

Dutch Retail - accessibility (Platform Detailhandel Nederland)

Preface

Platform Detailhandel Nederland is the lead trade association of Dutch retailing and exists to defend and enhance where possible, the economic, political and social climate in which its members operate. Platform Detailhandel members sell a wide selection of products through centre of town, out of town, rural and virtual stores. Reflecting the diversity of modern retailing, Platform Detailhandel members include the large multiples and department stores, charity shops and small and medium sized independent retailers.

Transport is vital to success of the retail industry. Retailers rely on access to transport for the daily operation of their business – to access their customer base, deliver goods, and to enable their employees to reach the workplace. Weak transport links and inadequate parking provision threaten the viability of the retail sector and jeopardise the sector's contribution to the economy. Delivery restrictions, charging schemes, car parking and public transport must take into consideration retail needs to ensure that town centre and urban developments continue to attract sustained retail investment.

Customers should be able to arrive and leave easily by a variety of modes of transport, including by car, particularly for goods that by virtue of their size or collective weight cannot be carried on public transport. Clearly, the driving public would prefer to have free, and unrestricted parking. However, they will be prepared to accept some form of control if it is delivered in the right way. If car-parking provision in the town centre is poorly located, unfairly or badly managed or if it is simply insufficient to meet demand, retail customers will literally be driven away.

Congestion

Congestion represents a significant cost to retailers who rely on the road network for access to customers, staff, and the delivery of the goods they sell. It is essential however that charging schemes are developed in partnership with the local retail and business community. With the high fixed costs retailers pay to trade in town centre locations, even the smallest variations in sales can have a disproportionate impact on retail profits and hence on investment and location decisions.

Many town centres demonstrate the risk that well-meaning traffic control measures or attempts to improve the use of public transport may in fact achieve exactly the opposite. Public transport plans are in the main designed to radiate to and from town centres and little attention is given to how public transportation can be managed differently to increase the connectivity within the retail network and link underserved communities with retail provision. Equally little attention is paid to find alternative ways to manage the car use that will maximise accessibility and meet environmental objectives at the same time.

The introduction of congestion charging schemes and other traffic control measures can be a strong disincentive to visiting town centres, while increasing parking charges simply punishes motorists without achieving any impact on

reducing congestion. There must be real incentives to use public transport, rather than costly deterrents from driving. A greater alignment between planning for retail and transportation is essential if retailers are to succeed in delivering a retail led urban renaissance.

Retail Deliveries

Deliveries are important to all industries, but particularly to the retail industry, where the primary business function is to bring products and services to customers. The retail consumer increasingly expects a full range of high quality products, available throughout the year at reasonable prices. The challenge for retailers is to balance the need to reduce cost and streamline operations with the need to have products available at all times.

In striving to make deliveries as efficient as possible, retailers seek to avoid traffic congestion and so aim to avoid peak travel times, by making use of the road during the night. However, store access can be restricted by delivery curfews, as a result of planning restrictions established when the store is built or noise abatement orders implemented by a local authority after the store has opened. Almost one third of retailers are affected in this way.

Freight transport technologies have advanced in recent years to provide quieter deliveries. While retailers are demonstrating good practice by investing in noise abatement technologies and specific training for their drivers, there is scope for local government to consider levying delivery curfews on a case-by-case basis, when they are suitably justified. It also strengthens the case for more flexible curfews, with a relaxation of 1-2 hours on either side of the existing delivery curfew time.

The removal of delivery curfews and improving the operation of freight vehicles could potentially offer significant benefits to everyone by reducing congestion and bringing environmental benefits. Being able to deliver at night would remove some lorries from the peak traffic travel periods, allow optimisation of the road network and maximise the availability of products for customers.

Greater alignment between planning and transport policy

Government policy should encourage local authorities to develop a greater alignment between retail and transport planning. Current planning policy is designed to meet local needs by allowing local communities to shop locally but says nothing of the barriers which make town centre operations difficult. For retailers there are a number of reasons why the town centre is not attractive, such as poor transport links, inadequate parking facilities, and restrictions on deliveries.

Insufficient parking provision reduces the viability of the town centre as a retail trading location. Evidence suggests that the current standards work quite well for out-of-town retail but are often inadequate for mixed use or town centre developments since they do not take account of the duration of stay – i.e. the turnover of spaces. For example, a visit to do a main food shop might take 45 minutes in an out of centre location. However, in a town centre or edge of centre location shoppers will often carry out linked trips to other shops or to access other town centre services and may stay in that space for an hour and half or longer. Ideally, in these locations, parking provision should be flexible enough to provide

some longer stay parking to give customers enough time to shop locally and visit the town centre comfortably.

Fair, well-run local authority parking

The goal of car park management should be to ensure that sufficient spaces are available for the intended users – it should not be used simply as a means of raising revenue through penalty notices. It is difficult to accurately assess whether local authorities are carrying out parking control in a reasonable, fair and accountable way since there have been very few attempts to monitor enforcement practices. Many local authorities now outsource parking control functions to parking management companies and a study should be undertaken to evaluate whether individual contracts are constructed in the public interest.

Statutory guidance might be helpful if it clarified the purpose of parking control - namely to promote the town centre and ensure that parking abuse is not taking place. Guidance might also be able to suggest useful mechanisms such as 'free parking on Tuesday mornings' or free late night or Christmas parking. It is important that local authorities retain some autonomy to manage parking in a way that balances the needs of their towns. Revenue generated by enforcement should be ring fenced to provide improvement in the quality of car parking in the town; improved security, lighting, landscape maintenance, signage and ultimately towards increasing the overall parking provision of the town.

Affordable & safe town centre parking

Quality, convenient, well-run, and secure car parks create an image for the town and are essential for a vibrant and diverse retail centre. Unfortunately, the cost of car parking is often prohibitive and in particular seems to penalise short-stay customers. Car parking charges must be seen to offer value for money if the town centre is to remain competitive and retain a diverse retail offer.

Charging regimes and payment bandings need to be structured carefully in order for the local authority to manage car parking space most effectively. Many car parks charge by the hour but this "one-size fits all approach" might not be suited to all town centre requirements. In large centres, retail customers may require up to 3 hours at reasonable rates. Alternatively, in small market towns – where trips are shorter – price bandings should be more flexible and allow customers to park for brief shopping journeys.

Vehicle security and personal safety are of vital importance to the success of town centre car parks. Well-lit, brightly painted and clean car parks, stairwells and linkages go some way to alleviating these fears. Ideally, 24-hour security cameras (CCTV) covering the whole of the car park should be installed and monitored on a regular basis.

Fear of personal attack is matched by a fear of car crime. A visible security presence (combined with police patrols or Car Watch schemes) also helps to allay customer concerns and deters the opportunist criminal.

Work place parking

Many retail employees work early morning or late evening shifts, which are not covered by public transport and so have no choice but to drive to work. This problem is further exacerbated in rural and remote locations, where public

transport is not a viable alternative. Furthermore, as car parking spaces are already part of the rating assessment for out of town retail developments.

Alternative transport strategies

Retailers have explored a variety of initiatives designed to promote alternatives to car based shopping. Various measures include providing free bus services for customers, provision of bicycle parks for customers and employees, and free-phone links with local mini-cab drivers.

Park & Ride

Park & Ride schemes offer customers a suitable alternative to in-town parking. When managed effectively, Park & Ride schemes have the potential to alleviate congestion and car-parking pressures in town centres by promoting commuter parking outside of town and city centres. Location is key to the success of every Park & Ride Scheme. They should be located on the main routes into the town and should be integrated with railway stations and other major public transport interchanges.

If a customer has to deviate from their route to find a Park & Ride site the easy alternative is to keep on driving into the town centre. Park & Ride must be prominently signed; the signage should clearly state where to park, the cost and the frequency of service. Security is paramount, both for customers and their cars. CCTV should be combined with effective lighting and security patrols.

The cost of Park & Ride should be competitive versus town centre car parks to provide a clear incentive. The service must be frequent - no longer than 10-minute intervals. If Park & Ride buses can be given priority into a town centre they have a visible, as well as timed, advantage over cars.

Green travel plans

The majority of retailers now have travel plans in place to promote greener travel choices and reduce reliance on the car. Retailers make every effort to ensure these plans are successful in encouraging staff and customers to make use of more environmentally friendly alternatives than driving alone, at least for some of their journeys. Many retailers regularly assess the performance of individual travel plans and adapt the plan in accordance with the changing circumstances of their business operations. Travel plans are now also a regular feature of the planning process and retailers work very closely with local planning authorities to agree the formulation of travel.

Cycling

It is essential that local authorities take the lead in ensuring that there is adequate bike parking provision in close proximity to shops on the high street. Provision of good quality cycle parking in town centres and particularly on the high street is a key element in encouraging people to cycle more. In a study by the Automobile Association, 86% of cyclists interviewed considered that there was insufficient cycle parking in public spaces, and equally high numbers said that they would cycle more if secure cycle parking were available.

Retailers are increasingly examining the role cycling can play in reducing pressure on car parking spaces. Where appropriate, retailers in town centre and edge of town locations have installed secure cycle parking for both customers and employees.
