

Designing for housing growth: sustaining historic towns

Cirencester conference report 18-19 July 2006



Duntisbourne, The Cotswolds

The pressure from the demand for new housing will impact dramatically on historic towns. The need for high quality design is paramount to safeguard their character and integrity, whilst continuing to provide places in which people want to live and which are economically and socially sustainable.

The conference brought together people with experience of the issues which need to be addressed, with a view to identifying and disseminating best practice. The demand for places at the conference was overwhelming, which demonstrates the significance of the subject. The audience consisted of practitioners from a broad range of disciplines and sectors, from all over the country.

Beginning on Wednesday evening with activities to help familiarise early arrivals with Cirencester, delegates enjoyed a tour guided by **Martin Read** Chairman of the Cirencester Civic Society, followed by a reception held in the Corinium Museum. **Cllr John Birch**, Chairman of Planning (Regulatory) Committee and Trustee of the Museum, welcomed EHTF to the town and **Dr John Paddock** gave an illustrated presentation on "Cirencester from AD 45 to AD1845". Delegates rounded off the evening with a meal at Harry Hare's, a local restaurant.

On Thursday morning **Ian Poole**, Chair of EHTF, welcomed delegates and outlined the purpose of the event and introduced **Andrea Pellegram**, Head of Development Services Group at Cotswold District Council. Andrea announced the launch of "The Vision for Cirencester", an ambitious plan which would include all departments of Cotswold District Council and external stakeholders in the future of the town. She also promised delegates a 'warts and all' tour of Cirencester, exploring the topic of the conference.

Richard Simmons, Chief Executive of CABA, set the tone for the conference with the high expectations CABA has for future housing provision. He added that, as a statutory body, CABA is now able to ask to see designs, not only to be consulted. He urged everyone to take the time and resources necessary to define what it is you want for your place. Houses which are "designed for nowhere: found everywhere" is one of the reasons people do not like housing growth.

He listed the elements which might contribute to successful, well designed housing growth:

- leadership
- being clear about what you want
- the right skills
- the right techniques
- public engagement
- making or improving the market
- creativity!

He suggested that we should begin with the principles of good urban design learned over many centuries:

- character - reinforcing local identity
- continuity and enclosure - use of perimeter blocks, frontages, public areas
- quality of the public realm - which means investment in it
- ease of movement - includes public transport and efforts to change behaviour; permeability and connectivity
- legibility - cul de sacs do not help!
- adaptability - life-time homes – for social, technological and economic changes
- diversity of design - people like identity; responding to local needs
- sustainability - taking account of climate change, energy demands, walkability etc
- inclusiveness - welcoming and accessible to everyone.

The issue is not density per se, but the character of the density, Richard said; minimum criteria do not help, as communities need to decide the appropriate density for their place. He showed examples with dph from 33 to 328 which all meet the Building for Life standard.

He stressed that an Urban Design Strategy is very important, and 'figure ground' plans can also be very helpful in understanding the urban character, at the outset of planning for growth.

Richard used the case study of Harlow to demonstrate the importance of consideration of the landscape context and offered a passage from the public examination panel, East of England Regional Spatial Strategy:

"The arguments relate as much to the form and location of development as to its quantity...there is in our view a need for the growth to be of such a form, and carried out in such a way, as to ensure that it is part of the town and does not acquire a separate identity and momentum which could undermine the progress of the town itself. This we would take to be part of the definition of a sustainable urban extension"

Using Rochester as a further case study, Richard explained the 'characterisation' approach. Public opinion expressed the desire for something which 'felt like Rochester'.

Finally Richard recommended "Building for Life" as a standard; it offers information on Government policy, examples of good practice and key issues for inclusion in planning proposals.

James Hulme, Policy Manager with The Prince's Foundation, explained first of all what the Foundation does – its projects, education, research and guidance, outreach and network programmes.

Good urbanism and good place-making are universally applicable, he said, and it is possible to draw on historical tradition, with innovation and new technology, when planning new neighbourhoods.

'Enquiry By Design' emerged from a long history of collaborative planning, and is inclusive from the start, from scoping engagements at local authority level to large scale planning events. He recommended the methodology for town extensions from 500 to 4000 homes, but only after the allocation has been made.

He explained the process in detail as one which brings together the key stakeholders in an intensive workshop to create a vision for the site with a consensus master plan and delivery structure. It also encourages innovative and dynamic solutions to key issues. The inclusivity of the process leads to quicker delivery of the final plan.

James explained the use of Pattern Books, the Structure of Five Day EbD and the outcomes – the Report, Illustrative Masterplan and the Design Coding. He used projects in Sherford in Devon, Crewkerne in Somerset, Upton in Northampton and Lincoln City Centre as recent case studies.

In conclusion, he said that EbD offers to the planning process:

- an overview affording better use of site and better integrated urbanism, linking to existing settlement
- it brings stakeholders together, multi-disciplinary approach breaking down professional barriers, and between profession and community
- saves time by allowing rapid review and revision by engaged design disciplines, working with planners
- allows a community voice on the form and character of new development, through a visual medium. Representation of community at start and end of the process mitigates confrontation
- and develops a consensus vision.

Mike Carr, a Partner at Pegasus Planning LLP, explained the background to the work he has been carrying out in partnership with EHTF, to produce guidance for practitioners managing housing growth. He began with the premise that housing growth will have a significant impact on historic towns and much of the charm of historic towns is their individuality and sense of place. This individuality should be cherished as it sets historic towns apart from the 'competition', economically and socially- major cities such as Bristol already understand this.

He posed several questions which need to be addressed:

- is this individuality being eroded by national standards that have a metropolitan emphasis?
- how do we retain this individuality? - we need to focus on problems within the system
- we need clarity of communication between developers, LPA, community; there is often misunderstanding
- is applying national dph density standards the correct approach for making best use of land in historic towns?



Castle Street, Cirencester

- how do we respond to a town's existing townscape character?
- are designers reflecting the town's true urban grain or applying standard national design principles?
- is site development being informed by wider context? - as opposed to immediate edge of town context that may already have lost identity
- how is best practice for highway/parking standards applied to new development in historic towns? (he noted the new Manual for Streets which could provide support)
- can historic town's support a sustainable transport system and minimise car use effectively?
- how do we become confident with contemporary/sustainable design in a historic towns?

There are various sources of guidance already available including the cd produced by EHTF in partnership with others – "Building Confidence in High Quality Design" – which he recommended. In addition, historic towns often have a well developed community 'self image', and new development should recognise this.

He suggested that a town specific approach should be promoted, rather than a national 'one size fits all', and that this is often best achieved by the use of site specific design codes. His work across the UK strives to address site individuality and he cited projects in Kingshill South in Cirencester (which is one of 12 government pilot sites), Milton Keynes and Eastchurch, Gloucester.

There has been increased recognition of design/context and the recent **Design and Access Statements** should reinforce this. LPAs will need clear points of reference for housing growth D&AS submissions, as applications come in all shapes and sizes. He illustrated this with three case studies, in Weston super Mare, Gainsborough and Chesterfield.

Mike suggested that **Town Design Codes/Manual** should be a concise tailor made point of reference for LPA and stakeholders. They should be:

- compact - like the Cotswold Design Code
- but made individually for each growth town
- potential SPD
- inform the pre application process
- used for assessing site Design Codes/Design and Access Statements
- informed by established tools - Placecheck etc

He considered that the EHTF guidance, to be progressed following the conference, should focus on the issues arising

and provide the tools needed to deliver the best we can, for example what should be included in a town design code? He suggested:

- parameters for use mix
- community aspirations
- streets and spaces typology
- building typology
- contemporary design
- sustainable design
- contemporary construction
- scale and massing
- articulation
- materials, fenestration, roofscape
- landscape design
- signage...etc

Ian thanked the speakers and invited questions from the audience, after which delegates worked in groups, with facilitators, to explore the issues and to identify the guidance requirements. The outcomes from these workshops will be brought together and progressed to form guidance which will be launched at the Annual Conference in October.

After lunch, delegates braved the record temperatures for walking tours of Cirencester, which illustrated many of the issues under discussion.

Reconvening, **Jonathan Bore**, a Director at Urban Initiatives Ltd, gave delegates the details and process behind the well-known, and large scale, urban extension at Ashford in Kent. The 'headlines' he acknowledged were:

- 31,000 new homes and
- 28,000 new jobs

But beyond that Jonathan agreed with Mr Einstein that "We cannot solve problems with the same order of thinking as that which caused them". The issue of good urban design is not about some abstract ideal, he said, it is about creating the conditions to make places work. This would be realized through a Development Framework which would allow "Ashford to grow from a small market town, with mediaeval origins and a strong railway history, to a vibrant and sustainable settlement".

The big problem in Ashford, he said, was severance. It had become a series of disparate parts; the challenge was to use the character and vernacular to knit these together. It has been a growth area for three decades but the need for a more positive approach has now been recognized, in order to bring activity back onto the street.

The community was engaged in a 'game' created to reach consensus on issues of density and the Town Team approach offers ownership and continuity. A very detailed analysis was undertaken of all of the elements effecting development, including public transport links. A long term strategy will reduce parking in the town centre and exploit the surrounding flood plains to best effect – creating a canal district and 'green necklace'. It will also create three major re-development sites and expansion of the town centre. Walking links with the town centre and connectivity across the railways will be re-established.

The framework also includes an Economic Vision:

- Business Plan Led > Financial sustainability
- Jobs in the knowledge sectors within the South East

growth region

- Serving the new seeker and consumption markets of London, the South East and Europe
- Supplied by indigenous businesses and labour in Greater Ashford and the wider Kent labour force

and an Ecological Vision:

- Thinking on the macro-scale
- Water, waste, energy
- Landscape working hard for its keep
- The Aesthetic of function.

He identified key infrastructure issues:

- Early delivery of additional transport provision required to develop sustainable communities
- Holistic solutions to flood risk, water supply, waste management and river quality
- Water demand management for new and existing development
- Sustainable drainage solutions

He said that there are large areas of vacant land around the centre, which can be readily redeveloped, but there is also a 'concrete collar' which needs to be broken through. Consensus has been built on all major issues and the vision – for up to 2031 – is being taken forward by the Borough Council.

Jonathan Lambert, an Associate at Donaldsons, said that the company now works with one in three local authorities to improve and compliment town centres. He addressed the issues for managing housing growth as the relationship of urban extensions to town centres and accommodating more housing in sensitive and constrained areas. He considered that the role of urban extensions is the next most sustainable option to town centres. They should be compact and socially integrated and offer the opportunity for significant critical mass of development, improvement of infrastructure and community uses, as well as sustainability.

He also listed the advantages and disadvantages to town centres:

Advantages

- Larger catchment population
- "Quantitative need" for retail enhancement
- Increased spending assists commercial & leisure
- Opportunity to improve transport links
- Opportunity for greater diversity of employment uses
- Opportunity for greater mix of housing types

Disadvantages

- Development focus outside the town centre
- Leakage to stronger centres
- Congestion
- District Centres can provide competition
- Easier option than brownfield land assembly
- Commercial : focus is on business parks
- Green Belt

He explored the retail, employment and residential issues which are complex, and illustrated these with case studies in Corby, Lincoln, Weston super Mare, Dartford and Gloucester.

When considering extensions versus town centre development, he suggested the following should be taken into account:

- Economic & Functional Links
- Need to Retain Growth
- Need to Direct Investment to Town Centres
- Retail needs to be complementary
- Employment: Inward Investment
- S.106 – Pool for Contributions
- Capital Receipts

He added that when delivering housing in historic towns urban extension does provide an alternative, but urban areas should still be a priority; they should enhance the historic, traditional and unique element of a location and provide activity outside of traditional commercial hours. They offer opportunities to enhance commercial values and bring buildings back into use, remove poor quality buildings, stimulate mixed use development, provide affordable housing, public realm improvements and promote high quality design.

In conclusion, Jonathan's key messages were:

- Urban extensions can benefit town centres
- They are an alternative
- They can facilitate investment in the town
- Need to complement the town centre
- Need to Improve in parallel – Timing & Phasing
- Residential can benefit Historic Towns

One of the major issues of urban extension and housing growth is integration with the town centre. This was explored by two representatives from Colin Buchanan. **Greg Lee**, an Associate Planner, looked at 'Selecting locations'. He began by emphasising the need to identify what it is that you want to achieve. Predicting growth shows patterns of occupation which are very different from those we have been used to. Many more single person dwellings will be needed – up to a 72% increase. Travel patterns and changes to infrastructure need analysis and investment, and capacity studies help to identify sites for development.

Greg's graph of travel patterns demonstrates that historic towns achieve lower levels of travel, which might offer examples of good practice.

He used case studies in Thurrock, Priors Hall and Essex to show how to achieve self containment and how urban extension might be used to relieve pressure on the existing historic fabric, create employment opportunities and new facilities, can repair and regenerate a town and stimulate investment.

Martina Juvara, an Associate at Colin Buchanan, asked "What happens next?" First, she said, it is important to face the opposition. She supported the need for participation, which might be stronger in historic towns where:

- conservation is a priority
- transport infrastructure is "constrained"
- densities of PPG 3 are alien
- the "new look" of development is perceived as a threat

She also identified the common pitfalls:

- Progressive small scale change by stealth – no

opportunity to address wider issues

- Acceptance of lower densities/ sub-critical mass – impossible to deliver sustainable transport
- Formulaic "integration" – suppression of innovation and appropriate house types
- Screening and green buffers – reduced potential of social integration, repair and regeneration

So how, Martina asked, can a masterplan create a special place? This can be achieved by:

- 1 Exploiting local assets – use the landscape setting, the unique location
- 2 Exciting and lively heart – make heritage at the heart of it, as a focus; people will then use it and generate civic pride
- 3 Appropriate housing and architecture – design, environmental considerations, scale, diverse tenure and values
- 4 Innovation and sustainability – including combined heat & power, biodiversity, sustainable transport links

Three examples showed opportunities supported by masterplanning:

- Huddersfield – the new development can provide energy to regenerate the old
- Lincoln – address the brownfield sites at the same time – not separately
- Pontefract – addressing town centre degradation

Her conclusions were:

- Growth is inevitable
- Site selection creates opportunities
- Historic towns offer better quality of life
- Opposition does not always improve development
- Urban design can promote sense of place
- There are different degrees of integration: all to be explored and exploited

The great advantage of historic towns is their established identity and a stable community, who feel that they belong.

After a short question and answer session, Ian assured delegates that the good practice and information exchanged during the day would contribute to the guidance which would be launched at the Annual Conference in Bury St Edmunds in October. He thanked all of the speakers and participants, especially those from Cotswold District Council and MURBEX, for their support.

Report by Chris Winter, EHTF

Handouts from the power point presentations are available from the EHTF office.



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