

Carterton Fast Forward response to Planning Application 09/0963/P/OP – Erection of retail foodstore with associated parking, landscaping, access and other works

The Carterton Fast Forward Partnership has a particular interest in this application, as we believe that it will have an adverse impact on plans to redevelop Carterton's town centre – a project which has been a key priority of the partnership since it published its first Action Plan in 2003. Since then extensive work has taken place, largely behind the scenes due to commercial confidentiality, to bring the town centre site forward. Progress has been slow - considerably hampered by two changes of ownership of the key site. However we are confident that plans will shortly be submitted for a viable comprehensive development. Our confidence is supported by the knowledge that the development partner is Simons (the company currently developing Marriotts Close in Witney), the strong interest of major national food retailers and the willingness of the Co-op to support such a development.

We therefore object strongly to this planning application, our specific points being:

1. Policy Context

This application is contrary to current planning policy at a national, regional and local level.

PPS 6 – Positive Planning for Town Centres dictates the application of the Sequential Approach to Site Selection. This states that locations in existing town centres should be considered first. We understand that Sainsburys have rejected this on the basis there is a covenant restricting food retail development, yet it appears that they have not approached the Co-op (who attached the covenant), who have indicated that they are open to the possibility of amending it.

PPS 4 – Planning for Prosperous Economies. Although this PPS is in draft, its consultation period has closed and it contains a number of policies to support town centres and again refers to the 'sequential approach'

The South East Plan, the Regional Spatial Strategy for the South East of England recognises the issues facing market towns and the role and value of Market Town Health Checks, such as the one carried out in Carterton, which identify priorities for the community

West Oxfordshire District Council Local Plan and Emerging LDF

The District Council is in the process of preparing its Local Development Framework (LDF) and plans its final consultation on its Core Strategy in November 2009/January 2010. The Local Plan as it stands (adopted 2006 to run to 2011) has a strong policy identifying the area in the town centre for development 'to help Carterton fulfil an important role in the District shopping hierarchy'. More generally in the section on Town Centres, the district will resist proposals that would damage the vitality and viability of existing service centres and measures to improve them. It has been indicated that the district is likely to propose similar policies in the emerging LDF.

Carterton Town Council has supported the work on the town centre development and is a partner in the current consortium which is developing plans for the town centre

2. The effect on the vitality of the town centre

We note that in its Planning Statement, Sainsbury's claim that 'it is clear that no adverse trading consequences will result from the development. The proposed store in itself will not threaten to undermine the retail offer in the Town Centre.'

Carterton town centre is currently characterised by a number of independent shops, which offer a range of services and products which we believe undoubtedly would be adversely affected if this application is allowed, and this view is supported by many of the town centre traders who have expressed grave concern about the proposal. Some have gone so far as to say they may well be forced to close. So far Carterton's town centre has not suffered the mass closures of some other market towns, but the local businesses may well be unable to withstand the competition of an out of town store. The independent butcher and greengrocer feel especially vulnerable. We understand that the Chamber of Trade is opposed to the application. It has been suggested that shoppers at Sainsburys would then use the town centre for secondary shopping. To those familiar with the layout of the town this seems unlikely. Sainsbury's cater for the weekly family shop, hence the large car park. Their store is too far out for people realistically to walk into town, and since most of their needs could be met at Sainsburys it is unlikely they will drive on to the town centre.

3. The plans and the site

The site under question was given planning permission, with a specific restriction on food retail outlets, in order to protect the town centre. It has been suggested that by allowing this application, other businesses will be drawn to the currently underdeveloped site. CFF was involved in discussions with the owner several years ago, which led to planning permission being granted for a much-needed family pub/restaurant and hotel on an adjacent site on the same business park. This has never been implemented, in spite of indications that several pub/hotel chains were interested, as Carterton with a population of approaching 15,000 has only 2 pubs and a couple of B&Bs. We do not believe that it is wise to yield to this type of pressure and that in any case, once this application has been refused, the owner will need to be more realistic about how the business park is developed. We are also concerned that the plans indicated for the store are very close to the boundary of the site with the existing pub/restaurant planning permission and may prejudice its development.

4. The wider economy

Sainsbury's indicate that this application will bring employment to the area. While this may be the case, we believe that it will be largely at the lower end of the skills ranges. Work undertaken for the CFF Partnership shows a need for employers offering highly skilled jobs to redress a current imbalance. It should also be noted that the West Oxfordshire District Area is well below the national average for unemployment.

5. Public opinion

We note the consultation that Sainsbury's has undertaken, which seems to have covered a wide area. We understand that their proposal will be popular, particularly as the longer term implications for the town centre are not immediately obvious and progress on the town centre development up to now has been slow. However in the recent process of reviewing our Action Plan, developing the town centre still appeared to be a high priority.

6. Conclusion

This application is contrary to policy and threatens the viability of the town centre and should be refused.