

Evidence-based retail planning and the need for data

More than its predecessors, draft PPS4 emphasises the need for a robust evidence base for retail and town centre planning, particularly at the regional level. The actual information requirements are little changed:

- At national level to monitor policy effectiveness (e.g. proportion of new development in town centres);
- At regional level for RSS formulation, monitoring the network of centres;
- At local level for LDF and town centre strategy formulation, assessing capacity for and impact of new developments, monitoring.

However the concerns of local and regional planning authorities over the data availability and resource implications of developing and maintaining an adequate evidence base also remain unchanged.

The current situation

At national level DCLG produces statistics on the annual proportion of newly-built retail floorspace within town centres using Valuation Office Agency (VOA) floorspace data and centre boundaries at 2004 from the Town Centre Statistics (see below) with a simple 300m buffer around each centre representing 'edge of centre'. Regional figures are available on request with disaggregation to district level proposed. No figures are published for floorspace lost or replaced.

Local Planning Authorities produce retail studies for their LDF evidence base. Floorspace data may be sourced from planning application databases, which include duplicate applications and unused permissions; boundaries are from the local plan and may be very tightly defined around the prime space or much more loosely depending on local priorities. More frequently, consultants are commissioned who in turn buy data from commercial providers. Designed principally for the property and retail industries, these sources are expensive and not as comprehensive or as accurate as the VOA database: their floorspace definitions, update cycles and boundary definitions vary. Timings of local retail studies vary with each authority's progress through the LDF process; updates between full studies rarely happen in practice due to resource constraints.

Regional authorities rely on data supplied by local authorities for monitoring purposes, but find it difficult to make any meaningful comparisons because of the wildly inconsistent quality of local data.

The CLG Town Centre Statistics

Like its 2009 successor, the 1994 Commons Select Committee on the Environment highlighted the need for nationally consistent town centre and retail data, published regularly and at a local level. In response the government commissioned the Town Centre Statistics project to produce robust and consistently defined boundaries for town centres throughout England & Wales and floorspace, employment and turnover statistics for retailing and other uses in each centre, using data already being collected by central government for other purposes.

Postcode-level VOA floorspace data (available publicly at the individual property level) and ONS Annual Business Inquiry employment data (not available publicly at such a fine level) are used to model levels of activities associated with town centres at a fine scale for England and Wales. This allows boundaries for town centres, where levels of such activity are highest, to be identified in a robust and consistent manner; these have been found to accord closely with the town centre definitions of a wide variety of stakeholders. These boundaries can move over time as the location of town centre activities changes; the West Quay development on the edge of Southampton's centre which opened in 2000 is an example. The

same data sources are aggregated to calculate statistics for each centre; disclosure issues were dealt with thoroughly. A similar model which considers only retail activity is used to produce boundaries and statistics for the retail cores of larger centres.

Floorspace and employment statistics for England & Wales covering 2000 and 2002 were initially released in 2004. Turnover statistics had proved problematic during the pilot phase and were not published nationally. The next release, in early 2008, comprised annual statistics and boundaries for 1999 to 2004 inclusive. They were poorly publicised, although NRPF and Geofutures set up a dedicated website www.planningstatistics.org.uk to make them more easily available and widely known. There have been no subsequent releases, although arrangements for supply of VOA and ONS data to DCLG remain in place.

The case for continuing the Town Centre Statistics

For comparisons over time or between different places to be made, statistics must be comparable, i.e. calculated using consistent methods for comparable areas. Statistics also need to be timely if they are to be of any use for policy formulation or monitoring. The case for a single, consistent, regularly updated set of local level statistics and centre boundaries covering retail and ideally other town centre activities is overwhelming: these could be used at all levels of the planning process to provide a robust, comparable evidence base while hugely reducing the financial and administrative burden on local, regional and national planning bodies compared to the current confused situation.

The most pressing need is for floorspace statistics – both standing stock and gains and losses. The VOA dataset allows these to be derived at the local level; DCLG is already using this to produce its national-level statistics using the 2004 town centre boundaries and this could also be done using local authorities' local plan boundaries. But these 2004 boundaries will become increasingly inaccurate over time as different town centres expand and contract. For valid comparisons between places and over time to be made, consistent and up-to-date boundaries are needed.

Thus there is a very strong argument for reviving the Town Centre Statistics model, even if only to produce up-to-date boundaries, although it would then be simple to use the model to produce floorspace (and employment) statistics. This would require access to the ONS employment dataset; DCLG are best placed to do this, having a data supply agreement in place and the appropriate clearances to access the fine scale data, although lack of capacity means subcontracting the actual production of the boundaries and statistics may be necessary.

Since VOA data is gathered for property rating, its current classifications do not accord directly with planning use classes. The Town Centre Statistics attempted to reclassify floorspace data appropriately; VOA have suggested they would be willing to amend their data collection methods going forward in response to a request from DCLG, as they have previously done on the introduction of A4 and A5 use classes.

The way forward

The NRPF Research Group subgroup formed to consider the issue concluded that reviving the Town Centres Statistics appears to be the best option for improving the availability of consistent and robust retail statistics as the main infrastructure is already in place. Several local and regional planning authorities have expressed their interest in participating in any pilot scheme for improved floorspace data. Geofutures Ltd, who developed the Town Centres Statistics model for DCLG, are also keen for the boundaries and statistics to be updated and more widely used and are keen to be involved in reviving the model. The cost of running the Town Centres Statistics model would be little different whether for a few districts or the whole country, although a smaller pilot would allow the districts involved to better check the results and demonstrate the benefits. The next stage would be to produce a costed proposal for such a pilot; costs will be dependent on the current state of the model within DCLG.