

Key issues for PPS6

In July, CLG issued draft revisions to PPS6 for consultation until 3 October. NRPF Research Group Chair **Mike Burchell** looks at the proposed changes and practitioners' reactions to them. Inside, a range of contributors from across private and public sectors give their own views...

The proposed revisions to Planning Policy Statement 6 (PPS6): *Planning for Town Centres*

continue to support town centre investment as a principal objective. Consequently, much of PPS6 remains unchanged, and the sequential test is retained as a mechanism for channelling investment to town centre locations first. The need for local authorities to be pro-active and to develop a plan-led approach, with a strong evidence base, is re-emphasised. To assess proposals for retail development outside town centres that are not identified in the plan process, the 'need test' is replaced by a new, broader-based 'impact test', which includes a wider range of impacts to be evaluated and compensating positive benefits, such as urban regeneration, to be taken into account.

References to the need to foster competition between retailers as a key objective of Government policy for town centres are strengthened, together with those on the need to promote consumer choice and retail diversity. Reference to the need for sustainable patterns of development, helping to tackle climate change, is an additional key objective. The 'competition test' proposed by the Competition Commission – currently the subject of legal challenge – is not included; the Government has yet to form a view about this proposal.

At the end of the consultation period the NRPF hosted workshops in Birmingham and London with invited practitioners to explore the practical

implications of the changes in greater depth. CLG personnel were present at the workshop 'in listening mode'. Several key issues emerged:

- Re-emphasising **the importance of plan-making** is both a challenge and an opportunity for local authorities. Some practitioners were sceptical about local authorities' capacity to be sufficiently pro-active when faced with the changing dynamics of the retail industry, and had doubts about whether the Planning Inspectorate would adequately support local plan policies when tested on

individual departure cases. Jonathan Baldock's rejoinder that 'the Inspectorate are more likely to support local authorities that help themselves' (by adopting positive policies grounded in a robust evidence base) is worth heeding. It will be important for the Government to ensure that the Inspectorate and its own regional offices are alert to the importance of this when the new PPS6 is finally rolled out.

- The weakness of **regional planning's treatment of retail issues** was

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What's your definition?

The NRPF's new **Definitions for Retail Planning** are now available on the website at www.nrpf.org/definitions. These cover a range of parameters widely used in retail planning analysis and forecasting. They are published in draft form, and comments from interested parties are invited. Please send comments by 19 December 2008 to:

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National Retail Planning Forum
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London SE1 0EP

Email: gnicho6499@aol.com

Following receipt of comments, the definitions will be finalised and provided to Communities and Local Government. They will then be annexed to the forthcoming guidance supporting the expected new version of PPS6, so that they become the new national standard for the provision and use of retail planning data. ■

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highlighted, and treatment of **town centre issues at regional and sub-regional scale** was felt to be superficial. Issues about competition between retail centres in different local authority areas were difficult to resolve. Better guidance on the regional dimension is needed.

- The consultation draft's **removal of references to 'rebalancing of networks' and 'avoiding over-concentration of growth in the higher-level centres'** was interpreted as a Government policy steer that these were no longer seen as important objectives, and several participants had serious concerns about this. My impression is that these remain issues that may need to be addressed at both regional and local levels in some circumstances, and it will be helpful for the Government to clarify its thinking in the final version.
- Some local authority practitioners, in particular, were concerned that the **broadening of the impact test** would

have the effect of diluting the town centre priority strategy by enabling developers to argue that out-of-centre developments were providing a range of other positive benefits (for example employment creation and urban regeneration). The practice guidance, which the Government has promised to publish shortly, will need to clarify how the 'super-impact test' is to be applied and how the various policy objectives are to be prioritised. In particular, the current loose references to competition and consumer choice need to be tightened up. The guidance will also need to address transitional arrangements for those authorities well-advanced with plan-making based on existing PPS6 criteria.

- There also seems to be a gap in guidance with respect to the **future of existing out-of-centre retail development**, as Cliff Guy highlights below. It may be that this is for local determination, but it is important that the

guidance acknowledges that the issue needs to be addressed.

- There is concern among local authority practitioners that **the addition of references to sustainable development and climate change** may lead to development proposals in inappropriate locations seeking to justify themselves on the basis of a wind generator on the roof. Appropriate links need to be made between PPS6 and *Planning and Climate Change – Supplement to PPS1*.

As chair of the workshops, I was struck throughout by the scope for different interpretations of the same wording. Not only will it be important for CLG to iron these out as far as possible in the final version, and to supplement this with clear and timely guidance, but it will be important to pursue a pro-active programme of awareness-raising and training, aimed at local authority members as well as officers, to ensure that policy is applied consistently. ■

In the following pages, ten contributors from across private and public sectors give their views on the draft revision of PPS6...

'A period of planning by appeal?'

Stephen Wright, John Lewis Partnership

Planning policy might have slipped down the immediate political agenda, but in these economically turbulent times it is more important than ever to shore up town and city regeneration for the future.

The John Lewis Partnership has therefore welcomed the central 'town centres first' thrust of the draft revised PPS6, but made it clear to the Government that we can support the removal of the need test only if the new impact test is sufficiently robust to avoid weakening the protection given to town centres. We are concerned that it is not.

The Government is reluctant to issue binding guidance to councils on the way in which the revised impact test should be applied, preferring a 'devolutionary' approach that gives greater scope for local interpretation. But this jeopardises the certainty and consistency that

are vital characteristics for town centre development. The complexity of design, planning, land assembly and construction means that major town and city centre schemes can take a decade to come to fruition. Investors will only consider projects of this nature if they can confidently rely on clarity and transparency in the local and national planning policy and retail landscape.

Our fear is that the proposed impact test could result in a period of 'planning by appeal', as disgruntled developers resort to the Secretary of State to explore the meaning and application of the test. Perversely, this will work against the Government's aim of devolution.

The John Lewis Partnership also has misgivings about the weight of paperwork we see resulting from the impact test. The draft PPS identified a wide range of factors that might be

considered as part of an impact analysis. As drafted, overly-cautious councils may well demand that the full range of considerations is assessed, resulting in reports of many hundreds of pages. This will only exacerbate the problems of the planning system, already buckling under the strain of unnecessary and excessive documentation. Our suggestion is a 'scoping' mechanism (similar to that used to focus Environmental Statements), to encourage the sifting out of issues that are not of significance to a specific application.

We share the Government's regeneration priorities. Our aspiration is to see a clear, weighted set of impact requirements that will underpin ongoing investment and employment in our towns and cities. ■

Stephen Wright, Principal Lawyer (Planning), John Lewis Partnership

'Opportunity to inject the place dimension'

Michael Bach, Consultant

It has been a long time coming, but at last the draft changes to PPS6 were published in July, two years after Kate Barker first suggested that changes were needed. Since then there has been her Final Report, the Planning White Paper and a Competition Commission inquiry into supermarkets, all seeking changes to how the 'town centres first' policy should operate. It has taken two years to manage down expectations of change.

Despite repeated reassurances that the thrust of the policy would remain unchanged, the proposed removal of the need test was initially seen as a threat to the effectiveness of the assessment of out-of-centre retail proposals. It was seen as a robust indicator of potential problems, whereas there was – and still is – a great deal of unstated scepticism about the effectiveness of retail impact assessments to provide robust results.

The Competition Commission inquiry looked like it wanted to challenge the whole range of tests in PPS6, but in the end has focused on a competition test. This has come so late – and is the subject of legal challenge by Tesco – that if it is to be included in the final changes, there will be a further consultation.

So what has changed?

The main changes proposed are to replace the current need and impact tests with a new impact test, which



maintains a strong focus on town centres first, but promotes competition and improves consumer choice. But does it do it?

The introductory section says the changes will strengthen the Government's policy of positive planning for town centres, although the main changes relate to how out-of-centre planning applications should be considered and tested. It promises a 'new impact assessment framework' to set out clearly the key impacts which applicants must assess, as well as a number of wider impacts which should be considered. This suggests an impact assessment framework, similar to the approach for environmental assessment, which would provide a more systematic and transparent approach. The current draft attempts to set out the range of

factors to be considered – the contents of a possible framework – but these need to be set out in a more structured way than at present to convey the sense of the 'new impact assessment framework' promised in the introduction. We must await the final version **and** the accompanying guidance.

But change can also be an opportunity, not just a threat. The proposed changes are an opportunity to provide PPS6 with an economic rationale. Town and city centres are the economic drivers of regional and local economies, yet the policy does not stress sufficiently the importance of economically-successful town centres, which may be of a different degree of importance from the productivity of individual firms; or whether there is more competition between supermarkets in some local markets.

The proposed revision would also be an opportunity to inject the place dimension, so fulsomely endorsed in the Ministerial Foreword, and yet so obviously lacking (*mea culpa!*) in PPS6. If any PPS should have a place dimension, this is it.

The show is not over yet! ■

Michael Bach, consultant, and formerly Principal Planner at the predecessors of CLG, where he developed the Government's policy for town centres and retail development – PPG6 (1996) and PPS6 (2005).

'Much work remains to be done'

Martin Eade, Birmingham City Council

The PPS6 consultation has received a mixed response among local authority planners in the West Midlands.

There is general support for the Government's commitment to the 'centres first' approach of the current PPS – but questions over the impact that the proposed changes may have on the practical delivery of the policy.

The West Midlands Regional Spatial Strategy emphasises the role of centres in delivering urban renaissance and seeks to secure balanced growth in

and between the region's strategic centres. How will this be affected by the proposed removal of the requirement for regional strategies to avoid an over-concentration of growth in the larger centres?

The new impact test is all-embracing – but how will it work in practice? What weight will be given to the different issues it identifies, and will it be possible to apply it in a consistent way?

It does seem clear that the new test will be even more demanding in terms

of data requirements and analysis. What will be the resource implications of this – and will it simply benefit those with the deepest pockets?

There are no definite answers to these questions – but it seems that much work remains to be done to convert the aspirations of the consultation paper into effective policy. ■

Martin Eade, Team Leader, Strategic Planning, Birmingham City Council

'Glaring omission'

Scott Cordrey, IKEA UK

The Government's proposed changes to PPS6 are fairly limited in scope. The Barker Review of Land Use Planning invited the Government to re-balance the system so that job-creating development would face fewer obstacles. This opportunity has only been grasped to a very limited extent by the consultation draft on PPS6.

The biggest change is the proposed abolition of the need test, and this does represent the removal of an obstacle to job-creating development. Planning authorities are still required to assess expenditure capacity – need by another name – to help them formulate their development plans. Some commentators have claimed that this means the need test is therefore not actually abolished, but, given that the lack of need could no longer be cited as a valid reason for refusal, such claims are erroneous.

The document suggests that the need test was a blunt instrument which had unintended consequences, specifically preventing competition by safeguarding expenditure on out-of-centre facilities. An expanded impact test is proposed as a more effective policy tool. This includes four new tests:

- the extent to which a proposal will promote town centre viability;
- the extent to which it benefits deprived areas and promotes social inclusion;
- the effect on employment; and
- the extent of expenditure leakage clawback.

From the viewpoint of a developer with an out-of-centre proposal, three of these new tests are helpful, although whether they would swing the balance in favour of a proposal is doubtful.

That's basically it in terms of proposed changes to policy. There is, however, one glaring omission. The Planning White Paper stated in para. 7.52 on page 115 that: *'Where development outside the town centre would not impact detrimentally on the town centre, and it is otherwise acceptable in planning terms, both plans and decisions should reflect this.'*

The Barker Review of Land Use Planning and the Planning White Paper both took as a central theme the need to secure a better balance between the

objectives of protecting our environment and promoting economic development. It therefore seems strange that the above wording from para. 7.52 of the White Paper is not reproduced in the proposed changes to PPS6.

The consultation draft was prepared before the current financial storm really began to seriously affect our economy. The Government may take the view that greater encouragement now needs to be given to job-creating developments. Inclusion of the above wording from the White Paper in the final version of the revised PPS6 would assist in this regard. ■

Scott Cordrey, Property Manager, IKEA UK

'Clarification needed'

Bill Boler, Under-served Markets Project

There are several positive changes in the proposed revisions to PPS6, particularly the acknowledgement of social exclusion and deprivation issues and of the role that retail can play in alleviating them through regeneration projects. The proposed impact test's reference to the specific needs of deprived areas and the link between retail and wider regeneration and social exclusion objectives is also welcome.

However, there are several areas where more clarification in the PPS and guidance document is needed.

Discussions with practitioners during the USM (Under-served Markets) dissemination programme revealed confusion at local level over the extent to which national policy promotes retail-led regeneration. This is a good opportunity to clarify and strengthen the message to both the private and public sectors that investment should act as a catalyst for providing social and economic benefits. Ideally, a single paragraph would clearly set out the role retail investment can play in tackling unemployment, social deprivation and exclusion.

To benefit deprived areas fully, retail investment needs to be accompanied by a strategy for achieving socio-economic benefits. Levels of knowledge and

'Good riddance'

Cliff Guy, Cardiff University

Good riddance to the need test! The new impact test is not a particularly radical proposal since it embodies much of what a good planning authority or consultant should currently do. But the emphasis on positive as well as negative impacts is welcome.

Two points concern me. The first is the contrast between Hazel Blears' stated commitment in her Foreword to independent retailing and the traditional character of town centres, and the vague advice in the draft PPS itself about using 'consumer choice and retail diversity' in

expertise in negotiating effective retail-led regeneration schemes vary widely between local authorities, so the guidance should cover good practice and transferable knowledge. The new impact test represents a good opportunity to deal with these issues, but by covering both qualitative and quantitative impacts, it will necessarily be complex. The wording of the guidance will hence be crucial in how the test is applied; an initial scoping stage, as used in Environmental Impact Assessment, may help.

The revision is an opportunity to strengthen the link between regeneration of deprived areas and place-making. It is also important to recognise the wider strategic context; PPS6 tests need to link to other policies that affect regeneration and development.

Clarification will also be needed over the 'regeneration exemption' within the competition test proposed by the Competition Commission, to explain how supermarket-led regeneration schemes could be judged to be exempt from a test aimed at preventing a grocery retailer from dominating an area. This is necessary to ensure that real regeneration is achieved, rather than the exemption becoming a loophole. ■

Bill Boler, Director, Under-served Markets

to the need test'

assessing proposals. Many local campaigners feel that a new town centre Ascobury superstore reduces 'consumer choice and retail diversity' through causing closure of specialist food shops in the same centre. But the PPS simply isn't clear as to whether this view is legitimate as part of an impact assessment.

My second concern is over the absence of any guidance on out-of-centre retail and leisure. I wouldn't expect CLG to admit to any of its advantages for the retailer and consumer, but it is disappointing that there is no guidance for the

future of the oldest out-of-centre superstores and retail parks. These could be recycled as district centres with better design and landscaping, provision of social facilities and improved transport links. Other vacated or tired schemes could be taken out of retail use altogether.

Finally I welcome the promise (on page 5) that the final revision of PPS6 will be 'shorter and more strategic' than the existing version. (Have we heard this before? I will be counting the paragraphs!) ■

Professor Cliff Guy, School of City and Regional Planning, Cardiff University

'Potential ramifications of the new impact assessment'

Simon Birnbaum, Tesco Stores Limited

The draft revision to PPS6 was launched on the basis of 'improving the effectiveness' of policies, with the 'aims of promoting vibrant, viable town centres more successfully'.

Will it achieve these aims?

The potential ramifications of the proposed new impact assessment could be quite serious. In the current economic climate it is important to reduce risk levels and barriers to investment and regeneration. If the new test results in complexity and inconsistency, it will increase the risk for developers and could deter investment in the areas that need it most. It is imperative that CLG ensure that good practice guidance is issued with the finalised version of the revised PPS.

The impact assessment must be applied in a proportionate way in accordance with the scale of development proposed.

Local planning authorities can help create the right conditions to help diversity flourish. It is important that they do so in a way which encourages competition, vitality and vibrancy. The character of a proposed development

and the type and range of goods to be sold are correct matters to be taken into account. However, the identity of the proposed operator has never been a relevant consideration in the UK planning system and this principle should remain.

Draft PPS4: *Planning for Sustainable Economic Development* seeks to encourage more autonomous, pro-active local authorities, particularly with regard to securing investment for economic development. The key test in draft PPS4 in relation to the efficient and effective use of land is to encourage development unless it causes demonstrable harm. Similar considerations should apply to *Planning for Town Centres* – there should be a presumption in favour unless demonstrable harm would be caused to the town centre as a whole.

In a weak economic climate, developers need consistency and efficiency in decision-making – not a complex assessment test that could delay or potentially defer development. ■

Simon Birnbaum, Strategic Town Planning Manager, Tesco Stores Limited

'Pro-active in developing town centres'

Jonathan Baldock, DTZ

The proposed changes to PPS6 encourage local authorities to be pro-active in developing town centres, while freeing the market for other developments which would bring net benefits. Competition and retail diversity become important policy objectives.

The sequential approach remains and is re-emphasised. The proposed new impact test widens the range of issues to be assessed, both when allocating sites in the development plan and when planning applications are submitted. The indicators of vitality and viability in town centre monitoring reports now include land values and the time that sites have remained undeveloped.

Although the need test would be abolished for proposed new retail developments, local planning authorities would still have to assess need when preparing development plans. And aspiring developers of retail schemes outside town centres and not in accordance with up-to-date development plans would still have to assess appropriateness of scale and the impact on in-centre trade/turnover, taking account of catchment area expenditure, and potential 'clawback' of trade leakage. In other words, assess need by another name.

The major change proposed is the new impact test, which includes 12 wide-ranging criteria. In addition, 'high quality and inclusive design... sustainable development' and 'tackling climate change' are presented as overriding considerations in determining the acceptability of proposed developments (para. 3.19f). It seems likely that these latter requirements, if adopted as Government policy, will effectively kill proposals for large, low-density car-dependent developments which are not located at public transport nodes – i.e. most out-of-centre superstores and retail warehouses. ■

Jonathan Baldock, Director and Head of Retail Planning, DTZ

'Continuing focus on large-format major retailing to the detriment of local retailers'

Ruairidh Jackson, The Co-operative Group

The consultation document proposes the removal of the need test, replacing it with an integrated impact test. Although the need test has played an important role, there is scope for this to be replaced with a more robust series of tests based around a holistic assessment of social, economic and environmental factors. The impact assessment framework approach is broadly supported, but we await more details through guidance in terms of how PPS6 will be applied.

There is a continuing focus on large-format major retailing to the detriment of local retailers. As it stands, the revised PPS6 does not offer the same support for local retailing as intended by the policy Foreword by the Secretary of State. There is a need to revisit assumptions made in regards to floorspace and land efficiency and gaining a fuller picture in terms of the sustainability of local retailing.



The guidance does not sufficiently emphasise the economic rationale for the 'town centre first' policy. The 'town centre first' policy should remain and become entrenched in the new impact

tests. In addition, where the clear economic case exists for supporting our town and community centres, this should be demonstrated through the guidance to PPS6.

Too much scope remains to obtain planning permission for schemes that are not consistent with either the local authority's development plan or 'town centre first' principles. A plan-led system is essential to ensuring that the long-term needs of a region and locality are met. PPS6 should act as a driver for local planning authorities to become more empowered in the decision-making process when assessing planning applications by testing against an agreed regional retail plan.

Overall, it is impossible to draw specific conclusions on the content and impacts of the revised PPS6 without the accompanying 'best practice' guidance. ■

Ruairidh Jackson, Head of Planning and Property Strategy, The Co-operative Group

'Lack of clarity on how the impact assessment will work'

Mike Haines, LGA Environment Board & Teignbridge District Council

As a member of a planning/development control committee for over 20 years, with much of that time as Chairman, I appreciate the need for a good policy basis when it comes to decision-making. Through meeting members from other local authorities, I soon realised how national policies need to recognise local distinctiveness.

I believe the 'town centre first' policy and the sequential test are an important tool for councils to protect the long-term viability of their towns, but in their role as place-shapers they need to be able to determine for themselves the policies that will best meet particular challenges in their localities – i.e. it should not be prescribed by central government.

I welcome the retention of the need test at the development planning stage (although there are bound to be additional resource implications for local authorities), but the removal of the need test at the planning application stage suggests that proposals might still challenge the development plan. The problem will always be that the detail of subsequent proposals will not necessarily be known at the development plan-making stage.

The lack of clarity on how the new impact assessment will work is a concern, while greater complexity may increase the likelihood of delays and possible legal action.

This would add costs to all parties, and I would have particular concerns about

the limited resources of the public sector. Greater co-operation between local authorities and developers would be in all our interests, although experience of challenges from rival schemes (not necessarily in the retail sector) show that other tensions may exist.

At the regional level, the change of emphasis may focus investment in the larger centres to the detriment of smaller centres (such as those in my own district), so I would wish to see a more balanced approach, which would also be more sustainable. ■

Mike Haines, Deputy Chair, LGA Environment Board, and Planning Portfolio Holder, Teignbridge District Council

Unintended consequences?

Recent research suggests that the 'town centres first' approach of PPS6 may have unintentionally accelerated the decline of small independent retailers, as Raffaella Sadun of the LSE explains

Research carried out at the Centre for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics (LSE) suggests that the 'town centres first' approach may have actually accelerated the decline of small, independent retailers.

The study finds that in parts of the country where more large stores of over 1,000 square metres were given planning permission, fewer small convenience stores have been forced out of business. At the same time, the fewer large stores that councils have allowed, the more small chain stores were introduced – and the more independent retailers have suffered.

The effect of the number of planning permissions for large stores on the employment growth among independent convenience retailers is estimated at local authority level. This is not straightforward, as the same factors can influence both the number of large store permissions and the growth of independent retailers – for example, if an area experiences rising incomes, increasing retail demand will result in both the entry of large stores and the growth of small independent retailers.

To identify whether the number of large-store permissions affects the employment growth of independent retailers, the research considers the political dimension to the planning process. Using data for retail permissions, election results data and employment data at local authority level, the research finds a strong negative correlation between the level of Conservative control of councils and the amount of large-store development permitted. The political differences across and within local authorities thus lead to variation in successful planning applications between local authorities, independent of factors that might affect employment by independent retailers.

The number of successful planning applications for out-of-town

supermarkets is found to be positively related to the employment growth of small independent retailers. This implies that regulation which prevents the development of large stores may actually harm independent retailers and the people they employ.

A possible interpretation of this result is that when planning regulations prevent the entry of large supermarkets, retail chains move to a business model based more on smaller in-town stores. These smaller-format stores compete more directly with independent stores, and accelerate their decline. More evidence for this comes from the finding that the growth of smaller in-town stores belonging to retail chains is negatively associated with the number of large stores gaining planning permission, suggesting that the increasing movement of the major UK chains towards small convenience stores can be directly linked to the increasing planning hurdles faced by 'big boxes'.

Separately, there appears to be minimal effect from the level of large-store permissions on changes in the size of existing retailers, nor does there appear to be any effect on the number of

new independent retailers that enter the market. The entire effect from more large stores obtaining planning permission appears to come from fewer independent retailers leaving the market. This suggests that having more large stores has the effect of reducing the total amount of competition that independent retailers face.

It is estimated that the sharp decline in new large stores could account for about 15 per cent of the decline in employment among independent retailers between 1998 and 2004, although it is not clear whether all independent retailers benefit equally from more large stores, and it is too early to draw conclusions about any long-run effects.

A non-technical summary of the research can be found at http://personal.lse.ac.uk/sadun/Raffaella_Website/Research_files/retail_centrepiece.pdf, and the full report can be downloaded from <http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp0888.pdf> ■

Dr Raffaella Sadun is with the Centre for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics.

Third National Food Markets Conference – 'Growing a Market'

The nation's food supply chain is certainly becoming a hot political issue, recently tackled in a Cabinet Office paper. Hot on the heels of the successful Symposium of London Markets held at City Hall in London on the 23 October, the Third National Food Markets Conference, being held in Blackpool on 8-9 December, is picking up the challenge.

There is a lot to discuss, under this year's theme 'Growing a Market', with the redevelopment of historic markets in a number of UK cities, the continued interest in farmers' markets and small producers, a growing awareness of the importance of 'food tourism', and the successful regeneration of a number of existing markets a particular focus. Throw in the new Minister for Farming, Jane Kennedy, Robin Butler from Lend Lease, and Carolyn Steel, author of *The Hungry City*, and a lot more ingredients, all stirred by Sheila Dillon of Radio 4's *Food Programme*, and you have an interesting event. Check out the website, at www.nationalfoodmarketsconference.co.uk ■

Retail planning education crisis

There has been a consistent theme emerging from both the public and private sector response to recent Government reviews of the planning system – where are all the future planners going to come from? Not only that, while the general thrust of policy has been to attempt to simplify the planning system, responses to the PPS6 revisions point to an increasing level of complexity and added workload, rather than the opposite – particularly with respect to the new impact test.

To start to make sense of what is going on and move towards finding some solutions, the NRPF commissioned Professor Cliff Guy of Cardiff University to undertake a review of retail planning teaching in UK universities. His findings were very stark indeed: 'From this year onward, it appears that no university will offer an integrated retail planning syllabus which gives thorough coverage of both private sector development and public sector planning and regulation.' Even worse, a number of existing retail

specialists are retiring, with no replacements in sight. It is clearly in the interests of those seeking decisions and those issuing government policy documents that this issue is tackled – and fast.

Contrast this situation with the NRPF's ongoing series of seminars and workshops around the country, which has revealed a real appetite for knowledge of the retail sector and a clear need among those at the coal face for ongoing training and discussion on current policy matters. What can be done?

The NRPF will shortly be convening a meeting of people from the academic world, the relevant institutes, central and local government, and the retail world to review the situation and start to bring forward options for some action. It is in everybody's interest that rapid progress is made. ■

George Nicholson
Secretary, NRPF

USM project update

Since the update in the last NRPF newsletter, the Under-served Markets (USM) Project has been concentrating on feeding into the Government consultation on revisions to PPS6. A roundtable consultation event was held recently at the LGA with local authority planners and private sector representatives, at which possible changes to the PPS were discussed. Following this the project has submitted a response drawing on the key lessons from the work undertaken to date.

A copy of the response can be found on the USM section of the NRPF website at www.nrpf.org/usm – see also the item on PPS6 by Bill Boler on page 4 in this issue of *Retail Forum*.

In early 2007, a consortium of GHK Consulting, GVA Grimley and the University of Cardiff were commissioned by CLG to undertake a three-year evaluation of the impact and effectiveness of the USM Project. The evaluation process is being managed by Business in the Community and is on-going. ■

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NRPF Updates

■ **Data and statistics:** The NRPF Online Planning Statistics went live in early summer. The NRPF website has an intuitive design familiar to anyone who has used Google Maps, making it easy to find retail planning data for any particular place. There is also a traditional text search, and all datasets can be downloaded, including boundary data. The first datasets to be made available are floorspace and employment statistics for the CLG Town Centres and Retail Cores, with more to be added in the near future. Data can be accessed directly from our homepage at www.nrpf.org

We are also working with the Valuation Office Agency and CLG, looking at ways to make more timely retail planning statistics (especially on floorspace) freely and easily available.

■ **Research programme:** As well as the retail definitions work (see the front page of this issue), the NRPF Research Group is currently looking at retail planning and mixed-use developments, 'before and after' studies and different models of impact testing, and retail development trends with special reference to small shops. Each of these topics has gained added relevance with the proposed revisions to PPS6 – reports will be added to the NRPF website (www.nrpf.org) as they are published.

■ **Website:** Alongside the launch of the Online Planning Statistics, the whole website (www.nrpf.org) has undergone a refresh, with our new branding applied. We've adjusted the navigation to make it even easier to find your way through the wealth of useful retail planning information on the site – all free of charge. There have also been several additions, including a new Briefing Note on *Urban Regeneration in the Knowledge Base*.

■ **Events:** Our first conference outside London, held in Manchester in late May, was a great success; the presentations can be viewed on our website (www.nrpf.org). We're now looking at locations for 2009 – keep checking the homepage for more details!