

**OPPORTUNITY AREA BRIEFING – MID-KENT
TUESDAY MARCH 27TH 2018
KENT EVENT CENTRE, DETLING, MAIDSTONE**

INTRODUCTION

Two historic towns in the heart of Kent, Ashford and Maidstone have long been centres of trade and community. But with the rapid economic and population growth of south-east England, and the rise of young professionals unable to afford life in the capital, these hyper-connected towns face a moment of exciting opportunity and development, not just as commuter hubs but as thriving places in their own right.

Design South East and Kent Design brought together a range of key public and private sector representatives, as well as design professionals, to discuss the myriad plans and projects both towns are undertaking, as well as the potential impact of these on the local and wider regional economies and communities. As both places transform, how can key stakeholders come together to integrate the new infrastructure, connections and growth whilst supporting identity, place quality, history and existing residents?

ASHFORD: Projects and Opportunities

‘Ashford has been characterised as a town in waiting for a long time,’ announced **Ashford Borough Council’s** Director of Place and Space **Richard Alderton**, ‘but it’s not any longer.’

The town is currently undergoing physical and social transformations. In the last year, Ashford has welcomed a new college in the town centre, addressing the local skills shortage. Adjacent to it sits the commercial quarter, which includes 50 000 sq m of employment floor space. ‘We have a loose masterplanning framework for this so that we can be responsive to demand,’ explained Alderton, mentioning that focus has been given to creating high-quality pedestrian space. ‘We want to create a centre that nurtures creativity and innovation, pitched at the millennial workforce – we need to create great experiences to do that.’

The council has made its own investments to achieve this vision, including offering rental guarantees and loans. ‘Local authorities are behaving in a different way now as of course they need to in order to become self financing,’ Alderton commented in the panel discussion. Projects on the horizon in Ashford include the new Picturehouse cinema, due to complete in November, as well as a designer outlet centre to rival Bicester.

Also in the works is the Curious Brewery hub and large-scale housing developments being designed by **Guy Hollaway Architects**. **Alex Richards**, Partner at the firm, spoke about the vital need to work with the town’s context and history when planning its future: ‘It has to be connected, it has to be

creative, and it has to connect to Ashford's heritage. You can't just build houses, you need to create a community'. This ethos has led the firm's plans for Ashford, focused on making places people want to spend time in, as demonstrated through their Curious Brewery project, which includes apartments, retail space and a hotel alongside a brewery and visitor attraction. GHA is also working on Elwick Place, a new leisure quarter in the city centre incorporating a cinema, restaurants, events space, hotel and new homes, as well as the Powergen residential development of 660 homes. Richards also explained it is important to make the town attractive to young businesses as well as residents. With office rent 78% lower than central London, working in Ashford is better value for businesses.

One of these planned new business hubs is **Waterbrook Park**, a new development centred around an improved, expanded Ashford International truck stop. **Jonathan Buckwell**, Director at **DHA Planning**, who is working on the project, explained how Ashford currently struggles with approximately 320 illegally parked lorries in town each night. The Waterbrook Park project would increase the current 350-space truck stop to 600 spaces, as well as adding in employment, retail, and residential space, within a parkland setting.

Another local development currently awaiting planning approval is **Kingsnorth Green**, a joint venture residential scheme from Pentland Homes and Jarvis Homes, delivering 550 dwellings around a new village green. **Pentland Homes'** Development Director **Ian Hardman** and **Quantum PR** Managing Director **Charlie Vavasour**, spoke about the project. 'We recognise that there is a financial benefit from good design,' commented Hardman. 'We want to make a place people actually want to live in. Major development companies can be constrained but minor developers have more flexibility.' The two explained how public engagement – including two exhibitions and a popular hotline – had been central to the scheme, which will also include large areas of landscaped open space and transport infrastructure.

Community engagement has also been at the heart of developing a public art strategy for **Conningbrook Lakes**, a new 300-home community around a country park on Ashford's eastern edge. **Louise Francis** and **Laura Knight** from public art consultancy **FrancisKnight**, and **Katherine Putnam**, Head of Planning at **Chartway Group**, explained that public art has played a key role in the placemaking-led approach to the site's development. FrancisKnight undertook extensive research and public consultation to shape the public art strategy. 'It's easy to pay lip service to heritage and placemaking,' noted FrancisKnight in the panel discussion, 'but it needs to be meaningfully considered. We think bringing artists in introduces that extra level of detail.' Those artists will take up residence and engage with the local community; the first commission due to be in place by March 2019.

MAIDSTONE: Projects and Opportunities

Maidstone is growing, and if new NPPF (National Planning Policy Framework) goes through, it will see a big growth in housing. Improved rail links to London, due to open in 2019, will also fuel development. A Local Plan has recently been adopted for the town, explained **Rob Jarman**, Head of Planning and Development at **Maidstone Borough Council**; this has identified five brownfield sites in the town centre ripe for development. The council's vision for these is mixed-use, high-quality and well-connected schemes. 'We will provide planning guidance to developers but it won't be prescriptive,' Jarman said. The council is looking to appoint a team to deliver these five sites including urban designers and heritage experts, and is keen to undertake a wider marketing campaign for area. 'Town centres are changing rapidly' Jarman noted. 'Retail is on its way down in terms of floorspace. One of the key challenges for town centres in the future is to work with the changing face of retail.'

Another strategic project on the town's horizon is **Maidstone East**, a collaborative initiative from Maidstone Council and Kent County Council. **John Foster**, Regeneration and Economic Development Manager for **Maidstone Borough Council**, explained that the project links up the Maidstone East station site with two adjacent sites in order to deliver large-scale sustainable regeneration that drives economic growth. 'We wanted to do something special to create a place, rather than just give it over to private developers,' explained Foster, adding that 'as a collaborative project, getting the two councils on the same page has been a huge undertaking.' The evolving plans for the site include residential units and office space, as well as landscaped public realm, food and beverage outlets and retail, all linked up to the station.

In the panel discussion, concerns directed to the council around sustainable transport and a struggling housing market were raised. 'We are concentrating on better pedestrian connectivity to rail stations across Maidstone and enhancing existing pedestrian links,' explained Jarman, adding that the council does not anticipate problems with the housing market: 'Our developers do see property values in Maidstone as going up. Housing companies are getting very interested.'

Retail and its future was also raised. 'Maidstone is a mature county town,' noted Foster. 'It has a big retail offer and vacancies are low, so looking ahead it's about getting the appropriate mix.' Chris Lamb, conference chair and Director of Design South East, added: 'The reality is that not all retail is failing. Think of Croydon where the council took an enormous risk financially to get in Boxpark, and that is doing extraordinary well. Changing demographics will shape retail's future.'

There are plenty more private sector-led developments taking place across Maidstone. **Keith Mandy**, Head of Regeneration and Construction for **Golding Homes**, spoke about Wallis Fields, the affordable housing provider's regeneration project transforming the Park Wood estate. With the vision of creating a new village green, Golding Homes appointed PCKO Architects to

deliver a mix of 202 family homes and flats in response to local need, as well as new community facilities and a new shopping area. The homes are rated Sustainable Code 3; 'there was a push to make it Code 4,' Mandy admitted in the panel session, 'but we would rather spend the money to create wider benefits for whole community.' Public consultation showed that local residents wanted public realm improvements, so Golding Homes integrated that into the scheme, including a new parkside walk and community square.

Elsewhere in the town, within the 440-acre Mote Park, a new visitors centre and cafe designed by **Hazle McCormack Young** is on the drawing board. Practice Partner **James Galpin** discussed how the project responds to the fact that with a local increase in housing density, space for leisure will become more important. While the park itself will see a bank of new interventions including an adventure zone, skate park, and play area, the proposed 500 sq m centre – which is submitted for planning approval in April – is planned to 'create a new gateway for the park.'

Simon Flisher, Director of **Barton Willmore**, presented the **Woodcut Farm** project just outside Maidstone by the M20 Junction 8, which is being developed by Roxhill, designed by PRC Architecture, with Barton Willmore as planning consultants. The site is the largest new employment allocation to be made in the Maidstone Local Plan, and the project is set to deliver up to 49,000 sq m of office and industrial floorspace accordingly. Located in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), the project is required to respect the local landscape AND create a hub of employment within a 'spacious parkland setting'. Outline planning permission has been granted for the project. 'Our goal has been to bind stakeholders into the process so that they remain involved as it moves forward,' mentioned Flisher.

Another future scheme on the outskirts of Maidstone which is set to create a new destination within the AONB is **Binbury Park**, a proposed 63 ha 'garden village' near Detling. **Tim Chilvers**, Development Director at **Quinn Estates**, presented the developer's plans for 1700 homes alongside two primary schools, a SEN school, community centre, medical centre, hotel, park & ride facilities, business park and incubator space, nursery, pub, retail and sports hub.

Though Quinn Estates is at the early stages of realising the scheme, Chilvers explained that they are 'creating a bottom-up vision of what a new settlement can be,' adding: 'The business-as-usual approach to development will need to change. The idea of shipping people in and out of London is going out of date, so Kent needs to offer affordable and flexible working space. Binbury Park will massively contribute to Maidstone's economy and is a real placemaking opportunity.' Although the AONB represents a significant hurdle, Quinn Estates is hoping to demonstrate that this is 'an exceptional case with public interest.'

But how do you go about creating a brand new place and the identity for it? 'It's exciting,' responded Chilvers in the panel session. 'We work with architects who understand how to do that. You need to work with and build

upon what you've already got there, the existing assets.' Flisher added: 'Linking it into context is important too – the place needs to make sense in its wider context.'

MOVING FORWARD

So how do great development ideas secure the funding they need to move forward? **Abigail Raymond**, Project Manager at the **UK's Department for International Trade** spoke to all attendees about the government's role in facilitating international investment. 'We're here to identify projects to attract international investment,' said Raymond. 'We're keen to get projects from all sectors and areas that help to accelerate growth.'

In terms of identifying viable opportunities, Raymond explained that the key investability indicators included: value, ownership, planning status, maturity of project business case, political/government support, and background checks. If projects want to be considered, Raymond added, they need a clear picture of the type of investment sought, with a firm understanding of the level of risk involved.

Director of Economic Development for Kent County Council, David Smith, also gave a short presentation, outlining how Design South East has been working with planning authorities across Kent to refresh the 13-year-old Kent Design Guide. 'Our conclusion was that we don't need a new design guide,' said Smith, 'we need a new design toolkit.'

By 2031, Kent is required to build 158,000 new homes. 'What can we envisage for the future, what kind of place are we going to put into being for our citizens and workers?' asked Smith. 'Memorable spaces are exciting, unique and of good quality. Places need to be of value not just to the development itself but to the wider locale.'

REFLECTIONS

Summing up the discussions after a morning packed full of information and opportunities, Chris Lamb identified some key takeaways:

- **The role of local authorities is changing and becoming more critical.** Councils are delivering placemaking projects, because they realise the importance of delivering quality. Local authorities are taking risks and showing leadership, including in terms of investment.
- **There is value in context-led schemes.** You have to get under the skin of places to meaningfully respond to them: understand a place's history, context, and its people, present and future.
- **Connections are important: how we move is changing rapidly.** There is an increasing focus on pedestrian links and healthy towns as the desire for sustainable transport grows. We need to connect places within towns as well as between towns. Stronger, better, faster, more consistent connections to HS1 will also be important.

- **The new demographic of millennials is changing expectations around place.** The notion of a cultural experience is becoming a more important part of developments. We need to attract people through experiences not just homes.
- **Landscape is important, and one of Kent's greatest assets.** Successful projects need to enhance connections to that landscape.

'There's a really exciting story in Mid-Kent to be told,' concluded Lamb. Now let's see where that story takes us.