

WELWYN GARDEN CITY SOCIETY

Registered with the Civic Trust
www.wgesoc.org.uk

8 September 2006

The Inquiry Secretary (Groceries Market Enquiry)
Competition Commission
Victoria House
Southampton Row
London, WC1B 4AD

Dear Sirs

Your enquiry into the Groceries Market
A view from Welwyn Garden City, Hertfordshire

We understand that you are making enquiries into the competitive effects of the property portfolios (as well as other matters) held by large supermarkets and their impact on the consumer.

We are writing to highlight the situation in this town as it may be pertinent to the intent of your enquiry, though we are concerned that your brief appears is so narrow.

Background

We have one large Tesco superstore located at The Oldings roundabout at the entrance to the town at the junction of the A1(M); and

we have an Asda superstore in Hatfield; and

we have a Morrisons store situated on the east side of the town in the Panshanger area; and

we have a Marks and Spencers, Sainsburys and Waitrose located in or immediately adjacent to the town centre and the two latter companies have development plans in hand or about to begin. The former will result in significant redevelopment in one part of the town centre. The latter has yet to submit a formal planning application but its intended plans have been given prominence in its local store.

There are other smaller supermarkets including the Co-op located at other sites in the town.

The major supermarkets are all largely accessed by car though it can be argued that the supermarkets in the town centre can all be visited as part of a single journey to the town centre.

1...2

The Broadwater site

A map shows this site (outlined in red) and its relation to the town centre (outlined in green).

This site is located on the far side of the railway line that borders the town centre and a schematic diagram is attached that identifies a significant site owned by Tesco (coloured blue).

The owners of the Broadwater site sought to reverse the zoning of this site by requesting that its use change from that of a key employment site to one providing residential and retail services. Our Borough Council successfully fought this off at a public enquiry.

Whilst accepting that large companies are entitled to fight for their own interests, we are drawing to your attention the impact that yet another Tesco supermarket - albeit one that may have been devoted to electrical goods - located outside the periphery of the town centre would have on the town centre proper.

Impact on this Garden City

The fact is that Welwyn Garden City suffered substantially in the last major recession from the loss of industry and the town centre was in a dire condition for very many years as a result. It has taken the best part of twenty years to bring it up to a lively and fit condition – which it now is. That said, we have no objection to Tesco operating from another site provided it is from appropriate premises within the town centre itself.

The impact of the proposed change of use of the Broadwater site would have resulted in a major loss of focus for the existing town centre; and certainly this Society was, and still is, flatly opposed to any retail space being located so close to the town centre that is liable to draw people away from the very thing that the town has worked so successfully at rebuilding.

This Garden City has a special ethos of its own and does not need its town centre damaged as part of the competitive battle between large corporate bodies all in the name of the consumer, when the consumer is very well served already in this locality. So the question that we think you need to address is to what extent large companies, with huge financial resources, should be allowed to dictate the shape of our Garden City town centre – a modern one that is uniquely located within a Conservation Area - and one that is supported by local residents and the surrounding community.

Your limited brief

The foregoing in turn raises a larger issue.

Put simply, your enquiry is narrowly focused on “Groceries” whereas the impact of a supermarket, selling as it does anything from jeans to petrol, clothing to DIY products and TVs, now has a massive impact on local competition in all its forms, impacting on all shops selling any one of these items or associated ranges. The fact is that because of the size of some supermarkets, the range they stock and their location, they actually become a competitor to the very town centres they choose to rival.

That could well be the issue in our town and we feel this would result in a real reduction in consumer choice and availability of goods to the market. But in this town there is something more. Quite apart from the possible damage to the town centre itself, we have local outlying community shops that were designed from the outset as serving the community’s needs, also threatened. The latter were conceived

/3

in an age where dependence on motor vehicles was infinitely less; but we think it would be wiser to ensure that this fundamental structure to our town be preserved as we move, and move we must, towards a more sustainable future.

This is all the more important right now as the town embarks on planning the redevelopment of parts of its centre. Clearly that investment by the town in its infrastructure is something that no one here wants to see threatened. Perhaps this goes to the very heart of consumers' underlying concern about supermarkets. Whilst they see their operations as beneficial in many respects, at the same time they see their indirect impact on the environment and on local infrastructure as something that is, at times, harmful and costly to their neighbourhoods: they feel helpless at influencing them. That is, unfortunately, beyond your brief.

We remain concerned that the owners of the Broadwater site may yet appeal against the decision taken by our Borough Council and for this reason we are highlighting it to you as a matter that is still very much on the table and actually relevant to the impact supermarkets have on their local community.

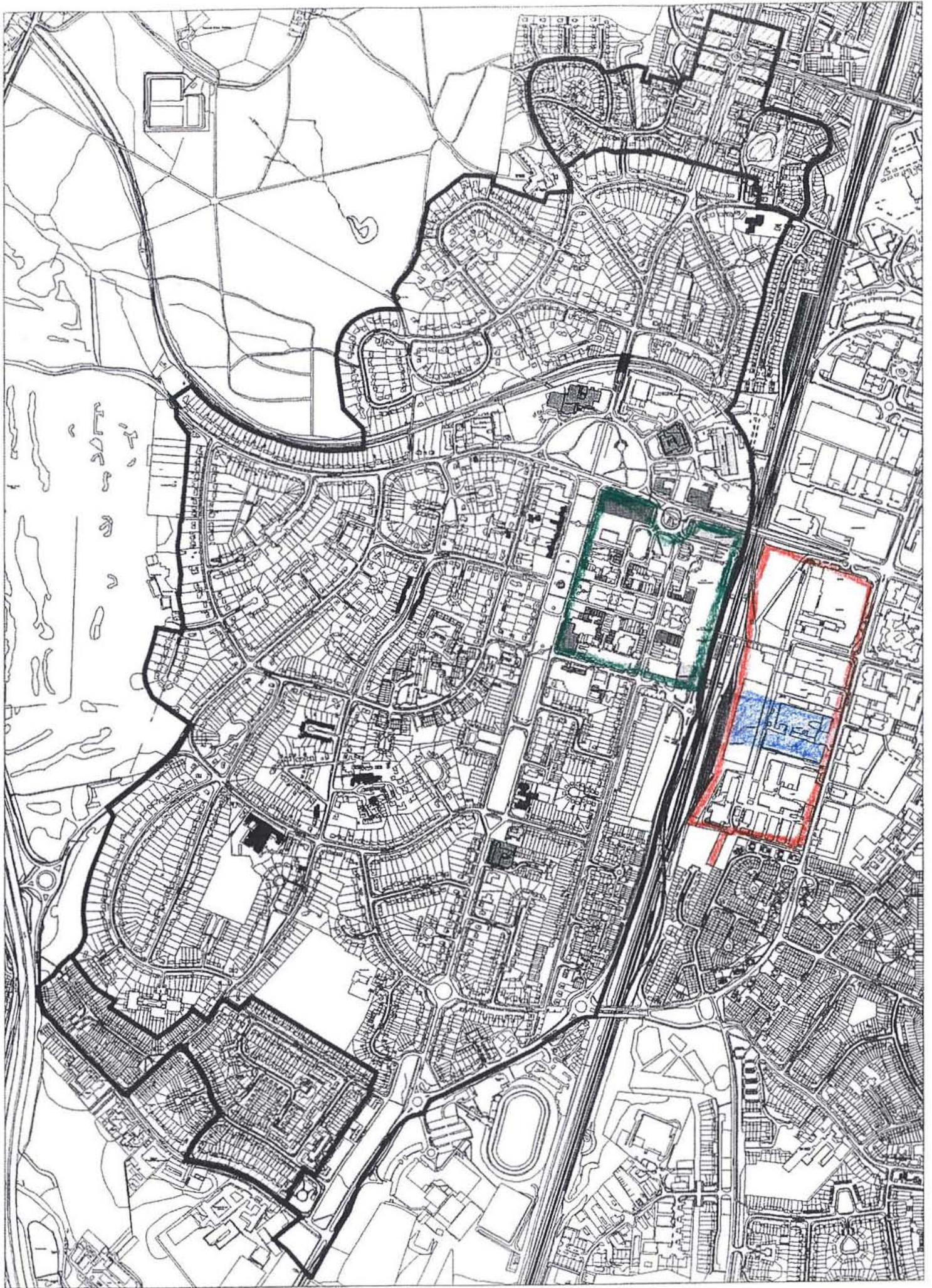
We are hopeful you will consider this as an issue and are content for this letter to be published as a submission to your enquiry.

Yours faithfully
for Welwyn Garden City Society

Shaun O'Reilly ACIS
Hon Secretary

Enc:

cc. Chris Conway
Chief Planning & Environmental Health Officer
Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council



Welwyn Garden City:

Key: Town Centre: Green

Broadwater site: Outlined in red

Approximate area owned by Tesco: Coloured blue