

Summary of the fifth meeting in the fourth series of TEN Newhall and Harlow Town Centre 25th October 2007

Present

Andrew Bramidge, Chief Executive, Harlow Renaissance
Chris Donovan, Assistant Director (Strategy, Planning & Regeneration), Bexley Council
Marc Dorfman, Chief Planning Officer, LB Redbridge
Sue Foster, Head of Planning and Land Charges, LB of Hackney
David Hennings, Director of Strategic Planning, Haringey Council
Philip James, Planning Officer, LB Sutton
Nicholas Falk, Founding Director, URBED
Anne Wyatt, Administration Manager, URBED

Apologies

Andrew Armes, Head of Development and Design, Milton Keynes Council
Anne Doherty, Assistant Director Planning, LB of Camden
Paul Evans, Strategic Director of Regeneration, Southwark Council
Pat Hayes, Executive Director of Regeneration and Housing, Ealing Council
Tom Jeffrey, Director of Environment and Leisure, LB Sutton
Colin Lovell, Head of Land Use Planning, Transport for London
Seema Manchanda, Head of Physical Regeneration and Development, Newham Council
Shifa Mustafa, Assistant Director of Planning and Environmental Control, Haringey Council
Brendan Walsh, Director of Regeneration and Community Development, Ealing Council
Bob West, Service Manager, Culture and Environment, LB of Camden

The fifth meeting of the TEN Group involved a study tour of Newhall, the new extension of Harlow, and a discussion on the theme of using new design to regenerate a fading star. The meeting took place in the offices of Harlow Renaissance, and our grateful thanks are extended to Andrew Bramidge, their Chief Executive, for guiding us around, and responding to our questions.

Challenges for post war settlements

Harlow, like many developments in the aftermath of the Second World War, was based on a number of principles that no longer hold so true:

- It was built as one of the first generation of New Towns to re-house part of London's population that had been hard-hit by war-time devastation
- It offered a series of small hamlets with predominantly two storey housing surrounded by 'green wedges'

- At its heart was a car-free town centre offering a good choice of shops, a cinema and a theatre, and with an exceptional collection of modern art
- Jobs were provided locally in a series of industrial estates that ran along the edge of the railway line from Liverpool Street to Cambridge.

Since its construction, a number of factors changed:

- People bought and used cars to get to work and shop, whereas Harlow was built on the idea of only one car for every third household
- Industry contracted, and the sites were turned to retail and leisure, creating an 'edge city' on American lines only accessible by car
- The system built housing in many cases has not stood the test of time, and requires expensive refurbishment or redevelopment
- The M11 motorway went the wrong side of Harlow leaving the town stranded and congested by through traffic going to join the motorway
- Stansted Airport has been built nearby, but does not employ many local people
- What was effectively a working class town, with a mindset of expecting the Council to give them housing, now has to cope with a much individualistic culture
- Though educational standards are rising the town has ended up with a poor image locally, where it is surrounded by attractive countryside and a much wealthier residents
- The population is ageing, and is not growing, unlike the rest of Essex, and there is a significant group of people who have poor prospects
- The town centre remains depressing and dead much of the time, despite good features like the Water Gardens Civic Centre, with eating places overlooking a pocket park, and a new housing, such as the Foyer built by East Thames.

Harlow wants to achieve a 'renaissance' and is actively promoting growth:

- The town has been identified as part of a Growth Area running from Cambridge along the M11
- It also may form part of an 'arc' in the Outer Metropolitan Area extending from Watford via St Albans to Chelmsford
- Either way it is well placed to attract significant amounts of new housing, especially given its proximity to London
- The population could rise by 30,000 from its current 80,000, and imaginative ideas for a 'sustainable urban extension' to the North have been put forward, and Land Securities are now the main landowner along with the Housing Association Places for People
- A Local Delivery Vehicle, Harlow Renaissance Ltd, has been set up with backing from CLG, EP, EEDA and Essex County, and with the involvement of Harlow Council as well as some private representation
- Major projects are being promoted to redevelop the old market square, develop workspace for small enterprise, and to widen the choice of housing

- However there is concern among some of the older residents who fear the future, and, for example, are wary of letting housing associations taking over from the Council, who currently is the main landlord.

Newhall is significant because it has been widely praised as one of the best new housing schemes in the country, and offers a different model for how new housing could be provided:

- It is on former fields owned by a couple of brothers, who were dissatisfied by what volume housebuilders had put up at neighbouring Church Langley on land previously sold by them
- They commissioned a masterplan from the urban designers who subsequently have produced English Partnerships new Urban Design Compendium, and the visitor centre features a model of the planned scheme along with panels on the different elements
- 300 homes have been built so far in the first phase by a variety of builders according to a series of Design Codes to relatively high densities (for Harlow) of around 35 to the hectare, and are predominantly terraced 'town houses'; each builder is developing around 60 homes on around 3 hectares
- 25% of the homes were built by a housing association for social rent, but look indistinguishable, and the designs all have to conform to the masterplan. The second phase will see 35% social housing within a total development of 2,800 units
- The character is that of a traditional village, but with a high proportion of good contemporary architecture, and some delightful features; the builders have all employed first-class architects
- The public realm comprises over 40% of the development, and includes extensive grassland and woods alongside a stream that forms part of a SUDs scheme, and this is to be maintained by a trust controlled by the residents
- A mixed use building is under construction that will provide a restaurant and community facilities with housing and some live work units above
- The next phase is aimed at extending the village centre, with small shops; however this depends on continuing to attract people to live in Harlow and pay relatively high prices (25% above the values in neighbouring Church Langley); currently about a third of the units have been sold to local people and people are already starting to move around within Newhall.

Lessons from East Berlin

As the visit took place soon after our study tour to East Berlin and the new settlement on the edge of Potsdam, the discussion focussed on some of the parallels and lessons:

- Both places have experienced a fundamental change in the local economy, and what people can expect the State to provide
- They also have to compete with many other places that are seen as better places to bring up a family

- There are also issues of limited financial resources, and values being too low to attract private developers
- The group had been struck by the quality of public transport in East Berlin, which is heavily used, the extensive greenery which softens the blocks of flats, and the use of colour, private entrances, and play areas for children; there is also greater collaboration within the public sector, symbolised by services being re-laid in a common trench
- With blocks of flats being rented to a wide range of social groups, spatial differences are less apparent than in the UK
- Low property costs have also enabled creative people to settle in Berlin, particularly in the Eastern sector, which may be helping to develop a new spirit of collaboration.

Conclusions

The group could see the potential benefits from a planned expansion if this was linked to substantial investment in new infrastructure. However they questioned whether there should not also be an alternative plan for before that took place. They could see opportunities for:

1. Immediate environmental improvements to brighten up and soften the town centre, and to create better first impressions, for example outside Harlow Town station
2. The letting of empty space on an 'interim' basis to individuals or groups who could make good use of it, such as artists or community enterprises
3. The potential for attracting entrepreneurial ethnic groups to fill gaps in provision
4. The scope for new forms of housing tenure and development, including making space available for self-build (and Harlow had the first self-build scheme for rent), and for people who would refurbish existing housing
5. The promotion of Harlow as the town where good design and innovation had created a distinctive set of places linked to a range of good jobs in the surrounding area

Future meetings

The final meeting of the series will be hosted by Sue Foster in Hackney (date to be confirmed). We will be discussing topics for a possible fifth series.