that are less strategically significant than the Principal Settlement Centres. The Key Settlement Centres will continue to play their role in providing varied shopping opportunities, food and hospitality and smaller levels of public services. Other commercial and leisure uses exist here, and will be further encouraged within appropriate locations. The Key Settlement Centres will also continue to be focal points for additional growth and strategic redevelopment opportunities, particularly in the instances of protracted vacancies.

Although the Hirwaun and Llanharan centres are smaller, it remains that the overall settlements themselves are capable of accommodating additional growth over the plan period. It should be considered that growth within these settlements would positively result in more viable centres and possibly opportunities for their growth.

It should be noted that, as with other centres, Penygraig and Williamstown enjoy a successful interdependent relationship with the Key Settlement Centre of Tonypandy and will be fundamental in supporting the Key Settlement over the course of the plan period.

The Smaller Settlement Centres will also remain generally the same however new centres will be introduced at Llanharry, Penywaun, Llwydcoed and The Precinct at Cardigan Close, Tonteg; in order to protect and expand upon these important existing facilities within these settlements. The Revised LDP Strategy seeks to provide services and facilities in close proximity to residents. This complies with the general principles set out in *Building Better Places* to ensure that residents have access to services and facilities close to where they live. This was paramount during the global COVID-19 pandemic and consequently, the Council have taken the decision to protect such facilities, irrespective of size, as they are deemed to be of the utmost importance to their communities.

It is acknowledged that the Smaller Settlement Centres vary quite considerably in size. Nonetheless, they all provide essential services and facilities for the communities that they serve. These centres provide significant convenience shopping opportunities for the residents of the communities that they serve and can perhaps support more development over the plan period, as a result of the interdependent relationship that they enjoy with higher order settlements.

As noted within the Settlement Hierarchy, some of the Smaller Settlements have an interdependent relationship with the Principal and Key Settlements' Centres, whilst others are more stand-alone in nature. Abercynon is one of the larger Smaller Settlement Centres and has flourished quite significantly over the past decade, with the centre expanding to meet the community's needs and providing a good balance of uses within the area. This centre sits alongside the Valleys Lines railway station and park and ride (serving the Cynon and Merthyr valleys to Cardiff) and the significant edge of centre modern office park, Navigation Park.

All these centres at all levels are therefore considered a key element of our communities, and the RLDP has a fundamental role in ensuring their future vitality. The RLDP now has a role in seeking to ensure that appropriate planning policies are put in place to allow and encourage appropriate types of development proposals, and their uses, into these centres of different scales.

The current LDP policies are more traditional planning policies for retail centres, in that they seek to ensure formal retail centre uses (known as A1, A2 and A3 in planning terms) in our town centres.

A proposed new strategic policy in the RLDP Preferred Strategy, will set out the high-level policy intentions for the future of our centres; allowing for wider considerations as to what could be beneficial for these places.

6.0 CONCLUSION

This Retail and Commercial Centre Hierarchy review has determined that, in general, no significant changes are required when moving forward to the Revised LDP. One change is the name changes and that it is now referred to as a Settlement Centre Hierarchy, and all places known as settlement centres in their respective settlement's hierarchy position.

As set out above, there are certain smaller amendments proposed, primarily relating to the wider Principal Settlement of Talbot Green, Pontyclun and Llantrisant and its respective Settlement Centres. Further additions are proposed to the list of Smaller Settlement Centres, where some places have evolved into important community facilities.

The outcomes of this paper will be set out as appropriate in the formal elements of the Revised LDP, in informing the Preferred Strategy and ultimately forming the necessary policies in the Revised LDP.