

Ledbury is Saved

Written by Richard Hadley

Wednesday, 22 February 2012 20:51 - Last Updated Monday, 05 March 2012 10:45

Ledbury's battle against the supermarket giants has ended in victory. Herefordshire Council today rejected a controversial proposal to build a 30 thousand square feet out of town superstore on the historic town's by-pass. The decision ends months of uncertainty and bitterness between opposing camps as first Tesco, then Sainsbury's put in plans for identical stores a mile from the town centre.

'For eight months our town has been turned upside down by supermarket developers who wish to dominate trade here by building a monstrous, out of town superstore, utterly disproportionate to the needs of our town of less than ten thousand people', said Rich Hadley campaign chairman for Ledbury Opposes Out of Town Superstores.

'We are aware that there is a desire among some local people for our town to offer a wider choice particularly in meeting the needs of hard-pressed families. There are realistic options for that to happen in town, beyond the horizons of a big grey shed a mile out of town, and we hope that a constructive dialogue may now take place about our collective future', he added.

The planning committee voted 12 to refuse, 6 to permit Sainsbury's planning application. The vote follows on from a clear-cut recommendation to refuse the Sainsbury's application by the Council's planning officers. The scheme was judged to have been damaging to the vitality of the currently thriving town centre, one of the country's few remaining traditional High Streets of independent shops.

The Campaign to Protect Rural England this week published its report on Ledbury's rich food economy and holds it up as a model of national excellence. More than 500 jobs and £30 million of trade is focussed on Ledbury High Street. Ledbury town centre was also voted as one of Britain's favourites – ranked in the top four by a BBC Radio 4 listeners poll.

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Statement to Planning Committee from Rich Hadley

There has been so much uncertainty caused by this issue, that we implore you to make a decision today. Business investment in the town is on hold, houses aren't selling, and there is conflict in our community. Our town is suffering. Ledbury has to get back on track. You have the power to help make that happen. Please do not defer this decision.

For eight months local people have been campaigning against an out of town superstore. Not against Tesco or Sainsbury's. The brand over the front door is irrelevant. It is the principle of an out of town superstore which is at issue.

The proposed scheme is nearly a mile from the centre. It will preclude linked shopping trips between supermarket and town and it will be accessible only by car. So it will generate more traffic through already congested streets, and it will mean that fewer people will frequent our cherished High Street.

The superstore is too big. There is simply not enough retail capacity to go round to support this scheme on top of the existing shops and supermarkets in our town. Sainsbury's own economic assessment is full of holes and inconsistencies which the planning officer has set out in detail for you.

This is not opinion or hunch. There have been five retail impact assessments. They all predict that a store of this size will lead to shop closures in our High Street. The excellent Coop will not survive, with the loss of fifty jobs. But it will be the small independent retailers who will suffer first and most. Sainsbury's claim their store will offer more choice. In fact it will lead to a virtual monopoly on trade. And then there will be less choice.

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Ledbury High Street is one of Britain's favourites – ranked in the top four by a BBC Radio 4 listeners poll. Compared to other market towns, there are few empty premises, and it keeps its traditional character with wonderful independent shops: not just butchers and greengrocers, but bookshops, an ironmongers, design and homeware, delicatessens, florists, even an old fashioned printers, one of the country's last. People love Ledbury, and we are proud of it. Ledbury is not just a tourist town. It is a living, breathing Herefordshire market town.

We are in the midst of the worst financial crisis in our lifetimes. Independent shops in Ledbury are not coining it. Trading is tough. If you've ever run a business, you'll know that small drops in pedestrian footfall and turnover can push already vulnerable traders out of business. It doesn't take much to wreck the fragile balance.

Finally, though we are passionate about our town, I do want to acknowledge that Ledbury isn't perfect, it doesn't offer everything – but why should it? We are a town of under ten thousand, not a city suburb. And we all have access to the internet...

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At this very moment, we are starting out on a new parish plan, and hopefully a local neighbourhood planning framework. A conversation is going to take place about our future, the kind of town we want, how the needs of different communities may be fulfilled. But we need time, and space and calm to be able to work those things out for ourselves.

The last few months have been hell. As a community we have been toiling in response to outside forces – the supermarket developers who care little for Ledbury, and who are single-mindedly looking to maximise their profits. Fair play to them: it's their business.

But Ledbury is our business. We say, please don't risk Ledbury – at least not now. For the sake of jobs and tourism, for its sense of community, for a way of life and a heritage stretching back a thousand years. Please refuse this planning application.