

PLANNING – A RETURN OF THE “NEEDS TEST”

Bristol is a proud city with a very long history. Once it was second only to London in the kingdom, a key port and trading centre, with many charters over the centuries to affirm its independent civic government. In the past Bristol has given a welcome or barred its gates to kings and rebels. In recent times, it was forced to become part of the newly created county of Avon. Bristol fought tooth and claw to regain its separate identity. It won. As a result, Avon no longer exists and Bristol has its own council again.

It is therefore quite remarkable when the Leader of Bristol City Council writes to Tesco in the following pleading terms:

Re: Former Jesters site, Cheltenham Rd, Bristol

Dear Mr Leahy,

You will no doubt know of the concerns we have about Tesco's intention to open a store at the above site. We would like Stokes Croft to become a distinctive destination in Bristol and do not believe another chain store will help achieve this aim.

Tesco, we know, is proud of its pledge to “listen to people in the community from the moment we identify a site for a new store”. Tesco says it wants to “respond to suggestions and concerns people might have”.

We would like to take you at your word and seek assurances from you that you will consider backing down over your plans and allowing the site to be used by a community-owned alternative.

Some local groups feel very strongly that Tesco has failed to engage with them. They want to see the site used for something other than a supermarket. Will you meet them to discuss their ideas?

Yours sincerely,

*Barbara Janke, Leader of Bristol City Council
Stephen Williams, Bristol West MP*

This letter is amazing. Bristol City Council grants planning permission to a development and then a couple of months later has to plead with Tesco to even talk to them.

Whatever the rights or wrongs of this particular case, it highlights in the starkest terms that the balance in the current planning system is just wrong. Local authorities are terrified of turning down applications from supermarket chains in case they end up with a massive compensation bill if ultimately the application is successful on appeal. The RSA does not usually concern itself

with urban issues – the clue is in our name - but this is such a clear illustration of the national problem that we had to highlight it.

Tesco plans to open 2.4 million sq. ft. of new space in Britain this year, equivalent to about 80 superstores. The other leading supermarket chains have also announced big expansion plans. Sometimes local communities welcome these developments, often they do not.

The current PPS4 planning guidelines need to be modified to include a needs test to ensure that supermarkets cannot ride roughshod over local views. There can be too much supermarket competition as well as too little and we need a robust planning system that can distinguish between the two situations. The current planning laws need to be completely overhauled to get the right balance between the various pressures on the system. It is not being a Luddite to say that there is a need to ensure a variety of shop types and that a system that is slanted towards more large supermarkets with car-based customers is not a good model for a greener future.

Until recently, a supermarket chain had to pass the needs test before planning permission for a new supermarket would be granted. This was not perfect by any means, but it meant that the applicant had to show that there was a good case for more retail space before receiving permission to provide it. The current PPS4 planning regulations have abandoned this requirement. Although only introduced recently, there is sufficient evidence already to highlight that they are just not working properly.

The RSA is calling for a full re-evaluation of PPS4, based on a clear appraisal of what outcomes the system is trying to achieve, and a restoration of the needs test to help restore balance to the process.