

Bedlington Town Champion Blog 12th January 2016

The Bedlington Steering Group meet for the second time on Tuesday 23 January in the beautiful church of St Cuthbert's Church, Bedlington. This was the preparatory 'training' meeting for next week's meeting with the five architectural practices that are competing to develop the Tesco site. The session was expertly led by Lowri Bond from Northern Architecture, a charity that supports community involvement in building projects.

Next week's meeting (w/b 18th January) with the architects is the 'Interim Review' stage in the process; that is, a chance for the Bedlington Steering Group, Arch and the County Council to check that the competitors are on-track and that they understand the criteria by which they will be accessed. They will also be asked to highlight in their presentations the issues that they have yet to resolve at this interim stage. Lowri also wanted the Steering Group to know how to recognise the strengths and weaknesses in the interim designs presented and the questions that the group should be asking. She also stressed that a development of this type is not just for now but needs to meet the needs of the town for the next ten, twenty, even fifty years.

The Steering Group was urged to consider four key areas when looking at the interim designs: (1) the sociability of the design – is it a place I want to go to?; (2) uses and activities – what can it be used for?; (3) access and linkages – is it accessible and does it fit within the wider environment?; (4) comfort and image – does it look good? would I want to linger? would I use it?

Three further points were made that the Steering Group need to keep in mind: (1) how the proposals for the site integrate with the wider context of Bedlington – the point was well made that it is not just about everything inside the red line on the planners' map; (2) the need to 'knit' the town together with the new development; (3) the character given to the town by the buildings and the spaces being proposed. This may all seem a little deep and meaningful but we have all seen town centre building projects that haven't worked and where many of the points raised above haven't been considered in sufficient detail at the planning stage.

To conclude the 'indoor' session before the Steering Group walked the site together, it was stressed that Bedlington clearly has a character that is unique to it; however, the architects' job is not necessarily to 'mimic' that character but, in addition, the project must not conflict with it. It needs to be modern and to serve future generations of Bedlington residents but needs to be sensitive to the history and heritage of the town – it must 'feel' like Bedlington.

It was stressed that this is a five year project. The first stage, the conclusion of the design competition, will be completed by the end of March. It won't include everything that everyone wants but the aspirations for the project are high and the Steering Group will push hard to get as much as it can within the commercial parameters being worked to. The one thing that the Bedlington Steering Group cannot be accused of is lacking ambition for the town.

I will issue a further report following the conclusion of the Interim Reviews next week.

Dean Jackson, Town Champion

