

Experts clash at appeal hearing into store's plan to come to Coleraine

Role of retail park under the spotlight



COLERAINE'S Riverside retail park should compliment the town centre, rather than compete with it, a planning appeal has heard.

Consultants and legal experts clashed during the latest bid to win approval for a discount store at the out of town shopping centre.

Supporters claimed that Coleraine could lose out on 50 jobs and a much-needed £1m cash boost if the green light isn't given for a new Home Bargains' unit.

But objectors, including representatives for the Diamond shopping complex, contended that

there were alternative suitable sites in various locations including the town centre.

Among those giving evidence at a Planning Appeals Commission hearing at the Bushtown House Hotel was Causeway Coast and Glens planning officer Michael Wilson.

He stressed that the Northern Area Plan stated that the retail park should strengthen the town centre, complementing rather than competing with it.

Representing the appellant, William Orbinson QC said: "Our case is that the proposal strengthens the town centre, by providing additional choice. There has been a rash of Home

Bargains' approvals throughout Northern Ireland in the past couple of years. Why should this proposal be different?"

However Stuart Beattie, representing objectors, stressed that the Diamond Centre was "half empty," adding: "This will encourage people to move away from town. Whether or not previous applications were granted is neither here nor there; two wrongs don't make a right."

Andy Stevens, from the Northern Ireland Trade Association, said: "If there was a hierarchy the Diamond Centre would be at the top of the pile; Home Bargains has

evolved very rapidly. We can't just take a broad brush approach."

Threat

Mr Beattie described Home Bargains as "an opportunist operation" but Mr Orbinson insisted: "There is no evidence of any threat to the Diamond Centre by this proposal. The two can live side by side. In reality, the Diamond Centre wants to prevent any element of competition."

But Mr Beattie replied: "The Diamond Centre's interest is not solely the Diamond Centre; my client has an interest in protecting the town centre. Home Bargains are footloose; if you have goods to sell they will put them on their shelves."

Mr Orbinson insisted: "There is nowhere for them in the town centre that is a suitable viable alternative; Home Bargains have been trying to get premises in Coleraine for several years. Home Bargains are keen to come to Coleraine; they will be an economic driver for the town and the North-West, in terms of job creation."

Mr Stevens urged the appellants to be open-minded, adding: "You are going to have sites that aren't perfect."

The appellants stated that the ceiling height in a Diamond Centre unit, which could accommodate Home Bargains, was insufficient. There were

also concerns over columns and stairs, as well as a ramp, but Mr Wilson said they were "not insurmountable."

Adapt

The Commissioner George Scott heard that the Diamond Centre was prepared to adapt a unit to accommodate Home Bargains. But concerns were also raised over the lack of an on-site car-park and dedicated servicing arrangements.

Mr Orbinson asked who would pay for "surgery" to the Diamond Centre and was told that the centre owners were willing to pay for work to adapt the unit. He said there had been "zero co-operation" from the Diamond Centre but

objectors said no investigations into the merits of units had been carried out.

Other alternative sites in Coleraine were discussed including the nearby former JJB Sports unit at Hanover Place as well as three potential retail locations in Ballymoney.

Fears were raised that if the retail park scheme got the go-ahead it could create a precedent for future applications but the appellants dismissed these claims.

The Commission will consider the evidence and visit other Home Bargains' locations before making a decision on the planning appeal.

Macosquin lighting plan

THREE new six metre high lights are to be erected at Macosquin Laying Fields despite the plan attracting one objection.

The application came before Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council in January

Planning Committee meeting and was approved by all councillors who sit on it.

Alderman William King proposed council accept the recommendation to approve which the DUP's Sam Cole seconded.

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