

DARLASTON STRATEGIC REGENERATION FRAMEWORK: WALKABOUT





June 2009

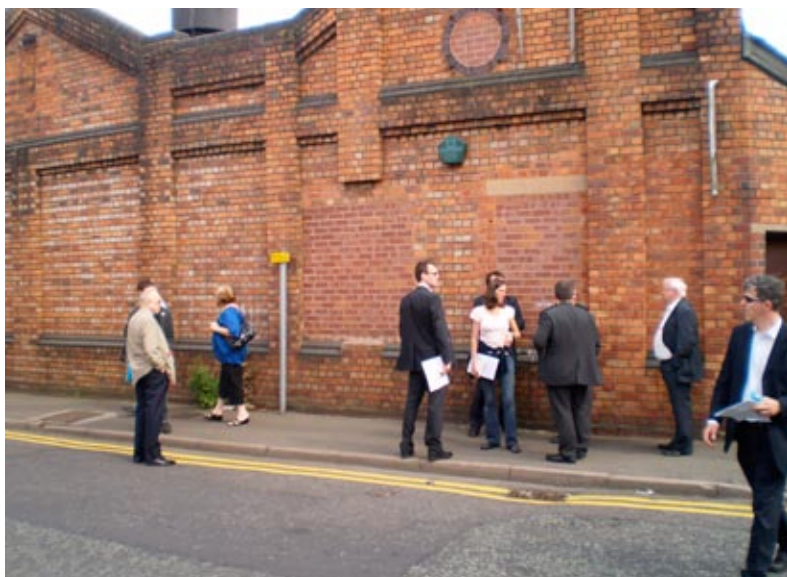
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Station Street

WALKABOUT

To start off the consultation and engagement process for the Darlaston Strategic Regeneration Framework, a walkabout took place in Darlaston on Thursday 4th June 2009. A group consisting of local councillors and representatives from Walsall Council took members from the consultant team on a walk around Darlaston to help understand the issues and opportunities the area faces now and in the future.

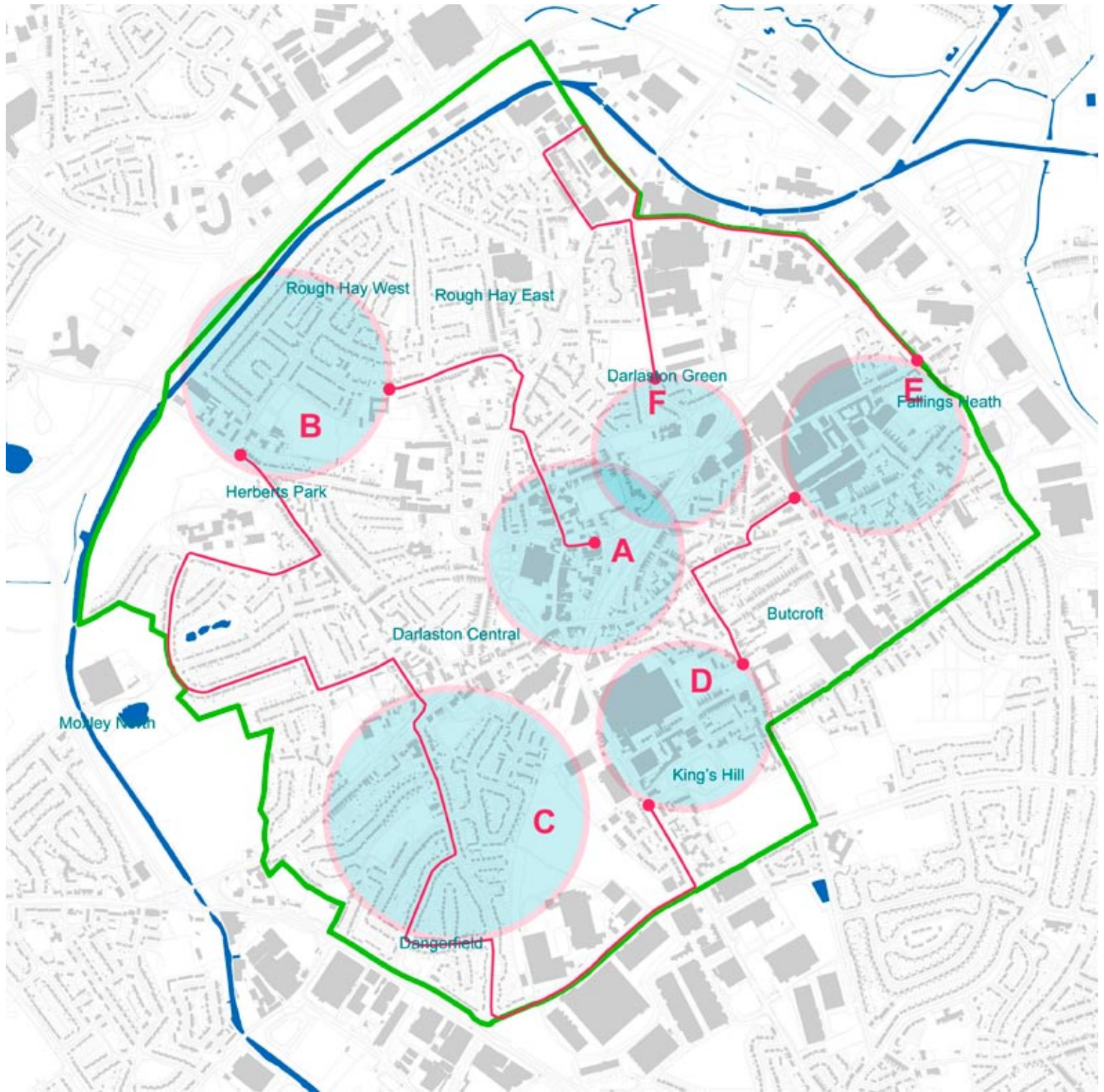
The Walkabout visited six areas, as shown by the plan opposite. The exercise was done to allow specific issues, opportunities and priorities to be raised whilst walking in a specific site context, by people who know the area a lot more personally than we ever will.

What follows are some of the main points of discussion raised during the walk together with a selection of photos from each of the focus areas.

This exercise is by no means exhaustive, or representative of a complete picture of Darlaston, but it does provide a foot in the door of understanding the issues faced locally by parts of Darlaston. We will follow this exercise with further workshops that will reveal and record more issues and opinions that we will have to consider in our work in Darlaston.

Following the Walkabout there will be a roundtable consultation with key stakeholders to discuss issues in more detail on the 2nd July.

ATTENDEES	
Local Authority	Cllr Adrian Andrew – Deputy leader and Portfolio holder for regeneration Cllr Chris Bott – Ward Cllr Darlaston South Cllr Paul Bott – Ward Cllr Darlaston South Cllr Graham Wilkes – Ward Cllr Darlaston South Cllr Keith Chambers – Ward Cllr Bentley and Darlaston North Cllr Bill Madeley – Ward Cllr Bentley and Darlaston North
Client Team	Richard Chadwick – Team Leader Development Rob Andrews – Development Team Helen Kindon – District Centre Manager Nick Bird – Major Projects Director (Walsall Regeneration Company) Alison Hayward – Development Team (Walsall Housing Group) Fred Gleeson – Chair Moxley Project Reference Group and Manager of Moxley Peoples Centre
Consultant Team	David Rudlin - URBED, Director Helen Flage - URBED, Lead Project Manager Jonathan Brown, URBED, Senior Consultant Paul Bower, URBED, Urban Designer Jonathan Tutt, DTZ, Project Manager Stephen Lucas, SQW Project Director



Legend

 Darlaston Regeneration Area

 Mini-bus Route

 Walkabout Area

- Area A - Town Centre
- Area B - Rough Hay
- Area C - Woods Bank
- Area D - Kings Hill
- Area E - Station Street
- Area F - Victoria Road



King Street and the ASDA facade



King Street and children playing



Bar (Former Bank) on Pinfold Street



King Street and vacant units



Surestart, Church Street



Mixed services on Church Street

pedestrian.

Area A - Town Centre

- Fundamental cause of Darlaston's problems is erosion of manufacturing jobs.
- Unemployment has had a large impact on the town centres prospects with much of the depleted income going to ASDA as opposed to the rest of the High Street (King Street)
- The High Street lacks the range of goods and services a town of Darlastons size should possess and it was felt that ASDA had a direct and ongoing influence in this current situation. The only national retailer on King Street is Boots, not ignoring the two bookmakers of Coral and William Hill.
- The current ASDA store is actually the second store the supermarket has had on the site; formerly it did have entry off King Street, but since the rebuild it has turned its one active frontage towards its large surface car park to the south of the store. This lack of integration with the town centre is a key issue that needs addressing.
- The ASDA store receives regular deliveries along New Street, where large vehicles turn in and out of the service yard making this a street quite treacherous for a pedestrian.
- The Owen Memorial Garden is hidden by the presence of the ASDA store, disconnecting it visually and physically from the civic centre of Darlaston. Although it was noted that the mature trees do well to obscure the large blank façade of the supermarket behind.
- The number of cars in ASDA's car park shows people are willing to make the journey to the store
- ASDA site used to be a Methodist church and a network of small streets. Its lack of activity on King Street is very regrettable.
- King Street has been pedestrianised for several decades now and has been generally accepted, although the street becomes dead when the shops close in the evenings. With the exception of some children who sometimes gather on bicycles or with a football – as was the case when we were leaving. This was seen as both a positive and negative side effect.
- There is a feeling that the newer buildings that have replaced the original Victorian High Street have not been of a good enough design and build quality and are failing as a result of this. Despite good examples of contemporary design locally in the Surestart centre to the east of King Street and the swimming pool to the north of the centre.



Library, King Street from south



Town Hall and the Swan Pub on Victoria Road



Empty unit in restored shop, Church Street



The Leys, carparks and leftover verge



Dovecot in Victoria Park



Darlaston Bus Station beside ASDA's carpark

- There was consensus that King Street should be transformed, the work should explore opening up King Street again to traffic and site assembly and redevelopment opportunities assessed.
- King Street needs animating with activity from both the ASDA store and other uses, such as market stalls
- The internet cafe was closed, the reason was unknown
- The town centre lacks any night time activity, with the exception of the former bank, on the southern tip of King Street, which is now a popular Gay Bar in the evening.
- The library is seen as a real success in Darlaston and is valued by the local community as an accessible resource and educational venue for life long learning.
- New signage is generally disliked, and appears to have only been placed in the centre recently; although no-one seems to know who is responsible for it. The lack of any map or quality, accurate and consistent signage is apparent to all.
- The bike shop on Church Street has vacated the premises due to persistent vandalism
- To the north and south of King Street there are high levels of traffic together with regular high speed vehicles (quad bikes and customised cars) cruising around the centre.
- The current bus shelters are isolated from the town and facilities poor. There is potential to redevelop this site and surroundings and relocate the bus station more centrally.
- The Pinfold Street block presents a poor gateway to the town on a strategic route, this area needs to be a focus for improvement
- Victoria Park's dovecot and bird bath divide opinion due to the high level of investment. The dovecot appears to be well used, notwithstanding the large number of pigeons but the bird bath has been fenced off and appears to be in disrepair.
- Town Hall is currently underused, in spite of current investments and requires assistance in bringing more people in to use it. Ideas welcome. – Publicity?
- The former multi use recreation centre is in the process of being demolished, however its sign outside the town hall is still present – its loss raises mixed responses.
- Bus services draw another mixed response with some



Pinfold Street and the derelict shop units



Recently installed signage on King Street



Side street off King Street



Boarded up semis on Lowe Avenue



Local centre at junction of Rough Hay Rd and Hall Street



View back towards the spire of St Lawrence on Rough Hay Road

councillors saying how well the buses serve Darlaston, as they are the only real means of public transport on offer. On the other hand several responses raised questions over the reliability and quality of the bus service currently available.

- The social clubs and pubs to the north of the roundabout adjacent to St. Lawrence's church are surrounded by a large amount of car parking and unused open space – however it was mentioned that these are well used by the local residents. (The Leys)
- Employers like GKN and Rubery Owen were enlightened – they were owned by families from the West Midlands and looked after their employees.
- Staff canteens, unions and social clubs helped cement social solidarity and support the wider community.
- Church Street once lined with shops. Nissen hut is the old Drill Hall. War memorial was built on the site of an old house – found a lavish wine cellar when building the memorial!
- Cottage next to the Post Office has an historic 'dovery' in the garden.

- Town Hall has had £500k spent a year or so back but still needs gutters clearing; should be used to provide managed workspace for local enterprises to rent – this would generate a revenue to sustain the building. It is still used for plays and events.

- Darlaston had its own council; it's good that Walsall have maintained a presence – local neighbourhood partnership meet there, perhaps council could 'rotate' from Walsall sometimes?

- The former tower blocks on St. Lawrence Way were built on an area of cleared terraced houses, now they themselves are cleared whilst terraces on King Edward Street are seen as nice houses.

- <http://www.localhistory.scit.wlv.ac.uk/articles/DarlastonAlbum/Album2.htm>

Area B - Rough Hay

- Houses largely owned by Walsall Housing Group, received Decent Homes, but quality and condition of gardens and public realm could be improved. There are some vacant properties.



Locked up and empty sports ground, Hall St



Gates to George Rose Park, Wolverhampton St



View up Stafford Road



Hidden sports ground, Hall St



Former Factory for sale, Stafford Road



New housing on Willenhall Street

- The recreation ground on Hall Street is on a long lease to the Darlaston Community Association from the Council. It has received much investment (all weather pitches, floodlighting etc) but not well used or managed by the community association. The all-weather pitches on Hall Street are currently locked and out of use.
- There is a possibility of the resource being used by the forthcoming academy as sports facilities for both children and adults in the evening – this idea was welcomed as a possible alternative to current plans. The bowling green also used to be the best in the area, uncertainty over who runs and manages it now, but appears underused.
- The proposed Academy on George Rose Park is at an advanced stage – however the scheme faces opposition from those who see it removing vital mature green space from Rough Hay.
- The local centre at the junction of Rough Hay Road and Hall Street has had recent investment in its public realm together with money (£100K) for a safe walk to school scheme. The outward appearance is pleasant although we are made aware that the lay-by dimensions make it hard to capture passing trade and the current tenants are struggling to stay afloat. Further more the original planters designed for the local centre have since been removed due to creating unforeseen anti-social behaviour. There was a dead tree which needed to be removed.
- Rough Hay suffers from a large proportion of unemployed and benefit dependency – no exact figures were quoted. This is seen as a major hurdle in attracting further investment in the area.
- The surgery on Rough Hay Road appeared to be locked-up (Half-day closing on Thursdays?) behind an unforgiving palisade fence.
- The adjacent site to the surgery was formerly the Neighbourhood Centre – but due to vandalism and misuse this facility was demolished and the site remains empty and fenced off.
- There was a general consensus that children were under provided for in the area – as there was no centre or managed place for them to go to, which seems illogical with the Hall Street recreation ground possibility.



Secluded and hidden park on Kings Hill



East entry to Kings Hill Park



New playground to the west of Kings Hill



Kings Hill primary school, Old Park Road



Factory Building, Station Street



Salisbury School, Station Street

- New Academy on George Rose Park will take some of the space but release funds to restore the remainder to a high standard; it will also be a flagship educational facility. The Academy does cause some controversy due to its sponsor.
- George Rose Park has already enjoyed £150k of NRF for a new playground and skatepark. Former park keeper's house has been refurbished.
- Local primary schools 'punch above their weight' but senior schools less so.
- Kings Hill Park will benefit from £200k of Section 106 from the TIW residential site allocation (Woden Road).
- In Moxley, the West Midlands Wildlife trust are relocating their HQ to Moorcroft Wood (just south of the A41, not far from the 'tip' site, opportunity for green links along Canal)
- 'Wards Site' (permission for 300 houses) is being planned to incorporate a wildlife corridor and to improve the setting of the pond.
- Playing field complex on Hall Street is huge but badly

undervalued and virtually invisible – local kids deserve to be able to access and use it. Considerable money spent (possibly Lottery funded) on astro-turf, floodlighting, new roof for changing rooms etc. but gates are always locked.

- This was the former GKN social club. (Should pull back fence if possible to allow wider pavement – gets very busy with children from the school)
- 'Belgian Houses' on Wolverhampton Street took people from occupied Europe during and after WWII. They are in need of some repair.

Area C - Woods Bank

- Dangerfield Lane being pleasant enough council 'garden suburbia', with generous landscaping 'set backs', a little shop at the south end and a nice playground/rec on Broadwaters Road.
- Interface with the new development on the Woods Bank (Industrial) Estate looked non-existent.
- The proximity of the Black Country Route is felt by some residents.



Youth Centre, Bill Street



Playground, Whitton Street



Station Street, mixed uses side by side



Sikh Temple,



Industrial premises



On site, large residential scheme by MarCity, Bloor Homes, Woden Road West

- Pinfold Street is a featureless approach route – why the 200 yard dual carriageway?

Area D - Kings Hill

- The park was opened in 1904. The mound is the slag from an old pit shaft. It used to have more facilities, including a paddling pool. A user survey showed the facility people most want to keep are the toilets, though the block is closed (and ugly).
- Friends of Darlaston Park South have a £250k business plan using Section 106 from the TIW site, to complement money already spent through NRF on the playground.
- Over-mature planting needs radically thinning down to open up views and reduce fear of crime.
- An idea for opening up views from the top of the mound to frame the axis between the two historic church spires of 17th C St. Lawrence Darlaston and 13th C St. Bartholomew's Wednesbury is a possibility. A good site for a landmark?
- Rolling Stones and other great bands like the Hollies played in the Bolero Club down the road in Wednesbury!
- Tragic suicide of a young boy subjected to homophobic bullying is marked by a memorial bench and informal planting.
- There was a common feeling that Kings Hill Park and its surrounding recreational spaces were very hidden not only from visitors but also for many of the residents of Darlaston. One councillor mentioned it was his first visit to the park and he had lived in Darlaston for many years.
- The gateways, with the exception to the one off Darlaston Road, are understated and poorly defined with low quality signage indicating what lies beyond.
- “Bus services are poor to some areas – Kings Hill”.
- BT Exchange opposite Kings Hill Primary School is vacant along with adjacent Council owned land, potential development opportunity.
- Development Opportunities on Darlaston Road, such as Servis site, which has planning permission for housing



Factory gates opposite Whitton Street



Vacant BT Exchange, Old Park Road



Vacant site



Asian foodstore, Cobden Street



Scout hut, Victoria Road



Allotments off Victoria Road

Area E - Station Street

- The area is served by a well functioning school on Station Street and youth facilities in the form of a Youth centre, children’s playground and Multi-Use Games Area along Whitton Street.
- The two mosques and one Sikh Temple are well tended and provide the local ethnic communities with communal hubs amongst the industrial/residential setting.
- The surrounding area is made up of large scale Industrial premises, despite this potential conflict the uses are managing to co-exist. This may need to be clarified by asking those who actually live here how they perceive this relationship?
- The industrial area around Station Street provides hundreds of local jobs which should be protected
- Development opportunity around Cook Street/Franchise Street area



Darlaston Swimming Pool, Victoria Road



Half demolished leisure centre, Victoria Road



The Innovation Works @ Rubery Owen, Booth Street

Area F - Victoria Road

- Former Leisure Building (formerly a Victoria School) is in the process of being demolished, the existing signage pointing to this long vacated building is still present outside the Town Hall. This was noted by several participants during the walkabout and will be dealt with shortly.
- The allotments opposite the Swimming Pool and adjacent to the former leisure building are still active and tended for. However there appears to be uncollected waste near the road edge and the site is under occupied which detracts from what is a pleasant set of allotments.
- Darlaston Swimming Pool is a quality piece of public architecture (Hodder Associates, c. 2000), praised and held up by CABE that sits at the northern tip of Victoria Park. However, there is little evidence/acknowledgement of its presence in the town centre. I.e. no signs or posters showing directions or publicising its existence.
- Vacant, under-utilised land around Heath Road needs a clear planning strategy. MarCity former employment site off Richards Street has had a planning application submitted for housing, which has yet to be determined. There is some support for this change of use in the area.
- Managed work space on Booth Street is under-utilised. This facility offers 29 flexible office spaces with support facilities. It is linked to the Walsall Social Economy Centre and home of the Walsall Regeneration Housing Agency Partnership led by Accord.