JOHN LEWIS REPRESENTATIONS to the
BARKER REVIEW of LAND USE PLANNING IN ENGLAND

John Lewis is one of the leading retailers in the UK and operates 27 department stores throughout the UK, predominantly in town and city centres. The company is a major investor and employer and plays a significant role in the UK's highly successful, productive and innovative retail sector.

John Lewis is actively planning a major expansion of it's department store portfolio and consequently has a key interest in the efficient, consistent and effective operation of the English land use system. The planning system plays a critical role in the delivery of new investment in town and city centres and guiding our own investment decisions particularly with regard to protecting the vitality and viability of town and city centres in order to maintain both retailer and investor confidence in them.

We have experienced the evolution of Central Government guidance on retail and town centre development over a number of decades which led to the rapid expansion of out of centre retailing and significant concerns about the vitality and viability of town centres. John Lewis supports the current established policy position on retail and town centres set out in PPS6, which sets out the Government's primary objectives to sustain and enhance town and city centres and to achieve sustainable and socially inclusive patterns of development, as long as they remain consistent over the long term. The current national policy guidance specifically acknowledges the need to balance the policy objectives for town centres and sustainability/social inclusion and the need to continue to provide for a competitive, efficient and innovative retail sector. We do not wish to see any change in this approach, with consistency being the key.

We are therefore basing our major investment decisions upon this current planning policy and subsequently making long term commitments to established town and city centres.

We support a thorough and independent review of the English land use system. We believe there should be a clear distinction between establishing appropriate land use planning policies at national, regional and local level and the effective and efficient operation of the planning system to ensure that it is fair and inclusive. It should provide an efficient and transparent basis for decision making without imposing undue costs or delays on new investment in the continued growth of the UK retail sector and in particular the need for significant investment in town and city centres.

John Lewis believes that there is substantial evidence and experience to show that the retail sector in Britain is highly competitive, efficient and innovative and that the planning system as it stands has little effect in reducing the sector's competitiveness. In Britain the notion of 'barriers to entry' in the sector, in which town planning is sometimes included as a factor of importance, are complex.

Given the Government's objectives of achieving a balance between economic, social and environmental objectives when determining the structure of towns and cities, through the location of retail facilities, any barriers that the planning system may create are minor compared with the general cost of land in Britain compared with say the USA. In this respect it is sometimes not appreciated how important location is to retail competition. Increasingly there are major competitive advantages for those retailers who can rely on their own dedicated car parking, something most readily achieved with ‘free-standing’ stores or in out of centre retail centres including ‘retail parks’. Those whose business models may suggest that they require large areas of land very often are in effect seeking the advantage of such car parking.

John Lewis’ position as a long term investor has been consistently made clear for many years. If planning constraints did not exist it would generally seek sites for its new Department stores away from town centres similar to the sites of its out of centre branches at High Wycombe and Cheadle. However, if the Government, and society in general, through the planning system believes it to be important to support town centres for economic, social and environmental reasons, John Lewis will support such centres through new investment, as long as it believes planning policies are realistic, robust and long term in the way that they support the compromises such development in town centres requires.

In the retail sector a large amount of innovation and investment is possible within the existing stock of buildings. Such innovation is independent of the planning system. Indeed if the planning system did not exist, in the way described above, it is unlikely that much of this innovation would not occur. The existing stock of buildings provides a good opportunity for new SMEs to enter in this sector particularly in out of centre locations.

We believe that international comparisons of retail productivity are unlikely to be very helpful given the lack of data relating to the sector as whole in most countries. There have been important studies carried out that show that productivity is directly linked not with planning and ease of entry but with broad environmental factors.

OUR RESPONSE TO THE QUESTIONS listed in Annex 1.
Please note all our responses are within our retail context.

1. *Is the planning system sufficiently flexible?*
   The system as now defined is generally satisfactory in the terms expressed here. Our investment decisions like the property development industry require a relatively long term view. John Lewis welcome the underlying objectives of the new planning system with clear regional and local policy guidance and provision for local authorities to take a more proactive role through for example the development of Area Action Plans.

2. *The Scope of plans at different spatial levels.*
   Given the limited resources available at local and regional level we believe that more central direction would be helpful in providing the certainty so important for long term investment in town and city centres. The whole process and terminology of the new system however is creating confusion and this lack of clarity is likely to result in the retail sector generally being less involved.

3. *Sustainable development.*
   The current system is striking the right balance between economic, social and other goals.

4. *Other Countries.*
   Land use, economic, social and environmental factors differ so much from one country to another, we see no obvious lessons from elsewhere for the English system.

5. *Impact of planning on business investment.*
   There are dangers that the current transparency of the English planning system and the relative certainty this now provides will be lost by the encouragement of too many levels of planning and the absence of firm central direction. This would harm long term investment.

6. *Joined up.*
   We consider it important to the retail sector that Regional Spatial Strategies are well researched prepared and administered in such a way that the limited resources of most firms in the sector can provide proper feed-back.

7. *Timing.*
   We support the establishment of clear delivery milestones but consider that the pressures of speed on local authorities can result in poor quality decisions being made and we believe that such pressures should not be added to. We do feel however that the planning system is too slow in processing matters after it has been decided to permit a proposal (e.g. in the preparation of Section 106 planning agreements and also highway agreements). We also feel that appeal hearings should be fixed and also the resultant decisions should be made far more quickly.

8. *Costs deterring investment?*
   Not in our experience.

9. *High occupation costs.*
   The level of occupation costs partly arise from the finite amount of land available for all purposes but land or property related costs are a relatively small part of the overall occupancy costs involved. In the retail sector they are inevitable if the government's social and environmental objectives are to be achieved.

10. *Barriers to entry.*
    Barriers to entry are not a direct effect of the planning system. There is a constant redistribution of existing properties and sites within the retail sector and the whole balance of investment could easily be over-turned by changes in the planning system to the disadvantage of social and environmental objectives.

11. *Innovation.*
    Not really applicable to the retail sector.

12. *Skills and resources.*
We feel that planning authorities at all levels are generally under skilled and under funded in this regard. There is therefore a need for more central direction and investment in the information base supporting and recording decisions and in the resourcing of the wider planning system generally.

13. *Stakeholders.*
It may be helpful if there was a central and regional register of 'stakeholders' who would like to be informed by all the various regional authorities of their consultative plans rather than placing the onus on 'stakeholders' to monitor what stages such plans have reached.

14. *Incentive Structure.*
We feel that planning decisions should be taken in the wider 'public interest' and not too locally based.

15. *Regeneration.*
We feel that economic development already does help create regeneration with respect to town and city centres.

Ann Humphries
Retail Development Director
John Lewis

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