

Little Town – Big Problem: *hacktivism comes to Llandeilo*

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The invasion of the superstores

Dinefwr Green Group (DGG) has, for a number of months, campaigned against a number of superstore proposals in their part of Carmarthenshire, West Wales. Over the past year there has been a rush of applications for new superstores as the cut-price chains seek to compete with the larger supermarket chains. DGG have been campaigning on many of these applications with other groups in the area. DGG itself is associated with a group that runs a fundraising and recycling shop in Llandeilo – *The Greenhouse* (pictured below) – and this has provided a focus for organising local campaigns.



The Greenhouse, Llandeilo

Rural West Wales, with a low population, has seen a number of such applications for many of the larger settlements. Llandeilo, population around 2,000, has had two applications. Carmarthen, 25 miles of the south west, population about 20,000 (the major population centre), has had a number of large supermarkets proposed. Brecon, 25

miles to the east, has recently had a large supermarket development at its centre. Llandovery, 10 miles to the north, population about 1,500, has had another application recently permitted by the local council (in addition to the existing supermarket there already). To the south, in the 'Valleys', a number of the settlements have had large supermarkets developed as part of 'regeneration' proposals.

The development of such a large number of supermarkets across a small area with such a low

population is putting pressure on local shops, particularly food shops. Small local enterprises are unable to compete with the nationally based supermarket chains. Many fear that these new supermarkets will cause irreparable damage to the traditional High Streets and public street markets in West Wales. The applications for Llandeilo were, like others nearby, for national chains that pride themselves on 'cost cutting' through the sale of mass-produced, low quality food – further prejudicing the local stores that rely on local supply links and a local customer base.

To add insult to injury, the members of the planning committee for Carmarthenshire County Council inexplicably, and rather perversely, recommended approval for both of the supermarket applications in Llandeilo on the grounds that they could "fight it out between themselves". This of course ignores the potential impact on the existing shops in Llandeilo and nearby villages.

DGG now only have one hope – to request that the two recently approved applications for development are referred to a public inquiry by the Welsh Assembly (the regional government for Wales). It was at this point that a request was made to *the electrohippie collective* for help.

Hacktivism comes to Llandeilo

After developing 'upscale' actions, *the electrohippie collective* have been seeking to develop tools for small, local actions. The type of tool necessary to assist with DGG's campaign needs fitted with recent work by members of *the collective*. Therefore *the electrohippies* designed a page using a generic letter-writing tool development system to be released during 2001, for testing of the new system in a 'real world' environment.

The new tool is essentially a letter-writing web page. But it has been designed for use on a stand-

alone computer system, as well as for online use. In keeping with the philosophy of The Greenhouse, as well as the electrohippies, the computer used by the group in The Greenhouse has been recycled from computer scrap. In fact, it's an old Pentium-75 motherboard over-clocked with a faster (P-200 MMX) processor, second-hand memory, and with a case/PSU, hard disks, cards and 16-colour monitor recovered from skips and computer scrap sales.



Tim Shaw, of the Greenhouse, checks out the letter-writer system

The letter-writer has pre-programmed within it eight “arguments” as to why the Welsh Assembly must call-in these two development applications for a public inquiry. The members of the public using the system are able to select which of these arguments are put in the letter composited by the system. The system also enables the public to select their own member of the Welsh Assembly for their area in order to personalise the letter. Finally, the system randomises the use of the user-selected arguments to ensure that no two letters, even with the same arguments, come out the same way. Likewise, the typefaces for the letter are also randomly selected.

All the public have to do to use the system is:

- Enter their name, address and phone number;
- Select their member of the Welsh Assembly (if they live outside of Wales the chairperson of the Assembly’s planning committee is automatically selected);
- Select between 1 and 8 of the eight pre-selected arguments relating to the development of the two superstores;
- Press the button at the bottom of the page, which compiles the letter and automatically brings up the printer dialogue box, and then press ‘OK’ to print out the letter, which they can then sign.

A member of *the electrohippie collective* went to Wales in early February to demonstrate the system and give training in its use. Most of those using the system felt it was fairly simple and easy to use.

The staff of The Greenhouse now have sessions when the shop is open where members of the public can drop in and composite their letter of objection in a few minutes. These letters can then be collected together and posted in bulk, or sent by the individual themselves if they prefer.

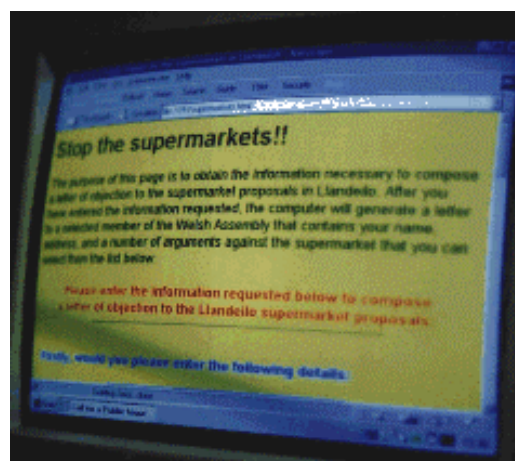


A member of the public uses the system in The Greenhouse

The future

From the view of the electrohippie collective, the development of the letter-writing system has been successful. The use of the system through DGG’s supermarket campaign has also demonstrated its usefulness to a small, local campaign group. It has also helped us to tweak the design of the letter-writing system to improve the user interface for ease of use.

We hope to be able to release a development system, for groups to use independently of the collective, sometime in the spring.



The letter-writer web page

For more information on this ‘hacktion’ contact:

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