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Workshop for Supplementary Planning Document: land between A6 and River Derwent, Belper (Meadows Edge)

Comments from Heather Emery, OPUN Design Enabler

The workshop demonstrated how people care passionately about the place they live, and what makes it different and special. The people who attended had a high level of understanding and appreciation about their town and included a level of expertise that was encouraging and should be captured and used to the benefit of the development of the SPD. The workshop gave the attendees an opportunity to voice their concerns but also more importantly an opportunity to start the process of community engagement and to start identifying the design issues which will assist in developing a fresh SPD that will help to protect and enhance the identified site, Meadows Edge.

Design – general principles and objectives

During the ‘Have your Say’ session there were many points made that should help guide and inform the development of some general principles and objectives regarding inclusion of design in the production of the SPD. These included:

- Promote viable mixed use development which respects and recognises the proximity to the open countryside, the heritage and the proximity to the town centre
- Enhance the quality of the environment, especially with regard to the location of the site within the Belper Conservation Area and the Derwent Valley Mills World Heritage site,
- Maintain and enhance the existing formal and informal open space at the Meadows
- Integrate the riverside with the town centre, both in terms of opening up views into and out of the site
- Strengthen the connection both visual and physical between the town centre and the site
- Diversify the general activity being offered in the whole of the town centre



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- Address issues of access through the town centre both vehicular, pedestrian and cyclists
- Accommodate parking for cars and coaches
- Scale and massing of future development to respect the sensitive location of the site

The integration of design principles into the SPD should follow good practice and help to inform the development of a document that is responsive and focused on the achievement of a high value and well connected proposal. In order to achieve the highest quality development certain principles should act as a guide including:

- Buildings and spaces that are fit for the purpose and respond to the surroundings
- Places that are designed for all to use and promote community inclusion and cohesion
- A network of streets and quality open spaces
- Pedestrian links from Bridge Street through to the Meadows and beyond to open countryside
- Building units that are flexible and capable of accommodating a variety of uses
- Views of the open countryside through the site and views back into the town beyond Bridge Street
- Height and massing of the buildings should reinforce the built edge of the site and act to enclose the street and open spaces
- Design and detailing of the buildings should reflect vertical and horizontal patterns, rooflines
- Materials should respect the historic examples used locally



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Signposting

It was evident throughout the workshop that although a great deal of work had already been done to help inform the understanding and appreciation of the site including the World Heritage Site documentation there is a significant gap in the need for a robust and comprehensive analysis of the character and townscape quality of Belper and particularly the SPD site. The need for a character appraisal was mentioned during the workshop and a valid point made that there is a significant body of knowledge and experience present in the town which could effectively provide a rich stream of information and knowledge backed by English Heritage and other agencies including the Environment Agency and Derbyshire County Council if effectively co-ordinated, captured and reported.

The use of the Building in Context toolkit could be put to great effect in developing a character appraisal and in getting the different representatives to collaborate together to achieve a comprehensive baseline of knowledge and information.

A key provision of the Decentralisation and Localism Bill is Neighbourhood Planning which has laudable and ambitious aims of providing communities with real power. The neighbourhood planning initiative is a new opportunity that could be used by the community in Belper to shape their own vision for their community, from deciding the locations of shops, offices and schools to setting standards of design for new development and protecting and enhancing areas of value to the community.

Other guidance and best practice could be usefully employed to help inform and shape any future development, for example Manual for Streets and design review. The site has great potential to deliver a quality of environment that will affect the whole of the town for the better and achieve a distinctive identity with lasting benefits to the whole community.

Heather Emery
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