

Democratic deficit and increased resource pressures

Cllr Jane Chevis, Chair of the LGA Planning Executive, outlines local government concerns over the Planning Bill

The much awaited Planning Bill, published in December, carried forward the Government's vision and strategy to fundamentally reform the planning system. In essence the reforms are intended to help achieve a faster planning system, deliver better outcomes, and promote sustainable development. While the need for reform is undisputed, it is much more debatable as to whether the Bill will deliver a better, faster, and fairer system.

A key reform underlying the Bill is the removal of statutory planning powers for county councils. The Bill envisages a two-tier structure, with planning responsibility held by local (district or unitary) councils, and a wider strategic planning role resting with as yet unelected regional assemblies. This raises concerns about democratic accountability. The fact that the proposed system will increase the distance between local people affected by strategic-level policy and those preparing it at a regional level further

undermines democratic input into the planning system.

Another key issue is resources. In an attempt to improve planning services and address the serious resource and skills shortages within the system, a new Delivery Grant worth £350million over three years between 2003-4 and 2005-6 is proposed. This much needed injection of resources is to be welcomed. However, it is suggested that local authorities will only be awarded the money when their planning performance improves against Best Value performance indicators.

The Local Government Association (LGA) has argued that it is fundamental that funds are provided *now* to help all councils redress the resource constraints already identified by the Government and affecting the quality of local authority planning services. These funds will also be vital to help local authorities effectively deliver and implement the planning reform agenda.

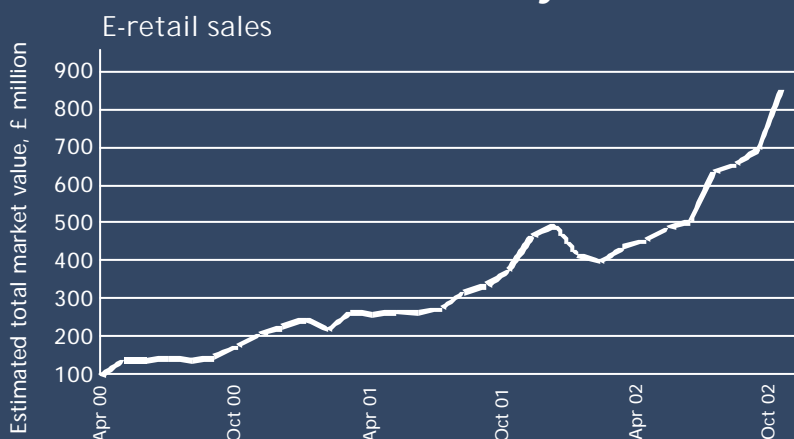
Ironically, while the Government seeks to address resource deficiencies in

the planning system on the one hand, the impact of other proposals, such as the removal of county councils' statutory planning role, is likely to seriously challenge long-term and overall resources within the system.

County councils currently employ a significant number of planning experts, but given the many competing pressures on councils – for example from education and social services – it is unlikely that they will be able to devote scarce resources to retain this expertise unless they have a statutory role in the planning system. Therefore, there is a danger that the failure to establish a statutory planning duty for county councils will inevitably erode their strategic planning function – resulting in a reduction in funding for strategic planning, and a subsequent loss of strategic planning skills. Overall, this may seriously undermine the Government's objective to create a better and much improved system.

As the Bill makes its passage through Parliament the LGA, along with others, will be lobbying for much needed amendments to help promote a better and more sustainable planning system. ■

Did you know... ?



Source: IMRG (Interactive Media in Retail Group)

Available from the NRPF

■ **Going to Town: Improving Town Centre Access. A Companion Guide to PPG6**



Available at £20 inc. p&p from George Nicholson, NRPF, 6 Copperfield Street, London SE1 0EP.
<http://www.nrpf.org>

Retail Forum is the Newsletter of The National Retail Planning Forum, a registered charity promoting private-public sector understanding of planning's impact on retailing through research, seminars and conferences.

The processes of obtaining funding for research are taking longer than the process of origination, commissioning, validation, and – note this – the research itself. Too tight a control on the purse strings is reducing the real amount available for the research. Can this be right? No wonder academics and consultants need ever larger overheads. Fortunately for the NRPf, with so much voluntary support we can keep on-costs low. We can be good value for money. What about it, you guys? Speed please!

So where are we? The wholly revised *Bibliography* has now been published,

In 1998 the NRPf commissioned the Institute for Retail Studies at the University of Stirling to prepare a bibliography on retail planning. The aim was to identify significant research and publications and thus to inform both the NRPf and other interested stakeholders of the range, depth, and quality of the available research. This *Bibliography* and its associated commentary and Retail Planners' Bookshelf was published in 1999 in hard copy and on CD-ROM. Since 1999, annual updates to the bibliography have been published on the NRPf website (www.nrpf.org), to which has now been added a wholly revised *Bibliography* (2002) and a new Retail Planners' Bookshelf.

The new commentary again reviews recent research areas. It points out the gaps between academic research and planners' knowledge and between the producers of research and policy-makers.

In terms of academic research input, the past five years have probably not produced the range and depth of research that planners have needed. Research within retail studies has provided useful material, but planners are not well connected to this research and the literature remains unfamiliar to them. The policy focus on particular types of locations and specifically town centres has not been matched by a research focus in this area.

The changing environment of planning itself has not encouraged planners to further data collection or research other than that contingent to specific developments. Changing relationships between the public and private sectors – as well as the trend

NRPf research (and meeting its costs)

and some really interesting findings are emerging that will shape future research and education practice. Funding for the secondary shopping project is almost in place and work is likely to commence this spring. This is proving quite a challenge and will certainly open our eyes. The leisure and retailing project has achieved its Brussels funding, and matching amounts are being lined up. A spring start on its management is programmed. The first paper on linked trips is close to the commissioning stage, but the bulk

of the survey work for part two awaits significant funding from agencies and foundations. This is well worth a penny or two. Are you interested in coming on board – with brains and or cash? Our data library project – carried out with our property colleagues – is well under way; completion soon. Work on the planning portal looks to open up access to sources formerly closed. Finally, our survey of planners' educational resources in retail and related areas is soon to be launched. Busy, busy, busy. ■

Wholly revised *Bibliography*

The new, revised NRPf *Bibliography of Retail Planning* is an invaluable resource for everyone with an interest in retail planning. Compilers **Anne Findlay** and **Leigh Sparks** look at the trends it reveals

towards widening participation in policy debates – has left planners less influential in terms of policy formulation.

It was the NRPf's hope that the commentary could draw up an agenda of research topics. We propose that a possible agenda might include:

- How do we maximise the limited data resources available?
- What is the relationship between retailing and regeneration?
- What are the relationships among place of shopping, place of work, and place of residence?
- How can we understand the likely impacts of changing formats and new retailer developments in terms of retail structure, location, provision, and consumer choice?
- What research on rural communities and rural shopping is needed?

Research is, however, the beginning of a process. The dissemination of results and ensuring that planners (and others) see and understand the implications of this research are vital. Given the lack of time and reading around the area by land use planners, dissemination strategies are fundamental. Some good research is being done, but its implications are often not identified nor communicated to its critical target audience. If we wish for an evidence-based planning policy on retailing, more engagement

has to take place among researchers, planners, and policy developers. A more critical stance on some of the research and on the pressures on policy development would also not go amiss. ■

Leigh Sparks and Anne Findlay are with the Institute for Retail Studies at the University of Stirling. The new edition of the Bibliography is available from the NRPf.

Retail Planners' Bookshelf

- Carley, M., Kirk, K., and S. McIntosh ***Retailing, Sustainability and Neighbourhood Regeneration***, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2001
- Competition Commission ***A Report on the Supply of Groceries from Multiple Stores in the UK***, The Stationery Office, 2000
- Cox, J., Thurstain-Goodwin, M., and C. Tomalin ***Town Centre Vitality and Viability: A Review of Health Check Methodology***, NRPf, 2000
- Dawson, J. ***Future Patterns of Retailing in Scotland***, Scottish Executive Central Unit, 2000
- Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions ***The Impact of Large Foodstores on Market Towns and District Centres***, The Stationery Office, 1998
- England, J. ***Retailing Impact Assessment: A Guide to Best Practice***, Routledge, 2000
- Foresight Panel, Retail and Consumer Services Panel ***The Retail Revolution: From a Nation of Shopkeepers to a World of Opportunities***, Foresight Panel, 2000
- Hass-Klau, C., Mobbs, I., and G. Crampton ***Accessibility, Walking and Linked Trips***, NRPf, 1999
- Ruston, P. ***Out of Town Retailing: The Future of Retailing***, British Library, 1999
- Schiller, R. ***The Dynamics of Property Location, Values and the Factors which Drive the Location of Shops, Offices and other Land Uses***, Spon, 2001
- Smith, A., and L. Sparks ***Retailing and Small Shops***, Scottish Office, 1997
- Social Exclusion Unit ***Improving Shopping Access for People Living in Deprived Neighbourhoods***, Department of Health, Policy Action Team 13, 1999

Retail issues for regional planning

At first sight retailing would appear to have little relevance at the regional level of policy and planning. Although shopping trips have tended to lengthen, few are longer than 20 miles. Retailing therefore mainly operates between a major centre and its hinterland. There are examples of catchment areas crossing regional boundaries, but generally retailing functions well below regional level. Retail policy for the regions needs to concern itself, therefore, with issues other than those of normal development control, the sequential test, and the various matters covered by PPG6.

The first of these is dealing with the regional implications of major population growth and new transport investment. New airports are proposed, and these will clearly have major repercussions. They could, for example, lead to the justification for a new out-of-town regional centre which would draw shoppers from several surrounding districts or counties.

The second issue concerns the health of town centres. Retail is the major, although not the only function of the town centre, and there are indications that over the next 20 years many town centres could suffer retail decline. Often this decline is due to deep-seated changes in shopping behaviour: the tendency to desert medium-sized centres for the greater choice offered by larger centres. Sometimes there are physical constraints, such as a railway line or river, which make it difficult for a town centre to accommodate development pressure.

Finally there is leisure and tourism. Shops serving this area, particularly those offering food and drink in all its forms, have grown enormously in recent years and show every sign of continuing to grow. This type of shopping is often seen as being in opposition to high-volume conventional retailing. Developers and landlords fear it means lower rents, and local authorities worry about the break in frontage which may occur in the retail

In with matters such as town centre health, major population growth, transport investment, and leisure and tourism, regional policy has a significant role to play in retail planning, says Russell Schiller

core. In practice it may offer the only realistic alternative for many town centres to replace the decline in mainstream retailing.

Town centres are attractive places to visit and browse in. They are often better able to accommodate the leisure shopper than mainstream shopping, with its demands for car parking and lorry access. Visitors who want to walk around, maybe do a little shopping, and maybe have a meal don't fit comfortably with the harassed rush of the weekly shop. Certain towns, particularly smaller historic centres, could well find that their heritage is better conserved and protected by

allowing or even encouraging mainstream retailing to leave rather than trying to accommodate it.

By covering a large geographical area and by looking decades ahead, regional policy can help in planning for areas of growth, in identifying town centres where problems may arise, and in planning for the expansion of leisure and tourism. If successful, it could result in both a healthy retail sector which meets the public's needs and attractive town centres which people want to visit. ■

Russell Schiller was previously Director of Research at CB Hillier. Having spent 30 years developing property research, he is now advising the NRPF Research Group, as well as acting as a consultant.



Snooper, retail FORUM's roving reporter and sampler of retail environments, on design and linkages, or the lack of them, in retail parks built on brownfield land

Fit for nothing

Retail parks on brownfield land have an honourable past, with notable contributions to urban efficiency, public service, and design. Perhaps the most notable is Bluewater. Some names I will not praise, and many sites in ordinary places are a disgrace.

The re-occupation of sites and buildings in industrial estates in a piecemeal manner can be a useful process, enabling low-cost retailing to reflect the rapidity and often short duration of market changes. But, as ever, there is a cost. A scattering of premises leaves the customer with an environment in which each stop requires the car, with little possibility of walking between places, and with low-grade industrial ground-scape to scramble over. Some of it is, frankly, appalling and unsafe, with juggernauts crushing roads, kerbs, and paths, and scattering shoppers like a storm of asteroids in changing evolution. Despite economies of land usage, current practice is often unsustainable in terms of trip-making and public satisfaction.

Why are design and area management left out of the process? Planners should plan these areas and create in them tight clusters of retail usages with improved and managed environments appropriate for people and feet and retailers. Upgrading trading estates into more than 'lots for sheds' needs to be an objective of local plans and management. Otherwise the land use, and the planners, will be fit for nothing. ■

Going local with TCMs

Local planning needs to respond to the Big Boys' interest in the revitalisation of the small-shop sector, says Geoff Steeley, Chair of the NRPf Research Group

Revitalising the local-shop sector is clearly a very important part of national policy. Several different strands of government are helping to drive forward work on community endeavour, neighbourhood vitality, and partnerships with big retailers.

How interesting, then, to see that the sterling work in the small-shop sector is being eyed up by the 'Big Boys'. Co-op is working with Alldays, Tesco is talking to T&S, Asda is going 'Fresh', Sainsbury is thinking 'local', Safeway has been linking up with BP, and M&S has its in-house strategy of local food.

Clearly this is a 'good thing'. 'Small' does need access to managerial resources, capital strength, purchasing

Source: Verdict on Neighbourhood Retailing 2001

Did you know... ?

Market share, convenience stores		
	1995	2002 est.
Spar	3.8%	5.3%
Co-op Group	2.8%	4.5%
Somerfield	3.6%	4.2%
Londis	2.6%	4.0%
Costcutter	1.6%	2.7%
TM Retail	1.2%	2.2%
T&S	1.3%	2.6%
First Quench	2.5%	1.8%
Alldays	0.8%	1.4%
Budgens	0.9%	1.3%

power, and an exciting sense of imminent renewal. But is all this to be an addition to the locality, or a bitter blast of competition for market share that will leave many areas out in the cold? It need not be.

Local planning of all sorts needs to respond to this move. Effective support for community enterprise must not wither. Economic development teams in local authorities need more help to engage directly with small-shopkeepers. Chambers of commerce need to devise support teams to service their neighbourhoods. Moreover – outside the public sector – community enterprise needs support from the expertise and purchasing facility of the larger 'small shop' chains and new 'Big Boy' interventions. How can it be done? Why not make local support a complementary function of town centre managers? How about it chaps? ■

The NRPf's 'Retail Planners' Bookshelf' (see inside this newsletter, or visit the NRPf's website at www.nrpf.org) lists key recently published documents about retail development and planning issues – publications that you can't afford to miss. In the first of a series looking at each work in turn, Anne Findlay reviews **Out of Town Shopping: the Future of Retailing**

BOOKSHELF review

Out of Town Shopping: the Future of Retailing

By Phil Ruston

The British Library, London, 1999, 182pp, ISBN 0-7123-0848-2, £37.00

This is a racy readable book which offers retail planners a very accessible down-to-earth introductory reference to matters of retail planning. The author modestly sees the book as a guide to the retail literature; but it is much more than that. Its success lies in the excellent contextualisation of issues. It is neither a textbook nor a research monograph (and does not pretend to be). However, the way in which it tries to bridge the gap between the statements made by practitioners and the findings of researchers, and the insights achieved by this approach, make this a 'must-read' book.

Chapter 1, for example, tackles the question of whether the high street can survive. Beginning with the paper by Gerald Eve, *Whither the High Street?*, and continuing with references to articles in *Estates Gazette*, it moves to an academic perspective, citing the work

published in *Environment & Planning A*. This is then set within the context of government thinking. Against this background, the chapter cites examples of different scenarios for future high street development and tries to show how PPG6 is influencing the shape of the high street. Thus in the space of some 40 pages in this chapter the literature cited ranges from academic to practitioner, retailer to consultant, government to planner. It finishes with a statement from a piece in *The Guardian* entitled 'High streets from hell!'

The same approach is adopted in the second chapter, which examines out-of-town shopping development. It specifically focuses on the outworking of planning policy. The third chapter, entitled 'Open all hours at the one stop shop', discusses new ways in which retailers are exerting their

competitiveness. The fourth chapter, on on-line shopping, draws on retailer initiatives and contextualises these within the academic research carried out by Reynolds. A concluding chapter, 'Shop 'til you drop', presents a range of statements – press, consultant, academic – on the future of UK retailing. The final words lay down the gauntlet to retail planners to take responsibility for shaping retail futures.

This is a stimulating book. It is almost as if its approach, with its diverse mix of opinions and expertise, is mirrored in the emerging mix of stakeholders and experts seeking to influence retail planning policy. Because of the diversity of material included and the accessible and interesting way in which it is presented, this is definitely one for the 'Bookshelf'. ■

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