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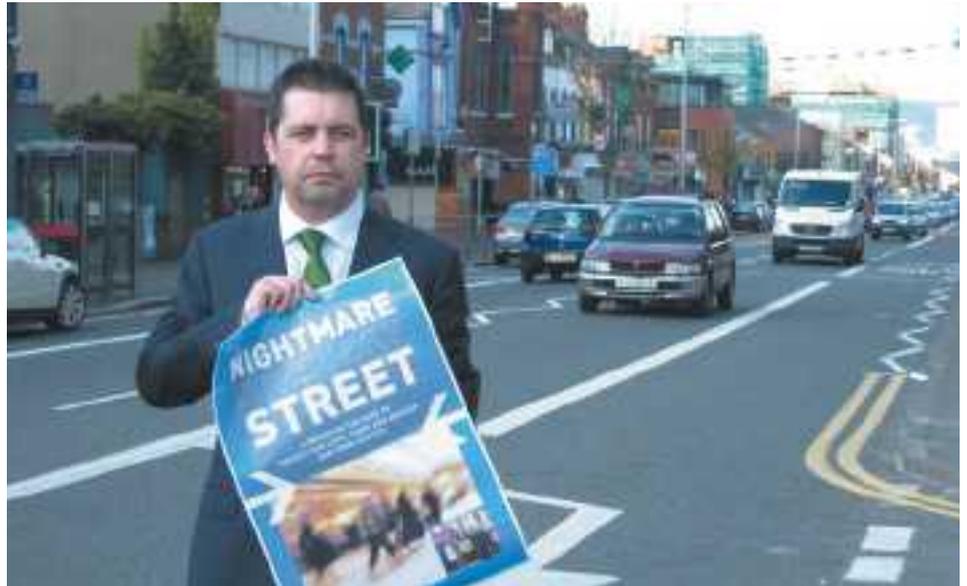
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Nightmare wake-up call!

Crisis looming as government fails to tackle the spread of out-of-town shopping centres.



NIIRTA Chief executive Glyn Roberts highlights the fact that the nightmare scenario exposed in its report could be coming to a street near you

Thursday 17th April saw an impressive turnout of local politicians and concerned retailers at Parliament Buildings, Stormont for the launch of a new report commissioned by NIIRTA. 'Nightmare on Every Street' produced by Donald McFetridge, a lecturer in Retail Studies at the University of Ulster, predicts more than 700 shop closures in the next three to five years, 7,000 jobs lost and the appearance of 'food deserts' across Northern Ireland if the Executive doesn't act on the pressing issue of publishing the long overdue retail planning policy, PPS5, which was promised five years ago. In the interim, irreparable damage has been done to town and village centres across Northern Ireland by the hopelessly out-of-date current policy planners are forced to work with.

As a result of out-of-town development, historic local towns like Lurgan and Antrim have already become retail ghost towns, with little more than a few pubs and charity shops left, while areas like the Lower Newtownards Road in Belfast, once a thriving retail hub, are awash with 'for sale' signs. But it doesn't end there. Towns such as Banbridge, Larne, Ballyclare, Crumlin and many others all face retail devastation if proposed out-of-town planning applications by the multiples are allowed to go ahead.

NIIRTA SETS OUT ITS CASE

Speaking at the launch of the report, NIIRTA Chief Executive Glyn Roberts said that the independent retail sector, one of the cornerstones of the economy, is under threat as a direct result of the lack of a level playing field with the big multiples, who continue to seek out-of-town venues. "The Northern Ireland Executive cannot on one hand claim to support local small businesses whilst allowing the current weak and out-of-date planning policy to remain and the devastation it causes to communities, our environment and the economy.

Out-of-town food shopping causes damage not just to the local economy and jobs, but also to the character of town and city centres, which is bad for the community and our environment. In England, where they have had a similar policy to the Northern Ireland Executive, the result is that 42 per cent of small towns and villages no longer have a shop of any kind."

Story continues overleaf



"The Nightmare on Every Street report sets out our case for supporting local retailers and our local town and city centres. NIIRTA is not anti-multiple, but we are anti out-of-town development. We want to see vibrant and dynamic town centres at the heart of local economic development. In order to take forward the recommendations in this report, we will be seeking meetings with the Ministers for Environment, Social Development and Enterprise and will be seeking to lobby the Assembly to establish an All Party Group on Small Shops, which is already in place in Westminster," affirmed Glyn.

EVIDENCE IS OVERWHELMING

Report author Donald McFetridge reiterated Glyn's assertion that there is no doubt of the need for urgent action from the Executive: "As someone who has watched this situation develop for a number of years, I am astounded that we still haven't seen publication of a new PPS5," he said. "Whilst there is an absence of action, the multiples are making applications that wouldn't stand a chance in the Irish Republic or elsewhere in Europe. The evidence, which I have included in my report, is overwhelming. Far too much out-of-town retail development has already taken place in Northern Ireland. We have reached superstore saturation here and the continuation of current trends will lead to the development of food deserts in Northern Ireland."

If the wholesale closure of local convenience stores, greengrocers, butchers and newsagents continues, we will see the creation of deserts where local communities no longer have easy access to local shops, services and healthy nutritional food, says the report. "I challenge everyone to read it, consider its findings and act upon its recommendations to ensure a healthy, balanced retail sector. The department must, with great urgency, publish a final and robust PPS5 and, until it does, there should be a moratorium on all out of town developments," added Donald.

TIME FOR ACTION IS NOW

Also speaking at the launch, Des Stephens, an independent planning consultant, who



Above: Pictured at the launch of the Nightmare on Every Street report are (back l-r) NIIRTA Board members Patrick Doody, Nigel Maxwell, Tom Uprichard, Frank McPloin, Joe Quail and James McCaughan with (front l-r) NIIRTA planning consultant Des Stephens, David Ford MLA, Brian Wilson MLA, report author Donald McFetridge, NIIRTA Chief Executive Glyn Roberts and Cathal Boylan MLA



Left: Pictured on the steps of Stormont are report author Donald McFetridge; NIIRTA planning consultant Des Stephens; Brian Wilson MLA; and NIIRTA Chief Executive Glyn Roberts

wrote the original PPS5 whilst a senior member of the Planning Service, said: "I originally wrote the various drafts of PPS5 following the research completed by Roger Tymes in 2002, who even then recommended a moratorium on retailing until the new policy was published.

The brief was to assess the existing PPS5 now that Northern Ireland had completed the first phase of attracting the major retailers to Northern Ireland and recognising that the then current rate of out-of-town approvals could not continue indefinitely. A more even-handed policy was required to create a more level playing field and to redress the balance towards town centres. Under the existing PPS5 planners are struggling with a retail planning policy that is discredited and out-of-date, imprecise, vague and open to various interpretations that have benefited out-of-town applications.

Indeed, in the past six years while PPS5 has been delayed, the Department of Environment has granted planning permission for in excess of 8.5 million

square feet of retail space - that's five square feet for every man, woman and child in Northern Ireland. In the same period, only one application was rejected. Applications are also pending for a further 2.5 million square feet of retailing space. Northern Ireland currently exports over £750 million net revenue each year away from the local economy and into the bank accounts of the multiples.

It's time to end that situation and I am very supportive of the findings of this report. There is no valid reason that the new PPS5 should not have been published by now. How many more years have we to wait, whilst Northern Ireland's town centres are decimated? If we continue in this vein, in just a few years there will little left of local family businesses and consumers will have little choice on where to shop. The time for action is now."



Download **Nightmare on every Street** at: www.niirta.com. For a synopsis of the main findings of the **Nightmare on Every Street** report, see pages 6 and 7.

Lurgan set for resurgence

Ambitious proposals are currently being developed to completely revitalise Lurgan town centre.



If the proposals come to fruition, the Town Centre Management Company 'Lurgan Forward' says they will maximise opportunities for shoppers and on-street trading. The town management group hopes this will be achieved by improving the public realm, increasing footpath space while maintaining traffic throughput, creating dedicated service bays and improving lighting to benefit the evening economy. These physical changes, combined with significant investment from major retailers and institutions, is poised to propel the town to the fore, laying the foundations for a planned resurgence that has been quietly in the making.

Heralding the new era and raising awareness of its new brand message: 'Lurgan - Get to the Heart of it', a recent major promotion incorporating poster campaigns, media advertising and a bridal radio competition, all combined with the publication of a new investment brochure, proved extremely successful.

CONSIDERABLE INVESTMENT

The Heritage Lottery Fund has been investing considerable funds into the area due to the heritage value of the town and is about to invest further. This includes the restoration of about 30 buildings under the Townscape Heritage Initiative, which encourages partnerships to carry out repairs and other works to historic properties. The first properties have already been completed with more to commence imminently.

At the same time, a new Town Centre Living Initiative will see a similar number of properties or redundant commercial spaces being converted into dual use buildings, providing private living spaces in the heart of the town, creating the bedrock for a new evening economy.

The Chairman of Lurgan Forward, Charles Gardiner is adamant the town has a resilience and determination to succeed in a harsh retail environment. "Lurgan is full of independent retailers. It is impossible for provincial towns to compete with out-of-town shopping locations on a like-for-like basis. We have therefore set about to fill a niche in the market that is overlooked," he explained. "Significantly, we have encouraged retail investment from the likes of Tesco in the retail core of the town, rather than an edge-of town-location. This highlights best practise for the long term sustainability of traditional town centres, while reducing the attraction to shoppers of travelling to out-of-town locations."

www.niirta.com

Tax relief for small shops?

Conservative party leader, David Cameron has proposed tax relief for small shops in recognition of their contribution to local communities. In a speech on 12th May, Mr Cameron confirmed a pledge by the party to increase protection given to small shops from the planning system and extended this by promising to consider the impact that reducing taxation and red tape could have on helping independent shops survive.

Speaking as part of an address about the importance of local communities to the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England, Mr Cameron said the move marks a shift in policy, which may have wider applications by taking social, as well as monetary, values into consideration. "The personal and specialised offer from independent retailers, combined with their tendency to be more involved in community activities, to be plugged into local social networks or to support local suppliers, means that they should be treated differently. They should be considered to compete with larger chains not just on economic terms, such as price or the range of goods or services available, but also on their social value," he stated.

"If small independent shops have a greater social value than chains or larger shops, then it makes sense for them to benefit not only from retention and strengthening of the 'needs test' in planning law, but also from an advantageous tax and regulatory regime which tips the balance back in their favour against the larger retailers," added Mr Cameron.

Equal treatment deserved!

Reacting to the recent publication by the Economic Research Institute on a model for Small Business Rates Relief Scheme for Northern Ireland, NIIRTA Chief Executive Glyn Roberts said: "It is clearly disappointing that the ERINI Report was so negative toward a small business rates relief scheme, particularly as our members are asking why their counterparts elsewhere in the UK are getting rates relief and they are not."

"Small shops and retailers represent the biggest sector of our local small business economy and deserve to be given equal treatment with the rest of the UK. However, the report does suggest that the Welsh model of rate relief would be an option if the Executive did decide to take this issue forward and so we would urge the DFP to give it active consideration."



A complete shambles!

NIIRTA lobbies Stormont on post office closures

A delegation from the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association presented evidence to the NI Assembly Ad Hoc Committee on Postal Services on 6th May. The delegation included Chief Executive Glyn Roberts and NIIRTA members Charles Henderson and Elaine Murdock of Parkhall Post Office, Antrim; Liam and Grainne McGranaghan from Blacks Road Post Office, West Belfast; and Sean Gormley of Carlisle Circus Post Office, North Belfast, whose Post Offices are amongst the 96 in Northern Ireland facing closure as part of a rationalisation of the size and shape of the Post Office network.

Addressing the Committee, Glyn Roberts Chief Executive said: "There is no doubt that these proposed Post Office closures will be a double blow to the community and the economy in Northern Ireland and we are committed to seeing how they can be limited. Just under 50 per cent of the proposed Post Office closures are also small retailers, which if forced to close down will result in the loss of around 100-150 jobs in areas already economically deprived."

ESSEX COUNCIL MODEL

"Among the proposals we outlined to the Committee were the consideration of the Welsh model of small business rates relief and adoption of the scheme funded by Essex County Council when many of its local post offices were facing the axe. The Council is in the process of investing £1.5million over a three-year period into fifteen urban and rural post offices set up



for closure, effectively taking on the burden from central Government. Within that three-year period, all efforts will be made to help those 15 post offices become self-sufficient for the long term.

If a local authority can undertake this, then there is no reason that a devolved government with law making powers and bigger budget could not at the very least help 15 of our local post offices who are facing closure. Invest Northern Ireland is already spending millions on effectively subsidising foreign call centres, so why can the NI Executive not do likewise for local post offices given their vital contribution to the local community and our economy?"

MAKES NO ECONOMIC SENSE

NIIRTA has also urged Royal Mail to radically change its Post Office closure

proposals, six of which are run by NIIRTA members within their convenience stores.

"It is increasingly clear that this proposed closure programme is a complete shambles and, in the case of six NIIRTA members, makes no economic sense at all," stated Glyn Roberts. "All six of our members tell us that their post offices are extremely busy and are an integral part of their business, generating much needed footfall for their stores as well as providing a vital community service.

"The owners of the six stores in Castlereagh, Omagh, North Belfast, Antrim, Dungannon and West Belfast are extremely busy and profitable post offices and, if forced to close, it will have a very severe impact on the viability of their stores and will result in a number of jobs being lost.

Continues on next page

Royal Mail must answer this question - why are they proposing to shut down post offices that are clearly economically viable? It makes no sense at all and the six-week consultation period should be extended to allow more time for full consideration."

BLOW TO LOCAL RETAILERS

"For those who rely on Post Offices, such as many older people and those in the community who have mobility issues, this decision will be a bad April Fool's joke," continued Glyn. "While we understand the commercial realities, it is clearly a great disappointment that so many post offices are going to close. This will be a blow to local retailers and many local communities in Northern Ireland. Post Offices are useful in generating footfall for many of our members as many of their customers collect benefits and pensions and then visit local convenience stores and other local retailers to buy groceries.

The closure of these post offices is clearly connected to the decline of small local shops in our high streets, which already have to put up with disastrous out of town planning decisions and anti-competitive practices of the big multiples. We will be seeking a meeting with the Post Office to discuss these proposals further," he added.

CGT revisions welcome

NIIRTA has welcomed the Government's changes to its plans to reform capital gains tax (CGT). In last year's Pre-Budget Report the Chancellor Alistair Darling announced a flat rate of CGT at 18 per cent, abolishing taper relief and leaving many small business owners facing massive tax rises from April this year.

Following pressure from industry representatives, on 24th January the Chancellor outlined revisions to those plans, which will give entrepreneurs a 10 per cent rate on the first £1 million of gain.

Commenting, NIIRTA Chief Executive Glyn Roberts said: "We are pleased that these revisions have been made as it shows that the Chancellor is listening to and considering small businesses when making important decisions that directly affect the independent retail sector."

Fighting to save Banbridge

NIIRTA's efforts to protect independent retailers in towns and villages across Northern Ireland from further ill-considered and potentially devastating plans to develop new out-of-town supermarkets continues apace. For example, at a meeting on 6th March with MLAs from Upper Bann, Lagan Valley, South Down and Banbridge Councillors, NIIRTA joined with the Banbridge Traders' Association to outline their objection to the proposed Tesco Extra Store 130,000 sq. ft application for the Outlet Centre in Banbridge.

The proposed Tesco store would be the largest yet on the whole island of Ireland and, if successful, would threaten hundreds of small retailers and jobs, not only in Banbridge, but also surrounding towns such as Dromore, Rathfriland and Gilford. Speaking at the meeting in the Belmont Hotel, NIIRTA Chief Executive Glyn Roberts said: "If successful this Tesco application for the largest ever store on this island will result in the closure of hundreds of local small retailers, the loss of jobs and turn Banbridge Town Centre into a ghost town. Effectively, a new town centre will be created at the Outlet Centre, impacting on the local community, economy and environment."



OPPOSED BY LOCAL TRADERS

"The application is opposed by local traders in Banbridge, Dromore, Rathfriland and Gilford and is completely contrary to the Draft PPS 5 and the Banbridge Area Plan. As this application is an Article 31, the Minister for the Environment has the final say and we are calling for Arlene Foster to support local traders, small businesses and the economy in the Banbridge area and to reject this application.

"This situation demonstrates clearly why we need to see the Draft PPS 5 published as soon as possible to create a level playing field for independent retailers, to protect our town centres and to ensure that consumers can have the choice and variety that local shops can offer," added Glyn.

Adrian Marley from the Banbridge Traders Association also commented: "We already have a large Tesco store in Banbridge town centre, which has integrated well, and so local traders are asking serious questions as to why they wish to build another one just a mile up the road.

"Banbridge is a thriving retail town, which has provided jobs, investment and service to the local community, all of which will be under threat if this application goes ahead. Our neighbouring town of Lurgan has been decimated by the out-of-town centre at Rushmere and we are desperately concerned that Banbridge will go the same way."



John Dallat MLA with Niirta members at Stormont



Pictured at Stormont are Mitchell McLaughlin MLA, Chair of Finance and Personnel Committee, NIIRTA Member Elaine Murdoch of Parkhall Post Office, Thomas Burns MLA and Glyn Roberts, NIIRTA Chief executive



Pictured at Stormont are Glyn Roberts, NIIRTA Chief Executive, with William McCrea MP MLA, NIIRTA Member Elaine Murdoch of Parkhall Post Office and David Ford MLA, Alliance Party Leader



Nightmare on Every Street... The Main Findings

There is a wealth of evidence from the rest of the UK to demonstrate what will happen here unless the growth of out-of-town centres is checked:

- 42 per cent of small English towns and villages no longer have a shop of any kind.
- Between 1997-2002, specialised stores, including butchers, bakers, fishmongers and newsagents selling confectionery, tobacco and newspapers closed at the rate of 50 per week.
- General stores have been closing at the rate of ONE per day,

The real impact of the rising dominance of the big supermarkets may be partially hidden as, typically, there is a time lapse of two to three years before smaller stores are forced to close, having used up their operating reserves in their battle with the big stores. The rapid growth of 'fake local' stores under big supermarket brands is yet another threat to small, independent stores – e.g. Tesco 'Express' stores have reportedly caused drops in business of 30-40 per cent for other local shops. Northern Ireland will be no exception to this rule.

Additionally, wholesalers have closed at the rate of six per week over the past two years, again in the face of competition from the big four supermarkets. During the past five years, VAT registrations for small-scale food manufacturers have fallen by almost 12 per cent. This is clearly very obvious additional evidence of emerging trends and patterns.

The average consumer now travels 893 miles a year in order to be able to shop for food - 893 miles to travel for food shopping is clearly doing little to reduce the carbon footprint of individual, ethically minded consumers. According to the Campaign for Community Banking Services, there are now 800 communities across Britain with no bank left and 1,087 rural and urban communities have just one single branch remaining - yet another particularly worrying trend. Furthermore, an Office of Fair Trading Report (2006) proposing deregulation of the community pharmacy sector threatened a potential closure rate for community pharmacies of approximately



Glyn Roberts with Roy Beggs MLA at the launch of Nightmare on Every Street report

one per day. Modification to the proposals still leaves large numbers under threat in areas of high social deprivation.

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO PPS5?

In August 2000, the Northern Ireland Department of Regional Development announced a review of Retail Planning Policy - PPS 5 - with a timescale of 18 months to two years. When the then Minister for Regional Development (Gregory Campbell) was called on by NIIRTA in the spring of 2001 to introduce a moratorium pending review of planning policy in the region, he responded with the statement that the Department would proceed with the review "as quickly as possible".

In the event, successive direct rule Ministers prevaricated over the publication of this key policy, which is primarily designed to protect our town and village centres from further retail erosion. In the intervening period DOE Planning Service continued to approve out-of-town retail

developments at a 2:1 ratio compared with town and city centres due to the weakness of current retail policy. In other words, for every square metre of retail space approved in town and city centres, two square metres were approved in out-of-town location. This cannot continue.

In September 2004, NIIRTA was briefed by the Department on the content of the proposed new policy and was further informed that the policy would be published within two weeks. This did not happen. In fact, it took until July 2006 for a draft to appear and, as at the date of writing the report, Retail Planning Policy in Northern Ireland remains unpublished.

In the interim, irreparable damage has been done to town and village centres right across Northern Ireland. Antrim in particular has been hard hit by new developments, while other towns, such as Ballymena, Ballyclare, Ballycastle, Banbridge, Larne and Crumlin have all been threatened by proposed major new out-of-town superstore developments.

IDEAS FOR IMPROVED RETAIL ENVIRONMENT

In Northern Ireland, the multiple retailers are applying for planning permission for stores as large as 130,000 square feet, almost three times the size of Tesco's flagship Knocknagoney store outside Belfast. Currently floor space caps are used in Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Portugal and Spain, as a key policy to promote and develop town centres.

Northern Ireland should follow the example of other European Governments and introduce a complete moratorium on further out-of-town retail developments until PPS 5 is finally published. In addition to this, serious consideration needs to be given to the use of floor space caps in the longer term. Furthermore, it is important to do something positive, by looking at future town centre improvements, in order to provide the best retailing environment possible for Northern Ireland consumers by:

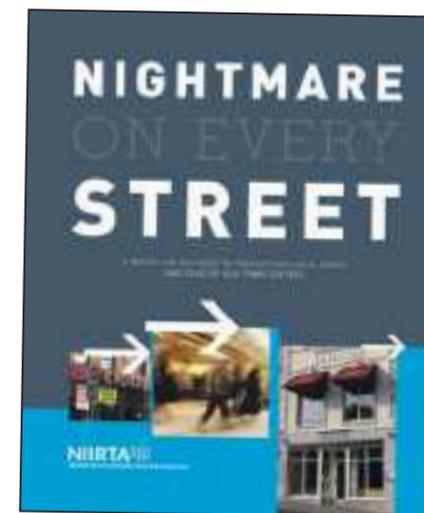
- Making town centres easier to access
- Providing more local shops, not fewer
- Providing a greater range of shops – e.g. specialist shops
- Providing specific shops missing from the retail mix
- Providing greater leisure/retail facilities for Northern Ireland consumers
- Improving the cleanliness/streetscapes of the streets in Northern Ireland towns and villages
- Improving the pedestrian environment in Northern Ireland towns and villages
- Improving public transport services in Northern Ireland generally

WEALTH OF RESEARCH AVAILABLE

The Nightmare on Every Street report goes on to outline and highlight key findings from a wealth of research and other reports examining the impact on out-of-town retail developments on existing town centres, retailers, communities and the environment. Amongst these is the original retail research carried out in Northern Ireland by Roger Tym & Partners for Government in 2002/2003, which concluded even then that there was an urgent need to replace the current retail policy – a position still held when they re-examined the situation in their research in 2006.

While it is impossible to cover the entire contents of NIIRTA's report here, other research included the Food Poverty: Fact or Fiction? report published by the Public Health Alliance for Ireland, the Chartered Institute of Environment Health, The Institute of Public Health in Ireland and the University of Ulster, which found that:

- Food poverty is not just about what people can afford to eat. It is also about whether or not people can run a car to get to the large supermarkets to buy cheaper food.
- Access to good quality, nutritious food has been diminished for those consumers who do not have access to a car or public transport network which serves the local supermarket.
- While large supermarkets can offer good deals on goods because of economies of scale, they have also directly and indirectly increased costs on disadvantaged consumers in terms of time, physical effort and transport.
- Many of the poorest families in Britain reside in inner city, local authority housing which is no longer served by large supermarkets.



THE CONSEQUENCES OF INACTION

Supermarkets generally claim that, when they come to town, they bring choice, cheap food, development and jobs. This is far from being the whole case. Instead, several things happen:

- Local choice for consumers is eroded as smaller, independent shops struggle to compete with the larger supermarkets. For instance, between 1997 and 2002

in excess of 13,000 specialist shops around the UK - including newsagents, grocers, bakers, butchers and Post Offices - closed. The loss of local, independent shops can, and does, have a serious impact in terms of access to food, particularly in the case of people on lower incomes or those who do not have access to, or the use of, a car (in Londonderry, only 41 per cent of the population own, or have access to, a car/motor vehicle).

- Money is siphoned away from local communities and moves towards shareholders and distant corporations – i.e. back to Head Office. Interestingly, a 'Friends of the Earth' study of local food schemes has found that, on average, just over 50 per cent of business turnover was returned to the local economy compared to as little as 5 per cent for supermarkets.
- Traffic congestion increases as the distribution systems used by supermarkets and the location of out-of-town stores generate larger amounts of traffic. Recent research for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) suggests that car use for shopping results in greater costs to society of more than £3.5 billion per annum, resulting from traffic emissions, noise, accidents and congestion. Socially, and environmentally, this is an issue of grave concern.
- Local jobs are often lost, even though supermarkets are keen to claim that new stores bring in more new jobs. What politicians often fail to consider is the wider picture of independent retailer bankruptcies. A study in 1998 by the National Retailer Planning Forum (NRPF) examined - in great detail - the employment impact of 93 superstore openings between 1991 and 1994 and found that they result in a net loss of more than 25,000 jobs – i.e. an average of 276 lost jobs per new store opened.
- Suppliers are exploited and the environment is damaged due to the fact that supermarkets use their market dominance to exploit suppliers (and also farmers) to drive down prices, thus ensuring that environmentally damaging practices are continued both in the UK, Northern Ireland and overseas.



Inquiry a cop out!

Local shops failed by grocery market investigation

The Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association has criticised the final report of the Competition Commission published on 30th April. "After a two year investigation and despite the weight of evidence showing the extent of competition problems in the market, this Inquiry has failed to support choice and diversity in the grocery market," said NIIRTA Chief Executive Glyn Roberts.

"Frankly, on first inspection, it appears to be something of a cop out. The overriding failing of this Inquiry is that the Commission views competition in the grocery market as competition between the big four retailers. This approach ignores the critical need for a variety of retailers and supply chains. It is out of kilter with consumer trends towards more local shopping and neglects the needs of many groups of consumers whose requirements are not properly met by the big four superstores.

"In the Northern Ireland context, the problems highlighted across the water are being ignored here as we continue to do little to support our own local retailers. Furthermore, the utterly inexplicable delay in publishing a planning policy which has some comparison to the reality of today's retail landscape compounds an already difficult situation to an extent that is already having a detrimental effect on our towns and villages."

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Key recommendations in the final report include:

- A reformed code of practice to regulate the dealings between supermarkets and their suppliers.
- A reformed code of practice, with a proposal for it to be policed by a new Ombudsman.
- A new competition test to prevent supermarkets from building stores in areas where they are already dominant.

NIIRTA believes the Competition Commission has, over the course of its Inquiry, uncovered verification that shows the anti-competitive effects of supermarket buyer power. However, the Commission has chosen not to take action to address major distortions in buying prices. It has ignored significant evidence of below cost selling and aggressive pricing behaviour and the alarming trend of consolidation in the number of stores built, and acquired, by an ever-smaller number of large companies.

MUCH LEFT UNRESOLVED

"We welcome the Commission's recognition that intervention is needed to stop supermarkets abusing suppliers," continued Glyn. "However, the big problem with the previous code of practice and enforcement was that suppliers were too fearful to complain. It is not clear how the Commission's new proposals will tackle this 'climate of fear'. We are concerned that the Commission is far from decisive in setting up the Ombudsman.

"There is much left unresolved in the appointment and funding of the Ombudsman and we will be seeking clarification as to its



role in Northern Ireland and take the view that its remit should include the unfair planning system which is heavy biased toward the big multiples.

"The Commission has also failed to address the significant distortions in buying prices. It has found that supermarkets can command as much as 15 per cent better buying terms. This buying advantage is not justified economically and this undermines the ability of smaller competitors to invest and compete. This buying price differential is the single biggest threat to healthy competition and long-term consumer interest, but the Commission has failed take this seriously," he added.

"In our view, this Competition Inquiry has failed local shops. However, NIIRTA will not be allowing the politicians to put off action. The campaign to ensure that local shops, specialists and vibrant high streets have a place in the future of the market and the communities they serve continues," stressed Glyn.

Tackling business crime

Partnership approach the best strategy



Deputy Chief Constable Paul Leighton, who hosted the business partnership seminar

The Police Service held its first business partnership seminar on 14th May, where it sought the views of key representatives within Northern Ireland on how the police and industry can best tackle crime against business. The seminar was the first in a series of initiatives designed to ensure the Police Service is working effectively with businesses across Northern Ireland to prevent and solve crime.

It was organised by the PSNI Business Crime Steering Group, which was formed in June 2007 and has since been working on a wide-ranging review covering crimes such as criminal damage, theft, burglary, robbery, extortion, violent crime, money laundering, fraud, counterfeit currency, e-crime and intellectual property theft. As a result, the Group has developed a draft Business Crime Strategy, aimed at tackling the issues surrounding the crime and fear of crime experienced by all parts of the business community.

ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

Hosting the event, Deputy Chief Constable Paul Leighton said: "We know that business crime is not a victimless crime and the aim of this seminar was to discuss how we, the Police Service, can work better in

partnership with the business community. We already have in place a wide range of expertise and initiatives to prevent and detect crimes affecting business, which are producing good results. However, there is always room for improvement and no matter how much our crime figures are falling, this is of little consolation to those business owners who have been the target of criminal activity.

I was delighted to see so many representatives from the business world present at the event, all of whom have offered us their views in a frank and committed manner. We strongly believe it is through partnership working that we can achieve the greatest success in preventing and detecting crime that impacts on business."

Attending and supporting the event, the Chairman of the Policing Board, Professor Sir Desmond Rea also said: "It is important to note that business crime affects everyone, including business owners, employees and, ultimately, customers. We also know that the problems arising from crimes ranging from shoplifting and counterfeiting to extortion and armed robbery can only be solved if

the business community and the police work in partnership against the criminals."

PROGRESS IS WELCOME

Welcoming the progress of the PSNI in developing its Business Crime Strategy, NIIRTA Chief Executive Glyn Roberts, who attended the PSNI Seminar, said: "For far too long retailers in Northern Ireland have been the focus of criminals and very much want to see effective strategies put in place by the PSNI and Policing Board to tackle this problem. The draft Business Crime Strategy outlined by the PSNI has many positive aspects such as appointing a business advisory group and a senior officer to co-ordinate this strategy. It is clear that they are listening to the concerns of the business community.

However, we will only know if real progress is being made by this strategy if the business community sees a real reduction in the level of crime against it. We also have a big challenge to ensure that retailers report crime to the police. We also need to see real targets set for tackling crime and the introduction of performance indicators for the PSNI in this area."



Non Domestic Revaluation 2010 – Your Legal Obligations



Land & Property Services™

Land & Property Services (LPS) is carrying out a revaluation of all non-domestic properties in Northern Ireland. This will result in a new Valuation List which will come into effect in 2010.

As part of this revaluation LPS have already issued Forms of Return seeking information about ownership, lease arrangements, rental details, fit out and so on. The information being requested is essential to ensure that the new assessments are accurate and fully reflect current market rental values. There is a statutory obligation on those who receive the Form of Return to respond by providing the information sought within 28 days. LPS are about to issue reminders to those who have not responded to date. Failure to respond could lead to court proceedings and a fine of £1,000.

Below is a brief summary of Non-Domestic Revaluation 2010.

What is a non-domestic revaluation?

As the name suggests, non domestic revaluation deals with all properties that are not domestic. Numerically, the bulk of properties to be re-valued are shops, offices, factories and warehouses, but also included will be pubs hotels, petrol stations, golf courses etc etc.

Revaluation brings rateable values back into line with current property rental values. It is not designed to raise additional revenue but to make sure that rates liability is fairly distributed across all properties in

line with changes in rental values.

For example - businesses located in an area that has undergone relative economic decline since the last revaluation in 2003 may be paying proportionally too much in rates, whereas businesses in an area that has benefited from improved economic conditions may be paying proportionally too little. Revaluation tackles these imbalances and results in a fairer distribution of the rate burden.

What information am I obliged to supply?

Everyone who has not replied to the initial Form of Return will receive a reminder which you must complete and return to LPS. A Helpline has been established to assist with any queries you may have on completing the form. The Helpline number will be on the reminder letter.

For further information on Revaluation you can visit www.lpsni.gov.uk

Minimum wage hike

The minimum wage is set to increase by 3.8 per cent, well above the inflation rate, from 1st October. This will mean that the adult National Minimum Wage (NMW) rate will rise from £5.52 to £5.73. The rate for 18-21 year olds will also increase from £4.60 to £4.77, while the 16-17 year old rate will rise from £3.40 to £3.53.

This latest rise means that, since the minimum wage was introduced in 1999, it has risen by 59 per cent, which is more than double the rate predicted.

Commenting, NIIRTA Chief Executive Glyn Roberts said: *"To expect businesses to deal with these above inflation increases year-on-year is unacceptable. We support the principle of a minimum level below which wages should not fall, but the continual increases of this level are not sustainable or fair to businesses."*

"This is particularly true in a year when the Government has received so much criticism from many different professions for their own low public sector wage increases," continued Glyn. *"If the majority of workers in the country are receiving inflationary rises of around the 2 per cent mark then why should small businesses such as convenience stores that already have to deal with the burden of increasing regulation have to foot the bill? Why are we expected to afford pay increases greater than those the Government is prepared to pay itself?"*

Flexible working rights

Flexible working rights for parents are to be extended. Under the new law, working parents with children up to the age of 16 will have the right to request flexible working. Previously, only parents of children up to age six or disabled children up to age 18 had the right to request flexible working.

Commenting on the new rules, NIIRTA Chief Executive Glyn Roberts said: *"Flexible working is ingrained in retailing. While the legislation only applies to parents, flexible working in our sector has generally gone well beyond this. Retail staff are more likely to be able to choose hours that suit their needs than in most other sectors, allowing retail employers to offer opportunities which reflect the varied needs and backgrounds of their workforce."*

"Retailers' approach to flexible working has enabled the sector to embrace diversity and create a supportive environment for all staff. However, businesses, especially smaller ones, will need clear guidance on implementing the proposed legislation to enable employers to go on meeting the needs of their businesses and customers."

Search on for top retailers

The search to discover the hidden gems of the independent grocery retailing industry is again underway with the recent launch of the 2008 Neighbourhood Retailer Awards.



Pictured at the launch of the 2008 Neighbourhood Retailer Awards are Bernard Rooney (left), Senior Manager, Bank of Ireland, platinum sponsor of the awards,; Melanie Boreham, and Bill Penton, Publisher, Neighbourhood Retailer

Supported by platinum sponsor Bank of Ireland, these prestigious awards celebrate and reward grocery-retailing excellence and are the Province's most definitive and longest standing retailing awards for the industry.

Over the years the Neighbourhood Retailer Awards have made a significant contribution to the grocery retailing industry, marking key achievements and highlighting all that is good and positive about the sector. Designed ultimately to recognise and reward professionalism and raise industry standards, the awards honour and acknowledge a broad reach of retailers from supermarkets, independent grocers, garage forecourts and symbol groups as well as manufacturers and suppliers, who all form a vital part of the Northern Ireland economy.

HIGHLIGHTING ROLE OF INDEPENDENTS

Speaking at the launch of the awards, Bill Penton, Managing Editor and Publisher of Neighbourhood Retailer said: *"At what is a crucial time for independent retailers as they are faced with adverse trading conditions and competition at an all time high, our awards aim to highlight the challenges to the industry and the actions that are needed to safeguard it. The Neighbourhood Retailer Awards have helped build confidence at key times during the longstanding fight against the multiples and have reinforced the important role that these traditionally family-owned independent retailers play in each of the communities they serve."*

Judged independently by Spotcheck, market leaders in providing independent and objective judging systems for awards, the deadline for entries is Friday 4th July 2008 at 5pm and all companies, retailers, shops and individuals are encouraged to send in their entries as soon as possible. For further information on the Neighbourhood Retailer Awards 2008 please contact Michelle Murphy on 028 9045 7458 or email michelle.murphy@pentonpublications.co.uk or you can download an entry form at www.neighbourhoodretailer.com.

www.niirta.com

NIIRTA NEWS

Regular NIIRTA Benefits column

Do you have a News Story? Contact NIIRTA with the details and we'll cover it if we can!

What is NIIRTA?

It's not just a lobbying body – it's a trade association with an excellent range of services and benefits available to members.

What can NIIRTA do for you?

NIIRTA can provide retailers with advice on a whole range of issues – from rates reductions and car parking to crime prevention and legislation information.

Here's a list of what's on offer from NIIRTA.....

NIIRTA News – a regular update on issues affecting you!

Public Affairs – NIIRTA is the voice at Government level on all issues affecting your business

Press cuttings – just send a blank e-mail with "Press" in the title to admin@niirta.com

Weekly e-mail digest – with latest planning news – if you wish to receive details of planning applications send an e-mail to admin@niirta.com with 'Planning' in the subject line

NIIRTA Advice Helpline – Available 9.00-5.00 – Monday to Friday – for specific advice on employment and other issues.

BUPA Healthcare – available to all members and staff – Tel: 0800 328 3654

Willis Insurance – Property insurance at competitive rates – Contact NIIRTA or Ian McClure at Willis Insurance – 028 9089 5068 and mobile 07961 453303

HCMA – a sickness and injury scheme similar to BUPA – contact NIIRTA for details or telephone 01423 866985 (and quote NIIRTA).

Vehicle Leasing – Fleet Financial are offering members vehicle leasing with 18 per cent discount – contact Fleet Financial or NIIRTA

XACT – Health & Safety/Food Management System available at competitive rates – 'No Obligation' audit facility available to NIIRTA members. Contact Xact on 0845 665 3006.

To find out more about any of NIIRTA's services e-mail admin@niirta.com or telephone 028 9022 0004



Business for breakfast!



NIIRTA Chief Executive Glyn Roberts (pictured centre) was a guest at the recent SDLP/Fianna Fail Business Breakfast at Dundalk, which was addressed by then Taoiseach Bertie Ahern TD (left) and SDLP Leader Mark Durkan MP MLA (second from right). Also pictured are Wilfred Mitchell, FSB Policy Chairman (second from left) and Alasdair McDonnell MP (right).

Need to address skills gap



The Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association has welcomed the emphasis in the second Varney Report on addressing the skills gap in Northern Ireland and expressed the hope that its recommendations on restructuring the Public Sector will kick start a wider debate on the local economy.

Commenting, Glyn Roberts, Chief Executive said: *"The Skills gap in Northern Ireland is one of the biggest challenges facing the Northern Ireland Executive given that many of our members tell us that they struggle to find staff with basic numeracy and literacy skills. Retailing in Northern Ireland is requiring a greater skilled set of employees, with increased focus on IT, Health and Safety and Food Hygiene. If staff don't have the basics then it is clearly more difficult to train them in these areas."*

"As we have over 250,000 people in Northern Ireland without these basic skills, Sir David was right to focus on this as a top priority to rebuild our economy. We need to see greater partnerships between the Departments of Education and Employment and Learning to ensure that no young people aged between 14-19 fall through the gap between the school and FE sectors."

Setting out policy priorities



Pictured before the NIGAG meeting are Peter Robinson and Glyn Roberts

Incoming First Minister and DUP Leader, Peter Robinson MP MLA recently addressed members of the Northern Ireland Government Affairs Group, at which he set out his policy priorities. This was the latest in the NIGAG Meet the Minister Programme where the group is inviting members of the NI Executive to set out their policy stall. Ministers Edwin Poots MLA and Margaret Ritchie MLA have already spoken with NIGAG.

Speaking after the event, NIGAG Vice Chair and NIIRTA Chief Executive Glyn Roberts said: *"This was a very useful opportunity for Mr Robinson to outline his economic priorities, given that he is becoming First Minister and DUP leader in the coming month. NIIRTA will look forward to working with him to develop the independent retail sector in Northern Ireland."*