

KENT DESIGN

Meeting to shape our built environment

Roundtable

New Routes to Growth: Evaluating fast-track mechanisms to planning that can foster design quality

9th March 2017

Maidstone Museum

Attendees:

Mark Aplin, Mark Bottomley, Kevin Burbidge, Andrew Clague, Dr Nicholas Falk, Simon Fisher, Rob Jarman, Lois Jarrett, Chris Johnson, Elena Licci, Amena Matin, Mark Osborn, David Smith, Hilary Satchwell, Gordon Young

This roundtable focused on models of public and private sector partnerships in helping to deliver quality housing growth. Joined by guest speakers Dr Nicholas Falk, Director of Urbed Trust, and Amena Matin, Head of Development at Brick By Brick, Croydon Council, their short presentations kick-started the discussion.

Nicholas started with a short introduction of himself as an economist and strategic planner with an interest in eco-towns. He published a report called 'Beyond Eco-towns' based on lessons from Europe. Places like Hammarby Sjostad have achieved high quality not seen in the UK. Not only quality but faster delivery. The research produced reports for different places in continental Europe such as Learning from Berlin, Learning from Paris etc. The aim was to understand the process and identify what things they had in common to distil into a set of principles. The result was an ABC methodology; Ambition, Brokerage, and Continuity. This work was applied in Cambridgeshire where people were taken to look at these examples in the Netherlands and Germany. This led to Cambridge becoming the developer with over 100 people involved in collaborating on developing the southern fringe of the city. The result is that the development looks and feels different proving it is possible to do things differently in the UK. Nicholas then explained in more detail the ABC model. He explained that the ambition was to achieve higher quality standards, a **different product** that would create a market. The Cambridge Quality Charter was critical to quality; it focussed on five principles, or 5Cs: Community; Climate; Collaboration; Connectivity; and Character. Nicholas highlighted the current open door in government where these ideas on how to build quality and faster can be considered again. Making reference to Urbed's successful winning of the Wolfson Garden Cities Economics Prize in 2014, Nicholas used Uxcester Garden City to explore a possible future for smart development.

Amena Matin explained Brick By Brick, the delivery vehicle set up by Croydon Council. Coming out of a new administration, Brick By Brick is housing company, 50% owned by the Council and 50% by the private sector, with the ambition was to provide every resident with a home to buy or rent. The focus is on infill sites and underutilised land. Assets are procured differently from the council by borrowing at commercial rates from the council with the condition that the assets go back to council service to capture the uplift. In one year, twenty-seven sites are in the planning process, delivering 500 units

and twenty sites are going in for a further 500 units. Most of the sites are difficult and constrained and only the council can develop them. A challenge has been to agree what is best for affordable housing rather than pressure to sell at market price. The commitment is 50% of all housing is affordable. Amena highlighted the council's commitment to design quality; carefully selected architects work to design briefs and a design guide produced by the council and they are retained to stage 4. The development management team from Brick By Brick is made up of 12 people who buy services from the council. The board has two representatives from the council and two from the private sector. The Chair was also on the board of Laing. Colm Lacey, the CEO, is seconded from the Council and has private and public sector experience. Croydon has a strong sense of self and it is a confident council; Box Park is an example of this.

Are the lessons from Nicholas and Amena's presentation transferrable to Kent?

In Ashford achieving quality in a low value environment has led to the setting up of a Strategic Sites Team of urban designers and planners. The task of the team is to promote Ashford to developers and time has shown values have grown. The key has been development management **not** development control: developing relationships with developers doing transformational projects. Chilmington Green is a good example. A range of delivery models are being used following the Garden city principles including land value uplift. Commuted sums are taken out of the equation and responsibility is transferred to a Community Management Organisation (CMO) to manage the assets including landscape, sports facilities, community centres etc. The CMO owns the assets and charges rent including commercial floor space for emerging businesses. Outline planning permission was granted on 6th January and the developers have started to build this month in March and the scheme appeared in the Core Strategy in 2008. Quality has been critical to the scheme; a great deal of investment was put into a landscape-led design to act as the front window of the development. With the new cinema, designer outlet, brewery and the upgrade of the international station, Ashford is becoming a destination.

We were interested in the Government's Housing White Paper and its emphasis on considering different kinds of developers besides house builders. For example, Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) are being treated as private developers and house builders are actively working with RSLs rather than selling off land to other house builders. Could the Homes and Community Agency could morph into an investment agency?

From the discussion it became clear that delivering good design is a choice; a choice those around the table were committed to, both the public and private sectors, not least because delivering better design delivers an economic dividend. There was also agreement that political leadership is critical to delivering quality growth, local authorities need to prioritise quality. Croydon Council clearly 'changed the conversation' and transformed perceptions but it also took risks, risks that are clearly paying off. In Kent, the higher values are found in the villages, but, with the demographic shift and population growth, our towns will be getting larger; does this provide an opportunity to be equally innovative in our approach and to rethink urban centres like Canterbury and Maidstone and those of North Kent, providing opportunities to deliver distinctive urban neighbourhoods with higher densities that previously?

How do we demonstrate our commitment to quality? Our response was that, though we acknowledge the value of the Kent Design Guide, the best way to do this is a **Kent and Medway Quality Charter**, developed with the people and organisations from all sectors delivering growth across the county.