

## Saving Northern Ireland's High Street



### INTRODUCTION

The Federation of Small Businesses is now Northern Ireland's largest business organisation with over 6000 members and growing from every sector of industry. FSB lobbies all decision makers to create a better business environment.

This document highlights the difficulties experienced by independent retailers in our High Street's and town centres, and makes recommendations which will improve the economic viability of this sector.

We also highlight the difficulties experienced by many of our arterial routes. These were once vibrant stretches of road, dominated by a wide and varied range of businesses, but have become rundown over many years. It is important that they are taken into consideration alongside the shining new developments growing up all around us.

**Wilfred Mitchell O.B.E.**  
FSB POLICY CHAIRMAN

### SETTING THE SCENE

The retail sector in Northern Ireland has changed drastically in recent years, principally due to a willingness of large multiples to enter the local market as the security situation has improved. Many of the new developments accommodating these multiples have been located away from existing town centre infrastructure. These large out-of-town alternative shopping centres have drawn the public away with them. As a consequence, the ability of independent retailers to retain their customers has been severely damaged.

Recently, the large supermarkets have expanded through their 'neighbourhood stores'. As a consequence, whole commercial zones are becoming 'cloned', missing any form of local identity and offering only uniformed goods and services. It is through the revitalisation of the independent retail sector that local choice can be best preserved.

It is now apparent that the promised 'spin off' for nearby town centres, when approval was given for the building of out-of-town centres, has not materialised. As a consequence an overhaul of planning regulation is now urgently required, and with this in mind, FSB broadly endorses the objectives of the PPS5 review.



The Federation of Small Businesses

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## Reviving **RETAIL** in Northern Ireland





### PLANNING POLICY STATEMENT 5

FSB welcomes the emphasis being placed upon reinvigorating Northern Ireland's town centres through the PPS5 proposals. It must be a firm policy which oversees the development of innovative solutions for independent retailers, whilst promoting sustainability at its heart.

The reinvigorating of Northern Ireland's town centres through the PPS5 proposals is recognition of past failings. The FSB will monitor closely the new policy framework and determine if the revised guidelines have the ability to prevent the mistakes from reoccurring.

### ARTERIAL ROUTES

Arterial routes in many of our towns and cities have been severely eroded over recent years. Whilst FSB accepts there are many socio-economic factors, the growth of out-of-town retailing is a clear contributor to a dramatic fall in quality of both the visual and commercial environment. Many of these routes have become through roads with those passing through having little incentive to stop. This has resulted in buildings becoming derelict and run down, and a generally unattractive environment developing.

Regeneration initiatives of arterial routes must have a representative voice from the small business sector included in its consultation forums. It is this sector which will bring economic benefits into the community and therefore must have a voice when decisions are being made. The benefits of small business input into an area's development include;

- Retail outlets act as a focal point for the communities to interact
- A vibrant commercial sector draws in visitors, and thus contributes substantially to the economic prosperity of an area
- Appropriate signage and decoration contribute positively to the wider visual environment
- It has a key role to play when considering proposals for wider community regeneration

## regeneration Vital

to the future of  
Northern Ireland  
retail industry.

# action!

regenerate current commercial infrastructure to meet **local need** and to act as a **focal point** for communities to **interact**

### RECOMMENDATIONS

1. FSB recommends that the government must call a moratorium on the further development of 'out-of-town' retail centres in Northern Ireland and instead, Public Planning Statement 5 must enshrine the need to regenerate current commercial infrastructure to meet local needs.
2. The 'town centre health check' process must work in close co-operation with existing small businesses in a target area. The proposal to seek retailers views 'as optional depending on time and resources' risks overlooking an important target group, who will have a key role to play in future local economic planning.
3. The issue of car parking must be properly addressed as a priority. Out-of-town shopping centres benefit from the advantage of huge, free parking facilities, and this has created an imbalance as the majority of town centre parking is currently chargeable and hard to find. This factor is often what makes the difference in a shopper's choice of where to go and therefore parking availability and pricing must be a key element in regeneration planning.
4. FSB recommends that on-street parking charges, which act as a disincentive for shoppers, should be reviewed, and if feasible, removed. Equally, business owners

must assist this situation by refraining from using parking which could be more profitably used by customers.

5. Public transport must be designed to maximise benefit for the town centre. This can be best facilitated by the introduction of dedicated bus lanes for arrivals and departures, and well maintained, designated and waiting points for passengers.

6. FSB recognises that small businesses have a major part to play in attracting customers to their stores. An attractive visual environment will encourage both first time and repeat visitors, and can be achieved by developing appropriate and well maintained shop front signage, a level of greenery and regular checks to remove rubbish. Local business representatives must work in partnership with local authorities and community representatives to develop programmes in this area.

7. FSB recognises that shopping habits have changed by the growth of the internet, and this competition will continue to increase. Surveys have shown that small business usage of this area is generally low, and therefore they need to develop their own 'unique selling points' to compete effectively, such as promoting the benefits of the

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'personal touch' to its customers through staff training, welcoming premises and after sales services.

8. A reconstituted Northern Ireland Assembly should instigate a review of the retail sector in Northern Ireland, as part of a wider economic appraisal of the province.

### CONCLUSION

Small, independent retailers make a unique and irreplaceable contribution to the character of the high streets in our towns and cities. They are also vital to economies throughout the country as money spent locally is then recycled in other local services.

Our recommendations are designed to help independent retailers compete more effectively against their larger competitors. The latter will always have the advantage of economies of scale but can come second in terms of quality of service and local knowledge.

The shopping public also have a role to play, by consciously deciding to use their local independent retailers - or face losing them.

