

Petitions, Cards, Letters and Emails about Sainsbury's: An Attempt at a Statistical Analysis

Written by Andrew Warmington

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Throughout the battle over the out-of-town superstore (OOTS) issue, there has been much argument over which side has majority support among the people of Ledbury. In the absence of definite statistical evidence either way, this has led to a lot of claims and counter-claims. It is impossible to know for sure, since neither of the ways of finding out – an actual poll or a properly conducted survey of a statistically significant and randomly chosen inhabitants – has ever happened. The only documentary evidence we can use is the petitions, letters, emails and cards sent to Herefordshire Council at various times during the campaign.

On 22 October, therefore I went to Blueschool House in Hereford to have a look at these. This proved a very tricky – and long – exercise because of the sheer bulk of the evidence, its sometimes confusing nature and the lack of time to do a full statistical analysis, which would take even the most qualified person weeks.

I am not pretending to be an impartial observer. I am one of the most prominent anti-superstore campaigners and I think that any OOTS in Ledbury would be a disaster. However, I have done my utmost to be fair and accurate.

The evidence is of four main types:

- A petition organised by Ledbury Opposes Out-of-Town Superstores (LOTS, which originally stood for Ledbury Opposes Tesco Superstore) against the proposal by Tesco to build a superstore on the site of Ledbury Engineering and to close down their existing town store
- A petition organised by Ledbury Supports Sainsbury's (LESS, which was originally called LATS (Ledbury Approves Tesco Superstore)) in favour of the proposal by Sainsbury's to build a superstore on the site of Galebreaker
 - Letters and emails sent in to Herefordshire Council in favour of and against the Sainsbury's proposal in the run up to the Planning meeting on 22 February
 - Response cards distributed by LOTS, LESS and Sainsbury's in favour of and against the Sainsbury's proposal in the run up to the Planning meeting on 22 February

I examined these, especially the first, in as much detail as possible and will lay out my findings below:

1. LOTS Anti-Tesco petition

This was gathered mainly by leaving sheets in various shops around Ledbury for people to sign, supplemented by a small amount of signature gathering in the street. It was done before Sainsbury's proposal emerged and is therefore in opposition to the Tesco proposal.

There had been various allegations from LESS supporters that the petition was not mainly signed by local people ('from Melbourne to Miami' being one statement). In particular a letter in the Ledbury Reporter in September claimed that fewer than 1,000 people from the whole of Herefordshire had signed it.

LOTS has also stated that an unknown number of sheets disappeared from shops or in transit to Hereford. A number of near to 3,600 signatories was mentioned at one point, not including any lost from shops.

The petition has, by the council's count 3,257 revised down to 3,234. I counted 3,193, eliminating two as known duplicates and one as a child's signature, leaving 3,190. This figure, 44 down from the original 3,234, is well within the standard margin of error.

I went through the entire petition, noting where the person signing was from, if stated, which it almost always was. Because people often put just a street name, town, postcode or limited details, it was not in practice possible to distinguish between towns and their wider postcode district.

It is also worth pointing out that counties and postcodes do not always match each other – most obviously WR 13 is a Worcester postcode but is mostly in Herefordshire. Moreover, Ledbury is in a corner of Herefordshire and much of its immediate area is actually in Gloucestershire (Newent, Dymock, etc.) or Worcestershire (Malvern and around). However, the broad figures are clear enough. The location of those who signed was: Ledbury/HR8 – 1,243 (39.0%) Colwall/WR13 – 290 (9.1%) Hereford/HR1 – 202 (6.3%) Other HR postcodes – 266 (8.3%) [**Ed:** Hereford city comprises parts of postcodes HR1 through HR4. These postcodes are radial out of Hereford, going as far as Bodenham, for example.] Malvern/WR 14 – 169 (5.3%) Other WR postcodes - 146 (4.6%) All GL postcodes- 293 (9.2%) Other UK- 523 (16.4%) Non-UK- 17 (0.5%) Blank/illegible/unsure- 41 (1.3%) Thus, of those who signed the petition, only 16.4% were from parts of the UK outside the Three Counties and hardly any from abroad. A full 71.8% were from the Three Counties, leaving a few whose origins are unclear. This is essentially a snapshot of those who come to Ledbury and go into its independent shops. Not surprisingly, the vast majority are local, supplemented by visitors from all over, though with the West Midlands and Wales supplying a large proportion of these.

It has been argued that this petition should not have been allowed in evidence against Sainsbury's because it is anti-Tesco and not everyone who was anti-Tesco was necessarily anti-Sainsbury's. This is really a matter of opinion.

However, the wording is essentially about the likely damage to the High Street from a store of the proposed size and location. Since Sainsbury's proposal was for a slightly larger store right across the street, Planning presumably took the view that most people who think that a Tesco OOTS would have a devastating impact on the High Street would think the same about a Sainsbury OOTS and that therefore this petition could be used in evidence in the Sainsbury's proposal.

I note in passing that one person who signed the anti-Tesco petition added 'Yes to Sainsbury's' (which was not on offer at the time), while among the letters in a separate file is one from a doctor in Yarkhill who said he had changed his mind and was now in favour of a Sainsbury's after seeing the happy petition gatherers with their orange balloons about town. I

did wonder if he was being facetious, but had to assume that he was not...!

2. LESS Pro-Sainsbury's Petition

This petition was gathered by a mixture of door-to-door and street collection, as is immediately obvious from the fact that large amounts of it consist of names from the same street and others are more mixed up. There was also some targeted soliciting of names at specific places, such as among parents collecting children outside Ledbury Primary School or in work places. As such, it is rather different in nature to the anti-Tesco petition.

By the Council's count, which I did not have time to check, there were 2,517 names on it. I also found a sheet with 10 more that had been mislaid in another box, bringing the total to 2,527. It was clear straight away that the vast majority of names are from Ledbury/HR8.

As I did not have time to do a full count to determine where the signatories came from, I sampled the petition, i.e. picked a random place and started counting every fifth signature until I had 100 and then did the same again at another point later in the petition. This meant that I counted 200, or about one in every 12. In statistical terms, this means that the results are likely to be accurate to within 2-3% of the true total. The count was as follows: Ledbury/HR8 – 164 (82%) Other 3 Counties - 30 (15%) Other UK- 3 (1.5%) Not stated/illegible- 3 (1.5%) I have not broken down the 'Other 3 Counties' any further because the numbers are too small to be meaningful. There were a few oddities, e.g. two people signing themselves 'c/o Davant' and one being 'Pontypridd & Ledbury'. I have assigned these to Ledbury on the balance of probabilities. Either way, getting this number of people to sign it in a small town was no mean feat.

Collating the signatures to both petitions by road to get a picture of where pro and anti supporters come from would have taken months. However, I note in passing that despite the suggestion that those who support an OOTS are mainly working class families who have always lived in Ledbury and those who oppose it are mainly well-off incomers, that this is not at all obvious from the signatures. In the three completely middle class roads in the area of the modern estate where I live, there were slightly more pro than anti signatures.

3. Letters & Emails to Council

As part of the public consultation process, members of the public were invited to write in to Herefordshire Council by letter and email to spell out their reasons for supporting or objecting to the Sainsbury's proposal.

In total, there were 258 letters and emails received before the deadline of 3 February 2012 in favour of the proposal, plus 35 received after, and 311 received before against it, plus 25 received after. As far as I could see, every single one came from a Ledbury or HR8 address.

In statistical terms and as guides to the majority view, however, these are virtually worthless. Many people both wrote and emailed, while a few sent the same letter more than once. I myself was among the duplicates, since I sent the same letter to Planning and to every County Councillor, one of whom forwarded it to Planning.

Moreover, it is obviously highly likely that many of those motivated enough to write individually will also have signed a petition and/or sent a response card in. I have therefore not used the letters and emails as part of the statistical analysis.

4. Response Cards to Council

As stated above, both LOTS and LESS organised a campaign of sending in cards in favour of or against the Sainsbury's proposal. These gave a standard list of arguments in favour or against, with space to add in any further thoughts. In a few cases, supporters used the anti card to support the proposal and opponents used the pro card to object to it but it appears that the Council successfully spotted this every time.

These cards had to be signed and, in the vast majority of cases, the sender gave an address, which makes it possible to assess where they were from. It is, of course, possible that some people sent in multiple cards but it is not likely that this skewed the result because (a) it was necessary to put a stamp on the card, thus making systematic fraud a costly business, and (b) where there was duplication among the cards collated and posted by LESS, this was spotted.

This part of the campaign is slightly confused by the fact that Sainsbury's also organised a separate card filling campaign. These were collated by LESS and sent in after the deadline had passed. The potential for duplication of names between the LESS card and the Sainsbury's card, because many of the same people would have filled them both in, is obvious, but I simply did not have the time to check this.

In addition, 476 of Sainsbury's own cards were filled in multiple times by a few people – some did this more than 20 times, putting the same name, address and reason for support every time. This was sufficiently obvious to the Council that they bundled them together marked 'Duplicates'. Whether this was the result of an organised attempt to deceive or just over-enthusiasm by some LESS supporters is impossible to say.

The total number of cards was as follows:

In favour: 861 standard LESS cards received before the deadline, 158 standard LESS cards received after the deadline and 359 of Sainsbury's own cards, all received after the deadline (not including the 'Duplicates' bundle), = 1,378

Opposed: 2,139 standard LOTS cards received before the deadline, 119 standard LESS cards received after the deadline, = 2,258

Lacking time to analyse them in detail, I also did samples of 100 among the standard LOTS and LESS cards. This showed the origins of the signatories to be as follows. There were none in either group from outside the Three Counties, and an address was always given:

Ledbury/HR8 - Pro 86, Anti 78 Other HR postcodes - Pro 4, Anti 4 WR postcodes - Pro 6, Anti 13 GL postcodes - Pro 4, Anti 5 Clearly both sides drew most of their support from Ledbury/HR8, the pro-Sainsbury side somewhat more so. Most of the WR postcodes on the anti side were from WR13, which tends to back up the petition evidence that there is strong anti-superstore feeling in Colwall.

Conclusions

A few points of caution need to be made before reaching any conclusions:

- It is highly probable that many people both signed a petition and sent in a card, letter and/or email. There is bound to be some level of duplication on both sides. People sending in multiple cards on either side cannot be entirely discounted, though the Council did spot it in the

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most obvious instance.

- Being anti-Tesco and being anti-Sainsbury's are not necessarily the same thing. It is possible that some of those who signed the anti-Tesco petition were in favour of or at least not against, or not so strongly against Sainsbury's. Or indeed, vice-versa.

- The petitions were gathered in very different ways. LOTS gathered its petition passively, by leaving it in shops. Therefore it would not have reached large numbers of people who did notice it because they did not go in the right shops, were too busy or otherwise not inclined to sign a petition unless specifically asked to do so. LESS gathered its petition actively; they went door-to-door and specifically targeted Ledbury residents. For these reasons, it is inherently probable that LESS reached a higher proportion of its supporters in town than LOTS did.

- It is certain that a large minority or possibly a majority of Ledbury/HR8 residents have never expressed a view either way throughout the whole campaign. Whether that is because they have no interest in the issue, have no strong opinion, are undecided or do have a view but do not wish to sign petitions or send cards is impossible to say.

Does all this offer any proof either way of what the majority view in Ledbury/HR8 was on the Sainsbury's proposal? No, not conclusively, though both sides can take some points of comfort. For LESS, it is certain that more Ledbury people signed the pro-Sainsbury's petition than the anti-Tesco one. If we count all signatures from the Three Counties to the petitions, it is pretty much a dead heat. For LOTS, the cards give a clear majority against, by nearly two to one, even on the most generous reading for LESS. The cards are more directly comparable than the petitions for obvious reasons.

Based on all this, my personal view, based on many years of working with imprecise figures, is that the split among Ledbury/HR8 residents who have expressed a view at any point is about three to two against Sainsbury's, less than it was against Tesco but still a solid majority.

It can and will be argued both ways and in any case planning decisions are not made on a majority vote, but this is a conclusion reached after a full and fair assessment of the evidence that we have and I have revised this down from two to one.