

New Routes to Growth: Proactive planning and place-making under the NPPF 30th September

The second in the Kent Design series of roundtables of 2016 focused on the planning system and asked if the current process of site allocation and development management compromises quality of place. With local authorities facing the need to respond to housing demand and an ever-increasing number of applications how do we find the time and resources to both proactively plan and unblock the barriers to creating truly sustainable places? How do we give forward planning a higher political and public profile? How can the private sector contribute?

The roundtable was hosted by Sir Terry Farrell in his home at Great Maytham Hall designed by Edwin Lutyens. Sir Terry spoke about the Farrell Review, commissioned by the then Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) that outlined five key recommendations; Education, Outreach and Skills, Design Quality, Cultural Heritage, Economic Benefits, and Built Environment Policy. Design quality requires proactive planning, said Sir Terry, but he believes focusing on the new alone is not enough. Focusing on 'Place' review rather than 'design' review means working within design limitations, thinking about the existing, and encouraging proactive thinking about the 'place'. As a local resident, Sir Terry is interested in smaller areas such as housing allocations in his local village where they engaged with the history of Tenterden then created an approach to small sites that can be scaled up as an approach to large scale growth.

The started with a look at who has the influence to deliver growth? What is driving the process is a land-led approach. Developers focus on where development is most acceptable and which communities are more accepting. That is why infill sites are coming forward more quickly because they attract less resistance. Scale is an issue that raises concerns. However, an infill-pattern of development is not attractive for a developer even though it is an historical form of growth that has reduced car use, as in Tenterden. Big land ownership happens to be available in areas that are not the best location. At the same time, infill development loses sight of the bigger picture of delivery.

A key concern identified around the table is the absence of strategic regional planning - a long term plan - leading to local authorities being driven by short terms fixes to address the pressure to only deliver units. There was some agreement that Kent is reacting to the problem of London, creating garden suburbs in the greenbelt as commuter towns with no political voices to stop it. When scrutinizing London, it has a great deal of underutilized sites. In fact London is half the density of Paris. There is a belief that 200,000 houses are capable of being built in London.

One of the key problems of Kent is it has not considered housing growth since the second world war. Kent was claimed to be anti-growth. There is a great deal of resistance mainly because people don't feel the social infrastructure is for them. Politics is in the way, particularly around the Green Belt.

There is a conflict between housing need and delivery. How can development pay for infrastructure? What's the role of the private sector? Only people with vision invest in placemaking. With the disappearance of the small and medium sized developer, only larger places are built out that are less sensitive to the context. More diversity in development is better for place. Land-led development appeals to the lowest common denominator. The question is how to produce something better? Do Local Authorities have the ability and resources to plan? Reality is, they rely on private consultants. It is an economical issue. Local Authorities don't always find the players who want to develop the allocated sites. It takes imagination. The planning system needs more power. Large estates can have more control on what's being built if there is long term investment in the present and the future. They know that investing in the public realm sells the flats, like the London Estate model.

In the absence of the regional plan, the spatial strategy is key. It has an urban design role. Calling for sites is only part of it. The Local Authority must look at other sites that make more sense with suitability based on strategic urban design. Leadership of urban design strategic thinking needed, even if resource is in-house. With a strategy first, the call for sites can be controlled.

There is a general lack of an accepted culture of urbanism and growth. According to the Farrell Review the argument of urban rooms as a place to educate people on what their town is about and how it can grow sensitively to the local place is critical. There is a lack of custodianship over place. A wider awareness can then feed into a spatial strategy. The role of civic societies is weak and under-funded but there are opportunities for bottom-up planning. There were concerns about democracy. In the NPPF there is no ability to plan at county level. Some boroughs are planning by default; others have political will to develop a plan for longer term. There is no structure to help decide how to shape their environment. There was a view local people shouldn't be asked, they should be led. There is a need to plan ahead. Design is led by cost rather than developers knowing the premium of design – an insufficient knowledge of quality development. Politically, 4-5 year terms can help plan longer term. There was a skepticism about neighbourhood planning based on the level of knowledge of politicians and locals – making the process meaningless. Others felt the neighbourhood planning process can raise awareness and civic action to shape a place. Is stronger leadership needed to raise awareness; to turn it into a positive conversation? A point was made that Local Authorities need to be flexible without compromise.

What is driving the discussion on growth is the economy but are the economic forecasts - largely based on population forecasts – correct? On a wider scale, the market-driven economy without the benefit of a county-wide regional plan may not be addressing the more deprived areas. Can the districts co-operate to address this?

A renewed sense of co-ordination around the table began to emerge. Can the districts work together? There is a need to be proactive in assembling land with

owners. Public intervention needs to lead this coordinated effort with forward funding of infrastructure.

The discussion shifted to tackling low land value in parts of Kent. The 'lowest common denominator' approach means housing will be delivered by placemaking will suffer. There is no innovation and no developer competitiveness leading to low expectations. A more focused discussion on the quality of places ensued. Layouts in low value areas must be considered. How can we make streets feel positive? A good replicable model of low value housing is not available, like in France. Loss of guidance in the NPPF makes street making difficult. In Essex, they have been proactive custodians of placemaking but have taken an authoritarian approach with the Essex Design Guide. The local Kent Design Guide is still not working. Is new guidance needed?

In conclusion a number of key themes were discussed. First that historically 50% of homes were built by small developers but now they cannot get funding. Should there be encouragement for more infill sites? Second, most development needs to be driven from the top by the Districts. In this way, developers will not just show up with their drawings, but will be encouraged to enter into dialogue. The new Kent Planning Protocol aims to help developers and Local Authorities to get on with business collaboratively. Finally, winning hearts and minds as an approach is needed to incentivize developers who consider 'place'. As an example, land being taken from fields and converted could be taxed and given to the locals – the theory being Section 106 should be set against the uplift in land value.

Chris Lamb ended the roundtable with a summary identifying key points:

- A planning strategy should underpin decision making about growth, and could be developed collaboratively by the districts across the county
- Longer political horizons would help to unlock strategic thinking
- Local Authorities are in the best position to lead place-making, and strong leadership is essential
- Design guidance is required to support higher quality development