



The building that never was

Waveney Campus would have provided a home for two councils and specialist accommodation for fish researchers, but a surprise blow means it cannot be built. Mark Smulian finds out who killed off £53m of regeneration

It would have been the £53m centrepiece of a regeneration area, a building designed to high environmental standards and a showpiece for collaboration between public bodies.

'Would have been' because the plug was pulled on Waveney Campus in December 2009 after five years of planning and design work, leaving it as one of the largest local authority-led projects never to be built.

The design was acclaimed, it had passed government financial tests and its local backers were keen to proceed. Public spending

cuts would not have helped, but need not have proved fatal given the long-term savings it would have brought. Yet when the final blow fell that scuppered Waveney Campus it came from a totally unexpected direction and, too late, events were to prove that it could have proceeded after all.

The story began in the mid-2000s. Waveney District Council had had its ageing offices in Lowestoft slated as "unfit for purpose" by Audit Commission inspectors.

Meanwhile the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and



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Aquaculture Science (Cefas) – a government agency that is a major local employer – was struggling in a converted seaside hotel with assorted extensions.

Suffolk County Council wished to create a local presence for some of its services, and so these three bodies conceived the idea that they would jointly develop a building for their shared use. They chose a site on Kirkley waterfront, an area zoned for regeneration, which it was hoped the campus' presence would help to kick-start.

The project was certainly ambitious, but it wasn't reckless. Indeed in 2007 it was singled out by Sir David Varney, then a Treasury special adviser, for praise as "an exciting new development involving the co-location of three local and central government bodies in new offices and laboratories that are part of a wider strategy for improving customer service in the town".

Ken Sale, then Waveney's portfolio holder for the built environment, said at the time: "This will be a building with high environmental sustainability: lower CO₂ emissions, lower waste and noise outputs, more efficient heating and water solutions,

and cycle routes and secure parking to encourage sustainable transport to the site."

Despite its name, the 'campus' rapidly turned into a single building. Yasser El Gabry, regional director of designer Aedas Architects, explains: "It would have been quite a complex building. Although the site is not unusual, Cefas has specialised requirements for laboratories and an aquarium, and the councils wanted offices, and it became clear quite early on that they wanted a shared entrance and some shared facilities so it became a single building."

Mr El Gabry at first considered designing a tower block, since the site was out of town and this would provide a landmark. This idea was though rapidly abandoned because of Cefas' laboratories.

"They require fume extraction at the highest point of the building, but you cannot put laboratories at the top of a tower as they as they have to have materials delivered. So the building had to have a larger footprint," he says.

Waveney Campus thus became a building of three storeys and

“an exciting new development involving the co-location of three local and central government bodies [...] part of a wider strategy for improving customer service in the town”

Sir David Varney

15,000 m² of space, with a single entrance and a central ‘street’ running through the ground floor bridged by floors with meeting rooms and break out areas, which would be shared by all three occupants. They would also share the canteen.

Accommodating the partners’ different needs posed challenges. “The laboratories had to have higher ceilings than the offices so there was some reconciliation to do,” Mr El Gabry says.

“The offices were a standard specification using natural ventilation, but the laboratories had to be mechanically ventilated.”

The design used the building’s concrete frame as a heat sink, with a north-south orientation to maximise natural heat and light.

the campus as:

“Not only an exciting opportunity to regenerate a brownfield site in the former docks area, but also an integral part of the wider area action plan, which identifies Kirkley Waterfront as a key site for the creation of new infrastructure with a new east-west spine road and a high quality business park.

“This public sector investment will be an important signal for investors and developers that the transformation of the town is genuinely underway and is supported by the public sector.”

Yet the same report provided an inkling of what was to go wrong. Waveney had been in financial difficulties for years and, as it noted, had in 2005 had had a ‘poor’ rating from the Audit Commission, the worst possible.



Masonry would have been used to clad the frame, with the exposed concrete painted inside to improve its appearance.

The intention was to seek a BREEAM ‘excellent’ rating. The design also included a biomass boiler, solar heating panels and materials would have been rated ‘B’ or better in the Green Guide to Specification.

Things looked promising when the East of England Development agency agreed to contribute some funding and there was further good news when the Office of Government Commerce approved the business case for a traditional design and build contract.

A 2006 Suffolk County Council report spoke glowingly of

The commission’s report also criticised “material weaknesses in accounting and systems of internal control”, and in 2007 it found fault with Waveney’s use of resources.

Council leader Mark Bee admitted that as his new administration sought to turn things round, fresh and unforeseen financial problems continually reared their heads.

For example, in 2008 a council report warned of a potential disastrous £5m overspend only weeks after a £17m budget had been agreed.

Waveney was still determined to press ahead – it needed the building, it needed to keep Cefas’ jobs in the town, and the project itself remained financially and technically sound.

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But in March 2009 Waveney was hit – out of the blue – with a demand for £9m from the Department for Work and Pensions, which it said the council had over-claimed in grants for benefit payments in the mid-2000s. Faced with the uncertainty caused by this potentially ruinous bill, Waveney felt it could no longer commit to the risks involved and the project was abandoned in December 2009.

By September 2010, negotiations with the DWP had reduced Waveney's debt to a manageable £379,000. But by that time the campus was dead.

Stephen Archer, Waveney's strategic director, says: "The project was blown off course by financial factors.

"The DWP challenge was the biggie, but also the government's indication that changes were coming involving massive savings. The partners would have hoped to go on, but we felt it was too risky to continue.

"If we'd know the DWP claim would turn out as it did we could have proceeded, but we did not know that and it was not clear what would be demanded. Without it we would have moved forward, but it's over now."

Mr Archer added that Waveney had been "through difficult financial times in the last decade and part of the idea behind the project was to show we had recovered and could do something innovative.

"We were the smallest of the three partners but carried the biggest risk, and in hindsight we should have had more robust discussions about whether that was the right structure for the partnership."

An independent report from Local Government Improvement and Development found in October 2010 that the project had indeed been financially sound, though it said the partnership should have been better structured so that Waveney, the smallest and least financially stable partner, was not in the lead.

Waveney is now looking for new accommodation to replace a town hall that "isn't fit for purpose and can get pretty cold in the winter", Mr Archer says.

Suffolk lacks a local presence and Cefas is coping as best it can in its hotel. Its communications manager Anne McClarnon says: "We have to look again at long term arrangements. The building we are in is not a long term option."

It's important to note that Waveney Campus foundered because of financial surprises, not any construction or design issue.

Central government is enthusiastically urging different parts of the public sector to collaborate to secure efficiency savings and Waveney campus is unlikely to be the last joint construction project.

The lesson perhaps is that no matter how well considered a project may be the vagaries of public finance can still be fatal.

Architects - Aedas Architects

Clients

The Centre for Environment Fisheries and Aquaculture Science
Waveney District Council
Suffolk County Council