

# **Parliamentary statement on town centre planning policies**

## **Parliamentary Statement 10 April 2003**

The Government's planning policy on town centres is set out in:

- Planning Policy Guidance Note 6 (PPG6): Town Centres and Retail Developments (June 1996);
- the Parliamentary Answers given by the then Planning Ministers, Nick Raynsford on 5 December 1997 and Richard Caborn on 11 February 1999 (the Caborn statement), together with Mr Caborn's contribution to a debate in the House of Commons on 11 March 1999;
- the Government Responses to Select Committees in July 1997 and May 2000;
- PPG11: Regional Planning (October 2000); and
- PPG13: Transport (March 2001).

The policy has operated successfully since 1996 but there is increasing evidence of differences in interpretation. This statement sets out the policy and how the First Secretary of State intends to operate it when determining planning applications and appeals. He expects local planning authorities to apply the same policy when determining planning applications.

### **Policy Tests**

The purpose of the policy is to sustain and enhance the vitality and viability of town and other existing centres by focusing retail, leisure and other key town centre uses which attract a lot of people within those centres. PPG6 emphasises the plan-led approach to promoting development in town centres, both through plan policies and the identification of locations and sites for development. It sets out a number of tests that must be satisfied if applications to develop retail or leisure facilities are to be successful. The Caborn statement further clarified the application of the test of need and the sequential approach as applying to proposals to develop at edge of centre or out of centre locations which are not in accordance with an up to date development plan strategy that is itself consistent with PPG6.

In summary, applicants must:

- demonstrate that there is a need for the development;
- having established that such a need exists, adopt a sequential approach to site selection;
- consider the impact on nearby centres; and
- provide evidence on the site's accessibility by a choice of means of transport, as demonstrated by a transport assessment (see PPG13), the likely changes in travel patterns over the relevant catchment area, and any significant environmental impacts.

All these tests apply equally to proposals for extensions as well as to new developments.

### **Need**

Proposals which would be located at an edge of centre or out of centre location and which:

- are not in accordance with an up to date development plan strategy; or
- are in accordance with the development plan but that plan is out of date, is inconsistent with national planning policy guidance, or otherwise fails to establish adequately the need for new retail and leisure development and other development to which PPG6 applies,

should be required to demonstrate both a retail need for additional facilities and that a sequential approach has been applied in selecting the location for the site.

Some applicants have sought to make a distinction between quantitative and qualitative need for new retail facilities. PPG6 does not make this distinction although evidence on both has frequently been presented at planning inquiries. The First Secretary of State accepts that need can be expressed in quantitative and qualitative terms but considers that evidence presented on need is becoming increasingly and unnecessarily complicated. He therefore places greater weight on quantitative need for new retail provision to be defined in terms of additional floorspace for the types of retail development distinguished in PPG6, which are comparison and convenience shopping. Where both comparison and convenience goods are proposed to be sold within the same development, the First Secretary of State will expect to have evidence on the need for each type of goods.

Regeneration has also been argued to be a component of the need for additional retail floorspace. There is no Government guidance that supports this interpretation. The First Secretary of State considers that the contribution that a proposed development might make to the regeneration of a site or its area could be a material consideration to be taken into account in determining an application, but does not consider it to be an aspect of retail need.

Equally, the net additional employment created by a proposed development is not an indicator of retail need but may be a material consideration.

For the avoidance of doubt, the First Secretary of State does not regard regeneration or employment creation as aspects of retail need for the purposes of the tests set out in PPG6 and the Caborn statement.

The principles outlined above apply also to leisure uses.

### **Sequential Approach**

PPG6 seeks to promote sustainable development by locating major generators of travel in existing centres, where access by a choice of means of transport, not only by car, is easy and convenient.

PPG6 requires a sequential approach to be adopted in selecting sites for new development. Both local planning authorities and developers should be able to demonstrate that all town centre options have been thoroughly assessed before less central sites are considered for development for key town centre uses. This means that the first preference should be for town centre sites, followed by edge of centre sites and only then out of centre sites in locations that are accessible by a choice of means of transport.

In providing evidence that they have complied with this guidance, applicants must demonstrate flexibility and realism in terms of the format, design and scale of their development, and the amount of car parking, tailoring these to fit local circumstances.

The First Secretary of State will follow the approach set out in the Government's Response to the Environment Select Committee in 2000. Where a class of goods is capable of being sold from a

town centre location, that is the preferred location for the retail development and he will expect to see flexibility in the scale and format of a proposed development to meet that objective. A retailing format that can only be provided at an out of town location is not regarded as meeting the requirements of this policy.

The First Secretary of State does not consider that developers and retailers always take sufficient account of this element of planning policy and further considers that this is potentially undermining the Government's objectives for town centres and its policies to achieve development that makes efficient and sustainable use of land and reduces social exclusion. He will look for evidence of, for example, more efficient design and layout, greater use of multi-storey developments, more efficient car parking provision, mixed-use development and opportunities for home delivery services. Where development consists of defined elements, such as a retail warehouse park or a grouping of retail or leisure uses, the First Secretary of State expects developers and retailers to consider the degree to which constituent parts of the development could be accommodated on more central sites.

In applying the sequential approach, the relevant centres in which to search for sites will depend on the nature and scale of the proposed development and the catchment that the development seeks to serve, as set out in the Caborn statement. The scale of such proposals should also be appropriately related to the centre and catchment that the development seeks to serve. The First Secretary of State therefore wishes to make it clear that development that would serve a wide catchment should be located in a centre that serves a similar catchment area.

### **Bulky Goods**

PPG6 recognises that some types of retailing, such as large stores selling bulky goods, may not be able to find suitable sites either in or on the edge of town centres. The First Secretary of State considers that it rests with developers and retailers to demonstrate that a majority of their goods cannot be sold from town centre stores. He does not consider that developments involving the sale of bulky goods are exempted from meeting the policy tests in PPG6 and subsequent clarifications.

### **Revised PPG6**

The First Secretary of State will be issuing revised planning policy guidance for town centres and retail developments for consultation in due course.