

Shopping Hierarchy

Revision points:

- In general, the larger the settlement, the greater the variety of shops and services. Convenience goods and groceries will be available in small settlements, though larger stores and comparison goods require a visit to a town or city. This is the shopping hierarchy.
- The threshold population is the number of people needed to ensure that a shop or service is profitable. A village shop may need a few hundred people to keep it going, but a large supermarket will need thousands of customers.
- The sphere of influence or catchment area is the distance or range that people are prepared to travel to buy goods or services. This idea is linked to the shopping hierarchy.
- The sphere of influence is dependent on factors such as transport links, availability of parking and quality of the environment. This makes more distant settlements more attractive to shoppers in some cases, despite the same goods being available more locally.
- The internet is rapidly changing the geography of retail, especially for groceries and certain comparison goods.

A teacher and a student discussing geography coursework.

Teacher: Your project was about shopping patterns wasn't it?

Student: Yeah, I was looking at the ideas you taught us about sphere of influence and shopping hierarchy. I'm trying to prove that people will travel further to buy higher order goods such as jewellery, furniture or electrical equipment.

Teacher: So where did you do your fieldwork?

Student: I studied a hamlet called Pewton, a village called North Petherton and the town of Bridgewater. I also went up to Bristol.

Teacher: How did you start your research?

Student: I started by working out a shopping hierarchy. I counted the shops in the hamlet, Pewton and the village of North Petherton and estimated the total number of shops in Bridgewater which is a town. Then I looked at specialist shops like bike dealers, jewellers and also big furniture stores.

Teacher: What did you find out?

Student: That the larger the settlement, the more services it has, so Bristol has lots of shops as well as specialist shops. Pewton and North Petherton had fewer shops and they didn't have any shops selling higher order goods. It's quite obvious really.

Teacher: Have you explained what you mean by 'high order goods'?

Student: Yes, I said that high order goods are more expensive so include items like televisions and furniture. People take their time choosing them. They are also called comparison goods. People will travel further to buy high order goods. I then explained that low order goods are things you buy regularly like bread and newspapers. They are also called convenience goods. People don't want to travel very far to buy them.

Teacher: Can you think of a better expression than 'people will travel further'?

Student: Is it 'range'? High order goods have a higher range?

Teacher: Yes, that's right. Do you remember when we looked at shopping hierarchy and I explained why larger settlements have higher order services such as shopping malls, outlet villages and flagship stores.

Student: You talked about threshold population?

Teacher: Yes that's right. A village shop needs to be used by a few hundred people to stay profitable but a big furniture store like IKEA needs hundreds of thousands of customers to stay profitable.

Student: That is why there is only one IKEA for the whole of the South West in Bristol, because people are prepared to travel the distance and also why there are shopping malls in Bristol and not in the hamlet of Pewton.

Teacher: Exactly. Tell me what you did next.

Student: I thought of two hypotheses. The first being that people in North Petherton will travel further to buy higher order goods. The second being that towns such as Bridgewater and Taunton will have a similar sphere of influence because they are roughly the same size, but more people from the village of North Petherton will visit Bridgewater because it's slightly closer. I did a questionnaire in the village.

Teacher: Why did you choose to do your questionnaire in North Petherton?

Student: I chose it because the village has a few local shops and it's roughly between two towns of similar sizes Taunton and Bridgewater. Bristol is about 30 miles away.

Teacher: OK, so you carried out this questionnaire. Have you explained why you asked the questions?

Student: Yes, I wanted to know where people went to buy 5 different products: milk, a toothbrush, CDs, shoes and furniture. I expected to find people using the local convenience store in North Petherton for milk and a toothbrush. After that I expected them to visit either Bridgewater or Taunton for the CDs and shoes. For furniture I thought people would go to Bristol.

Teacher: Did the results surprise you?

Student: Yes, I found that some people never shopped in North Petherton for anything. And from those that did shop locally it was mainly older people who didn't want to travel very far for stuff.

Most people went to Bridgewater or Taunton for their food shopping. That's because people with cars tend to visit supermarkets rather than their local shops along the high street. One person said that the local shops in North Petherton were too expensive compared to supermarket prices – even for very basic things.

Teacher: Where did people buy CDs and shoes from?

Student: I found that quite a lot of people bought CDs on the internet. For shoes, the majority of people went to Taunton even though Bridgewater is closer. When I asked why they said it was because there are more shoe shops in Taunton. Also it's easy to get to on the M5 motorway. Some people even bought furniture from Taunton but most went up to Bristol to the IKEA store.

Teacher: So what have you concluded?

Student: I decided that my first hypothesis is correct. People definitely travel further to buy higher order goods. My second one was disproved though. The catchment area of Taunton was wider than Bridgewater even though Bridgewater is closer to North Petherton. That's because people thought there was more choice in Taunton and some people also said it was a nicer town centre with better parking. Bristol has the biggest sphere of influence when it comes to buying expensive goods. For furniture the IKEA store attracts people from the rest of the South West.

Teacher: Well, it sounds as though your project is going very well. Don't forget to use as many geographical terms as possible. I'm sure you'll get a good mark!