

Superstores: Is this the solution?

Written by Andrew Warmington

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We can't have a new superstore AND preserve the High Street, can we? Actually we can. Here's how

Throughout the superstore debate, those for and against an out of town superstore (OOTS) have made one assumption: we can't have a superstore within Ledbury because there simply isn't a suitable place for one. Local architect Anthony Peake thinks otherwise. His proposal could actually be the solution to the whole problem, one that could be acceptable to nearly everyone.

Anthony knows a bit about this. He designed, among many other things, a giant out of town store for John Lewis off the M40 near High Wycombe. When Tesco applied for planning permission for an OOTS off Leadon Way, they dismissed the option of redeveloping their current site on Orchard Lane. Not only did Anthony think that this could be done, he has drawn up a plan.

The current Tesco store – which we can all agree is very far from ideal – covers a footprint of about 22,150 sq. ft, with 167 customer car parking spaces. It sits at the bottom of a hole excavated below street level, far back from the Homend and doing nothing whatsoever to complement the High Street.

Anthony's plan calls for this to be replaced by a bigger, better store built at street level and fronting the Homend. This would be built on top of a giant concrete slab on columns, above the car park. In all, it could cover up to 38,750 sq. ft., with about 28,000 sq. ft. of net selling space, about 85% as much as it proposed on Leadon Way.

(It should be noted that this figure is an 'up to' figure. Any planning application would have to fit with the retail need of Ledbury and other planning requirements. LOTS would not want a new supermarket to be quite this large. The point is that Tesco CAN redevelop their current site and absorb all the projected retail growth in Ledbury to 2026.)

There would be 222 customer car parking spaces in place of the current 167, plus 20 for staff. This is just shy of the usual formula of one for every 150 sq. ft of selling space but plenty for a store that would draw many customers on foot or public transport. Access from the car park below could be by lift, stairways or revelatory.

As well as being bigger and able to offer a wider range of goods than the current store, this proposed store has a number of important advantages. Most important of all is its location: on the High Street and part of it, with a frontage close to the first shops in the High Street and a front door on the corner of Orchard Lane and the Homend. It means that our supermarkets remain in the right place.

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Secondly, it could be much more attractive, giving visitors a much better first impression of Ledbury. What Tesco came up with in Ludlow – once their plans for a bog standard OOTS were rejected – gives you a model of how a supermarket building does not have to be ugly and dull and can even complement a lovely old town, visually and practically.

Third, instead of the current, hopelessly inadequate delivery area where all goods have to be unloaded by lorries with flaps that crash down and a compactor makes added noise, Anthony proposes a docking bay deeper down for two articulated lorries and two lifts, still shielded by the wall to Robinson Meadow. This will reduce noise and enable lorries to turn within the area rather than reversing in front of shoppers.

This plan has gone some way already. Anthony has met with Tesco executives, who have responded favourably – they were already re-thinking their plans after the debacle of the OOTS. As an edge-of-town site, it is, to use the jargon, 'sequentially preferable' to either Leadon Way site and would be more acceptable to the planners. And, as it is in retail use already, no issues about loss of employment land arise. It is possible Tesco could put this forward even before Sainsbury's application is debated.

Any downsides? Well, no solution is ever perfect and no doubt the plan would be changed in some ways before ever being built. There would be more – though probably not many more – deliveries here than to the current store and there would also be a transitional period of up to a year, though it could be less, where the current store is closed while the new one is built. What would happen to the staff during that period? Only Tesco could answer that.

However, let's face facts. One way or another, the current Tesco's days are numbered. It is inadequate and has to be changed dramatically. If Sainsbury's get planning permission for their store, Tesco will either pursue their OOTS to the bitter end and close this one when it happens, or simply close it and leave Ledbury. They will not sit there and let their market share be taken away. Corporations don't work like that.

Overall, this is surely a plan that all of us who love Ledbury can get behind. It offers us a bigger, better supermarket with more choice but in the right place, complementing the High Street. As such, the independent shops would support it fully. It preserves employment land on Leadon Way. It saves us from the nightmare prospect of thousands more car trips out of town every day.

In all, this could be the silver bullet, the option that pleases pretty much everyone. Except Sainsbury's, of course. But what have they done for us lately, except set us at each other's throats? I ask everyone to look at this with an open mind and see that this is the best way forward.