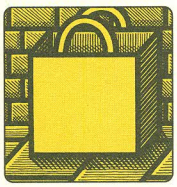
Anne Findlay and Leigh Sparks on planning, betting shops and distinguishing between issues relating to the high street and issues relating to problem gambling

unlucky no. 13?



No. 13 on Mary Portas' list of actions to be taken to solve the problems of the high street was that betting shops should be put into a use class of their own.[1] As an action, it didn't survive 2012, as this was one of the few Portas proposals turned down by the Government. Yet in 2014 it is back on the agenda, although highlighting the confusion in many minds over the aims of and limits to planning.

There are a number of causes of confusion concerning betting shops. First, and continuing a theme over the (mis)use of data, there are perceptions of a rising tide of betting shops in the country. Portas speaks of a 'proliferation' of betting shops. The popular press and politicians have been much exercised by the prevalence of betting shops (and pay-day loan shops). The Mayor of London, on the issue of betting shops, has said:

'They have grown in number with an increased supply of premises such as vacant banks and pubs that do not require planning permission to be used as a betting shop. Betting firms are attracted to busy high streets and town centres with a ready supply of such premises. This has resulted in clustering in less prosperous areas like Hackney, which has 64 betting shops in the borough, eight in Mare Street alone, and Deptford with seven betting shops on one street.'[2]

Portas suggested that if a use class for betting shops were to be created it would be easier 'to check on the number of betting shops'.[1] But actually for once there is a reasonable data source, so we can examine recent trends in betting shop numbers.

Industry figures from the Gambling Commission suggest that in the 1970s there were 16,500 betting shops in the UK. By 2009 the figures suggested there were just over half this number, at 8,872. Over the past five years the figure has hovered around the 9,000 mark,[3] as shown in Table 1. These figures are from a time when betting has become more prevalent and visible, and online gambling and betting has grown substantially. The industry claims that the figures do not represent a 'proliferation', and indeed on the surface they do not. So something else must be going on.

What appears to have changed is the location and the character/content of betting shops. They were formerly located in secondary shopping areas and in back streets, i.e. away from high streets and far less visible. But betting shops have made their way onto the high street, arguably as a result of the increased availability of empty properties there, although the growing mainstream acceptability of previously more controversial retail uses, such as betting shops, sex shops and tattoo parlours, has acted as a driving factor as well.

In land use planning terms, betting shops are classed as A2 uses: financial and professional services. The closure of properties in these uses on the high street (for example banks, estate agents, etc.) paved the way for betting shops to open in their place.

Betting has changed from a furtive, back-street activity to an acceptable leisure activity. But this is not a new phenomenon, being first commented upon in the early 1990s.[4] So the issue seems to be not about more betting shops, but rather about their location, visibility, prevalence and possibly nature, as well as the increasing opportunities for them on high streets.

A second confusion arises as to whether the concerns raised are really focused on the state of the high street or on reducing gambling. A House of Commons debate mixed the two up in its opening statement:

'I beg to move... That this House is concerned that the clustering of betting shops in or close to deprived communities is being driven by increasing revenue from fixed odds betting terminals (FOBT) rather than traditional over the counter betting; believes that this has encouraged betting shop operators to open more than one premises in close proximity to one another; is aware of the growing concern in many communities about the detrimental effect this is having on the diversity and character of UK high streets; is alarmed that people can stake as much as £100 every 20 seconds on these machines; is further concerned that the practice of single