

Tesco's 'Secret Meeting' with Selected Councillors

Written by John Eager

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At a volatile Town Council meeting tonight (19th May) the Mayor of Ledbury, Allen Conway, and Ward councillor Peter Watts were put under pressure to explain Tuesday's extraordinary meeting held at the Market House, which had been called by the grocers Tesco to discuss their plans for a Tesco hypermarket on the outskirts of Ledbury.

The Ledbury Community Portal asked Mayor Conway who had organised the meeting, who had been invited, who had attended, what had been discussed and what had been the outcome of the meeting.

The Mayor refused point blank to answer these questions.

Deputy Mayor, Tony Bradford, who had not been invited to the meeting, said he had been 'kept in the dark' and that questions needed to be asked publicly.

When Mayor Conway told the council there had been too little time to invite or inform all councillors of the meeting, he was greeted with uproar and cries of nonsense.

Councillor Clive Jupp objected to the meeting stating that it was 'out of order' and that all councillors should have been informed.

Councillor Martin Eager described it as a 'secret meeting' which had caused 'anxiety' and 'mistrust' around the town leading to 'accusations' by some traders against the council.

Councillor Paul Winter said that he was 'disappointed' he had not been told of the meeting and that it portrayed 'a very bad picture' of the council, which needed to be perceived by the public as being transparent.

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Ex-Ward Councillor Mary Cooper asked Councillor Watts whether a Herefordshire Council planning officer had been present at the meeting. Councillor Watts told the council that there hadn't been. Councillor Cooper then warned him that she had previously been advised by Herefordshire Council never to meet with a developer without a planning officer present.

At this point Councillor Watts asked the press not to report the following: He had been sent an email from a Herefordshire Council planning officer warning him that everything about Tesco is confidential. Councillor Watts stated that his reply had been 'sod the planning officer!'

Earlier in the evening Annette Crowe, representing the traders of Ledbury, had made an impassioned plea to councillors to block Tesco's planned hypermarket. Mrs Crowe told council she had seen plans that showed the hypermarket would be three times bigger than the current Tesco site and would be selling everything from clothing to electrical goods. Mrs Crowe pointed to Malvern and the damage that could be done to retailers and the high street caused by out-of-town shopping developments.

Councillor Watts told the council that no formal planning application had yet been made by Tesco, but Herefordshire Council had been 'informally discussing' with the grocers Tesco since February of this year.

Councillor Watts said 'we are not happy with the situation - the last thing we want to see is a dead town. We have to keep the character of this town - we must be careful that *we* are in *control*'.

Although it was clear from the discussion that Tesco had called Tuesday's meeting, or to put it another way, summoned a selection of potential Tesco-friendly councillors, it was still unclear who had attended, what had been discussed and what had been the outcome of the meeting.

Earlier in the day Herefordshire Council leader Mr John Jarvis told the Ledbury Portal he knew 'nothing at all' about the meeting.