



Awards for Planning Excellence Case Study

The BIS - entered by Hartlepool Borough Council

RTPI North East Awards for Planning Excellence 2020

Our Awards champion the very best examples of planning and planners in the North East. They demonstrate the positive impact planning has on our quality of life and celebrate professional expertise. The Awards are open to all planners, both members and non-members, and all other build environment professions and community groups. Entry to our Awards is free. Being shortlisted or winning is a clear demonstration of the high quality of your work and professionalism.

All shortlisted and winning entrants will be provided with the RTPI North East Awards for Planning Excellence logo, which can be used on your own website, email, social media and promotional materials.

Summary

The BIS is a vibrant flexible workspace providing studios and offices for the creative industries sector through the refurbishment and extension of the derelict Grade II Listed former General Post Office Building in Hartlepool. The project is aimed at both new and existing creative businesses to capture and retain knowledge and skills in the town. It is a key catalyst project in the Innovation and Skills Quarter regeneration strategy, is significantly contributing to the revitalisation of the Church Street Victorian conservation area, whilst bringing community benefit by shifting perceptions of the area from decline into an evolving and dynamic area.

1. Background

Please outline the background to the project:

Formerly a nightclub, this Grade II listed building was derelict when identified for this project. The area around the BIS, formerly the heart of Hartlepool until the 1960s, has been in a state of market failure for a number of years with no signs of private investment in the area. A conservation area at risk, this market failure has seen the condition of historic buildings and the historic environment decline significantly. Strategic planning was necessary to address the challenges of the area and arrest the decline.

The initiative to regenerate this building into an SME business incubator was instigated by a strategy produced in 2014. The strategy identified two key issues: a lack of accommodation for creative industry sector SMEs in Hartlepool, especially accommodation that created a cluster of businesses (evidenced to be in demand), and the missed opportunity to retain the exceptional creative industries talent being developed by the Northern School of Art in Hartlepool.

In 2014 the area that had been the Victorian centre of Hartlepool, and continued to be home to the Northern School of art and Hartlepool Further Education College, was identified as the Innovation and Skills Quarter (ISQ) with an ambitious strategic plan to regenerate the whole area into a cluster for creative industry businesses. An area in long-term decline, the renewed focus for the area was intended to drive its long-term regeneration into a progressive, evolving and dynamic area. A business incubator facility for the creative sector was critical to this strategic area.

The aims and objectives of the project:

- To provide vibrant and flexible workspace for established and new business start-ups.
- To create a 'leading-light' anchor project that places creative businesses at the heart of the Innovation and Skills Quarter regeneration programme.

- To design an innovative scheme that enabled the development of a creative community network, a collection of individual spaces with 'staff attractive' features, and flexible space supporting business growth.
- To shift the perception of the area away from one of decline into a progressive, evolving and dynamic area that retains a young creative population and establishes a diverse community.
- To provide a catalyst for the ISQ that demonstrates the potential of the area and attracts further private investment in the area.
- To save a Grade II listed building.

Pre Project Stage – This included: Early economic studies (2014) that assessed needs and opportunities in the town. Masterplanning to create a regeneration strategy that included a focus on this Conservation Area at risk (2016). Production of the Innovation and Skills Strategy (2018) that assessed economic, policy and land issues. Identification and acquisition of a suitable building within the strategic area to accommodate the project.

Feasibility Stage – This included: Feasibility studies for the building including close collaboration with the planning and conservation teams to appraise options and issues for the refurbishment and extension of the identified building.

Design Phase – Throughout the early and developed design stages the team worked in close collaboration with the support of the planning team in early advice.

2. Outcomes

Positive impacts the project has provided for:

The project has provided much needed high quality and accessible facilities for the creative community of Hartlepool, helping to retain creative sector businesses in the town.

Tenant creative organisations have been using the workshop space to develop services for community benefit that complement their business. The design of the BIS has facilitated new collaborative partnerships that have generated business opportunities for tenants leading to the creation of new festivals, events and community outreach programmes.

The core partners in the project are the two local colleges: this partnership has already enabled the colleges to show progression routes to creative industry work and enterprise through student collectives and running teaching spaces. It is hoped it will encourage and support young creative professionals to return to set up their own business in the local area during their career, retaining talent and a younger population in the area.

The BIS is having a significantly positive impact on the ISQ area and has been an important part of a regeneration strategy; demand for SME accommodation has been demonstrated, a new identity for the area is forming and private investment is now being made in the immediate vicinity of The BIS as perceptions of the area change. An important heritage asset in the town has been saved and the historic environment has been improved.

The design of the building, the choice of materials used and technology employed has contributed to the sustainability of the building and reduced the buildings long term impact on the environment. Construction techniques and the use of AOV's have been used to support the buildings heating and cooling. The new extension is highly insulated and built to a high specification with consideration to the buildings carbon footprint i.e. the materials used to clad the rear new build have a high content of recycled materials and are able to be fully recycled at the end of the buildings life.

3. Planning contribution

How the project has benefitted from the involvement of a planner or planners:

Strategic planning of the area in the pre project stage has been critical in enabling this project to happen. Planners were instrumental in developing the overarching regeneration strategy for the area which involves the creation of an “Innovation and Skills Quarter” creative industries quarter to reshape the regeneration of the historic Church Street area of Hartlepool, a conservation area at risk.

The vision is to create a new rationale and demand within the Church Street area which is characterised by vacant and underutilised properties and a lack of footfall and demand. The ISQ strategy now forms a key pillar of the Local Plan. The strong leadership and direction provided by planners provided the rationale, evidence base and justification for the project and galvanized support from members, politicians and the Tees Valley Combined Authority and led to a partnership for the delivery of the project.

From the outset the overriding mindset of the project team was one of partnering and collaboration with the planning and conservation officers. The architectural strategy for the development of the building was to provide a carefully considered balance between old and new. The fundamental ethos was to re-use and restore rather than refurbish. Interventions were kept to a minimum, only being introduced to ensure the building functioned as a whole entity. This brought a raw freshness to the buildings character. The unique character was created primarily by including the Conservation Officer as a member of the project team from the outset which allowed the design team to identify, retain and give prominence to the key historical features. Guided tours of the building were held by the conservation officer before the design process started which allowed the historical features to be identified and form and integral features of the building, adding character which the targeted creative industries sector value. Direct communication channels were established, saving time and allowing trust to be established with the planning and conservation teams. This also led to the creation of the unique “feature” new build extension with gold zinc cladding which the planning team advised on from an early stage to ensure maximum impact and complementarity with the Listed building.

Extensive research was undertaken across North East England to determine the best balance of studio and office spaces that would enable the development of a creative community and a vibrant collection of individual spaces. The Conservation Officer was involved in best practice visits with the design team to the Tetley Building and Old Mill in Leeds to help advise on the retention of historical features within the BIS.

The project has significantly benefited from the close collaboration with the planning and conservation teams. Regular tours were organised with the planning and conservation teams so again they maintained a key advisory role once the works had started on site. This allowed issues to be addressed such as the transition between the Listed building and new build extension.

4. Sustainable development

How the project has supported:

The project has already demonstrated short to medium term public benefits with long-term benefits expected:

- tenant businesses have used the building to develop community engagement programmes, delivering workshops that support wellbeing and build social capital in the community.
- the BIS is a serviced building and discounted rent to encourage the creation of new businesses includes the provision of dedicated business support in partnership with the Northern School of Art. This is supporting business to be connected and resilient with the hope that the long term benefit will be the generation of jobs and the growth of SME's. The aim is for businesses to become established in the BIS then be supported to move out into vacant buildings within the wider Church Street area, thereby improving the economic sustainability of the Church Street area.

The projects core objectives are in supporting economic growth and job creation; the project has been key in capturing businesses and providing them with accommodation that can support their growth. This

retention and support will lead to job retention and job creation. As a council-led project working in partnership with the local colleges, it is hope that businesses will provide jobs for graduates, building the creative industry economy in the area.

This is balanced well with the social objectives through the design and development of the project; the education of young people is supported through the college partnerships and the education of community members through the creative workshop and creative groups supports people's wellbeing. The growth of good quality professional jobs in the creative industries sector will provide a good standard of living. The conservation of a landmark building in Hartlepool supports the sense of history, place and identify in the area that reinforces people's sense of pride in the area.

The design and construction of the building has sort to reduce the construction and life-long use of carbon as well as cleverly manage resources in both the construction and ongoing running of the building. The new building is highly insulated and built to a high specification. The materials used to clad the rear new build have a high content of recycled materials and are able to be fully recycled at the end of the buildings life. The exposed brick work and ceilings provides high thermal mass which can be used to benefit the heating and cooling required by providing a constant and stable back ground. Night purging to cool the thermal mass has been allowed for through the integration of AOV's. Natural ventilation through openable windows allows for individually controlled cooling and each space benefits from controlled heat source powered through a centralised wet heating system with dual boilers responsive to demand. The listed building envelop performance was enhanced through replacement conservation sash windows and enhanced roof insulation where possible. The historic section of the building has been left in its raw unplastered state to reduce its carbon footprint the approximate carbon footprint of Gypsum plaster is 0.12 kg CO2 per 1 kg.

5. Community benefit

How the project has provided:

Hartlepool Borough Council, the Tees Valley Combined Authority, Hartlepool College of Further Education and the Northern School of Art have worked in partnership on the project as part of a wider ongoing initiative to develop the Innovation and Skills Quarter around Church Street.

The strategy for the Innovation and Skills Quarter was developed in association with extensive stakeholder and community consultation. The Northern School of Art were involved in the project from the initial feasibility work which allowed creative practitioners and students to help shape the development of the project.

The provision of quality jobs with good wages and with the potential for progression is an important contribution that this project is making to the community of Hartlepool, one of the 10% most deprived areas in the country. This addresses one of the area's most significant challenges of retaining skilled and educated young people in the area.

During the delivery of the project, the focus was on using local labour wherever possible. In excess of 90% of the subcontractors employed on the works were within a 30 mile radius of the works. The main contractor Gus Robinson Developments, is an established Hartlepool contractor who partner with the charity Hartlepool Youth to improve the lives of local young peoples. They employ several apprentice trainees from the area who were involved with this vital local regeneration projects.

This project provides the infrastructure of a high quality work place with, crucially, the space and facilities to enable networking and cross-connections between professionals and businesses that are known to support creative industry sector development. The design of the building has also enabled the creative businesses to provide community members not within the creative industries sector to engage with this industry and experience and learn from creative businesses and professional i.e. photography courses, designer-maker course and community participation through arts. The Halloween event is a prime example of the success of dialogue and engagement of local people. The individual businesses used the atrium space space

provided by the open design of the building to collaborate and provide workshops and events which engaged the local community with the creative sector.

The existing building was extended by providing a new fourth wing, enclosing the central area to create a common social space. This linking multi-function space provides a social gathering space which already plays host to events and community activities. The size distribution of spaces was designed to allow businesses to grow organically within the same building whilst providing opportunities for existing companies to establish themselves in a burgeoning creative environment.

Regional Significance

The project is an exemplar project for the North East and is a key component of the Innovation and Skills Quarter regeneration plan which has started to develop a thriving creative industries cluster centred around the Church Street Conservation Area.

This project has placed creative businesses at the heart of the regeneration plan for this historic conservation area. It allows them to be located in Hartlepool and the North East rather than forced from the area through lack of suitable workspace. The legacy is a “creative cluster” of businesses which has already seen the growth of the creative sector in Hartlepool and the North East, driving new footfall and demand within the area.

The principal aspiration behind the ISQ project is that its proposals shift the perception of the area away from one of decline into a progressive evolving and dynamic area with new life centred on the student and young creative population and their retention to establish a diverse community; nurturing collaborative relationships through the provision of spaces for new businesses, teaching and education.

Generous sized studios facing on to the social spaces has attracted creative organisations looking to develop businesses in a more outward looking direction for community benefit and wellbeing, including creative workshops for the community and a young professional collective.

The project has proved a successful catalyst for new investment and demand within the area. The BIS complements a range of existing projects within the Innovation and Skills Quarter including a £5m programme of public realm improvement in Church Street, Church Square and Stockton Street in addition to the £11m new campus for the Northern School of Art which has both a regional and national significance within the creative industries sector, being one of only four specialist art colleges in the country.

The existing Listed building has been extended by providing a new complementary fourth wing, enclosing the central area to create a common social space, which links new and old buildings unifying the spaces into a single facility. The proposed new building is distinct, modern and clearly separate but complementary to the existing building. This is a space designed to allow different building occupants, including visitors and guests to mix with the intent of nurturing collaborative partnerships.

The BIS has proven to have a significant influence on the behaviour and aspirations of tenants and been a key attractor to new businesses. The design, quality and style of the building is unique not only in the Tees Valley but in the North East of England.

The evidence for The BIS speaks for itself, with a take-up of 75% in under a year which is far in advance of the Council's target for this stage. The occupiers benefit from incentivised rental arrangements and business support include artists, photographers, animators and jewellers in addition to Hartlepool College of Further Education who have taken space for training and studio use.