



DORRIDGE & DISTRICT RESIDENTS ASSOCIATION

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DDRA View on Sainsbury's Development

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With the dust having settled after the highly charged atmosphere of the recent Planning Committee meeting that rejected the development, Dorridge and District Residents Association (DDRA) have been reviewing the Dorridge Sainsbury's situation. We thought it would be helpful to explain where we stand – and we encourage members to contact us with their thoughts.

We believe we have a clear understanding of the desires of the local community, which has been expressed in different ways by different parties but there is surprising accord.

Forest Court has been managed into dereliction by both the previous owners and now Sainsbury's but there is no desire locally to resurrect it.

There are many elements of the proposed development that accorded with a vision of Dorridge that we had established before Sainsbury's bought the site. The guiding principles we set out were:

The shopping facilities must be redeveloped to encourage revitalisation. An appropriate mix of retailers and essential restaurants, cafes and bars should be encouraged to create a more "round the clock" use of the area.

It's important that the village community facilities are increased and improved to inject vitality into the village. Additional Health, Entertainment and cultural facilities (for all ages) are required together with informal meeting places.

The busy main road carries passing traffic straight through the heart of the village and needs to be diverted around the centre. Steps need to be taken to pedestrianise the existing village square and links to Forest Court which will allow for open air activities e.g. markets and other street activities.

We saw that the Sainsbury's proposals went some way towards that goal and therefore it was inappropriate to reject them without detailed consideration.

The centre of Dorridge is constrained so there is not going to be a perfect solution; the reality is that Sainsbury's control the site so unless they walk away, there is little point investing in researching alternative developers. Sainsbury's cannot have what they want; but the reality is that the ideal for Dorridge is likely to be uncommercial for developers; the challenge is to find the compromise that both Sainsbury's and Dorridge can live with.

Residents have made it quite clear that they want Sainsbury's but not at any price and not of the size proposed as they have recognised the impacts caused by the scale.

Like many people, the DDRA felt that the initial proposal presented in January 2009 from Sainsbury's seemed to have potential as a solution, though from the outset it was clear that the scheme was extremely ambitious for the site and from the outset we flagged up that the size of the development was a worry. We assumed that there would be revisions to the scheme as the detailed planning process progressed; and it is our view that Sainsbury's stance that they were only interested in a superstore development meant that genuine consultation on the issues caused by the scale did not occur. This inflamed local opinion even of those broadly in favour of a redevelopment. It is worth noting that the scale of the development was set in stone by Sainsbury's before they had appointed their transport consultants.

Within the DDRA, our investigations, on the issues of traffic and parking especially, meant that we had objective reasons to state that the scheme was not one that was workable – however much there was a desire to see a redevelopment. The principle we worked to in assessing it was “prove that the development can work” - in our view Sainsbury's could not do this without making unjustified assumptions which could all be traced back to trying to fit too large a development on the site, one we suspected would swamp Dorridge rather than revitalise it. For that reason we were satisfied that it was the correct decision of the Planning Committee to reject the development.

We were also disappointed that Sainsbury's had no solutions for what seemed easy problems to fix: Was it impossible to design some interest into the bland facade on Forest Road? Surely a solution to the problem of the trees in Station Road could have been to have a more ambitious tree planting scheme that reflected the mature trees that dominate the Dorridge skyline? We do not approve of the suggestion that Station Approach and the rest of the Sainsbury's site might be left derelict being used as a ransom to persuade the community to accept something inappropriate.

With our experience in planning, we are comfortable that a rejection is a normal part of the development process – there appears to be a misunderstanding that the council can control what Sainsbury's submit and that a rejection was a rejection of even the principle of redevelopment which it was clearly not. In fact, it is helpful to the development process, as both Sainsbury's and the SMBC officers now have a clear statement of where they need to go in producing an acceptable plan. Sainsbury's are experienced developers and once they have come to their own understanding of what happened they will come to their own professional views of how to move ahead. Residents should not be surprised if Sainsbury's submit an appeal – and in fact it is quite common to do this in parallel with developing an alternative scheme.

Having sought opinion from around the community, it is clear that many people see the price of having the Sainsbury's site semi-derelict for some time an acceptable price to pay to avoid an inappropriate development but others are dismayed. However, we believe the responsibility for the

current situation rests firmly with Sainsbury's. We look forward to Sainsbury's coming forward with fresh ideas. We would hope that if Sainsbury's decide that they are not interested in developing in a timely fashion then they will do the honourable thing and exit swiftly and not impede other developers.

In the meantime, we hope that the community will be innovative in making use of the space and Sainsbury's will be co-operative, though we were disappointed that they did not co-operate with the police who believed that a temporary base there would have been mutually beneficial.

Finally, having seen the Knowle supermarket proposals, what is clear is that the concerns over inappropriate development are similar, and over the coming months DDRA and Knowle Society must work together to come up with a vision of how our communities will adapt to the pressures of modern development, welcoming appropriate change and resisting the rest. The solution does not lie in isolation, but in a vision for the communities of Knowle, Dorridge and Bentley Heath.

Ian Spencer
Chairman
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