



## **The Retail Planning Knowledge Base Briefing Paper 2**

### **Food Deserts**

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## FOOD DESERTS

The term food desert was an evocative term which focused attention on areas where food provision was deemed inadequate. The term under-served markets more accurately reflects the level of provision and choice although it usually refers to a broader range of services than food retailing.



### Key Findings

1. The social exclusion agenda initially envisaged small scale retailing and community measures to redress disparities in levels of provision. Tight planning controls and the regeneration agenda however became influential, and the major retailers and in particular Tesco, became involved.
2. Although social exclusion agendas were initially important the business in the community agenda of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has become instrumental in fostering partnerships to promote regeneration. It is under this policy umbrella that most retail regeneration partnerships find their place.
3. There seems to be wide agreement of the need to 'do something' based on qualitative and quantitative analysis, analysis of provision and shopping habits
4. Frequently it has been hoped that these initiatives could deliver solutions to a wide range of problems from employment to diet. Initiatives have been more successful in delivering some of these than others.
5. Impacts on employment have been largely positive in the immediate area and have been important in renewal and regeneration.
6. Impacts on shopping behaviour are positive with improved access, increased walking to the store, more independent shopping and a more positive outlook.
7. Impacts on diet are disputed. Even the most optimistic admit that the potential impact would be limited to a few particularly disadvantaged groups.
8. In an under served area a significant proportion of shoppers will switch to the new store often clawing back trade to the area. Not all shoppers will switch and indeed new marginal groups can emerge depending on the location of the store in relation to particularly vulnerable and disadvantaged groups.

## Key projects

Three major academic projects have studied before and after effects of a major food retail-led regeneration development.

**Springburn and Shettleston, Glasgow** (Researchers: S. Cummins, A. Findlay, M. Petticrew, L. Sparks,) Study undertaken for the Department of Health, Reducing Health Inequalities Initiative (ref 121/7492). A before and after study of diet and health in Springburn following the opening of a Tesco hypermarket. A unique feature of this study was the use of a control area. Findings suggested that diet impacts could not be identified. Regeneration effects were positive in terms of the local economy, local retailing and employment.

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**Newcastle** (Researchers: M. White, J. Bunting, S. Raybauld, A. Adamson, I. Williams, J. Mathers) Study undertaken for Food Standards Agency. A study of the concept of the food desert and impacts on diet in a deprived area. Relationships between access and socio-economic variables shows that for most people there is access to modern food retail outlets although some people have to travel to achieve this. They were unable to establish a relationship between retail provision and diet although unhealthy eating was associated with living in a deprived area.

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**Seacroft, Leeds** (Researchers: N. Wrigley, A. Whelan, B. Margetts, D. Warm, E. Cannings) An ESRC sponsored project. A before and after study of the impact of Tesco Seacroft in Leeds. Qualitative and quantitative material was collected. The study showed that there were some particular groups of consumers whose diets improved as a result of changing shopping provision.

### Contacts

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## References

Cummins, S. and Macintyre, S.  
Food deserts: evidence and assumption in health policy making,  
**British Medical Journal**, 24<sup>th</sup> August, 2002, 436-438.

This paper challenges the use of the concept 'food desert' suggesting that then extensive use of the term has given it legitimacy even without adequate evidence that food deserts actually exist. Despite the lack of evidence based research about food deserts policy is already being implemented which assumes that they exist. The article concludes not that food deserts do not exist but that the evidence that they exist and that the policies being implemented are correct simply does not exist.

Food deserts

Cummins, S., Petticrew, M., Higgins, C., Findlay, A. and Sparks, L.  
Large scale food retailing as an intervention for diet and health: quasi-experimental evaluation of a natural experiment,  
**Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health**, 59, 2005, 1035-1040.

Findings from the study of a food retail intervention in Springburn in Glasgow used a 'quasi-experimental' design to ensure that changes in the intervention area were not merely symptomatic of broader changes. The potential impact on diet as the result of food retail interventions had important implications. No impact on diet was uncovered but an improvement in psychological health was discovered.

Diet, Food desert, Glasgow, Urban regeneration

Cummins, S., Petticrew, M., Sparks, L. and Findlay, A.  
Large scale food retail interventions and diet,  
**British Medical Journal**, 330, 2005, 683-684.

This article reports on the findings from the study of the large scale food intervention in Springburn in Glasgow. The conclusions suggested that there had been no significant impact on diet as a result of the store intervention.

Food desert, Glasgow, regeneration

Cummins, S., Findlay, A., Petticrew, M. and Sparks, L.  
Healthy cities: The impact of food-retail led regeneration on food access, choice and retail structure,  
**Built Environment**, 31(4), 2005, 288-301.

The paper arises from a study of diet and health related effects of a superstore in a deprived area of Glasgow, Springburn. The paper specifically presents the results of the impacts on retail structure showing that the superstore has not led to the closure of existing retail outlets, even in the fresh food sector, but has stimulated retailing in the area with lowered vacancy rates and greater retail employment in the area.

Diet, Food deserts, Glasgow, Urban regeneration

Department of Trade and Industry

**Business investment in under-served markets: an opportunity for businesses and communities,**

London: DTI, 2002, 50p.

This paper includes developments in under-served areas within the retail and non-retail sectors and engages with the business potential of these areas and ways in which new developments can be articulated to the mutual benefit of community and business. It includes examples such as Harlem Pathmark, Tesco involvement, Merry Hill and Castle Vale.

Urban regeneration

Guy, C.

Arid debates,

**Town and Country Planning**, 71(10), 2002, 246-247.

People living in deprived areas often seem to have lower levels of nutrition. Guy presents results from Seacroft in Leeds on the types of shops where these people actually purchase their main food shopping and how they perceive their shopping trips. Interestingly the majority travelled to a superstore which was outwith the Seacroft area. The travel did not seem to be perceived as a particular problem. Variations in nutrition seemed to be linked to social characteristics. The article concludes that people living in 'food deserts' find superstores to shop in. It also suggests that indeed superstores are their preferred shopping environment and that PAT 13's recommendations for small scale local retail development would not have met the needs of these areas in terms of the costs of foodstuffs.

Food deserts, Leeds, Social exclusion , Seacroft

Guy, C.

Neighbourhood retailing and food poverty: a case study in Cardiff,

**International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management**, 32(12), 2004, 577-581.

Within the context of the food desert debate the role of neighbourhood stores contribute to food availability and in particular fresh food availability. This article looks at the role of neighbourhood retailing in providing a healthy diet in deprived areas. The fresh food offer in neighbourhood stores is often limited and in the case of symbol group stores expensive.

Neighbourhood retailing, Food deserts

Guy, C., Clarke, G. and Eyre, H.

Food retail change and the growth of food deserts: a case study of Cardiff,

**International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management**, 32(2), 2004, 72-88.

Accessibility scores are calculated for access to food retailers in Cardiff. It is shown that a divide in access scores has developed between better off and deprived areas. Data for a twenty year period is used for the city of Cardiff. The study is contextualised within the food desert debate and focuses on changing patterns of access to food retailing. The conclusions were somewhat mixed. Large food store development has not only benefited the higher income areas although increased access has been greater in these areas. Many of the poorest EDs have become worse off in terms of access to high quality food retailing.

Food deserts, Food retailing, Superstores, Cardiff

Hitchman, C., Christie, J., Harrison, M. and Lang, T.

**Inconvenience food: the struggle to eat well on a low income**,  
London: DEMOS, 2002, 63p. 1841800503

The results of an in-depth study of coping strategies for buying food on a low income. Ethnographic techniques, diaries and in-depth interviews were used to obtain detailed data for a small number of low income households living in both rural and urban situations. Shopping strategies in relation to budgetary constraints and travel solutions for obtaining shopping are discussed. From a planning perspective a key finding is that small shop provision in deprived areas would not offer low income families the type of shopping opportunity they require.

Consumer groups, Food deserts, Food retailing, Social exclusion

Lavin, M.

Supermarket access and consumer well-being,

**International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management**, 33(5), 2005, 388-398.

This study is contextualised in the UK literature as well as the US literature on the link between food accessibility and healthy eating with particular reference to the appropriateness of a large supermarket intervention in a deprived area. In considering whether this was an appropriate intervention the author concludes that the expertise of a larger company (in this case Pathmark) was more likely to be able to ensure the supply and management of the fresh food sector and procurement of healthy foods than a locally based initiative or smaller scale development.

Food deserts, Diet

Moorland, K., Wing, S., Diez-Rous, I. and Poole, C.

Neighbourhood characteristics associated with the location of food stores and service places,

**American Journal of Preventative Medicine**, 22, 2002, 23-29.

This study is concerned with whether locality is a factor in the hindering people's ability to achieve a healthier diet. It examines the distribution of food stores in an American city looking at the different types of provision available with specific reference to the availability of healthy foods. The results support the proposition that

there are differentials in availability of healthy foods and that this will influence dietary choices.

Food deserts, Food retailing

Office of the Deputy Prime Minister

**Business in the community: under-served markets,**

London: ODPM, 17p. (Available online at [www.bitc.org.uk](http://www.bitc.org.uk))

A guide to government envisaged private participation in developments in under-served areas including the provision of retail facilities in order to progress government policy on exclusion and community welfare.

Urban regeneration

Rex, D. and Blair, A.

Unjust des(s)erts: food retailing and neighbourhood health in Sandwell,

**International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management**, 31(9), 2003, 459-465.

The research in Sandwell investigated the degree to which local shops provided foods which would offer a healthy diet. Mapping of shops showed that most residents could not walk (500m) to a shop selling a minimum of eight fruit or vegetables. On this basis a concept 'healthy food desertification' is suggested. Retailer interviews suggested that whilst there was consumer demand for these products the problems associated with this type of produce discouraged them from stocking them. Additionally poor hygiene and shop environments discouraged purchases of fruit and vegetables in these shops.

Neighbourhood Retailing, Food deserts

Social Exclusion Unit

**National strategy for neighbourhood renewal: policy action team audit,**

London: Cabinet Office, Social Exclusion Unit, 2001, 14p. Available on-line from [www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/seu/2001/pataudit/13.htm](http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/seu/2001/pataudit/13.htm).

This document takes the work of the Social Exclusion Unit's findings a step further towards action. Recommendation 2ii states that proactive planning should mean that local shopping access is a core issue for local regeneration funding, that planners should work at a neighbourhood level to identify viable retail sites, communities should be helped to achieve their service goals, a range of services should be grouped together in local centres and that developments greater than 1000sq metres should be discouraged outside existing centres. This is in line with PPG6.

Neighbourhood retailing, Social exclusion

Whelan, A., Wrigley, N. , Warm, D. and Cannings, E.

Life in a 'Food Desert',

**Urban Studies**, 39(11), 2002, 2083-2100.

This article reports on focus group sessions undertaken in Seacroft in Leeds prior to the opening of Tesco in the area. The aim of the focus groups was to find out which aspects of shopping were particularly important to the residents of Seacroft. The families with older children, for example, favoured going to a major superstore for their weekly shopping but those with toddler age children sought cheaper alternatives and were less concerned with diet and food quality. The findings relate to small groups of respondents selected from particular social groups such as mothers at college, toddler group and exercise club.

Food deserts, Social exclusion, Seacroft, Leeds, Tesco

White, M., Bunting, J., Raybould, S., Adamson, A., Williams, I., Mathers, J.

**Do food deserts exist? A multi-level geographical analysis of the relationship between retail food access, socio-economic position and dietary intake,**

London: Food Standards Agency, 2001. (Available online at [www.food.gov.uk/science/research/researchinfo/nutritionresearch/foodacceptability/n09programme/n09projectlist/n09010/n09010r](http://www.food.gov.uk/science/research/researchinfo/nutritionresearch/foodacceptability/n09programme/n09projectlist/n09010/n09010r) )

Report of the Newcastle based research project into differential access to food outlets. Relationships between access and socio-economic variables show that for most people there is access to modern food retail outlets although some people have to travel to achieve this. They were unable to establish a relationship between retail provision and diet although unhealthy eating was associated with living in a deprived area.

Newcastle, Food deserts

Wrigley, N.

'Food Deserts' in British cities: policy context and research priorities,  
**Urban Studies**, 39(11), 2002, 2029-2040.

This is the article which introduces the set of articles on food deserts published in *Urban Studies*. It is a useful piece in tracing how the concept of food deserts came onto the political and research agendas. It shows how the concept of a food desert captured the imagination of policy makers. The way in which diet and food shopping issues became related to health issues is discussed. The article comments on how policy got ahead of evidence based research and discusses the complexities and variety of findings on the concept of food deserts which have been produced by researchers so far.

Food deserts, PPG6, Urban regeneration

Wrigley, N. , Guy, C. and Lowe, M.

Urban regeneration, social inclusion and large store development; the Seacroft development in context,

**Urban Studies**, 39(11), 2002, 2101-2114.

The main focus of this article is a discussion of the planning context of large store development in deprived areas or food deserts. The social inclusion agenda and particularly PAT 13 focused attention on these areas but it did not envisage the development of large stores in deprived areas envisaging smaller scale local

developments. Then the question of whether these stores are the most appropriate solution or merely a matter of expediency is tackled.

Leeds, PPG6, Seacroft, Social exclusion, Superstores

Wrigley, N. , Warm, D. and Margetts, B.

Deprivation, diet and food retail access: Findings from the Leeds 'Food deserts' study, **Environment and Planning A**, 35 (1), 2003, 151-188.

The study of Tesco in Leeds Seacroft district has suggested that this non-health intervention may have had a positive if modest impact on the health at least on the margins. It has also had an impact on the number of people walking for shopping. This paper examines the effect of the store on the groups who switched to shopping in the new store. The majority of these were switching from limited range discounters. In aggregate terms little impact on diet was found after statistical analyses but more detailed analysis showed that there was an impact on those who had had the least healthy diets when they switched from a limited discounter to Tesco. Groups who switched from one Tesco to another showed no change.

Food deserts, Leeds, Seacroft, Tesco

Wrigley, N. , Warm, D., Margetts, B. and Whelan, A.

Assessing the impact of improved retail access on diet in a 'Food Desert': A preliminary report, **Urban Studies**, 39(11), 2002, 2061-2082.

A presentation of results from the study of Tesco in Seacroft in Leeds. No association between diet and access to a car or transport to a store could be found. The type of retail outlet patronised by respondents was found to be important. Those patronising limited range discount stores for fruit and vegetable purchases appeared to have a less good diet. Switching away from these stores following the opening of Tesco appears to result in some improvement for those formerly with the worst diets.

Food deserts, Leeds, Seacroft, Social exclusion, Tesco

## Web Sites

[www.fooddeserts.org](http://www.fooddeserts.org)

[www.geog.leeds.ac.uk/projects](http://www.geog.leeds.ac.uk/projects)

[www.renewal.net](http://www.renewal.net)

[www.bitc.org.uk](http://www.bitc.org.uk)

[www.odpm.gov.uk](http://www.odpm.gov.uk)

[www.food.gov.uk](http://www.food.gov.uk)

[www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)