



Are you an "Out of Townie"?

The debate concerning "out of town" development as opposed to "in town" development has been brought sharply into focus in Northern Ireland as a result of a recent ministerial decision approving a significant extension to an existing out of town shopping centre at Sprucefield which is situated some 8 miles up the M1 from Belfast City Centre and close to the city of Lisburn.

The planning application was processed under the special arrangements set out in Article 31 of the Planning (NI) Order 1991 which allows the Department of the Environment to take one of three options. They can issue a notice of opinion to refuse, issue a notice of opinion to approve or call for a public enquiry. In this instance the Minister for the Environment in the Province issued a notice of opinion to approve.

The planning application is for a major extension at the centre which will more than double its size. Approximately half of the extended retail area is to be occupied by the retailer, John Lewis, at a cost to the company reported to be £40 million and which the company states will create 1000 full and part time jobs for the area. Lord Rooker, Minister for the Environment in the Province, who approved the plans stated that he was "convinced that a decision to approve is in the best interests of the people in Northern Ireland".

It is understood that Belfast City Council and Chamber of Commerce are preparing for legal action to block the development as are private developers including the Dutch company, AM Developments, the latter being the company behind the ongoing £300m shopping centre development at Victoria Square in Belfast city centre. In April 2004 the Department for Social Development launched its regeneration policy statement for Belfast city centre and in so doing gave its support to the Victoria Square development. The statement committed the department to working in partnership with Belfast City Council, the property development sector, commercial, retail and leisure sectors to maximise the potential for economic growth in the city. It reinforced the Government's vision of strengthening the city centre as a "premier regional shopping destination providing a high quality safe urban environment, attractive to investors, employees, residents and tourists".

The president of the Belfast Chamber of Commerce has stated that the Sprucefield development amounts to "almost as much floor space as we have in the city centre". There is real concern amongst the opponents, which include Lisburn city centre trade organisations, that the Sprucefield development whilst creating jobs will take trade away from city centres. In a previous letter delivered by various opponents to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland the Secretary of State was reminded of the damage out of town developments have caused in England and of the Deputy Prime Minister's recent comments that out of town shopping was a thing of the past and that revitalisation of town centres was the way forward.

It has been reported that the opponents of the Sprucefield development will argue that the decision to allow the out of town development flies in the face of Government reported policies and particularly the policies contained in the recently published Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan 2015 Draft Plan. This plan was accompanied by a transport plan proposing £1.9bn worth of transport expenditure in the area by 2015. The plan covers Belfast and five neighbouring authorities which have a combined population of 600,000, 40% of Northern Ireland's population.

BMAP reports that in 2001 100,827 people were employed in Belfast city out of a population of 277,000. The city population had however declined from 416,000 in 1971. It reports that this has come about due to suburban expansion and migration to other areas of the province following the dispersal of employment, retailing and other facilities. This the report finds has led to an age imbalance in the inner city areas, under utilisation of the existing infrastructure and significant land dereliction.

As with other cities in the UK the report addresses traffic congestion in the city. Since 1980 the plan reports a five fold increase in the number of car parking spaces in the city centre reflecting increased use of private car trips. This increase, it maintains, has resulted from both increased public parking provision and additional spaces allocated with commercial premises together with temporary car parks. The report contends that availability of parking spaces often at relatively low prices or free of charge encourages the use of the private car for journeys. These policies are being reflected in planning permissions granted for office use in the city where few if any car parking spaces are being allowed within the permissions.

The report also states that the rate of decline is reducing and that the city centre is playing a significant role in the regional economy. It reports significant growth in the office, retail and entertainment sectors in the city and a growth in city tourism. Central to this has been the Lagside initiative and the transformation of the city's waterfront.

All of these issues have been well debated in England and battles have been fought, with some won, to halt out of town developments. It seems that planning has been so restricted for out of town developments that some out of town retailers have been expanding the size of their retail floor area by installing mezzanine floors which are not subject to planning controls. The Planning Minister, Keith Hill, recently announced that consultations were taking place to introduce planning legislation covering large increases in retail floor space to "discourage the out of town retail sprawl that was common in the 1980s and 1990s" and encourage town centres to thrive.

Many of the local political parties in Northern Ireland uphold, as part of their policy statements, the regeneration of the province's towns and cities and planning restrictions on out of town development. However with the Assembly currently suspended, planning policies and their implementation remain in the hands of the ministers currently in office. It remains to be seen if the Government's latest decision giving the "thumbs up" to out of town development will be overturned by the courts.