

Bentham Masterplan - Informal Discussion

Monday, 17 July 2023, 19:00 - 21:00

Bentham Town Hall

Notes of the Informal Discussion

Attendees and Apologies

Councillors of Bentham Town Council – Phil Gerrie, Liz Ryan, Thomas Marshall, Tim Stannard, Mark Paige, Gareth Adams

Bentham Masterplan – Elizabeth Adlington, Jim Munday, Mark Dawson

North Yorkshire Council – Sharon Sunter, Andrew Laycock

Apologies - Tony Burton, Jo Burton

Introduction

Sharon Sunter gave a brief history of the masterplan process to date, including:

- A presentation by David Smurthwaite to the Town Council in 2021 raised an initiative by North Yorkshire County Council / York and North Yorkshire LEP to produce masterplans for key towns across the County.
- Craven District Council proposed Bentham as an appropriate location due to being the second largest settlement in the district, having a role of as a service centre for the north of the district and its position to the western extremity of north Yorkshire.
- In early 2022 CDC issued a procurement brief to appoint a consultant to manage the production of the masterplan. As a result no submissions were received; the key issue cited being the available budget did not reflect the level of work required in the brief.
- As a result of the unsuccessful procurement exercise a group of residents from the Bentham area with senior management experience in the public and private sector came forward with an offer to deliver a public consultation exercise and produce a masterplan based on an agreed brief.
- The masterplan has now been drafted and the purpose of this conservation is to seek informal comments from town councillors prior to the same from North Yorkshire Council and ultimately formal sign off by the project partners.

Elizabeth Adlington gave a brief introduction to the masterplan including:

- The preface clearly sets out the context of the masterplan, why and how it was written
- The final document isn't a consultant or local authority led masterplan; it is a Bentham led masterplan.
- A reminder was made that this is a robust plan and the best that could be done with the available resources available.
- It needed to be made clear the masterplan isn't a document that will be accompanied with or immediately bring funding and investment to the town. It is a document that can be used by others to evidence how a project fits in a wider strategic context

Jim Munday added to this:

- The masterplan was built on strong consultation exercise with local people, organisations, and businesses. The response rate was high with a c.12% response rate.
- Consultation questions were open to seek the honest views of Bentham, not closed yes / no questions.
- The full consultation report will be included as an appendix to the main plan.

Layout

Andrew Laycock noted the layout of the masterplan:

- A deliberately short document to ensure readability.
- A 'Plan on a page' to graphically show the content.
- Areas of activity detailed in tables for readability and a modular approach to content.

Elizabeth Adlington added:

- The masterplan consists of four key themes with a small number of 'areas of activity' underneath.

Themes

A general discussion was had by all on the key issues facing Bentham, broadly structured through the themes noted below.

Community and Facilities

A discussion was had regarding this theme with the following comments made:

- Bentham has a wealth of community groups, many consisting of similar individuals and often set up to address a particular issue or concern.
- There is often a lack of co-ordination between these groups and an approach to overseeing activity would be beneficial.
 - An example given, which overlapped with the Connectivity theme, related to the availability (or otherwise) of minibuses for transport to and from clubs and activities and how resources can be maximised, accessed, and operated safely.
- In relation to young people, access to youth services and opportunities. It was noted there have been previous initiatives often with limited success. Those (including historical initiatives) involved young people in their day-to-day organisation which it was felt helped sustain their operation. It was felt there was an opportunity for further consultation with young people on need and how groups could operate.
- Equally there are youth groups / organisations in neighbouring towns and villages but often transport is an issue which the point noted above may help address.
- Public transport (bus services), predominantly cross border services, were discussed and how the new Melling service was well used but with the necessary services only on a Wednesday.

Connectivity

- Highway – there was a long discussion about liaison and engagement with (the former) NYCC Highways, specifically in relation to the town centre.
 - There was a general frustration regarding engagement in discussions with the Highways Team.
 - The improvement to footways (works to the Station Road footway commenced the evening of this discussion) and resurfacing of the B6480 carriageway to the east of Bentham was welcome but the geographic location of the town meant that works in the direction in which residents accessed services (i.e. towards Lancaster) often fell through the gaps due to the Lancashire / North Yorkshire County boundary.
 - Sharon Sunter noted that as a new Council there is the opportunity for greater joint working between teams, including highways. The difference between the Highway Authority services based at Northallerton; transport planning etc. and locally based maintenance and improvement teams was discussed.
 - Early discussions with NYC Highways had proposed a possible discussion / site visit between representatives of the local highway office, representatives of the town council and economic development. This would allow a clear discussion on how works are prioritised, how the need for works can be raised and possible small-scale activities.
- Rail
 - Rail was seen as a more attractive approach to travel, especially with younger people, and the positioning of the railway station had benefit to the town.
 - The Eden Project (Morecambe) was seen as a positive for Bentham, but a view raised during the meeting was that there needed to be a greater priority on accessibility and integration via rail.
 - Ongoing improvement of rail services with a focus on appropriately timed commuter services was noted.
 - The capacity of trains was raised and reference the length of available platforms versus the number of cars.
- Digital
 - Minimal discussion but the importance of appropriate digital connectivity was noted as an enabler to other areas of activity within the plan, however good broadband connectivity was noted as having an impact on housing costs and there had been a notable increase of people working from home as a result of Covid-19.

Natural and Built Environment

Town Centre

- It was felt a little money could go a long way to improving the town centre and initial works were basic; power washing of public spaces, painting of frontages, planting etc. It was felt this could be an early, low-cost project for the town.
- Street lighting – this had been a frustration with the town council in terms of improving the lighting stock in the town.
- Heritage Trail – this existing initiative is well liked and used but the infrastructure needs bringing up to date.
- Car parking was raised, specifically regarding the quality and operation of Grasmere Drive and how, through better management could help strengthen the town. This would require discussion regarding future double devolution opportunities.

Business and Employment

The need for appropriate employment facilities, whether industrial space or co-working facilities was raised. This was also discussed in relation to access to support services and skills training.

Final Feedback on the Draft Masterplan

This was not a formal meeting of Bentham Town Council. The informal view of the town councillors was that thanks should be given to the Masterplan Team on the work they have completed to bring together a comprehensive plan that clearly identifies the issues facing Bentham. There were no changes to the format or wording of the plan as presented.

Formalising the Plan and Way Forward

Sharon Sunter summarised the process and the way forward:

- The Masterplan is a partnership between Bentham Town Council and North Yorkshire Council (formally Craven District Council and North Yorkshire County Council).
- The draft plan is a plan for Bentham. It isn't a plan of either NYC or BTC and neither organisation is solely responsible for delivery in isolation – it is a plan for all to deliver.
- There was limited discussion on the mechanism to delivery.
- Now informal support has been given by town councillors the next step is for informal consultation within North Yorkshire Council on the content of the plan and seek guidance on how a formal decision on the plan itself will be taken. It is hoped that feedback will be available during September 2023.
- Once comments have been received and acted on accordingly a graphic designer will be commissioned to produce a final document and photographs procured from Jon Brook incorporated.
- This will then be distribution for sign off by individual organisations as appropriate.

Gareth Adams asked about future public consultation on the content of the Plan. Elizabeth Adlington replied:

- There had been a thorough consultation exercise at the start of the process with the ability to engage further during development of the plan. The Plan was drafted clearly on the themes raised during consultation. As such it was felt there wasn't a need for further public consultation.

As a side note there would likely be a need for individual projects developing areas of activity to consult on their proposal as part of any project development and proposed funding bids.

A final comment was made on whether activity to deliver content of the plan by the Town Council could commence or it needed to wait until final approval by all organisations. It was noted that activity should continue and, even though in draft format the plan provided a structure for project activity.

The plan will not be formally published until the above tasks have been completed.