



SATURDAY 3 FEBRUARY 2007

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Tesco Town: store plan to put heart back into community

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"I am not used to people clapping," admitted Nick Gellatly as he was applauded into one of Scotland's most run-down shopping precincts yesterday.

The supermarket giant's head of corporate affairs routinely expects at least some fear and anger when he announces a new store.

Not yesterday; not in Linwood, a Renfrewshire town desperate for a facelift. Because this was Tesco as no-one in Scotland had seen it before: the saviour of a town centre.

"This announcement is about more than Tesco and about more than the shopping centre," Mr Gellatly, still clearly a little bit phased by his warm reception, told gathered local leaders. "It's about putting a new beat in the heart of Linwood."

Essentially Tesco is to take over the entire centre of the town, currently a crumbling, heavily vandalised and largely vacant 1960s concrete plaza surrounded by derelict, burnt-out offices.

It does so under a deal, brokered by local MSP Wendy Alexander, that means it has to build a lot more than a new superstore. It has to redesign the old precinct to find space for a library, a clinic, a new council and housing offices and a replacement for Tweedie Hall, Linwood's community centre. And Tesco has to do all that, Ms Alexander stressed, after full consultation with residents.

"We have managed to negotiate something without precedent," said the MSP. "This is not just a store being plomped down but a total redevelopment. A store is not enough. People want small shops, a new library, a new hall, a new health centre. The discussions have been robust, but our campaigning persistence has paid off."

Tesco, within weeks, will launch exhibitions for what it has in mind for the town. Residents will be asked to shape that vision, long before any planning application is lodged. The company has "branded" the redevelopment as Linwood Regeneration Partnership. It hasn't got any partners yet. But the partnership will eventually include everybody from the elderly forum to the community council.

The company, despite its reputation for out-of-town developments that suck the life out of high streets, has experience of town-centre management, albeit in a single English pilot in Sunderland.

So why is Tesco so welcome? The last landlords, explained Ms Alexander, were not popular. Fully 3100 people in Linwood, half the town's total population, signed a petition to get rid of precinct owners, Balmore Properties, a firm set up by Glasgow businessman Dallas Rhodes.

Just six years into the firm's ownership and the precinct of 44 units has just five private-sector tenants, a Farmfoods, a pharmacy, a newsagent's, an optician and a Chinese take-away.

Gone are the butcher's, the barber's, the greengrocer's, the florist's, the bookie's and the dentist's, their

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peeling old signs now covered in the tags of a local teenage gang, the Linwood Young Team. Shut too is the Village Cafe.

Even charity shops - staples of traditional high streets decimated by Tesco and its rivals up and down Scotland - have all closed their doors.

People still live around the precinct, amid the regular fires that light up the plaza, the underage drinkers, the broken windows and the loose wiring. Seventeen families, several with children, are housed in rows of roomy three-bedroom maisonettes perched above the empty, flat-roofed shops. Reluctant to speak on the record, they don't think any more of their landlord than the shoppers.

Balmore eventually bowed out this week, agreeing to sell a controlling interest in the precinct to Tesco, rather, it is understood, than face a compulsory purchase order. Tesco wouldn't say what price they have agreed with Balmore. But The Herald understands the figure is little more than Balmore paid for the business back in 2001.

"From the day they built this place there have been problems," said Iain Wilson, secretary of Linwood's community council and a resident of the town for 37 years. "They are just going to have to tear it down."

Robert and Helen Cameron, both 74, agreed. "We just close our eyes when we go through the centre," said Mr Cameron, a former inspector at the Rootes car plant, long shut, that most of Linwood was built to serve. "We are ashamed to show it to visitors."

Residents want their children and grandchildren to be able to come to Linwood. New and bought homes are at a premium. Housebuilders have already shown an interest in the town, not least thanks to a new Roman Catholic secondary and a rebuilt non-denominational school.

The new centre will lure more, Ms Alexander believes. "Linwood will be the real Tesco Town," said one resident.

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