

Summary of TEN meeting in Stratford 4.7.05

Present:

Paul Clark, Chief Planning Officer, LB Redbridge

Chris Donovan, Assistant Director (Strategy, Planning and Regeneration) LB Bexley

Marc Dorfman, Director of Regeneration, LB Ealing

John Herman, Divisional Director, Regeneration and Development, LB Newham

Nicholas Falk, URBED

Esther Caplin, URBED

Apologies:

Peter Bishop

Paul Evans

David Hennings

The last meeting in the second TEN series (2004-5) took place in Stratford and focused on 'ensuring the future of town centres'. Stephen Hoier, Strategic Policy Coordinator, also hosted the Group.

Briefing papers were circulated in advance including a comprehensive background paper on Newham's regeneration projects and the local socio-economic/demographic context. Case studies were chosen to go beyond the usual focus on retailing. They showed how Newham engaged citizens in developing its plans, which was part of the reason why its rating as a local authority was greatly upgraded; and also how Stratford had broadened its attractions through early projects to develop the arts.

Examples were also included from Leeds, showing how cultural development was used to promote city pride; from Birmingham showing how the standard of urban design had been raised; from Lille showing what has been done to make the city highly accessible; and from Manchester showing how it started its city centre renaissance by making the most of its waterways.

The meeting began with a tour from the exciting new station through the main shopping mall. This seemed thriving with market stalls and shoppers from every cultural background. The group climbed Holden Point, whose 22nd storey has become a viewing station for the site of the new development. We could see that more lines and trains went through Stratford than almost anywhere else in Britain, and that linking the existing town centre with the new development is a huge challenge.

Before John Herman's presentation, the Group reviewed the last meeting in the Netherlands, drew some conclusions and considered the audience for the report (a draft had been circulated to all members previously). John talked about integrating the new with the old in Stratford, as well as protecting and developing existing town centres using

a range of approaches. He posed the question of how to link Stratford's town centre with the new development.

The presentation and discussion on the development of the area around the Stadium highlighted the challenges of securing comprehensive development through our fragmented planning and funding system, but also showed what local authorities can achieve, given the right circumstances.

Discussion focussed on

- Finding new roles for weak centres
- Using public investment more effectively
- Mobilising the private sector

The meeting was highly participative and grappled with issues in depth very effectively (possibly as a result of the small size of the group on this occasion). A summary of the discussion follows.

Some conclusions from the Dutch Study Tour

The session began by reviewing the previous meeting that had taken place in the Netherlands over two days. Participants were very enthusiastic about aspects of the Dutch approach, and the lessons for the UK.

We have seen the future and it works'

- 1 In Holland we spoke to people who have big departments. Local authority teams are paid respect by private developers. This is completely different from the UK.
- 2 In the UK we have introduced our anti-social behaviour controls, and planners and social planners are very concerned. This contrasts with the Opzoomeren project in Rotterdam. To go hand in hand with ASBOs etc, we need to put two or three people in each neighbourhood to build social capital, without targets or time scales.
- 3 There is more respect for public involvement (positive rather than a negative concern re. ASBOs). A major concern of the city manager was measuring participation.
- 4 The quality of the built environment depends on a culture which is different from the UK's. Everyone has a financial interest in keeping the area up. There is sensitive management of your own space, which is difficult e.g. in London. The difference is partly cultural and partly institutional.
- 5 More money is invested in the built environment services.
- 6 The TEN report of the study tour should be targetted at the next generation of planners, including politicians and civil servants.

Stratford:

Understanding the context

John Herman explained that there is a major concern with protecting existing centres. Forest Gate has pioneered the upgrading of a group of old buildings, which has led to improved levels of trade. They have also upgraded Green Street in ways that reflected its customers' culture. There are also projects to develop new centres in the Royal Docks and at Gallions Point. Newham had to run its own bus service before London Transport was willing to run services. Gallions has 400 jobs in it, and Newham ran a Jobs Fair, which attracted 10,000 by 10.00 a.m., many times the level forecast.

Newham is building two new town centres next to existing in centres: Silvertown Quays and Stratford. Stratford has been historically isolated and focused inwards, but now transport links have opened it up and changed perceptions. The meeting took place just before the announcement of the Olympic Bid result, and it was clear that there was already a real buzz to the town centre, amplified by the public art works around the station. The bid has already attracted 500 million of public investment that would have taken place irrespective of the result. This has been a major factor in advancing the plans for redeveloping the Lea Valley, such as undergrounding the electricity transmission lines, which local people considered to be a top priority.

Linking the new with the old

The problems for Stratford include the functional relationship between the existing and new centres, as well as the physical links, with many variations in level to cross the different transport links. The new land is 7 metres higher as a result of reusing the spoil from the Channel Tunnel. There is also a distance of 250 yards between the two. There is consequently an issue of whether the two should be seen as independent, complementary or in some kind of graduated relationship. The Council would like Stratford to achieve metropolitan status, and the catchment areas are not large enough for them to each function independently. Ideally they would attract a department store, or create a local service centre, making the most of the existing cultural quarter. Land Securities are planning to expand the existing centre, but attracting major tenants will be difficult.

The Council managed to secure refurbishment by dropping its share of income from 25% to 15% about four years ago. They have also undertaken extensive public art and lighting schemes. However the big issue is what to do when what is in effect another Bluewater eventually opens. Newham have come to the conclusion that it will have to relate to the existing centre and the physical integration needs to be as good as possible. However there is a question of exactly what the provision should be.

Achieving a 'Living Bridge' between the existing town centre and Stratford City requires major further development, and an upgrading of the image. Hence the level of residential could be key. Already there have been major success stories like the development of a redundant office block into luxury apartments, which were largely sold off plan.

Making development happen

Newham finds it difficult to negotiate substantial planning gain agreements up front, because of the high site development costs. The level of car parking will not be very high (5,000 spaces) in relation to the size of development. Hence the centre is seen as being sustained by its local catchment. At present only 17% of local expenditure is spent locally. However Newham expects to have an additional population of 69,000. Newham already comes sixth in the levels of spending power in relation to local facilities.

Though Stratford can be marketed on its accessibility, do people want to live nearby? Transport tends to create barriers, and there needs to be a continuous frontage. As things stand today, there will be new domestic trains, and they will stop at Stratford, but there is no agreed link between the domestic station and the other lines. There is a need to go beyond retail or offices as a way of building and financing major new developments. In Ealing the new public attractions are temples for non Christian faiths. Marc Dorfman suggested that Newham might consider promoting a new faith centre as a public focus. Esther Caplin suggested the idea of a public hall for wedding. Transport can be used to rebadge Stratford, but requires something more to create a great place.

In other cities transport has been sunk, while in Stratford it will create a new higher ground level linking the town centre and the new residential area. A strategic plan is being developed for the Lea Valley, and the new UDC will be concerned to tap the increases in land value. The challenge for Newham is how to ensure that the momentum is maintained, and that people who are currently being priced out of the housing market do not feel excluded. The fall back strategy for the Olympic bid is the extension of Lea Valley Park down to the Thames. This will make it possible to broaden the range of housing, and to be able to hang on to people who are upwardly mobile.

Managing the town centre

The other major issue is town centre management. Newham has set up the Stratford Renaissance Partnership to foster the future of the Town Centre, and there is a Stratford Strategic Forum coordinated by the GLA. Newham Council has already decided that is not going to run the services in Stratford City, and Land Securities is already keen on the idea of a BID. However getting a BID off the ground on the back of support from major retailers is not easy, and may not be the best way of taxing businesses.

In Bexley Town Centre Management was crucial to ensuring the Bexleyheath did not lose out to Bluewater. TCM was backed up by a corporate group of officers. The manager's main role was liaison and setting up events, publicity and promotion, as well as working with officers on strategy and providing a visible presence on the street. In contrast, Ilford, which had the first Town Centre Manager in the country, has gone for a housing led approach. The current manager is a local authority officer working for an independent company. It is best to appoint a charismatic person, and back them up, as the promotional role is key. Ealing believes that area management is crucial generally, and TCM is the most complex form. The starting point was creating strategies, and is essentially a form of project management, and is basically about securing better coordination between services. Eventually they can be taken over either by

environmental services or by a BID company if it is strong enough. (Paying about £29,000 as they are worth their weight in gold!)

Conclusions

- To achieve desired outcomes you cannot rely on private developers, and so local authorities have to take the lead
- At present progress depends on a few exceptional individuals who stick with it. (John Herman has been working in the same area for 17 years. So though they have got through four chief executives and lots of leaders, the basic policies have been maintained.)
- The social functions of town centres are particularly important in changing images, for example Stratford's new cultural quarter
- Changing the flow of people is as important as the physical environment. (How can changing trains be made into something that improves the local economy?)

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