



# SOUTH ACTON REPORT

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## Produced by

### URBED

26 Gray's Inn Road  
London WC1X 8HP  
t. 020 7831 9986  
f. 020 7831 2466

e-mail: [n.falk@urbed.co.uk](mailto:n.falk@urbed.co.uk)  
website: [www.urbed.co.uk](http://www.urbed.co.uk)

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## SOUTH ACTON REPORT

The final meeting of the TEN Group's seventh series visited the South Acton Estate in Ealing, which is the largest post-war housing estate in West London. Once considered the worst estate in Ealing, it is now undergoing an amazing transformation. Thanks to members David Hennings and Pat Hayes, the Group not only went round the estate, visiting a show flat., but also benefited from meeting up with Mark Brayford, Head of Housing Regeneration at Ealing Council, Janet Payne, Regeneration Manager at Catalyst, Countryside's Estate Regeneration Director Michael Hill, and Adam Simpson, who leads for L&Q. Following the tour, the Group discussed the future of estate renewal in the new Community Centre.



This was the fourth London housing estate the group has visited (others include East London Housing's award winning schemes on the canal in Tower Hamlets, Southwark's scheme for the Elephant and Castle, Woodberry Down in Hackney). The briefing papers for the event showed how the Catalyst Housing Group were not only providing better homes, but were also playing an important role in regenerating run-down areas by redeveloping failing Council estates. Articles by Barry Munday and Nicholas Falk suggested there were plenty of similar opportunities in peripheral estates or 'forgotten suburbs'. However, to succeed great care has to be taken in tackling the underlying economic and social issues, which presents major challenges for both community engagement and subsequent management, and was the focus of discussions.

### South Acton Estate Renewal

**Catalyst as pioneers** The South Acton Estate occupies a site next to South Acton Station on the over-ground, just across the railway line from Chiswick. Acton was very much a Victorian industrial area, and like many other estates has suffered from post war high rise housing becoming unpopular. It got a bad name as a result of crime, and high levels of unemployment, which eventually led to proposals for redeveloping the whole estate.

Despite much work by the Council, they were unable to make the project work financially, as the masterplan was so complex, with 35 phases! Catalyst (formerly Ealing Housing) won the contract for redeveloping the estate in partnership with Wates. David's notes explain that Catalyst is a medium sized housing association, which manages 17,000 homes with an asset value of £2 billion. When Wates pulled out at very short notice Catalyst decided to go it alone.

**Community engagement** Catalyst held a series of workshops and planning exhibitions, where residents commented on layouts before the submission of the detailed planning application. Residents were also offered tours of the construction site to see the new properties and could choose between a separate kitchen and open plan, the kitchen fittings, flooring and paint. External finishes were chosen by residents. Community engagement has included support for football groups that bring children in different tenures together.



**Design** The masterplan by PRP combines two storey terraces with new nine storey blocks with relatively few flats per floor. The first phases involve the demolition of five residential blocks and their replacement by 254 new homes, of which 150 are social rented, and 96 are shared ownership. The latter represented a huge risk, as this had not been done before in this location, (now Catalyst wish there were opportunities for outright sale). A measure of success is that prior to redevelopment only 25% of residents wanted to live in the area, while now the figure is 75%. A major feature has been the relocation of a road, and the building of an attractive terrace alongside the railway line, which has created a beautiful and popular square out of what was an unused stretch of green space.



**Funding** The social housing is cross-subsidised by shared ownership, which is in separate blocks but with the same external design. The total investment was £45 million. The shared owners units have sold well with an uplift of 10% on latest sales. A key feature has been the energy system. The energy performance is currently Eco-Homes 'very good', which is equivalent to Code Level 4, with a CHP scheme. The estate is now seen as so safe that children leave bikes unlocked. Safety has been helped by the fact that a number of 'problem tenants' are now in prison!

David Hennings explained that there were originally fears that the shared ownership would not sell and it would be seen as infill. However, the striking colours and attractive designs have changed the image. There are higher space standards, separate utility rooms and large balconies, plus a high quality of finish, which was clearly visible in the show flat. The scheme is now seen as ‘North Chiswick’ which has created market and resident confidence. Residents are now keen to move as the new homes look much better than the old ones and have much better insulation.

South Acton is probably the last estate where grant forms a significant part of the funding. Increases in rental levels, with lower benefit payments, could lead to higher void rates, and in turn make it more difficult for RSL’s to raise capital. Hence private sales are becoming increasingly important, and Catalyst by Design has been formed with the capacity to develop 500 units a year. Shared ownership could be problematic, as a 25% share in London could amount to more than £100,000 and it also ties up capital.



**Site disposal** The principle of simplifying the requirements on the developer, who gets the land for free, has been taken further in the final stages which have been won by Countryside with L&Q as the housing association. The Council was keen to avoid past mistakes. Three developer teams were short-listed. The selection was made primarily on the basis of the developers’ intentions with the price playing a minor role.

**New approach to consultation** Whilst producing the original masterplan Ealing Council carried out extensive consultations with a small group of activists (who wanted to keep some of the blocks). This time around the Council wanted to make sure they reached a much wider and representative group. The consultation process started eight to nine months before developer selection. They came up with a range of approaches including employing an architect to speak to residents and formed a resident group called the Community Board who identified key concerns. Throughout the development process the Council have worked with the residents on briefs, incorporating their priorities and assessing the bids against them. The resident group met with the short-listed developers and bidders had to respond to resident queries.

The Council operated a parallel process; and marked the bids at the same time as the residents. Fortunately the residents scored bidders very similarly and have supported the decisions that the Council have made. This has only been made possible because they had been involved from the start and understand the process. As a result many of the tenants who wanted to move away want to stay and are backing the regeneration programme.

**Countryside and L&Q** felt that this process has meant that they have had to be resident focused and they are keeping impetus going. However, it is equally important not to over consult!

Mark Brayford explained that what are now 1,832 properties are being redeveloped as 2,850. Currently only 21% is private, and these are largely rented out, so the social mix is going to change to being more like 50:50. The process has been very rapid with only ten weeks allowed for stages two and three of the bidding process. This was tough but everyone wanted to keep the momentum going. So Countryside and L&Q started the planning process before all the legal requirements had been completed.

Adam Simpson from L&Q explained they were keen to get involved as it is their biggest scheme, and Countryside were natural partners. The key of doing without grant is almost doubling the number of units by making much better use of all the space between buildings (but without losing useful open space). They are planning to start on site properly within 6 months, which is the fastest programme that Countryside have been involved in since 1992. A crucial element in viability is that the new scheme has a very limited Section 106 agreement.

Michael Hill from Countryside explained that the huge investment commitment is made up of two thirds housing for sale (£400 million) and one third affordable (£200 million) plus some retail and employment space. They have set up a joint venture company modelled on Greater Bewley Park in Essex, which is a 4,000 unit scheme with a new station. The key to success has been making the most of the location, a tenure blind approach to masterplanning, with a wide range of options in terms of both tenure and



house types. There is going to be a common approach to estate management and they will be involved over a period of some 17 years.

## Future of Estate Renewal

The Group were very impressed by the scheme, which compared favourable with other estates we have visited, both in terms of the variety of designs and the quality of the public realm. However funding is going to get much more difficult:

- The renewal of housing estates without grant is going to require at least 60% sales, as well as the land being made available for free.
- The demand for private housing is for larger units, whereas social housing now needs smaller units (85% of demand is for small units).
- The largest housing problem could be supplying affordable housing to those with no benefits and limited incomes (affordable housing costs at least a third more than that provided by volume housebuilders like Barratts).
- This is going to require much more flexibility on the part of local authorities, for example with regard to how the masterplan is going to look and what they ask for e.g. parking is only available for 48% of units, which is only going to work in urban areas with good public transport.
- Without flexibility and trust nothing much is going to happen. In future local authorities may well need to undertake clearance and provide serviced sites with clear briefs to get housing built on public land.
- One member commented that planners need more space to discuss options before a masterplan is submitted. Instead of tight agreements it would be better to tax land that is not brought forward for development (as in Copenhagen).
- David raised frustrations with design and planning by tick box, for example, safer by design, HCA standards, Code for Sustainable Homes, as some of this negates good design. Under safer by design you cannot have letter boxes in case people squirt petrol through and set light to them! Therefore you have to have mailboxes in the hall but these are a crime risk and so then you have to put special security in and this creates even bigger hallways.

Getting the image right early on is therefore crucial:

- Tenant engagement matters and this requires considerable skills as well as time to win confidence (with interesting issues about how public spaces like lobbies are designed and managed given people's natural conservatism, and how to involve those who do not currently live in a new scheme).

- Changing the image can be achieved through imaginative public realm works (such as the small park) and careful phasing, as well as intensive estate management (as, for example, is described in Nicholas Falk's article in the Briefing Pack).
- Success will also depend on careful urban design (building simple blocks with the right proportions), and leaner construction (for example greater modular construction, and faster build-out rates).
- Training and IT can engage with young people (though signs saying No Ball Games seem retrograde).
- Hence the future pattern of development is likely to depend on joint ventures with a relatively few organisation who can marshall the investment required.

## Energy Saving

Meeting higher energy standards is tricky because the situation is changing all the time, and requirements are not flexible enough:

- CHP was used to meet the standards, which now might better be met with PV panels.
- It was a little absurd to import wood pellets from China and the CHP produces so much heat that homes are getting over-heated.
- The heating requirements on new units are very low due to high levels of insulation and much better windows.
- To make CHP viable you need to link up with other users, such as swimming baths or commercial offices to sell off the heat economically rather than providing it to flats, and also alternatives to biomass may be better e.g. at Brent Cross they are using waste from the retail.
- There is a need for greater flexibility e.g. the light fittings are a requirement of the code for Sustainable Homes and it is a condition of grant and planning to meet the code standard. This was done to stop people being able to put energy inefficient bulbs in but the law is now phasing these out anyway so why make it a requirement!
- Funds may be raised by housing associations borrowing against their considerable assets using bonds to get long-term money at cheaper rates than house builders would pay.





## Role of Local Authorities

Local authorities will play an even more important role in future if regeneration schemes are to get off the ground, and new ways of working include:

- Fresh products and different development strategies
- Tapping public land, such as hospitals and defence sites
- Cutting out the middle men and saving on fees e.g. lawyers
- Joint ventures, possibly with private consortia that include housing associations
- Flexible plans
- Better procurement skills.

However, landowners need to be incentivised, for example to avoid hoarding of sites, and to recycle sales receipts. The keys to success based on Ealing's experience are to:

- Set flexible briefs and avoid London being seen as 'too difficult'.
- Find ways of making housing attainable for key workers, such as railway staff, who currently end up living outside London altogether.
- Focus on what really matters, and provide greater certainty with space for proper planning before developers get too committed to a particular approach.
- Tap new developers by bring proactive rather than responding to proposals
- Accept that development in London is always going to be more expensive than elsewhere, which requires a partnership approach to get schemes off the ground.

## Chiswick Park

After the discussion we briefly saw the amazing transformation that has taken place at Chiswick Park, which was formerly the London Transport bus works, and which extends over 33 acres between Gunnersbury Station and the District Line. Following an original masterplan by Terry Farrell for Stanhope, development eventually went ahead to a new masterplan by Richard Rogers in which the buildings overlook water. The site straddles three boroughs but is largely in Hounslow.



The challenge Stanhope faced was how to develop a site that was a cross between Broadgate by Liverpool Street Station, and Stockley Park, near London Airport. The scheme has been very successful in attracting media related businesses, many of whom have relocated from the West End. The marketing of the site emphasised lifestyle, and access to a large choice of restaurants undoubtedly helped the scheme to get off the

ground. There are very few parking spaces, and so the development shows it is possible to develop new commercial schemes if the location is right (in this case midway between the centre of London and Heathrow Airport). The Group were entranced by the quality of the landscaping, and the beautiful buildings, set off by a large full moon.

### Next TEN Series

There has been a very positive response from members for an eighth year and from a secret ballot at the end of the meeting it was decided that the next series would feature a symposium for a wider group of invitees. We will be circulating a short paper summarising the changes to the subscription.



## Appendix A - Participants and apologies

### Participants

Chris Brown, Chief Executive, Igloo  
Mark Brayford, Head of Housing Regeneration, Ealing Council  
Marc Dorfman, Assistant Director Planning & Regeneration, Haringey Council  
Nicholas Falk, Director, URBED  
Sue Foster, Executive Director of Housing, Regeneration & Environment, Lambeth Council  
Karen Galey, Head of Economic Development, LB Waltham Forest  
Pat Hayes, Executive Director of Regeneration and Housing, Ealing Council  
David Hennings, Head of Regeneration, Catalyst  
Michael Hill, Director, Countryside  
Tom Jeffrey, Director, Environment, Culture and Public Participation, Croydon Council  
Mark Lucas, Head of Regeneration, Redbridge Council  
Seema Manchanda, Assistant Director Planning Services, Wandsworth Borough Council  
Janet Payne, Regeneration Manager, Catalyst Housing Group  
Darren Richards, Head of Planning and Transportation, LB Sutton  
Adam Sampson, L&Q  
Stephen Tapper, Assistant Director of Place Shaping, Enfield Council  
Anne Wyatt, Project Manager, URBED

### Apologies

Chris Berry, Chief Planning & Regeneration Officer, LB Redbridge  
Chris Donovan, Assistant Director (Strategy, Planning & Regeneration), Bexley Council  
John East, Divisional Director: Development Services, London Borough of Newham  
Daniel Ratchford, Strategic Director of Environment and Leisure, LB Sutton  
Ed Watson, Assistant Director Planning and Public Protection, Camden Council