



Ilford station and the Icon building



Loxford Polyclinic



Valentines Mansion

REDBRIDGE: the renaissance of Ilford town centre

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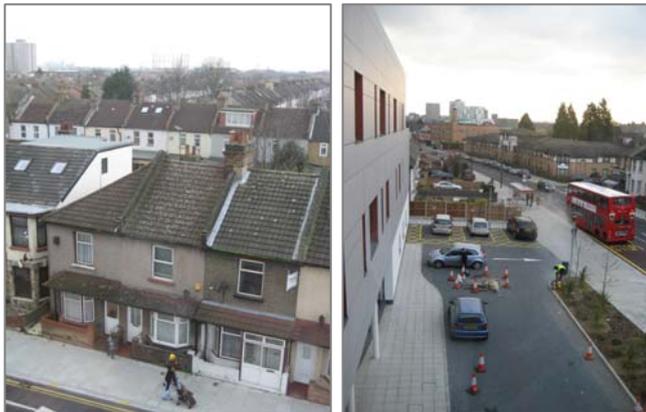
REDBRIDGE: the renaissance of Ilford town centre

The fourth meeting of the TEN Group focussed on the lessons emerging from a number of major projects on the fringes of Ilford town centre, which is going through a renaissance. After a mini bus tour, and tour of the Loxford Polyclinic, the meeting took place in the listed Valentine’s Mansion, a recently restored country house and park at Gants Hill. Redbridge provided an excellent profile of seven major projects (for more information on the these projects see Appendix B), and the meeting was a chance to review progress since the Group last visited Redbridge some five years ago, and discussed plans for intensifying the centre with high density housing.

The highlight of the visit was the chance to discuss Ilford’s new Polyclinic, which is the first to open, and which offers lessons for delivering health services locally. The report considers in turn the centre’s context, and then draws lessons for community, character, and connectivity.

The context and challenges for suburban town centres

Ilford is a classic example of a London suburb that grew up on the back of excellent commuter rail services to the City in the late 19th century and early 20th century, when rows of similar looking terraces were built. New industries, like photographic processing, provided good local jobs. In turn shops prospered



along the High Street, which became classified as a Metropolitan Centre, because of its size. However Ilford is close to both Barking, (reached along Ilford Lane), and Romford further out, and so has had to fight hard to differentiate itself.

The town centre is still in a programme of investment that over several decades. The first big taking traffic out of the High pedestrianising it, after a bypass the South of the centre. Shortly was the first place in the country



transition after dates back step was Street, and was built to after Ilford to pioneer

Town Centre Management in 1986. Action was taken to make the centre clean and safe, with for example a new town clock, along with the development of a covered 300,000 sq ft shopping centre.

New cultural attractions were later built in the form of a theatre and library, and later Cineworld on the Southern side of the bypass. Most recently the former Woolworths has been given a new lease of life as a new style Wilkinsons, with bright lighting on the façade, along with stylish lighting columns on the adjoining secondary shopping street. A Business Improvement District has been set up to promote and manage the centre. But this still left the issue of what to do with the fringes of the High Street. These can often decay and provide a bad first impression. They also provide some of the only brownfield sites where new developments can be squeezed in.



Community and delivering local services

Ilford, unlike neighbouring Newham or Barking & Dagenham, never had much Council housing, and so has a relatively high proportion of owner occupiers. Over the last couple of decades, the population has changed, and 50% are Black and Minority Ethnic groups. Importantly there is quite a mix, with no dominant group, though significant numbers are of Pakistani Muslim and Sikh Indian descent. The poorer areas tend to be in the South of the Borough, nearest to the River Thames.

The Group were astonished by the vibrancy of Ilford Lane, which runs down from Ilford town centre to Barking, and which is occupied by a wide range of independent and predominantly ethnic businesses. It is likely the shops thrive from being on a busy bus route, with wide pavements, serving a relatively dense residential area, and they generally looked quite large.

The Loxford Polyclinic is not far from the end this stretch of shops. The changing population had made a number of large public houses redundant, and one of these was acquired by a developer, and then promoted as the first of a new wave of Polyclinics through a development agreement with the Redbridge Primary Care Trust. Generally local authorities have found it hard to work with Health Trusts to develop Local Development Frameworks, with the fear that any new schemes would be used as



excuses to close local hospitals. However Redbridge PCT developed an Estates Strategy with proposals for four new health care facilities, with the aim of making services more accessible to populations of up to 50,000. It may also help in getting GPs to work together, thus overcoming the difficulty young practitioners have in finding premises.



The Loxford Polyclinic currently serves some 20,000 residents, and the numbers have been growing rapidly since it opened six months ago. It employs over one hundred staff, with a majority coming from the locality.



The centre combines GPs (5.5 at any time) and a pharmacy, with a very diverse series of specialist services, for example eye services from Moorfields Eye Hospital. There are rooms for voluntary organisations concerned with healthy living. It is designed to be open and friendly, with for example a café and a family room, and operates seven days a week from 8 till 8 at night as does the pharmacy.



Even though town planners might have preferred it to be in Ilford town centre, the striking building is seen as a sign of confidence in the future of what might have otherwise seemed a neglected area. It was also hard to find a large enough site within the town centre. It also removed what was seen as a blight on the neighbourhood. Relatively little parking has been provided (25 spaces for staff and five for patients), as use can be made of public transport. Before the clinic was opened, maps were provided to local residents mapping walking and bus routes. The scheme has been nominated for a number of awards and short listed for an RTPI Planning award, and clearly is popular (there has been a 10% rise in patients since January). It cost some £18 million, and is an example of how diversifying the uses can be used to bring life back to suburban neighbourhoods, as well as how cost-effective design can still look attractive. Care had been taken to involve local people through a Community Panel, who were given free range deciding on colours and sign posting.

However it was pointed out that the scheme might have been even more adventurous in mixing uses. The example was given of the Sunlight Centre in Gillingham Kent, where a development trust has turned an old industrial building into the heart of a health centre run as a social enterprise, which also includes a radio station and recording rooms, and an organic café, and thus goes even further towards providing a heart for a poorer residential area.

Character and developing a distinctive identity

An important issue is how to re-brand suburban centres, and create a pride of place. Ilford is benefiting from a growing residential population (though it has lost considerable local employment). The visit brought out the sheer variety of London's suburbs, which is easily neglected in official statistics. A key feature of the town centre is now a number of tall blocks of apartments, which tower over the predominantly two storey housing in the surrounding neighbourhoods. They also look out to nearby Canary Wharf and the City of London.

Four schemes were seen, and others are underway. The plan was to create a kind of 'dumbbell' with high rise buildings at either end of the High Street, and this has now been achieved. There are some similarities with Rotterdam in using iconic architecture to re-brand a town, and perhaps in time Ilford could be called Manhattan on the Roding!

The idea of tower blocks some 20 or 30 stories high was very controversial, and indeed the Mayor of London has sought to cut back the size of one of them. Members feared that they would become social housing, but hoped they would attract young professionals, and so far they are drawing a mix of people. Their scale and proximity to the town centre and a railway station that is only 16 minutes from Liverpool Street may have made the project appealing not just to a range of developers, but also to investors. Significantly one is funded with German money, and another has been pre-sold in Hong Kong, while a third is being rented out by an institution based in Canary Wharf.



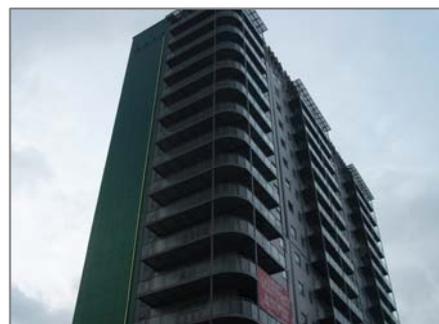
Pioneer Point

The briefing pack provided by Redbridge (Appendix B) highlights a number of features:

- Vision 20 on a former nightclub site, is 22 storeys high with 130 units with balconies or terraces, and includes a gym, communal roof gardens, and office space. It makes use of passive energy.

- Pioneer Point on a former market site consists of a 33 and a 25 storey tower, providing 279 units, plus retail and a specialist market.
- A development by Durkan Homes on the site of Britannia Music provides over 320 units in a 23 storey tower with commercial space on the lower floors, but has not yet started.
- The Icon is a former British Gas office building, which has been converted into 238 flats in 10/12 storeys.

Several features were noted, such as prominent balconies, imaginative use of colour, and limited parking spaces, which have to be paid for. Though some major housebuilders are involved (Durkan Homes and Galliard) it may be significant that Ilford not only now has a cosmopolitan population, but is also attracting foreign investment.



Icon

We also noted some historic buildings on the edge of the town centre which were easily overlooked despite being in a Conservation Area, because so much traffic passes by the town centre. In contrast Valentine's Mansion in Gants Hill is a haven of quiet, and has been beautifully restored, along with the park, thanks to a Heritage Lottery Fund grant, after being vacated in 1993, having served a time as Council offices, and is now seen as 'raising the tone of the whole borough'.

Connectivity and making the most of transport links

The key to attracting investment has been making the most of the centre's high connectivity. The East London Transit will provide a fast bus services to Barking Reach on dedicated lanes, and will open shortly. Ilford is a major stop on Crossrail, which is due to open in 2017. The new station will provide a 21st century interchange, and Redbridge are seeking to make the most of under-used space around the station, some of which the Council owns. Drawing on urban design studies, they have proposed shifting the station towards Liverpool Street, and creating a new square in front of it, with cafes and bars around it.

One of the Council's concerns is to further diversify the centre of Ilford, which could, for example, include providing workspace for smaller enterprises, and developing the 'evening economy'. As the station is on the border of the town centre, a stylish mixed use development (including a hotel), could complement the wide range of shops, and provide the final link in the centre's renaissance.

Later that evening some of the Group ended up in Gants Hill at a superb and packed Indian restaurant. Outside, work is underway to undertake £7 million of street enhancements as part of a major Transport for London scheme. Gants Hill roundabout was identified some years ago as symbolic of the decline of suburban centres. With the fine restored park and mansion, and a first-class public realm, there is a new sense of purpose in some of Redbridge's centres, itself the product of positive planning.

Collaboration and leadership

Members were struck by the leadership that the Borough has provided, and the ambition of the Council to persist, despite the recession. There is a vision expressed in an Area Action Plan, that in turn is based on an urban design analysis. This has been due to officers carefully briefing key members who have then persuaded others. A variety of developers have been attracted, not just the 'usual suspects', and it has probably been beneficial that they have not depended on a single developer partner. However the centre is very dependent on jobs in the public sector, and so could be very vulnerable to the next waves of cutbacks, unless it can really enlist the energy and resources of its minorities.

Though there is social stress, which will intensify as the recession deepens, there is a relatively good spirit, and the town centre feels far less hostile at night than some of the other metropolitan centres. Though the centre of Ilford is well-connected radially, it is very car dominated. Crossrail does offer a major chance to change travel behaviour and the image of the suburbs, but it is essential that the station and the connections with it are to the same standard.

Some local authorities have spent a lot of time and money on developing masterplans without getting schemes off the ground. Redbridge prefers to spend its resources on services such as education, which performs very well, thanks in part to aspirational Asian and Jewish parents. Instead, it aims to attract finance from the 'next league of developers' and is seeking to create a 'blueprint' that will give centres like Ilford a niche. Though some politicians would like to have kept things as they once were, (and the BNP has made small inroads in an isolated estate), most have come to see the value of a diverse and growing population. Redbridge, in short, does seem to be a 'growing place that is going places' as one person commented.

Appendix A

Participants and apologies

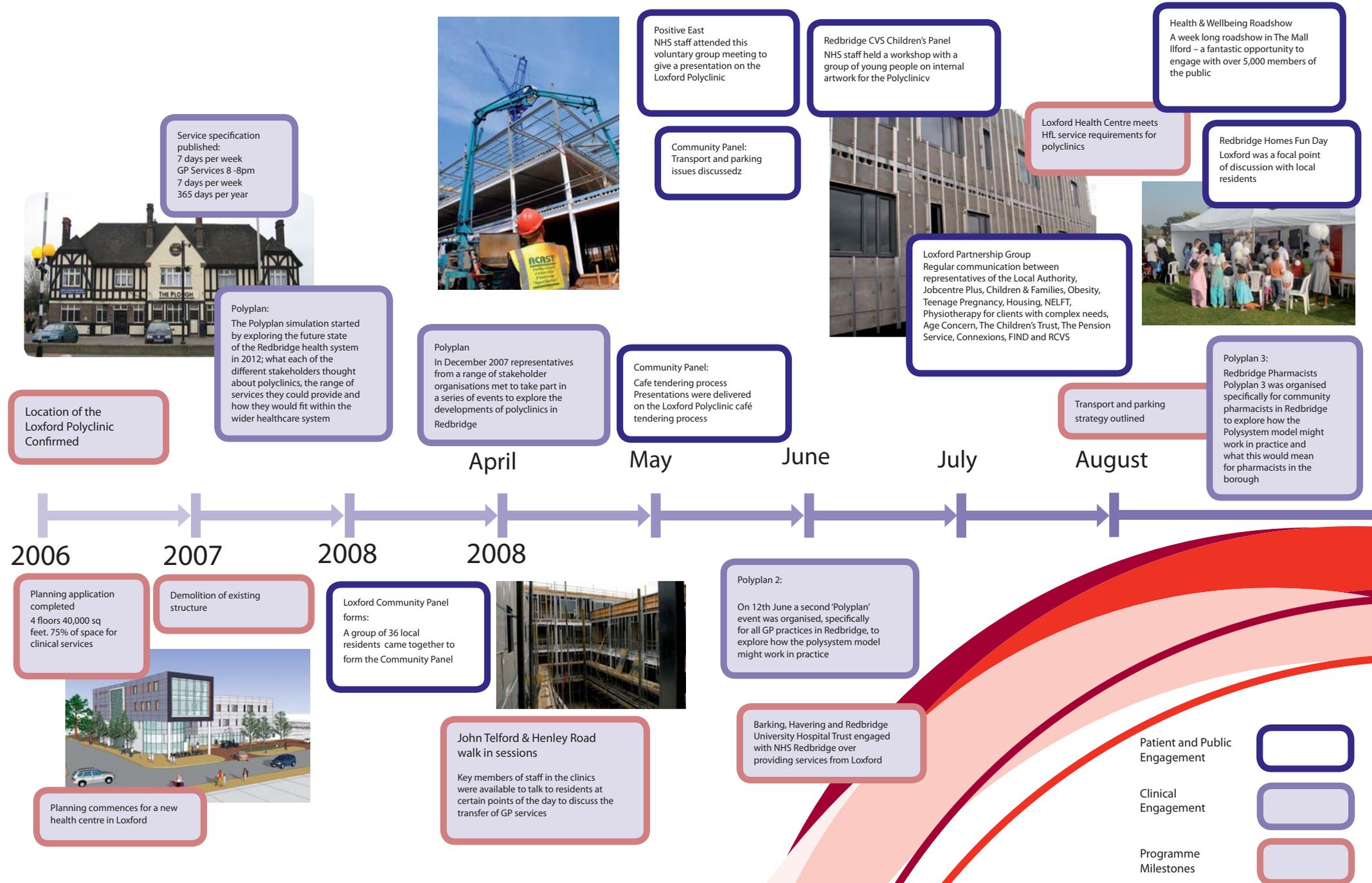
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Communication, Collaboration, Innovation, Inspiration, Imagination



Patient and Public Engagement

Clinical Engagement

Programme Milestones



Realisation

