



Falkirk Council

Chief Executive Office

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Andrew Howlett
Assistant Clerk
Public petitions Committee
T3.40
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
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Dear Mr Howlett

Scottish Parliament Public Petition PE1497 on Supermarket Expansion on Local High Streets

I refer to your letter 4 February and have had opportunity to consider this new petition. I would make the following comments and observations in relation to the two specific questions asked:

What are your views on what the petition seeks and discussions that took place at the meeting of 28 January?

The discussion recorded at the introduction of the new petition to the Public Petitions Committee is considered specific to the retailing environment of the West End of Glasgow and the perceived detriment of local independent retailers through the opening of new mainstream food retailers in the area and specifically Tesco, where the petitioners specific action against this company is included in their Petitioner name. Additionally as requested by Angus McDonald MSP, I have also canvassed the views of Alastair Mitchell, Town Centre Manager to our local Business Improvement District company, Falkirk Towns Ltd.

I consider that the discussion of the 28 accurately reflects the concerns of many local independent retailers who, from our experience, continue to remain challenged in the present retailing environment, this despite the introduction of non-domestic rates relief measures.

Present planning policy enables new stores up to 2,500 sq m to proceed without the requirement to undertake a retail impact assessment. Specific changes to this policy are not currently proposed despite the fundamental changes taking place in this market.

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The obvious tensions and concerns which such schemes present appears to be at odds with the Scottish Government proposals through its response to the Malcom Fraser National Review of Town Centres where recommendations are to ensure vibrancy of our High Streets. It does not recognise that independent retailers provide character and vibrancy to a local economy contributing to both the indigenous and visitor economy often in very clearly defined character environments. Notwithstanding this observation, the retailing environment within Falkirk whilst having a large proportion of independent retailers is considered to be structured differently, with a much smaller indigenous population than those in cities requiring to be serviced by such outlets. There has also been some recent expansion of larger store formats in Falkirk resulting in less pressure for the small scale supermarket format.

In discussions with Alastair Mitchell as our BID manager and member of the Association of Town centre Managers, he is fully aware that the large supermarkets are restructuring from the out-of-town market and have now decided to opt for an in-town presence. Specifically in the case of Falkirk he considers that small national convenience traders might act as an attractor / magnet in preference to retaining a vacant property. In smaller units within High Streets, Alastair considers such retailers would not be able to sell much non-food product due to space constraints. Additionally where policy is now to be fully promoted to encourage more residential occupancy in town centres, part of that will ultimately mean the provision of services to those residents without them having to resort to another car journey to an out of town superstore. On this basis an in-town convenience store would be essential for commuters and town centre workers. Such ventures mean opening longer than the traditional 9- 5, and would hopefully therefore have the additional effect to encouraging other types of businesses to stay open later thereby creating an 'evening' economy culture. Alastair considers Falkirk does relatively well with day time and night time trading, but most town centres die at 5.00pm. Critically we consider Falkirk cannot be compared with the West End of Glasgow where such environments with historic indigenous delis and speciality food offers might be threatened by such competition.

What has been the impact of new small local supermarkets opening in town centres?

Current planning policy is considered to be fairly clear on this issue and positively directs such retail developments to our town centres in the interests of their ongoing vitality and viability. The Scottish Retail Consortium's letter of 17th February sets out clearly the fundamental structural changes that have occurred in the retail sector since 2008 and whilst experienced in the Falkirk area these have not been to the great detriment of the High Street retailing environment and is not an issue Falkirk Council has had direct experience of in Falkirk when compared to such environments as the West End of Glasgow. It is more the threat to our town centres from large scale out of town food stores that has concerned us and planning policy is designed to discourage this at the local and national level. The fact here is that we already have large food supermarkets in our town centres as a result of planning policy and the towns have adapted to an extent.

The impact of such development on competing local traders is fairly predictable. However adaption in town centres will be the way forward as the National Review points out. Resisting legitimate competition will not assist this. The future of town centres is clearly in the balance at the moment and it is our considered opinion that legitimate, willing participants need to be accommodated at a scale appropriate to each centre's needs.

I trust the above allows further consideration of this matter by the Public petitions Committee

Yours sincerely

CHIEF EXECUTIVE

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