

**JOINT MEETING
TOWN CENTRE FORUM AND
DARLINGTON TRANSPORT FORUM
21st September, 2006**

PRESENT – Councillor Williams (in the Chair); Councillors Hartley, Lewis, Richmond, F.S. Robson, S. Robson, Ruck and Wallis

Officers in Attendance – Sharon Brown, Head of Performance Development and Community Partnerships; Peter Roberts, Service Development Manager; Bill Westland, Assistant Director, Public Protection; Steve Jones, Head of Communications; Richard Alty, Assistant Director, Development and Regeneration; and Louise Toms, Town Centre Manager.

Also in Attendance – Michelle Lindsay, Lucy Raines and Stephen Paterson, Karol Marketing Group and Adam Pyrke, Colliers CRE.

Town Centre Representatives –

D. Anderson, Next;
A. Atkins, Cooks and Kitchens;
M. Barker, Health Warehouse;
J. Cheadle, Catkins Café;
T. Clifton, Clinic 36;
A. Coultas, Say No to Tesco Campaign;
D. Crompton, B. Supplier;
P.M. Dore, National Council of Women;
A. Draper, Indoor/Outdoor Market;
A. Dunn, Scots Knight;
L. Esnol, Arriva North East;
K. Fridd, Whinbush Resident Group;
Gala Club;
P. Garthwaite, H. Taylor & Son;
J. Gray, Cycle Forum;
N. Hatch, Blake Newport;
C.J. Hawkes, Council Forums;
B. Jackson;
I. McGregor, Tees Valley JSU;
H. McMillan, Darlington Police;
C. Moore, Darlington Railway Centre and Museum;
J. Peacock; GOLD;
G. Pybus, Darlington Association on Disability;
L. Robinson, Darlington Association on Disability;
J. Robson, Blind Dogs for the Blind;
L. Scott, Darlington Chamber of Commerce;
G. Smith, G.A. Consultancy;

D. Simpson, Simpson Sports;
T. Stahl;
F. Stehr, Crombies;
T. Stevens, Arriva North East;
A. Storey, Thomas Bakery;
S. Tunstall, Loafers;
R.H. Wake; and
S. Young, Cornmill Centre;

1. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS – The Chair, Councillor Williams, welcomed everyone to the Forum, and outlined the format for the meeting.

2. Feethams Development - Consultation – Peter Roberts, Service Development Manager, gave a presentation to the meeting outlining the ‘Vision’ for Darlington and the work that is currently ongoing to ensure that the Town Centre is a key asset for the future. Particular reference was made to the proposal by Tesco to develop the Feethams site, which would provide a 10,500 square metre store, providing a 50/50 split of food and non-food items, with 750 car parking spaces, a petrol filling station and new Town Hall. A number of potential benefits and risks associated with the development were highlighted.

Michelle Lindsay, Karol Marketing, stated that there were two main issues to consider, namely, is the site right for the development and does it fit the ‘vision’ for Darlington.

The Forum thereupon dispersed into groups and were given four questions to consider.

One representative from each Group gave feedback, as detailed below, in response to those questions. Some representatives took the opportunity to give their personal views and these are also recorded below:-

Question 1:-

What do you think of the current town centre environment?

- Support required for the town centre over the long term.
- Too many low grade shops e.g. Charity Shops, in Skinnergate.
- Out of Town developments pulling trade away from the Town Centre.
- Parking.
- New retail trade in the Town Centre e.g. redeveloped M & S, Commercial Street, etc.
- Looking ahead – Tesco could bring in extra trade.
- There is a decline commercially in the Town Centre – not able to regenerate.
- Issues regarding commercial viability due to internet shopping on all commercial activity – this will possibly be further exacerbated by Tesco.
- There is a decline in the number of people visiting the Town Centre.
- Concerns around the Pedestrian Heart scheme.
- Access by road to the Town Centre is an issue.
- There is a lack of recreational space in the Town Centre.
- Poor tourist offer in the town.
- The size of the units available in the town, are not ideal.

- Too many cars in the Town Centre – it is not bike/pedestrian friendly.
- The town should be left to age gracefully.
- There has been a failure to recognise the impact on St. Cuthberts.
- Lack of awareness around the River Skerne. Work needs to be done to make it more attractive.
- Not sure if Tesco would bring more people into the Town Centre.
- The location of the bus stops means that people have a distance to walk from/to them.
- People are unsure as to the location of the bus stops.
- The Town Centre is being used as a bus station.

Question 2:-

What do you think is required to continue to develop and improve Darlington Town Centre?

- Darlington's distinctiveness should be retained/improved. The proposal does not assist this.
- The markets have lost their way. They need to be looked at and improved to give a more 'cosmopolitan' feel.
- There should be a more open environment along the River Skerne.
- The original planning consent for the area for leisure and recreational facilities needs to be looked into again. This would contribute to the 'Gateway' initiative and would encourage spend and tourism.
- The Pedestrian Heart and other schemes need to be finished before more work is undertaken in the Town Centre.
- Personal safety within the Town Centre needs to be improved.
- There is no cohesion in the Town Centre – it is difficult to 'signpost' around.
- Transport needs to be addressed including traffic flow and the possibility of introducing park and ride needs to be investigated.
- Buses need to be off the streets and back in the bus station.
- What are Darlington's strengths?
- There are no retailers on the Panel and there is not enough feedback to retailers.
- The River Skerne should be developed and the site developed as green space for people to use.
- Larger units are required in the Town Centre – this may be addressed by the Commercial Street development.
- One large unit such as Tesco is not attractive.
- Yards should be developed.
- More markets in the streets.
- Skinnergate is a mess. There are too many pubs and charity shops.
- Tesco should be allowed and pressure should be put on them to help other areas of the town.
- The site should be used for leisure e.g. bowling, in order to attract young people.
- Business support to be offered, in order to encourage new businesses.
- The Market Place needs to be improved.
- Road safety should be enforced.
- Two hour free parking to be introduced to encourage trade.

Question 3:-

What do you think the effect on the Town Centre and Darlington's future vision, of a proposal like the one on the table by Tesco would be?

- The proposal will impact on the trade in the rest of the Town Centre.
- What will happen to the Markets?
- The proposal will change the look/feel of the Town Centre in terms of retail. It will be a very different place.
- The proposal will have an impact on the national as well as the independent retailers.
- Tesco is a 'one-stop' shop and it will 'eat up' many product categories that are currently available within the Town Centre.
- Should the shop be open 24 hours it will take trade from other shops which are not open for the same length of time.
- The impact on the roads into/around the Town Centre should be investigated.
- The shop could add footfall and bring investment/improvement to the Town Centre and the townscape.
- The development will ruin the Town Centre.
- The development could be good for the town and could encourage other retailers to provide a 'niche'.
- Good for non car owners.
- The development will strengthen the retail offering.
- Work should be undertaken with Sainsbury's to make their store more accessible for non car users who visit the Town Centre.
- The possibility of using the trolleys around the town should be investigated.
- The development would bring more investment to the town.
- Adverse effect on other shops e.g. Binns.
- Net loss of trade to the Town Centre.
- The Town Centre could sustain a small food hall. The loss of Safeway detracted from the Town Centre and a new smaller unit would be beneficial.
- 50% of the unit would be used for the sale of comparison goods e.g. non-food.
- Tesco has a strategy of taking sales from everywhere else.
- Impact of the car park.
- Concern over the tradition and style of the Town Centre.
- The floorspace of the store will have an impact on other retailers and in particular Sainsbury's and other supermarkets within the Town.
- The store will have an impact on St. Cuthbert's Church.
- The experiences of other towns where Tesco has built a store should be investigated.
- The development could be of benefit to communities with low car ownership.
- Could Tesco be requested to only sell food items – if so would they withdraw?
- No joined up thinking.
- Traffic issues.
- 'One-stop' shop could be of benefit to the disabled.

Question 4:-

Two fold question: Would you like to see the Feethams site developed (please give reasons for your answers) and if so would you like to see that development being the Tesco proposition?

- The majority of those in attendance wanted to see the site developed.
- The town needs to settle down before any more development takes place.
- What is the justification for a new Town Hall.
- The bus station needs to go.
- There is a need for food offering within the Town Centre - possibly a small food shop in the Commercial Street development.
- No non-food sales to take place on the site.
- Bus station/leisure/green open space and general leisure use will best suit the site.
- Concerns were expressed on the ownership of the site and how future development would work.
- The area should be more open plan and make more use of the River Skerne.
- Still do not have enough information to give a view on the proposals.
- This is the wrong development in the wrong place.
- Need to recognise what other people want e.g. young people.
- There has been a number of other proposals for the site which have never progressed. Tesco is not the right development for the site it should be leisure, housing or open space around the River Skerne.
- The store has no benefit for the town.

Following the feedback from the groups, a general question and answer session was held at which a number of questions were raised on issues such as the involvement of young people in the consultation process; impact of the development on St. Cuthbert's and the Markets; the needs of Darlington in respect of supermarkets; and why a petrol station was included within the development.

3. CLOSING REMARKS – The Leader thanked those present for attending and stated that the consultation on the proposals would continue for another month.