

MEDIA RELEASE

New report warns of threat to local high streets and shops

31 July 2009

John Howell, MP for the Henley constituency, criticised the Government's proposed changes to planning rules, which will reduce the powers of councils such as SODC to control out-of-town retail development in towns such as Henley and Thame.

A new report from a cross-party House of Commons Committee has warned that the Government's proposed changes to planning rules on retail development (the scrapping of the 'needs test') will result in "*many more out-of-town superstores*" and lead to "*unnecessary risks to town centres*". This comes as a separate nationwide survey by the British Retail Consortium has found that 1 in 10 of all town centre shops is now vacant.

The Government's proposals to scrap the 'needs test' will end the requirement for developers to prove the 'need' for additional out-of-town development. The Government consultation exercise found that the changes would "*lead to more edge-of and out-of-centre development*" and "*undermine regeneration schemes by allowing development outside town centres*".

John Howell said:

"I am not against out-of-town shopping centres in themselves; most of us use them at some time. But it is wrong that we are once again seeing another reduction in the powers of locally elected councillors to take decisions about planning in their area on proper evidence.

"In addition, this is a ridiculous time to put at risk the centres of our towns. In Henley we are seeing the town buck the trend of vacant shops whilst in Thame we need to make sure the town centre is vibrant in the face of potentially large development. The scrapping of the 'needs test' sends all the wrong signals about promoting town centre regeneration."

SODC's Cabinet Member for Planning, Cllr Angie Paterson, said:

“We have set out a clear strategy for the district in our latest planning documents and there is no evidence to suggest that there is a need for any new out-of-town shopping schemes. Indeed our preferred approach is to promote our town centres. Anything which undermines this and takes control over planning away from local councils should be resisted.”

Notes to Editors

1. In a new report (CLG Select Committee, *Need and impact: planning for town centres*, HC 517, 25 July 2009), the cross-party Communities & Local Government Select Committee, has said:

“We are unconvinced by the evidence put forward that the need test is having undesirable effects. On the contrary, we have heard from representatives of developers, of local planning authorities and of local campaign groups that it is serving a useful—some say essential—function. In addition, whilst we accept that planning policy should be “economic cycle blind”, the timing of change can be significant. In the current economic climate, the removal of the need test would present unnecessary risks to town centres. We therefore recommend that the need test be retained as a component of town centre planning policy” (para 48).

“There was a widespread perception when the Government’s proposals were published that they would lead to many more out-of-town superstores” (para 52).

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmcomloc/517/51702.htm>

2. The ‘needs test’ provides a set of rules to prevent the proliferation of out-of-town shopping centres. As a result, local councils can reject proposals for new supermarkets and retail development outside towns. The Government signalled the end of this test in its consultation on Planning Policy Statement 6 in February 2009/
3. A survey by the British Retail Consortium has found that 12 per cent of town centre shops are now vacant (*BRC press release*, 21 July 2009). <http://www.brc.org.uk/details04.asp?id=1599>