



Spatial Economics Research Centre

Wednesday, 21 December 2011

CLG select committee report on planning: The good, the bad, the ugly

An early Christmas present from the CLG select committee - it's [report on the national planning framework](#). My assessment - part good, part bad, part ugly.

The good(ish):

- Parts of the NPPF could be clarified, either by making the document longer or cross referencing to other things
- Importance of local plans and a presumption in favour of sustainable development consistent with the plan (I always assumed that was the [intention of the draft](#))
- Transition should allow a little more time for LAs to get their act together and current planning guidance to continue to apply until new guidance in place (something we suggested in our [recent assessment](#))
- Clarify what is meant by affordable housing
- NPPF is placeless, allow local variation where there is evidence to support this
- Local authorities to set *own* targets for brownfield first (again, something we called for in our [recent assessment](#))

The bad:

- The committee's suggestion that NPPF makes the economic dimension appear predominant. For too long the planning system has essentially *ignored* the economic dimension. It says a lot that NPPF tries to partially redress this balance and is immediately accused of going too far.

The ugly:

- The unwritten assumption underlying the select committee report that the problem with the planning system is the process rather than huge constraints imposed on the use of greenfield sites. In keeping with this implicit assumption, the select committee wants to strengthen brownfield targets and reinforce town centre first. These are exactly the policies that tie us to our existing urban footprint and create many of the problems we experience in adjusting to the structural changes occurring in the UK.
- The continued insistence that constraining us to our existing urban footprint is somehow costless. The committee claims to have 'found no conclusive research, however, that planning policy or guidance is a particular constraint on economic development'. This is misleading because it relies on a very narrow definition of 'economic development' (oh the irony). As SERC [has documented](#), there is evidence that the UK planning system:
 - Increases house prices (with a regressive impact on low to middle income families)
 - Increases housing market volatility
 - Increases office rents
 - Lowers retail productivity
 - Lowers employment in small independent retailers
 - May not properly assess the true social costs of brownfield versus greenfield development.

I certainly accept that this evidence is not 'conclusive', but neither is it irrelevant. Taking proper account of it should be central to striking the right balance between the costs and benefits of our planning system. The fact that the committee chooses to ignore it and focus instead on reforming the NPPF to perpetuate the status quo - at least in terms of outcomes, if not process - is a deeply depressing reminder of just how biased is the debate on the future of our planning system.

Posted by [Prof Henry G. Overman](#) on [Wednesday, December 21, 2011](#)

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2 comments:

Tom said...

On independent retailers, the very interesting research by Raffaella Sadun suggested that planning regulations to prevent the development of "big box" out of town supermarkets led the supermarkets to switch to smaller format shops in town centres, which were even more damaging to independent retailers than the out of town supermarkets.

The research didn't explore alternative planning policies that could check the growth of those smaller format supermarkets, nor the role of complementary non-planning approaches to supporting independent retailers.

Nor does it consider many other reasons to check the growth of out-of-town supermarkets including congestion, air pollution, doughnut development and carbon emissions.

So it's a bit of a sleight of hand to say this research supports the view that the planning system harmed independent retailers and that those retailers would be best served by an absence of relevant policy.

The trouble with much of the debate around the NPPF is that the planning system is being debated as though it is an end, rather than a means to achieve sustainable development. So instead of looking at a rounded approach to, for example, making housing more affordable, supporting smaller businesses and adapting our communities to cope with climate change, we get a fragmented debate about this or that policy being *the* answer to one particular issue.

[21 December 2011 at 14:59](#)

Phil said...

There are as many reasons why out of town developments should *reduce* air pollution, congestion and carbon emissions as increase them (fewer trips required, better location etc). As I understand it SERC are currently researching the net impacts from in- versus out-of-town development. So we should know more about these things in future. It seems unfair to say there is something underhand going on.

The suggestion that national policy should advance the interests of small, independent businesses over larger ones really troubles me. The adverse impacts of, e.g. air pollution, on human welfare are well documented. The same can't be said of large chain stores; any alledged externalities are pretty tenuous.

Obsessing about SMEs risks seeing less productive businesses supported over their more successful and popular rivals.

[23 December 2011 at 11:11](#)

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