

# 1 CONTENTS

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## **Appendices**

Case Studies (separate volume)

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### **Background**

- 1.1 Town centres have a role that extends far beyond places in which people shop and transact business. They are, literally and metaphorically, at the heart of the communities they serve. The importance of town centres is therefore not simply their commercial viability but also their contribution as a location for jobs, services, community development, marketing and promotion.
- 1.2 This Study analyses the current position of town centres in Northern Ireland and sets out recommendations to ensure their reinvigoration as part of the ongoing process of economic and social renaissance. Town centres in Northern Ireland have an individuality that many centres in the rest of the United Kingdom have lost – this is an asset that should be exploited for the future. This Study sets out practical proposals which are intended to exploit the strengths of town centres in Northern Ireland as much as identifying the extent to which town centres need to be ‘protected’ from new development.
- 1.3 The relationship between the Government and local authorities in Northern Ireland are different than on the mainland. District Councils are more limited in terms of powers and resources in that they do not, for example, have planning or housing powers. Their limited statutory duties and their limited resource base means that they are not in a position to initiate and implement major physical regeneration initiatives such as environmental improvement schemes or comprehensive development. There is consequently an obligation on the Government to take a lead in the regeneration of town centres.
- 1.4 This Report was undertaken prior to the reorganisation of government Departments in late 1999. In order to properly represent the comments made the references to Departments have not been amended – other than in respect to recommendations that directly impinge on the new structure. One key area of concern raised in the report was the need to ensure clear accountability. It is important that one Government Department has lead responsibility for taking forward the town centre regeneration agenda. It is suggested that this role falls to the Department for Social Development under the new structure, in consultation with the Department of Regional Development. There is of course also a move towards more local democracy and this will involve more responsibility at the local level.

### **The Brief**

- 1.5 This Study into the Reinvigoration of Town Centres was commissioned by the Department of the Environment (Northern Ireland). EDAW was commissioned, in September 1999, by the Regional Development Office to lead a consultancy team. The team included Oscar Faber (transport consultants), Lisney (chartered surveyors) and Kriterion (conservation planners). The objectives of the study were to:
  - i. Identify the major factors influencing the changes experienced in town centres in Northern Ireland;
  - ii. Examine current Government policies and other factors which affect towns; and
  - iii. Identify what changes are needed to effect improvement.
- 1.6 The consultancy team agreed with the inter - departmental steering group headed by the DOE (NI) that the key tasks in meeting this Brief were:

- i. The preparation of an overview of the current state of the region's town centres based on a sample of eight towns;
- ii. A review of Departmental policies and programmes for the promotion of town centres of regional towns and small towns;
- iii. Consultation with town centre stakeholders and the development of recommendations on issues affecting the prosperity, business competitiveness and the social and community fabric to town centres - with particular reference to social need; and
- iv. To make recommendations in respect to - planning, transport and access, physical environment, urban housing, community services, leisure, business improvement districts and Town Centre management.

## **Study Methodology**

1.7 The approach was based on undertaking 10 tasks over a fourteen week programme:

Task 1 : To refine and agree the proposed work programme;

Task 2: To review relevant departmental policy and programme documents agreed with the Steering Group, and to undertake a wide ranging consultation process.;

Task 3 : Visiting the eight towns and listening workshops ( This included basic survey work allied to consultation with key local stakeholders);

Task 4: To undertake a review of town centre property markets in Northern Ireland;

Task 5: To undertake a health check of each of the eight towns;

Task 6: To present a progress report to the Steering Group;

Task 7: To undertake a best practice review;

Task 8: To facilitate a Policy and Programme Workshop;

Task 9 : To scope out broad intervention programmes for each town centre;

Task 10: To draft a final report.

1.8 This Report provides the following outputs:

### **An Overview**

1.9 The development of a strategic overview of town centres in Northern Ireland is founded on a mix of desk research and survey work. The Study includes the collation of relevant information on a wide range of issues that impact on town centres - together with original research and survey work.

### **A Policy Review**

1.10 This includes the collection and analysis of policy documents and comparison with documents from mainland UK. This has included not only the analysis of written information but also the results of interviews with Government officials.

### **Eight Case Studies**

1.11 Eight case studies were selected by the client as typical of town centres in Northern Ireland. The Study does not include detailed land use and socio-economic analyses but rather uses

the case studies to verify strategic analysis and to focus on the key issues facing each town centre.

### **Best Practice Notes**

- 1.12 This involves identifying examples of best practice in town centre reinvigoration from a variety of sources and identifying the best practice which can be applied to the situation in Northern Ireland.

## 2. THE DRIVERS OF CHANGE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

### Introduction

2.1 Northern Ireland towns have retained distinctive identities and many still serve largely rural hinterlands. The pressures which some town centres are now facing emerge from a number of drivers of change that need to be understood if their impact is to be managed.

2.2 The success or otherwise of town centres depends upon a wide range of variables and the measures of success chosen. It is impossible to categorically establish ‘success’ without a set of measures that are universally acceptable. It is relatively easy to assess town centres in terms of the level of vacancies for example – but this may be the result of a variety of factors and whilst vacancies may be an obvious measure it is perhaps not very useful. This section considers the underlying factors that influence success in town centres.

### Defining Measures of Success

#### Vital and Viable Town Centres

5.76 Vital and Viable Town Centres (DOE, 1994) argues that the elements of a healthy town centre are:

- Attractions;
- Accessibility;
- Amenity; and
- Actions.

5.77 *Attractions* include those facets of the town centre that are able to draw people into the centre to use it. The critical factors in this regard are the diversity of attractions and their critical mass. Town centres are multi- functional centres – they provide a range of services for consumers (in the broadest sense of the word). These uses include:

- Retailing (multiples, shopping centres, markets, specialist independents);
- Services (professional, civic, health, education, religious, children’s facilities);
- Arts, culture and entertainment (pubs/bars, restaurants/cafes/hotels, libraries/museums, theatres/cinemas/music, sport/leisure, events/festivals);
- Business space (small business centres, offices, workshops/distribution, studios); and
- Residential (sheltered/elderly, student, young person, family).

2.5 The diversity of attractions needs to be balanced by critical mass – not only is the presence of attractions that is important but also the number of attractions and types of attractions necessary to provide a sense of choice and of concentration.

2.6 *Accessibility* is about mobility and linkages. Mobility is the cost (in money and time terms) of getting to a centre from your home or other point of origin. Linkages refer to the ease of accessing centres in terms of the availability of car parking, the location of bus centres etc. Commercial ‘success’ is traditionally seen to rely heavily upon the ease of access to and parking within town centres for private cars.

2.7 Accessibility includes consideration of the needs of :

- Private cars (car ownership levels, ease of flow, signposting, peripheral parking, short stay car parking, charges);
- Foot/bicycles (pedestrian networks, traffic-free areas, signage, cycle routes/tracks);
- Delivery vehicles (loading bays, weight restrictions, service roads, limited access);
- Public transport (priority measures, bus services, train services, public transport networks, user friendly stations/pick up points, special services such as schools/coaches/taxis);
- Special needs (dropped kerbs, disabled parking/shopmobility, access for all, seating, design for the partially sighted).

5.76 *Amenity* is concerned with how pleasant a centre is as a place to be. In broad terms amenity involves town centre users in having a sense of security in using a centre and also a sense of identity. This includes consideration of:

- Streetscape (hard landscaping, lighting, perceptions of safety, appearance/cleanliness, street furniture, maintenance);
- Private space (usage, personalisation, appearance, condition);
- Townscape (gateways/interchanges, signage, distinctive area, landmarks); and
- Public space (public art, appropriate landscaping, perceptions of safety, usage).

2.8 *Action* refers to making things happen – which is a function of organisational capacity and resourcing.

2.9 The ‘Vital and Viable Town Centres’ approach adopted is based upon the concept of vitality (how busy a centre is at different times and in different parts) and viability (the ability of the centre to attract continuing investment to maintain the fabric of the centre and allow for improvement and adaptation to change).

2.10 Vital and Viable Town Centres was a comprehensive analysis of the factors that make town centres successful. It also included a Health Check Procedure which has been used as the basis for the Health Check used for the eight case studies.

### **Centres of Excellence**

2.11 In contrast a private sector based approach to measuring success is provided by Centres of Excellence, published by The British Chambers of Commerce in July 1998. The report is founded upon the belief that ‘The town centre must be recognised as a vital engine of economic growth (British Chambers of Commerce, 1998).’ The Report concluded that ‘sustainable and prosperous town centres can only result from strategic planning, active management and true public/private partnerships.’ It further suggests that each of the key stakeholders has a role to play in the process of sustainable regeneration.

Businesses should:

- Play an active part in strategic decision making processes;
- Recognise the importance of their environment and play their beneficial role in the local community;
- Recognise how their behaviour and that of their employees may add to infrastructural problems;
- Recognise public funding constraints and pledge resources to schemes outwith local authorities’ statutory duties.

Chambers of Commerce should:

- Act as key interface between local authorities and businesses;
- Play a leading role in promoting the town centre;
- Provide timely and high quality feedback to local authorities;
- Work with /employ the Town Centre Manager to ensure wider business community involvement with town centre strategies; and
- Ensure that businesses are not ‘hounded for funds’ but are targeted as part of a public /private partnership with clear project goals and evaluation mechanisms.

Local authorities should:

- Understand the importance of business in contributing to the growth of local economies;
- Recognise the value which local business can add to the statutory consultation process;
- Play a leading role in developing public/private partnerships to improve local decision making;
- Integrate the town centre within overall economic development plans – especially with regard to access issues, planning and strategies to stimulate new investment;
- Take into account the significant contribution to funding which businesses already make through the business rate; and
- Undertake initiatives to develop, manage and promote the town centre.

Development Agencies should:

- Develop a mechanism for assessing towns within a region and target new investment in line with specific town centre needs and development opportunities;
- Play a role in determining the impact assessments of any future out-of-town developments;
- Co-ordinate local access plans to be integrated into transport strategies for the region; and
- Moderate the adverse consequences of competition between towns by formulating balanced economic development strategies.

Central government should:

- Show a commitment to town centres through the publication of a White Paper for a new city centre policy highlighting the importance of effective town centres as a component of business competitiveness;
- Provide greater assistance in dealing with out of town development proposals;
- Ensure that national challenge funding directed to town centres is based on clear partnerships and business involvement;
- Provides clear guidance to local authorities in implementing the Integrated Transport White Paper.

5.76 The Report suggests that the factors which make a town centre attractive to business and successful are an adequate supply of the following:

- Premises
- Labour/workforce;
- Variety and choice of shops and services;
- Suppliers/customers
- Safe and quality environment;
- Efficient planning;
- Efficient public and private sector services;
- Access/transport choice; and
- High quality housing.

- 5.77 The Report also identifies the key challenges for town centres over the next ten years as:
- Maximising development potential and regenerating the town without increasing congestion;
  - Developing flexible planning which while respecting the local plan actively encourages the changes required to reverse economic decline;
  - Adapting to changes in business practice;
  - Coping with demographic changes such as an ageing population;
  - Providing for new skills requirements;
  - Further decentralisation and urban sprawl; and
  - The competition between towns combined with the continuing competitive threat from out-of-town developments

### **The Social, Economic and Public Policy Drivers**

- 2.14 The drivers for change which will impact on town centres are common to all developed economies in Europe. However their resultant impacts will vary between nations and between regions. The following analysis considers the drivers that will be of specific relevance to Northern Ireland.
- 2.15 Traditionally, in Northern Ireland, the role and function of town centres has been underpinned by a broad range of retail activity. More than this they have been a focus for a range of cultural and leisure activities which have provided important social, as well as economic cohesion for communities. Some town centres have acted as residential locations. They may also be transport hubs and, importantly, places to meet and interact. It is this diversity of activity which can sustain the *vitality and viability* of town and city centres.
- 2.16 Many town and city centres in mainland UK have gone through radical changes as a result of the emergence of new forms of retailing, and the growth of employment and leisure facilities in edge of town locations. The underlying causes of change lie in the shift towards a service based economy and the increasing dominance of the private car.
- 2.17 These changes will continue to have profound implications for Northern Ireland's towns and cities - which were designed for the needs of a different economic order. Most towns and cities are facing stronger competition to retain their former economic role and more importantly to identify new economic roles often based on providing higher value services. This kind of economic re-positioning increasingly requires the public and private sectors to work in partnership to establish, develop and promote these new economic roles. This form of partnership is not yet well established in Northern Ireland.
- 2.18 In looking to the future it is important to have an understanding of the wider social and economic drivers that have shaped town centres. This section presents an overview of these factors. In addition we highlight a number of emerging policy responses to help reinvigorate town centres which can be seen to reflect these social and economic drivers.

### **Technology**

- 2.19 Advances in information and communications technologies (ICTs) are transforming the developed world from an industrial to a knowledge economy. These technological developments have important implications for our town centres: as communication technology increases business mobility, or indeed the way that business transactions are conducted, the role of town centres as commercial locations can come under threat. On-line

banking and financial services are already well established, home retailing is just taking off and an increasing proportion of learning, leisure and entertainment is enjoyed in the home.

- 2.20 But while the development of ICTs have threatened some traditional high street activities, it is clear that they also open up new opportunities for town and city centres to exploit. Town centres can provide the combination of excellent telecommunication access, alongside some of the more traditional virtues of the city centre such as good public transport links and an appropriate supply of office space.
- 2.21 This emphasis on areas with a large stock of sophisticated customers is likely to favour town centres as long as the cost of laying more advanced telecommunications infrastructures remains relatively high. Fibre optic cable has provided the basis for recent networks in UK. However the laying of cable is still expensive, therefore the economics of the operation inevitably favour urban areas. If however the cost of cabling, or installing new types of networks, falls the cost advantage of central and ‘dense’ areas may well be eroded.
- 2.22 While major urban centres stand to benefit from the ongoing development of ICTs it is clear that the impact of technological change is and is likely to remain uneven across the urban hierarchy. Towns with no critical mass, little intensive, or declining economic activity are likely to remain ‘disconnected’ from sophisticated communication networks, contributing to a growing gap between the ‘information rich’ and the ‘information poor’.
- 2.23 Counter-urbanisation in Cities & Residential Development Pressure in Towns. For the last thirty years or more social geographers have documented the over-arching trend of counter urbanisation or dispersal, that is the growth and spread of activity away from major urban centres. Counter-urbanisation has had impacts not only in terms of housing, but also employment, retailing and entertainment. This process has also been accelerated by the dramatic increase in the use of the private car (UK car ownership increased ten times between 1950-1991 and could rise by a further 70% over the next 30 years). Commuting distances have also increased significantly and the annual distance travelled increased by 20% between 1989-1994.
- 2.24 Nevertheless these macro level trends do not constitute a counsel of despair for *all* of our town and city centres. In the light of increasing restrictions on private car access to city centres it is possible that high quality living environments in central urban areas are likely to become more attractive to certain types of residents.
- 2.25 The trend of counter urbanisation has also brought with it particular problems of growth in some attractive smaller towns. Residential development pressure can bring positive benefits in terms of securing the buoyancy of town centre retailers, however it can also place pressure on other parts of the physical and social infrastructure such as the road network, schools or cultural facilities. These are issues that has had to be considered in *Shaping our Future – the Draft Regional Strategic Framework for Northern Ireland*.

### **Retail: the Growth of the Large Multiples**

- 2.24 The transformation to a service based economy in the UK has had a significant impact on both work and leisure patterns. Families now shop on a weekly, rather than daily basis and often outside ‘normal’ working hours. Higher incomes mean that ownership of freezers and refrigerators is almost universal. Thus the appeal of ‘one-stop shopping’ offered by large food retailers, typically located on edge of town sites, has increased. This market trend has however been delayed in Northern Ireland due to the reluctance, until recently, of the major retailers to invest in new stores.

- 2.25 These social and cultural trends, combined by real economic growth fuelled a massive (40%) increase in retail spending during the 1980s in the UK. The fastest growing areas were DIY and furniture and furnishings, although food sales also grew at a faster rate than overall retail spending. The recession of the early 1990s saw a decrease in the rate of retail growth, with the exception of food sales.
- 2.26 The importance of the multiple retailer in both the convenience (food) and comparison (non-food) sectors has increased steadily since the 1950s. By 1976 large multiples with an annual turnover of more than £5 million accounted for more than 51.4% of all retail turnover and this figure had risen to 63% by 1991. In the convenience sector, the corresponding figures were 50.3% and 78.8% respectively.
- 2.27 A key feature of the increasing dominance of the multiples is the growth in the average size of retail outlets. The average net sales area of a new Sainsburys store was 5,800 sq.ft in 1960 but had increased to around 32,300 sq.ft by 1990 and is still increasing. Larger stores offer clear benefits in the form of increased and more flexible product ranges, economies of scale in stockholding terms (although the introduction of just in time distribution approaches has reduced the need to retain stock on-site) and greater flexibility in the use of labour.
- 2.28 The UK has a higher concentration of retailing in purpose built, urban shopping centres than any other country in the world. This has had both positive and negative impacts: whilst the range and choice on offer has undoubtedly improved, the individuality of many centres has been lost (although this has happened less in Northern Ireland where individuality has been retained). The rapid development of EPOS (electronic point of sale) equipment has also had a significant impact on the retail sector particularly for larger firms with substantial economies of scale. For smaller firms, the benefits of EPOS have been limited to more rapid and accurate billing and improved stock control.
- 2.29 Town centres, by virtue of their inability to cater effectively for the private car have faced increasing competition to retain their share of retail and leisure spending. Increasingly it is the smaller, secondary centres that are now having to address these kinds of threats. The 'new' retail market is more developed in mainland UK due to the longer period of exposure to these trends. The impact in Northern Ireland is likely to be different – particularly given the scale of new floorspace being developed over a short period of time.

### **Demographic Change**

- 2.30 Changing demographic trends also have important implications for our town centres. The UK population in the main is ageing and this has implications for both accessibility to city centres and the types of retail, leisure, community and cultural facilities located there. In smaller towns the retention of a critical mass of accessible and affordable local services is of growing significance to older age groups.
- 2.31 While younger cohorts of the population are declining in absolute terms it is clear a significant proportion of 15-30 year olds and the active elderly (60+) are characterised by an increased and growing amount of disposable income. These trends are creating a whole variety of new niche markets in retailing and leisure which developers are responding to and so will continue to influence the face of town centres. The most obvious example of this trend is the proliferation of sports clothing shops.

### **Employment Change**

- 2.32 As stated above the underlying causes of employment change in town and city centres lie in the shift towards a service/knowledge-based economy and the emergence of the private car as a dominant form of transport. The combination of these factors has the potential to seriously undermine the employment roles of town centres and this has been recognised by Government in recent policies on retailing, transport and housing. ICTs allow the dispersal of activities which traditionally required a central location, while the demand for car access has been a key driver in the rise of the out of centre business park.
- 2.33 Analysis carried out for the Department of the Environment in 1994 (*Viable and Vital Town Centres*), suggested that in the main town and city centres were beginning to lag behind the wider urban areas in which they are set in terms of job creation. More worryingly in those districts where employment actually fell between 1981 and 1991, employment in town centres tended to fall proportionally at a faster rate.

### **Tourism**

- 2.34 Tourism offers a number of opportunities for new employment generating roles for town and city centres alike and is playing an increasingly important role in providing accessible employment opportunities. Tourism in Northern Ireland has been dampened as a result of the ‘Troubles’ but clearly offers tremendous potential.
- 2.35 Tourism can play a role in securing and maintaining the economic future of smaller towns. The Wigtown Book Town initiative is an interesting example of a former market town repositioning its role in the face of competition from larger centres for retail and other economic activity.

### **Place Competitiveness**

- 2.36 Places compete for inward investment, business visitors and tourists. They must also be competitive to provide the right environment for helping successful firms, skilled workers and residents. Competitive places will also need to provide a range of high quality local services including health care and education and to promote access to opportunity initiatives to combat social exclusion.
- 2.37 The role of arts and culture in the regeneration process highlights just one approach to place competition. Central to this approach is a view that culture can be integrated and lead area based regeneration and town centre strategies and provide a catalyst for physical and environmental renewal, attracting spending and capital investment to an area which as a result generates new economic activity. Enniskillen is an example of a town in Northern Ireland that has placed a considerable emphasis on art and cultural development in the town centre.

### **Town & City Centres: Policy Context**

- 2.38 In Northern Ireland the Government are committed to sustainable development and a view that embraces economic growth and social progress as well as a concern for the environment. The aim is to promote economic activity by establishing favourable economic conditions for the market to exploit. As part of its policies related to welfare to work and overcoming social exclusion, the Government wants as many as possible to take advantage of the changes in retailing and leisure, and to ensure that most people, including the disabled, have access to them. Promotion of and greater reliance on public transport forms an important part of this approach.

- 2.39 In regard to these wider objectives the Government has adopted planning policies which promote the regeneration of urban areas, particularly town and city centres, reuse previously developed sites and protect green belt or countryside. The Government expects development to be located where there is better access by public transport, walking and cycling and less dependence on access by car. It also attaches importance to air quality and recognises that traffic is the dominant source of pollution in urban areas.

### **Mixed Use : Urban Villages & Sustainability**

- 2.40 The Urban Villages Forum recognised that mature, established, quarters, close to the centres of our towns and cities, show the advantages of developing homes for rent and sale, shops, offices, schools, churches, and even light industrial workshops, in the same neighbourhood. There are many examples of historic parts of towns and cities which satisfy the needs of those who live and work in them. Some are so attractive, as places, that they appeal to visitors. Throughout Europe and in many North American cities, mixed use is the predominant pattern of development, and continues to be commercially successful.

- 2.41 In this way new communities can help to reduce the need to travel by car for some daily needs. Integrating private and social housing, mixed use developments can help to avoid the social polarisation which tends to arise from large concentrations of single tenure housing. Mixed use developments can, and should, be catalysts for new major urban regeneration initiatives. Some mixed use schemes will be on vacant or under-utilised sites; others may feature the refurbishment or demolition of existing large municipal housing estates. Smaller projects can also be part of city and town centre area based regeneration programmes.

- 2.42 In “*Making Places: A Guide to Good Practice In Undertaking Mixed Use Development*” (1998) Urban Villages Forum and English Partnerships highlight the qualities of successful mixed use developments in towns and cities. They include:-

- provide a balanced mix of uses including housing for rent and sale, shopping, community facilities, leisure, office and sometimes industrial or workshop accommodation;
- reduce the need to use private motor cars by creating environments in which it is safe and easy to walk, cycle, and journey by public transport.
- feature carefully designed and well used public space in the form of civic squares and plazas, pavements and streets, parks and pedestrian routes;
- offer strong, positive sense of connectivity to places within the scheme and to places beyond it, and
- create character and identity, where a ‘sense of place’ is achieved by the careful design of spaces and buildings and the relationship between them.

### **Good Design: Best Practice in Building Landscape and Urban Design**

- 2.43 Increasingly economic development agencies are recognising the importance of good design in the regeneration of towns and cities. Recent publications by Scottish Enterprise (*Streets Ahead: Technical Guidelines For Quality Streetscape Projects*) 1997 and English Partnerships (*Time for Design and Time for Design 2*, 1997 & 1998) are excellent examples.

Good design is sometimes thought of as being only about aesthetics or appearances. But design is also about performance and usefulness. There is a rule of thumb. If the “lifetime” cost of building is assumed to be 100%, its capital cost is only 10% of this. Its design cost generally represents only a mere 1%. But this small percentage can determine the building’s lifetime usefulness and its overall artistic merit.

2.44 *Time for Design* identifies more fundamental principles that are essential in creating an attractive environment namely:-

- a building should be appropriate to its place
- buildings should not ignore their neighbours
- buildings must be built to last according to their use
- buildings do not end at their perimeter; the public realm and landscape treatment is just as important for their success
- building design must consider the needs of the users
- buildings should be safe, environmentally friendly and energy efficient
- respect for tradition should not rule out innovation and bold statements
- building design and construction should avoid short-term savings that would obscure the benefits of good design and fitness for purpose
- the style of buildings and refurbishments should complement the assets and facilities they house

### **The Troubles**

2.45 It would be dishonest to also not recognise that The Troubles have had a very real and quite unique impact on town centres in Northern Ireland. Security measures and safety considerations tended to make town centres unwelcoming places – particularly of an evening. There was also an historic unwillingness to invest in town centres on the part of the large mainland based multiple retailers. The town centres have also, in some cases, been at the heart of community divisions whilst in others they have provided a neutral space.

### 3. POLICY REVIEW

#### Introduction

- 3.1 Town Centres are by their nature the subjects of various policy statements by government. This review is not intended to be a detailed appraisal of all policies that relate to town centres in Northern Ireland but rather to those key policy areas that require to be addressed in developing a framework for the reinvigoration of town centres. The consequential review of those policies is a matter for the Government in consultation with policy stakeholders such as councils, the business community etc.

#### Planning Policy Statement 5- Retailing and Town Centres

##### Current Policy

- 3.2 Planning Policy Statement 5 (PPS5) Retailing and Town Centres was published in June 1996. It sets out the policy of the Department of the Environment (NI) and has to be taken into account in preparing development plans and may also be material to decisions on individual planning applications and appeals.

- 3.3 The stated policy objectives of the Government are:

- 'To sustain and enhance the vitality and viability of town centres;
- To focus development, especially retail development, in locations where the proximity of business facilitates competition from which all consumers are able to benefit and maximises the opportunity to use means of transport other than the car;
- To maintain an efficient, competitive and innovative retail sector; and
- To ensure the availability of a wide range of shops, employment services and facilities to which people have easy access by a choice of means of transport.'

- 5.76 PPS5 explicitly recognises the wide-ranging importance of town centres:

' An attractive and flourishing town centre can enhance the quality of life of its visitors, stimulate economic investment and support and encourage a whole range of cultural, leisure, social and commercial activity. The location of such uses in town centres, which are normally also the focus of transportation networks, promotes accessibility for a large section of the population. Shopping largely underpins the use and value of town centres and makes a major contribution to their vitality and viability. Accordingly town centres should normally be the first choice for major new retail developments.'

- 3.5 The vitality of town centres should, it is suggested, be monitored by undertaking 'health-checks' focussing on a number of key indicators. These are:

- accessibility;
- customer views;
- diversity of uses;
- environmental quality;
- pedestrian flow;
- retailer profile
- retailers views;
- shop rents; and

- vacancy rates.
- 3.6 Diversity is also promoted with the over-riding ‘presumption in favour of development that would make a positive contribution to ensuring that existing town centres continue to provide a focus for shopping.’ The policy also undertakes to control non-retail uses at ground floor level within primary retail core areas. The ‘increase of retail floorspace through the refurbishment of existing units and sympathetic redevelopment will be encouraged.’ The policy also supports the promotion of town centres as principal locations for office, leisure, entertainment, cultural and service uses. It is also noted that ‘residential development within town centres can contribute to its vitality’ and suggests that ‘planning permission may be granted for residential use above shops and other business premises within town centres.’
- 3.7 In respect to physical environment PPS5 notes that the Department will, where appropriate and within financial constraints, support proposals for :
- Further pedestrianisation;
  - Environmental improvements...;
  - Rear servicing of premises ...;
  - Enhancement of open spaces;
  - Making better use of derelict, underused or unused land;
  - Conserving and enhancing historic buildings and townscape;
  - Provision of an appropriate level of car parking ;
  - Provision for cycle parking.’
- 3.8 PPS5 is also the key policy document in terms of planning for major retail developments. The key issues for major retail development is that:
- ‘There is no justifiable need for any new regional out-of-town shopping centres in Northern Ireland’;
  - ‘Town centres will be the preferred location for major comparison shopping and mixed retailing development proposals’;
  - ‘Major proposals for comparison shopping or mixed retailing will only be permitted in out-of-centre locations where the Department is satisfied that suitable town centre sites are not available and where the development satisfies stated criteria;
  - Edge- of- centre locations are favoured ahead of out-of-centre locations where the above criteria are met;
  - ‘The availability of suitable sites within the primary retail core.. will be an important consideration in cases where development is proposed outside the core. Applicants should be able to demonstrate that all potential primary retail core sites have been thoroughly assessed’
  - Guidance is provided on the assessment of major retail developments in that the following will be considered ..
    - the extent to which the proposal complements existing facilities or meets existing deficiencies in shopping provision,
    - the extent to which the development would complement or undermine the strategy for existing centres set out in the Area or Local Plan, taking into account progress being made on its implementation, in particular through public investment,
    - its accessibility by a choice of means of transport,
    - its likely effect on overall travel patterns and overall number and length of car trips;
    - the likely implications for the continuing vitality and viability of existing centres if the proposed development does not take place, and
    - the likely impact on the vitality and viability of existing centres

## Comparators

- 3.9 Policy guidance in England and Wales and Scotland is presented as comparators for PPS5 – in order to establish the strengths and weaknesses of these alternative approaches.

### PPG 6 (1996)

- 3.10 Planning Policy Guidance : Town Centres and Retail Developments sets out Government policy for England and Wales. The key features of PPG6 are:
- An emphasis on a plan-led approach to promoting development in town centres;
  - An emphasis on the sequential approach to selecting sites for development (retail, employment, leisure etc);
  - Support for local centres;
  - Promotion of mixed-use development and retention of key town centre uses;
  - An emphasis on the importance of a coherent town centre parking strategy;
  - Promotion of town centre management to develop clear standards of service and improve quality for town centre users;
  - Promotion of good urban design - including attractive and secure car parks;
  - Clarification of the three key tests for assessing retail developments (Impact on vitality and viability of town centres, Accessibility by a choice of means of transport; Impact on overall travel and car use;
  - Guidance on how to assess out-of-centre developments; and
  - Specific guidance on the assessment of new types of retail development.
- 3.11 The objectives of PPG6 mix the need for protection of existing centres with a commitment to ensuring choice for consumers. The stated objectives are:
- To sustain and enhance the vitality and viability of town centres;
  - To focus development, especially retail development, in locations where the proximity of businesses facilitates competition from which all consumers are able to benefit and maximises the opportunity to use means of transport other than the car;
  - To maintain an efficient, competitive and innovative retail sector ; and
  - To ensure the availability of a wide range of shops, employment, services and facilities to which people have easy access by a choice of means of transport.
- 3.12 PPG6 sets out a number of basic principles that have become standards in respect to good practice in town centre regeneration:
- Establishing a strategic context for development through the plan system;
  - Placing the onus of responsibility on developers to prove that he/she has thoroughly assessed all potential town centre options before proposing an out-of-centre location and establishing town centre locations as the first preference for development;
  - Promoting positive management strategies for town centres rather than being reactive;
  - Monitoring change in town centres to assess vitality and viability;
  - Encouraging mixed use development;
  - Recognising the importance of leisure and the evening economy;
  - Promoting positive traffic management strategies that takes an integrated and forward looking approach to transport needs;
  - Discouragement of regional shopping centres other than in exceptional cases;
  - Assessing major shopping proposals but also measuring cumulative effects; and
  - Encouraging town centre management schemes.
- 3.13 PPG6 represented a sea-change in policy towards town centres and major retail developments. This was in part a response to greater environmental concerns such as

increasing car usage but was also a recognition that there was the possibility of major impacts on town centres if previous rates of out-of-centre development were maintained. It was partly in the light of a hardening of policy in Great Britain that led the multiples to look more closely at Northern Ireland as a largely unexploited resource.

### **NPPG 8 (1988)**

- 3.14 The Scottish Office published the latest National Policy Planning Guideline(NPPG) 8 on Town Centres and Retailing in 1998. The NPPG establishes the policy context for town centres and retailing as well as establishing general principles, specific policy guidelines, assessment criteria for new development and supplementary guidance for particular retail / leisure developments.
- 3.15 The broad policy objectives for town centres and retailing are:
- to sustain and enhance the vitality, viability and design quality of town centres as the most appropriate location for retailing and other related activities;
  - to maintain an efficient, competitive and innovative retail sector offering consumer choice, consistent with the overall commitment to town centres; and
  - to ensure that ways of meeting these objectives are compatible with sustainable development and in particular , that new developments are located where there are good public transport services, and better access for those walking and cycling, leading to less dependence on access by car.
- 3.16 The key to these policy objectives is the application of a sequential approach to selecting sites for new development, with first preference always being given to development opportunities in town centres.
- 3.17 ‘First preference should be for town centre sites, where sites or buildings suitable for conversion are available, followed by edge-of-centre sites, and only then by out-of-centre sites in locations that are, or can be made, easily accessible by a choice of means of transport. The sequential approach should apply to all food and comparison shopping as well as other attractions and facilities usually found in town centres, unless specifically excepted by the NPPG or the development plan.’
- 3.18 The onus of proof is the responsibility of the developer/applicant and only if it can be demonstrated that all town centre options have been thoroughly addressed and a view taken on availability should less central sites in out-of-centre locations be considered for key town centre uses. ‘Even where a developer, as part of a sequential approach , demonstrates an out-of-centre location to be the most appropriate , the impact on the vitality and viability of existing centres still has to be shown to be acceptable.’
- 3.19 Other general principles contained in NPPG8 are:
- Ensuring the availability of a wide range of shops, employment, services and facilities to which people have easy access by a choice of transport;
  - Minimising transport impacts; and
  - Promoting quality –through urban design, environmental improvements, and promoting individuality.
- 3.20 NPPG 8 also provides guidelines for town centres:
- Monitoring vitality and viability – through a range of measures based upon Vital and Viable Town Centres (1994);

- Identifying centre which are at risk and developing an action programme which considers the availability of development opportunities, encouraging a diversity of uses in the town centres (day and night), ensuring accessibility by a range of transport types (including reviewing the car parking strategy), creating an attractive and safe town centre, and
- Undertaking effective management and promotion of the town centre.

3.21 The potential benefits from town centre management are highlighted – ‘There is increasing evidence that effective town management and promotion of town centres brings positive benefits. Town centre management programmes ‘should form part of a wider commitment and partnership between local authorities, retailers and other private sector and community interests. They should be based on a long term town centre strategy agreed by both public and private sectors, supported by ongoing monitoring of its health to ensure long-lasting success..

### **PPS5 – The Key Concerns**

3.22 Consultations undertaken during this study highlighted concerns as to the efficacy of PPS5. These concerns were founded in part upon challenges made to the wording of the guidance in the process of planning appeals. There was also a general recognition that as a policy area retailing and town centres needed to be reviewed in the light of strategic policy development and in response to the significant number and scale of major retail development proposals that had been lodged since the policy statement was drafted. It was also apparent that there was a limited body of monitoring information available to assess the extent to which the policy had been successful in achieving its objectives.

3.23 The key concerns identified in respect to PPS5 are:

- The effectiveness of the policy in ensuring the Government’s objectives were met;
- The guidance that the policy provided to applicants for planning permission;
- The clarity of the policy in terms of development control guidance;
- The suitability of the policy in the context of Regional Planning guidance;
- The extent to which the policy is able to balance the sometimes competing needs of town centres, consumers, and special interest groups (such as the socially excluded);
- The relationship with Area and Local Plans;
- The extent to which PPS5 is integrated with other policy initiatives.

3.24 In respect to the extent to which the policy has met the Government’s objectives it is impossible to quantify the impact on town centres of decisions founded on PPS5. The scale of permissions for new major retail developments has been such that it will be a number of years before the impact of developments arising from current permissions will be quantifiable. Even at the strategic level there is no definitive assessment of retail capacity available to consider the ability of the Northern Ireland economy to support the increase in retail floorspace. Whilst there was concern expressed during the Study about the scale of retail development which has been allowed through the planning system this has tended to be ‘gut reaction’ rather than objective assessment. Whilst individual retail impact assessments may provide some guidance it is questionable whether such assessments can be validated without an over-arching capacity assessment.

3.25 The guidance offered to applicants for planning permission in PPS5 is certainly less helpful than that provided in Scotland through NPPG8. NPPG 8 provides a clear, if restrictive, policy for applicants wishing to obtain planning permission for major retail developments. The onus is clearly on the applicant to ‘prove’ his/her case through the sequential procedure and guidelines are provided for different types of development (regional shopping centres, district shopping centres, retail parks, food discount stores, retail warehouse clubs, factory

shops, factory outlet centres, shops in small towns and rural areas, village shops, local shops, petrol filling stations, commercial leisure schemes, combined retail/leisure schemes, amusement centres, restaurants, pubs, and hot food outlets).

- 3.26 In respect to clarity the challenges made during planning appeals would suggest that there are issues that could be clarified through a review of PPS5. In particular the policy whilst ostensibly restrictive in respect to out-of-centre developments also stresses the commitment to allow ‘freedom of choice and flexibility in terms of retail development throughout Northern Ireland and to assist in the provision of a wide range of shopping opportunities to which the whole community has access.’ Also whilst retail impact assessments are highlighted as a requirement for major developments the criteria against which assessments will be engaged are not quantified and leave the way open for differing interpretations over what could or could not be considered acceptable.
- 3.27 The Draft Regional Strategic Framework, which was going through the process of public examination whilst this Study was in progress. SPG7 proposes ‘To strengthen the network of Regional Towns as major and key service centres for their urban and rural communities.’ SPG8 proposes ‘To underpin the role of local rural centres.’ These proposals are in accord with PPS5 to all intents and purposes. (Although it was suggested during consultation on the Regional Strategic Framework that Strategy 2010. Prepared by the Department of Economic Development, assumes a ‘less permissive policy on out-of-town shopping than the proposed Framework (Planning 15 October 1999).’
- 3.28 PPS5 does attempt to balance competing needs – in particular consumer needs to access modern shopping facilities against the socio-economic needs to maintain existing town centres. The question is whether the balance needs to be shifted one way or another. There cannot realistically be a shift wholly towards ‘protectionism’ or ‘choice’ – not least as this would be open to legal question. Whatever policy shift is made however needs to be founded on an objective assessment of the strategic capacity of the Northern Ireland economy to accommodate current and potential retail investments without unrecoverable damage being inflicted upon town centres. This requires a retail capacity exercise for Northern Ireland to be undertaken as a matter of priority. In the meantime however it should be noted that if policy in Northern Ireland were to become more in line with the rest of the UK then a more restrictive approach would be required – and in particular a more explicit sequential test requirement.
- 3.29 The EDAW team’s review of policy documents showed that Local and Area Plans are often not up-to-date for many parts of Northern Ireland. Whilst there is a commitment to a plans led approach the reality is that limited resources mean that many plans are out of date – often covering retrospective timeframes when produced. The Consultation Paper ‘Proposals for Amendments to Planning Legislation in Northern Ireland’ issued in March 1999 concludes ‘It is proposed that development plans should be given prime importance in the determination of planning applications thus implementing the commitment given to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.’ There will need to be a substantial increase in production rates if development plan coverage is to provide the context for town centre development that is required.
- 3.30 Integration with other policy initiatives is a key requirement for PPS given that it has a wide ranging remit across a number of policy areas – in particular accessibility, transport, economic development, and social inclusion/segregation etc. The current PPS5 does not include the wider socio-economic issues that are developing as ‘joined-up-policy’ in the UK. A review of PPS5 would provide the opportunity to include references to other emerging

policy areas – including perhaps a more explicit focus on town centres and retailing rather than on retailing and town centres.

**Recommendation 1 - There is a strong case for PPS5 to be reviewed as a priority**  
*There is a strong case for the commissioning of a Retail Capacity Assessment for Northern Ireland to provide an objective and independent base upon which to assess further applications for major retail developments. The review should focus on the key concerns identified above.*

*PPS5 should include a more explicit sequential test requirement to place the onus of responsibility on applicants for planning permission to prove that an out-of-centre location is both unavoidable and has only a limited and definable impact on existing town centres. PPS5 would be improved by offering more explicit guidance to applicants for different types of potential town centre development.*

### **Other Planning Policy Statements – General Comments**

- 3.31 Town centres are naturally subject to other Planning Policy Statements. In most respects the generality of policy is such that no specific issues relating to town centres need to be raised. The only general comments are as follows.

#### **PPS1 General Principles**

- 3.32 The principle of sustainability is particularly relevant to town centres in that the definition of sustainability is ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.’ For example the ‘centrality’ of town centres and their mass may be able to contribute more to energy conservation than dispersed retail and service centres through reductions in the need for trips- particularly car based trips.
- The design principles are also important for town centres in that development control needs to ensure that development is sympathetic to existing design without becoming sterile pastiche or failing to meet the changing space needs of the retail and services sectors.
  - Mixed uses are recognised as a particular feature of town centres in PPS1 and this should be endorsed. It should also be noted that mixed use developments can also be used as the basis for the regeneration of town centres where there is an inevitable and unavoidable decrease in retail floorspace requirements.

#### **PPS3 Development Control Roads Considerations**

- Whilst recognising that policy and practice in this area is subject to other policy documents (see Accessibility in Chapter 4) PPS3 there may be some merit in highlighting that full operational and non-operational car parking cannot always be provided in new developments in town centres.

#### **PPS 4 Industrial Development**

- Much modern industrial development requires only small units and is not environmentally intrusive. This form of industry may be suitable for inclusion at the edge of town centres and has a number of benefits. Firstly it provides a source of demand for town centre businesses. Secondly it is more accessible for non-car users and therefore can contribute to social inclusion objectives. Thirdly town centres are often seen as ‘neutral’ and therefore there is less likelihood of sectarian employment divisions. Fourthly conversion of edge of centre properties can provide good starter units for small businesses and therefore contribute to business birth rates.

### **PPS6 Planning Archaeology and the Built Environment**

- The built form is a key aspect of the structure of town centres. The delayed commercial ‘renewal’ of many Northern Ireland town centres has left a rich built heritage that is of considerable merit and can be exploited to increase the place competitiveness of town centres. Heritage is of increasing importance as qualitative factors become more important – and also as distinctiveness become a marketable objective.

### **CRISP**

- 3.33 The Community Regeneration and Improvement Special Programme (CRISP) was set up in 1990 to provide disadvantaged areas with the opportunity to access the International Fund for Ireland funds as part of a package of support. The package included:
- A core economic project promoted by a local community group (up to 80% grant);
  - Urban development programme grants for run down commercial property (up to 30% grant with £100,000 maximum);
  - Environmental improvement to public spaces (100% assistance);
  - Spruce up – minor property exterior works (£15,000 per town); and
  - Project worker assistance (up to £50,000 over 3 years).
- 3.34 Funding was provided for 58 towns/villages up to 1998. These included a wide range of projects (not just town centres) and represented a significant source of investment for physical improvements for communities to ‘disadvantaged wards’ outwith Belfast and Londonderry. The CRISP approach has been successful and innovative – including the proactive role given to communities. It has however tended to be focussed on physical projects rather than holistic regeneration programmes.

### **Rural Policy**

- 3.35 The remit for this study did not extend to rural shops. However the Study did consider the generic needs of rural town centres and recommendations will relate equally to all town centres. In the course of the Study the needs of rural shops was raised and the next section highlights key issues and policy recommendations are put forward in response.
- 3.36 The Rural strategy for Northern Ireland published in 1993 included a number of policies relating to town centres. PPS5 replaced much of the planning context in the Strategy related to town centres (IC9 Town Centres; IC10 Major Retail Development; IC11 Retail Warehouses; IC12 Neighbourhood Shopping; IC13 Local and Village Shops; and IC14 Rural Shops). The Rural Strategy includes other policies of indirect relevance to town centres (e.g. HOU5, HOU6, IC17, TOU3, PSU1, DES2 and DES3) but which fall outwith the remit of this Study.

- 3.37 The Draft Regional Strategic Framework for Northern Ireland includes a number of policies related to rural Northern Ireland of relevance to town centres – principally:  
SPG7 To strengthen the network of regional towns as major and key service centres for their urban and rural communities;  
SPG 8 To underpin the role of local rural centres;  
SPG 9 To sustain a living and working countryside.
- 3.38 The Rural Development Programme in Northern Ireland 1994-99 included three strategic elements –
- Developing the capabilities of rural communities;
  - Community based regeneration projects;
  - Area based actions.
- 3.39 These strategies have contributed to; increased investment, new employment, new business formation, and community animation. It is recognised that future strategy will have to address a rural economy with :
- High dependence upon an agricultural sector facing structural change;
  - Relatively high levels of employment; and
  - Relatively high levels of deprivation.
- 3.40 Notwithstanding this emerging strategic context for town centres it is recognised that there is an explicit and direct link between rural economies and rural town centres. Increased car ownership allied to the density of population and settlement pattern in Northern Ireland means that rural market towns do not have the same well defined hinterland as they used to have. The economic difficulties currently being faced by rural communities will inevitably have an impact on patterns of expenditure in general and shopping expenditure in particular. It is not within the remit of this study to consider the issue of rural disadvantage or social exclusion per se and it is doubtful whether any study based simply on shopping will reveal a great deal in terms of rural disadvantage. Nonetheless it is suggested that in any consideration of rural disadvantage in the future that the issues of access to town centres should be included.
- 3.41 The Rural Development Council suggested in commenting on this strategy ‘ that more analysis needs to be carried out to determine the influence of rural shopping patterns on town centres. The apparent demise of the village shop and its historical linkage to service facilities in neighbouring market towns are inextricable factors in the overall regeneration process. The decline in one will have an impact on the other’ (Letter dated 29 October 1999).
- 3.42 It is suggested that the ‘demise’ of village shops and the role of market towns is worthy of separate analysis – but in the context of an approach to rural disadvantage that takes account of the wide range of issues that impact on the loss of services within rural areas. There are good examples of initiatives to combat the closure of rural shops (e.g Tayside Rural Shops Scheme) but it has increasingly been recognised that long term viability relies on the application of wide ranging strategies to diversify income and recognise the social role of rural shops.

***RECOMMENDATION 2 - That a review of policy on rural shop support and market town development be undertaken as part of a wider study of Rural Social Exclusion.***



## 4. STRATEGIC OVERVIEW – PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

### Major Retail Development

- 4.1 One of the key policy issue for planning in Northern Ireland is the impact of major retail development and particularly out of town retailing. The initial surge in superstore development proposals in the mid 90s has now been joined by demands from food and other multiples. For example:
- McDonalds is believed to be in the process of acquiring 16 new sites for drive-thru restaurants;
  - Sainsbury, Safeway and Tesco are continuing aggressive development campaigns; and
  - Halfords is moving into Bangor, Ballymena and Belfast.
- 4.2 The impact of the volume of applications has resulted in significant delays in the time taken to process them . This has led to a backlog of ‘floorspace’ in the pipeline and a consequent check on development progressing through to completion. However it also means that there is a considerable volume of floorspace with permissions likely to get permission which will take some time to feed through to development have an identifiable impact on existing town centres.
- 4.3 An analysis of the Schedule of Major Retail applications (1973-September 1999) shows the following pattern of permissions:

YEAR	GRF
1978	16250
1979	5200
1980	24163
1981	3902
1982	11555
1983	0
1984	26547
1985	37750
1986	5498
1987	55856
1988	16995
1989	61010
1990	392406
1991	51330
1992	55147
1993	83825
1994	64398
1995	68609
1996	168211
1997	141418
1998	186683
1999	192880
TOTAL	1669633

Source: EDAW (1999)

- 4.4 There are significant volumes of retail floorspace still under consideration. Whilst not all permissions result in development the above table indicates the need to address the likely implications of new development on existing city and town centres.
- 4.5 The extent of retail development applications and the highly competitive approach being adopted by the retail sector – particularly foodstores - has led to a number of legal challenges to decisions. The most damaging of these to date was the judicial quashing of the 23,225 sq. m (250,000 sq ft) consent for the D5 site in north-east Belfast in July 1999. There has also been criticism that almost all of the major retail out-of-centre food store applications over the last four years have been given planning permission.
- 4.6 Experience in the rest of the UK has been based on a more gradual pattern of major retail development growth – with a strengthening, weakening and strengthening of policy over a period of some 30 years. It is likely that impacts in Northern Ireland may be more pronounced and immediate given the volume of floorspace coming forward and the lack of time available for town centre businesses to adapt to the changing commercial environment.
- 5.76 The Department of the Environment Transport and the Regions published ‘The Impact of Large Foodstores on Market Towns and District Centres’ in October 1988. The Study concluded that:

‘Our research has shown that large foodstores can and have had an adverse impact on market towns and district centres. The level, and consequences, of impact will vary depending on the particular local circumstances of the centres concerned. Smaller centres which are dependent to a large extent on convenience retailing to underpin their function, are most vulnerable to the effects of larger foodstore development in edge –of-centre and out-of-centre locations. It is vital that those responsible for the future of market towns and district centres take positive steps to improve the range and quality of food shopping in these centres, and adopt a cautious approach to considering the location and likely long term consequences of large foodstores in non-central locations.

### **Town Centre Development**

- 4.8 Whilst the general principles for ensuring the vitality and viability of town centres was considered in Chapter 2 there are practical measures that can be taken to ensure that town centres are reinvigorated.
- 4.9 Recent research by Leigh Sparks et al (Town centre Uses in Scotland, SOCRU, 1998) has attempted to provide an overview of town centre uses by :
1. Examining what makes a successful town centre and how various components, singly and collectively, interact to provide vitality and viability;
  2. Understanding how town centres have been changing and what changes are likely to occur in the future; and
  3. Assessing the role and implications for planning policy and other government policies and initiatives of the current and future town centre uses. Whilst based on work in Scotland the findings are generally applicable to all town centres in developed western European economies.
- 4.10 The key conclusions of relevance are: that a broad picture of town centre uses has to be drawn as uses are so complex; that decentralisation of many activities has provided benefits to mobile consumers; that standardisation has narrowed the breadth of the target market; and that non-mobile and non-targeted individuals have been disadvantaged.

4.11 The Study also identifies that there is a need to encourage, within town centres-

- 5 The provision of a wide range of everyday needs;
- 6 The conservation and maintenance of the built fabric and the public realm;
- 7 The generation of local pride and confidence; and
- 8 The emergence of new uses of space.

4.12 The Study suggests that ‘good centres’ may have the following components or characteristics:

- There has to be a mixture of land uses to satisfy the needs of the catchment population – single use town centres are not successful;
- The critical nature of a town centre in use terms is not any one use but the combinations – town centres are synergistic;
- Proximate or immediate resident population is a benefit and should be encouraged;
- Small businesses in town centres provide variety and need to be encouraged and incentives;
- Transport and accessibility needs to include all modes to attract a range of people and to provide a suitable environment in the town centre itself;
- Where pedestrianisation has not been carried out, then pedestrian priority should be indicated to improve the environment;
- Town centres need to be clean, safe and provide a good quality environment with high quality urban design and maintenance;
- Public art and festivals as well as traditional arts and culture can provide added interest;
- The heritage is increasingly important;
- Town centres are a focus for sustainability; and
- Management of the town centre is critical.

4.13 The key issues for town centres in the medium and longer term are:

- Population and consumer change will lead to enhanced demand for high quality town centres (and increased demand for homes)
- Town centres need more investment and to resolve obstacles to investment – eg, resistance to evening economies, living and working over the shop, use of secondary streets and small business incentivisation;
- Demand for high quality townscapes and streetscape and enhancement for urban heritage;
- The use of social space in informal ways needs to be encouraged not over-regulated;
- Service provision needs to be expanded to meet the modern demands for town centres to be more active for longer yet to be cleaner and safer;
- Accessibility proposals should ensure users are attracted out of sense of desire to visit not for some pricing reasons; and
- Public transport will need a thorough overhaul to cope with new demands.

4.14 Good practice for town centre management are put forward:

- Cleansing and maintenance are fundamental;
- Marketing and promotion depends on having local attractions that can uniquely position the town centre;
- Safety and security are vital to attract consumers back into the town centre – CCTV is a common element;
- Streetscape needs to be enhanced in quality to meet consumer demands;
- Pedestrian priority is critical to how many users feel about town centres;
- Evening and weekend economies will become increasingly important;

- Need to involve all stakeholders in the use and design of town centres;
- TCM is one way forward.

### **Smaller Towns and Villages**

4.15 Whilst there has been considerable research on the impact of large retail developments - although often inconclusive – there has been relatively little on the health of smaller town and villages. The Historic Burghs Association of Scotland has undertaken a number of studies of smaller town centres that are of particular relevance to Northern Ireland.

4.16 Research Paper 1 established a useful Performance Indicators Matrix to compare town centres. For each town centre the following information was obtained:

#### **A. RETAIL INDICATORS**

- Total retail floorspace (sq ft);
- Change in total retail floorspace over a 10 year period (%);
- Comparison retail floorspace as percentage of total retail floorspace(%);
- Multiples – rank in UK;
- Vacancy rates (% of units);
- Zone A rent (£per square foot)
- Pedestrian flow at peak level (1000s);
- Customer attitude – based on consumer surveys (% satisfaction).

#### **B. PROPERTY INDICATORS**

- Rental growth;
- Yield;
- Return.

#### **C. DIVERSITY INDICATORS**

- Resident population;
- Working population;
- Tourists number).

#### **D. ACCESSIBILITY INDICATORS**

- Availability of short stay car parking (good, fair, poor);
- Central location/good distribution of car parking (good, fair, poor);
- Clear and readily understood signing for car parks (good, fair, poor);
- Bus frequency/quality/cost (good, fair, poor);
- Specific coach parking and central drop off point (good, fair, poor);
- Environment (good, fair, poor);
- Pedestrian signage (good, fair, poor); and
- Ease of movement (good, fair, poor).

4.17 This approach was useful in both describing each town centre but more importantly facilitated comparison between centres and between each centre and the mean.

4.18 Research Report 3 took this approach further to assess the performance of smaller town centres to establish benchmarking data develop recommendations for the future. The Study concluded (inter alia) that:

- Average local shopper expenditure in the food and catering sectors was significantly higher than for the 7 larger centres surveyed in Research Report 1;
- 76% of all visitors made catering purchases;
- The top 5 issues for shoppers were- variety of goods, amount of car parking, range of services, leisure facilities and public transport;
- The top 5 issues for retailers were – variety of goods, amount of car parking, location of car parking, independent retailers and cleanliness;
- Tourism is influenced by accessibility, presence of visitor attractions; and environmental quality;
- Accessibility primary issues are : location and capacity of car parking; signing to and within towns, in town pedestrian management; and traffic inclusion;
- Town Centre Forums offer the opportunity for towns to develop coherent strategies which should – Develop inherent strengths, identify and address weaknesses, prioritise and focus investment, act as a focus for economic growth, manage tourism ; and address parking and pedestrian care issues.

***Recommendation 3- A common monitoring and evaluation system would help to compare and contrast performance in individual Northern Ireland town centres.***

### **Town Centre Management**

- 4.19 The application of the above principles and practices requires a delivery mechanism. One of the most useful delivery mechanisms is town centre management.
- 4.20 Town centre management is a generic term to describe a process of co-ordination intended to improve the performance of town centres – both in absolute terms and relative to competing centres. Definitions of town centre management vary depending upon the focus of the organisation. A composite definition (Warnaby et al, 1988) is:
- 4.21 ‘Town centre management is the search for competitive advantage through the maintenance an/or strategic development of both public and private areas and interests within town centres, initiated and undertaken by stakeholders drawn from a combination of the public, private and voluntary sectors.’
- 4.23 The key characteristics of town centre management in Northern Ireland in comparison to Great Britain is that there is generally lower levels of financial involvement in core funding by the private sector and that the onus on funding has tended to be European funding allied to local authority funding (from the 5p in the pound that can be used for economic development). Whilst the private sector is usually involved in administering town centre schemes and in project funding there does not seem to be the market ethos that has led to private sector interest in town centre management in Great Britain..
- 4.24 Town centre management schemes draw their strength from their flexible approach to problem resolution and a willingness on the part of public agencies to accept the unofficial co-ordinating role of the schemes. Whilst town centre management is progressing into a professional discipline in its own right it requires the application of skills in planning, economic development, marketing, project management and community development towards agreed objectives.
- 4.25 Town centre management is increasingly becoming a common strategy in many towns and cities in response to the threats of out-of-town centres and in response to the application of town centre management in competing centres.

***Recommendation 4 - Town centre management should be considered as an element of town centre reinvigoration in Northern Ireland.***

- 4.26 The Northern Ireland Association of Town Centre Management submitted comments to the Study Team. The Association notes that :
- Town centres have suffered as a result of out-of-town centres, although perhaps at a slower pace;
  - Town centres are no longer the hub of life for their communities but find themselves in competition for retail and services provision.
  - Town centres suffer further due to a lack of clear focus in development due to the number of organisations sharing responsibilities for town centres (DOE Roads, DOE Planning, Local authority, Chamber of Trade, Community groups) and have been restricted in their capacity to combat the changes brought about by ‘out-of-town’ developments.
  - In Great Britain towns and cities have successfully fought ‘out- of- town’ challenges through a positive town centre management approach .
- 4.27 The Association proposes that there should be the statutory provision of a TCM facility in each town of ‘sufficient size’. ‘The DOE ..should provide a blueprint for the establishment of the office and the areas of activity to be addressed including a reporting procedure. The local authorities , which have a presence in each town, should take the lead in the operational issues such as recruitment and essential facilities provision. Funding should be on a 50/50 basis between the local authority and the DOE. This mechanism would allow a focused and co-ordinated development of urban spaces in the Province, the efficient use of resources, the measuring and targeting of development activity, drawing in of alternative resources and the effective implementation of government urban development policy across Northern Ireland.’ They also propose that ‘the status of TCM , which can offer a focused non-aligned professionalism to urban development, should be offered a more statutory standing. This would allow the consideration of the expansion of TCM responsibilities in areas that play an integral part of a town’s development and should be considered as part of an integrated plan.’

**Town Centre Property Markets**

- 4.28 The changes facing town centres can be seen clearly in property trends in Northern Ireland.
- 4.29 Retail rents in Northern Ireland towns have seen substantial increases – largely as a consequence of the interest in new sites by the UK multiples. In 1997 retail rents in Zone A areas in market towns and suburban locations were able to reach £45 by 1999 some reached almost £70. This increase in interest in retail rents is a response to market pressures which have been released after some 10-15 years of relative inactivity.
- 4.30 UK multiples have established their presence in Belfast and in the expectation of continued peace and an improving economy are now moving out to the regional towns. The key sectors have been sports retailers, as an adjunct to their rapid growth over recent years throughout the UK, and by fashion retailers.
- 4.31 Rents have tended to rise most clearly in modern malls which are able to fulfill the multiples space and quality requirements. One example of retail rent growth is the Buttercrane Centre in Newry – where Zone a rents moved from £45 to £65 between late 1997 and late 1998.
- 4.32 Whilst the rate of growth is unlikely to be sustainable over the longer term and will be most pronounced in the newer mall developments required by the multiples. UK retailers

generally want stores of around 230 sq m (2500 sq ft) but most of the traditional shopping centres in Northern Ireland have units of circa 140sq m (1500 sq ft).

- 4.33 The rent levels have of course also increased development pressure to meet the emerging demands. The Quays development in Newry for example cost over £55m and is unlikely to have been viable without the retail rental growth experienced over the last 3 or 4 years.
- 4.34 Much of the property market confidence of the recent past has been predicated on assumptions of long term peace. The Royal Incorporation of Chartered Surveyors (1994) examined the effects of lasting peace on property and construction in Northern Ireland . They concluded, in respect to provincial towns that:
- There would be benefits from cross- border trading and likely increased interest in retail property in towns close to the border such as Newry and Enniskillen.
  - The net impact would be the product of increased tourism spend, some decrease in aggregate expenditure as a consequence of decreased spending on security, competition from an enhanced Belfast, and strategic location.
- 4.35 An analysis of average Zone A rents in key town centres in Northern Ireland has shown ‘high street rentals’ (with the exception of Antrim) to be approximately :

<b>Town</b>	<b>Street</b>	<b>Zone a Rate (£psf)</b>	<b>Vacancy Rate</b>
Antrim	Castle Centre	£45	No data
Armagh	Market Street	£27.50	6.1%
Ballymena	Church Street	£35	6.9%
Bangor	Main Street	£40-£60	2.2%
Coleraine	Church Street	£70	0.2%
Cookstown	Main Street	£30	No data
Dungannon	Market Square	£30	3.0%
Enniskillen	High Street	£40	4.1%
Larne	Main Street	£35	3.7%
Lisburn	Bow Street	£82.50	1.7%
Lurgan	Market Street	No data	0.2%
Newry	Hill Street	£35	4.0%
Newtownards	High Street	£35	6.25%
Omagh	High Street	£35	0.2%
Portadown	Market Street	£37.50	2.5%

Source: LISNEY

### **Historic Town Centre Regeneration**

- 4.36 Historic Town Centres by their character offer additional regeneration opportunities and constraints in comparison to other centres.
- 4.37 The Town Heritage Initiative operated by the Heritage Lottery Fund in Northern Ireland is an example of how historic regeneration can contribute to town centre reinvigoration. Since 1998 there have been nearly twenty applications to this UK wide scheme in Northern Ireland. Of these, thirteen are currently being processed with another bidding round due in year 2000 for round 3 applications.
- 4.38 The schemes in the province are characterised by the involvement of community groups and are generally small in character compared to the UK schemes. This character is also very diverse and distinctive and gives individuality to each town. Two of the study towns Dromore

and Newry have been successful in the round 2 and are now beginning the process of detailed examination of the local issues and identification of buildings in order to succeed to the next stage.

- 4.39 The scheme is designed to support local partnerships to deliver heritage led regeneration and involves local communities addressing problems of disrepair, erosion of quality and under-use of buildings in historic areas of social and economic need. The initiative addresses individual buildings in a defined area established from an analysis of the heritage area and economic need. It enables the partnership to work with and offer grant aid to individual owners to undertake a variety of works to provide buildings that have a sustainable future.
- 4.40 The variety of works includes building repair, reinstatement of architectural features, bringing historic floor space back into use, contributing to the costs of rebuilding in gap sites to ensure a high standard and the reinstatement of historic public realm works. Grants are determined by examining the conservation deficit and are variable. Importantly costs of operating the scheme by the partnerships are also eligible particularly in Northern Ireland with the involvement of so many community groups with little or no past experience.
- 4.41 The scheme includes an important aspect relative to timing and programming. The partnerships have a period of 3 to 5 years to undertake the work as a reflection of the complex nature that is often associated with the problems. This focusing of local action, financial provision and variable approach will enable the whole issues relating to economic regeneration to be tackled and overcome.
- 4.42 Northern Ireland was behind the rest of the UK in designating conservation areas. There are currently 50 areas designated throughout the province.
- 4.43 The character of many of these areas is distinctive and particular to their locality. The last 30 years has not been kind to the built heritage and explosions have eroded the character of these areas, often incrementally. The losses of architectural detail, the patina of age and the poor quality of some of the replacements have led to a degrading in overall quality.
- 4.44 Current Government policy can play an important part in promoting economic prosperity by ensuring that an area offers attractive living and working conditions, which will encourage inward investment. Also factors such as the quality of life and environmental quality are increasingly playing a factor in many commercial decisions.
- 4.45 Careful and sensitive exploitation of the built heritage resource of a town to achieve social, economic and environmental benefits can result in high quality sustainable solutions to the regeneration of urban centres.
- 4.46 Renewed interest and awareness in the historical significance or industrial heritage of the town can help rekindle a sense of pride and local identity which can be used as the catalyst for its more widespread regeneration
- 4.47 As the province begins to enter a potentially exciting but changing future the recognition of local values and characteristics are going to be of further importance. The involvement of local communities in the direct future of their shared inheritance will ensure that proper recognition of the past can be used to provide a framework for the future.
- 4.48 Individual building projects in the case studies that may be of interest include:

**Antrim Castle Gardens scheme**

Whilst outside the main centre has given important lead in care and protection of the town which now advertises itself as an historic town

#### **Enniskillen Buttermarket**

Completed several years ago this scheme was ambitious at the time but provided a stimulus to the ongoing energy that is in Enniskillen. Involved the conversion and re-use of the formerly derelict buildings.

#### **Newtownards Town Hall and square**

The restoration of this visually important and commanding building which straddles the two main shopping streets is seen as confidence building in a market town that still retains some of its important historic links

#### **Dromore 10-12 Bridge St**

This small scheme adjoining the river and a very narrow street demonstrates that individual buildings can have a profound impact on their surroundings. This was almost a derelict shell but the perseverance and determination of one owner turned this around with a funding combination of grants.

#### **Newry Clanrye Abbey**

A project now some years completed but focused on job creation on a major terrace on entering the town. It gave rise to an improved entrance and confidence to the area and the town.

### **Urban Regeneration Strategies**

- 4.49 Town centres are one aspect of the process of urban regeneration. The Urban Regeneration Group in the Department of the Environment are in the process of reviewing their Urban Regeneration Strategy.
- 4.50 In a Study commissioned from John Rhodes and Peter Tyler (Cambridge University) it was suggested that there is a continuing needs for the delivery of urban regeneration in Northern Ireland and that it is not possible to target social needs without a specific focus on these specific areas of deprivation and social exclusion. The consultants suggested that future policy delivery should be based on :
- a comprehensive integrated local and thematic area –based strategy rather than single programmes;
  - a targeting of need rather than a competitive regime approach and the related establishment of objective geographical boundaries;
  - the importance of genuinely engaging local partnerships in delivery;
  - regeneration based on need involving physical, economic and people based intervention; and
  - the importance of working with other mainstream Departments , as well as within and with relevant EU programmes.
- 4.51 The need for strategic change was endorsed by Lord Dubs in a speech to Business in the Community in September 1999 in which he said ‘It is now clear that the focus for successful urban regeneration policies has shifted from being mainly physical to include social and economic regeneration, and that the solution to these problems lies through a labour market strategy and engaging all interests, including the private sector.’
- 4.52 The approach to urban regeneration is under discussion within the DOE however the implications for town centres needs to be addressed in the context of this study. An approach

which focuses on targeting resources towards established areas of need would not focus resources on town centres. Town centres generally would not show up as areas of need as established on the basis of socio-economic indicators of deprivation. Town centres have a significance beyond their own boundaries. Town centres serve the needs of the wider population and at the same time are seen as indicative of the communities they serve. It is suggested that town centres must be seen as additional and contributory to targeted urban regeneration in that failure to address town centre issues could not be balanced by the gradual increase in wealth and income for the socially excluded that result from targeting.

***Recommendation 5- Town centres are of significance across the communities they serve and urban regeneration strategy should address their reinvigoration as a corollary to targeted strategies for neighbourhood regeneration.***

### **Social Inclusion**

4.53 The Equality Commission Working Group published Draft Public Authority Equality Scheme Guidelines in 1999. The Guidelines noted that Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 provides that local authorities are required in carrying out their functions relating to Northern Ireland to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between certain different individuals and groups. The relevant categories included; religious beliefs, political opinions, race, age, marital status, sexual orientation, gender disability and dependants. A public authority is to have specific regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious beliefs, political opinions or racial groups.

4.54 Government policy is to mainstream equality issues to avoid sidelining. Mainstreaming is a tool for identifying where policies are likely to advance or retard the achievement of greater equality in Northern Ireland. It should not be seen as a procedure for preventing actions with significant adverse impacts on equality from being implemented but rather for ensuring that if such actions are authorised this decision takes place in the full knowledge of their consequences, with the participation of those affected, and in an accountable manner.

4.55 In developing proposals for town centre the following recommendation is proposed:

***Recommendation 6 - In developing any town centre project involving public sector funding the needs of the socially excluded must be recognised and the impact on those groups must be stated. Wherever possible projects should positively :***

- A. *Reinforce the neutrality of town centres in terms of divisions based on religious or political beliefs;*
- B. *Provide for the access needs of people without access to a car;*
- C. *Promote events/activities which cross religious/political divisions;*
- D. *Provide for the needs of people with mobility problems (including the provision of shopmobility services where appropriate, dropped kerbs, tactile surfaces next to crossings etc)*

4.56 Social inclusion is however more than ‘mainstreaming’ of this nature. If town centres are to contribute to social inclusion in Northern Ireland then they need to contribute to inclusive communities. The Scottish Executive have established a Strategy Action Team to examine how to develop inclusive communities and their findings may be of value for Northern Ireland.

An inclusive community is one where people;

- Are able to participate in community life;
- Have influence over decisions affecting them;
- Are able to take responsibility for their communities;
- Have a right of access to appropriate information and support; and
- Have equal access to services and facilities.

In order to achieve inclusive communities action is needed to:

- To create genuine opportunities for individual participation at community level;
- To address equalities issues;
- To review the current systems of funding for community organisations;
- To develop a long term programme of infrastructure and capacity building;
- To develop models of community ownership and control;
- To change approaches to consulting communities, and listening to their views;
- To change the way organisations behave in relation to communities; and
- To join up social inclusion programmes at regional and community level.

4.57 Town centre partnerships are one way in which people can have a role in the development of their town centres. People generally do have an affiliation for ‘their’ town centre and this can be used as the basis for building bridges between communities and in encouraging the devolution of power to town centre stakeholders and away from the state. This can range from encouraging involvement in administering town centre programmes through to participation in town centre events programme.

### Strategic Settlement Policy

4.58 The Draft Regional Strategic Framework for Northern Ireland includes a spatial development strategy that is based on a hub, corridor and gateway approach. that is intended to give a ‘strategic focus to future physical development and achieve balanced growth’. The Framework is subject to consultation but it is of relevance to this study in that it will guide population and consumer spending patterns.

The Strategy comprises:

- Key transport corridors as the skeletal framework for future physical development;
- A compact and thriving metropolitan core centred on Belfast;
- A strong north-west regional centre based on Derry/Londonderry;
- A network of strong regional towns/major service centres (Craigavon, Antrim, Ballymena, Coleraine, Enniskillen, Newry and Omagh);
- A network of regional towns/ key service centres (City of Armagh, Ballycastle, Ballymoney, Banbridge, Cookstown, Downpatrick, Dungannon, Larne, Limavady, Magherafelt, Newtownards and Strabane); and
- A vibrant rural community.

The housing targets for 2010 contained in the Strategy are:

Location	Target 2010
Belfast	30,000
Derry/Londonderry	7,800
Craigavon	3,500
Antrim	2,000
Ballymena	2,300
Coleraine	2,100

Enniskillen	1,200
Newry	2,700
Omagh	2,000
City of Armagh	1,100
Ballycastle	300
Ballymoney	700
Banbridge	1,000
Cookstown	1,000
Downpatrick	1,000
Dungannon	1,000
Larne	1,000
Limavady	1,000
Magherafelt	700
Newtownards	1,500
Strabane	1,000

### Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation

- 4.59 Northern Ireland has been the beneficiary of a Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation between 1995 and 1999. The Programme has two strategic objectives: To promote the social inclusion of those at the margins of economic and social life; and To exploit the opportunities and address the needs arising from the peace process in order to boost economic growth and stimulate social and economic regeneration. The priorities for action were: Employment; Urban regeneration; Rural regeneration; Cross border development, Social inclusion and Productive investment and industrial development.
- 4.60 The Special Programme has funded a wide variety of projects – much wider indeed than is normally the case with European Union funds. These have included town centre related projects although there was no explicit Sub-programme of Measure related to town centre issues.
- 4.61 The Government is in the process of negotiating the second Programme with the European Commission and it is suggested that the opportunity could be take to raise the specific contribution of town centres to employment, regeneration, social inclusion and partnership development. Whilst the scope of any programme related to town centres would need to be closely prescribed it could offer the opportunity to access funds that may otherwise be difficult to draw down.

***RECOMMENDATION 7 - Consider identification of a Town Centre Regeneration Sub-programme within the second Peace and Reconciliation Programme.***

### Housing in Town Centres

- 4.62 Within the rest of the UK housing in town centres has seen a marked resurgence in interest following many years of depopulation. This ‘counter-flow’ has been based on a number of ‘push’ factors such as restrictions on suburban development, the increase in the number of small households, the worsening traffic situation in cities and towns for commuters and the costs of commuting (such as accelerated petrol tax increases, car parking fees etc). This process has also been the result of ‘pull factors’ such as the reinvestment in town centre housing, increased mixed use developments, the development of town and city centres as

- evening leisure centres, the development and marketing of fashionable town house and flatted accommodation.
- 5.76 Town centre housing in Northern Ireland is not yet recognised as a distinct residential market as in other parts of the UK. Yet town centre housing has the potential to make a significant difference to town centres in the future.
- 4.64 There are a number of benefits that apply to all town centres from an increase in the number of people living within a town centre. Town centres are:
- Livelier – there are more people milling around – particularly in the evening;
  - Safer – due an element of passive security;
  - More pleasant – less vandalism and graffiti;
  - Economically more diverse – because there are new markets for businesses such as restaurants;
  - More efficient – as otherwise vacant premises are used for housing;
- 4.65 Town centre housing has wider social, economic and environmental benefits in that it:
- Reduces the need for suburban development and therefore contributes to brownfield housing allocations ;
  - Meets the need of the increasing number of smaller households without children;
  - Reduces the need for commuting and is therefore environmentally sound;
  - May provide a cheaper entry to home ownership for young people; and
  - Provides the economic justification for reinvestment in sites in town centres.
- 4.66 In the case of Northern Ireland there is an added benefit to town centre housing in that town centres are usually seen as politically neutral (with some marked exceptions). As town centre housing , whether rented or owned, is likely to be equally available for all sectors of the community it offers the opportunity to further break down religious/political boundaries. It is also the case that town centres in Northern Ireland have tended to be even less populated in recent years than many town centres in the rest of the UK due to safety perceptions. It is therefore even more important that people are encouraged back into town centres.
- 4.67 Whilst there has been market led investment in housing in Belfast city centre there is little evidence available to suggest that self-generating private investment is likely to make a significant contribution to town centre housing in the rest of the Province. This is supported by experience elsewhere where town centre housing – particularly living-over-the –shop schemes - have tended to need public sector support.
- 4.68 The responsibility for encouraging town centre housing is likely to rest with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. The Executive’s approach has changed over recent years towards an enhanced strategic and enabling/facilitating role. This role includes an increased emphasis on the promotion of town centre, private sector and brownfield housing as part of a corporate commitment to urban regeneration.
- 4.69 The Executive is currently involved in a number of projects to assess the brownfield capacity of towns as part of the Regional Strategic Framework and is also progressing a LOTS (Living Over The Shop) pilot in Londonderry. Town centre housing can be provided both through new development in gap and other sites, through the conversion of premises into housing and through the re-use and adaptation of previously unoccupied housing.

***RECOMMENDATION 8- Housing can make a significant contribution to the reinvigoration of town centres but will require the establishment of public subsidy systems able to overcome market failure.***

- 4.70 Within the remit of this Study it has not been possible to undertake a detailed study of housing in town centres. There is a need for a study to build upon the results of the Londonderry pilot by examining the scope for living-over-the shop developments in town rather than city centres. Any study would also need to consider the relative potential of town centres to accommodate social, private rented and low cost housing.

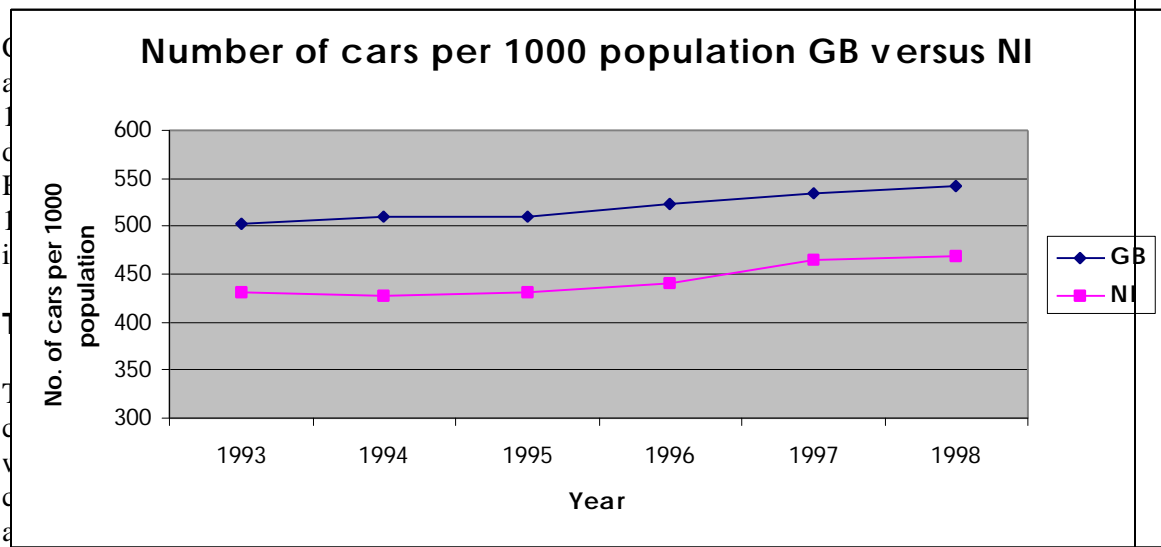
## 5. STRATEGIC OVERVIEW - ACCESSIBILITY

### Northern Ireland Transport Trends

5.1 In Northern Ireland, around 70 per cent of households own a car, with 48 percent owning one car and 22 per cent owning two or more cars, and this compares favourably with Great Britain with around 70 per cent. However, when examined in the context of cars per 1000 population (aged over 16 years), in 1998 Northern Ireland had 468 cars per 1000 population compared to 542 cars per 1000 in Great Britain. The Northern Ireland statistics have increased from 431 cars per 1000 to 468 cars per 1000 between 1993 and 1998 representing an 8.6 per cent growth.

5.2 Car ownership continues to grow. In Northern Ireland new cars registered for the first time in 1994 totalled 43,820. In 1998 this totalled 62,138, an increase of approximately 42 per cent in four years. Analysis indicates a high expectation of car ownership especially amongst the young, despite widespread concerns over the environmental externalities of the car.

2.1  
5.3



5.4

transport (bus, coach and rail) was almost 5 per cent less.

### Shopping Travel Patterns

5.5 It is also worth noting some characteristics of shopping trips, obtained from the DETR publication 'Focus on Personal Travel' 1998 Edition. Whilst the data applies to GB only, (no data is available for NI) it does give some idea of statistics relating to travel and shopping. Shopping trips account for 21 per cent of all trips. The average length of a shopping trip was 3.8 miles in 1997 compared to 2.9 miles in 1986. This illustrates that shopping trips are relatively short (compare with a work trip equivalent of 8.1 miles) but are getting longer, reflecting increases in car ownership and perhaps other factors such as increasing 'out of town' developments.

### Overview

5.6 It is clear from the information presented that Northern Ireland reflects other regions in the UK with respect to increasing car ownership and decreasing public transport usage. Car ownership is expected to continue to rise, as relatively it lags behind other regions. Whilst

passenger miles on the rail network have increased, this gives a distorted view of public transport, as buses are the main public transport carrier, and passenger miles on Ulsterbus routes have declined.

### **Transportation Planning Policies**

5.7 Planning policies relevant to transportation planning in town centres are set out in various documents and these include:

- Planning Policy Statement 5 (PPS5) Retailing and Town Centres (DoE (NI) 1996)
- Transportation in Northern Ireland – The Way Forward (DoE (NI) 1995)
- Moving Forward – The Northern Ireland Transport Policy Statement (DoE (NI) 1998)
- Shaping Our Future – Draft Regional Strategic Framework for Northern Ireland

### **Retailing and Town Centres PPS 5**

5.8 PPS5 identifies town centres as the main generators of journeys for employment, shopping, services and entertainment. Town centres act as the focus for a relatively large number of trips and are usually the hub for public transport networks, therefore PPS5 highlights that new development in town centres can encourage public transport use or minimise car use through the fact that the car trips are multi-purpose trips. PPS5 states ‘for the former reasons, town centres can therefore play an important role in reducing the need to travel and reliance on the car’.

5.10 The document highlights that car parking policy is currently being revised to reflect its more prominent role in transportation strategy. Therefore, it is likely that where public transport provides an alternative, all day car parking in urban centres will be discouraged by:

- widening the scope for using pricing mechanisms in appropriate circumstances to discourage long stay parking;
- the control of parking in residential areas;
- a more restrictive development control policy for sites to be used for non-operational all day parking.

### **Transportation in Northern Ireland – The Way Forward**

5.12 ‘The Way Forward’, published in Autumn 1995, outlined seven key principles which would be used in determining the future transportation policy in Northern Ireland, in the medium term. The principles were:

- the need to minimise, where possible, the effects of transport on the environment;
- a recognition that it is no longer acceptable to seek to meet the full demands of future traffic growth simply by building roads, particularly in urban areas;
- an improved public transport system which will include better co-ordination of bus and rail services;

- a fuller integration of land use and transport planning;
  - a more integrated approach to transport planning and funding;
  - the maintenance of good strategic transport connections both within Northern Ireland and between Northern Ireland and the rest of Europe; and
  - a realistic assessment of what is achievable, in both the short and medium-term, having regard to the availability of future financial resources and changing public attitudes.
- 5.13 The document accepts that the future use of the car needs to be influenced by both managing demand and restraining demand, for the following reasons:
- the ever increasing demand for travel by car cannot be accommodated indefinitely;
  - the rate of urban traffic growth must be contained to prevent the twin problems of congestion and pollution from reaching unacceptable levels.
- 5.14 With regard to restraining demand, policies such as road pricing are inappropriate for most parts of Northern Ireland at present. However, affecting the demand for car parking spaces is an available tool in most of the town centres under study, as the Department considers that it will no longer be appropriate to meet the demand for parking in larger urban centres. Whilst the study towns could not be considered larger urban areas, it should be recognised that a balance must be struck between the following:
- strategic objectives of reducing travel by car;
  - the mobility requirements of people who have no alternatives to private car travel;
  - the need to ensure the commercial viability of town and city centres; and
  - traffic management and safety.
- 5.15 The Department has also identified the need to ameliorate any problems associated with measures to discourage long stay parkers, particularly in respect to commuters in residential streets and the periphery of town centres. This could include the introduction of residents parking schemes.
- 5.16 Other relevant points included in the document include, possibly parking eliminated to allow freer movement of traffic on main roads. On others parking may be added, and that on others where parking exists, charges could be introduced.
- 5.76 The increase in car ownership and use, described earlier, has led to a reduction in public transport levels of service. This has been particularly true in the rural areas of the province, where mobility for many without a car has been reduced. It is worth noting the flip side of one of the earlier statistics on car ownership i.e. 30 per cent of households did not own a car. Therefore in reference to such matters, the Department promised to:
- continue to support research to identify causes of the mobility gap and appropriate solutions

- take steps to ensure that public transport becomes more accessible to people with a mobility handicap
- examine options for accessible transport in rural communities
- seek to develop an accessible transport network for N.I.

### **Moving Forward – Northern Ireland Transport Policy Statement**

- 5.18 Following the publication of the Way Forward, and in the light of the publication of the White Paper ‘A New Deal for Transport’ : Better for Everyone, a new policy statement for transport in Northern Ireland was published. ‘Moving Forward’ – The Northern Ireland Policy Statement is considered an important step in developing a strategy to enable a move from a transport system which is dominated by, and to some extent geared towards car use, to a more balanced and integrated transport system.
- 5.19 The Policy Document proposes a Regional Transport Plan contained within the Regional Strategic Framework (to be discussed later). The Regional Transport Plan will include the following relevant issues:
- an overview of the strategic transport needs of the region which identifies the most pressing problems to be addressed;
  - measures to deliver the transport components of the development plan strategy at both regional and local level;
  - a public transport development strategy;
  - cycling and walking strategies;
  - policies relating to parking and consideration of park and ride possibilities;
  - provision for the needs of service, commercial and freight traffic;
  - a costed implementation programme of schemes and policy measures; and
  - a strategy for targeting social need and the problems of reduced transport opportunities experienced by disadvantaged sections of society and those living in rural areas.

### **Shaping Our Future**

- 5.20 The final policy document examined was the draft Regional Strategic Framework for Northern Ireland - Shaping Our Future published in December 1998. Chapter Six examines transportation issues. The transportation aims are broadly in line with those identified in the previous documents, but encompassed in Strategic Planning Guidelines (SPG’s). The three strategic planning guidelines in relation to transportation are:

SPG12 :           To develop a Regional Strategic Transport Network

SPG13 : To extend travel choice for all sections of the community by enhancing public transport.

SPG14 : To change the regional travel culture and contribute to healthier lifestyles.

5.21 Within each of these there are important points in relation to transportation issues in the context of this study. Within SPG12 there are proposals for five key transport corridors. These are:

- The Eastern Seaboard corridor (includes Newry, Larne and Dromore)
- The Belfast Metro Area – Derry / Londonderry Corridor (includes Antrim)
- The Northern Corridor (includes Antrim)
- The Western Corridor (connected to Omagh)
- The South Western Corridor (includes Lurgan and Enniskillen)

5.22 It could be argued that the designations of towns on the corridors will improve their accessibility whilst those not directly on the routes will lose out. As can be seen from the above corridors, six of the study towns are directly on designated corridors i.e. Larne, Antrim, Newry, Enniskillen and Lurgan. Another two are sub-connected to the corridors, i.e. Newtownards to the Eastern Seaboard Corridor and Cookstown to the Western Corridor.

5.23 Within SPG13, there are specific policies relevant to this study and these include:

- enhance rural bus services by improving accessibility to the conventional public transport network to provide better integration with the strategic bus network;
- promote rural transport initiatives; and
- develop commuter rail services in the Belfast Metro Area connecting Carrickfergus, Belfast, Lisburn, Antrim, Templepatrick and Bangor and linking services from the lines to Derry/Londonderry, Craigavon (Lurgan), Newry and Larne.

5.24 SPG14's main objective is to change travel behaviour and to reduce reliance on the car through the following:

- developing more sustainable land use patterns;
  - maintain compact urban areas and promote mixed-use developments to reduce travel and to encourage more walking, cycling and public transport use;
- make greater use of traffic management aimed at discouraging car use;
  - reallocate road space to modes other than the car in residential areas, town centres and where there are high levels of pedestrian movement and create safe routes to schools for children.
  - Adopt car parking policies that reduce car use by curtailing public long stay parking in urban centres, where public transport is a realistic alternative and, where appropriate, control private non-residential parking in housing areas.
- Encourage more cycling and walking;
  - promotion of walking and cycling for short journeys
  - provide more space for pedestrians in traditional shopping streets

- Take into account and accommodate the needs of people with impaired mobility in the development of all transport systems to bring about a more inclusive society.

### **The Chancellors Initiative**

5.25 The Chancellors Initiative 1998 included six schemes for improvement to the Regional Strategic Transport Network and the most relevant to the study towns are:

- A8 Belfast to Larne Road
- A1 Loughbrickland to Newry Road

5.26 The first scheme proposes to upgrade the A8 to dual carriageway standard between Ballynure and the approaches to Larne. The second scheme proposes a similar solution between Loughbrickland and the approaches to Newry. Whilst the schemes will not directly effect the centres of the respective towns they will shorten the journey times to the respective towns. This is of particular importance to Larne as it provides improved access to the motorway network.

## **3**

### **Accessibility - Collation and Consultations**

5.27 Accessibility is one of the key issues affecting the success of town centres (along with attractions, amenity and actions). Accessibility can be defined as the ease with which one can reach their destination and can be considered from the point of view of the trip origin in terms of workers travelling to their business or persons travelling to shop. Alternatively it can be defined as the catchment area for a town or business.

5.28 Vital and Viable Town Centre (DoE 1994) sets out an indicative health check survey which includes accessibility and this survey was carried out as part of the of the listening workshop exercise. In addition Planning Policy Statement 5, Retailing and Town Centres, highlights a number of indicators with regard to accessibility. These include: the ease and convenience of means of travel including the frequency, penetration and quality of public transport services; the quality, quantity location and type of car parking; and the quality of provision for people with a mobility handicap, pedestrians and cyclists.

5.29 Each of the towns has been assessed in the context of the above (see Case Studies), and brought together in a health check sheet for each of the towns. Some of the comments are anecdotal based on-site surveys and responses at the workshops. Others are factual, based on reports and studies, and discussions with Roads Service, Translink and other relevant bodies.

### **Antrim**

5.30 One of the main issues raised, and observed in Antrim, is the pedestrianisation scheme. Comments at the listening workshop highlighted that because of the removal of traffic, business in that area had declined. The lack of on street parking was also cited as another reason for the decline in business, along with parking charges at the off street car parks (free parking was preferred). Other issues related to the pay and display car parks where there was a time limit which if exceeded (normally when the shopping took longer than expected) resulted in a heavy fine for shoppers.

### **Newry**

- 5.31 Car parking was again at the forefront of discussions on accessibility issues for Newry. Comments at the listening workshop highlighted that the edge of town centres i.e. Buttercrane and the Quays, had ample parking whilst the town centre has not the same amount. From the surveys results highlighted in Appendix A, it can be seen that Newry has around 1300 public parking spaces. There would seem to be a problem with the turnover of spaces, rather than the amount, as observations have indicated high occupancy in the town centre but lower at the edges e.g. Abbey Way car park. Traffic congestion was also seen as a problem at a number of locations and this was confirmed by Roads Service, who recently completed a traffic study of Newry. There are plans for a number of improvements at key junctions and to install an UTC system next year.

### **Lurgan**

- 5.32 The main traffic problems in Lurgan relate to parking and the mix of local through traffic with town centre traffic along Market Street and High Street. There is still an expectancy by car borne shoppers to be able to park in High Street/ Market Street at the point closest to their destination. This results in double parking and drivers circulating looking for a car parking space which exacerbates the traffic conditions and results in congestion at peak times. There was a perception at the listening workshop of not enough parking spaces. Additional spaces were suggested, however observations have shown the car parks around the town centre to be under-utilised, probably as a result of having to pay a modest amount whilst the street parking in the town centre was free. Public transport was also mentioned as being poor and the level of bus services does not compare well with a similar sized town such as Newry. There is no bus station in the town but there are plans for a major bus stop in the centre of Market Street. There are also plans for a through pass which could be the subject of a planning inquiry. If this were to go ahead much of the local through traffic would be removed from High Street/Market Street.

### **3.1 Cookstown**

- 5.33 Cookstown experienced many of the problems associated with Lurgan. The linear nature of the main street forced through traffic and town centre traffic to mix which resulted in congestion at peak times. A bypass was suggested as a means of ameliorating this problem and this had been examined by consultants on behalf of Roads Service. Parking on the main street was also perceived as a major problem for both shoppers and commuters, however there seemed to be spare capacity in the free car parks ‘behind ‘ the main street. The extent of local public transport services was limited. There were limited destinations and the level of service was poor, only one morning and one evening service.

### **Enniskillen**

- 5.34 Whilst the town is seen as being relatively successful those attending the workshop thought that accessibility issues (traffic congestion and car parking problems) could affect the towns capability to maintain its’ success. There is a considerable amount of on-street and off-street car parking (approximately 1400 spaces, see Appendix A) and this compares well, on a population basis, with most of the other towns in the study. There was a consensus that additional car parking was required and that a multi-storey, either as a stand-alone project or as part of a development was required. Traffic congestion is a regular occurrence on the ‘island’ approaches and a bypass solution for the town had also been examined. It is unlikely that a bypass, under existing conditions, is economically viable, as the existing ‘through pass’ can satisfy this role, therefore traffic management solutions are the most likely solutions.

### **Newtownards**

- 5.35 Traffic congestion occurs at a limited number of locations (see Appendix A). Roads Service confirmed that the amount of car parking spaces seemed to be adequate, but that they were aware of the limited number of free spaces. This was confirmed by the consultations, where the lack of free parking provision was seen as reducing accessibility to the town centre. Currently there are plans for a major edge of town development (at the former BT site) and this would introduce free parking spaces as a part of the development. The signing in Newtownards could be improved as it was thought that there was an amount of circulatory traffic in the town centre looking for parking, however footway width restrictions provide a constraint on improvements.

### **Dromore**

- 5.36 Dromore is bypassed by the A1, which is part of the main road between Dublin and Belfast. The effect of the bypass removing through traffic, and the size of the town, mean that there are very few traffic problems. The town centre does not generate a lot of traffic due to the level of activity taking place but there would seem to be adequate parking within the town centre. Dromore does not have any local town services due to its' size and the fact that it is very much a commuter town. There are on average two buses per hour to Belfast, one of which is via Lisburn. The overall scale of the traffic problems in Dromore were negligible compared to the other towns.

### **Larne**

- 5.37 Larne has most of its through traffic removed by the Harbour Highway but Main Street is still relatively busy. Car parks on both sides of Main Street have reasonable linkages and therefore provide an attractive alternative to on street parking. As a result, Larne does not suffer on parking problems on the main thoroughfare to the degree of some of the other towns. In addition the narrowness of Main Street does not lend itself to double parking etc. Whilst the consultations did not identify any major traffic problems, public transport was seen in need of improvement. There are also plans for an environmental improvement at the Broadway and some associated traffic management proposals.

### **Study Review**

- 5.38 A number of studies/reports considering all aspects of traffic/transportation and town centres, were examined, including:
- Vital and Viable Town Centres : Meeting the Challenge – Department of the Environment/URBED
  - Transport Demand Management, a Guide to Practice – English Historic Towns Forum
  - Caring for our Towns and Cities – Civic Trust Regeneration Unit
  - Public Transport and Town Centre Accessibility – British Council for Shopping Centres
  - Transport in the Urban Environment, Chapter 12, Town Centres – The Institution of Highways and Transportation

- Delivering the Goods, Best practice in Urban Distribution – FTA Industry/Local Government Partnership Initiative
  - Town Centre Accessibility – Healey & Baker
- 5.39 From an analysis of the above reports, access, parking and servicing are key interrelated factors which play an important role in the success of town centres, but only if a balanced approach is undertaken. This is reflected in a number of opinion surveys for different locations in England, which show a consensus with regard to policies for dealing with traffic in towns. These are:
- i. Remove unnecessary traffic
  - ii. Reduce the impact of what is left
  - iii. Improve traffic conditions for pedestrians
  - iv. Manage parked vehicles
  - v. Improve the environment
- 5.40 It is interesting to compare these opinions with those voiced at the listening workshops where car parking was a key issue, but there was a clear consensus that there should be more parking and additional free parking.
- 5.41 Improved parking is a key consideration of many retailers because it is assumed that if parking is not satisfactory, the viability of retailing can reduce as customers then shop/work elsewhere. On the other hand Table 5.1 below, highlights that a balance must be achieved but with a common aim of maintaining town centres as places people wish to travel to.

<b>Table 5.1 – Parking Policies in Town Centres, Advantages and Disadvantages</b>		
<b>Action</b>	<b>Assumed Advantage</b>	<b>Typical Disadvantage</b>
Reduce price or have free parking	More attractive for car borne shopping to visit town centre	All day commuters take up ‘shopper’ spaces and queues at car parks
Increase amount of parking close to town centre	Better access for car borne shoppers	May encourage more traffic with increased congestion in town centres

- 5.42 It is also worth noting that some of the principles identified in i.-v. have already been applied in a number the study towns, i.e. removal of traffic, improvements for pedestrians and environmental improvements. These have been brought together in pedestrian schemes, for example in Hill Street, Newry and Castle Street in Antrim, and the environmental improvement schemes in Lurgan and Cookstown.
- 5.43 In movement terms the pedestrianisation schemes cannot be considered to be successful. The level of vehicular traffic in the pedestrian areas is high and therefore the schemes have had their integrity diminished by the amount of parked vehicles. From the consultation

responses, if there were a trade off between an improved vehicle free environment and being able to park their car immediately outside their destination, most consultees would choose the latter.

- 5.44 Another example where these principles have been applied are the environmental improvements Lurgan. The environmental improvements in the centre of Market Street have removed parking spaces, and even though this loss has been compensated by the provision of additional off street spaces, traffic congestion in the town centre during peak periods is considered worse.
- 5.45 One theme common to all the studies, which reflects the views expressed in the public opinion surveys with regard to dealing with traffic in towns, was demand management. This is borne out of acknowledging that the externalities (congestion and pollution), associated with mobility offered by the private car, are at levels which are no longer acceptable. Therefore, there is a consensus that the demand for travel, particularly by private car must be managed.

Possible measures include:

- Development control policies
- Parking controls and pricing
- Controls on land use development
- Public transport improvements
- Encouraging more travel by foot and cycle

### **Development Control Policies**

- 5.46 Development control policies are one way parking can be adopted to influence travel demand as most local authority employ parking standards for new developments. The number of spaces can be reduced by having a higher parking standard. Some authorities employ a commuted payments system where developers pay the local authority to provide parking spaces in the town centre or elsewhere and an example of such a scheme is in Worcester.

### **Parking Controls and Pricing**

- 5.47 Adjustment of pricing structures is a common form of demand restraint. This is normally done through limiting the length of stay in car parks and structuring the charges to encourage/discourage user types such as commuters, shoppers, residents, etc. from using certain spaces. An example of this approach is York which has used such a policy to curb problems with commuter parking in the city by increasing long stay charges, removing the amount of long stay spaces, increasing the number of short stay spaces and providing resident only parking spaces. Whilst the number of cars parked has increased, there has been a reduction in the number of long stay commuters parking in the town centre.
- 5.48 Control of on street parking in and around town centres is another component of parking and a number of local authorities in GB have introduced on street parking schemes by introducing Controlled Parking Zones (CPZ's). These are normally set up by designating a zone over which a consistent control of parking can be introduced via prohibiting waiting during certain times of the day and/or permitting limited stay parking in laid out spaces only. Canterbury is an example of a town that has implemented an extensive CPZ on street parking scheme. The scheme prohibits all public on street parking from streets within the city walls (except for residents and the disabled); waiting limited to 2 hours (except for residents) by pre-paid voucher in a zone around the centre (620 spaces); and waiting limited to 4 hours (except for residents) in an outer buffer zone (1250 spaces).

### **Controls on land use development**

- 5.49 Land use patterns can influence the distance and number of trips and there are a number of factors which are a contributory factor and these include settlement size; proximity and centrality, scale of use; hierarchy; and density.
- 5.50 Overall the planning system should reduce the need to travel, especially by car and the two main ways of doing this are:
- Influencing the location of different types of transport development relative to transport provision (and vice versa); and
  - Embrace forms of development which encourage walking cycling and public transport use.

### **Public Transport Improvements**

- 5.51 In the context of demand management and to encourage modal transfer, public transport is often seen as a “carrot” to complement the “sticks” of the more restrictive policies. Improvements to bus services are the most common approach, with increases in frequencies, routes and possibly new vehicles. In those town centres which suffer from congestion, bus routes can be improved by providing bus priority lanes, signal priorities for buses, and other priorities such as bus gates or access into pedestrianised areas.
- 5.52 A large number of the towns have also implemented Park and Ride schemes and examples include Bath, York, Chester, Canterbury, Guildford and Scarborough. These schemes have free or cheap parking at car parks outside the town centre and dedicated bus services to transport people between the car park and the town centre. Unfortunately, Park and Ride is not always the right tool and tends to be more appropriate in the larger towns and cities. Operations in Colchester and Paisley have failed, as there was adequate parking in the town centres and traffic congestion was not severe, therefore there was no incentive to change modes. However, it is interesting to note that a seasonal scheme operates in Scarborough bringing in day visitor traffic during the summer. There may be an opportunity for such a scheme in some of the larger more successful towns in the study area, such as Newry or Enniskillen. However, it should be noted that a bus service operated between the Quays development in Newry and the town centre, which acted as an informal Park and Ride, but was removed due to lack of patronage.

### **Encouraging more travel by foot and cycle**

- 5.53 Walking and cycling are playing a more important part in overall transportation strategy. The production a national cycling strategy and a national walking strategy will give added impetus to these modes as alternative forms of transport.
- 5.54 A number of towns have introduced a variety of schemes in order to encourage cycling and walking. As part of the National Cycle Network a number of cycle routes have been provided to encourage this mode of transport as the networks overcome safety concerns and can also create ‘short cuts’ to reduce journey times by cycling. Local examples include Route 93 in Belfast and Coleraine which have provided segregated cycle lanes, as part of the overall network in these areas. In Worcester, the local authority tries to encourage a switch by demonstrating how unfit people are through fitness testing, highlighting the potential

health problems of their sedentary lifestyle and advising more exercise such as walking and cycling!

### **Appropriateness of Study Review Solutions**

- 5.55 Cities and towns in continental Europe have been successful in reducing congestion and pollution through the provision of attractive alternatives to the car. In GB this is also seen as an effective policy but needs to be enforced with traffic management measures (including workplace parking charges) and possibly congestion charging. How appropriate are these solutions for towns under 30,000 in Northern Ireland?
- 5.56 With regard to town centres and traffic, increased car ownership at the expense of public transport provision, has increased mobility but not necessarily increased accessibility. In some of the larger more successful towns, during past peak periods, congestion is reducing accessibility.
- 5.57 Whilst these conditions do not consistently affect the towns, there could be a time when the congestion and pollution levels rise to such a degree that parts of the town centre will become unpleasant. It may even get to the stage where the traffic congestion deters people from shopping in town centres.
- 5.58 What are the solutions for Northern Ireland?
- Parking Management
  - Public Transport
  - Infrastructure
- 5.59 Having examined the various policies, both transportation and planning, some assessment can be made of transport policies which would provide a healthy town centre, in the context of those areas studied.
- 5.60 In terms of overall policy advice Moving Forward accepts that ‘Transport in Northern Ireland is predominately based on cars, buses and lorries using the road system. This approach will continue to provide for transport needs for many years but with greater emphasis on the needs of pedestrians, cyclists, public transport – both bus and rail’. The draft Regional Strategic Framework has a main objective of changing travel behaviour to reduce reliance on the car. It is clear from the two statements that a balance has to be struck between measures that help the economic sustainability of town centres with the more macroscopic objectives of environmental sustainability.

### **Parking Management**

- 5.61 The most common issue of concern with regard to accessibility was car parking, especially the charging regime and the amount of spaces. The current situation, generally speaking, is that in most of the towns’ main thoroughfares on street parking is free, though restricted in length of stay. This results in the main street parking spaces being constantly in demand and sometimes encouraging congestion, whilst the off-street (often fee paying) is underused. There are also some cases where the parking restrictions are not adhered to and commuters/workers use free on-street spaces to park all day.

- 5.62 One method to better rationalise the types of parking acts, is for people who wish to park immediately outside a shop, bank, building society, to pay a premium for the convenience. As this parking is currently free, this would require charging for all main street car parking (possibly by disc parking) and limiting the length of stay to one or two hours.
- 5.63 To ameliorate concerns with regard to perceived loss of trade by charging on the main street, free parking, up to two hours should be provided on the peripheral off-street car parks. This would still allow shoppers free parking, close by, but not immediately outside, shops. Long stay parkers would still be required to pay the existing tariffs and a move should be made towards charging for all car parking.
- 5.64 These plans should have the following impact:
- limit the growth in commuter parking through relocation to short stay and possibly higher tariffs;
  - increase short stay parking to meet demand; and

#### **Remove circulatory traffic looking for a main street space and reduce congestion**

- 5.65 It is likely that as parking in the immediate environs of the town centre is discouraged, rather than using public transport, some drivers will migrate to secondary streets. If this does happen, two ameliorative measures can be applied. Residents Parking or Controlled Parking Zones (CPZ's) could be introduced if the appropriate legislation was available. This would further discourage long stay parkers from the town centre.

#### **Public Transport**

- 5.67 In many of the studies reviewed, improvements were made to public transport, such as the provision of Park and Ride, to compensate for demand management practices. These were carried out in the likelihood that some car trips would transfer to public transport. Promotion of public transport services for modal transfer purposes is likely to have limited success in the short term, however this should not rule out the increased provision for public transport in the study towns. Improved public transport should be provided not on the basis of delivering modal transfer but on the basis of equality, giving commensurate levels of access to those without a car.
- 5.68 In the section of the report on transport trends, it was noted that, on average, 30 per cent of households did not own a car and comments in the listening workshops highlighted the paucity of services in some of the towns. At the recent public examination of the Draft Regional Strategic Frame, it was commented that Translink 'was not providing a service to the rural community' and 'the bus network exists because of the schools service and stops after 5.30pm'. There is clearly a demand for improved services that would provide increased accessibility for the rural hinterlands on which many of the towns depend on for both trade and employees.
- 5.69 It is acknowledged that the decline in use of public transport has exacerbated problems in rural areas, but recently a Rural Transport Fund (RTF) was set up within Northern Ireland. The RTF will provide support for conventional public transport, community transport and partnership initiatives between various transport providers.
- 5.70 The document Moving Forward, points out that there is evidence to suggest there is a plentiful supply of transport vehicles (Translink, Health Boards, Education Boards) but ways

need to be examined to better utilise these services. Consultations with the Community Transport Association confirmed the above.

### **Infrastructure**

- 5.71 New infrastructure, particularly road building, has been used to address traffic problems in the past and at some of the listening workshops there were suggestions that bypasses were needed for Cookstown and Enniskillen
- 5.72 The Bypass Demonstration Project, announced in the GB Environmental White Paper, ‘This Common Inheritance’ was launched in January 1992. The project illustrated that whilst the by-pass schemes removed through traffic, if the existing routes capacity was not reduced by pedestrianisation, traffic calming, footway widening etc. the road space would fill up again and any short term benefits would be removed.
- 5.73 Recent research has also shown that if supply of road space is reduced, this will not necessarily result in additional traffic elsewhere, since people switch to another mode or do not make the trip. Notwithstanding the above arguments, it is unlikely that the volume of through traffic in the towns would justify economically the construction of bypasses, at least not in the short term.
- 5.74 Other infrastructure projects relate to car parks, particularly off street and multi-storey car parks. These too were seen as a panacea to parking problems in some of the towns, e.g. Newry and Enniskillen, and are probably worth further consideration.
- 5.75 The possible solutions mentioned are balanced to provide for the study towns. Whilst each town is different, parking management is seen as the best tool although demand management is seen in many of the policy documents and studies reviewed as the main tool in addressing traffic congestion.
- 5.76 The appropriateness of such a tool to the study towns is questionable in the short term and whilst it may be appropriate for the larger towns (say over 30,000 population) the danger is that restrictions will literally drive away customers. In addition the level of car based externalities has not reached sufficient levels to justify such policies. Whilst the proposals are not as sustainable as some of the Northern Ireland policy documents suggest, they likely to be more acceptable than the principles of demand management.

### **Recommendations**

*Recommendation 9 : Within the context of any review of PPS5 transport issues should be reviewed and greater emphasis placed on the specific needs of town centres.*

*Recommendation 10: The Regional Transport Plan should include specific policies in respect to town centres.*

*Recommendation 11: parking controls are considered to be the key area for short term action (as detailed in the Report) and attention should be given to developing a consistent approach but one which recognises the specific circumstances of each town centre.*

*Recommendation 12: Public transport should be promoted as an alternative to the car and as part of social inclusion strategy*

***Recommendation 13: Pedestrianisation in some of the case study towns would seem not to have worked in terms of the viability and vitality of the town centre. There is a need to review the bases upon which pedestrianisation is carried out and to initiate schemes only as part of a comprehensive town centre strategy.***

## 6. CASE STUDY OVERVIEW

- 6.1 As part of the Reinvigoration of Town Centres Study the consultants were asked to undertake eight case studies. These studies were intended to provide a context for the strategic recommendations made in the Final Report and to illustrate the specific issues facing towns in Northern Ireland.
- 6.2 The case studies were selected as a representative sample of town centres outwith Belfast and Londonderry in terms of location, size and ‘success’.
- 6.3 The Appendix (separate document) provides a brief summary of each case study highlighting key issues. The case studies are not intended to be detailed analyses –although they could be progressed into full studies by building-in site specific design analysis.
- 6.4 Each case study includes:
- Description – a pen picture of the centre
  - Retailer surveys – the results of a sample survey of retailers in each centre
  - Listening Workshop – the results of a Workshop involving key stakeholders
  - Analysis – the analysis of the centre in terms of a document review, site survey, the retailer survey and the Listening Workshop
  - Conclusions – drawn from the above
  - Recommendations – focussing on key issues
  - Health Check questionnaire – a summary of the Health Check questionnaires completed at the Listening Workshop
  - Accessibility Health Check questionnaire – based on a site survey and document review
- 6.5 The case studies provides a broad range of examples for developing an understanding of the issues facing town centres in Northern Ireland. Each offers a different perspective on the situation.
- 6.6 Antrim is under performing as a town centre partly due to the poor product quality in comparison to competing centres but also due to the loss of links between ‘new’ housing areas and the core of the town.
- 6.7 Newry has done extremely well in promoting edge of centre developments and in consolidating the market position of the town centre – although part of this performance is attributable to cross-border trade.
- 6.8 Lurgan exhibits structural decline allied to serious social exclusion difficulties.
- 6.9 Cookstown –is an example of a successful market town that is doing the right things to encourage greater vitality in the town centre through development of an Arts facility and encouraging appropriate edge of centre developments. The difficult situation for agriculture is however a risk for the future.
- 6.10 Newtownards – a generally successful town centre but one facing competition from new out of centre developments. There is a need for improved marketing and greater co-operation – including Ards Shopping Centre.
- 6.11 Dromore is facing a downward spiral of decline without action to meet better the needs of a local population who have become isolated from the town centre. If rationalisation of the

core area, new housing development and effective promotion can be achieved the centre has the capacity to become a very attractive and vibrant centre.

- 6.12 Enniskillen is a very attractive centre facing problems of restricted development space but with a forward looking and strategic approach which will help to guide development in the future.
- 6.13 Larne has adopted a forward looking approach to town centre management and policy that provides the context for new development – it is however hampered by a limited number of multiple retailers and areas exhibiting very poor levels of re-investment.
- 6.14 There are also common issues for these town centres – such as concern over the scale and charging of car parking, the impact of new developments, the mix between independent and multiple retailers and the need for improved co-ordination of service delivery.
- 6.15 One issue which did not arise through the consultation process but which needs to be addressed is that there would appear to be a culture in most of the case studies that expects the public sector ‘to do something’ rather than recognise that the private sector should be involved and may even lead where this is most appropriate. Capital spending constraints would suggest that more town centre work will need to involve partnerships than has hitherto been the case.

## 7. BEST PRACTICE IN TOWN CENTRE MANAGEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

### Introduction

- 7.1 The following case studies provide examples of approaches to town centre management and development as a basis for comparison and the development of best practice.

### Ayr

#### *Background*

- 7.2 Ayr is an established Scottish market town and tourist destination functioning as a sub-regional shopping centre for the rural area to the south of Glasgow. The town was one of the first in Scotland to appoint a town centre manager in 1990, to develop Ayr as a shopping and visitor destination. A public/private partnership was formally set up in 1993. In recent years town centre management has been required to overcome the increasing threats of out of town retailing and the diminishing tourist sector.

- 7.3 The Ayr Town Centre Management Initiative has five key objectives. These are;
- promoting and marketing Ayr
  - improving business performance
  - improving communication, liaison and co-ordination
  - encouraging environmental improvements
  - promoting better local services

#### *Key Issues*

- 7.4 Before the creation of town centre management the town suffered from heavy congestion, with a great number of vehicles parked on street. Narrow pavements exacerbated the image of congestion. The fabric of the town centre had deteriorated badly due to lack of investment, and the growth of out of town retail development had severe impacts on town centre traders, with many ceasing trade. Tourist trade was falling as a result of the deterioration of the town.

#### *Schemes*

- 7.5 A number of schemes were implemented to reinvigorate the town centre. A pedestrian priority scheme was introduced to the High Street, which incorporated a one way system. This allowed pavements to be widened and congestion was eased. Access to the High Street was limited to buses, taxis and service vehicles. Traffic calming measures were also introduced to provide a safe and pleasant environment for pedestrians. Pavement widening created an opportunity for the introduction of public art exhibits to be placed onto the street. New pedestrian crossings and traffic lights were introduced, and improved road signs and tourist signage were implemented, allowing the town to become user friendly once again.
- 7.6 More recent schemes have included the introduction of CCTV, which has reduced crime in the town centre by 40%, and the refurbishment of historic buildings.

#### *Evaluation*

- 7.7 The traffic management and associated environmental improvements have had a significant impact upon the appearance of the town centre. Despite this commercial activity has not increased. However, vacancies have remained stable at a period when out

of town retailing has a significant impact on the vitality of town centres such as Ayr. Pedestrian activity has increased however, and the town has regained vitality previously lost. In addition, the maintenance of the towns role in the shopping hierarchy has been crucial.

*Conclusions*

- 7.8 The example of Ayr is one which illustrates the success of town centre management in halting decline. The programmes undertaken illustrate that pedestrianisation does not necessarily lead to the loss of businesses for retailers, and indeed can improve the vitality of the town overall. The town also illustrates that a number of partners are required to be involved in an integrated process, and that environmental improvements must be part of an integrated strategy of promotion and management.

**Stirling**

*Background*

- 7.9 Stirling is a Scottish market town and tourist destination which functions as sub regional shopping centre, tourist destination and commuter settlement for the area to the north east of Glasgow. The town was the subject of a major public sector initiative in 1993, when the Stirling Initiative Partnership was established to diversify and strengthen the economy of the settlement. A number of public sector agencies entered into a partnership to best utilise their expertise and resources to achieve this goal. The project is nearing the end of a 10 year programme and over £100m of public and private monies have been invested. The reinvigoration of the town centre is a key objective of the initiative.

*Key Issues*

- 7.10 The creation of the Initiative and the programmes aimed at rejuvenating the town centre were a direct response to gradual decline. The town centre experienced problems of congestion, particularly at specific entrances to the town, and suffered from lack of signage and poor appearance of buildings and retail signage. A large amount of retail spend leaked to surrounding settlements, in particular Glasgow. Housing in the town centre was poor, characterised by older, predominately tenemental housing often in a poor condition and below a tolerable standard. The population of those living in the town centre was also skewed towards particular age groups, resulting in a poor mix of groups and a detrimental image.

*Schemes*

- 7.11 A number of schemes have been introduced by the Initiative which aim to halt decline. Streetscaping improvements have been completed in the main shopping streets of the town, combined with external improvements to prominent buildings in the area. A pedestrian priority scheme has been introduced in the town centre, reducing the number of private cars and increasing the pedestrian flow. Despite this off street car parking provision was consolidated, with the provision of a new 550 space park.
- 7.12 A new network of signage was also completed, which directed visitors to main road routes and main pedestrian routes as well as increasing awareness of Stirling as a historic town, particularly directing tourists to Stirling Castle.
- 7.13 A new road link is planned which will further relieve congestion in the town, particularly at the entrances to the town. A new bus station has been constructed which will link the town to surrounding areas by public transport. The town is already linked by rail.

- 7.14 An extension to the main shopping mall for the town, the Thistle Centre, was constructed, to consolidate the position of the town centre as a major sub regional shopping centre and to minimise the leakage of retail spend to other centres. The extension also features a car parking component. To assist local retailers to remain competitive, the local council have provided grants of up to 50% of the cost of shop front improvements.
- 7.15 Crime has also been reduced with the provision of CCTV.
- 7.16 Tenemental properties have been upgraded and refurbished, and 50% of the local council's private housing investment programmes have been spent on town centre homes. Scottish Homes, the national housing agency, committed some £8m to town centre dwellings.

#### *Evaluation*

- 7.17 The Stirling Initiative Partnership has reversed the decline of the town centre and of business investment within it. In addition, the performance of the tourism sector has greatly increased, to the benefit of the town and the town centre in particular. The image of the town has improved greatly, and the problems of traffic congestion and retail leakage are now diminished to a great extent. The Partnership has also been successful in extending the range and quality of housing in the area. Older, neglected properties have been brought back into use and vacant sites developed.

#### *Conclusions*

- 7.18 The Stirling Initiative Partnership is an example of a town centre management initiative which has been successful due to the holistic nature of the programmes run to tackle decline. The decline of the town centre was not dealt with in isolation and a range of issues such as housing and retail leakage were addressed to ensure the success of the Initiative. The example of Stirling also illustrates that the provision of on street parking may not harm businesses and indeed may encourage the exploration of the town centre as a whole, provided that signage is adequate. Stirling also illustrates that the diversification of a town in terms of attractions is crucial to the survival of the settlement. Again, the example illustrates that a number of partners must be involved in an integrated and holistic process for any management of the town centre to succeed.

### **Frome**

#### *Background*

- 7.19 Frome is a small market town in Somerset, England. The town suffered from a major loss in trade with the end of the historical cattle market which had sustained economic vitality for a number of years. This effect was exacerbated by a new out of town retail centre, and trade lost to the surrounding towns of Bath and Trowbridge. The town was the subject of a town centre management initiative in 1995, and the problems of the area are now being successfully tackled.

#### *Key Issues*

- 7.20 The main problems in Frome related to the vitality of the town centre. Loss of the cattle market and increasing leakage of trade resulted in a 25% vacancy rate in January 1995, with some areas of the town centre experiencing rates of 60%. The loss of the traditional role for Frome meant that the town did not attract people from surrounding areas, and had little to offer. Deterioration of the physical condition of the town centre exacerbated the problems experienced, and crime rates were high.

#### *Schemes*

- 7.21 The Town Centre Manager for the area implemented the recommendations of a consultant study in a bid to rejuvenate the area. A Vacant Property Schedule was set up and flexible, reduced rent leases were secured from landlords. A 30% reduction in rates for businesses was achieved. An environmental clean up scheme was set up with the council and a Town Centre Watch was established in association with the police.
- 7.22 The area was promoted with a new image, and specific types of businesses were targeted. Private sector sponsorship and donations were also secured. Investment was encouraged with a 1 year retail grant of up to £2,500 to cover start-up costs.

#### *Evaluation*

- 7.23 The town centre management initiative has been a marked success, with the vacancy rate dropping to 15% in 17 months. The town centre has now become a specialist centre for arts, crafts and antiques, and attracts visitors from outwith the area. The environment has been improved and rates of crime have been reduced. The vitality of the centre has been restored and the area is thriving.

#### *Conclusions*

- 7.24 Frome town centre is an example of a successful town centre management initiative which involved the definition of a new role for a small centre. Targeted specialisation has resulted in the rejuvenation of the town and the reclamation of the vibrancy once lost. The example also illustrates that environmental improvements for town centres must be undertaken as part of an overall regeneration strategy if they are to be successful.

### **Gravesend**

#### *Background*

- 7.25 Gravesend is a small town situated in the county of Kent, England. The vitality of the town is under threat from two large regional shopping centres, Lakeside and Bluewater. Bluewater is Europe's largest shopping and entertainment mall, with some 300 outlets and over 40 bars and restaurants. Lakeside is the second largest centre in Britain after Bluewater, with some 310 outlets. In response to the inevitable threat to the town centre from these developments, a Town Centre Initiative undertook a comprehensive review of town centre management in 1997.

#### *Key Issues*

- 7.26 The key issue affecting the town centred upon the imminent threat of the new retail centres. These were perceived to be a threat to the town centre, diverting visitors away from Gravesend and reducing the vibrancy of the area, in terms of both footfall and retailers. In turn, slow and long term decline of the town centre would begin.

#### *Schemes*

- 7.27 The Town Centre Initiative, a partnership of public and private sector interests, undertook a comprehensive review of the town centre in late 1997. The main steps in the review process were:

- **To establish a clear vision: Gravesend is a centre where people can shop, work, live and play: Key questions:**
  - What do we want to be?
  - How do we want to go about it?
- **Confirming Current Position: Where we are now**
  - The story so far

- What are the important attributes of the town centre
- What monitoring shows
- How others see us

- **What are the challenges to be faced?**

- The Challenges
- The Opportunities

- **In order to get there - establishing a programme for action**

- A Centre for excellence
- Getting the basics right - clean, friendly & safe
- Access for all
- The Quarters: character areas
- Health check

- **Monitoring progress**

- Testing the strategy
- Promotion and marketing
- Co-ordinating activity

- **Shared ownership and commitment**

7.28 The comprehensive review was published as ‘A Strategy for Action’. This document explores both a possible long term role for Gravesend and suggests a shorter term action plan and work programme. The aim is to create an attractive, lively and prosperous town centre, as a place where people want to be, a centre where people can shop, work, live and play. The Strategy takes account of the viewpoints and requirements of all existing and potential users of the town centre. Shared ownership and commitment are the essential ingredients of success.

*Evaluation*

7.29 The key relevant conclusions from reviewing the Gravesend Town Centre Initiative are:

- the process of preparing a medium and long term strategy is essential and brings its own benefits in terms of **strengthening the partnership**
- a town centre like Gravesend can **reposition and adopt new roles** even in the teeth of fierce competition from two massive out of town centre projects
- it is essential to get the basics right - a clear, friendly and safe centre is fundamental
- an integrated approach to managing change is essential so that business development, street events, marketing and promotion are just as important as environmental improvements and property investment

*Conclusions*

7.30 Gravesend Town Centre is an example of approach taken to manage threats and potential decline by planning a holistic strategy to deal with these problems. In this way decline is prevented and the vitality of the town centre is protected.

## **Stowmarket**

*Background*

7.31 Stowmarket is a small market town in Suffolk, East Anglia. A pedestrian priority scheme was implemented in 1992 to allow the town to compete effectively with other settlements in the area.

*Key Issues*

- 7.32 The main issues in relation to Stowmarket town centre centred upon access and traffic. Before pedestrianisation, the main shopping areas, Ipswich Street and Bury Street, accommodated two lanes of through traffic, resulting in narrow pavements and a dangerous environment for pedestrians. The through traffic, in addition to illegal parking and service vehicles, created a polluted and congested town centre which did little to attract visitors. The town centre began to decline as a result, and the development of a major out of town retail scheme exacerbated this problem.

*Schemes*

- 7.33 An Inner Relief Road was built in 1992 which removed traffic from the town centre. The opportunity was then taken to establish a pedestrian priority scheme within the main primary shopping areas. A number of environmental improvements were undertaken, including the widening of pavements, the provision of street furniture and planting of trees. Access to the area for vehicles was restricted to service vehicles and the emergency services.

*Evaluation*

- 7.34 The scheme has been well received by the public and has greatly improved the general environment and security of the town centre. The twice weekly market held in the town has also been able to expand due to the increase of public space. The increase in public space and the improved environment has also introduced fresh vitality into the centre, as increasing numbers of visitors are attracted to it. The vacancy levels in the centre have stabilised, however have not increased to any great extent. Car park usage has also stabilised, however some retailers suggest that their trade has been affected by the loss of on street car parking space.

*Conclusions*

- 7.35 Stowmarket is illustrative of the debilitating effects of a poor environment and traffic congestion in town centres. The initiative illustrates that the environment is a fundamental aspect of the town centre, and one which greatly affects the use of the area. The town is also an example of the benefits of environmental improvement, whilst indicating that improvements must be undertaken in a sensitive manner to avoid any loss of trade.

**Alnwick**

*Background*

- 7.36 Alnwick is a market town in Northumberland, England. The town has benefited from funding opportunities and community partnership in the initiative to regenerate the town centre.

*Schemes*

- 7.37 The town benefited from a grant by the Better Towns Programme, sponsored by British Telecom, The Post Office and Business in the Community. Three possible projects were developed for the town, before a local drop in centre for teenagers was favoured. A further £100,000 was levered in from other public and private sector organisations and the centre was constructed.

*Evaluation*

- 7.38 The initiative acted as a catalyst to further regeneration of the town centre, as it has created confidence within the community. Solid partnerships are now in place, and future initiatives will be successful due to this.

*Conclusion*

- 7.39 Alnwick town centre is an example of successful revitalisation of a town centre by utilising partnerships at the local community level to ensure a sense of ownership of the town centre. In this way the community are encouraged to become involved within the regeneration process and be more active in future initiatives. These initiatives, with the support of the community, are increasingly successful as a result.

## **Town Centre Management in France**

*Background*

- 7.40 French town centres, like those of Britain, are suffering from the threats of out of town developments and environmental decay, as well loss of traditional roles for towns. In response to this the French National Town Centres Federation has been established, and in addition the Zones d'Aménagement Concertées, which are similar in form to the Single Regeneration Budget in the UK.

*Key Issues*

- 7.41 Key issues facing town centres in France are similar to those facing British towns. Problems include environmental decay, increasing traffic congestion, poor perceptions of safety and security, threats from out of town developments and a loss of roles. These have resulted in the establishment of the Town Centre Federation.

*Schemes*

- 7.42 The National Town Centre Federation has established a number of schemes in response to these problems. The Federation promotes the towns of France as places where people can congregate, creating a sense of community and an identity for visitors. Multi-agency partnerships have been promoted, including Councils and Chambers of Commerce. A manifesto has been published which promotes traffic calming initiatives, environmental improvement, diversification of uses and roles for town centres and development of gap sites. A town centre 'access card' which allows entry to museums, transport and parking facilities has also been outlined.

*Conclusions*

- 7.43 The example of the French National Town Centre Federation is illustrative of a comprehensive and holistic regeneration strategy which refers to both environmental and economic improvement. The strategy also promotes partnership between public, private and the community sectors which are crucial if regeneration of town centres is to be achieved.

## **Business Improvement Districts**

*Context*

- 7.44 Business Improvement Districts (BIDS) are town centre strategies which originate from the United States. They consist of groups of private property owners who agree by a majority vote to raise additional monies for improvements to the town centre by collecting additional taxes on themselves. The relevant local authority will collect the taxes and

passes these to the BID, who then utilise the funds for pre-agreed improvements such as security patrols and enhanced street cleaning. The initiative is reliant upon by business self help and in the belief that if the environment of an area is improved, visitors will return to the area and land and property values will rise.

#### *Key Issues*

- 7.45 BIDs are usually located within the ‘downtown’ areas of major cities. These are the areas of the city which have been affected by post war suburbanisation which segregated the population, isolating an urban poor in the city centre location. Few retail outlets and facilities are present in these areas, and crime is high. The environment has badly deteriorated and little activity occurs at night.

#### *Schemes*

- 7.46 A number of schemes have been undertaken by a number of land owners in varied locations throughout America. These include

- *Portland, Oregon;* The BID brings an additional \$2m from a charge on property tax and a further \$3m from car parking charges. The funds have been spent on streetscaping, security patrols, and the enhancement of buildings, and has created an improved and attractive environment with low crime rates and high retail sales.
- *Edge City, Hampton, Virginia;* The BID was created by the owners of a 1,800 commercial centre along Mercury Boulevard in Hampton, as a result of loss of market share to more spacious and more recent out of town retail centres. The buildings in the area were deteriorating, and the environment poor. The BID has provided for a 20 year revitalisation plan, involving over \$60m of investment from the funds raised. The area will be landscaped and the environment improved with over 60 acres of woodland and a boating canal.

#### *Evaluation*

- 7.47 Business Improvement Districts are effective in rejuvenating the areas they target. The examples of Edge City and Portland illustrate that the initiatives have great impact on the most deprived and run down areas of the city and successfully tackle the problems of crime, environmental deterioration and lack of visitor trade.
- 7.48 However the use of a BID may simply displace the problems of one area of the city to another, where landowners may not be able to afford the extra taxes that are required for the successful implementation of the initiative. In addition, only limited evidence exists to suggest that the implementation of a BID will improve conditions for the entire city.
- 7.49 Raising monies in declining towns may prove a problem, particularly in Britain where the history of public/private partnership is yet to be firmly established.
- 7.50 The conditions which BIDs attempt to tackle are dissimilar to conditions in British towns. In America, separation of town centre uses has often taken place and the general environment run down. In Britain the problems facing town centres are of a more structural nature. The conservation of the built environment, increasing congestion on roads unfit for heavy traffic and pressure on car parking are all examples of British problems, which may occur in tandem with those in America. Fragmented ownership, common in Britain, may add to these problems, increasing the difficulty of raising additional funding.

#### *Conclusions*

- 7.51 Business Improvement Districts in the United States are an example of a successful private sector initiative to rejuvenate particular areas located within town centres. Difficulties may arise in the implementation of such a system in Britain however, as a result of the different problems and conditions facing town centres in this country

### **Town Centre Management in Belgium**

#### *Background*

- 7.52 Towns in Belgium once declined as a result of the loss of heavy industry in central locations and the loss of population to the suburbs. Today many of the towns in Belgium are thriving, due to Governmental initiatives to regenerate the declining areas.

#### *Key Issues*

- 7.53 Similar to Britain, town centres in Belgium declined as a result of the decline of heavy industry and the loss of population to the suburbs. These problems left town centres with an ageing population and a large number of vacant buildings, in addition to a rapidly deteriorating environment.

#### *Schemes*

- 7.54 Although there is no town centre management system equivalent to that in Britain, local authorities in Belgium place great importance on town centre management. A number of initiatives and schemes have been introduced to reach this goal. The majority of town centres have established traffic calming measures or exclude traffic from the main shopping areas completely. Pedestrianised space now exists for meeting places, public art, restaurants and cafes. This provides a sense of vibrancy previously absent. Shops are more diverse and independent, and less out of town retail development have been permitted to develop, lessening the threat to town centres.

#### *Evaluation*

- 7.55 A number of schemes have been visibly successful in town throughout the country.

#### **Charleroi**

- 7.56 A rapid transport system has been built underground, in addition to 2 underground car parks. Cars have been excluded from the town centre as a result, and extended public space has given a new sense of vitality to the town

#### **Mons**

- 7.57 A number of vacant older buildings were kept in use with private sector grant aid and initiatives. This has increased the population of the city by 10%.
- 7.58 In other towns in the country the restoration of buildings, expansion of shopping in the centre and the development of a mass transit system have secured the rehabilitation town centres.

#### *Conclusions*

- 7.59 Town centre management in Belgium illustrates that a comprehensive management strategy for town centres can be successful, provided that the implementation of the initiatives are sensitively implemented. In addition, the example illustrates that efficient alternatives to the motor car must be offered to visitors if they are not to use this method of transport.

## 8. CONCLUSIONS – A STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR INTERVENTION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

### Introduction

- 8.1 This section summarises a strategic framework for public sector intervention in Northern Ireland's town centres. Northern Ireland's town centres are showing the signs of the region's new found confidence. The transformation owes much to the political progress towards peace in recent years, which has meant that Northern Ireland has received a positive re-rating from investors. This has pushed up rents and suppressed yields in the retail and business property markets. The vision for the Northern Ireland economy as laid out in the recently published Strategy 2010 document is of a fast growing, competitive, knowledge based economy with plentiful opportunities.
- 8.2 It is within this context and the move to devolution that the DOE(NI) must promote a clearer framework for intervention in town centres.
- 8.3 Public sector intervention in town centres cannot be predicated on purely political grounds (although these may be significant) given constraints on public sector funds at the outset. There must be an underlying rationale for intervention to support the case for funding.
- 8.4 In intervening in town centres it is suggested that the public sector needs to ensure that:
- The long term economic role of the centre is clear and that there is consensus about that amongst stakeholders in broad terms;
  - The intervention is able to assist in achieving long term structural change - this may include slowing decline initially;
  - There is evidence of market failure and that intervention is necessary and able to support the re-establishment of effective market activity without long term public sector investment;
  - There is co-ordination between stakeholders, ideally through a formal partnership;
  - There is evidence of need;
  - The intervention will contribute to public sector objectives in respect to social inclusion;
  - The delivery mechanisms are in place to ensure effective completion of projects and programmes;
  - The investment will lead to an apparent, sustainable and high quality impact on the town centre.
- 8.5 The principles for intervention are the core requirements to ensure that public sector investment is both effective and sustainable. In the context of Reinvigorating Town Centres it is suggested that the key principles of intervention are:
- 8.6 *Holistic approach* - Town centres are dynamic environments and effective policy needs to address the range of activities that can be undertaken in town centres. There is therefore a need to adopt a holistic approach which considers not simply physical regeneration but also business development, marketing, training etc.
- 8.7 *Strategic planning* - In the absence of comprehensive up-to-date Area Plan coverage there should be a Strategic Planning document in place for a town centre which identifies a Vision, Strategic Objectives and Costed Proposals for action (see diagram below) . The

responsibility for this should lie with local authorities in respect to their economic development responsibilities.

- 8.8 *Integrated policy development and implementation* - Effective intervention requires integrated policy development and implementation. Where an investment package is likely to be progressed Co-ordination Officers should be identified in Key Stakeholders to be accountable for project and programme delivery.
- 8.9 *The mainstreaming of social inclusion* requires an explicit identification of the contribution of investment to meeting social inclusion objectives. The role of town centres as the hub of a community makes this particularly important.
- 8.10 There is little likelihood of effective sustained public sector investment without the establishment of *partnerships*. Whilst informal partnerships may be sufficient for minor programmes and projects there should be a tendency to develop formal partnerships where investment may be substantial and/or long term.

### **Reasons for Intervention**

- 8.11 The reason for intervention in town centres varies according to the size and also the characteristics of the town centre.
- 8.12 In Large Towns (e.g Newry) the town centre is the hub of a complex range of interactions and a location for a significant number of jobs - that have both commercial and broader economic implications. These centres typically have a distinct character, often suffer traffic and parking problems and have the potential to support seasonal and/or cultural events. Intervention in Large Towns should therefore build on the distinctive function and character of the centre and possibly focus on encouraging a move to higher value services that appeal to knowledge workers and higher spending visitors.
- 8.13 In Opportunity Towns (e.g Enniskillen, Cookstown, Newtonards) there are specific characteristics which can be exploited to generate economic gains. Intervention is likely to be focused on developing a narrower range of economic activities, perhaps identifying niche markets that offer the potential for sustainable growth. Examples of where such intervention has been undertaken includes St Andrews in Fife which has focused on tourism or Wigtown in Dumfries and Galloway which is being promoted as Scotland's Book town. Intervention needs to be focused in terms of objectives but also include both capital and revenue support.
- 8.14 In Towns Requiring the Management of Change (e.g Lurgan, Dromore, Antrim, Larne) intervention is necessary to overcome long term localised decline or where the retail core has been unable to compete with out-of-centre developments. There is seldom a panacea to structural decline of this nature but generally intervention needs to focus on:
- Protection and consolidation;
  - Helping the market to adjust;
  - Recognising the role that these centres play in maintaining access to convenience retail and sustaining a critical mass of other local community and civic functions; and retaining existing employment.

### **Defining Measures of Success**

- 8.15 There are a variety of measures of success for town centres. The key measures however are:

- The right mix of attractions;
  - Adequate accessibility;
  - High amenity; and
  - The mechanisms to control and direct actions in response to change.
- 8.16 In the case of Northern Ireland there is a specific advantage in respect to the distinctiveness of the town centres but there is also a need to adapt them to become evening entertainment centres as much as daytime centres.
- 8.17 Each stakeholder in the town centre has a role to play in ensuring the success of the centre – it is important that individual roles are known and the mechanisms are created to co-ordinate those roles.

### **The Drivers of Change**

- 8.18 The drivers of change identified in Chapter 2 are common to all town centres in developed European economies. However the relative impact of each driver naturally differs according to the regional situation. Drivers which are affecting town centres in Northern Ireland in particular include:
- Technology;
  - The beginnings of counter-urbanisation;
  - The recent introduction of large multiple retailers; and
  - Design.

### **Policy Review**

- 8.19 PPS5 requires to be reviewed in response to the changing retail policy environment and in response to legal challenges at appeals. It should be tailored to meet the needs of the Northern Ireland economy but can draw upon the approaches contained in PPG5 (England and Wales) and NPPG8 (Scotland) which are more restrictive on new developments.

### **Other Policy Documents**

- 8.20 There are aspects of other policy documents that may require to be changed once PPS5 is reviewed. Also there are other policy areas such rural policy which were not the subject of this Study but could benefit from further consideration.

### **Strategic Overview**

#### **Major retail development**

- 8.21 The scale of permissions granted over recent years highlights the need to undertake a retail capacity assessment for Northern Ireland that provides a guide to the ability of the economy to sustain further growth in this sector without significant damage to existing town centres.

#### **Town centre development**

- 8.22 The diversity of town centres is such that policy and practice need to be based upon an holistic approach that works towards meeting the needs of the users of town centres and also recognises the commercial realities of competition.

#### **Town centre management**

- 8.23 Town Centre Management provides a co-ordination mechanism that is essential to enable town centres to adapt effectively to market changes and to optimise the limited resources that are available for regeneration.

### **Town centre property markets**

- 8.24 The recent growth in the retail sector in Northern Ireland has had a marked effect on town centre property markets. Whilst growth has been most marked in new shopping centres able to accommodate the needs of the multiple retailers there has been growth across all market segments.

### **Accessibility**

- 8.25 Parking management should be reviewed to: limit the growth in commuter parking through on-street controls (charging or disc based schemes) within core areas allied to free short term parking in off-street car parks. Parking management is seen as the most cost effective demand management tool in terms of traffic. Public transport should be further encouraged as should the development of community transport options able to utilise off-peak transport in the ownership of public agencies. Infrastructure – new roads should be considered where essential but only in conjunction with measures to clam traffic in by-passed centres.

### **Historic town centre regeneration**

- 8.26 There are specific benefits for investing in historic town centre regeneration which have implications for tourism development and for high quality design.

### **Urban regeneration strategies**

- 8.27 Town centres are critical for the regeneration of towns and whilst not generally exhibiting the characteristics of socially excluded communities they need to be supported as they are both symbols of the communities they serve and an important resource for socially excluded communities.

### **Social inclusion**

- 8.28 Social inclusion policy for town centre is in two parts. Firstly identifying the implications of policy on disadvantaged groups and secondly positively encouraging measures to meet the needs of socially excluded people.

### **Special support programme for peace and reconciliation**

- 8.29 The Special Support Programme may offer potential funding for town centre programmes (physical/economic/marketing/capacity building etc) and this should be discusses as part of the negotiation process.

### **Housing in town centres**

- 8.30 Living over the shop and town centre brownfield housing should be encouraged – both to meet strategic housing policies and to contribute to the reinvigoration of town centres.

**Case Studies**

- 8.31 The case studies provide the practical foundations for the conclusions and recommendations made in this Report.

**Best Practice**

- 8.32 The best practice notes are intended to provide an indication of how town centres elsewhere deal with the pressures facing them and to learn from both successes and failures.

## 9. RECOMMENDATIONS

### Key Recommendations

9.1 The EDAW team's key recommendations which were discussed in the above Report are:

**Recommendation 1 :** There is a strong case for PPS5 to be reviewed as a priority

- Also there is a strong case for the commissioning of a Retail Capacity Assessment for Northern Ireland to provide an objective and independent base upon which to assess further applications for major retail developments.
- Also PPS5 should include a more explicit sequential test requirement to place the onus of responsibility on applicants for planning permission to prove that an out-of-centre location is both unavoidable and has only a limited and definable impact on existing town centres.
- Also PPS5 would be improved by offering more explicit guidance to applicants for different types of potential town centre development.

**Recommendation 2:** That a review of policy on rural shop support and market town development be undertaken as part of a wider study of Rural Social Exclusion.

**Recommendation 3:** A common monitoring and evaluation system would help to compare and contrast performance in individual Northern Ireland town centres

**Recommendation 4:** Town centre management should be considered as an element of town centre reinvigoration in Northern Ireland

**Recommendation 5:** Town centres are of significance across the communities they serve and urban regeneration strategy should address their reinvigoration as a corollary to targeted strategies for neighbourhood regeneration.

**Recommendation 6:** In developing any town centre project involving public sector funding the needs of the socially excluded must be recognised and the impact on those groups must be stated. Wherever possible projects should positively :

- Reinforce the neutrality of town centres in terms of divisions based on religious or political beliefs;
- Provide for the access needs of people without access to a car;
- Promote events/activities which cross religious/political divisions;
- Provide for the needs of people with mobility problems (including the provision of shopmobility services where appropriate, dropped kerbs, tactile surfaces next to crossings etc)

**Recommendation 7:** Consider identification of a Town Centre Regeneration Sub-programme within the second Peace and Reconciliation Programme.

**Recommendation 8:** Housing can make a significant contribution to the reinvigoration of town centres but will require the establishment of public subsidy systems able to overcome market failure.

**Recommendation 9 :** Within the context of any review of PPS5 transport issues should be reviewed and greater emphasis placed on the specific needs of town centres.

**Recommendation 10:** The Regional Transport Plan should include specific policies in respect to town centres.

**Recommendation 11:** Parking controls are considered to be the key area for short term action (as detailed in the Report) and attention should be given to developing a consistent approach but one which recognises the specific circumstances of each town centre.

**Recommendation 12:** Public transport should be promoted as an alternative to the car and as part of social inclusion strategy

**Recommendation 13:** Pedestrianisation in some of the case study towns would seem not to have worked in terms of the viability and vitality of the town centre. There is a need to review the bases upon which pedestrianisation is carried out and to initiate schemes only as part of a comprehensive town centre strategy.

### **Integration Recommendations**

- 9.2 The following recommendations are based on the findings of the study as whole and on developing a ‘joined –up’ policy approach

#### **Policy**

- 9.3 PPS5 is and should remain the principal policy statement on Retailing and Town Centres in Northern Ireland . Similarly the development plan framework is the statutory basis for development and the Local/Area Plan is the appropriate vehicle for planning land use and associated communications . However there needs to be a recognition that the issues facing town centres in Northern Ireland also require a more holistic approach based on an integrated town centre strategy with business development, training, marketing and promotion, as well as property development and environmental improvement components.

**Recommendation 14:** Town centre strategies should be prepared to guide future public and private sector investment in town centres. The preparation of a Strategy should be a pre-requisite to significant investment and should be led by District Councils in consultation with key stakeholders (including Government Departments and private sector organisations). Strategies must comply with existing up-to-date development plans and mesh with the Regional Strategic Framework and Policy Planning Statements.

- 9.4 This kind of approach will require more ‘Joined-up’ policies from the various Government Departments and private sector agencies involved. It is important that given the restructuring of the Government Departments that a lead Department is identified. The most appropriate Department in this regard would seem to be Social Development.

#### **Practice Integration**

- 9.5 There is a need to co-ordinate public sector activity in town centres, this can be best achieved through an obligation to commit in principle to an agreed Town Centre Strategy. Such a strategy is however not an alternative to a current and active development plan – indeed it should be seen as an extension to the development plan in that it would add an economic and social development role to the primary land use orientation of the development plan. This will require a partnership between Government, local authorities

and the private sector that will ensure a more integrated approach town centre management and development. However it will also require the preparation of guidance.

**Recommendation 15 : Government should prepare and issue guidance on the preparation of Town Centre Strategies.**

- 9.6 Responsibility for co-ordination of government involvement in individual town centres should be agreed for all larger towns. In most cases this role would probably fall to the Planning Service in order that there is continuity between the development plan and the Town Centre Strategy.

### **Physical and Business Environment**

**Recommendation 16:** Whilst physical regeneration is important in town centres it should be part of a more holistic approach that looks at the town centre as a multi-purpose location . There should be a wider recognition of the importance of business development, Welcome Host training and marketing and of ensuring that the product mix is optimised

#### **Urban housing**

**Recommendation 17:** Positive encouragement should be given to town centre housing development where this contributes to strategic land use objectives and in support of town centre reinvigoration. Consideration should be given to providing subsidy and technical support for schemes to promote living over the shop (LOTS).

#### **Social inclusion/cohesion**

**Recommendation 18:** Town Centre Strategies should be required to explicitly state the implications of proposals on social inclusion.

**Recommendation 19:** Any revision of PPS5 should require social inclusion impacts to be a relevant criteria in assessing the impacts of large scale retail developments in accordance with the policy of mainstreaming social inclusion.

#### **Tourism and Leisure**

**Recommendation 20:** Towns should be encouraged to position themselves to target particular tourism market needs – families, activities, art etc. Leisure, entertainment and other development which encourages vitality in town centres should be promoted within the parameters set by normal development control procedures to minimise nuisance and loss of amenity for residents.

**Recommendation 21:** Tourism and leisure issues should be addressed as part of any review of PPS5.

#### **Funding**

**Recommendation 22:** Funding of town centre projects could be limited to those Town Centres where there is an agreed Town Centre Strategy.

- 9.7 Public sector funding for town centre initiatives (whether physical development and/or business development training/marketing) should be routed through the same channels. The mechanism for this will require to be agreed by the Government and attention paid particularly to ensuring transparency given the likely level of demand for limited resources.
- 9.8 There should also be a presumption that private sector funding will be a part of any town centre improvement scheme – either directly or as part of an integrated package of projects. European support for town centre strategies and projects should be sought as part of the Second Peace and Reconciliation Programme
- 9.9 Public funding for town centres should be conditional upon meeting a given set of requirements and also be subject to competition. The criteria should include physical, economic and social considerations – in particular making a positive contribution to social inclusion policy. Given anticipated funding constraints it should be the responsibility of applicants to prove need and also the ability to deliver holistic programmes of action.

### **Town centre management**

***Recommendation 23:*** Town Centre Management as an approach should be promoted as an essential prerequisite to funding being provided for town centre schemes. This need not involve the appointment of a Town Centre Manager but this should be considered for larger town centres or groups of smaller town centres.

### **Structures**

***Recommendation 24 :***Town Centre Partnerships should be established for all major town centres or where the local authority proposes to prepare a Town Centre Strategy. This Partnership should be guide the preparation of a town centre strategy and should be wound –up only if and when a Town Centre Management Partnership is established to progress the Strategy or a decision has been made not to progress a scheme.

***Recommendation 25:*** The government should consider the establishment of a Town Centre Regeneration Agency to act as the supervisory mechanism to manage funding and to ensure that monitoring and evaluation information is collected as a condition of funding. The Agency would require to ensure absolute transparency in its decision making and should not become involved in the preparation of individual strategies – only in the dissemination of information and in the co-ordination of funding.

***Recommendation 26:*** Department of Social Development has a lead role to play in relation to reinvigoration of town centres in conjunction with the Department of Regional Development.

### **Dissemination**

***Recommendation 27:*** An illustrated Executive Summary setting out best practice and key conclusions should be produced and consideration be given to an associated Conference in the summer of 2000. The Case Studies should be circulated and supported by facilitated workshops involving key players.

