

Case Study

Feethams and the Markets, Darlington

Summary of Project

Enabling the public sector response to a major town centre development

Project Partners

Client: Darlington Borough Council [Feethams and the Markets Working Group – an advisory board that has representatives from Council officers and members, private sector traders, community representatives and the local Civic Trust]

Summary

A series of large brownfield sites to the immediate south of the town centre and the markets were subject to speculative discussions and ultimately proposals by *Tesco*. A combination of three large sites, currently surface car parking, a bus Depot [*Arriva*] and the town hall [1970's civic architecture] were combined, through ownership and options, for proposals for a new *Tesco Extra* superstore. Proposals proved to be controversial for several reasons and the Council decided to use the pre-application proposals as the basis for broad public consultation within the town.

While the proposals included the demolition and replacement of the town hall and were mixed use; with residential uses 'wrapped' around the superstore; it was dominated by a single footprint development of a single retailer and included large areas of surface car parking. There was a large negative reactions due to the potential scale of retail use and the impact on existing town centre retailers that became a well organised [for example; the window poster campaign in the town centre below], and ultimately successful, local retailers campaign against the *Tesco* proposals.



In addition there were serious concerns over the design of the proposals as the site was bounded by the town centre conservation area, the market square, the river Skerne [a tributary to the River Tees] and the grade 1 listed

St Cuthbert's Church. The Council's initial suggestions that design concerns could be addressed at a detailed level and involve CABI in on-going consultations. The programme manager was invited to get involved in discussions following the Council's decision to reject the Tesco proposals.

Darlington & Stockton Times Friday October 13th 2006 p5

Not one audience member voted in favour

Meeting overwhelmingly rejects Tesco plan

BY OWEN AMOS
TESCO'S plans to redevelop Darlington town centre have been overwhelmingly rejected at a public meeting organised by local church leaders.

More than 200 people attended the debate, organised by members of the Darlington diocese of churches, on Thursday of last week.

After the debate, held at St Cuthbert's Church in Darlington, a vote on Tesco's plans was

held and not one audience member was in favour.

One member of the audience said: "If Tesco's plans go ahead, it will be a case of 'Can the last person to leave the town centre please turn off the lights'."

Another said: "It is extremely naive for anyone in authority to expect existing shops not to be affected. Tesco will crucify the town centre."

The debate, chaired by the Rev John Dobson, Area Dean of

Darlington, started with two ten-minute speeches, for and against.

David Preston, born and raised in Darlington, and chairman of Firth Moor Community Association, spoke for the plans.

He later admitted it was like facing a "lion's den".

Mr Preston said: "I'm not here to represent Tesco - I'm here to talk for myself, my children, my grandchildren, and the future of Darlington."

"Shops that have closed haven't done so because of Tesco. The challenge for small retailers is to make themselves interesting enough to drag shoppers away."

"It's no good moaning and groaning - shops have always had competition."

Alan Coultas, also born and raised in Darlington, spoke against the plans.

He said: "Many people feel the supermarkets are turning from a giant into a monster."

"We already have four supermarkets, and one, Sainsbury's, in the town centre. There is no justifiable case for a fifth in what is a relatively small town."

"We tell the world we are a market town. We can turn the markets into a viable operation again."

The audience was invited to comment and put questions to John Buxton, Darlington Borough Council's director of development and the environment.

One member of the audience, who said he was a shop owner, asked: "Why do we have to put shops everywhere? What about museums, an art gallery or a casino?"

"We should not think in square boxes of baked beans."

After voting against Tesco's plans, the audience was asked if it thought any supermarket should build in the town centre. No-one voted in favour.

The Tesco consultation finishes on October 11. A council decision is expected in November.

Town's civic trust labels development 'monolithic'

PLANS for a giant Tesco store have been described as "monolithic" by Darlington Civic Trust.

The trust, which campaigned against the Pedestrian Heart project, has finally set out its views on the controversial plans, more than a month after they were unveiled by Darlington Borough Council.

However, members have focused only on the architectural and townscape aspects of the proposals, rather than the economic arguments.

Richard Wimbury, secretary of the trust, said: "The scale of the development is massive, making it essential that the architectural treatment is sympathetic and in keeping with Darlington's still mainly Victorian townscape."

However, he added: "The new proposals for the town hall area

look monolithic and are in a style that has no sympathy at all with the existing built environment."

The trust said that, after studying the plans, it appeared the development would be six storeys high on the River Skerne side.

"The building must not be allowed to impede the views of St Cuthbert's Church as seen from the ring road," said Mr Wimbury.

The trust would like to see a corridor along the bank of the River Skerne preserved, saying that there was a great opportunity for amenities and public open space in that area.

Mr Wimbury continued: "While the idea of building apartments around the superstore may initially seem good in disguising the enormous shed

of the building, it is not clear how the apartments will be designed nor whether they will have windows on more than one elevation."

"Instead, town houses could be provided with varying facades and roof styles, which would blend more comfortably with the existing Darlington townscape."

The trust is also concerned about the planned roof top car park and delivery access.

The trust has said that, from a townscape point of view, "a residential development on the bus depot site would be preferable to the current massive and overbearing proposals, perhaps a development of townhouses with a generous amenity space along the bank of the River Skerne."



[The popular campaign against the Tesco proposals created local momentum with the Civic Trust and local retailers to become pro-active in the approach to the redevelopment of the town centre sites]

The involvement began after an approach from the Director of Development for Darlington and involving several officer-based briefing sessions, leading to a presentation and workshop with Darlington Town Centre Board [Feethams and the markets Working Group]¹. The programme manager was invited to attend and contribute the group, helping to show the context for the site[s] at the scale of the town centre [based upon a briefing paper] and introduce ideas / best practice in town centre development and design followed by discussions on environmental, design, conservation and movement/transport opportunities/issues for the site.

The purpose of the meeting / workshop was to present the Urban Design opportunities for the site[s] through an approach to masterplanning that was based upon best practice processes and by introducing some of the theory and processes behind [1] analysis, using Lynchian mental mapping, historical and context analysis; and [2] development of options using 'collage' techniques. The intention was to introduce some of the key tasks undertaken in masterplanning and place them within the broader development and regeneration processes.

¹ This was held on Thursday 19th April, 2007, Committee Room 2, Town Hall Darlington – a location overlooking the development sites being discussed.

Preparing a masterplan

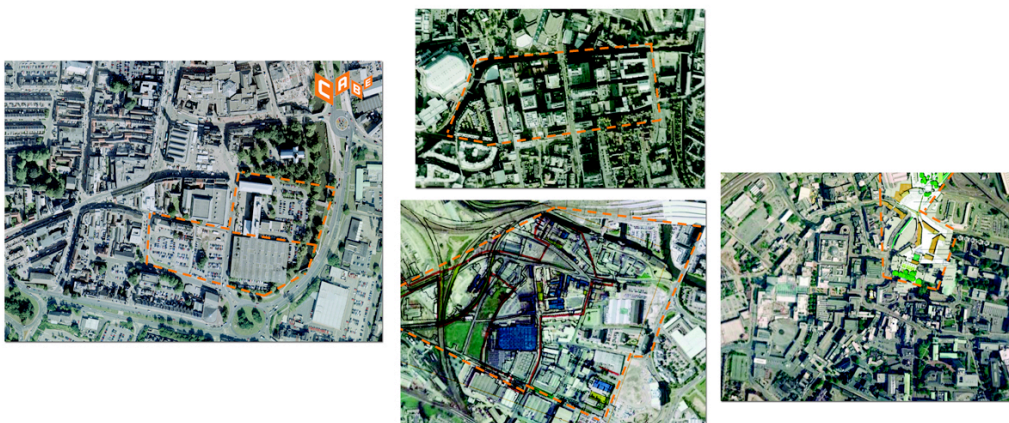
The first stage of the workshop included some basic and explicit ‘signposting’ to the client group towards existing CABA services and publications that introduced the idea of masterplanning as a process.



While there was reference to the design process in terms of different stages – preparatory design work was undertaken in advance of the workshop to provide a practical and locally relevant example of what each stage would entail. There was a particular focus on the relevant early preparatory stage.

Some of the basic steps in the preparation of a masterplan or development framework were introduced ...

... the idea of benchmarking through a series of comparative projects within the UK town / city centre locations was introduced through scaled aerial and precedent images. There were a series of potential ‘visioning’ study trips² discussed as a direct result of this benchmarking exercise.



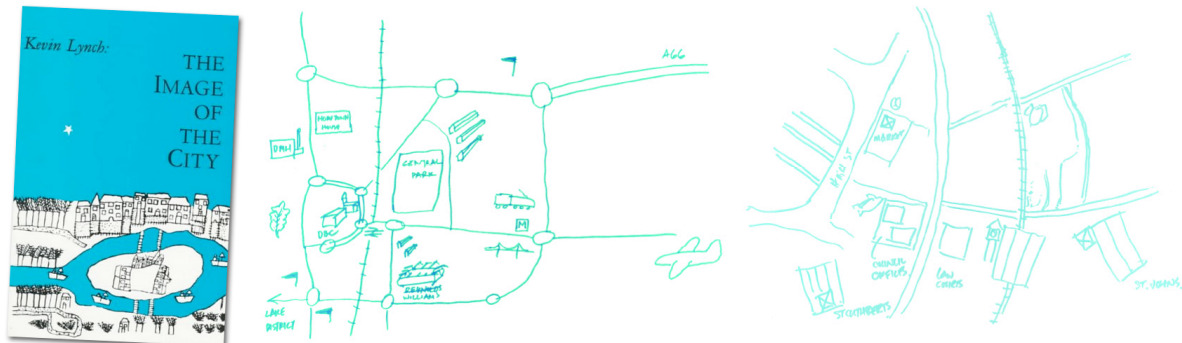
[Example of regeneration projects and masterplans presented on a comparative scale to Darlington town centre – far left image]

² These include, Brindley Place, Birmingham; Phoenix Project, Coventry; Holbeck Urban Village, Leeds; The Calls, Leeds / Piece Hall, Halifax.

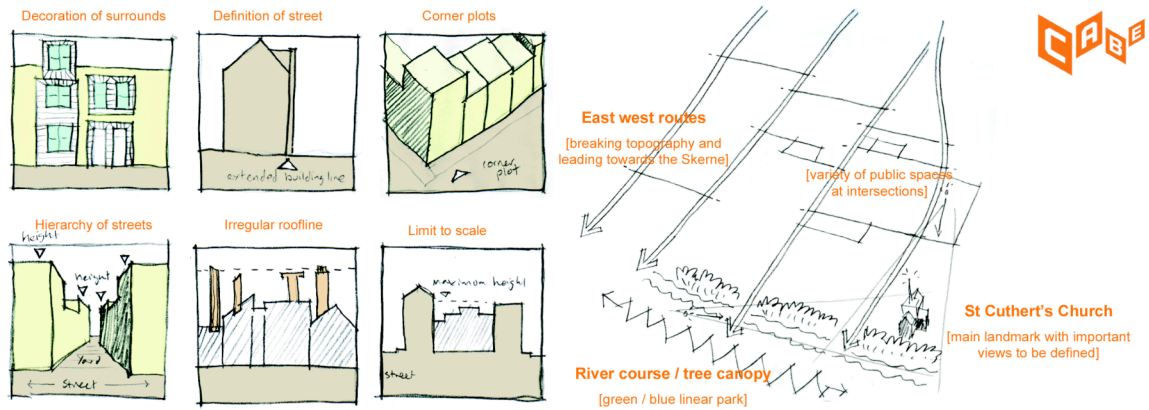
The significance of the historical uses of the site and surrounding locations was explored through desk-based research. This historic analysis of the town centre sites included existing image and photographic records of the site and surroundings showing the changing morphology around the site while the Feethams largely remained an open meadow next to the River Skerne [below chronological images of the proposed site from the early 1800's to 1980's].



The analysis of the site[s] within the context of the town centre was considered using a range of cognitive mapping exercises, as a group highlighting the aspects of the site that were essentially 'Darlingtonness'.

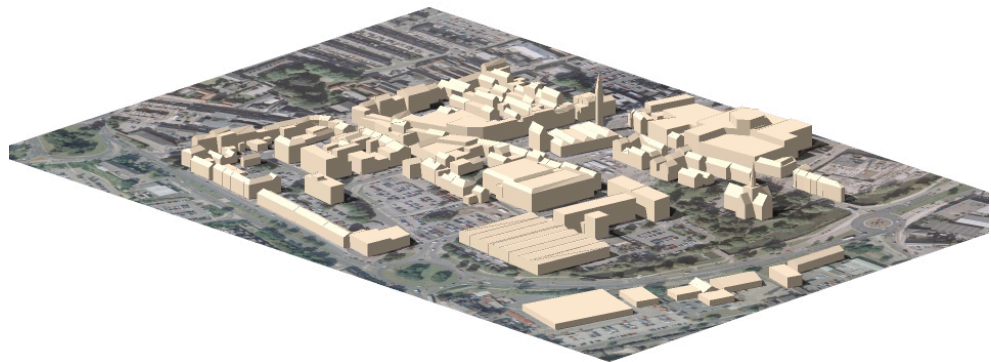
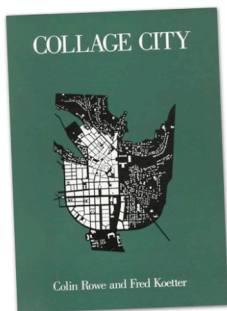


[Examples of local authority staff cognitive mapping of the town centre, based on the Lynch methods of landmarks, nodes, paths, edges and districts.]



[Presentation of initial thoughts on analysis of town centre character and setting of the site – drawing from earlier analysis work undertaken within the town centre in relation to the coding / planning for ‘Central Park’ and as part of the on-going SPD ‘Design for Development’]

Ideas on the urban design opportunities for the site were introduced as a range of potential options, each with a range of strengths and weaknesses, that were intended to challenge the level of thinking about the possibilities of the town centre and to encourage the town centre board to start with a positive vision for the future of the site rather than a focus on site constraints [physical restrictions, financial limitations etc] that had been the case.



This exercise was undertaken by the use of the collage city methodology to ‘cut and paste’ different urban development options. The approach to testing different morphologies and masterplans on the town centre development site was undertaken in three dimensions – making some assumptions on the building heights / number of storeys combining these figures with scanned plans / figure ground drawings to be placed within a specially constructed CAD model for Darlington town centre [This CAD model, above, was constructed over a 1km square area of the town centre using a mix of aerial and OS data provided under licence from Darlington Borough Council]. This adaptation of the ‘collage city’ method was vital in understanding the impact of scale and massing of development in addition to the plan; particularly the potential impact of large footprint buildings; on route and connections.

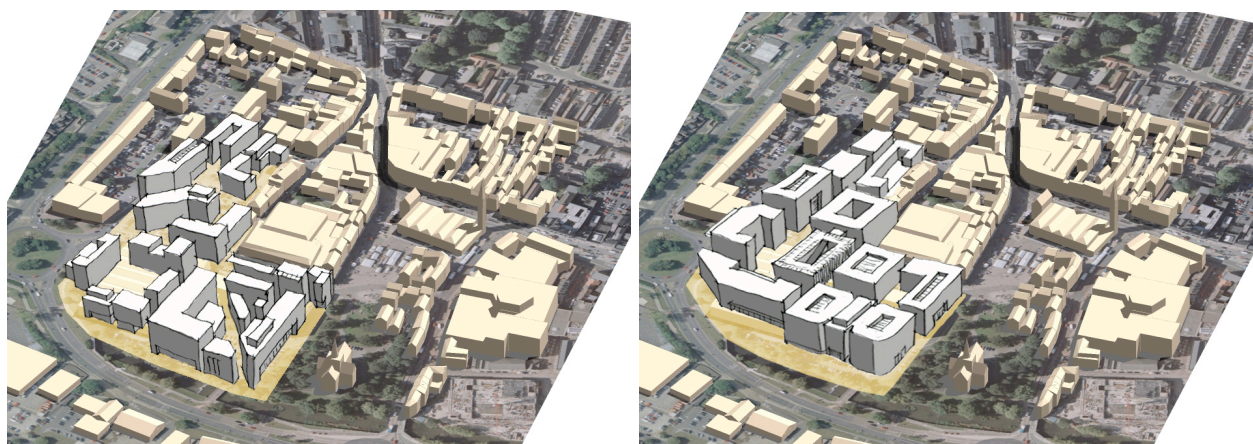
The intentions were to raise the idea of options and place the onus on the Town Centre Board to investigate and support their own ideas for the redevelopment of the site in a manner that met their own aspirations for development that was complementary to other developments within the town and the wider Tees Valley city region. As such, there were no substantive recommendations, just an explanation of where visioning, benchmarking,

options and then the testing of any preferred options fitted into a typical masterplanning exercise³.

The existing forms of development placed on the town centre sites were ...



... another part of Darlington town centre [based upon a hierarchy of street, wynds / yards; control over scale / massing; protection of important views; strong tree canopy / park edge]; Holbeck Urban Village, Leeds [approach based upon retention of existing structures; variety of plot sizes to support SME choices; human scale; creation of new towers and spires] ...



... the Phoenix Project, Coventry [approach based on the extension of the city centre; the creation of a journey through a sequence of spaces; incorporation of heritage] and Brindley Place, Birmingham [regeneration based upon a comprehensive masterplan; strong mix of uses at urban scale; flexible building footprints; successful integration of extensive car parking].

This advocacy for a more visionary planning process was largely supported by the Town Centre Board and was evident in the agreement for undertaking a series of fact-finding visits to some of the comparative masterplanning locations.

³ The site[s] are current identified for mixed uses - offices or other travel-intensive uses, including shopping, leisure [potential multiplex] and hotels but with challenges of supplying a multi-storey car park [estimated 550 spaces]. There are some controlling policies to enhance the Town Centre Conservation Area [with suggestions for stepping development and a broken roofline to fit into the local topography] and require a high standard of design [citing the significance as a 'gateway' location on the inner ring road. There are several 'encouraging' policies to improve the setting of the listed church, the creation of a linear park along the rover corridor and provide stronger pedestrian routes / connections between the town centre and the railway station.

The programme manager helped organise the first of this series of fact finding visits to Leeds, 20th June 2007. The purpose of trip was the exploration of regeneration ideas from Leeds that are transferable to Darlington Town Centre. The trip looked at two main areas [1] Holbeck Urban Village, a mixed-use area targeted at SME's and creative industries and [2] The Calls, riverside regeneration and included local planning and architect contacts to provide a number of distinctive views on the successes of the projects and the possible transferable elements to Darlington town centre.



[Members of the Town Centre Board 'on-site' at the Holbeck Urban Village and the Callas riverside area in Leeds. Lessons taken and reported back to the larger group related both to substance⁴ and process⁵

The intention is to continue this series of visits and adapt the key lessons, both substantive and procedural, to the pro-active masterplanning in Darlington Town Centre.

⁴ The importance of small-scale development. The 'grain' and human scale of Holbeck helped to support a good balance between a mix of uses. Often it was difficult to determine what was residential and what was business space – suggesting a flexible arrangement for living / working and the blurring of the boundaries between the two. Intimacy within the public spaces and courtyards. The size of the spaces and the enclosure achieved within the scheme was reminiscent of some similar spaces within Darlington – for example, Bull Wynd – that were able to incorporate mature planting, car-parking and external uses that brought life to the space. Service spaces. The quality and scale of the spaces were ideal for a range of service based businesses – these are potentially similar to a range of niche companies that could grow from the area of independent retailers clustered around Conniscliffe Road.

⁵ Including; capturing the shared vision and aspirations of various agents; production of 'fit for purpose' planning guidance; conservation issues; resources and extending the 'ownership' of the project; political leadership.

Procurement route

The Council's engagement with *CABE* was following to loss of their in-house urban designer and there was an expectation that the programme manager would provide a similar service. The reality was a constructive critique of the processes and procurement routes being followed by the local authority. While the benchmarking exercise is still on-going, there are indications that the local authority is now very aware of the challenges and choices for taking a pro-active approach to the development of these high profile sites. Options still include decisions regarding in-house and consultants supporting the production of a development brief with supplementary planning status.

Timescale of overall project

The project arose out of the rejected development proposals from *Tesco* in late October / November 2006. Approaches from Darlington Council began during February / March 2007 and continued to the end of the work of the pilot programme. Anticipated length of the project – 24 months preparatory work leading to some form of planning guidance for the development of the sites that could take the form of an area action plan or supplementary guidance. The 24 months allows for a mixed in-house and external consultancy team working together to produce an area action plan that requires more time for consultation due to the impact on specific land ownerships and the level of options / details being tested in anticipation of a planning document that can support any required CPO processes.

Budget [approx]

The expenditure was programme manager time in the preparation of some early stage design work as examples of the processes to be followed. Financially the support was for facilitating the initial study trip to Leeds – this involved seven people travel and subsistence.

Nature of advice provided

Period of Assistance:

The programme manager provided assistance from initial contacts in March 2007 until the end of the *CABE* regional pilot programme at the end of June 2007.

How and at what stage did you assist the client?

The assistance to Darlington Borough Council was ...

- Pre-application advice on design / planning process;
- Training in urban design analysis processes;
- Workshop on scoping / benchmarking and the development of site options as distinctive stages in a typical masterplanning process;
- Organisation of UK based study trip;
- Reporting of each stage of task / workshop.

Approximate time given to advise [in days]

Time input was spread over several months but included an initial 2 days process advice, 4 days preparation [mostly data collection, modelling and

desk-based research] and 1 day input for the meeting / workshop with the Town Centre, 1 day preparation and 1 day hosting the study trip to Leeds.

Client involvement and the impact of the advice provided

Was there a client commitment to design quality?

There was a client commitment to design quality but with a caveat that this reflected a limited understanding of quality design implications at a strategic masterplan level. There is an increasing level of understanding over what a masterplanning process may involve and the amount of work required in advance of any proposals becoming reality.

What was the design capacity of the client?

This was a concern following the loss of the in-house urban designer[who left in part due to the down scaling of the post because it didn't have any managerial responsibility. The Council does have a framework agreement with BDP [serviced through the Liverpool office] to provide urban design services but these are limited in the number of days input and the limited understanding of being a good commissioning client within the council. Thus, the intentions remain strong but the understanding of the implication of being a good client requires support.

How seriously did the client act on your advice? Were you genuinely welcomed into the project team? What was your most valuable contribution?

There was a genuine and immediate collective response to the advice on the masterplanning process. I was welcomed into the working group with most ideas being supported where they were seen to be positive [even where they were critical of the processes of working with *Tesco*] and able to give momentum to the thinking on the site. Useful to note that while the initial approaches to the programme manager appeared to have a pre-determined role for *CABE* within the project this was easily challenged and changed through discussion. The Council was very positive in being willing and able to learn from the procedural mistakes made in dealing with their early pre-application discussions with *Tesco*. Thus the most useful contribution was in setting out the implications and steps for a strong planning-led approach to the site and helping to take the client group one step back in this process to make the further forward steps possible.

What part of the support given worked well and what could have been done better?

Most of the programme manager's involvement was welcomed but was initially limited locally by an understanding of the exact role of *CABE* as an advocacy and facilitating organisation. The support could have been earlier in the process, with potential for improving masterplanning skills.

Were there any problems encountered and how were they or could they have been overcome – technical, political or procedural?

Like most projects, there was a limited involvement due to a lack of resources – both time and technology. The client group was open to substantial support as there was a void in their own in-house capacity and skills. The programme manager was also limited by the organisation framework and responsibilities

within *CABE* – where the programme’s initial protocol of dealing with local applications at a pre-application stage were limited to process issues but with limited ability / resources of the Design Review service to actually provide application specific responses. Given the nature of the proposals from *Tesco*, these would have been predictable but the programme manager was unable to make this; and thus limiting early involvement.

Did the client appoint a Design Champion and/or architectural design advisor?

No. There was support in principle and pragmatically there was an intention to provide design leadership for the project through members of the Town Centre Board. This was a failing of resources rather than intent.

What skills did the client develop during the enabling involvement and will this impact beyond the project?

The client group gained skills in early-stage masterplanning processes and increased understanding of the importance of producing a shared vision for the town centre as a whole and championing this vision [with the Town Centre Board as the custodians of the vision] through a lengthy preparatory, design, review and delivery stages of the project.

Did the project go to CABE / Regional / Sub-regional Design Review?

No. But there is both an understanding of the Design Review service and a commitment to refer the emerging masterplan to national and / or regional design review at an appropriate stage. Given the regional significance of the site[s] this appears to fit the criteria for *CABE*’s national panel to review and the programme manager would recommend that a case officer could take an opportunity to visit and view the site where an appropriate opportunity were to arise.

Outcomes

What will your input have on the quality of the end product?

The input has directed the client towards the production of statutory planning guidance / design framework with a strong conservation and design focus.

What quality will be achieved in the final building or development

It is still too early in the masterplanning process to determine the quality. The potential impacts on the scale and mix of development will have clear economic implications that have yet to be tested. The enabling work will at least ensure that the higher expectations for quality – defined locally – will be tested in the planning process.

Do the procurement design and construction methods used provide lessons for other or best practice for wider dissemination?

As yet there is no formal procurement process but certainly the working processes; collaborative work alongside local partners through a well-formed and focused advisory board; will be relevant to many market towns. There are also lessons from the early discussions with *Tesco* and the negativity associated with the imposition of a preferred solution on any significant site without a common vision / support, early consultation, and the consideration of alternative options. The mystification commonly associated with the later

stages of masterplanning [considering services, technical constraints, finances etc] was also the case as the Tesco led proposals developed. To go back a few stages in the planning process and work on a common vision for the development has allowed a deeper level of 'active' engagement rather than a simple Bodleian reaction.

Next stages

What are the next steps in terms of the project's progress?

The Town Centre Board is likely to continue their benchmarking exercise and put forward their aspirations for the development of the site[s] as the basis for statutory planning guidance. A decision on how this guidance is procured has yet to be made.

Are there key dates that the CAFE should be aware of as the project goes forward, e.g. when it might be worth revisiting the project to check progress / the opening of the building?

The key dates of interest will be [1] the production of the guidance and the potential for the Skills team to support a concentrated piece of work or a local masterclass, and [2] the development guidance / framework / masterplan nearing completion and being subject to national *Design Review*.

When will the project be completed?

The scale of the site and the local market responses suggests this will remain a long-term strategic project within the Tees Valley. The delivery of guidance [potentially 24 months] through to developer interest / agreement and physical development beginning will be market dependent.

Key issues

What were the key issues that came out of this project? - Can you draw out a few summary lessons, core benefits of being involved with this project or key issues that we can learn from?

There are simple benefits in signposting to ideas and publications early in a project where there is a requirement for ideas.

Training being connected to 'live' projects – there are clear benefits in tailoring training around locality specific issues and current project. The focus of the individuals will be on the most appropriate skills and ideas for their own project, providing a level of application, critique and adaptation of methods and skills that have not been present in more 'generic' training sessions.

There is a significant payback in terms of project involvement where the enabler is bringing both skills and additional capacity to the project team. There is a very real contribution in terms of modelling, analysis etc as examples of typical masterplanning processes when they are undertaken for the site in question. 'Learning by doing' within the project with the enabler as part of the project team [including a contribution towards project delivery] is in some cases the only means to be critically constructive. It ensures CAFE is perceived as a collaborating and facilitating organisation in practice rather than a slightly patronising distraction from the concerns of project delivery.

Further information

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This case study is based upon a generic *CABE Enabling Project Support Report* and *IGNITE* format.