

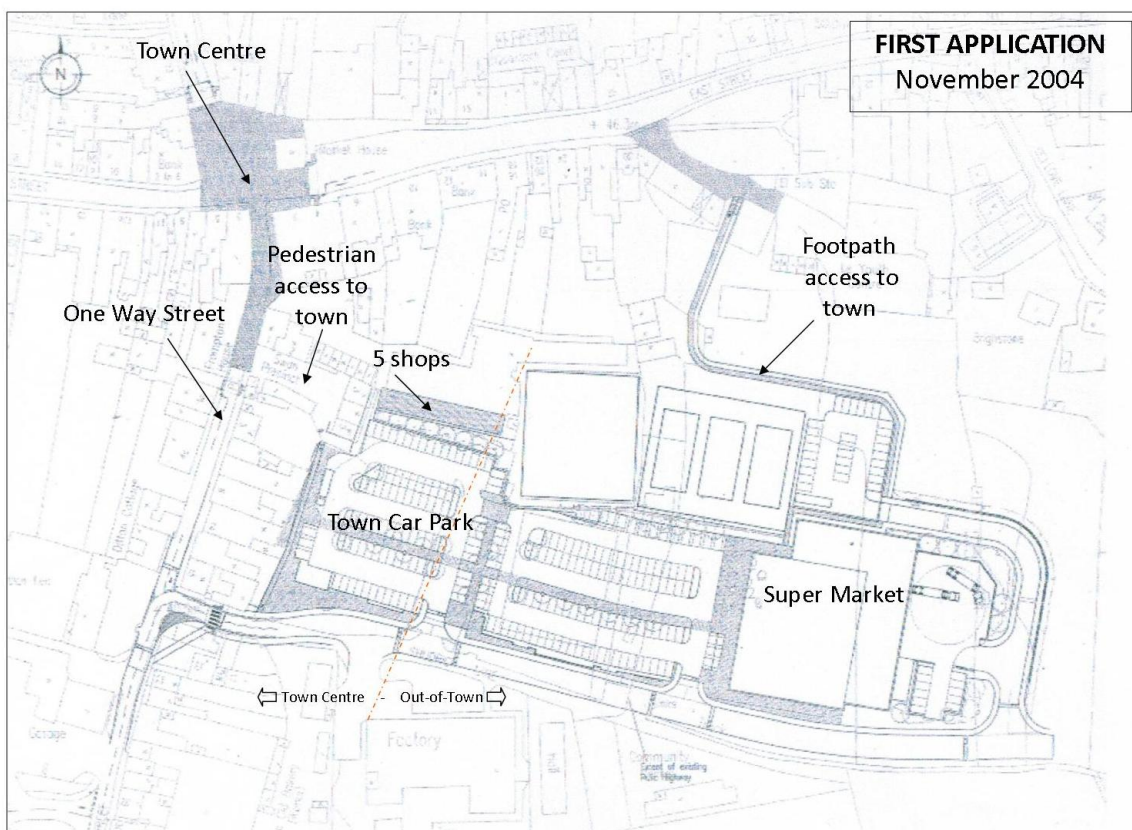
Report on ‘Supermarket Developments in towns: learning the lessons’ event

Shepton Mallet, 5th October 2011

There were three presentations, followed by questions, with a final Q&A session to finish. 44 attendees.

Clinton Bonner, Ilminster Chamber of Commerce

Ilminster has a population of 5000 people, and before the Tesco store opened had only a small Coop store. There were two planning applications for the Tesco store; the first in 2004 had the store at the eastern end of the site, with a car park to the western end (where the existing town car park was located), though there would have been a net loss of 30-40 spaces. Total floor space (store and storage) was 2668 sqm (approx 28,700 sqft) check.

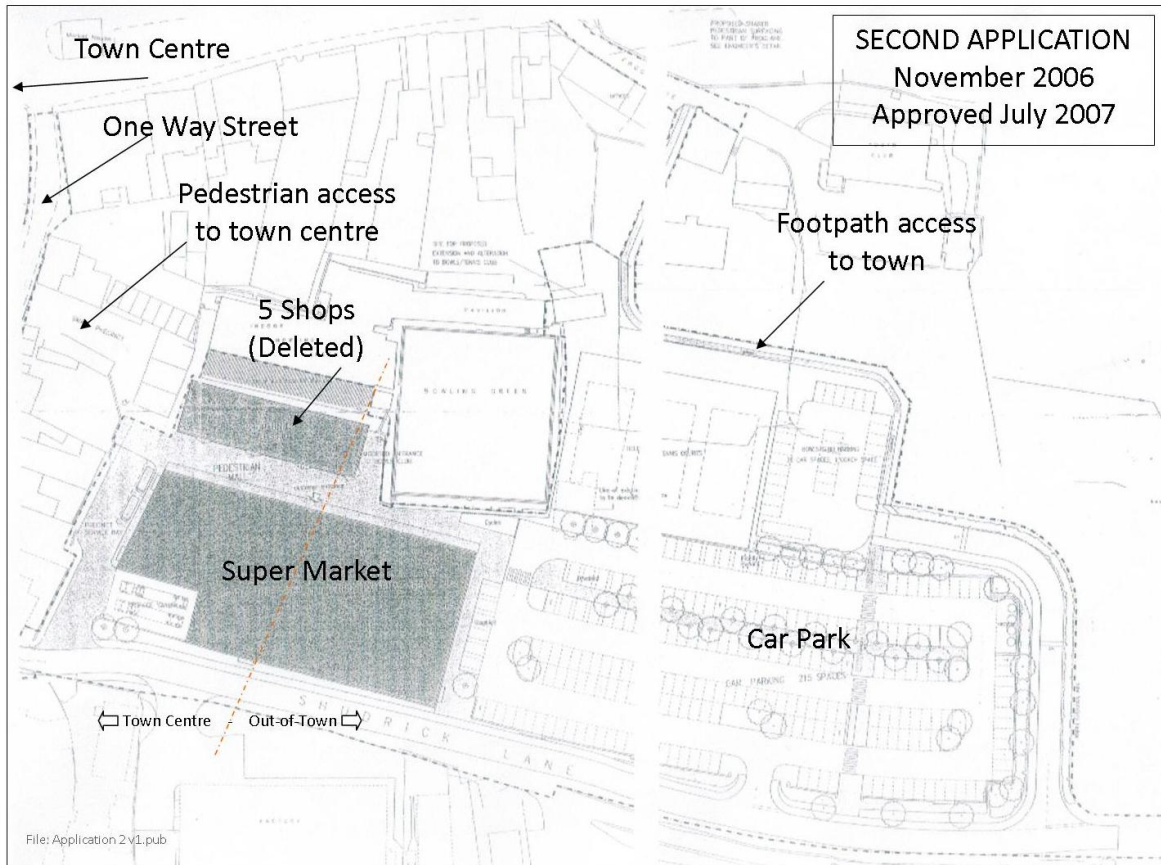


The Chamber did not object to the idea of a large food store coming to the town, but did have concerns over the effect of one-waying Ditton Street. The townsfolk were generally positive; the majority had indicated they wanted a large food store in an Ilminster Forum survey.

The second application in November 2006 switched the store and parking around (see plan below, not to scale). The Chamber objected to this application as the car park was further away from the

town centre and also the effect on the road network of one-way Ditton Street. Total floor space in this application rose by 1040 sqm to 3708 sqm (approx 39,900 sqft) check.

Clinton felt they (the Chamber) had been naive in how they objected – there was a separate planning application for the Highways work that they should have objected to as well. The Chamber launched a campaign against the one-way – ‘One Way, No Way!’ which gathered 15,000 signatures from residents and shoppers but the timing didn’t fit the application deadline – again Clinton felt the Chamber were the amateurs up against the professionals employed by Tesco’s.



SCC Highways decided that the one-way street, Ditton Street, should run North to South, taking traffic away from the town centre and creating a near 2-mile detour (along Canal Way) to any vehicles wanting to reach the town centre from the south.

The Chamber wanted the store not to sell electrical goods, newspapers and a few other products, so as not to compete with some existing shops. The Tesco store opened in 2007, and sells electrical goods and papers, though doesn’t have a cafe.

Ilminster is unusual in that around 70% of town shops are freeholder-owned, rather than leased, which gives stability, has a high number of independent and quality shops (approx 19) and there are currently only 2 empty shops and 2 charity shops, which is very similar to the situation before the Tesco store.

Advice for others – get organised! Clinton advised others to start measuring trade levels (footfall, empty shops etc), to employ a professional (could be a Planning Consultant, Retail expert, lawyer) to argue your case well, be prepared for the supermarkets to give the absolute minimum for their maximum gain and for their ‘strong arm’ tactics. In Ilminsters’ case this included all Town Councillors each receiving a letter from Tesco’s solicitor outlining the strength of their case and that

if it went to appeal and they lost, they may be liable for costs, which some took as a threat. He felt that some of the Town Councillors were concerned about the application, but were perhaps a bit 'out of their depth' and didn't present a united front. He suggested other towns initially say no, which may give some time to 'prepare the defence' including exactly what planning gain they want to see, though of course its important to have your District Councillors 'onboard' as that is the Planning Authority.

The studies prepared for the application (e.g. Ecology, Retail Impact etc) were paid for by Tesco, so no surprise when these were favourable to the proposal.

Pro's of the development;

- there are few vacant shops in the town centre 4 years on
- there are possibly more people doing their main shopping in Ilminster now (people used to drive to Chard, Yeovil or Taunton for large supermarkets)
- The Tesco car park has 3 hours free parking which allows time for town-centre shopping too (known as 'linked trips')
- There are good quality new toilets, in a separate block, though these are not open on Sundays or in the evenings.
- The public realm between the Tesco store and the town centre was improved.
- The Coop store hasn't closed, which was a concern.
- The development was the trigger for the Chamber to develop the First Tuesday monthly prize draw scheme, which has been very successful.

Con's of the development;

- Difficult to measure the actual impact on existing shops, partly because no figures were being collected before it, but also as the recession started shortly after the store opened. It is also worth noting its the 2nd worst-performing Tesco in the UK, said Clinton.
- This fact has probably been the reason why the store has had 8 Managers in 3 years, which hasn't helped to build up a strong relationship between the traders and Tesco.
- The one-way system has resulted in some people – even residents of Ilminster – going to Chard to shop at the larger Tesco store there.
- Bonners the Butchers experienced a 10% drop in trade from before to after.
- Clinton thinks that the traders on Ditton Street were affected more, up to 30 % reduction in trade. However there are no figures to evidence this.

Questions – **Ian MacQueen** (Exmouth Chamber of Trade and Commerce) pointed out that the town didn't seem to have suffered much or at all from the development, apart from the Highways issues.

Terry Sanford, Wellington Chamber of Trade & Commerce

Wellington has around 12,000 residents, 4 Bank branches, many independent shops and a number of stores that 'local chains'. It currently has a metro-style Coop in the centre of town, an Asda on the edge of the town centre (1393 sqm or 15,000 sqft), and a Waitrose store (slightly nearer the town centre) that opened two years ago. This is 1300 sqm (14,000 sqft).

The Waitrose store has been very popular, particularly in attracting customers from further afield (using the jargon – 'affluent greys' doing 'destination shopping') though has added to the traffic problems in the town centre. The Chamber did point out its concerns at the application stage, but were effectively told by Highways 'you get a supermarket with congestion or no supermarket'. The Chamber also wanted the store not to have a cafe or wet fish counter.

Pro's of the development;

- Waitrose management have been very helpful, including advising traders on South Street on a Shop Local campaign, and speaking at Chamber meetings.
- They supported the Wellington Food Town events
- Waitrose have paid for new signage in all the towns' car parks.
- 2 hours free parking in the Waitrose car park (the towns' Local Authority-owned car parks are all charged for).
- The development prompted the Chamber to develop an excellent shopping map.

Cons of the development;

- Traffic congestion in the town centre has worsened
- The store was allowed a cafe and to sell wet fish
- Though the store is well within walking distance of the existing shops, few shoppers so far have been doing linked trips (though some are now using the fish shop in town as there is more choice).

Zena Pollard, Shepton21

The BBC filmed 'The High Street' series in Shepton Mallet last year, which showed the development of our High Streets through the years. If there was one theme of these programmes, it was that 'everything changes'. Town centres have to be flexible and adapt to what people now want on the High Street, and not look backwards.

Tesco in Shepton began with an out of town store in 1995, but moved to its current edge-of-town centre location in 2006. The store was 100,000 sq ft then but has just grown to 150,000 sqft (and now sells more clothes, car parts, electrical etc). There are also 5 other stores in the same development – Argos, Boots, New Look, Laura Ashley and a pet store.

There is 2 hours free parking in the store car park, but an ongoing issue is how to entice shoppers down to the town centre (it is around 300m and across two busy roads). It is one of the best performing Tesco stores in the UK (also apparently affecting Tesco in Wells and Sainsbury's nearest store). Council-owned Car parks nearer town centre are all charged for.

Pros of the development;

- Less empty shops than before, with more niche shops (inc Somerset Antiques)
- Tesco store has triggered several initiatives in the town centre
- Public realm improvements and Shopfront enhancement scheme were funded through Section 106 (planning gain).

Cons of the development;

- Size of store and range of products makes it harder to attract shoppers to other retailers in town centre
- Road network does not help to make it easy to walk into town centre

Q&A session

The 3 presenters answered questions; I've rearranged the order of a couple of responses for clarity.

David Julian (Economic Development Manager, South Somerset District Council) pointed out that, as the planning system deals in facts and figures, its important for Chambers, Town Councils, and others objecting to get your facts and figures together, and to contest the out-of-town stores as these are almost always the least positive for the economy of town centres.

Andrew Rainsford (Diocese of Bath & Wells) felt that SCC Highways appeared to be very inconsistent in what they request, and that if Wellington does have a good relationship with Waitrose why not get them to distribute leaflets on the towns shops. He has worked in very deprived parts of Wales and Ireland, and yet sees more empty shops in Shepton than in those towns. He remembers there used to be a waiting list for Shepton shops 25 years ago; and pondered what has changed?

John Capstick (McKinlays Commercial Property) felt that for Shepton, any big effect would have been felt 15 years ago when the first Tesco store opened.

The Ilminster Tesco's is a modest size and mainly a food store, whereas the Waitrose in Wellington is different as it attracts the affluent greys 'going on a mission'. He feels that with large stores, people won't come into the town centre (and it doesn't matter whether it is edge-of-town or out-of-town) as they can get everything they need under one roof. Smaller stores with limited product ranges can be integrated into town centres successfully.

Avril Kerrwell (Bovey Tracey Town Council) explained the Town Council is being 'courted' by Sainsbury's representatives for an 80,000 sqft store, to be built on land the Town Council owns. She asked for advice from the participants, for their situation.

Sandie Sutton (Exmouth Town Council) suggested they should pressure Sainsbury's to limit the range of goods they sell, and to measure the impact of the store.

Clive Miller (Clive Miller Associates) explained that as they own the land, the Town Council have more control over how the land is developed and indeed – to some extent - who the operator is. An option is to retain the freehold and lease the land to the supermarket; conditions can be imposed in the lease.

Gerlinde Rambausek (Vision4Frome) asked if there was a relationship between the siting of a store and the Highways Department in terms of getting the funding from the store to implement a traffic management project like the one-way system in Ilminster or the location of traffic lights in Wellington.

David Julian felt that the best example of town centre regeneration planning he'd seen recently was the Chard Regeneration Scheme. The only money available to improve town centres at the moment is from supermarket developments. Towns need a strong plan for where development should go.

Mel Usher (Frome Town Council) was surprised that no one had yet mentioned the Localism Bill, and the opportunities within that including Neighbourhood Plans. He also felt this was a time to re-think the High Street; will we see something different in future, perhaps focussing more on the social aspect of High Street shopping?

Paul Myers (Midsomer Norton Town Council) doesn't think supermarkets will have a long life. His town's High Street shops are really suffering and have had nothing from Tesco. Paul would like to create a 'Social Towns Network' to share experiences between Councillors and local activists, one element of which would be how to deal with the supermarkets.

Neil Howlett (Vision4Frome) is a lawyer and likes to have evidence to refer to. The Southampton University report, commissioned by Tesco, on the impact of supermarkets on Market Towns, states that 60% of Tesco shoppers in Ilminster also use town centre shops; and that only 32% of Tesco shoppers in Shepton also use town centre shops. Clinton Bonner strongly questioned this figure for

Ilminster, and Zena Pollard said they would be pleased to get more 5% or more of the Tesco shoppers into town. Neil also asked where the S106 funding from the Shepton Tesco went – Zena said that it was used on improving pavements, the Millennium Way (a walking/cycling path), the shopfront facelift project, some customer care training for town centre businesses, a marketing strategy for the town, and a start-up business scheme. She felt that the Millennium Way and the Facelift project had been the most successful.

Christopher Price (Martock M3 Community Partnership) explained that Tesco are planning a store in the north of Martock (population 5,000); what advice could participants give them?

Clinton Bonner pointed out that the Parish Council needs to find whether the majority of people are supportive of the actual application, and then take it from there. If the Parish Council go against the wishes of the majority, then lobby your District and County Councillors and SCC Highways.

Charles Wood (Vision4Frome) wondered if free Council-owned car parks in Wellington would help to support the small independent shops, and whether the experience of shopping in Shepton has improved since Tesco moved? The answers were 'yes' for Wellington, and a marginal improvement in Shepton since the store moved from out of town to edge of town centre.

He explained that Frome has 2 out of town stores, with a proposal coming forward for a 40,000 sqft store near the centre of town. The current Sainsbury's was 40,000 sq ft selling space (around 65,000 sqft total footprint). In talking square footage, this difference needed to be made clear, and it often wasn't. He felt that the selling range of any proposed near town centre store needed to be big enough to move business away from the out of town stores, but not so big as to undermine the other town centre retail. From the presentations, the orientation of any town centre store regards the High Street shops was obviously a key point, as was the need for free car parking in town, and careful consideration of traffic flow. If these happened, an appropriately sized store could help to enhance the town centre.

Nick White (Frome Town Council) thought that Frome's 2 out of town stores had had a catastrophic effect on the town centre, from which it was just emerging.

John Bailey (Martock M3 Community Partnership and County Councillor) summarised that the help/support offered by the management of the superstores discussed at the event seemed to vary widely, depending on which company and also on the individual manager. Zena also pointed out the Managers would be given a budget for community relations/involvement.

Paul Myers asked 'who do we need to get onboard' to fight against unwelcome developments? Zena and Terry suggested the 'best silks' -planning consultants, lawyers and retail experts - would help, but the good ones will cost! Even better are 'poachers-turned-gamekeepers', people who have worked in the 'development industry' who want to help their town develop in the right way.

Ian MacQueen finished the session by reminding Town Councillors that they are up against powerful and canny opposition and need to prepare properly to take them on.

STF would like to thank all attending for their positive contributions.

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