

Housing, Regeneration and Planning

Literature review: policies adopted to support a healthy retail sector and retail led regeneration and the impact of retail on the regeneration of town centres and local high streets

Anne Findlay and Leigh Sparks
Institute for Retail Studies, University of Stirling

The Scottish Government, commissioned the Institute for Retail Studies at the University of Stirling to provide a literature review on the policies adopted to support a healthy retail sector and retail led regeneration and the impact of retail on the regeneration of town centres and local high streets.

Main Findings

- A healthy town centre involves identity and legibility, places which are well connected, convivial and where retailing is conspicuous, compatibility of functions, being competitive and having a coordinated strategy.
- A healthy retail sector in a town centre involves good retail mix, choice, diversity, anchor stores and preferred shopper formats and fascias, low vacancy rates, low turnover, good physical fabric, competitiveness and capacity for change.
- There are a variety of approaches and scales of intervention. These range from formal planning, through management approaches and partnerships such as town centre management and BIDS, to a myriad of local smaller initiatives and schemes.
- Retail-led regeneration can offer major benefits to communities. These vary in their appropriateness depending on the situation and scale of existing problems.
- Large-scale and out-of-town retail-led regeneration appears best placed to deliver targeted outcomes such as employment or community benefits.
- Case study material has established questions to be asked regarding retail development and town centres. These should be regarded as a useful instrument but they should not be considered a template for successful development.
- The literature base on town centres, regeneration and retail led regeneration is limited and tends to focus on large and out of town developments.
- There are not enough “before and after” studies in the literature to be certain of impacts in different circumstances and over time, and particularly in terms of town centres. Better town centre and retail monitoring would deliver benchmarking for assessing impacts and changes.

Introduction and Approach

The Institute for Retail Studies at the University of Stirling were asked to provide a literature review on the policies adopted to support a healthy retail sector and retail led regeneration and the impact of retail on the regeneration of town centres and local high streets. This literature review (focusing on literature relating to the UK) had three objectives:

- Identify what a healthy/vibrant town centre/local high street looks like;
- Identify, in the UK, what policies/approaches have been implemented to: (a) Support a healthy retail sector in local high streets and town centres, and (b) Undertake retail led regeneration;
- Explore what impact retail has had on the regeneration (in its widest sense – social, economic and physical) of town centres and local high streets, and how this has impacted on the wider community.

The work was structured in two parts. First, a literature review was undertaken. This used the sources accessible through the University of Stirling and which formed the basis of previous work on related subjects by the authors for the National Retail Planning Forum and Business in the Community. The review covered both academic literature (books, journals, reports) and practitioner material (planning reports, trade press, and relevant associations). The literature review was as comprehensive as possible given the two-week timescale. Secondly, this literature was assembled against the objectives. Commentary and conclusions were then drawn.

Background

Town centres and high streets in Scotland (and the UK) have been the focus of concern for some time. Land-use planning policy is focused on a “town centres first” principle and there has been encouragement for improving the vitality and vibrancy of town centres for many years. A number of approaches have been adopted. Nonetheless town centres remain a concern. Likewise, “high streets” are seen as the natural focus of retailing and a core of town centres, but consumers and retailers have shown a desire to use out-of-town and other off “high street” facilities (including the internet), leading to periodic concerns about the “health of the high street”. One reaction to these concerns has been a focus on regeneration of land, centres, areas, districts and streets, with retailing being seen as an important regeneration component or indeed the lead sector.

The literature base on the broad subject area of town centres, regeneration and retail-led regeneration has a number of characteristics which affected the focus and content of this review. In particular, many of the changes to high streets and town centres can be small-scale and incremental, and even if presented under a redevelopment, renewal or regeneration umbrella, tend not to be researched in terms of approaches and impacts. Such studies as there are, tend to focus on large-scale schemes and out-of-town developments and are often carried out in isolation and at one point in time. Comparative, systematic and longitudinal research on policies and approaches, changes and impacts, as well as management structures and partnerships, is lacking.

What does a Healthy/vibrant Town Centre/local High Street look like?

Town centres come in many shapes and sizes. The term town centre itself tends to be used to encompass everything from city centre to local or district centre. At all levels however there is concern over the “health” of the town centre. There are various definitional approaches to town centres, but it is more appropriate to focus on the components that are generally agreed to make up a town centre, noting however that the strength or even the presence/absence of such components will vary by situation, scale and level. Town centres generally include:

- Leisure, retail, entertainment and cultural facilities;
- Business, office and other employment opportunities;
- Public and private services;
- Residential opportunities;
- High density, mixed-use and sustainable developments;
- Quality, design, sense of place and focus on public realm;
- A place for the local (and other) community.

Defining town centres in these terms emphasises the differing scale of centres and the varying degrees of activity, diversity and sustainability of each location. Identifying what makes a healthy town centre is thus dependent on the history, scale, strategy and situation of each centre itself (as most centres operate in some form of network and/or perceived hierarchy). A healthy, vibrant town centre is thus dependent on the context, as well as the operation, of the various constituent components of the town centre.

Vibrant and healthy town centres and high streets thus take many forms and come in many shapes and sizes. Town centres are generally higher-density, mixed-use, accessible centres with a sense of local place and community. Key dimensions of a healthy town centre include being places with identity and legibility, places which are well connected, convivial and where retailing is conspicuous, compatibility of functions within the place, being competitive and having a coordinated strategy. Within that the key dimensions of a healthy retail sector include good retail mix, choice, diversity, anchor stores and preferred shopper formats and fascias, low vacancy rates, low turnover, good physical fabric, competitiveness and capacity for change.

Policies and Approaches to Support a Healthy Retail Sector in Local High Streets and Town Centres, and to Undertake Retail Led Regeneration

The history, context and relative health of high streets and town centres demands responses proportionate to the scale of the issues and problems. These vary from small scale initiatives such as individual shop improvements through to major urban centre regeneration. Town centres and high streets traditionally have been at the heart of the land-use planning system and form the cornerstone of the local strategy. However achieving a healthy high street and town centre has also been addressed by a number of other policy initiatives. These have varied from the introduction of town centre management and BIDS, but also include various other smaller scale initiatives and partnerships at a local level (e.g. shop front improvements). The degree of engagement at the local level also varies significantly.

The literature on such policies is rather scarce when compared to the literature on planning policy and large scale, often out of town retail development. In particular the literature on the numerous small scale local schemes and minor improvements is almost non-existent. Whilst there is literature noting policies expressing support for the local shop and the high street, there is little detailed research on the impacts of these policies and on identifying systematically cause and effect of policies and approaches. Our literature review has been obviously skewed by this coverage.

The variability in town centres and high streets and in their contexts and situations means that policies and approaches to town centres and high streets come in a variety of forms.

Town centres are at the heart of policy, but an understanding of the impact of the approaches and policies is difficult as the base line understanding of the situation of town centres and high streets is somewhat underdeveloped. This means that it is difficult to compare the trajectory of high streets and town centres over time and on a comparable basis. There is currently a lack of systematic research on the approaches and policy adopted towards town centres, their management and regeneration.

In terms of retail-led regeneration, there can be disputes over what may be seen as conflicting policy. Many regeneration proposals have to “work” around the local situation to identify what will be allowed. Partnerships at various levels appear to be fundamental to achieving outcomes, but in the literature there is not much detailed assessment of policy effectiveness or partnership working, and the material appears partial, piecemeal and subjective.

The Impact of Retail on the Regeneration of Town Centres and Local High Streets, and the Impact on the Wider Community

One of the key problems in assessing impact is the variability amongst the evidence and case studies. There is some academic research and also reports by developers and retailers. In terms of the literature review, local authority material is scarce. Small scale projects are rarely evaluated. The evidence base is variable in quantity, quality, approach and detail. What literature there is tends to focus on large scale and/or out-of-town situations, meaning that there is a lack of published evidence over the range of retail regeneration approaches and impacts in town centres, including the recently developed BIDS.

Large-scale and out-of-town retail-led regeneration appear best placed to deliver targeted outcomes, though it is recognised that the literature is slanted towards such schemes. Employment outcomes are the most obvious example. Wider regeneration outcomes are limited with image of an area and its integration into the wider urban area most significant. These can create consumer and investor confidence in much the same way as town centre retail development. This is harder to measure, particularly in the short term. In terms of impact it would seem that retail-led regeneration can offer major benefits, but these do vary.

However there are not enough “before and after” studies to be sure of impacts in different circumstances and over time, and particularly in terms of town centres. All retail-led

regeneration will not deliver the same outcomes or produce the same impacts (whether positive or negative). Research has produced ambiguous findings on retail-led urban regeneration; this mix of outcomes may derive from an inadequate understanding of the process of regeneration in very different areas. Much of the research has focused on food-led regeneration, with less consideration of other types of schemes.

Conclusions

The literature on the issues of healthy town centres and high streets and on retail-led regeneration is somewhat variable. It derives from a variety of authors and situations. There are issues over the coverage of the literature in terms of scale and type of high street, town centre and retail regeneration scheme. It is hard to draw firm conclusions from the literature. At one level we perhaps should expect this as the situations themselves vary so much.

However, there is an argument that the knowledge base of these subjects is hampered by an overall data inadequacy that is long standing. It is not routine to monitor town centres and high streets in a uniform and regular pattern and to undertake research in a suitable longitudinal way against specific and common criteria. Better retail monitoring could deliver benchmarking for assessing retail and town centre change, and allow the fuller consideration of impact of policies, approaches and schemes.

This document, along with “Literature review policies adopted to support a healthy retail sector and retail led regeneration and the impact of retail on the regeneration of town centres and local high streets” the full research report of the project, and further information about social and policy research commissioned and published on behalf of the Scottish Government, can be viewed on the Internet at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/socialresearch>. If you have any further queries about social research, please contact us at socialresearch@scotland.gsi.gov.uk or on 0131-244 7560.



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