

Homeless teenager, drug addict

Mercury winner

Speech DeBelle interview **times2**



THE



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Newspaper of the Year 90p

# Briton freed by special forces raid on Taleban

## Army should have waited, say negotiators

**James Hider** Kabul  
**Philip Webster** Political Editor  
**Michael Evans** Defence Editor

Hostage negotiators expressed shock and anger at Gordon Brown's decision to approve a commando raid to free

ever, several sources in Kabul said that the captors were, at worst, seeking a ransom. A Western source involved in the talks said: "There was no immediate urgency that they were going to be beheaded or handed over to another group. You cannot move these captives



SHAWN BUTTERILL / GETTY IMAGES





Planning restrictions are hampering attempts by estate agents to let acres of empty space in retail parks across the country and are forcing landlords to put huge development projects on ice

## Red tape scuppers bid to fill empty retail space

**Rebecca O'Connor**  
Property Correspondent

The future of the out of town retail park — that most reviled and loved of shopping destinations — is hanging in the balance.

DIY chains and large white goods retailers that have gone out of business are vacating stores, leaving millions of square feet sitting empty. Soft-furnishing retailers are being lined up to move in, but agents trying to shift the space say there is one thing standing in the way: council planning departments.

Existing vacant stores in out-of-town retail parks, as well as those planned for unfinished new developments, are "unlettable", says Savills, the property consultancy, due to planning restrictions that allow only bulky goods retailers to rent the space.

The restrictions were introduced to help to keep high streets alive. Planners feared an exodus to out of town sites and sought to limit them to stores

that did not already have a big presence in town centres. It was felt that bulky goods could be more easily transported from out-of-town sites.

Savills said that many closed former Allied Carpets and Focus DIY stores around the country cannot not be re-let because of the planning permission clauses.

The restrictions mean that other similar retailers, such as Currys or B&Q, could rent the stores, but those that sell food, or soft non-food items, such as home furnishings, for which there is greater demand, would not be permitted to move in.

The planning battles are frustrating attempts by agents to re-let outlets that have become vacant and delaying recovery in affected parks.

There are also developments in North London, Birmingham and the North East that had planning permission arranged prior to the downturn. But landlords are now reluctant to go ahead with construction, fearing they will not be able fully to let the sites

under the existing conditions. Johnny Rowland, national director of Savills Out of Town agency, said: "The planning consent is a challenge. In some cases, councils have been immovable, making the stores virtually unlettable in the current climate. If they change the consent, we can get new retailers

### 12-15%

Current vacancy rates  
Source: Times research

in and breathe new life into schemes."

There are between 13,000 and 14,000 retail warehouse units in the UK, about 95 per cent of which are outside town centres, according to Trevor Wood Associates, the industry analyst. At the end of 2007, vacancy rates were at 8.3 per cent. Industry estimates now put this figure nearer to 12 per cent to 15 per cent.

The closure of Land of Leather stores resulted in 1.05 million sq ft of space becoming vacant, while Woolworths left 1.3 million sq ft vacant, according to Jones Lang LaSalle, the property consultant.

However, the impact of recent administrations, such as that of Allied Carpets, was not yet known, it said.

Patrick Heaps, head of retail for Jones Lang LaSalle, said: "The void rate will grow once we know the full effect of the most recent departures. The question is who will be taking up the space? It presents an opportunity for retailers who are doing well to acquire space that had not been available previously."

Retailers that sold soft furnishings, such as HomeSense, TK Maxx's homeware division, Dunelm Mills and Next's homeware division, as well as supermarkets, were interested in taking some of the space, plus "anything with a focus on value", Mr Rowland said. Best Buy, the US-based homeware store, will open two UK out-

lets: one in the Lakeside shopping centre in Thurrock, Essex, and another in Hedgend, Southampton. Republic, the fashion retailer, has opened an out-of-town store in Edinburgh's Fort Kinnaird park.

However, landlords are having to offer new terms to attract tenants. In some cases, they have divided up one store to create two smaller units to maximise rents and appeal to more retailers. They have also begun to offer temporary leases to fill empty spaces.

The concept of out-of-town shopping first emerged in the late 1980s, with warehouses to let at £4 per sq ft. About 90 per cent of retail park outlets now cost between £15 and £35 per sq ft, according to Savills, which estimated rents had fallen by between 20 per cent and 50 per cent during the downturn.

Mr Rowland said: "This is the first time in the history of the sector that it has suffered as a result of recession. It was protected last time because the industry was so young."