

Case Study

Corporation Road, Middlesbrough 'model' design and development brief

Summary of Project

Enabling the preparation of a design-led development brief for a series of linked town centre sites in Middlesbrough.

Project Partners

Client: Middlesbrough Council [Urban Policy Unit] working with Middlesbrough Town Centre Company and CABA @ Tees Valley.

Procurement route

There were initial speculative development proposals for one of the principal sites within the town centre. This proposal was referred by the local planning authority to a desk top CABA design review and subject to initial negative comments that stated ... “[w]e believe this design to be devoid of architectural merit ... [the development] would be an inappropriate and depressing landmark for Middlesbrough. We believe that a fundamental rethink is required. Any development of the scale currently proposed should make a positive contribution to the public realm and character of Middlesbrough”¹. The enabling project grew out of following discussions between the applicant, *Middlesbrough Council*, and CABA’s Regional Representative and pilot programme officer. These initial discussions highlighted the lack of constructive advice within the CABA Design Review.

The initial planning application was an example of pre-application achieved through the local press. *Mandale* developments had bypassed discussions with planning staff and spoken directly with the elected mayor.

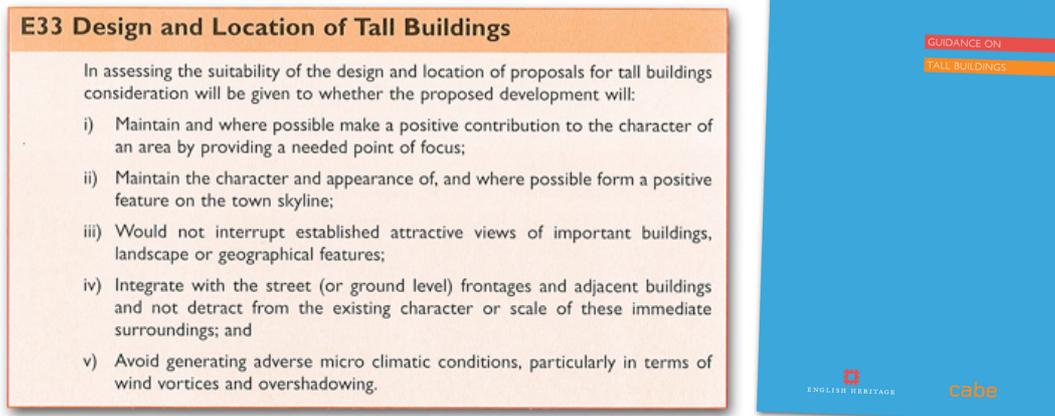


[extract from the front cover of the Middlesbrough Evening Gazette]

This proposal for a residential / student accommodation 32 storey tower proved controversial publicly and within members and officers of the council. Emerging from the poor CABA Design Review was a level of frustration on behalf of the architect and client about the aspirations and expectation of Middlesbrough Council and an on-going dialogue leading to CABA supporting the production of a development brief that clarified the planning authority requirements and the process. It is important to note that while the response

¹ CABA Design Review panel comments for proposal for Corporation Road, Middlesbrough, March 2006.

from CUBE Design Review was valuable, it was used tactically by the local planning authority to encourage the applicant to withdraw the proposal – the level of design awareness was sufficient within the council to recommend refusal for this first application. Yet, both the local planning authority and the project architect were seeking positive and constructive guidance beyond the review process.



[Policy E55 p50 in; *Middlesbrough Local Plan – Adopted August 1999*; CUBE and English Heritage [March 2003] *Guidance on Tall Buildings* [English Heritage, Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, London].]

The existing policy context was the Adopted Local Plan that had a specific policy on dealing with tall buildings; including a locality specific definition of a tall building being over 20metres in height²; and a policy on strategic approaches. In considering strategic approaches to the town centre, the existing policy did not precisely define routes or anticipate the applicants responsibility / expectations for responding to the policy.

Initial discussions between the programme manager and Middlesbrough Council officers built on the current policy framework to provide a detailed guidance note on the appropriate requirements for a Design and Access Statement to facilitate the discussions between the planning authority and the applicant.

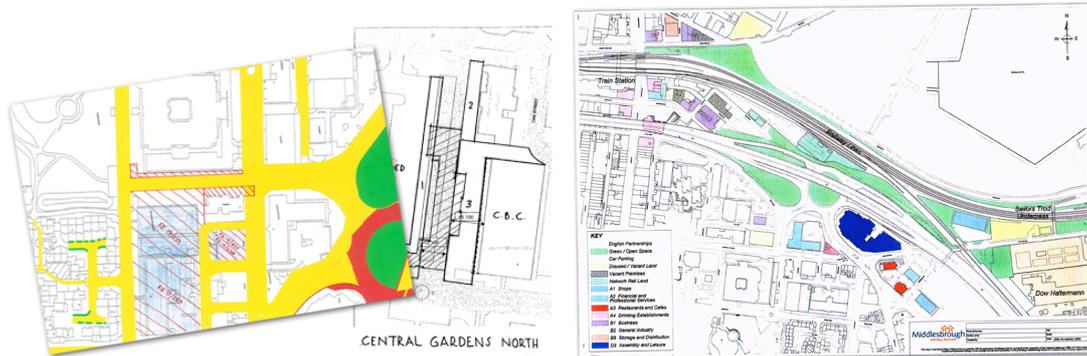
This developed from the programme manager's advice into a more pro-active and collaborative approach to dealing with speculative developments in this location. While there was some debate over the actual planning status of any design advice produced, there was a clear decision from the planning authority to produce a development brief for this area of Corporation Road, focused on the two corner plots where there was current developer interest. Part of the motivation behind the preparation of development / design guidance was [1] the level of council ownership within the area; and [2] the intent to support some form of appropriate development that would meet some of the current pressures for high quality offices adjacent to the Magistrates Court complex. The programme manager became embedded within the council's urban policy team to work on the production of the guidance with the intention that the processes followed, the use of data / evidence and the level of detail within the guidance would become a useful 'model' process to be followed on similar town centre locations.

² para. 1.164 p50 in; *Middlesbrough Local Plan – Adopted August 1999*.

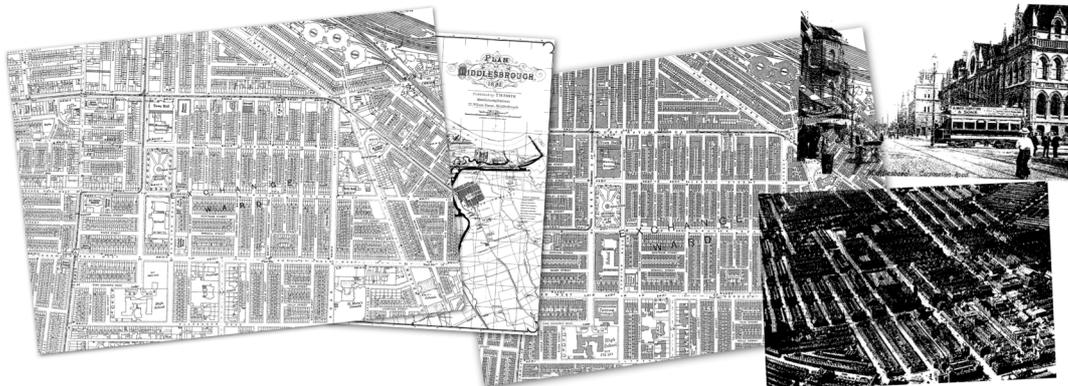
Embedded as part of the policy team, a programme of activities was developed that related to the agreed ‘contents’ of the development guidance. This process followed the stages of – prepare – design – review – deliver – that are the fundamental elements of creating successful masterplans.

Prepare

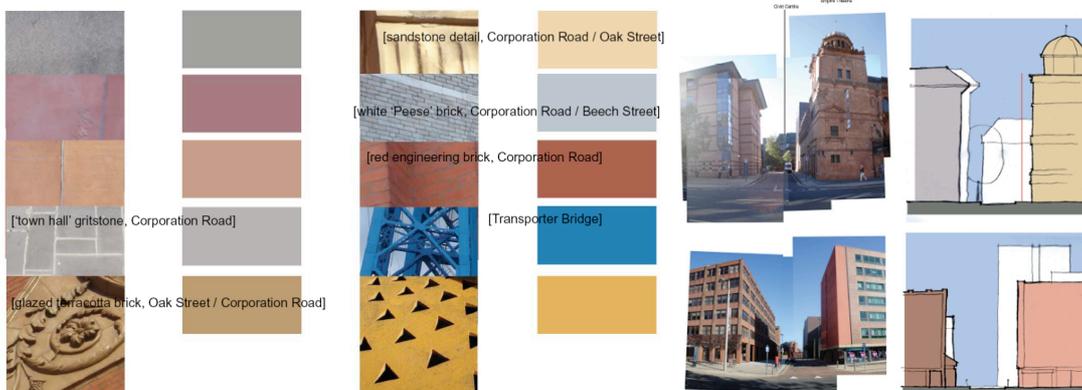
The initial preparatory stages included a significant amount of desk-based research; gathering information of constraints [services, ownerships, leaseholds and policy designations] and a site / context analysis within the town centre.



[initial data used within the development brief included highway adoption, site ownership boundaries, and freehold / lease holdings that present constraints to the delivery of any proposed development options]



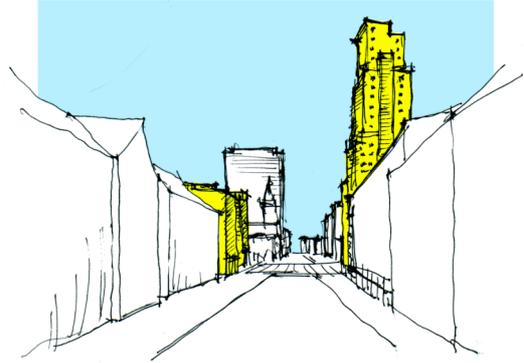
[historic context analysis of Middlesbrough town centre sourcing local maps and images]



[Site analysis was set within the town centre and looked at a range of structural elements at the scale of the urban block; street cross-sections, enclosure, corner treatments; down to the establishment of a local material and colour palette]



Corporation Road
[looking east with open vista /
view of petrochemical plant]



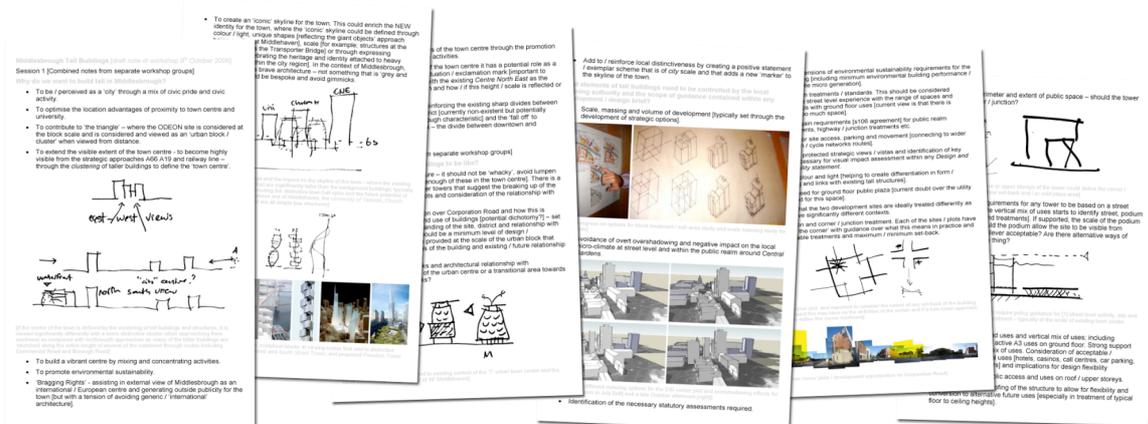
[Identification of a range of strategic views of the site to be considered in relation to any proposals for tall buildings]

The baseline information and context analysis provided the basis for an initial stakeholder workshop³. This was invitation only and extended to a large number of private sector partners operating within the town and who have had some historical association with proposals for the sites or their immediate surroundings. This workshop was organised by Middlesbrough Council and was facilitated by a private sector urban designer who had undertaken significant work within the town centre together with the CAFE pilot programme managers from the Tees Valley and Liverpool.



[Stakeholders at the workshop and during the site walk-a-bout]

The broad content included the policy context, common objectives with a presentation of the baseline material and site analysis, followed by site walkabout. This informed small group sessions on strategic opportunities and constraints for a range of development possibilities, including a look at the benefits and dis-benefits of pursuing ideas of tall buildings.



[Detailed notes and illustrative record of the workshop]

³ This was held on Monday 9th October at the Multi Media Exchange, 72-80 Corporation Road.

During the workshop day there was equal time given to the private sector representatives to present and explain their own thinking behind individual proposals. One innovative element involved the production for a basic town centre CAD model [using freely available demonstration software from Google / SketchUp] that provided the basis for the exploration of different scale and massing options. This was undertaken in real time with new options being constructed during discussions – helping to grow consensus and dismiss some of the more significant options for one of the two sites under consideration. There was an immediate reaction from the stakeholders over the impacts on strategic views and with the use of shadow modeling, the impact of overshadowing on key areas of the public realm. This dynamic use of CAD software as a design tool was incredibly helpful in thinking about options as a continuum [regarding overall building footprint / heights].

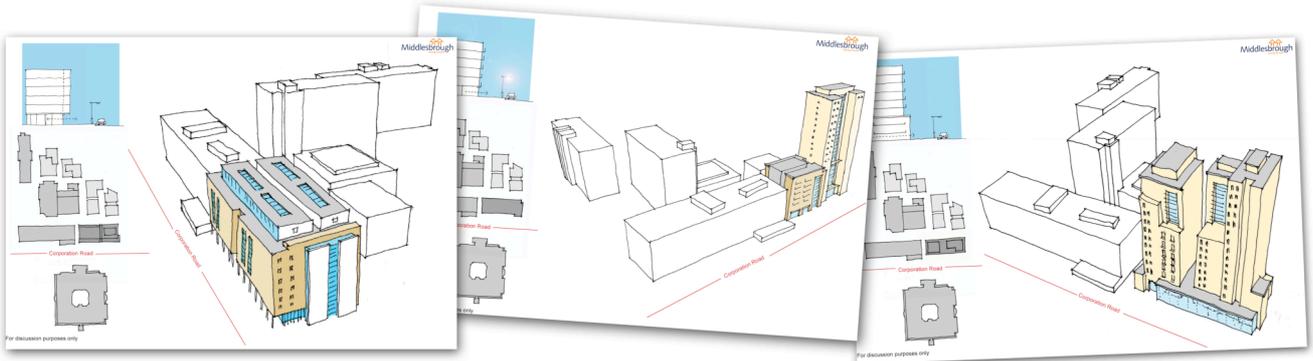
Design

The next stage of the work was the development of a range of possible options that were based on the outcome of the first project workshop combined with additional information gathered regarding other pre-application planning discussions on adjacent sites or in close proximity.

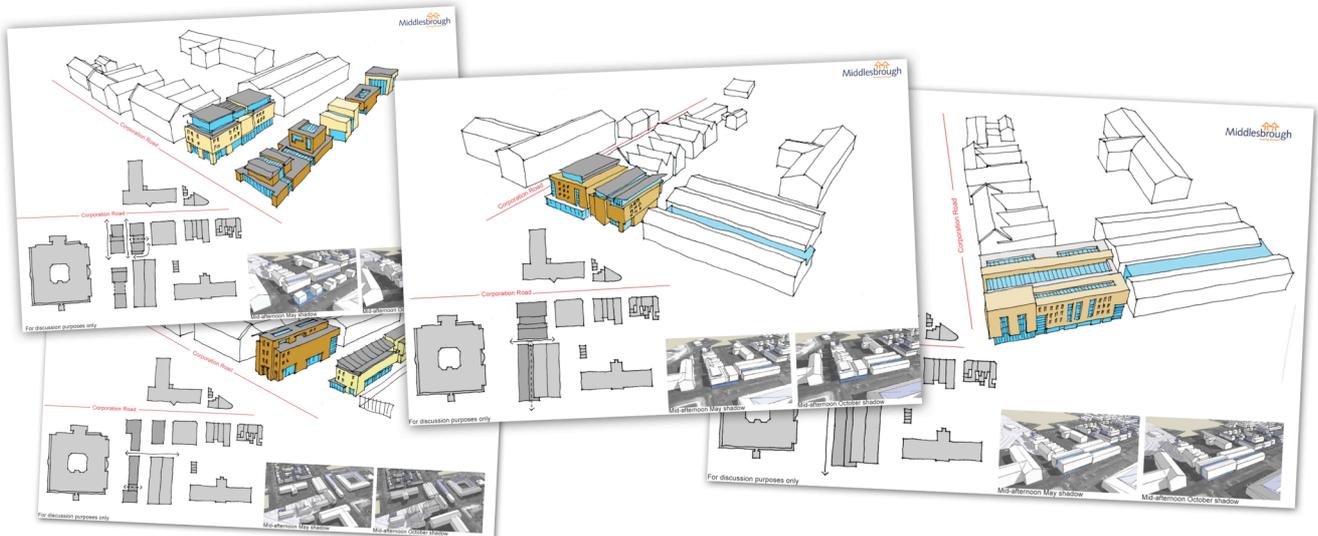


[Some existing development proposals were used as the basis for the development of broader options – in this instance to provision of purpose built court offices and associated car parking – that could benefit from being considered at a more strategic scale]

These preferred options for both of the sites were developed in more detail and included a specific look at ground floor treatments and relationship with public realm. The policy team put together a broad assessment framework for the systematic assessment and review of the options. Collectively these were the focus of a second 'invited' workshop. The continuity with the earlier workshop was evident in these ideas. There was also a significant 'policy' filter undertaken prior to the second workshop, with the Head of Planning making decisions to exclude some of the options in advance of the assessment / review workshop – this was effectively when the local planning authority took their first pro-active stance on the development of these sites and provided clear leadership over what they would find acceptable in terms of uses, scale and massing.



[The three strategic options for discussion for the former ODEON site ranged from a contextual urban block, to a single tower and two separate towers on a consolidated 'podium', beginning to respond to the idea of the growth of a cluster of tall buildings that included many existing tall buildings within this 'Guney Street Triangle' to the north of Corporation Road].

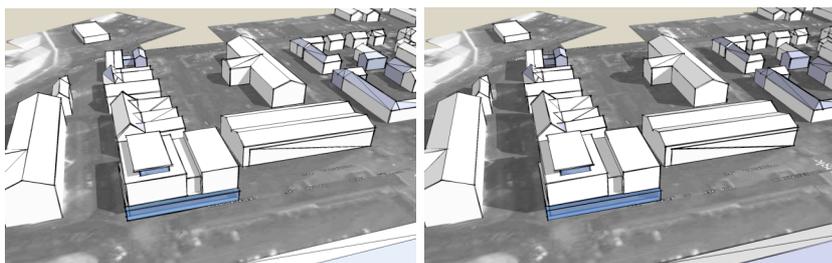


[The surviving options for the former CSI building site follow an internal review within the planning department].

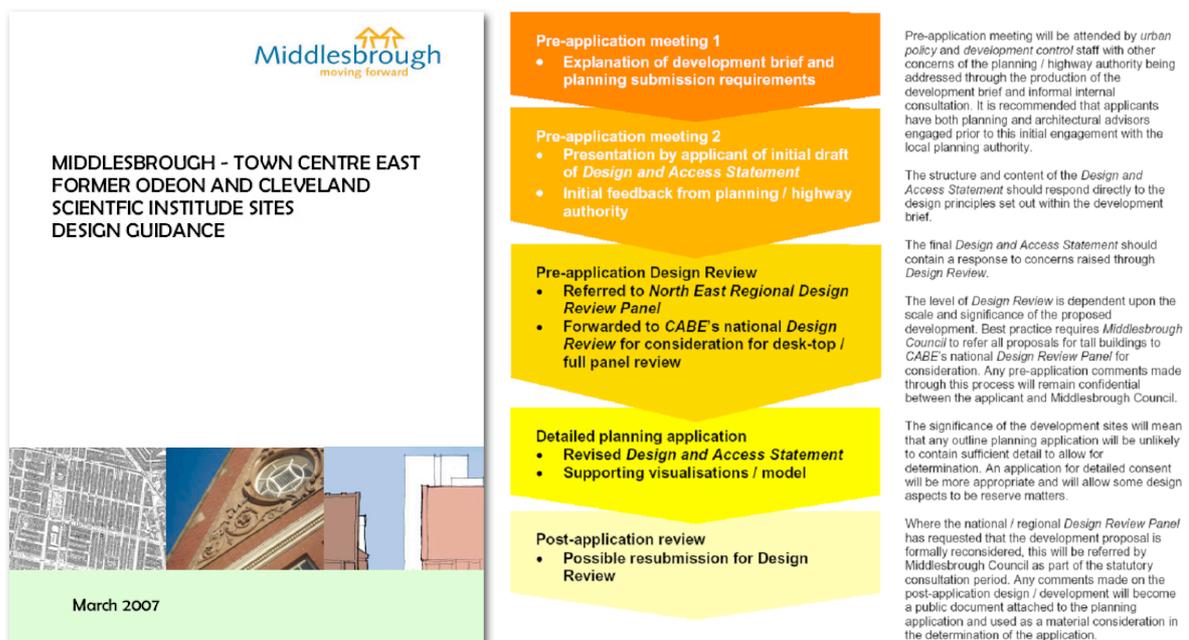
These were not architectural options but options limited to addressing strategic design considerations of;

- Scale and massing;
- Ground floor uses and relationship to public realm;
- Impact on skyline.

Each of these options were independently considered, graphically and within project workshop, against potential overshadowing at different times of the year along Corporation Road [Example below].



The outcome of this ‘options appraisal’ provide the guidance and consensus necessary for the preparation of the draft design guidance. This eventually included a range of possible options with the rationale behind each acceptable solution, presented as clear and unambiguous guidance from the planning authority. This substantive guidance was supplemented by clear guidance on the process with a particular emphasis on the pre-application requirements for a DAS and a commitment for a referral to Design Review. Members of C A B E Design Review have visited the site[s] and are aware of the on-going development interest in submitting a planning application that is likely to include a tall building. There is a commitment from Middlesbrough Council, as the local planning authority, to assess the application against the requirements of the design brief and to refer any future proposals to national or regional design review as appropriate. These commitments, together with submission requirements now clearly place the role of a Design and Access Statement as a tool for pre-application discussions and clearly set out the intention / requirement for a formal design review [nationally / regionally] as a step in meeting the development brief.



[The published brief, completed in March 2007 prior to the local government elections⁴, with an extract of the recommended pre-application processes and commitment to Design Review].

The guidance, as well as the depth of the work behind the production of the document, is being used to control and direct the on-going discussions of the development of the site[s].

⁴ The political timescales was a major factor in the preparation and production times for the planning guidance.

Timescale of overall project

The programme manager's involvement began at the end of August 2006 and running through to the completion of the design / development guidance at the end of March 2007.

Budget [approx]

Resources on the project were in staff time [including additional support from the Regions and Design Review teams within *CABE*] to facilitate the workshops, and a significance level of advance preparation work – this was broadly on the basis of up to 1 day per week working alongside the Urban Policy team in Middlesbrough from August 2006 until completion of the guidance in March 2007 [approximately 20 days in total] – this included initial reactive advice on the speculative proposals through to attending / running workshops, and modelling / preparation / assessment exercises. Additional cost was in the hosting of the workshops [venue hire and catering].

Nature of advice provided

Period of Assistance:

How and at what stage did you assist the client?

The assistance followed pre-application design review and in advance of the scoping of any brief or guidance. This early involvement was significant – *CABE* being invited to provide guidance on the suitability of the response as well as providing a response to the proposals.

Approximate time given to advise [in days]

Approximately 20 days.

Client involvement and the impact of the advice provided

Was there a client commitment to design quality?

There was a clear client commitment to design quality but also being challenged by the need to co-ordinate between a number of overlapping guidance notes and speculative developments. This commitment was due in part to the developer's demolition of an un-listed former church to popular dismay in the press and the frustration of several senior local politicians. This political dimension provided a high level of confidence to officers in their negotiations.

What was the design capacity of the client?

The client has some in-house design capacity but this was placed outside of the planning service and provided by a service level agreement. While there was no designated urban design officer, some members of the urban policy team were qualified in urban design and civic design as well as planning. This capacity was focused on design policy rather than skills in undertaking pro-active site-specific advice, hence the fall-back position of the council to respond to proposals rather than put forward solutions / options.

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

The initial guidance on the DAS requirements had an immediate impact with the private sector applicant appointing their own planning agent to work alongside the scheme architect. The council as client was welcoming at an officer level and allowed for close working as a equal team member with access to confidential briefings and political guidance.

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

Most areas of support worked well – particularly the use of CAD modelling to assess the impact of scale and massing. The restrictions on the programme manager to engage in an level of detail on the design, allied to the limited resources of the *Design Review* team did leave an unfulfilled need for advice at the detailed scale on specification and materials.

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

As the project moved from re-active to pro-active planning as a result of a tall building, the remit and responsibility for *CABE* dealing with tall buildings moved to the *Design Review* team. This created some confusion, although a level of flexibility in supporting the workshop helped resolve any internal tensions. There has to be a flexibility over the focus [and branding] of such a workshop – as in reality it was less about tall building proposals and more concerned about the ‘model’ processes to putting together design guidance and learning by collaborative working, something that required more time input that was possible from the *Design Review* service.

There were several ICT requirements where Middlesbrough Council provided support for the provision of OS Mastermap data, simply requiring the signing of a copyright certification.

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

The Council’s officer Design Champion was the key project contact and driven behind the approach and extent of the policy and design guidance. While the client did not directly appoint a design advisor, they did draw on external support that included design input from a number of public bodies and private sector companies.

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

These are typically split into [1] procedural and [2] technical / policy skills. Procedurally, the production of the design / development brief included;

- An approach to development of options and a structured approach to the appraisal of these options;
- Collaborative working, including drawing in local professional advice and experience regarding the planning history and adjacent sites;

Technical skills included;

- Signposting to, interpretation and adaptation of national policy addressing tall buildings;

- Construction and use of three dimensional computer modelling tools [this included a separate follow up session with local authority staff on ICT data / resources and software training used in the preparation of the development brief].

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

The project began from a poor review from CABE and the project would not have developed into a development brief had CABE's Design Review service not had some initial contact.

Outcomes

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

The input into the project has resulted in a design guidance document and close work with project officers to use this as the appropriate tool in controlling and guiding design quality. The most obvious impact has been the rejection of several of the poor quality proposals, with basic urban principles of mixed use and active frontage being met.

What quality will be achieved in the final building or development

I still have doubt over the final quality for both sites – something that reflects the ability of the architect and / of the willingness of the developer to fully meet the brief requirements.

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

The ability for Middlesbrough Council to put together a design-led and responsive policy document was important. Firstly in providing confidence for staff [with CABE sometimes taking an encouraging role in this work] that they have the technical ability and / or the ability to learn on the job. Secondly, in the use of large / formal pre-application stakeholder engagement and collaboration as a useful process in building consensus – with one agent agreeing with the planning authority's approach and suggestions, over their own 'overtly commercial' proposals for the site, and that the private sector need the council to take a strong stance in design.

Next stages

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

The planning guidance has been produced and is currently being used as the basis for on-going pre-application discussions. A revised planning application[s] for the strategic sites on Corporation Road are anticipated within the months immediately following the May 2007 local council elections.

Are there key dates that the CABE 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?

As above. An application is expected soon and the senior development control officer will be referring it to Design Review for a formal response.

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 is some important feedback for the *Design Review* service regarding the extent of the service offer. In this case the need was for constructive feedback to assist negotiations. The council officers were well aware of the poor design and limitations of the initial proposals and were following best practice in referring this significant tall building to *Design Review*. The officer and applicant / agent expectations of this service went beyond what was possible or available. Perhaps there remains an issue of managing expectations and clarity [via organisational protocol] over remit and responsibilities.

Further information

Contacts: Chris Hawking, Norman Kwan, Sophie White, Kevin Parkes.

e-mail:

Website: www.middlesbrough.gov.uk

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