

## Herefordshire Council Says No to Sainsbury's

Written by Andrew Warmington

Wednesday, 22 February 2012 21:32 - Last Updated Monday, 05 March 2012 10:45

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Nine months after the first application was made to build a superstore on Leaddon Way, it came down to this: a vote by the Planning Committee of Herefordshire Council on 22 February at the Shire Hall in Hereford. And, as anticipated, they voted in line with planning advice to refuse planning permission for Sainsbury's on the Galebreaker site in Leaddon Way, by 12 votes to 6.

In the week before the vote, the council's planning officials had issued a report that firmly recommended refusal, saying that the planned superstore failed to meet almost all of the critical hurdles it has to clear. At Shire Hall, Head of Planning Roland Close gave a detailed presentation to councillors explaining why.

There are two key questions that have to be addressed when considering an application of this magnitude, according to Mr Close. First, is the location appropriate? And second, would it have an adverse impact on the vitality of the town centre? Planning's answer was a definite 'no' to the first question and a definite 'yes' to the second.

Central government and Herefordshire Council policy dictates that there should be a 'sequential preference' for town centre sites for major retail development wherever possible. In Ledbury, there are two edge-of-centre sites available: the one currently occupied by Tesco and the Lawnside Road area which houses the swimming pool, the ambulance and fire stations, a BT exchange, some businesses and a car park.

Mr Close said that it would be "both feasible and viable" to redevelop the Tesco site to accommodate a larger store (as had been proven by local architect Anthony Peake's recent blueprint). In addition, Tesco themselves had recently issued an 'Urgent Update Report' saying that they were actively looking at doing this.

The Lawnside Road area, Mr Close established, could also be redeveloped to accommodate retailers, including a two-storey supermarket, though work would need to be done to see if the site owners were ready to sell the land. Sainsbury's had not apparently made contact with the site owners to see if they might be available in either case.

The potential impact on the town centre, Mr Close said, was a complex issue. However, various consultant reports had raised much concern that there was not enough extra spending power on convenience goods within the town to support such a massive store without posing a risk of closure to at least one of the existing supermarkets and many independent stores.

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'Linked trips' from a supermarket to another store are another key concern. At about 850 metres from the town centre through an industrial estate, Mr Close said, the proposed site is "so divorced from the town centre that linked trips are highly unlikely and the store will become a destination in its own right" – which is surely what Sainsbury's always intended it to be.

The store would also have threatened Ledbury's heritage assets. If many of the small stores that occupy them – which are themselves tourist attractions – close, there would be a risk of listed buildings lying empty and their fabric ultimately deteriorating.

The application also fell short on other grounds, such as transportation and sustainability (most trips to the store would be made by car) and loss of high quality employment land. An inadequate flood risk assessment and the now infamous slow worms on the site were both mentioned.

However, these were minor issues compared to the main grounds of objection, which, Mr Close said, "cannot in my opinion be overcome by negotiation". On all these grounds, planners recommended the application for refusal. This comprehensive demolition of the application, many feel, means that Sainsbury's do not have any basis for appeal or minor tweaking.

It was next the turn of speakers from the public. On behalf of Ledbury Town Council, Mayor Allen Conway gave the reasons why the Council – albeit only on his casting vote – had recommended refusal a few weeks earlier, stressing above all the excessive size of the superstore at 30,000 sq. ft., the likely impact on the town centre and the likely traffic problems on Bye Street and Bridge Street.

For LOTS, chair Rich Hadley asked the council not to delay making a decision. "Business investment is on hold, houses are not selling, the community is divided," he said, adding that the LOTS campaign was not about any particular brand nor anti-supermarket but against an excessively large, out-of-town superstore.

Rich also noted the recent CPRE report that found Ledbury's local food economy to be a model of sustainability, maintaining at least 500 jobs and £30,000 in sales. "It is not just a tourist town, it is a living, breathing market town," he said. Both he and local shopkeeper Annette Crowe stressed the fragility and interdependence of the High Street at a time of economic hardship.

For the pro-superstore side, Sainsbury's regional development executive Michael Adenmosun talked of the job opportunities at Sainsbury's and a relocated Galebreaker if the store went ahead, while Mike Ashton of Herefordshire & Worcestershire Chamber of Commerce highlighted a recent member survey in the Ledbury area that was broadly in favour of at least one supermarket on Leaden Way.

Following on, Yvonne White of Balloon Magic likewise talked of job opportunities, of which there are not nearly enough for local young people, as well as wanting to have a bigger, better supermarket in town. She claimed a large new supermarket in the centre of town would spoil the attractiveness of the town centre, so out of town was the best option.

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Although two of them were not Planning Committee members and none was allowed to vote in the debate, our ward councillors were allowed to speak. Cllr Phil Bettington, who was not present, had written in briefly objecting to the proposal, while Cllr Peter Watts, who had hitherto reserved his position and had abstained at the Town Council, surprised some by coming out vehemently in favour.

"Ledbury is crying out for a bigger and better shopping experience," he said, adding that many people were currently driving 30 miles to do their weekly shop. He argued that both the Tesco and the Lawnside Road sites failed the sustainability test and that if the current Tesco were to be redeveloped, it would take over two years. (Anthony Peake thinks it could be done in less than one.)

Cllr Watts also emphasised the jobs issue, saying that Sainsbury's would create 220 and Galebreaker at least 10 more, and added that Ledbury has enough employment land for the next 48 years. He concluded the whole debate by arguing that the Sainsbury's would redress the balance between tourism and local needs and even cited Darwin's Theory of Evolution to say that Ledbury must evolve or die.

However, Cllr Liz Harvey, who had voted against Sainsbury's in the Town Council, rebutted this, saying that "it's not about resisting change but resisting disproportionate, ill-timed and damaging change. This would not be evolution, but a paradigm shift that would [lead] to catastrophic damage to the town centre," she added.

Cllr Harvey also made the key point that even if all of the planned 800 houses envisaged by 2031 sprang up tomorrow fully occupied, she said, this supermarket would meet all the possible extra retail space needed to supply them. Doing so in one go, 20 years early, could have a devastating effect on the town. Ledbury will need more retail space, she said, "but not this size, not this location and not now".

There followed a debate in which 10 of the 19 councillors present spoke, seven against the application, two in favour, one without a definite conclusion. Many of them cited the example of Leominster, which was devastated by the construction of a giant out-of-town superstore and took years to recover, aided in part by EU grants that are certainly not available now.

The vote, after a two-hour debate, was 12 to 6, with 1 abstention. Perhaps Sainsbury's were expecting it – at any rate they had a pre-written press release in which Michael Adenmosun expressed disappointment and said that they will "consider our options and continue to work with Galebreaker to progress their planning application".

What now? Some have said Sainsbury's will appeal and that this will ultimately cost the Council Tax payer if Herefordshire Council loses. However, this seems unlikely in view of the obvious inadequacy of their case. Maybe Tesco will come back with a revised proposal to redevelop in town. How big? Or maybe they both have plans we haven't even thought about yet? The battle is won but the war goes on. Watch this space...