

TOWN CENTRE FORUM
26th June, 2007

PRESENT – Councillor Williams (in the Chair); Councillors Hartley, Long, D. A. Lyonette, Robson, Ruck and Mrs. Scott. (7)

Officers in Attendance – Richard Alty, Assistant Director, Development and Regeneration; Gwenda Lyn Jones, Economic Regeneration and Tourism Manager; Barry Pearson, Environmental Health Manager; Geraint Williams, Council's Liaison Officer; Marion Bynoe, Events Development Officer; Jennie Whitell, Communications Officer.

Town Centre Representatives –

John Archer, PCS at Regent House;
Guy Cleasby;
Dave Crompton, Bsupplied Ltd.
Craig Davison, Boyes;
Michael Davison;
Alan Draper, Chairman, National Market Traders Federation;
John Dobson;
A. Dunn, Gifts n Things;
June Good, Secretary, National Market Traders Federation;
Kenneth Frid, Whinbush Residents Group;
Beryl Hankin, Guru Boutique;
Andrea Hewitt, Age Concern Darlington;
Brian Jackson, Bsupplied Ltd.
K. Levick, Boyes;
Mark Lucas, Arriva North East;
Steve McCormick;
S. McGee, Tempest;
Tom Medhurst, Bondgate Methodist Church;
Nicola Neilson, Latimer Hinks;
Dave Preston, Town Centre Board;
J. P. Rodwell, Alzheimer's Disease Society
John Stoney, Darlington Civic Trust; and
John Wheeler, Coffee Bamber.

1. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS – The Chair, Councillor Williams, welcomed everyone to the Forum, and outlined the format and main focus for the meeting. It was also reported that the Town Centre Pedestrian Heart scheme would be complete by the launch events, which were scheduled to be held during the weekend of 30th June and 1st July, 2007.

2. THE OVAL DEVELOPMENT (COMMERCIAL STREET) – Max Lyons from Lyons & Sleeman & Hoare Architects, gave a presentation to the Forum on the new shopping centre to be known as The Oval, Commercial Street, Darlington. He conveyed the apologies of Hugo Hawkings (Chief Executive of Discovery Properties) who had been unable to travel to Darlington due to rail problems.

A brief description was given of the site, including its relationship with the Queen Street Shopping Centre, St. Augustine's Way and King Street. It was reported that the development had been granted planning permission and it was expected that work on the car park would commence early in 2008 and would be complete by Christmas 2008. Once the car park was finished, work would then start on the main development with an anticipated completion date of Christmas 2010.

The centre would comprise of:- one main department store, which would be Debenhams; 34 retail/shop units; 3 leisure facilities, including a cinema; residential units; and an 850 space car park. The centre would be built on three levels, two for shopping and one for leisure.

Views of the development from the St. Augustine's Way, Queen Street, North Lodge Park and King Street were also shown at the meeting. It was stated that a new shop unit would be built on the land at the side of the former 'Primark' elevation, in order to improve the view of the site; a 'Town Square' would be provided on King Street; that the majority of the shop units would be fashion; and that the shops had been designed to look like individual buildings within the centre.

A number of issues were raised by those in attendance at the Forum, including the appearance of the development, which was 21st century on the outside, but more in keeping with the street scene of Darlington internally; the use of energy efficient equipment within the development; and the management of the interface between residential and commercial developments.

In response to those issues, it was reported that in developing the centre the aim was to keep the 'feel' of a street inside, but that the development of the external elevations were more complicated and it had not been possible to continue the theme outside; a full sustainability report had been undertaken to ensure the building was energy efficient; and that a number of the concerns raised by residents in the area, had been taken on board, in the detailed design of the residential units.

3. 'RETAIL THERAPY': WHAT IS AVAILABLE TO HELP INDEPENDENT RETAILERS? – Dave Crompton of Bsupplied Ltd., gave a presentation to the Forum outlining the background to Bsupplied, a company which had been in existence for 5 years and specialised in the retail sector.

It was reported that the independent sector was worth £21bn per annum; there were currently 184,695 businesses in the retail sector, of which 103,000 had fewer than five staff; and over 500,000 worked in the independent sector, which equated to 11 per cent of the working population.

Reference was made to the type of independents that the company assisted; the key skills needed to succeed; what customers expected from retailers; and what support was on offer. Particular reference was made to the 'Retail Therapy' project, which gave the independent retailers the opportunity to receive a free business consultation and discuss their future; develop a plan highlighting any opportunities or issues that related to their particular business; and several months of specialist mentoring and support.

4. FEETHAMS AND THE MARKETS WORKING GROUP – UPDATE ON WORK IN PROGRESS – Richard Alty, Assistant Director, Development and Regeneration, on behalf of the Chair of the Group, Mr. Alasdair McConachie (who conveyed his apologies due to problems at his business that morning), outlined the progress on the work undertaken to date. The Group had been established to initially strengthen the markets and secondly to look at the future of the bus garage and car park sites on Feethams and Beaumont Hill.

The group initially concentrated on the markets, as many people consulted as part of the Tesco proposals, had identified the Markets as an urgent priority. The main actions already implemented from the work of the group have seen the open market relocated to surround the Covered Market, with the focus being on West Row, Tubwell Row and Horsemarket and the improved appearance and presentation of stalls as a result of the purchase of a number of high quality gazebos. Work on the Covered Market has also commenced, with improvements being made to the Market Hall floor to improve cleanliness and appearance around its joints with stall plinths and the installation of new heated door curtains.

In respect of the Feethams and Beaumont Street car park sites, work was still on-going in order to ascertain what was feasible for the site, and this has included visiting other towns in order to view other developments. It was felt there was a need to counter-balance the town centre in order to draw people past the Markets area and connect the site to High Row/Grange Road. Any development of the site would be considered in the light of national, regional and local planning policy. A list of objectives had been agreed for the site, which would need to be met in any future uses.

5. DRAFT TOWN CENTRE BUSINESS MARKETING STRATEGY AND DRAFT STRATEGY AND PROMOTIONAL PLAN FOR DARLINGTON TOWN CENTRE – SPRING TO AUTUMN 2007 – Geraint Williams, the Council's Liaison Officer presented the draft Town Centre Business Marketing Strategy and draft Strategy and Promotional Plan for Darlington Town Centre (both previously circulated) to the Forum, on behalf of the Town Centre Board. It was reported at the meeting that the two critical actions that were included within the 2001 Town Centre Development Strategy to allow Darlington to make a 'step' change, had now been realised and that there was now an opportunity to raise the profile of Darlington Town Centre to people in the region that were not currently shopping or visiting the town.

The aim of the promotional plan was to promote Darlington to a regional audience; attract people to the town centre, to ensure that they stayed longer, enjoyed the experience and returned again; and to provide a range of support services for businesses. The plan involved the promotion of both the attractions and diversity of the Town Centre, through a wide-ranging advertising campaign and through the provision of events, all of which would promote Darlington's unique blend of attractions.

For the longer term it was felt important to develop a clear strategy to ensure that the town centre marketing was as focussed and effective as possible, and to this end the Town Centre Marketing Strategy had been developed. The Strategy built on the aims and focus of the Promotional Plan and had five themes, namely to:- showcase the Darlington Town Centre experience; market Darlington as a shopping destination; celebrate the town centre heritage and encourage civic pride; support economic and entrepreneurial developments; and develop a collaborative approach to marketing across all sectors.

A number of issues and concerns were raised by Members of the Forum including:- the guidance available to the visually handicapped to assist them in finding the safest routes around the Town Centre; lack of handrails on the High Row steps; the height of the steps on High Row; the possibility of members of the public slipping on the steps; and car parking.

In response to those issues Members of the Forum were informed that work was on-going to provide support activities to assist the visually impaired when visiting the Town Centre. Following feedback from members of the public in relation to the handrails on the High Row steps, it was reported that more handrails were being installed prior to the launch weekend, and that the situation would be monitored to ascertain whether further rails were required. There had always been steps on High Row, which needed to remain in order to keep the roads flat, but to assist people to navigate around the Town Centre three ramps had been installed. The steps were made of materials that were 'non-slip', and, as such there should not be a problem of people slipping.

It was stated that the number of car parking spaces available in the Town Centre would increase in the coming year with the development of the 'Oval' shopping centre on Commercial Street. A number of car parking initiatives had been introduced and publicised throughout the Town Centre including 'Pay on Exit' and 'Pay by Phone' facilities. The focus of the car parking initiatives to date had been on securing more short stay spaces for shoppers and the issue of making more car parking spaces available for commuters, in order to address the balance, would be looked into further.

6. BUSINESS PLAN ACTION POINTS FOR YEAR 3 – The Director of Development and Environment submitted a report (previously circulated) to provide the Forum with a review of progress on the annual Action Points for Year 3 of the Town Centre Business Plan.

7. CLOSING REMARKS – The Leader thanked those present for attending and highlighted the need for everyone to be ambassadors for the Town Centre. The Working Group established to develop the Markets and the Feethams/Beaumont Street areas, had already dramatically changed the Markets in a short time, and the work would continue.