

Summary of the second meeting in the fifth series of TEN – Barking Town Centre 12th June 2008

Present

Jennifer Dearing, Corporate Director of Regeneration, LB Barking and Dagenham
Marc Dorfman, Chief Planning Officer, LB Redbridge
Jeremy Grint, Head of Spatial Regeneration, LB Barking and Dagenham
David Hennings, Assistant Director of Economic Regeneration, Haringey Council
Stephen McDonald, Strategic Director of Major Projects, Southwark Council
Seema Manchanda, Head of Physical Regeneration and Development, Newham Council
Shifa Mustafa, Assistant Director of Development, Waltham Forest Council
Darren Richards, Head of Planning and Transportation, LB Sutton
Nicholas Falk, Founding Director, URBED
Anne Wyatt, Project Coordinator, URBED

Apologies

Anne Doherty, Assistant Director Planning, LB of Camden
Chris Donovan, Assistant Director (Strategy, Planning & Regeneration), Bexley Council
Paul Evans, Interim Corporate Director of Development & Regeneration, LB Tower Hamlets
Sue Foster, Head of Planning and Land Charges, LB of Hackney
Pat Hayes, Executive Director of Regeneration and Housing, Ealing Council
Tom Jeffrey, Director, Environment, Culture and Public Participation, Croydon Council
Colin Lovell, Head of Land Use Planning, Transport for London
Brendan Walsh, Director of Regeneration and Community Development, Ealing Council

Introduction

Thanks to Jeremy Grint, Head of Spatial Regeneration at Barking and Dagenham Council, the TEN Group were able to look round Barking Town Centre, and see the amazing transformation that has taken place. Since 1989, when URBED's development strategy for diversifying the centre was rejected by the then Council (whose old Leader simply wanted to attract more retail), the area around the Civic Centre has been completely rebuilt, with exciting modern architecture, and what will eventually be 4,000 new homes.

Developments over the last five years include:

- A stylish Learning Centre and library, making use of the internal structure of the old building, but with a bright new façade

- A stylish square overlooked by a new 'ruined' wall which hides an ugly building
- Private apartments with colourful balconies
- A new block of mainly social flats
- A remodelled theatre
- The construction of a new health centre with housing above (not yet complete)
- The construction of a new secondary school/college focussed on vocational skills with a training hotel and restaurant alongside
- The installation of a sill which maintains the level of water in Town Wharf
- New high density housing around the Town Wharf and overlooking the River Roding
- The start of work on turning a warehouse into studios for creative enterprises
- A scheme by Countryside for land alongside the A13 was turned down by the Development Corporation, but when this part eventually goes ahead an area of low grade warehousing and retail will have become a stylish waterfront.

Diversifying the town centre

Jeremy and the Corporate Director of Regeneration, Jennifer Dearing, explained how the transformation has been secured:

1. The old Leader retired, and his replacement was keen to make a difference and take advantage of the demand for high density housing at the time and the prospect of tapping government funding allocated for Thames Gateway. The upgrading of the town centre is important not only to show that things are happening after a long lull, and a period when the major local employer Ford has closed, but also to boost development in the huge site at Barking Riverside.
2. A masterplan for the new quarter was drawn up by a consultancy team with the necessary design skills to show how the different elements could be fitted together, and this was used to secure private sector interest.
3. A small private developer, Urban Catalyst, was selected because of the quality of their proposals. Though the scheme had to be refinanced (leading some to label it a project management failure) in fact it was completed on time and largely within budget by a house builder on Urban Catalyst's board, Redrow, who has since gone on to do further schemes.
4. The East Thames Group, and their architects, Jestico and Whiles with Peter Barber, who are building several blocks of flats, won the Council's confidence through the scheme they did for Tanner Street, on the edge of the town centre. Because this comprised individual terraced houses rather than flats, the Council were happy with the involvement of a housing association.

5. Undoubtedly the quality and innovative nature of the scheme was helped by the provision of £3-4 million in grants by CLG as part of the funding for Thames Gateway.
6. Barking town centre was also helped by being designated as one of the Mayor's hundred squares, and received assistance from Design for London.
7. A key feature has been continuity. Jeremy Grint has continued to work on the area and the scheme for well over a decade, and has therefore been able to see things through from vision to reality.

Targeting the workless

Barking and Dagenham have suffered from the loss of many manufacturing jobs, and the consequent loss of relatively well-paid jobs close to home. Since Ford closed some £30 million of regeneration money has been spent, but there is very little to show on the site. At the same time the demographic profile has been changing much faster than in the past.

Barking (and the TEN Group) recognise that simply transforming the physical appearance of the town centre does not by itself change the attitudes and life of the existing residents. Over the past decade the population profile has changed hugely due to several factors:

- Upwardly mobile 'immigrant' families have moved in from Tower Hamlets to take advantage of the relatively cheap housing (Becontree was the largest Council estate in the world and much was sold off under the 'right to buy')
- Other houses have been vacated by their owners, and rented out (often by their children). This has sometimes created conflicts, for example where local authorities have taken the homes to house families who are seen as alien by their neighbours.
- Many homes have been intensively occupied by groups of foreign workers
- Overall the area is experiencing high population growth, with schools expanding from 3 to 11 forms.

Though school results are climbing up, analysis suggests that many white working class males are lagging behind. There are particular problems not just with 11-15 year olds, but also the 19-25 category, who have little aspiration and find it does not pay to get off benefits. There are consequently a series of different segments to deal with, which cannot be tackled by short-term initiatives, and which include:

- Those who have never worked
- Those from families with a history of disorder
- Those on low incomes for whom work hardly pays (particularly if it means losing housing benefits)

- Those with language and other difficulties.

Providing incentives

A fundamental national (or London wide) issue is the Benefit system coupled with the difficulty of finding accommodation. This has to be changed. But there are also other measures that Councils might take, which include:

- Targeting efforts at very young children and support for mothers going out to work (as this is when children's life chances tend to get formed).
- Introducing 'vocational education' and here Barking is learning from Dutch experience. By offering training that will lead to jobs that are in demand, such as construction and hospitality, in a busy town centre location, and in a building that will be seen by young people as 'cool', the Council hopes to change aspirations and behaviour.
- Establishing a neighbourhood management system for each of the 'super output' areas, with staffs of three in each to help coordination between social services and physical development.
- Possibly establishing some kind of 'charter' (or protocol) to set conditions on how new homes are allocated and who benefits (though a present evicting tenants for poor behaviour can simply lead to them being classed as homeless and coming to the top of the queue).

Tackling the roots of the problem

The group want to probe further (and a special meeting will take place in Southwark in late July or August). The ideas discussed include:

- 'Tough love' and zero tolerance (the American approach that may work in some cases)
- The use of 'urban etiquette' or locally developed rules of communal behaviour, which the TEN Group discovered on its study tour to Rotterdam
- The use of arts and sports or cultural development to build self-esteem
- The application of Continental design ideas (as in Barking Riverside) coupled with Continental approaches to housing management, and high quality transit corridors to enable people to reach jobs and services easily
- The extension of neighbourhood management to join-up services and tackle 'problem families' or behaviour, possibly with agreements to cover what residents and the Council expects from each other.
- Monitoring and rewarding good behaviour.

Training for planners

Marc and Sue along with contributions from the University of Westminster and URBED have put together a presentation with appendices highlighting the need for further training within local authorities in planning and regeneration skills. Marc is looking for at

least five members to contribute £2,000 to the programme which will be matched by the University of Westminster. Members welcomed the idea but need further clarification on what their £2,000 would get them. Courses such as 'Planning for Dummies' and 'Regeneration for Dummies' could prove very useful. The course needs to cover physical delivery, CPOs, housing, commissioning and site assembly. Time will be set aside at the special meeting of TEN to discuss the programme and its delivery.

Membership

This was Seema's last meeting for Newham but we hope she will be able to continue her membership in her new role for Islington. Tom has now started his new job at Croydon and will continue as a member. Darren Richards will be taking over Tom's place for Sutton and it is hoped that Paul Evans in his new position as Interim Corporate Director of Development & Regeneration at Tower Hamlets will be able to join for the remainder of the series. Jeremy and Jennifer were invited by the members present at the meeting to join the Group and Anne will follow this up with them.

Future meetings

The next meeting will be hosted by Stephen in Southwark. This is a special meeting to discuss the issue of worklessness in more detail. There will be no site visit and as a result the meeting will start slightly later in the day. There will be a couple of presentations which will lead on to group discussion. Time will also be set aside to discuss the training programme that Marc and Sue have been developing.

This meeting will be followed by a study tour to Belfast in early October. URBED will start to pull together a draft programme and are grateful for any suggestions of places to visit and contacts.