

Education for Retail Planning – An Initial Scoping Paper

1. There is a clear and pressing need to improve education for retail planning because:
 - The national requirement for up-to-date retail and town centre studies to form the evidence base for Local Plans is greater than the capacity of existing specialists to deliver in a timely manner.
 - Many retail studies undertaken for local planning authorities and retail assessments supporting planning applications are currently undertaken in ways which make them inherently unreliable.
 - Local Planning Authorities are often not able to understand fully the technicalities of retail need and impact forecasting, and so are unable to distinguish between a retail study or retail assessment which is reliable and one which is unreliable, thus undermining the quality of plan-making and decision taking.
 - Recruitment of retail planning specialists is extremely difficult for those consultants and other agencies which require that expertise.
 - Proper application of national planning policies for town centres and retail development in the NPPF is being hampered by the poor quality of retail planning data and analysis, and by the lack of suitably qualified retail planning specialists.
2. Retail planning is a specialist subject and a distinct branch of town and country planning. As such, it requires specialist training for its practitioners. However, a recent review of planning degree courses undertaken for the NRPF by Cliff Guy, formerly Professor of Planning at Cardiff University, showed that there are no longer any specialized retail planning modules in UK planning degree courses.
3. The principal demand for retail planning expertise comes from planning consultancies; since few local authorities have to deal with retail planning issues sufficiently often to justify employing such specialist staff on a permanent basis. Whilst this may change with the duty to co-operate with neighbouring authorities, it is likely that most local authorities will continue to outsource retail planning work to consultants which specialize in this field.
4. Most planning consultants are engaged in advocacy planning: i.e. their role is to assist their clients to optimise the value of their property interests through engagement in the plan-making process, or to obtain planning permissions for their clients. A smaller number also advise local planning authorities on retail planning. This includes undertaking retail studies

and advising on town centre and retail development strategies; preparing critiques of retail assessments submitted by advocacy planners and advising on planning applications for retail development; and providing Expert Witness services at Public Inquiries.

5. Advocacy planners tend to be generalists, taking on a wide range of such planning work, including retail applications. However, such consultancies will often employ some staff who, whilst also undertaking other work, do whatever retail planning work is available, in the process becoming retail planning specialists to a certain extent. There are few Planners in Britain who specialize exclusively in retail planning; and very few who specialize in advising local planning authorities¹.
6. Retail studies undertaken for local authorities are particularly demanding in a technical sense, because such studies form part of the evidence base for Local Plans, and so are potentially open to challenge by advocacy planners on behalf of their clients. And of course, high technical and professional standards and due objectivity in such work are what local authorities have a right to expect from their consultants. Critiques undertaken for local authorities of retail assessments submitted in support of planning applications are also technically demanding, because they may have to be defended at Public Inquiry.
7. For all planning consultancies, recruitment of Planners with substantial experience of retail planning is very difficult. It is not too difficult to find Planners who have some peripheral experience of retail planning, but recruiting genuine specialists is close to impossible. The result is that much retail planning is undertaken by non-specialists; and some does not provide reliable evidence of retail need and impact - even when undertaken for local planning authorities.
8. The lack of dedicated retail planning modules in planning degree courses is one reason for the lack of retail planning specialists. However, few planning students have sufficient knowledge of planning at the undergraduate or even postgraduate stage to be able to choose the field in which they want to specialize. It is also unwise to specialize too early in one's career, in any event. A second reason is that retail planning is widely perceived to be only 'number crunching' - which therefore puts off the non-numerate. Thirdly, it can be perceived as adversarial, with consultants acting for applicants and those acting for LPAs battling over the minutiae of data and assumptions.
9. This suggests that the role of the universities should be to focus on the context for retail planning; and provide education in the basic principles of it, but not the technical minutiae of application. This could include (but not necessarily be limited to):

¹ Other professions are also engaged in retail planning, in particular Chartered Surveyors and economists/geographers. Some such practitioners are dual qualified, e.g. as Chartered Surveyors and Chartered Town Planners. In this Paper the term 'Planners' is used loosely to describe all who are engaged in retail planning to any significant degree, whether or not they are Chartered Town Planners.

- National trends in retail development.
 - The development of national policies for town centres and retail development, from PPG13 of 1995, through PPG6 of 1996, to PPS6, PPS4 and the NPPF.
 - Locational issues of accessibility, sustainability and social inclusion.
 - The principles of retail capacity and forecasting.
 - Impact issues and principles of analysis.
 - Principles and application of the sequential approach.
 - The political dimensions to retail planning – jobs, impacts, resources for defense of policies, enabling development.
 - Accommodating needs for new retail development through positive planning for town centres.
 - Strategic choices in site allocation.
 - Retailers' and developers' preferences and requirements.
 - Town centre dynamics and strategies for improvement.
 - Principles of Town Centre Management.
10. Applied retail planning as a professional discipline is now almost entirely learnt on the job - unfortunately sometimes from others who themselves are non-specialists. Beyond broader contextual education by the universities as suggested above, the primary focus of retail planning training should therefore be job-related rather than academic. This suggests the establishment of short CPD modules focused specifically on the detailed application of retail planning. These would need to include at least the following:
- Methods of defining retail catchment areas.
 - Design of household interview surveys of shopping patterns, including sampling specification, questionnaire design and use of cross tabulations.
 - Demographic analysis and forecasting.
 - Sources of expenditure data and their use.

- Application of expenditure growth rates.
- Internet shopping and other special forms of trading.
- Design and use of retail capacity forecasting models.
- Shop floorspace surveys and other sources of shop floorspace data, and its limitations.
- Sourcing and use of retail sales density data.
- Modelling 'what if' development scenarios.
- Sensitivity testing.
- Retail impact analysis.
- Assessing qualitative needs for new retail development.
- Application of the sequential approach.
- Principles of positive planning for town centres to accommodate identified needs for new development.
- Assessment of town centre vitality and viability – including data sources and their use.
- Uses and design of on-street interview surveys of shoppers and other town centre users, and analysis of results including use of cross-tabulations.
- Design and use of other forms of attitudinal survey, including surveys of town centre businesses.
- Trends in the retail development market, and retailers' needs.
- Principles of development viability, including the effects if the CIL.
- Use of planning conditions and S106 Agreements to control the nature of permitted developments.
- Obligations and requirements of Expert Witnesses giving evidence in retail planning cases.

11. In the light of the discussion above, the principal aim would be to train up a cadre of retail planners to the standard needed for reliable retail planning for local authorities. Some may

be already employed by local authorities, but most will probably be in the consultancy sector. By raising standards to the level required for a reliable evidence base for Local Plans, standards of retail planning generally should rise as such knowledge becomes more widely disseminated. The quality of retail assessments produced to support planning applications should then also rise, since poor quality and highly subjective work will be more readily apparent. Retail planning will also be de-mystified and established as a rigorous professional discipline in its own right, which is subject to objective technical standards.

12. There are a number of possible ways in which such a two-pronged strategy (contextual education in the universities and applied training via CPD) to improve the quality of retail planning could be implemented. In the case of the **universities**, these could include the following:
 - In conjunction with the RTPI, the NRPF could develop a new syllabus for retail planning modules, to be recommended for inclusion in Planning degree courses.
 - The NRPF could canvass industry sponsorship to pay for experienced practitioners to teach degree level modules on a part-time basis, without becoming full-time academics.
 - The NRPF, probably in conjunction with the RTPI and the RICS, could lobby and canvass industry sponsorship and academic support for the establishment of one or more full or part-time Chairs in Retail Planning, in universities which provide the leading Planning courses.
 - The NRPF could commission and publish a 'standard textbook' on retail planning, which sets out how to undertake retail need and impact forecasting to rigorous objective standards.

13. In the case of **applied CPD training**, they could include:
 - The NRPF working with existing CPD providers to run structured retail planning modules, e.g. Planning Summer School or RTPI training courses; with the NRPF defining the syllabus and arranging teaching to a defined standard by experienced practitioners.
 - The NRPF setting up its own retail planning CPD courses, defining the syllabus, setting the standards, arranging the teaching; and potentially setting examinations and awarding a qualification, such as a 'NRPF Diploma in Retail Planning', perhaps in conjunction with a university.
 - The NRPF preparing standard specifications for retail planning work; then leaving it to the market to raise the performance of retail planners to that level.

- The NRPF commissioning and publishing research on aspects of retail planning which are currently subject to differences of interpretation, e.g. trading characteristics of superstore extensions, allowances for special forms of trading, town centre sales densities; so as improve the understanding and use of important retail planning parameters.
 - Further development of the NRPF website (perhaps including distance learning modules), such that it becomes the most widely accepted source of reference for its members on the objective technical standards and methods needed to apply government planning policies for town centres and retail planning.
14. Any of these approaches will take time and resources to organize. In the short term, the NRPF could therefore continue and strengthen its campaign to raise awareness of the issues – as has already been started through initial discussions with the RTPI and the Planning Officers’ Society, for example. In the longer term, a more radical approach may well be needed – if possible timed so that more retail planners are available when retail development starts to grow again after the recession.
15. The following **actions** for the NRPF are suggested:
- Circulate this Scoping Paper to additional potentially interested bodies, in particular the RICS, BCSC Educational Trust, and Planning Course Directors in the universities.
 - Meet relevant opinion formers and decision takers, to discuss the issues; and to seek support and sponsorship for a NRPF initiative to raise the profile of education for retail planning.
 - Engage other interested parties such as the Local Government Association, Planning Advisory Service, selected Planning Course Directors in the leading university planning schools, and other potential CPD retail planning course providers.
 - Depending upon the response to these approaches, refine the approach to be taken by the NRPF; and prepare detailed Proposals for initiatives by the NRPF, for submission to potential funding agencies.

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September 2012
