

RETAIL DATA CATALOGUE

A scoping report for the NRPF by

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February 2002

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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, thanks are due to all the people interviewed for this research report. Many were extremely candid in their assessment of the role of data in the retail sector, and the inequities of access to it, and it is therefore proper to maintain their anonymity.

I would also like to thank Russell Schiller and George Nicholson of the NRPF for their advice and guidance during the process.

1 The need for a Retail Data Catalogue

You are facing a tight deadline. You have to make a decision about whether or not to locate a new store in the place you have heard of, but which has always been just a point on the map. Or perhaps you have to assess whether it makes sense to try and move the prime pitch of a town centre; you're not sure in what other towns this has been done, or what has happened to them since. Finding the relevant information won't be easy – it's difficult enough to keep track of the different databases within your own company, let alone in the wider industry as a whole. Time is pressing, and although the information would undoubtedly help you arrive at a more confident decision, you can't afford to waste time looking for it.

Even if you had the time, you would soon become frustrated as you tried to find the data to help you solve your problem. There are information portals on the web which can direct you to a myriad of possible datasets; advertisements from data providers and value added resellers fill the trade press. Tracking down retail data from these sources is not always straightforward; finding out exactly what they do is more difficult. This is when you need a Retail Data Catalogue.

1.1 The aim of the research

So why isn't there a Retail Data Catalogue already? Largely because there is little money to be made out of it. The major data providers are not even collating statistics on the country's smaller town centres and have yet to find a business case to compile a catalogue of *meta* data.

Meta Data

Meta is a prefix that in most information technology usage means "an underlying definition or description."

Meta data is, in essence, information about information. Retail meta data will include information on the format, provenance and location of the data.

This is perhaps a breach that the National Retail Planning Forum can step into. Over the last six months, we have conducted a series of interviews, over the phone and face to face to

determine the demand for a Retail Data Catalogue. (The original brief is included as Annex 2 of this report). We have talked with a diverse range of practitioners: retail researchers, fund managers from pension funds, chartered surveyors, retail consultants, academics and planners from the districts to Whitehall. They were asked how a Retail Data Catalogue would help them, what sort of datasets they would like to see in a Catalogue, in what format would a Catalogue best be presented, and finally, how often should it be updated.

The report outlines the results of this concise survey. The answer to the first question was immediate: all the members (and non-members) felt that it would save them time, and therefore money. But as the interviews progressed, interesting perspectives on the role of data within the retail industry began to emerge. These perspectives will be presented in the report, and how these differences may affect the outcome of this initiative will be discussed. A number of different strategies to take the Catalogue forward conclude the report.

1.2 The importance of data to the industry

Data is the raw material of the information economy. It is increasingly seen in business and in government as key to the long term success of UK plc.

The retail industry – in both the private and public sectors – is arguably in the vanguard of the information revolution, applying more powerful computer modelling and analytical techniques to better understand consumer behaviour, to optimise location in respect to logistical frameworks, and to map catchment populations.

Data lies at the heart of effective retail planning. Whether this involves the planning of a store network, or the maintenance of a town centre's vitality and viability, business decisions rely on the effective assimilation and analysis of information from a variety of different sources. Making the wrong decision is often costly. This cost not merely financial, as questions of urban sustainability and regeneration move up the agenda.

But the sources of data are disparate – many core datasets come from central government, others are available at considerable cost from commercial data suppliers, and there are of course the bespoke in-house datasets that different organisations have compiled.

Considering the large number of retail data sets potentially available to the retail planner compared to the recent past, we could be forgiven for thinking that we're drowning in a sea of information. Yet this is not the case since much of these data are confidential, firmly ensconced deep within the databases of organisations, too sensitive ever to reach the public domain.

Some data, although not strictly confidential, are buried deep within the retail planning literature – one-off retail impact studies, qualitative information drawn together from surveys, and the vast amount of quantitative information (both digital and paper-based) which is generated to support public inquiries.

Despite the volume of data out there, no one has a **comprehensive overview** of what retail data sets are available and how they may be used to further support decision making in the retail sector.

The need for knowledge about the whereabouts and format of retail data will become more pressing as more data becomes available, not least as the government frees up access to its own digital datasets. As Patricia Hewitt, the DTI minister argued in September 2000:

“Government information is the largest information resource available to the UK. It must be widely available to businesses so they can develop it for the full benefit of the UK economy”.

As both central and local government improve access to data, the amount of information available to the retail planner will increase significantly, and it is essential that we can keep track of it all.

1.3 Other data catalogues

There are a number of meta data catalogues currently available that help us do just that, although rarely do they contain data essential to the retail planner. Most, if not all of these can be found on the web. Many of them not only list datasets, but once registered, also enable users to download the data themselves.

Three examples of these are the Data Archive, MIMIAS, and AskGiraffe.

The Data Archive

Essex University hosts an ESRC initiative called the Data Archive (<http://www.data-archive.ac.uk/>) which is the largest collection of digital data in the social sciences and humanities in the United Kingdom. There is no specific section of the archive geared to retail data *per se*, but it does include a diverse array of datasets which have a retail context, such as the Retail Sales Index and the British Social Attitudes Survey.

The data held in the collection are available for download, but only for the purposes of non-commercial research and teaching. Despite this restriction, detailed meta data are available through this site.

MIMAS

The Manchester Information & Associated Services (MIMAS) is a national data centre charged with providing the UK higher education and research community with data. Again there is no discrete retail data section although there are more generic datasets, such as the Census of Population, which are of use.

Access to the data is restricted to members of higher education institutes, but like the Data Archive, it is possible to access meta data.

AskGiraffe

'AskGiraffe' is the brand name of a publicly funded geographic information (GI) service. Delivered by the Association of Geographic Information (AGI), it is currently backed via the National Interest Mapping Service Level Agreement (NIMSA), which is administered by the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR) to deliver a range of geographic services, such as rural maps, which are uneconomic but nonetheless important to the national interest.

It includes a comprehensive directory of UK geographic products and information about these products, supplied to a standard template by the geographic data providers. By choosing a keyword (from a list) visitors to the site can initiate a search through various databases resulting in the display of relevant product titles and meta data, including details of whom to contact for more information.

It also has a data integrator, which lists the various datasets in the UK available at the commonly used geographic units in the UK (i.e. wards, districts, counties). Information is provided about the key geographic data products that are available to support the referencing and analysis of these units, and links to the web sites of the data providers.

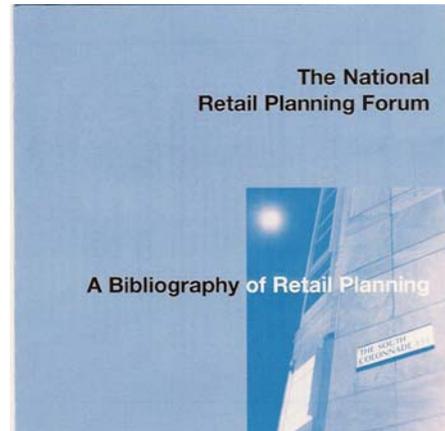
Others

The use of the web to communicate information is increasing. There are a number of web sites which contain lots of useful information: www.planweb.co.uk offers links to different types of organisations including local authority planners, academia, and consultancies; www.atcm.org, the site of the Association of Town Centre Management which as well as giving supporting information about the ATCM, has useful updates on recent planning decisions. For an excellent overview of retail related web sites, the first port of call should be the NRPF web site, in particular the list at www.nrpf.org/Biblio2000.htm.

1.4 Plugging the knowledge gap

None of the meta data catalogues listed above have a comprehensive listing of the datasets

used by the retail industry. In response to this gap in our knowledge, the National Retail Forum commissioned this report to see if it is possible to compile a Retail Data Catalogue.



The Catalogue would emulate the very successful Bibliography of Retail Planning, commissioned by the NRPF three years ago which presents practitioners, academics and others interested in the field of retail planning with a reasonably comprehensive bibliography of UK literature on retail planning in the 1990's. The Retail Data Catalogue would work in a similar way, but rather than recording information about books and literature, it would record and store information or meta data about retail datasets.

2 Who would use the Catalogue?

There are three main groups of people who would use information collated in a retail data catalogue - members of the National Retail Planning Forum, researchers who are doing work which has been commissioned by the NRPF, and also other people in the retail industry not directly connected to the NRPF.

<i>Practitioners interviewed for this research</i>	
Local Government Officers	4
Retailers	1
Chartered Surveyors	3
Central Government Officers	2
Investors	3
Retail Consultants	3
Data Providers	1
Academics	2
Professional Bodies	1

Representatives from all these groups were interviewed and questioned about the Retail Data Catalogue.

2.1 Members of the NRPF

Of those connected with the NRPF, the membership can be broken down into two distinct groups: the private sector membership and the public sector memberships. The distinction is important since despite having many common perspectives, there are a number of ways in which they are distinct, reflecting their different positions within the industry. These will be discussed in more detail shortly, but first it is important to note where all respondents, regardless of background, agreed.

It is generally estimated that 80% of project costs relate in some way to the acquisition and processing of information. An important component of these costs is the time taken trying to track the data and assemble it. *Everyone* contacted about the Catalogue agreed its existence would greatly speed up this process, ultimately leading to an overall

reduction in costs as well as increasing access to retail data.

Private Sector Membership

Many of the private sector members of the NRPF come from large organisations in a sector which has increasingly agglomerated. The dominance of the major retailers in the current retail landscape, the relentless mergers in chartered surveying, and the importance of global fund institutions all point to a globalised industry.

Inevitably, these organisations are focused on a national level of analysis, and so are most interested in those datasets that enable them to track the performance of their business and markets across the whole country. The comparison of place is the most important. The datasets that they employ are few in number. A typical large private sector company is likely to take two or three of the key commercial datasets (such as Experian-GOAD town centre data, or expenditure data from URPI) and will augment these with their own aggregated in-house datasets, often derived from business information sources such as EPOS or transaction data. From this they aim to build as detailed a picture of the national market place as possible.

It could be tempting to suggest that these larger companies are not particularly engaged at the local scale, where the impact of their decisions is most keenly felt, but in truth the importance of local information is widely recognised throughout the private sector. Understanding the local context of their business is important, not least when planning changes to their store network, or when purchasing a particular retail property for their portfolio.

Since they have access to national level data, the private sector membership of the NRPF have, on the whole, a greater interest in identifying local level datasets which add colour and context to the framework of their national datasets.

Public Sector Membership

In contrast to the private sector, public sector members of the NRPF are more interested in understanding the context of their authority in the national picture as they look to secure not only a local, but also a strategic role.

The scale at which comparisons are made depends on the size of the local authority. Regional and County authorities aim to track retailing trends at the national and regional level, looking at the relationship between them and the localities that fall within their jurisdiction. The County authorities in particular have been the most forward-thinking in the collation of retail and other data. Kent County Council's data infrastructure was probably only rivalled by Cambridgeshire in the 1990s. Other counties such as Worcestershire and Derbyshire have recently caught up and have since established innovative data sharing initiatives.

What will happen to these data (and other similar data resources) if the responsibilities of the County Councils change in line with recommendations in the recent Planning Green Paper, is unclear. The effective implementation of the Local Development Frameworks will undoubtedly depend on access to good quality data. The Counties occupy a central position in the spatial hierarchy and are perhaps ideally placed to improve access to data to all parts of the planning system.

The smaller local authorities are often most interested in making comparisons with other towns similar to their own – often within the same region. The competition between the different places at similar places in the retail hierarchy is immense and being able to track the relative performance of retail locations has never been more important. Until recently, there was no national framework around which to conduct this assessment – the commercial datasets are rarely fully comprehensive, often not providing data for smaller town centres for which there is little commercial demand. It was this fact, and the national government's need to have a strategic picture of UK's town centres, which led to the DTLR's *Town Centre Statistics* project being commissioned.

Central government's commitment to retail data is further demonstrated by PPG6, which requires local authorities to collect a whole

host of indicators relating to retailing and town centres.

It would be wrong though to think that as a result all public sector authorities are veins of golden data waiting to be mined. Some local authorities have excellent information systems and are replete with data on their localities. More often though, an individual authority will have lots of retail data, albeit spread throughout many different departments who are not aware of the existence of retail datasets held in different parts of the organisation. Increased awareness about the value of data, and guidance for how data infrastructures can be implemented, needs to be encouraged.

Despite many success stories, there remains a stubbornly large minority of local authorities which do not have much data at all, largely because of a lack of resources.

2.2 Non-members

There are a number of organisations, unfortunately not members of the NRPF, who would also find a Retail Data Catalogue of use. They will broadly accord with the private/public sector divide discussed earlier. Of course, the Catalogue would become a powerful marketing vehicle for the NRPF, and it is likely that its membership will increase if a Catalogue is created.

2.3 Commissioned researchers

The final group of the potential users are the researchers engaged by the NRPF on specific projects. Although many researchers will be able to access detailed datasets (either in-house or perhaps downloaded from one of the higher education resources listed in Section 1.3) there are always gaps which can sometimes hinder research. Tracking down data for research projects can often be time consuming and so a data catalogue would have the effect of reducing research costs.

A further way in which a Catalogue would benefit NRPF sponsored research would be the identification of the many in-house datasets owned by members of the NRPF which could undoubtedly aid research. Controlled use of these datasets (which could involve researchers signing confidentiality agreements) would further enlighten the NRPF's research agenda.

3 What data would be included in it?

In this section of the report, we will identify, with examples, the various types of data that could be included in the Catalogue. Notwithstanding important categorisation of data, such as quantitative or qualitative, digital or paper-based, spatial or aspatial, for the purpose of this report, the distinction is made between purchased data and in-house data.

3.1 Purchased data

The private sector data sets include those data sets that are marketed by a variety of companies. These datasets include URPI expenditure data, the Experian GOAD town centre data and a whole host of geo-demographic data which are used to support the decision making process. Additionally private sector organisations, such as the big retailers and chartered surveyors, also have a large number of in-house data sets. These bespoke data sets, whilst rarely available on the open market, are often a key source for these organisations and offer a competitive edge.

There is a large variety of retail data currently used by members of the NRPF; the data are not necessarily solely retail data but also include a variety of others. Some of the more popular datasets included:

URPI

In reaction to the lack of good retail data, a loose coalition of public and private sector bodies helped create the Reading-based Unit for Retail Planning Information (URPI). This organisation was supported by private subscription and contracts, and cemented itself into a position of some status since, at planning inquiries, URPI data (in particular consumer expenditure information) was generally agreed to be the standard. After evolving into the Data Consultancy in 1998, the organisation was subsequently purchased by MapInfo. Since then, the consumer expenditure data have not been updated, although MapInfo are considering updating the data as part of a new service in the future.

Experian/Goat

Experian are one of the largest data providers in the UK. They bought GOAD in the 1990s and continue to sell the town centre plans. These plans, and the statistics associated with them, often underpin retail research in both the private and public sectors.

PROMIS

PROMIS is a service provided by Property Market Analysis which gives detailed information on the retail sector by reference to individual towns and cities. Catchment and demographic data are provided as well as information on major occupiers, proposed developments, and recent property deals.

FOCUS

FOCUS, owned by Property Intelligence, provides a search facility across all the major publications with a property industry theme. As well as providing a key word search on the publications, it also offers town and county reports, covering over 700 towns, and information on retailer requirements. The 1990 and 1995 Rating Lists are also available through FOCUS.

Public Sector Data

Arguably, the Census of Distribution in 1971 was the last time that central government produced effective retail statistics. The DTLR's effort to produce town centre statistics demonstrates central government's desire to improve access to retail information; data from this initiative will be available this year. Other government departments, such as the DTI, through its Foresight Panels, also look to making retail data more available.

3.2 In-house datasets

Many of the commercially available datasets are extremely expensive – the cost of some of those listed above runs into thousands of pounds per annum. Few organisations subscribe to all of them, and often use them to support their own in-house datasets

The types of in-house datasets vary according to sector. In the private sector, there are a host of different sources of data. The major retailers, for example, will have datasets collated from loyalty card schemes and EPOS data.

Sometimes, companies form consortia to share data. One example is the dataset created by Weatherall Green and Smith for the Out of Town Retail Owners Forum. The Forum was created in the late 1990s and most of the major landlords subscribe. Members are invited to contribute their tenancy information to the group in return for access to other members' data. The dataset is not for sale.

In the public sector, the DTLR's project to compile comparable statistics for all town centres in the UK is a project where in-house government data sources are being pulled together to create a new datasets. Local government data is generally more *ad hoc* and concentrates on providing detailed information on localities. The information present in planning documents and development plans is often very useful, and is compiled from data on retail vacancies, the retail development pipeline, customer surveys, or even information on store turnover collated by the local authorities. The increase in the number of town centre managers and their efforts to produce information on their particular town centres are an additional source of information.

3.3 What data sources are untapped?

As well as discussing what datasets should be included in the Catalogue, participants in the survey were asked what data were missing. A large number of untapped data sources were identified.

Government remains the most obvious source of untapped data, including employment and turnover information from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and floorspace data from the Valuation Office Agency (VOA). Moves afoot in government to improve access to the data, most notably under the auspices of National Statistics suggests that more data will become available in the near future. (See www.statistics.gov.uk/about_ns/default.asp for more information.)

Another important source of information is that derived from public enquiries. An immense volume of data is collated by both private and public sector protagonists in public

inquiries and this is one of the key areas the NRPF has identified as a source of retail information. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that the same sorts of information are collected time and time again, sometimes by the same consultants, for different public inquiries.

Reproducing this information does not come cheap. For example, a consultant's report may well include a household study, which typically costs around £6,000 for a survey of 1000 respondents; a street survey can cost around £3,500 for 300 interviews. More often than not, once the inquiry is completed, those data sets rarely see the light of day again. If there was some means of compiling this information so that these data could be reused, the potential cost savings could be considerable. There were moves to create an index of public inquiries at the University of Reading's Real Estate Data Archive initiative, but at the time of writing, no significant progress has been made.

As data are organised within a Retail Data Catalogue, the gaps in data provision will become clearer. This will mean that the NRPF will be better informed to lobby to have those gaps filled.

3.4 Catalogue specification

As part of the survey, people were asked three key questions about the specification of the Catalogue – what meta data should be included, how often it should be updated, and in what format it should be held.

Meta data

There was a general agreement about what meta data should be stored within the Catalogue. These included a name and description of the dataset, from whom it could be obtained and for how much. Other respondents wanted to know the format of the data, and whether or not the information can be manipulated within a Geographic Information System (GIS). An excellent example of the type of meta data that should be collected is shown on the following page. It is an entry in the Society of Property Researcher's Directory of Property Datasets, compiled by the University of the West of England and first published in September 2000. The entry is the record of meta data of CB Hillier Parker's Shopping Centre Development Master Plan.

Shopping Centre Development Master Plan

CB Hillier Parker

Broad Topic	Supply	Geographical Extent	UK
Specific Subject	Development	Frequency of Publication	
Aggregation		Date of first issue	2000
Medium	Paper	Cost	£275
Telephone	020 7629 7666	Email/Web	www.hillierparker.co.uk
Access	On request		
Notes			

The meta data presented in the SPR Directory are comprehensive, not only listing the format and extent of the data, but also including information on what sort of data it is – categorised by *Broad Topic* and *Specific Subject*, making it easier to compare datasets.

This SPR framework is well thought out, and could well be used as a template for the NRPF's Retail Data Catalogue, perhaps augmented with other information. For example, if held on a web site, it would be possible to include a sample of the data (as a scanned image, or even in a digital format) to further clarify how the data can be used.

Update cycle

Everyone agreed that the Catalogue should be updated regularly. As with all data, meta data needs to be kept up to date to retain its full value; some sort of commitment will be necessary. For example, the meta data presented above, compiled in 2000, may now be out of date, and may require amendment.

The question arises as to whether contributions to the Catalogue should be voluntary, or if they should be undertaken by an outside consultant on a regular basis (say once a year). The key consideration here, of course, is cost.

Format

There was overwhelming agreement that the Catalogue should be available on the Internet. This would make the catalogue relatively easy to update, with any changes to the data being immediately available to the user base. Most other meta data catalogues (such as the Data Archive and AskGraffe) are posted on the web.

One of the great benefits of having the application on the web is that the owners of various datasets could update the Catalogue directly, giving the NRPF the option for contributions to be voluntary, so leading to reduced running costs.

Some interviewees also suggested that the Catalogue be available as a CD ROM; careful design of the web site should enable the transfer of all the files to such a format. The user would still use an internet browser (such as Internet Explorer) to view the data, but would do so from the CD ROM rather than the web.

Providing the Catalogue in hard copy was not generally favoured, largely because it was recognised that a publication would be out of date even before it would be published. The use of the web site could again solve this problem as a text document could be prepared for easy download and printing. An example of this is the update to the Bibliography of Retail Planning which is available on the NRPF web site.

4 Issues to address

A broad consensus became evident during the survey that the Retail Data Catalogue would be extremely useful to the industry. To some, this will come as no surprise since the potential for cost savings in terms of saved time is obvious. Despite widespread recognition of the benefits of the Catalogue, a number of key areas of difference that could affect the project emerged as the opposing camps began to parade along all too familiar lines.

4.1 Data confidentiality

The private sector seemed to be considerably more concerned about data confidentiality in the broadest possible sense than the public sector. While neither private and public sectors countenance releasing data which would disclose information about individuals or companies, local authorities are often happy to aggregate data into non-disclosive units – in contrast to commercial organisations who often feel that it is simply not worth the resources to do so.

Worryingly, there is reluctance in many private sector organisations about even putting meta data about in-house products on the Catalogue, arguing that even exposing the data that drives their business is commercially sensitive. Apparently, this intransigence has slowed the development of the University of Reading's Real Estate Data Archive.

Even where there is the will to make in-house data more available, copyright and licensing restrictions can sometimes preclude the release of data. This can be the case where organisations have augmented data purchased from commercial data providers with their own in-house information.

4.2 Data quality

Some respondents were concerned about ensuring the quality of the datasets recorded on the web site. An NRPF Catalogue could accord the data included with a stamp of quality that they might not deserve. A disclaimer on the Catalogue, and perhaps a means for users to comment on the quality of the data could be included.

Data quality was also the reason why some private sector members were reluctant to see public inquiry data in the Catalogue, arguing that since the data were compiled with a specific argument in mind, their provenance and quality would be compromised.

Questions of data quality was also cited as a reason for not putting in-house datasets in the Catalogue. By doing so, outside organisations would be encouraged to apply to use them, potentially exposing the datasets to detailed scrutiny and criticism. Some respondents felt that this level of exposure would not be welcome. Put simply, data may be good enough to support an organisation's decision making process, but are not good enough to sell.

4.3 The information rich, and the information poor

There is major inequity in terms of access to retail information. This inequity is played out in the membership of the NRPF, broadly between the private and public sectors. The private sector has lots of information, the public sector does not.

The private sector tends to be more quantitative in its approach to retail planning. The private sector takes data much more seriously and this is reflected in the amount of money which is spent on acquiring data sets. It could also be argued though that the seriousness reflects the amount of money being spent! There is a greater reliance on computer and statistical models to understand retail planning issues and the acquisition and analysis of data is seen as central to the profitability or non-profitability of private sector organisations.

In contrast, even obtaining the GOAD plan for a town centre is sometimes beyond the reach of cash-strapped local authorities. (This was reported in the NRPF's research on town centre health checks, where one local authority interviewed struggled to find enough money to purchase a paper GOAD plan). In this research project, one district planner revealed that the total IT, software and data budget for her division (which employs 13 staff) was a mere £3000 per annum. It is simply not possible for

them to acquire any of the ‘industry standard’ data listed in Section 3.1.

This is not a new phenomenon. The Royal Town Planning Institute has acknowledged that planning has the image of the ‘whipping boy’ and that the profession has been hit hard by the running down of public services. The DTLR also seems to recognise the problem and has commissioned research to assess the resources in the planning systems and how lack of resources puts a constraint on performance. Data, it appears, is often the first item to be cut out of budgets.

In many other countries (such as the US, Australia, and other nations in the EU) data costs are less of an issue since access to key data sets is free and open. In Italy, for example, detailed retail sales data are in the public domain; any concerns about commercial confidentiality are outweighed by the greater public good.

Concern about information poverty in the planning departments of many The UK’s local authorities is not confined to the professional bodies or to government. One major investor felt that the lack of data did affect the planning frameworks of some towns and cities and that this inevitably made it more difficult for his company to develop long term investment decisions.

Despite this enlightened view, bridging this information gap is not straightforward. The private sector tends to be much more secretive about data not only in terms of what data they have but also how that data is analysed and compiled. This is in complete contrast to the public sector which tends to be more open with their data. Many authorities do not look to generate profit from their data sets, and often happy to release information at cost price.

Indeed, one local authority officer interviewed for this research expressed outrage that the public sector was often seen as a cheap source of information by the private sector, and yet rarely got anything in return. The fact that the data supplied was sometimes repackaged and then sold on for a profit, was particularly galling.

The different attitudes to data were further thrown into relief when those interviewed for this report were asked to consider if information from public inquiry should be included in the retail data catalogue. On the one hand local authorities felt it should be since they saw the information buried deep in

consultants’ reports as being a very rich source of detailed information. In contrast, private sector organisations felt that the data in these reports were out of date and often of dubious quality and provenance.

This will have a direct impact on Catalogue particularly since the two different motivations begin to emerge. On the one hand the private sector is keen to keep information close to its chest, and if not, to charge money for the data, while on the other hand the public sector is often interested in sharing information, often at little or no cost.

This immediately suggests that the Catalogue should be a voluntary exercise whereby members can put forward meta data for collation in a retail catalogue. Some means of showing whether members have contributed to the catalogue would be useful.

4.4 Data sharing

One of the solutions to this problem is data sharing (or perhaps more accurately, data bartering). There are a number of data sharing initiatives underway. A growing number of larger local authorities and associated groups are making their data available. For example, Worcestershire County Council has co-ordinated a ‘strategic alliance’ between the key public sector agencies across the county, (including the county council, district councils, the police and health authority) in order to create an on-line data warehouse, so that the partner agencies are able to access data with relative ease.

There are examples of smaller authorities already making information freely available. For example, North Cornwall District Council has compiled a series of profiles at ward and parish levels which integrate a whole host of council data such as population, income, employment, unemployment, business and industry, community facilities, the environment and transport. This information, which is regularly updated, is available from the council’s web site (www.ncdc.gov.uk) for download.

The DTLR is also encouraging the creation of *Local Strategic Partnerships* which “bring together at a local level the different parts of the public sector as well as the private, business, community and voluntary sectors so that different initiatives and services support each other and work together”. While there is no explicit mention of data within this

guidance, the DTLR does encourage the sharing of “local information and good practice”. (For more information, check www.local-regions.detr.gov.uk/lsp/guidance/).

The impetus for this is coming from the public sector, not surprising perhaps since they do not have much data in the first place. The private sector remains as reticent as ever. One retail

expert was reminded of a conference discussing data sharing held at the British Museum in 1981. Sadly, nothing came of that, and the difficulty the RICS has had promoting data sharing in the property industry suggests little has changed, except that now the need to for widespread access to information is greater still.

5 The options

The importance of data and information to retail planning has never been greater. The NRPF has a role to play in promoting knowledge of, and access to retail data.

There is a clear need in the industry for a Retail Data Catalogue and the NRPF is extremely well placed to create one. There are three obvious ways to do so:

5.1 Use other meta data providers

It is possible for the NRPF to piggy-back its initiative on one of the existing meta data providers. The team at AskGiraffe, for example, is happy in principle for retail meta data to be put on their web site, free of charge. There would not be a discrete retail data area created on the web site, although the data would be identifiable by use of 'retail' as a keyword.

Pulling all the meta data together would be another question. Again, it would depend on whether the NRPF would want to make the initiative voluntary (where the costs would be confined to publicising the collaboration) or if resources were made available to collate the data separately.

5.2 Go it alone

The NRPF could set up a Retail Data Catalogue as an extension of its web site. A relatively simple meta data pro forma could be established, perhaps using the SPR pro forma as a template (see Annex 1). Again a key decision for the NRPF to make would be whether contributions to the database would be voluntary, or if the Forum would commission someone to create and maintain it.

5.3 Partnership with the SPR or similar organisations

The Society of Property Researchers has likewise identified the need for meta data for

the property industry. Two years ago, the Society commissioned a team from the University of the West of England, lead by Peter Wyatt, to compile a Directory of Property Datasets - a 'yellow pages' of data providers. The Directory, which was compiled in 2000, contains meta data for 25 retail datasets, many of which are compiled at a national level.

The SPR is currently considering putting the Directory on-line and have expressed interest in collaborating with the NRPF to this end, not least because of their would be overlaps in dataset coverage. Collaboration would also introduce members of both organisations to sources of data that were hitherto unknown to them.

5.4 What can be done now?

The NRPF has always been involved in the promotion of retail data – it has played an important supporting role in the DTLR's *Town Centre Statistics* project for example. It should use its position to increase the profile of data within its membership and beyond. There are a number of ways in which it can achieve this, with little or no cost to the organisation:

- Post links on the NRPF web site to the web sites of the main data providers and data portals;
- develop a section of the web site specifically for retail data – for example putting this document on-line in order to provoke debate about the role of data, and inequity in the access to it; and
- increase the awareness of the possibility of forging data partnerships within the membership and to encourage its members to do so.

ANNEX ONE: SPR property meta data pro forma



Commercial Property Data Sources

Title of data set
Author
Telephone Number
Web-site
Frequency of publication
Date of first issue
Property sector	office / retail / industrial / leisure / all / other
Geographical coverage	UK / region / city or town / other
Extent to which data set can be disaggregated	all property / sector / region / town / single properties / other
Medium	paper / online / disk
Cost band	<£10 / £10-£99 / £100-£999 / £1,000-£9,999 / >£10,000
Access	generally available on request/ subscription/ restricted circulation
Notes	

ANNEX 2: Original brief for the report

Overall Objective

The Bibliography of Retail Planning, prepared by Leigh Sparks and Anne Findlay at the University of Stirling is one of the most important pieces of research commissioned by the NRPF and is an invaluable resource to its members. As a reference tool, the Bibliography is unrivalled and should be found on the bookshelf of anyone interested in retail planning.

Increasingly though, retail research is not only dependent on the literature but also various quantitative datasets which are, more often than not, stored in a digital format. The Bibliography has gone a long way to sign-posting the retail literature, but the forest of retail data remains uncharted, unexplored, and general mysterious. The Catalogue of Retail Data will aim to emulate the Bibliography of Retail Planning and will identify and organise the various digital datasets available to the retail researcher. Its coverage will include data freely available in the commercial sector (such as floorspace data from Experian Goad and town centre profile information from Management Horizons) through to data from public sector organisations, such as those held by the DETR, ONS and VOA.

The Catalogue will also present information about datasets, held by members of the NRPF, which are not in the public domain. This information can be used by the NRPF to identify data resources which may be used to enhance the research it commissions. This particular aspect of the Catalogue will be invaluable to the NRPF's membership who will want to make use of such a facility to support their in-house research agenda. Knowledge of the presence of datasets in other member organisations could lead to exchange of information between members, or the creation of new value-added products through the combination of data sets. A Scoping Report needs to be prepared in order to ascertain the extent and form of the Catalogue.

Preparing the Scoping Report.

At the start of the research, a number of NRPF members will be surveyed in order to get a sense of what they think a Catalogue of Retail Data should provide. This qualitative survey is likely to take the form of face to face, or telephone interviews.

As well as talking to members of the NRPF, researchers who have been commissioned by the NRPF in the past will be interviewed, to discover from where they obtained the data which underpinned their work, how long it took to source, and if they feel that the Catalogue would be a useful research tool.

Some of the issues concerning data sharing between the NRPF and its members will also be explored, addressing some of the objections traditionally levied against this concept (such as data confidentiality).

A review of the extent of digital retail will also be undertaken, aiming to construct a prototype structure of the Catalogue itself. Key gaps in the provision of retail data will also be identified at this stage.

The Scoping report will be structured around the following four themes:

- **What will be the function of the Catalogue?**

The principal of establishing a resource for NRPF members and researchers to help identify key retail planning datasets has been outlined above. Support for this will be sought from NRPF members. Any further requirements suggested by the members will be addressed. For example, rather than seeing it as a means of directly supporting NRPF research, members may feel that its key role would be to identify gaps in data provision, which NRPF could lobby to have filled. Clearly, the primary function(s) of the Catalogue will affect the way it is implemented.

- **What would be in the Catalogue?**

The Catalogue will primarily contain meta-data (information on the specification of data) on the various datasets used in the retail planning community. It will be important to identify the diverse broad sources of data (i.e. commercial available datasets, data held by central government etc.) and include information on data format, availability and cost.

- **How would the Catalogue need to be presented?**

The Scoping Report will also explore how the meta-data will be organised and in what format it will be published - hard copy or CD ROM for example. The possibility of making the Catalogue available on the NRPF web site (with certain parts of it password-protected) and the implementation of this, will also be considered.

- **How often would be Catalogue be updated?**

More and more data becomes available every day. The Catalogue will therefore be out of date as soon as it is published. A sensible up-dating strategy for the Catalogue will be formulated.