KENT DESIGN

Meeting to shape our built environment

Roundtable: Shaping development and delivering design quality through local planning policies, a question of prescription or flexibility?

Friday 23rd February 2018
Time: 09:30 - 12:00
Maidstone Museum, Saint Faith's Street, Maidstone ME14 1LH

Attendees

Adrian Tofts, Andrew Clague, Chris Johnson, Chris Lamb, Eric Hallquist, Garry Hall, Guy Hollaway, Mark Aplin, Martin Hart, Nick Lee Evans, Ria Hotchin, Rob Jarman, Robert Rummey, Sandra Ryan, Tim Chapman, Victoria Pope

The next instalment in our ever-popular series of round table events saw participants address one of the toughest topics to date, namely, how to we get better quality outcomes through our planning system? This pressing issue has seen renewed focus from Government, with initiatives launched recently aimed ensuring we build not just more, but better.

After introductions from Chris Lamb, Chief Executive of DSE and long-time advocate of design quality in the built environment, guests heard from two speakers with particular experience of using planning policy tools to deliver design quality on the ground. As usual, the session was conducted under the Chatham House Rule, although our speakers were happy to be named. The speakers on the day were Richard Wilson, from the London Borough of Camden, and Jane Dunn, from Tibbalds Planning and Urban Design.

Richard was first to speak. In Camden, a proactive approach to planning policy that combines master plans, direct housing delivery and community collaboration come together to get the right results. There is more to it than the policy structures in place; in Camden, there is culture of good design. Politicians demand it, as do residents. High land values and owners with an interest in their legacy are also key components. Another component is the in-house skills within the Local Authority, and how they work. Rather than waiting for designers to come to them, they go out and work with external design teams, fostering a collaborative approach that gets the best out of team working. So, for Camden, bringing all this together is what helps get the desired design quality delivered on the ground.

Does planning policy at the higher level have a role to play? Our speaker was unsure, as local design policies all sound the same but the outcomes across different areas vary dramatically. What can be said is that policy alone is not enough; proactive planning, from master plans to frameworks and guidance for very specific areas, is a key part of getting the outcomes you want. Blanket guidance in particular is not as useful as that which helps designers make the most of their site. Timing the production of policy is also critical; too far

in advance and it dates before anything happens, and aspirations are forgotten. But who pays for all this? In a time of scares resources – both time and money – proactive planning is often difficult to do. Once answer is to work with developers to partner in bringing resources together as needed. Getting stakeholders bought into the process, both financially and in terms of vision, gets everyone pulling in the same direction when it comes to design quality. If a Council owns land then use this to demonstrate quality and make the Council a stakeholder. With the right political will, it can be done.

And what of the policy its self? Make it short. Make it visual. That was the advice given. Too often policy is written as if to appeal to other policy wonks, but they are not the target audience here. Designers work best in the visual, and are too busy to read lengthy and wordy documents. To be effective, policy needs to strike a balance between prescription and flexibility. Overly constraining designers is not desirable, but key fixes need to be clearly articulated in order to set out where flexibility can occur. Being innovative about funding this kind of work was also suggested, be it through Planning Performance Agreements or approaching local land owners. To do this, we need to communicate that better design leads higher long-term values. Better design leads to better long-term investment, which in turn leads to a better future. Not all development is good; only well-designed schemes can deliver this kind of wider benefit.

Next to speak was Jane. She addressed the thorny issue of local character and how planning policy might help make new development more appropriate for its context. This can be a big issue at the edge of a settlement, where there is little of value to drawn on in terms of the built environment. Here, a little investment up front can pay dividends in terms of future design quality. Characterisation studies that set out what is good about an area can really help applicants and designers capture what is important. But these need to be true analysis, not just descriptions, and they need to be presented in a way that are easy to use. A common understanding can help both designers and planning officers, and offer a good starting point for conversations about design. Guidance and policy can be helpful at planning appeals should it come that, so bear that in mind when developing it. In the speaker's view, guidance works best when it is prescriptive in terms of principle but flexible in terms of how it works spatially. Principles, not standards, allow guidance to cover wide areas. This allows specific solutions in specific locations to emerge. Key in writing policies around design is deciding what you want to do; do you want to promote change or maintain what is there? Identifying what it is the guidance is trying to achieve helps you hone your approach; be clear, be precise, and decide on who you are trying to reach.

Jane cited their experience working Birmingham. Here, an urban design strategy was developed and initially it was tough to get the required support to make it work. However, as culture changed, so did expectations. What also helped was moving the conversation about design on from what is essentially personal preference to that of principles that apply across the board. This helps to provide much-needed certainty to designers. As with before, the speaker stressed the importance of being proactive; any policy should seek to resolve issues, not create new ones. But when setting out policy, don't lose sight of the bigger picture. Careful site allocation is needed, as this is a big urban design decision that needs to be considered not just in terms of what land is available, but in place making terms too.

After the talks, the discussion began and it was clear that the issues raised by the speakers resonated with others in the room. Talk quickly focussed on the practical, as the principle of

making better use of policy to get good design was widely accepted. But how best to do this? One idea suggested was the use of Design Codes, but only for areas where disagreement is commonplace. In general, Design Codes should be used to solve common issues for specific sites, but why not widen their use beyond that, and code for things like better streets? An interesting idea worth exploring in more detail in the future.

Questions around the roll of elected members in setting the design policy agenda were raised. It was generally agreed that workshops, early engagement, and the process in general was the place where elected members were most effective. It is important that members and other stakeholders are engaged with more than just once; they need to give both input and to validate the outputs. Mixing stakeholders together is useful, as it helps to break down barriers to understanding and fosters partnership working. Testing guidance and policy was also raised as a key stage in generating useful tools for delivering quality. Most people in the room agreed that growth and new development was more readily accepted if it was of good quality.

An issue raised time and again was that of resourcing. How does all this extra work get funded? Another was the danger that design quality is eroded as projects move through to delivery; many quality issues arise not during planning but as things get changed as they are built. This last point can be addressed in part by being upfront about viability. Having a good understanding of the economics of the situation you are in is key to understanding what can be achieved in terms of design quality. It may also be necessary to sacrifice in one policy area to deliver on another should viability be an issue, for example reducing affordable housing percentages to get better design.

A core theme throughout the discussion was the need for closer – and better – partnership working. There is less central government money available for supporting design quality in planning policy, which means people need to come up with more efficient ways to push the design agenda forward. Working together, sharing resources, and joint bids for funding for public and private sectors all help make the resources we have available. The public sector may be in strong position in this regard, as generally the public sector has access to good rates on finance that can unlock complex projects.

Delivering quality without slowing down delivery was raised as a tricky issue to solve. A flexible approach to delivery through planning policy, such as self-build or custom build, is gathering pace as key part of the housing delivery model but has issues around uncertainty that makes many uncomfortable. Well thought out design policies are critical to encouraging this kind of diversity in the housing market whist maintaining quality. Existing tools such as Building for Life work well across scales and was agreed to be a useful tool in helping to push for better design. Within Kent are plenty of high-quality schemes; getting people out to see these places is an important part of raising the profile of design.

The final discussion point was the sheer pace of change. The way people live and more importantly want to live requires a shift in perceptions around what is good. Smaller gardens, higher densities and lower car ownership are all changes that need to be incorporated into the design policy agenda. Are we ready? Maybe not today, but policy can evolve rapidly to deal with new issues and it will be interesting to see how this unfolds going forward.