

## **GREATER FLEXIBILITIES FOR CHANGE OF USE: CONSULTATION**

### **COMMENTS OF THE LONDON FORUM OF AMENITY AND CIVIC SOCIETIES**

The London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies is the regional umbrella group for about 150 amenity and civic societies in London. The London Forum, amongst other things, comments on Government and Mayoral consultations, and contributes to a number of national bodies including the National Planning Forum and Civic Voice. We advise and inform our members about emerging policy at national and London levels and respond on their behalf based on a good knowledge of planning policy and practice in London.

#### **Our response:**

The London Forum considers that:

- **A blanket change in freedoms to change from A1 (shops) and A2 (professional and financial services) to housing is inappropriate in London where there is a London Plan (adopted in July 2011) and where almost all Boroughs have a recently adopted Local Plan.**

These plans already comply with the requirements of the NPPF in that they identify and designate a network of town centres, show them on their Proposals Map and, in many cases, have mapped these centres showing primary and secondary frontages and listed the addresses. These centres have been incorporated in successive plans, reviewed and amended as necessary after health checks, annual monitoring and review.

**The London Forum considers that London Boroughs with up-to-date plans should be supported, but as a matter of policy they should be encouraged in the next revision of the NPPF to review the future use of vacant shops. A blanket approach for the whole country is not appropriate.**

- **the existing centres, particularly neighbourhood centres, need all the support they can get. The large differential between housing values and those for shops already creates considerable pressures. The Government should be providing the tools to deliver vital and viable town centres and to promote healthy communities through supporting neighbourhood centres – in line with the NPPF paragraphs 69 and 70 and London Plan Policy 7.1 to maintain diverse, strong, secure and accessible neighbourhoods based around neighbourhood centres.**

- **the London Plan Policy 4.9: Small Shops defined small shops as 80sqm – a limit of 150sqm would not limit this proposal to small shops.** DCLG should analyse current VOA data for retail uses to see what proportion of shops in London would be included with a limit of 80sqm, 100sqm, 125sqm and 150sqm. **London Forum considers that this threshold is not evidence-based, let alone appropriate in London.**
- **the definition of shop needs to be tied down to its current use, to prevent “salami tactics” whereby other A Use Class uses could make a two stage move through shops and out of the A Use Class. We are particularly concerned about the impact that this would have on pubs**
- **a new freedom to change from shops to banks and building societies is not necessary – in many places there is a good choice of providers of these services. We are not aware of any problems that would warrant a countrywide change in the freedoms to change use. This is a policy issue best dealt with through changes to the NPPF.**
- **the need for more pre-school childcare provision is appreciated, but the London Forum remains unconvinced that the proposed solution is proportionate.**

**Question 1:**

**Do you agree there should be permitted development rights, as proposed, for shops (A1) and financial and professional services (A2) to change use to a dwelling house (C3) and to carry out building work connected with the change of use?**

**No** – this should be unnecessary in London where up-to-date London Plan and Local Plans respond to changes at the local level, through regular monitoring, town centre healthchecks and changing designations. London Forum considers that decisions to change use should follow a sequence where if a shop is no longer viable other town centre uses which will add to the range of services, economic activities and employment rather than housing. Housing should not be regarded as the universal default option where the opportunity to improve the vitality and viability of existing centres, especially neighbourhood centres, and to promote regeneration.

The London Forum considers that where an up-to-date exists for town centres, including neighbourhood centres, these areas should be exempt from this initiative.

**Prior approval criteria:** The London Forum considers that the proposed criteria should be expanded to consider the impact of the proposal on the

vision and strategy for the centre and that the cumulative impacts should be considered – although by then it will be too late!

#### **Question 2**

**Do you agree there should be permitted development rights for retail units (A1) to change use to banks and building societies?**

**No** – This is not needed everywhere – the need for choice in banking and building societies is not really an issue. Where is the evidence that would justify a change in national secondary legislation. This is essentially a policy issue that could be dealt with through amending the NPPF.

#### **Question 4:**

**Do you agree that there should be permitted development rights, as proposed, to allow offices (B1), hotels (C1); residential institutions (C2); secure residential institutions (C2A) and assembly and leisure (D2) to change use to nurseries providing childcare and to carry out building work connected with the change of use?**

**Not sure** whether this is the most effective way to achieve this – if any of these uses are redundant, social and community uses, such as pre-school childcare facilities should be preferred above commercial uses (ie they should be considered before change of use to commercial uses)