

Tools for retail planning

A new NRPF website will make vital statistical resources freely and easily available for retail planners to use, as Miles Davis explains

One of the NRPF's main aims is to ensure that retail planning decisions are well informed, and so the Forum has always worked to improve the quality, availability and awareness of relevant statistics.

Over the past few months the DCLG has released two significant sets of statistics relevant to retail planning:

- The Town Centres Statistics have been revised and re-issued: floorspace, employment and rateable value data are now available for over 1,200 centres in England and Wales for the years 1999 to 2004 inclusive. Statistics for Retail Cores in the largest fifty or so centres have not yet been published but should appear in the summer.
- Local commercial and industrial floorspace statistics as at April 2007 have been published at local authority level and also at the finer scale of medium-level Census Super Output Areas.

These datasets allow the vitality and viability of town centres and retail activity across space and time to be compared, free of charge.

However, although the statistics can be found on the DCLG website (www.communities.gov.uk), as parts of the State of the Cities database and planning statistics pages, respectively, it has been recognised that they are not in a format that is ideal for the resource-constrained retail planner. The NRPF is therefore sponsoring and launching a dedicated website to make the statistics available in an easy-to-use and relevant way, with a simple map-based interface for exploring and downloading the data. We intend to launch the site at our Manchester event on 22 May, and the site will be accessible from the NRPF

website, at www.nrpf.org. The first datasets to be made available will be the Town Centres Statistics and additional, previously unpublished information which will make them more relevant to retail planning users.

Consultations have been taking place on the future of both of these DCLG statistical series. However, the NRPF is concerned that many potential users are unaware of the statistics or what can be done with them. A Retail Statistics Working Group has been set up, comprising members, data experts and current and potential users. It will work

with other interested parties such as the BCSC to explore, with DCLG and other government statistical suppliers, ways to ensure that statistics are relevant and useful to retail planners.

The new statistics are already being used in the work of the NRPF Research Group, which is looking into recent changes in retail floorspace trends and how this affects future requirements. They are also being used in the longer-term project conducted with the ESRC looking at retail change since 1971. There will be more on these projects and the new website in the next issue of *Retail Forum*. ■

New definitions for retail planning

An update by Jonathan Baldock

The NRPF's Retail Definitions Working Group, convened towards the end of last year (as reported in the last edition of *Retail Forum*), held its initial meeting in January, and immediately uncovered most of the reasons why there has been no standard set of definitions for retail planning to date! But real progress was made: a set of topics needing new definitions was agreed, and responsibilities for preparing draft definitions were assigned to group members. These topics include population forecasts, definitions of convenience and comparison goods, retail expenditure projections, special forms of trading, different types of floorspace, sales densities, and retail employment. Draft definitions have subsequently been circulated around the group by e-mail, with different views emerging for some, and a lively virtual debate.

Much of this initial drafting work has now been completed; and the next step will be for me (as Working Group Convenor and Chairman) to draw together the various strands of the debate into a full set of draft definitions for review and sign-off by the group (expected during May). The DCLG, which will be kept fully informed, requires wider consultation on the draft, prior to accepting the final version and including it in the guidance on retail need and impact forecasting to be annexed to the forthcoming new version of PPS6.

The NRPF will therefore be publishing the final draft definitions as soon as they are approved by the Working Group, as part of the consultation process. **Your response will be needed, and all responses will be taken into account when we prepare the final version. Watch this space!** ■

Jonathan Baldock is Director – Head of Retail Planning, at DTZ.

Building bridges

The NRPF has collaborated with the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) on several research projects. As Miles Davis reports, the ESRC is keen to engage with business to ensure that academic research is relevant and timely, and to make it more available and digestible

The ESRC is the UK's leading research funding and training agency addressing economic and social concerns. As part of an ongoing project to promote closer links between the business community and academia, the ESRC commissioned a team of researchers from AIM (the Advanced Institute of Management) to identify the priority concerns of retailers and to explore the extent to which academic research has helped to build knowledge and expertise over the past five years. The resulting AIM report also highlights management priorities which have yet to be addressed by management research.

Analysis of data from face-to-face interviews with key industry professionals and commentators suggests that the challenges facing the retail sector can be grouped into four headline themes:

- Balancing environmental/ethical concerns with retail performance.
- Internationalisation and global supply networks.
- Retail innovation.
- Retail planning issues and the effect of development on local economies.

Clearly the last of these is of particular interest to retail planners. The activities of retailers continue to be a source of controversy among customers and in the media. In this highly politicised area there is a demand for independent research into the economic and social impact of shopping centre and store development in relation to urban regeneration, local retailing and the notion of the 'community'. The effectiveness of planning policy and understanding customer perceptions are other areas of concern. In particular, there is a need for evidence-based research.

Although many of the topics have been addressed in recent research, they have not always been easily accessible to a business audience. The AIM report on

Contemporary and Future Challenges in the UK Retail Sector is designed both to raise awareness of the body of relevant research which exists and to explore ways to improve the match between future research and the needs of the sector.

A great deal of academic research does confront issues that are high on the priority list of retailers. Recent studies have addressed a range of practical topics, including the role of price and ICT in driving productivity; consumer satisfaction with supermarkets; evaluating 'food deserts' in British cities; case histories on successful and unsuccessful internationalisation; and analysing the management of product returns by UK high street retailers. Research has also examined how codes of conduct affect the supply chain of IKEA, the impact of RFID (radio-frequency identification), the effects on shoppers of music and ambient odours, and the impact of e-shopping on shopping at city centres in the Netherlands for 25 retail categories.

The full report includes a detailed discussion of each of the themes mentioned above in the context of

recent research, and provides details of individual research projects with links to further information.

The AIM report highlights the need to demonstrate how academic work can support the 'real world' of retail management and ultimately increase business performance. However, the ESRC and the universities are both aware that research projects are not always communicated to a business audience in an appropriate way, and that academic research is often perceived as remote or theoretical. A recent seminar discussed how this could be remedied. One of the suggestions is for a website that could be regularly updated to act as a 'one-stop shop' on the practical and managerial implications of new academic research. ■

■ *A summary of the AIM report is available on the NRPF website, at www.nrpf.org. For more information visit the AIM website: <http://www.aimresearch.org/index.php/our-research/aim-research-projects/business-engagement-project>*

Miles Davis is a PhD student at the Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis (CASA) at University College London.

Under-served Markets Project update

Business in the Community's (BitC's) Under-served Markets Project, run jointly with the DCLG, aims to promote greater retail investment in England's most deprived communities. Last October saw the launch of the *Under-served Markets: Retail and Regeneration* guide, which provides advice to local authorities and their private sector partners on maximising the regeneration benefits of retail investment in deprived areas, based on practical lessons learned from the project. Over the winter and spring a programme of workshops, co-sponsored by BitC and the NRPF, has been running around the country to spread the messages of the guide to invited audiences of planners, regeneration practitioners, retailers and developers. Hosted by the Government Regional Offices, the workshops have each included speakers from successful local projects which also feature in the guide. All the materials from the workshops, and the *Retail and Regeneration* guide itself, can be found on the NRPF website at www.nrpf.org/USM_publication.htm. Details of further workshops will also appear there shortly, along with a short leaflet summarising the discussions at those held to date. ■

Secondary shops – open for business

***Open For Business* is a photographic snapshot of North End Road in Fulham and its market by NRPF Secretary, and accomplished photographer, George Nicholson. This is an edited version of the afterword by NRPF Chairman Chris Brearley CB**

North End Road in Fulham and the surrounding streets run like a spine through this busy part of west London. It is not just the diversity of shops, small office suites, restaurants, cafés, hairdressers, specialist suppliers, doctors and dental surgeries, health clubs and market stalls located there that stands out. A rich mix of people running a range of businesses – large and small – all contribute to creating an amazing cornucopia, rarely found on main street.

Indeed, a national study by the NRPF (*The Role and Vitality of Secondary Shopping: A New Direction*), the first of its kind in 2004, revealed that what are called 'secondary areas' in planners' jargon have a much wider diversity of retailing and services than the prime areas – suggesting that they play a vital part in the retail offer of a town.

The research explored the situation in towns as diverse as Exeter, Seaton, Sutton, Reigate, Birmingham, Doncaster and Bolton. The study concluded that no town centre would be complete without secondary shopping, and also that these areas provided a vital service to the local community.

This is still not the received wisdom among many of those responsible for managing our urban areas, who have tended to view secondary shopping as marginal or having an inferior offer. In short, such areas have an 'image problem' among decision-makers. Part of this is due to a tendency to be dazzled by household brands. But mostly it is a product of a profound ignorance of what is actually happening on the ground.



■ *Open For Business* – a photographic snapshot of North End Road and its market – by George Nicholson; 80 pages with foreword by Evan Davis, BBC Economics Editor and *Dragon's Den* presenter. Priced £15.00 from Civic Books (www.civicbooks.com)

Far from being areas in decline, these areas have **not** been declining over the last ten years, as the NRPF research revealed. What has, however, been happening is a shift from retail units to service businesses. Interestingly, the study also revealed a steady decline in vacancy rates in recent years, and while there are few multiple retailers in secondary areas (although their number is now growing), such areas have increasingly become a preferred location for 'specialist' retailers.

It could be argued that too much attention and investment is lavished on the core shopping areas, while not enough of either finds its way into adjacent streets. Certainly the NRPF study revealed that while improvements in the public realm and in facilities for shoppers have been widely carried out in

the prime retail areas in recent years, most secondary shopping streets have not been included in such improvement programmes. The result has been to reinforce the distinction between the prime and secondary areas, making the latter sometimes appear unkempt by comparison. The maintenance of buildings and shopfronts in secondary areas was also found to be generally inferior, pointing to the importance of the initiative by the New Deal for Communities in Fulham in giving an uplift to the area.

Among the recommendations from the NRPF report are: the need to create coherent pedestrian environments; active management of change; improvements to the public realm; support for independent businesses; applying 'asset management' principles to create long-term value; and 'niche marketing'.

A more 'hands on' approach to asset management by property owners, evolving more sophisticated planning policies, and promoting new mechanisms such as 'BIDs' or other forms of town centre management were also recommended in the study.

So there is no shortage of ideas as to how to start to give a boost to secondary shopping areas. There is certainly no shortage of business acumen residing there either. All that is required is a deeper understanding of the role and vitality of these important areas.

Hopefully, this book and the actions it records will play a small part in that process. ■

Now that the new planning framework of regional spatial strategies and local development documents has become established in England, **Cliff Guy** examines the relationships between their retail policies

Government policy

The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act of 2004 introduced the regional spatial strategy (RSS) as part of the statutory development plan for all areas in England. RSSs are prepared by regional assemblies, which themselves consist of local authority representatives (in the majority) and selected representatives of other public and private sector interests. The purpose of the RSS is to 'provide a broad development strategy for the region for a 15 to 20 year period. ... [it] should confine itself to matters of genuine regional and, where appropriate, subregional importance.'¹

Two general criteria govern the relationship between RSS and local development document (LDD) policies. First, LDD policies must be in 'general conformity' with the approved RSS. Secondly, 'The RSS must not identify specific sites as suitable for development ... [it] should, however, establish the locational criteria appropriate to regionally or subregionally significant housing, business, retail and leisure uses.'²

In relation to retail development, PPS6 states that:

'In preparing revisions to their regional spatial strategy, the regional planning body should:

- develop a strategic framework for the development of a network of centres in their region and, where appropriate, for any identified sub-regions, taking into account the need to avoid an over-concentration of growth in the higher level centres;
- make strategic choices about those centres of regional and, where appropriate, subregional significance:
 - where major growth should be encouraged; and
 - where appropriate, the need for

new centres in areas of planned major growth.

- in broad terms, assess the overall need for additional floorspace over the regional spatial strategy period, especially for comparison retail ...'³

Review of retail and town centres policies in draft RSSs

Under the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act of 2004, existing regional planning guidance (RPG) for each region became the RSS. However, it was intended that a new series of RSSs should be produced as soon as possible. Each regional assembly (RA) set up a team of planners to produce 'revised' strategies under the direction of the Assembly concerned. At the time of writing, several of these have been produced in draft form, subjected to examination in public (EIP), and await final approval by the DCLG.

Analysis of retail and town centres policies in the draft revised RSSs should be carried out in awareness that in some cases the drafting may have preceded the release of PPS6. However, one should expect policies to broadly reflect the main thrust of PPS6.

As expected, all RSSs specify that development of comparison goods retailing and other 'town centre' functions should be confined to town and city centres. They also suggest that there is no need for further major out-of-centre development (usually defined as 'regional' and 'sub-regional'). Nor should 'large-scale' extensions to existing such centres be permitted.

All RSSs specify some form of hierarchical classification of urban areas within their region. They also have a separate classification of city and town centres, but this is usually confined to a list of largest centres, sometimes with

Retail and town centres at regional level

another list of second-tier centres. In some cases similar lists are presented for sub-regions. Implications of these lists for retail and other 'town centre' development are usually limited to a general statement that major comparison goods developments should be restricted to first- and second-tier centres.

In keeping with PPS11: *Regional Spatial Strategies*, there are no retail proposals on specific sites. In only one case (the West Midlands) is there a list of recommended floorspace limits for certain individual town and city centres.

Regional/local level contention

A brief glance at EIP panel reports suggests several areas of disagreement between RAs and local authorities, including:

- Lists of town centres in which comparison shopping should be encouraged are criticised because of alleged omissions from the list, or the placing of centres in the 'wrong' tier.
- Attempts to estimate floorspace requirements for the whole region over the plan period are criticised as having little value.
- In contrast, one draft RSS was criticised for being too vague about the scale and type of growth envisaged in centres at various levels.

Since members of RAs are themselves mainly drawn from local authorities, one should expect most disagreements to be resolved during plan preparation. However, processes of compromise may have led to some of the weaknesses discussed below.

Critical review

My review of draft RSS policies indicates four inter-related problems:

and town centre policies onal and local level

● **Lack of ambition:** The policies are rather conservative in nature. There are no suggestions for upgrading or downgrading particular named centres, or for creating entirely new centres, although such policies are sanctioned in PPS6. There is also little recognition of the desirability of encouraging new development into second-tier centres. Nor is there much discussion of several other issues which feature prominently in PPS6, including the potential for retail development to assist access to shopping in areas of social exclusion and/or regeneration need.

● **Lack of direction:** In only a few cases are suggestions made concerning the steps which local authorities would need to take in order to implement RSS policies or frame LDD policies in conformity with the RSS. See the East of England RSS for good practice in this respect.

● **Lack of precision:** Terms such as 'regional', 'sub-regional' and 'large scale' are frequently used without any precise definition. It is not clear whether, for example, some of the larger fashion parks or outlet centres are included in policies which aim to restrict extension of 'sub-regional centres'.

● **Inconsistency:** RSS policies for retail and town centre development vary from several pages including discussion of individual places and/or floorspace targets (for example the West Midlands), to vague descriptive statements of only one or two pages (for example the South West). In addition, there is little consistency over terms used to describe first- and second-tier centres. So, for example, Manchester is a 'regional centre', whereas Basildon is a 'major regional centre'.

Issues for discussion

These shortcomings raise several issues which relate not simply to RSS policies but also to ongoing relationships

between RAs and local authorities. In the longer term, RAs are likely to be merged into the regional development agencies (RDAs), which seems likely to exacerbate any regional/local areas of contention:

● Should RAs' retail and town centres policies simply echo PPS6 and its subsequent modifications, or should there be a distinctive 'regional' element (as apparently encouraged in other Government statements)?

● Should RAs set out a hierarchy of town centres for the whole region? Or for sub-regions? Should floorspace or other limits be specified for town centres in each level? A range of possibilities could exist between precise floorspace limits in every local authority (as is the case for housing targets) at one extreme, to vague unquantified statements at the other.

● Should RAs develop clear policies to reinforce PPS6 guidance that new development should be encouraged in second-tier centres? Should specific centres be mentioned in this respect?

● Should RAs specify (a) centres to be moved up (or down?) the hierarchy; (b) broad locations for possible establishment of new centres?

Finally, three broader questions:

● How can the private sector interface with RSS formulation and the approval process? The DTI's Retail Strategy Group report recognised a potential problem

here and as a result set up the 'regional retail pilot' in the East Midlands.⁴ To what extent has this affected RA policy? Perhaps more significantly, to what extent have property developers been involved?

● What should be the extent and nature of local authority interface with regional assemblies concerning retail/town centre policies? Following the abolition of county structure plans, should policies for 'sub-regions' be jointly prepared? To what extent should LDD policies 'conform' with RSS? Can a regional assembly veto a policy which is not in 'general conformity'?

● What are the implications of the proposed merger of RAs into RDAs? Will the 'economic development' and 'regeneration' agendas subsume 'sustainable development', which is supposed to be the overriding principle of RSSs?⁵ On the other hand, is there potential advantage in linking plan preparation with the RDAs' powers for land assembly? ■

Notes

1 PPS11, paras 1.3, 1.5

2 PPS11, paras 1.16, 1.17

3 PPS6, para. 2.13

4 *Retail Forum*, Issue 11, p.2

5 'Strategies run dispute risk', *Planning*, 4 April 2008, p.1

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Event : Designing the future landscape of retail

The Retail Regeneration and Development 2008 event, to be held at the Royal Society of Medicine in London on 25 June, focuses on how schemes can contribute – and indeed pave the way – to local regeneration, identifying both opportunity and best practice in retail design.

The NRPF is a supporter of this event. More information and booking details are available on the conference website at www.ajretailregeneration.co.uk or by telephoning 0845 056 8069. ■

Getting to grips with MARKETS

Markets need a champion in each local authority, and the sooner they find one the better, says NRPf Secretary **George Nicholson**

'As an integral part of the vision for their town centres, local authorities should seek to retain existing markets and, where appropriate, re-introduce or create new ones.'

Planning Policy Statement 6: *Planning for Town Centres*

In the last issue of *Retail Forum*, I made a plea for markets to be considered as a part of today's retail hierarchy. Here, I want to re-visit the source that first placed markets in the planning policy process – a paragraph in PPS6. This raises the vexed issue of how government guidance is disseminated.

To that end, it has been fascinating being a part of the recent workshop series (see the NRPf website) promoting the findings of the Under-served Markets (USM) Project. Among the things that clearly emerged in response to Bill Boler's questioning, were (a) how sketchy the number of people who have actually read PPS6 is, and (b) how few had absorbed its full contents. Quite a few participants owned up to never having read it at all! It was also clear that the 'doers' were even more likely to fall into the latter categories than the policy-making fraternity. It is this division, which is reflected in many forms (and the classic 'falling between stools' that results), that has also dogged the development of markets in the UK.

By co-incidence, one of the USM workshops was staged in Nottingham. Despite a large amount of money having been spent on 'The Old Market Square' and the existence of an adjacent 'Market Street', one searches in vain for a market. In fact (like a number of markets) it is located on



Old Market Square, Nottingham – but no market in sight

the first floor of a rapidly ageing shopping centre – hardly the centrepiece of any future vision of the town centre.

A different picture emerges in London, where I have been involved in looking at the development of two street markets, one in Islington and one in Hammersmith. It is literally a tale of two markets. The Islington market in Whitecross Street was what can only be described as a failing market. Two years on, after a new quality food element was introduced and after the council spent £2 million on upgrading the street, the market has been revived and the surrounding area along with it.

North End Road is a different story altogether. Here, a vibrant market exists in an equally vibrant street setting (see *Open for Business*, on the NRPf website). The problem there is that there is no direct management of the market, apart from the issuing of licences. It also suffers from the neglect that often goes with being in what are classed 'secondary shopping' areas.

Hammersmith is by no means alone in this. Go almost anywhere in the country and you will find markets

located within a vast range of different – and often unrelated – departmental responsibilities.

Farmers' markets raise different issues again. Often resisted by existing market traders, they have sprung up in a wide range of car parks and other odd corners. Sometimes they trade next to the existing market, but are then forced to trade on different days.

Yet despite this mixed picture, the markets scene in the UK is still a pretty vibrant one, as the recent NABMA (National Association of British Market Authorities) awards clearly showed.

Gone are the days when markets had their own dedicated committee (with the exception of the City of London). But if markets are to make progress, they have to be given the attention they deserve and that the Government is asking they now get. Markets need a champion in each authority, and the sooner they find one the better. If there are any planners out there who want to take this challenge up, why not go along to the NABMA conference in Torquay in September? ■

Groceries Market Inquiry

NRPF Chairman Chris Brearley CB discusses the Forum's response to the Inquiry's *Provisional Decisions Relating to Planning Remedies*

The Competition Commission's Inquiry into the Groceries Market has now reached its conclusion, the final report appearing as we went to press. In February the Commission published its *Provisional Decisions Relating to Planning Remedies*, in which it proposed (to the relevant Government departments) the introduction of a 'competition test' when local planning authorities (LPAs) are assessing planning applications for new large grocery stores. To carry out the test the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) would act as a statutory consultee to the LPA.

The NRPF would not ordinarily consider getting involved in competition issues in retail – and it has taken no view on the merits of a competition test as such – but the proposal for incorporating a new test in the planning system fell squarely within our area of interest; consequently and the Forum submitted some comments. The views submitted are shared by most, but not all, of the NRPF's members.

In essence, the concern was that a competition test on the lines envisaged by the Commission would sit very uneasily inside the planning system and with the way in which both plan-making and development control operate. In particular:

- The proposal is to make a material planning consideration out of something – the identity of the applicant (or occupier) and their local market dominance – which has never been regarded as an issue relevant to planning. It is usually regarded as entirely improper for planning decision-makers to take the identity of the applicant or any non-planning consideration into account. We think such a radical change in the system ought to be contemplated only if no other way of achieving the competition objective is available, and we do not believe that this has by any means been demonstrated.
- Evidently, the test could be applied to the occupation of premises independently of any planning decision about the development of premises. Indeed the Commission's proposal is that such a test should be available outside the planning system where, for example, a company wants to move into existing premises (so

that no development is involved).

- The only argument advanced for incorporating the test in the planning system was that 'it would be desirable to allow LPAs to trade off competition issues and other [sic] planning issues at the margin in the interests of local people' (para. 132). It seems to us, however, that there would be much scope for argument about how such a discretion should be exercised, thereby complicating further the already complicated planning process and giving further occasion for delay and legal challenge – about which there is already much concern.

- Furthermore, such an approach would seem to put in place two inconsistent regimes: one where development and

planning permission is involved, where there would be, in effect, a local discretion to vary the OFT's decision on the test; and the other (for example, property purchase) where no planning decision is needed and the OFT's decision would be final. But, from the point of view of the interests of local people, it is not obvious that there is a distinction between these two cases.

The Commission's final report, while recognising some of these issues, continues to favour a test within the planning system with the OFT as statutory consultee. It remains to be seen how the DCLG and the devolved administrations implement these recommendations. ■

NRPF Knowledge Base update now online

Anne Findlay and Leigh Sparks, who maintain the NRPF Knowledge Base, outline the latest developments

The latest updates have recently been added to the NRPF Knowledge Base, retail planning's unique resource. Along with the new commentary on retail planning for 2007 and accompanying listing of relevant publications for the year, the Planner's Bookshelf listing of essential reading has been fully revised, as has the annotated list of relevant websites. The series of Briefing Notes, which pull together the relevant literature and contacts for particular hot topics in retail planning, has continued to grow. New additions in 2007 looked at *The Need Test*, *The Sequential Approach* and *Evidence Based Retail Planning Policy*, with a new note on *BIDs* just published and another on *Regeneration* currently in preparation.

2007 has seen a number of retail planning challenges arising as a result of the Planning White Paper and the Competition Commission Inquiry. Not surprisingly these have generated a significant body of responses and reactions in the literature. The 2007 listing covers these responses.

Contradictory proposals are coming from

different groups. Some of these pose greater threats than others to the underlying structure of retail planning. The commentary draws out some of the main issues surrounding the potential unpicking and remaking of PPS6. The focus of the commentary on the research presented in the update is on its relevance and pertinence to the emerging policy issues. There is a need for a positive approach to retail planning policy, with recognition of some of the positive achievements of PPS6 in terms of not just policy statements but also the way that retail planning is executed.

There remains a great need to be aware of the literature and of how changes in policy are perceived in academia and among practitioners alike. The 2007 update goes some way towards raising this awareness.

The Knowledge Base (including the commentary), Briefing Notes and Planner's Bookshelf can all be found on the NRPF website at www.nrpf.org ■

Anne Findlay and Leigh Sparks are with the Institute for Retail Studies at the University of Stirling.

Let's get this show on the road

The NRPF's tenth anniversary conference held in London in 2005 cast a critical gaze over the state of retail planning while also looking to the future.

The day was a resounding success, and with so much relevant policy emerging and economic change under way it was decided this should be a regular event – so in November 2007 the Review of Retail Planning was held, again in London, with speakers, debaters and delegates from the retail and property business, local and national government, and academia.

Now we're taking to the road to bring our brand of informed debate to a wider audience. 'Retail Planning – A Review' will take place on 22 May 2008 at the Midland Hotel (Lancaster Suite), Manchester from 10am-4pm, featuring many of the presentations from the November 2007 conference, but updated to reflect subsequent changes.

The event is aimed at those involved in the retail planning world, whether at a professional or political level. One of the objectives of the NRPF is to bring together the key participants in the decision-making process, and the agenda has been framed with that in mind.

As well as taking stock of the fast moving landscape of retail planning, the day will cover the UK retail investment and development scene, international perspectives, and current retail trends. The outcome of a three-year research project sponsored by the ESRC, the growth of the NRPF knowledge base, and the current state of retail statistics will also feature.

This is a very timely event, given the publication of the Competition Commission report and the ongoing reviews of PPS6 and PPG4. For this reason, a whole session has been set aside to discuss the issues involved with Mario Wolf from the DCLG.

For the final session a panel of experts will be challenging the audience to look

ahead at what decision-takers and policy-makers should expect to confront in the retail planning world in future.

Further details and a booking form are available on our website (www.nrpf.org), where presentations from this and the previous events will be found – or contact NRPF Secretary George Nicholson: t: 020-7633 0903. e-mail: Gnicho6499@aol.com ■

Snooper – Retail Forum's roving reporter – samples the retail environment in Uxbridge

Suburban dreams

Green is the scene before my eyes. Green like my primary school walls – and the clinic. Those were the days. It was meant to be a good, safe, comfortable colour and hard wearing. After all this time it is back. But now underfoot; with the same meanings. 'The Chimes' shopping centre has it, in its car park. At last a sign that the multi-storey car park is meant to be people-friendly. No longer only for the proles, for even the 'Mercs' and their loads come here to be courted. The green is about a metre wide, and is laid on bare concrete to show walkers where to be safe and where to go to shop. It really does work. People, old and young, with or without pushchairs, have room to stay away from manoeuvring cars and confidently stride out to Nirvana.

Of course, it was all done over twenty years ago in Holland; and they used carpet. But people loose in car parks is a retail reality, which is still not as recognised as it is in the shopping centre itself. As soon as you pass the fire doors, the floor has marble slabs and quality lighting, but with the cars it has got little further than paint and neon strip. Why treat people like this?

'The Chimes' is, however, pleasant. A pleasing roofline; it is well related to train and high street; a scale overall to match the town and earlier development nearby, like 'The Pavilions'; and development edges that respect its surrounds and access routes. Its external finishes and elevations don't scream, and its entrance canopy – like a cobra's hood – gives a sense of fun, not foreboding.

'The Pavilions' is from a full generation earlier and reflects the 'market' concept rather than the mega-store. It retains that people-buzz that all good markets have. I hope it isn't refurbished into something lacking an ethos of people and community.

Uxbridge – which is the place where this snoop got its birth – is a tidy suburban place close to the inner edge of London's green belt. There is money nearby, and no doubt that helps; it is a (not too) busy town with plenty of work and well heeled international companies. There can be no reason why this moderately good and comfortable town couldn't sport an even higher standard of car park. It is the new showpiece – forget the sculpture, the fountain, the canopy. Green for go. Uxbridge, set the pace with the refurbished Pavilions. Preach to the new Mayor! ■

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