
TOWN CENTRE REGENERATION – PUBLIC CONSULTATION

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. To update Members on the recent and ongoing consultation and participation process into the future of the Town Centre and to highlight the emerging themes that are developing.

Summary

2. In response to media coverage of proposals for further food retail in and around Darlington Town Centre the Council has embarked upon a comprehensive public consultation process.
3. The consultation events have been widely publicised in the media and backed up with significant leaflet coverage distributed through Town Centre traders and the Covered Market.
4. The consultation tools used have been developed to make the complex issues that need to be considered accessible. Using ‘Planning for Real’ style techniques the Council has developed the ‘Regeneration Game’ as a means to illustrating and considering the future of the Town Centre.
5. Some of the assumptions of the emerging Town Centre Fringe Masterplan, for example the necessary changes to the road network, flood alleviation and river restoration have been used to inform the discussions with the public.
6. There has to date been no specific consensus reached as to future development of the Town Centre although a number of themes have been identified.
7. The themes identified will be used to develop some core principles that will guide the future development of the Town Centre and adjoining sites, subject to further consultation.
8. The core principles and land uses that come out of the public consultation process will be tested with the development industry to ensure realism and deliverability.

Recommendations

9. It is recommended that:-
 - (a) Members note the consultation process to date, and future events planned.
 - (b) Members challenge and suggest further consultation that may need to be undertaken.
 - (c) Members note and comment on the emerging core principles that are emerging.

Richard Alty
Director of Place

Background Papers

No Background papers were used in the preparation of this report.

Timothy Crawshaw : Extension 2048

S17 Crime and Disorder	The consultation has been developed to highlight the issues that each opportunity site presents in terms of access and personal safety. Planning for the Town Centre will stimulate and guide development and potentially deliver public goods such as improvements to the river and pedestrian movement without the need for underpasses and subways. In addition many of the assumptions are based upon the adopted Design of New Development SPD that has a strong emphasis on Safety and Security.
Health and Well Being	Planning for the Town Centre encourages it's use as a social space within walking distance of a large number of residents. The goal of achieving a diverse and vibrant Town Centre contributes to this end. Public goods identified could include improved pedestrian access along and to the River Skerne.
Sustainability	The consultation has been based upon the assumptions of the adopted Design of New Development SPD, which has a strong sustainability strand . The creation of a vibrant and diverse Town Centre will encourage better travel choices due to its central and accessible location.
Diversity	The consultation has been developed in the light of a Equalities Impact Assessment.
Wards Affected	All
Groups Affected	All
Budget and Policy Framework	
Key Decision	Yes
Urgent Decision	No
One Darlington: Perfectly Placed	The planning of the Town Centre will inform the development of the Local Plan which is the spatial manifestation of One Darlington Perfectly Placed. The creation of a vibrant and economically prosperous Town Centre is a key priority.
Efficiency	The consideration of the regeneration benefits that could be realised through the disposal of Council owned sites includes the future of the Town Hall that could have efficiency gains in the medium to long term.

MAIN REPORT

Information and Analysis

10. When briefed regarding the Garden Street site, and other possible options for further food retail development, Cabinet Members decided to undertake a wide and comprehensive public consultation about future opportunities in the town centre.
11. The Garden Street site has been the subject of a confidential enquiry by a developer that includes a degree of food retail, although the operator of such a shop has not been identified. The development of the site would require the Council to dispose of the Garden Street car park to enable the assembly of the site, which is the subject of adjoining ownerships that the developer has control of or an interest in.
12. Also under consideration is the future of the current Town Hall in the Feethams area of Darlington. This building requires significant investment as it is beginning to fail in a number of key areas including lift access and heating. Any decision to refurbish or rebuild the Town Hall would, in the medium term, be cost to the Council.
13. The public consultation process underway has been developed to stimulate a wider conversation about the future of the Town Centre and the potential regeneration benefits the Councils' ownerships could bring to reinforce its offer and vitality.
14. To date there have been seven consultation events organised in the Dolphin Centre and Central Hall and officers attended the Annual Tea Dance in the market square. A variety of times were chosen to ensure that those with work and family commitments could attend.
15. Initially attendance was low at the first workshops as the short timescale demanded an early opportunity for the public to express their views. Later workshops have been better attended. Despite smaller than anticipated numbers the quality and density of the views and suggestions made has been good.
16. In addition specific workshops have been organised with the Deaf Club and the visual impairment group as well as specific invitations made to DAD.
17. There are planned events for schools and colleges in mid to late September when students have returned from the summer holidays.
18. The consultation events undertaken have been widely publicised in the press and through Darlington Together magazine. In addition about 2000 leaflets were distributed around the town specifically in the Covered Market, in shops, the Library and Council Contact Centre.
19. The key consultation tool developed was the 'Regeneration Game' where the public were asked to plan the Town Centre with officers around the table with a view to gaining consensus with other workshop participants. This 'Planning for Real' type of tool identifies the key characteristics of the Town Centre in terms of uses and the key opportunity sites available. A series of laminated cards with to-scale car parking, buildings and the size of a small food store were used to allow options to be considered and the discussion to take place.
20. The results of the 'game' were then photographed and themes from all of these workshops are being collated. In addition comments made throughout the discussions were recorded and these comments have been collated.

21. A number of assumptions arising from the emerging Town Centre Fringe masterplan were used to inform the discussions as the north and east of the Town Centre might be the subject of significant change and improvement in the coming years. The opportunity to restore the River Skerne was seen as a key public good that could be delivered out of the regeneration of the Town Centre. Also the opportunities presented by the proposed junction improvements on the inner ring road allowing better pedestrian and cycle access to and from the Town Centre were also a key consideration.
22. A developers' workshop is proposed for late September where the consultation responses, core principles and regeneration aspirations will be tested. This will inform the decision making process in terms of the future planning of the Town Centre in the Local Plan, the future use of Council land and property and the public good that could be delivered.

Early Indications from the Consultation

23. Some key themes that have been identified from the initial consultation events include:-
 - (a) The need for greenspace close to and within the Town Centre
 - (b) A desire for more leisure in the Town Centre
 - (c) The importance of cherishing Darlington's historic character
 - (d) The importance of the markets and Covered Market building
 - (e) The need to improve the current bus facilities
 - (f) A recognition of the need to balance the offer between different parts of the Town Centre in terms of footfall and land use
 - (g) Informed views on the options and challenges the Council has as landowner and the potential regeneration benefits that could be secured
 - (h) The importance of the emerging Parking Strategy in securing accessible and attractive parking option to support the Town Centre
 - (i) The value of office uses in the Town Centre adding vitality and economic benefits