

John Steele: J. Lewis brings fresh opportunities and challenges



The eagerly awaited opening of the new Waitrose and John Lewis at Home stores will herald the largest change in Horsham town's shopping pattern in a generation, creating huge opportunities and challenges.

The centre of gravity of the town's commercial activity, once Carfax, will shift dramatically, westwards, as epitomised by the developer Westrock's marketing slogan 'Horsham's new West End'.

Overall, there is no doubt that the new stores demonstrate confidence in the town's future prosperity and will attract shoppers from a wide area, some of whom at least will not be

regular Horsham visitors.

This should in turn bring fresh life, and new niche shops into the somewhat forgotten Bishopric, particularly if the Bishop's Weald redevelopment attracts high quality retail outlets.

Doubt still remains, however, whether new Waitrose and John Lewis shoppers will take the trouble to cross Albion Way to explore the riches the town centre has to offer, or instead just get back into their cars and drive home. And if they do make it over Albion Way, will they really trek all the way up to Carfax?

There lies the challenge facing the council and retailers.

First the good news. After a great deal of pressure we are promised a new single phase pedestrian crossing in Albion Way at the junction with Bishopric.

This will make the experience much safer and



Horsham's new Waitrose takes shape.

more attractive. But more is needed.

You may have noticed the large artist's impressions on the hoardings around the former McDonalds which show an additional pedestrian crossing near the Staples roundabout. This idea was put forward by Westrock to offer an alternative route into the

town centre by creating a walkway into London Road.

Despite still appearing in their pictures there is no sign of it being delivered which would be a shame and a missed opportunity.

But the biggest impediment to drawing shoppers up in to the town is Lynd Cross with the broken and boarded Shelley

Fountain and nearby broken and patched paving which makes the area look like a run down, second rate town.

It is very disappointing that the council has not tackled this before now. The fountain has to go and be replaced by a suitably attractive centrepiece. The Horsham Society has suggested a simple, but substantial piece of public art, preferably a water feature, but there are alternatives.

Given the council's decision to dispose of the council offices in North Street there can be no excuse for not quickly reinvesting some of the proceeds in improving this important area of the town.

The move of Waitrose from Piries Place has the potential to undermine the viability of other shops on the east side of the town centre.

It is vital that a new tenant is found for the store quickly and that it is one which will

both retain the footfall upon which the smaller retailers rely and, better still, provide a new offering to the town that will draw shoppers up from our shiny new West End.

The deafening silence surrounding the future of this anchor store is ominous.

Hopefully the council and the freeholder are working hard behind the scenes to find a solution. If not there is a serious risk that the rejuvenation of the west end of town will be at the expense of an increasingly tatty east end.

The Horsham Society is concerned about the past, present and future of the town. It seeks to promote good planning and design for the built environment and open spaces. Membership of the Horsham Society is open to anyone who shares these concerns. For more information, visit the website www.horshamsociety.org or phone 01403 272814.