

Report of the Scrutiny Review into Social and Community Infrastructure

Introduction

1. A Scrutiny Review Panel was established in late December 2015 to:
 - Examine the factors that contribute to a new residential development becoming a community from examples across the country;
 - Examine the factors that help an existing community accept and integrate with new residents and vice-versa from examples across the country;
 - Explore in particular the contribution that can be made by the Council and voluntary and community sector organisations to develop less tangible community benefits such as cohesion, self-help, volunteering, neighbourliness and mutual support; and
 - Recommend initiatives that could facilitate community development in the Borough of Harrow.

2. The brief approved by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee identified the following measures of success:
 - Production of a menu of community infrastructure projects and initiatives, and their impact, that have been introduced across the country that contributed to the success of major residential development in terms of community cohesion both amongst new residents and between new and existing communities;
 - Recommendation of a specific package of measures for consideration in relation to the development in the Borough of Harrow that can lead to:
 - Successful integration of the new and existing communities;
 - The diversity of people's backgrounds and circumstances being appreciated and positively valued;
 - Those from different backgrounds having similar life opportunities; and
 - Strong and positive relationships being developed between people in the area.

3. In summary, the Review Panel was tasked with considering the general "soft" infrastructure provision that helps community formation from new and expanded residential development and then identifying specific provision that would be appropriate.

4. The Review Panel comprised Councillor Marilyn Ashton, who chaired the Review, and Councillors Jeff Anderson, Michael Borio, Ameet Jogia, Barry Macleod-Cullinane, Primesh Patel and Stephen Wright. The Panel met on four occasions and received presentations from Paul Nichols, Divisional Director of Planning; Mark Billington, Head of Economic Development and Research, Edwin Whittingham, representing the Institute of Directors and Frank Vickery, Architect and social housing entrepreneur. The Panel also undertook a site visit to identify lessons that could be learnt from developments that have taken place comparatively recently in the Borough. The Panel also reviewed an extensive library of reports and publications relating to various aspects of the brief.

Amongst these background documents, there were several definitions of sustainable and cohesive communities, many of which mixed physical features, service provision and social attitudes, but were not clear about how these less concrete qualities could be engendered. However, a common theme was that a cohesive community is one where there is a common vision and sense of belonging, and where people from different backgrounds have similar life opportunities so that the place where they reside becomes more than simply a place to sleep.

Approach

5. The Review Panel identified three significant aspects to their brief early in the project: namely:
 - Developing a vision for an area/borough and master and site specific planning to achieve that vision;
 - Providing a range of employment opportunities; a range of employment initiatives are in place to ensure residents benefit from regeneration programme. (see attached)
 - Ensuring inclusivity in design (built into tender process).

6. The Panel felt that there were more fundamental issues that influenced the successful development of a community than the 'soft' issues set out in the brief. These fundamental issues included ensuring that there were adequate transport links for new developments; that the design did not visually and physically divide social from other forms of housing tenure in a manner where the development comprises a demarcation between the 'haves' and 'have nots'; and that there were employment opportunities and leisure provision so that, in the widest sense, there were 'things to do'. Without these basic elements built into regeneration proposals from the beginning, none of the softer social initiatives would have a realistic chance of success and, equally, if these elements were present, the need for social cohesion programmes would be reduced. These themes ran through the evidence provided by expert witnesses and spoke to the need to ensure development in general should reflect local needs articulated through supplementary planning documents to inform potential developers how an area needs to evolve.

Master Planning and site specific guidance

7. The Review heard about the scale of the regeneration envisaged for the 'Heart of Harrow area', which it is hoped will include investment of some £1.75billion and the development of around 5,500 new homes, as well as schools and other infrastructure buildings. The Divisional Director of Planning has justifiably called the scale of proposed change to amount to "Place Making". In this context, it is important to have a vision of the sort of place that the Council is trying to make.

8. The regeneration programme includes helping to meet the need for more residential accommodation, which could include the conversion of office floor space to residential uses; and relocating the Civic Centre. These ambitions

need to be defined through more detailed outcomes that describe the sort of place that the Council wants Harrow to become. The evidence that the Panel heard clearly indicated that without the use of specific, site-by-site master planning, supported by supplementary planning documents, there is a danger that the economics of piecemeal development will produce an undesirable and incoherent result. The current very high value of residential development sites will tend to drive out other uses and exacerbate the danger of Harrow becoming a residential only location, better known as a purely dormitory borough, without a convincing employment, retail, entertainment or heritage offer. In fact, inappropriate and incoherent regeneration programmes can deliver the destruction of existing communities and has a less well-established capacity to create them.

9. The Review considered the work of Create Streets, a non-partisan social enterprise and independent research institute focusing on the built environment which encourages the creation of more and better urban homes. Create Streets believe that what gets built has become divorced from what people actually want. They think that this is due to:

- density targets;
- building and planning regulations;
- very high land values;
- little focus on long-term returns;
- a contempt by some for how most wish to live.

10. New developments often therefore meet top-down targets rather than real people's needs. Communities, neighbourhoods, even landowners have lost control of what is built in this country. The 'market' for new homes in certain instances is broken. Many oppose new homes as they don't like what gets built, hence the need for the adoption of comprehensive master planning and the adoption of Supplementary Planning Documents.

11. While the Review Panel does not support all of the analysis that Create Streets put forward, there is some compelling evidence that, as the demand for residential accommodation across the whole of London in particular is so far in excess of supply, there is little incentive for the market to produce well designed schemes that promote formation and sustainability of communities. The evidence that the Panel received suggested that the involvement of existing residents in estate renewal and existing communities in local area regeneration can help to define plans that support the development of a place in which people will actively want to live with a good prospect of becoming a community. Create Streets have been involved in the development of an alternative development proposal for the Mount Pleasant former post office sorting office site in Camden. The land owner's proposal was for a series of large blocks which local people have described as being like a fortress whereas Create Streets and the local community have proposed a higher density, but human scale alternative called Mount Pleasant Circus. Their lesson is that attractive development proposals only need imagination and need not provide fewer units on a site.

12. The council is undertaking a rigorous consultation process on each of its sites, to ensure the views of residents and businesses inform the design process. .
13. The importance of design was underscored by a site visit that members of the Panel undertook to comparatively recent developments in Harrow. At Bentley Grove, the Panel identified first, that the development is isolated due to the lack of easily accessible transport links making it very hard to get there without using a car. The Panel also noted that the development includes three blocks of flats within an estate otherwise comprising houses. The Panel found that these blocks were out of character and inappropriate because such a high density development belongs in a more urban environment and not in a Green Belt site such as this. The lessons from this development need to be applied to future development proposals such as that likely to be made at the RNOH.
14. Similarly, at RAF Stanmore, the Panel was stuck by the narrowness of the streets, which lead to a congested feel with parked cars creating pinch points. There are detached garages that are dotted around the estate looking like strange small houses. The design of the individual dwellings was acceptable, but they seem to be crammed in, giving an impression of overcrowding. The biggest issue here, however, was the complete separation of the social housing from the owner occupied dwellings and this degree of separation runs the risk of creating ghetto-like areas. The Panel felt that, with a little more imagination, RAF Stanmore Park could have delivered a real sense of place that people would have been really proud of as opposed to simply being somewhere to live.
15. The Panel also visited Stanmore Place where, again, the segregation of the social and private housing was plainly evident with no connectivity between the different homes provided giving no impression of a sense of community.
16. These examples, and particularly the estate version of the “poor door”, demonstrate that without site specific planning requirements, developments can too often provide designs that undermine the aspiration for a cohesive community, a common sense of belonging and give a physical manifestation of different life opportunities.
17. The next section, which deals with employment opportunities, also reinforces the importance of providing a vision for the Borough and site specific supplementary planning documents to ensure that the loss of employment in Harrow is halted and reversed.

Employment

18. The Panel heard evidence from a representative of the Institute of Directors. This contrasted Harrow’s approach to seeking to expand the employment opportunities available in the Borough with those exhibited by Watford in generating a medical business campus adjacent to Watford General Hospital. The message of this evidence was that, rather than suggesting Harrow was available for all or any businesses, it needed to examine the local factors that

would appeal to particular forms of enterprise and market the Borough accordingly.

19. For Harrow, the plus factors included the quality of the environment, of education and of the quality of life that the Borough could offer. It has good transport links –especially rail - although this could also be a dis-benefit since it makes it easy to commute to work elsewhere in London and beyond.
20. Harrow's benefits were confirmed by an examination of a report prepared by Grant Thornton which scores a number of Business Location factors. The report helps local authorities, local enterprise partnerships, central government and other stakeholders understand and identify opportunities to address the factors that make areas less attractive. It is also used by businesses in making decisions about where to locate their premises. The combined Business Location Index score ranks the overall quality of areas but, as costs are also a critical factor, it includes an analysis of the costs of operating from each area. The most attractive business locations are also often the most expensive places.
21. Eight of the top ten performers on the index are in London. All London Boroughs score above the national median but the top locations are central London areas. Harrow does not feature in the top 25 authority areas nationally for quality versus cost; economic performance or people and skills. However, it is 18th in the Environment and Infrastructure category, which looks at connectivity, innovation based on the presence of universities and R&D centres and the quality of life based on health, school performance, crime levels and access to local amenities and an attractive natural environment. The current and projected level of traffic congestion is likely to threaten this good result if it can not be addressed.
22. The Institute of Directors advised that, rather than adopt an “open for anything” approach, Harrow should play to the strengths identified in the Grant Thornton report and other advantages including the diversity of the population as a draw for businesses based in Asia, and perhaps parts of Eastern Europe, developing an education business hub related to Harrow's strong education performance, and the extensive small business sector in the Borough.
23. The council's Build Innovate Grow (BIG) investment strategy is gaining momentum, focussing on promoting the boroughs strengths to developers and investors.
24. In relation to retail, the Panel heard that that the range of shops in Watford, Uxbridge, Brent Cross and Westfield at Shepherd's Bush would make it difficult for Harrow to compete for a mass shopping market. However, in addition to satisfying the local market, there might be scope for growing one or more niche shopping markets.
25. The council will build on its work with developers and the HA1 BID to maximise the capacity of Harrow Metropolitan Town Centre to realise the

potential of a catchment area of up to 1m shoppers and visitors.

26. The change in planning legislation that allowed offices to be converted to residential uses without the need for new planning consent had led to a loss of available office floor space – although much of that which had been lost had been vacant for some time and, therefore, this had not had an immediate impact on employment potential. The reducing supply and use of offices did however impact on the attractiveness of the Borough as a headquarters location as evidenced by the migration of companies out of the borough following mergers. In relation to new office uses, the Panel also considered the Government's Estates Strategy, but this envisages a concentration of staff into buildings currently in Government ownership rather than seeking new accommodation.
27. The Panel accepted the view that, in relation to employment opportunities, the Council needed to decide what it wanted from the regeneration opportunities, and to hold out for development that would advance this vision. The suggestion made earlier in this report regarding site specific planning briefs would be equally important to promote employment as attractive residential development. Without the Council having robust master planning and the adoption of Supplementary Planning Documents, it will find itself on the 'back-foot' with developers telling the Council what they want to build rather than the Council setting out its vision and enshrining that vision into adopted planning policy.

Inclusivity in Design

28. One of the background papers that the Panel received was a report prepared by the Prince's Foundation entitled "What People Want" which examined the forms of housing development that are the most popular and how communities have influenced regeneration proposals through community consultation. Their research has revealed a reasonably clear picture: people want where they live to be more than just a building. They want it to be somewhere distinct, somewhere that enhances their quality of life: a place. Creating places goes beyond merely creating spaces - it means designing buildings that cater to the needs of residents, supporting quality public spaces and providing opportunities for communities to thrive. Their research has shown that people do want parks and green spaces but they also want buildings that respect a traditional form and (often) style. Very few people want to live in huge or high buildings. People prefer streets, blocks and squares. Mixed use and mixed communities are valued by most. Perhaps above all, communities want to be genuinely involved in a real and not stage-managed consultation process.
29. The report concluded that people do not want rapid urban development that is exclusive, overbearing or which compromises the character of their local areas. Policy-makers, developers, local representatives, designers and architects need to give these public preferences the consideration they are due if we are to achieve a successful, thriving built environment.

30. The design message of the Prince's Foundation report was echoed in a report prepared by Savills for the Cabinet Office, which suggests that more and better housing can be provided by replacing existing estates with what they termed "Complete Streets". This term means streets of terraced housing and mid-rise mansion blocks, which would also contain neighbourhood employment, services and shops. The report envisages increasing densities from the average for a 'blocks and towers' estate of 78 homes per hectare to an average of 135 homes hectare plus neighbourhood community and commercial premises. This insight should form part of planning briefs for the regeneration of Harrow, including in relation to re-provisioning of the Council's own stock.
31. These messages were given practical expression in evidence that the Panel received from Frank Vickery, architect and social housing entrepreneur. Mr Vickery described how, predominantly in East London, he had been involved in the development of high quality affordable housing through involving public sector land owners who in one way or another provide development land for little or no cost. While these approaches may not be directly applicable to the regeneration of Harrow, the Panel felt that there were valuable lessons to be gleaned from his description of partnership approaches, the advantages of retention by public bodies or social landlords of the freehold interest in land to maintain influence over the form and tenure of developments, and the use of cross subsidies to enable some of the issues that the Panel had identified in relation to master planning and design to be realised.
32. The Panel also noted the benefits of "meanwhile" uses of land proposed for redevelopment in the future – in the case of the Coin Street development, land had been used for temporary car parks over a number of years yielding significant income to support the provision of high quality social housing.
33. Finally, the Panel heard of the success of the HARCA in Poplar – a Housing and Regeneration Community Association. Poplar HARCA is a charity and Housing Association working in the capital's most deprived neighbourhoods, tackling entrenched poverty through an innovative approach to delivering youth work, employment, health, financial inclusion, social enterprise and community organising. Poplar HARCA was established in 1996 and is a resident led housing association. Working only in Poplar enables it to focus resources into the local neighbourhoods with a view to transforming these into thriving areas where people are proud to live. Again, the example may not be immediately applicable to Harrow, but it does embody the advantages of co-ordinated master planning for all of the land uses that contribute to supporting a successful, cohesive community to demonstrate that Harrow's regeneration could be more than just housing.

Recommendations

Cabinet is recommended to:

1. Commission a site-specific master plan supported by Supplementary Planning Documents to ensure that the regeneration programme for Harrow fulfils the ambitions for successful cohesive, sustainable communities including quality housing, employment opportunities, viable retail, entertainment uses and a heritage offer (paragraph 8);
2. Ensure that existing communities are substantially involved in the design of new developments and that these do not repeat some of the mistakes the Panel has identified in comparatively recent schemes (paragraph 11);
3. Commission a strategy for attracting and retaining employments uses in Harrow that recognises the Borough's advantages (paragraphs 21 and 24);
4. Evaluate the Complete Streets and Create Streets concepts in relation to the vision for residential regeneration in Harrow (paragraphs 9-11 and 27);
5. Investigate further the potential advantages of retaining the freehold of Council-owned land that forms part of the regeneration area to give greater control over the form of development and the tenure residential development provided (paragraph 28).