

SUBURBAN WARRIORS

Retail investment has swung from out-of-town to city centres. Now the areas where most people live are fighting back, says Brian Waters

Tim Williams, former special advisor to David Miliband, says the suburbs "are the lost children of public policy... but actually most people live in them." Now, though, voices are getting louder in support of the suburbs and their revival after years of benign neglect.

A particular gripe is the decline of suburban and district centres, caught between the 1960s boom in out-of-town shopping and the more recent boost given to city centres by PPG6 and its successor planning policy, PPS6.



Bluewater: a swing from out-of-town shopping to city centre leapfrogged the suburbs

Some of those promoting a revitalisation of district centres and the suburbs, particularly in London, argue that PPG6 policies need relaxing so that retail investment doesn't all get directed to city centres. But is this perception correct?

After a decade of intensive out-of-town development, the Conservative government brought in PPG6 and the "sequential test" (centre before edge-of-town, edge-of-town before out-of-town) in 1996. The pipeline of permitted schemes was built out until about 2000. In 1994, less than 14 per cent of retail development in England was in town centres. By 2005, this had risen to 35 per cent, the highest level since the 1980s.

It took 10 years for the real effect of PPG6 to show on the ground and, while extending the sequential test to business parks, offices, leisure development and housing, PPS6 maintains the same direction of "town centres first".

Michael Bach, author at DoE/ODPM of both PPG6 and PPS6, does

not believe that 35 per cent is too much.

If anything, the trend for food retailers to add non-food to their offer is continuing to entice car-owners out of town at the expense of district and suburban centres in particular.

The recent imposition of controls on mezzanine additions will do little to discourage the trend.

London, as always, is something of a special case, and new shopping centres at White City, Stratford City and Brent Cross will affect

centres in their shadow. Equally, big regional centres will affect the prospect for investment in medium-sized towns.

Bach sees PPS6 as supporting investment in retail development. Some of the most ambitious developments, such as Grosvenor's Liverpool 1 regeneration scheme, depend on the policy not being relaxed.

There is always a political risk, with the Competition Commission looking at supermarkets and the Treasury circling planning policy with the Barker Review, but the revival of city centres and increases in the density of residential living have broad support.

Michael Bach predicts continuing pressure for larger modern shops in and out of town; that older out-of-town retail warehouse sites in poor locations will become available for housing; continuing pressure to enlarge supermarkets and hypermarkets as their non-food offers expand; and a continuing increase in town-centre shopping schemes, with many in the

pipeline for the next five years.

He goes on to note that small towns and district centres are caught between the growth of larger centres and the strength of supermarkets and out-of-town retail and need to face the challenge by developing new strategies. He thinks the main impact on suburban centres will be from the continued expansion and development of out-of-centre supermarkets and their increasing non-food sales.

Bach, with Mark Thurstain-Goodwin, of Geofutures, is looking at the issue for the BCSC and they are due to report shortly. They are looking at the extent to which the current success of major grocers is partly based on their ability to offer non-food goods in locations suited to car-borne shopping and that town centres are held back by poor access and the high cost of parking.

The project aims to provide a critical analysis of the factors likely to influence the location of retailing activity over the next 10 years. Trends in planning will be covered in depth and considered alongside the economics of retailing and the power of consumer demands.

Michael Bach criticises planning authorities for missing the point of PPG6: "They tend to use it as a development control tool and have failed positively to identify new sites and opportunities. Authorities have failed to develop strategies for promoting suburban centres and have not used PPG/S6 effectively in guiding new supermarket floorspace. This is the main point, rather than suggesting that PPG/S6 has gone too far."

In short, planning authorities should do a bit of planning if suburban and district centres are to evolve and thrive. **RPR**

Brian Waters is an architect and planner, principal of the Boisot Waters Cohen Partnership (www.bwcp.co.uk) and chairman of the London Planning & Development Forum