executive summary

Whereas in the 1980s most British towns expected their shopping centres to grow, many now feel threatened, and there are widespread signs of decline. The challenge stems not just from the recession and competition from other towns, but from social and economic changes. In particular, local authorities have to reconcile growing pressures for dispersal, as a result of rising car usage, with improvements to the environment for the many who value the mix of functions that town centres provide.

The new emphasis on positive planning, reflected in PPG6 and ministerial statements, recognises the threat to sustainability posed by excessive dispersal. It also encourages those with an interest in a town to work together to devise and implement strategies for improvement. This report, therefore, draws together information on trends, as well as experience in this country and abroad, to enable local authorities and others to make the most of their town and city centres.

Report structure

The report is the result of a year's work by the Urban and Economic Development Group (URBED), and a multi-disciplinary team of consultants and researchers. It is in three main parts. The first part deals with the challenges. It draws on fresh analyses of employment and population trends in 32 towns by the Bartlett School of University College London, and includes reviews of shopping and leisure trends by Hillier Parker and Comedia, and of transport by Environmental and Transport Planning. It considers alternative futures, based on American or Continental models. An assessment is made of the impact of different policies.

The second part then considers the responses local authorities can make, both in assessing vitality and viability and in devising town centre strategies. A series of indicators for both performance and the underlying components of a healthy town centre are put forward. The report sets out a sequential approach for drawing up a strategy. It also differentiates between the main types of town centre in terms of the particular problems and opportunities they face.

The final part deals with good practice. It is based on responses to a survey from 335 district and borough councils (85% of all such local authorities in England and Wales) and a number of case studies, as well as on visits, interviews and an analysis of the extensive literature. The section sets out some basic guidelines, with illustrations from the five basic types of town (and the report includes over 50 boxed examples). Appendices provide further information on measuring retail performance, undertaking a health check, and a list of examples of good practice, followed by a bibliography.

Underlying trends

Many town centres, in expanding market towns as well as contracting old industrial areas, feel they are declining. Chapter 2 argues that while the most obvious threat to town centres has come from out-of-town shopping and new forms of retailing, there are deeper trends towards dispersal. These are causing the population of larger towns to change and contract, although there is a slight increase in the numbers living near the town centre. The wide variation in employment trends between different town centres, suggests that there is a range of possible futures. However, with the growth of business parks on the periphery of towns, there is a danger of functions other than just shopping drifting away.

The underlying causes lie in the shift towards a service-based economy, and one where most people increasingly rely on cars to get around from one centre to another. Most towns were not built with cars in mind and reconciling the individual desire for personal mobility with collective desires for an attractive town centre depends on investment and good urban design. Major retailers and financial institutions who have invested heavily in the expansion of town centres, are in many cases now finding it more profitable to move out of town, where access by car is far easier.

Chapter 3 considers how towns have evolved and looks at possible alternative futures. It suggests one possible scenario is for British towns to follow the North American example, where retailing is no longer concentrated in town centres, and as a result many have contracted and gone 'down market'. Another is to become more like Continental towns, where a high density of population, good public transport and attractive streets keep the centres strong and popular.

Chapter 4 examines the impact of public policies. While the situation varies around the country, in general public policies are not checking dispersal or ensuring that enough investment is going into making centres competitive, although there are some promising examples of what could be achieved. The danger arises when dispersal has gone too far, and the response of 'beautification' may be like putting cosmetics on a corpse.

Positive planning

Chapter 5 deals with the meaning of vitality and viability, and how to assess them. The organic nature of town centres makes them hard to reduce to a few figures, and this is made more difficult by the lack of data on retail turnover. Nevertheless, reasonably reliable information is available on a number of factors that can be used to assess whether a town centre is healthy or at risk. Vitality refers to how busy the town is at different times, and information can be collected on pedestrian flow or footfall, as it is already for major shopping malls, to show trends and also areas of weakness. Viability refers to the capacity to attract ongoing investment, and here we suggest looking at town centres through the eyes of investors by using information on retail property yields and rentals. In each case, information is available which can also be analysed in terms of trends over time and comparable areas.

The strengths and weaknesses of town centres should also be analysed systematically. We propose that local authorities undertake "health checks", where possible in association with local businesses, to look in turn at how well the centre is performing in terms of attractions, accessibility, amenity, and action (the four `A's). A series of concepts such as diversity, linkages, identity and organisational capacity can be helpful, and these are described and illustrated.

Chapter 6 outlines a process for drawing up town centre strategies. Towns vary enormously, but success usually depends on a process that gives the centre the attention it needs and ensures the right strategic choices are taken. Success is helped by a realistic vision that draws the support of key interests, plus a strategy and action programme that mobilises resources, and effective management to maintain improvements.

Strategic differences

Chapter 7 deals with how to classify town centres. The most valid comparisons are not with the town down the road, but with similar types of town in terms of their wider function, not just their role as shopping centres. We have identified a number of archetypes that reflect different kinds of centre. The basic categories we propose are Market Towns, Industrial Towns, Suburban Centres, Metropolitan Cities, and Resorts and Historic Towns. The latter have been combined as they share a number of characteristics and problems.

Chapters 8 to 12 describe the common features and examples of good practice in each of the different types of town centre in turn. Although they perform eight or nine different functions, it is vital that they do not lose their retail function which still underpins the use and value of most British town centres. The town centres most at risk are the industrial and suburban centres, as these both face a drop in purchasing power and strong competition from all sides. Many market towns are also vulnerable from the development of too many out-of-town food superstores if their centres are not sufficiently attractive to compete. Seaside resorts face a special problem, having lost their traditional economic base, but could look to follow the example of historic towns, most of which have prospered. The Metropolitan city centres have made the greatest strides to

match their Continental rivals and many are now vibrant.

After the collapse of the property boom, with less finance for major redevelopment schemes, priority is switching to schemes that improve the centre as a whole. As standards rise and retail requirements change, local authorities need to work with local businesses and other key interests to assess how well their centres match up to competition, and what can practically be done to improve their attractions, accessibility and amenity.

Attractions

In smaller towns, empty space can sometimes be used to improve the retail mix, while planning briefs can secure appropriate development on the edge of the town centre, including housing as well as space for food stores. In larger towns, imaginative refurbishment of redundant buildings can help to create places where arts, culture and entertainment thrive. Mixed uses can also revitalise quarters on the edge of metropolitan cities. In some cases activities such as education and health uses can be important. Many major cities have also shown how to use events to bring places to life and promote a positive image. Though most centres cannot survive on residents alone, successful town centres tend to have people living in or around them, and there is great scope for expanding their populations once again, as on the Continent.

Accessibility

The stronger the attractions, the more effort people will make to get to town, but with much more choice it is vital that trips are a pleasure and not a chore. In market towns this may mean having free short stay parking close to the centre. In many larger towns the answer lies in making the bus system as attractive to use as the car, or through park and ride or rapid transit systems. As most towns cannot expect to compete with the convenience and parking availability of out-of-town centres they must take care not to lose customers. The relative success of historic towns provide much of the inspiration on how to create walkable cities. Walking must feel attractive and safe at all times, and this means more than an isolated pedestrian precinct. Many towns could do much more to improve their gateways, such as bus stations, and the linkages between car parks and the shops. Traffic calming provides an attractive option to total exclusion of cars in some situations.

Amenity

The main priority for amenity, or the appearance of the town, is to ensure that it looks well cared for, so that people feel welcome to explore and linger. Security is an increasing concern, and towns have to match standards set by managed shopping centres. However, the future of town centres lies in emphasising

their distinct identity as real places whose bustle comes from a mix of functions, such as housing and entertainment. Towns also need to make people feel safe through good maintenance and lighting. Instead of copying fads, towns need to undertake environmental or urban design audits to establish what makes them special, and then to invest in quality. While historic towns provide a useful model, the message is that good design pays.

Action

The final and perhaps most important element of a successful town is the capacity to turn visions into results or action. Successful towns are enterprising towns. This is mainly about organisation, with the different public and private agencies working together for the good of the town, and involving the business community on an ongoing basis so there is a sense of partnership. Town centre management involves much more than simply giving an officer the title of town centre manager. However, action also depends on money, and as businesses often believe they are already paying for local services through the business rate, there is a need to review the mechanisms for resourcing the improvement and maintenance of town centres.

Recommendations

A number of conclusions, leading to nine principal recommendations are put forward in Chapter 13. Local government should adopt a town centre focus, devise town centre strategies, implement town centre management, take initiatives on key sites through positive planning, and work with public transport operators to make alternatives to the car more attractive. The process of revitalising town centres should be supported with technical assistance, local business involvement, and measures to create a positive climate of investment and to introduce new resourcing mechanisms.