

Submission of Lorely Burt MP

to the Heart of Shirley consultation

1 INTRODUCTION

This report is not intended as an exhaustive review of all the evidence surrounding the Shirley Advance submission for the Heart of Shirley: that is for Council officers to conduct and to produce their report.

As MP I am intensely aware of the importance of this proposal for the future of Shirley and of my responsibility to represent the views of ALL the residents: those for, against, those who don't know and those who are frankly not that interested.

I have met with the developers, retailers, interest groups and local people, and attempted to look objectively at the arguments.

I think objectivity is a huge problem for everyone involved. Those on both sides of the debate come to the table with historical 'baggage': the Council from its clearly vested interest in the success of the project and some of the interest groups with a history of opposition and suspicion borne from perceived lack of fair play to Shirley in the past.

Indeed, some of the council officers reviewing the consultation material will have been involved with the development from its inception. Since the proposal is the result of a joint venture between the council and Shirley Advance, I worry that those reviewing the consultation material will have difficulty in maintaining an independent objective stance: they will hardly please their political masters if they do not recommend acceptance.

Another factor is that local people rarely embrace radical change: if the views of local people had held full sway such bold developments as Touchwood might never have been built. So sometimes the job of the politicians is to lead rather than to follow. I have no doubt that the ruling Conservative group in Solihull believe that this is what they are doing.

The Council Leader has referred to a 'silent majority' who want the development to go forward but who are not vocal. I have been seeking this silent majority, but I have to say I have found few examples of it in my discussions with local residents. While this evidence is anecdotal, I have to say the silent majority truly is keeping silent, even when presented with the opportunity of addressing their MP on their own doorstep!

Nevertheless, this report aspires to form an objective view in the best interests of the residents and traders in Shirley. What follows is an attempt to review the main arguments in the form of questions which hopefully will be relatively easy to follow.

2 FINDINGS

2.1 Will the proposed development be good for the overall economic

wellbeing of Shirley?

I firmly agree that Shirley needs economic investment. The point at issue is the scale of the offer. Shirley Advance say that unless we have a giant anchor store retail development of Shirley is not viable.

Shirley Advance argue that ASDA will draw customers away from existing large supermarkets situated outside of the main shopping drag such as Sainsbury's and Tesco's and bring more shoppers into Shirley.

When asked about the existing supermarkets in Shirley itself – Morrisons, Aldi, Marks and Spencer and Iceland – they say that these are too small or specialised, and that today people want a large supermarket with a wide variety of goods.

They also say that, having been drawn into the town centre, ASDA customers will be attracted into Shirley itself with its new retail thoroughfare with exciting new shops like Next and TK Maxx drawing them out onto the Stratford Road and this will be good for existing traders.

However, if the main parking is under ASDA itself, will customers not be drawn AWAY from the small shops and lured into ASDA whose car park they will be using?

If ASDA are offering a large variety of services (including estate agency announced last week) which undercut the prices offered by high street traders, what incentive will there be for shoppers to visit the high street shops?

Shops in the new mall may benefit, but what of retailers being undercut for services and products already on offer at ASDA?

The Localise West Midlands' submission draws attention to several examples of where the imposition of a large supermarket has sucked the heart out of a local shopping centre.

Keep Shirley Alive also maintain that the increased traffic on the Stratford Road will serve to bisect the road and further discourage shoppers from venturing to cross it to the shops on the south side.

The red route has clearly hampered the ability of shoppers to access shops on both sides of the road. Traders complain that inability to park – (eg a parking service road replaced by a hitherto unused 50 metre cycle lane) and inability to turn right into service roads have already taken their toll on shopper numbers.

It is not rocket science to conclude that if you cannot conveniently ‘pop’ to the shop you want you will go elsewhere. If ASDA has the main car park, why bother crossing the Stratford Road or walking down it when there are a whole variety of products and services undercutting the high street traders are right above you?

In my view Shirley works as a town centre because of the variety of supermarket and small shop offerings. Shoppers will get their frozen goods at Iceland, staples at Aldi, quality meat and service (and banter) from the butchers and fresh fruit and vegetables from the green grocer. The chemists, dry cleaner, shoe repairers etc all complement the food retailers, and a coffee can be had at the Methodist Church coffee shop which buzzes on a Saturday.

Alternative scenarios might include an even more traffic congested high street which may drive customers away altogether. After a wait to park in ASDA they may feel like going into ASDA to grab what they need and getting home as soon as they can.

ASDA will need to build its customer base, and while they will clearly draw customers from existing superstores, this may also create a price war between the large supermarkets, attracting existing high street customers away from their traditional shopping grounds.

While new stores such as Next and TK Maxx would be very welcome, these will be based in the newly generated shopping mall. If shoppers cannot be tempted further out, and particularly across the increasingly busy Stratford Road, this may spell the demise of some small shops.

While ASDA would undoubtedly create jobs, there may still be a net loss to the local economy because a greater proportion of the revenue from local shops filters into the local economy instead into the coffers of an American giant retailer intent on providing every service and product to every customer.

If smaller shops begin to close and an economic slide begins, Shirley could become a hollow shell of a town instead of the heart of a vibrant community. Unless the Shirley Advance economic argument can be proven, I would not feel disposed to recommend taking that risk with the future of Shirley.

2.2 What will be the impact on traffic?

The traffic impact assessment was submitted only recently, and I was promised a summary by Shirley Advance. As they have not favoured me with this I cannot comment too widely.

The main concern is the impact on Haslucks Green Road which would have the shoppers’ and delivery vehicles’ entrances, and the Stratford Road itself.

Shirley Advance say that some of the proposed increase in traffic will not materialise because traffic which was previously en route to other supermarkets will not need to use Stratford Road as it will be going to ASDA.

Further, a new gyratory roundabout will tackle the bottleneck at the junction of Stratford, Haslucks Green and Solihull roads. The expected increase in traffic from development of the Powergen site has also been factored into their calculations.

That is good news, because the existing traffic bottleneck is appalling and creates pollution and frustration for all: commuters, pedestrians and residents.

I hope the traffic impact assessment will also tackle the problem of traffic backed up along Haslucks Green Road as far as the Colebrook Pub roundabout and increased traffic on the Stratford Road.

Residents from Stanway Road and other existing 'rat runs' have also expressed concern about the expected effects on their roads (complete with photographs of existing potholes!)

Apart from observing that the situation has already achieved nightmarish proportions and it is difficult to see how a traffic island will be a magic wand to solve the problems of even more traffic, I am unable to comment further.

2.3 What will the environmental impact be?

Pollution There seems no getting away from the fact that with increased traffic air pollution will increase. I am unable to comment on exactly how much and leave that to others more knowledgeable in this field.

Noise pollution is a big concern, particularly for existing and proposed residents in Haslucks Green Road which would have the shopper and delivery vehicle entrances.

Shirley Advance say that deliveries will be restricted to certain hours, but shop opening hours have not been specified as far as I know. The plans show elderly residents' apartments on Haslucks Green Road right at the entrance to the underground car park, however. It is hard to imagine that these residents would be in for a very peaceful existence!

Use of parkland A major cause for concern for residents is the use of parkland, which will be mainly used for the construction of apartments which are to face the park. Shirley Advance say that the economics of the development will not stack up unless these apartments are built, the land take only represents 4% of the overall park area and the eyes of the residents will be on the park, thus reducing anti-social behaviour which is unfortunately currently rife.

Probably the most serious concern of residents is the desire not to lose any more parkland in Solihull. The Liberal Democrats polled Shirley residents in 1993-4 and discovered 84% were 'strongly against' the sale of any parkland for development.

Shirley Advance have clearly attempted to respond to residents' concerns over parkland, particularly by changing the plans to reduce the take of park by substituting the more expensive option of putting the car park underground.

As I understand it, the land incorporating the Oak Circle which will be situated underneath the ASDA building is not classed as parkland. Whatever its official designation is, it does not seem to matter too much to residents, many of whom feel strongly about its loss.

2.4 Other issues

Temporary car park Additionally, a temporary car park is to be built on the parkland facing the new proposed apartment development. Shirley Advance changed their original proposals to build it on the tennis courts and bowling green in the face of a storm of protest from residents.

They rejected an alternative site of the Powergen because of the volume of traffic there, already mixed with construction traffic, and the desire to make car parking convenient for shoppers. A cynic might argue that this would give shoppers a 'taste of things to come'!

At a public meeting convened by Keep Shirley Alive concern was expressed that the 'temporary' car park might become a permanent fixture because existing car parking provision had been estimated at only 60% of the actual requirement.

Shirley Advance have commented that they would hardly be able to sell apartments facing onto a car park and they would be required to pay a bond requiring them to restore the car park. A councillor responded at the meeting was that there would be nothing to stop them making a subsequent planning application to make it a permanent fixture.

Do local people want this development? The different interest groups have conducted consultations and referendums on this controversial subject, and unsurprisingly have come up with differing results.

The week before the end of the consultation period Keep Shirley Alive held a public meeting at the British Legion to discuss whether a call-in should be made to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. The room seated 240 people, but it was so packed that even with standing room not everyone could get in.

The mood of the meeting was very clear from the outset. No council officials or representatives from Shirley Advance came, and one could sympathise that they were unlikely to achieve anything more than reinforce existing views.

However, the views expressed at that meeting were exactly the views I have heard over and over again on the doorstep. A rough estimate of those against at the meeting would be 97%, while on the doorstep I would estimate 80% I spoke to were against the proposals.

3 CONCLUSION

While some economic development for Shirley is clearly needed, I believe the proposed development will, on balance, not be good for the economic wellbeing of Shirley. In my view an 80,000 sq ft superstore will create an imbalance in the current retail offer (ie it is disproportionately large) and will suck away some existing customers from smaller shops because most will need to park in the ASDA car park.

Once inside ASDA cut price offerings will dissuade them from venturing out into an even more traffic congested high street. Undercutting local traders will clearly be ASDA's economic strategy in order to build their customer base and justify their investment.

The subsequent effects on Shirley will be increased traffic congestion, air and noise pollution, loss of valuable and prized parkland and an historic oak circle. Some local businesses will fail which will take a disproportionate economic toll on the local economy. ASDA should do well.

Appendices

Appendix i: a note on the consultation process.

Many residents have expressed the view that an ASDA in Shirley has been inevitable ever since ASDA was refused planning permission to build on the Powergen site. They have felt that ASDA's ownership of that building and its fall into a dilapidated eyesore over the last 10 years has hung like a sword of Damocles over their heads.

Rightly or wrongly, these residents feel that any consultation about the basic premise of whether they wanted an ASDA superstore or not has been a sham: that there was a tacit agreement between the council and ASDA and there was always going to be an ASDA superstore in Shirley.

This has fuelled a general suspicion that the political group ruling the council do not have the interests of Shirley at heart: that they have been neglected and deceived. This is most unfortunate because I am sure that many good things have come to Shirley, but until local residents feel their views are being listened to and respected they are likely to persist.

Appendix ii: a note on terminology

I refer to Shirley in the text as a 'town'. I know this upsets some people who maintain Shirley is not a town. I also refer to high street traders and have also been reprimanded for using the term 'high street'. I use this term to denote the main thoroughfare of shops which is usually the 'high street' in most 'towns': oops, there I go again. Apologies to the semantic purists!