

# SUSTAINABLE URBAN NEIGHBOURHOODS NETWORK (SUNN)

## LESSONS FROM DICKENS HEATH, SOLIHULL







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## Report of the Dickens Heath, Solihull Event 12<sup>th</sup> April 2010

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Source: Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council



## SUSTAINABLE URBAN NEIGHBOURHOODS NETWORK

### LESSONS FROM DICKENS HEATH, SOLIHULL

On a sunny day, SUNN members visited the new village at Dickens Heath and discussed the best ways of engaging local communities, and planning for movement around new communities. Twenty-two members from six communities took part in a walking tour of the village and discussion held at the Community Centre.



Study tour of Dickens Heath

The visit was introduced with a presentation from planner Dave Simpson of Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council. Dave had been involved in the development of Dickens Heath from the beginning so was to give a valuable overview of the history and motivation in



founding this new community. Following that Richard Holt, Chair of the Parish

Dickens Heath Village Centre and ground floor uses  
Taken from Dave Simpson's presentation

Council, gave the community's perspective on the development. The afternoon session was kicked off with a presentation from transport specialist and engineer David Taylor of Alan Baxter who considered the potential for, and barriers to, innovation in new communities.

Chair of the meeting, John Hocking of the Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust announced the next SUNN visit will be to New Islington Millennium Village and Ancoats in Manchester on June 28<sup>th</sup>, where one focus will be on how to cut construction and other costs in the development process. The subsequent meeting will be at Grand Union Village in West London on September 27<sup>th</sup>. John also

announced that JRF's development at Derwenthorpe in York is now on site. He also floated the possibility of organising a visit to Holland, where SUNN members could visit new settlements around the old city of Utrecht. This might take place in July if there is sufficient interest. A proposal will be circulated setting out what we would hope to learn and what it would cost.

John also referred to the TCPA's review of the government's planning and housing policies, which can be accessed from the file-sharing website along with presentations and other material. The network submitted evidence to the Parliamentary Review of the Localism Bill, and the soon to be published Interim Findings will summarise the learning from SUNN to date.

## INTRODUCTION TO DICKENS HEATH

Dickens Heath Village, on the wealthy Southern fringes of Solihull, lies within Birmingham's Green Belt. It is unusual in having been promoted by the District Council from 1990 onwards as a better way of meeting housing targets than the option of extending existing settlements. The Council owned some of the land, and was therefore involved as a member of the development consortium as well as the planning authority.



The village is now largely complete as planned, though it has actually doubled in size to 1,672 units from the original plan. There is a population of around 4,000 persons, mainly young families, and some 25 businesses, though a number of the retail units remain empty. Unlikely other SUNN communities there is no social housing, as 'no



Village Centre retail units

need was identified', but quite a few of the flats have subsequently been rented out so there is a strong rental sector. One of the two 'garden squares' is on hold, due to the lull in the housing market, but a couple of small extensions are under consideration.

The village looks distinctive in mixing high quality traditional and modern architecture and in featuring a mix of uses, including a large number of shops in the village centre. At the centre a village hall, library and medical centre overlook a green. A short walk away a 'waterside' development of apartment blocks and offices overlooking a water feature that leads onto a picturesque canal. The village covers an area of around 57 hectares with a wide range of densities and house types. The

process has been exemplary in being led by the local authority, who commissioned the original 'concept masterplan' from architect John Simpson, who drew up the Design Guide and has provided ongoing advice to the Consortium. Some eight developers have been involved.

## Origins

The village was a response to the government's housing targets and the Development Plan process which required finding sites for 8,000 homes. Though the village is a product of the early 1990s, when there was less concern with mixed tenures and sustainability, the idea of limiting the expansion of villages and concentrating development in the most appropriate location is still very relevant, as concentration was judged to be 'the least harmful option'. Dickens Heath is only a 15 minute walk from a rail station which offers services every 20 minutes to Birmingham, which can be reached in half an hour.



A selection of the large range of housing types

An underlying objective from the outset was to build a functioning village with a strong, visible centre, not just another suburban housing estate. In part this was a *quid pro quo* to nearby local residents, along with a new surgery and school in return for support for building on hitherto agricultural land. The design principles in summary were:

- Clear identity
- Traditional features of a village
- Balanced mix of housing
- Safe and pleasant environment for pedestrians

A chronology handed out with the information pack on the village shows how it took five years to get from site identification to an approved masterplan, and another two years for outline planning permission and the Section 106 agreement. The school opened six years after the first house was occupied, and the village centre with its Market Square was completed in 2005. The Waterside neighbourhood was finished shortly after, by which time a thousand dwellings had been completed. Since then a further 600 dwellings have been completed, which averages out at around a hundred units a year.



## Design features

The masterplan aimed to have everyone living within five minutes of the central facilities, via pleasant walks, and to accommodate the car without it dominating. There are lots of trees and greenery. There is an interesting contrast between the suburban edges, where densities are generally around 25 units to the hectare, and the dense urban core, where densities are up to 90 units a hectare. The Design Guide promoted variety, and five different architects designed the buildings in the central area, which comprises the Village Green, Market Square, and Waterside.

To relieve traffic pressure, an existing through road was diverted into a series of 'squareabouts', with denser, higher buildings around them with the aim of creating landmarks. In fact some visitors are confused by the layout.



Dickens Heath primary school

Despite a commitment to pedestrian quality and ample pavements in most places, with a predominance of working parents, the car tends to be used to get children to school. There are complaints about insufficient parking provision with some larger households owning many cars. Typically parking is off-street, with some interesting variants such as houses around small squares. Interestingly, the garden squares in the central area feature parking below ground level, allowing central areas to be left as landscaped communal gardens.



Parking at Dickens Heath includes small parking squares, garden squares with underground parking and off-street parking

## Community features

Dickens Heath Parish Council was spun off from an existing Parish Council. Its Chairman moved to Dickens Heath eleven years ago, and has continued to chair the new council. It evolved out of a Residents Association with the aim of ensuring that *'things that happen were thought through'*. It has budget of £80,000, employs a part time clerk and caretaker for the Village Hall, and puts on a welcome programme of events for the benefit of the local community.



Perhaps the biggest disappointment in terms of the design of Dickens Heath is a lack of recreation space for young people. The problem is illustrated by the current difficulty of finding a site for a Mixed Use Games Area where *'teenagers can hang out'*, or kick a ball around. This is due to resident opposition whatever the location. There is also debate over whether traffic should be allowed to go through the village centre. At present there is no through traffic which means the village centre feels calm and safe from a pedestrian point of view but this may deter retail vitality.

There is also an issue between public and private control, for example regarding who cuts the grass, and the management of communal areas in blocks of flats. The Parish Council may extend the services it offers, as it can charge a precept on the Council Tax, and also potentially generate revenue from services it provides (and one of the results of the meeting was to open up contacts with other organisations tackling similar issues).

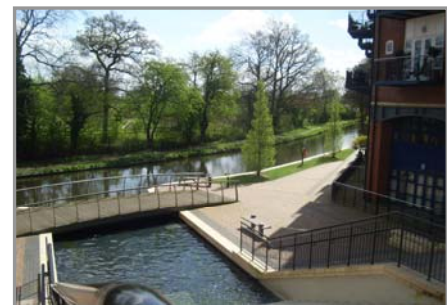
## Process features

The success of Dickens Heath as a development has been helped by a number of innovative factors:

- The District Council promoted the idea of a new settlement as a means of providing housing.
- It commissioned a concept masterplan, with axonometric or three dimensional views of what parts might look like, plus a design guide on factors such as densities, building heights and materials to achieve higher standards of quality than the usual housing development.
- Organisationally, development benefited from combination of a Dickens Heath Working Party bringing together the different stakeholders as required, plus a Consortium Technical Group to co-ordinate action.
- The original masterplanner has been retained to ensure that the original design intentions were maintained over the long development period.



Waterfront development



- Different Council departments have worked together (possibly helped by Solihull being a large unitary authority).
- Implementation involves no less than 13 key documents.

## **Members' reactions to Dickens Heath**

In considering members' reactions, the main likes included:

- Stylish waterside development
- Attractive centre with a Continental feel
- Leafy streets of detached houses
- Diverse housing types (though the obvious quality of both design and materials might be hard to replicate in most locations, particularly where money has to be put into affordable housing and energy saving measures).



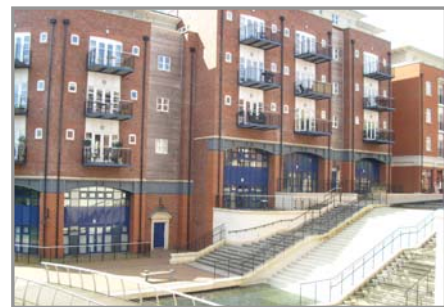
Concerns were expressed about:

- Confusing street layout (for example it was hard to find the Village Hall from the shopping Main Street).
- 'Squareabouts' that did not function as intended as people parked on them, crossing on foot was complicated, and they did not serve as landmarks as intended.



'Squareabouts'

- Excessive amounts of hard surfaces in the areas between the centre and the suburban fringes.
- Lack of local outdoor meeting places with seats or where a child could play.
- Shops or business premises on streets that would never attract enough trade.
- Inconsistency with the adoption of roads which led to some not being maintained to highways standards.



Empty retail units at the waterfront development



## PLANNING FOR CHANGING PATTERNS OF MOVEMENT IN NEW COMMUNITIES

In a presentation which preceded the workshops, David Taylor drew on his firm's experience to raise some basic philosophical issues about mobility as well as to illustrate some routes to more widespread innovation in transport planning. Some of his key points include:

- There has been a move over recent decades to a car-oriented lifestyle, marked by increased mobility and a wider range of destinations; for example where once children all walked to school, today many are driven to and fro.
- There has been a shift from post-war planning, where the expert knew best, to greater community participation, as in Dickens Heath.
- Despite huge changes in lifestyle, the Highways Act has not been altered since 1936. Despite a profusion of 'guidance' from Central Government, transport thinking often lags decades behind innovations in urban design.
- What matters most are the processes for 'bringing it all together',- that is resolving conflicts between different priorities, such as being able to see round corners as a driver, and keeping traffic speeds down, which calls for the opposite. Dickens Heath was a case study in *Places Streets and Movement* for its radical ideas at the time.
- A key issue is the relationship between density and car parking. It can be difficult to create truly walkable places at densities of over 30 units to the hectare due to the problems of 'park anywhere and everywhere' car parking - at least without formal parking controls. Poundbury in Dorset offers one 'walkable' model, with permeable streets and courtyards you can walk through, with an urban layout without front gardens.
- Where density moves up, ways have to be found to accommodate the car. For example, Upton in Northampton is built to 50 units to the hectare on a gridded street system. Accommodating parking requirements and the Sustainable Urban Drainage System, has resulted in very small back gardens.
- For retail vitality shops may need to be located on the edge of new communities, In Upton for example a peripheral road was downgraded to slow traffic which makes it attractive to shops and services.
- New concepts include the Dutch idea of road spaces equally shared between pedestrians, cyclists and motor vehicles in a form of 'naked streets' with no signs and barriers. A good example is Ashford, which has been identified for major growth, has shown how measures to give people on foot priority can work even where traffic levels are quite high
- In conclusion masterplanning needs to be led by a consideration of movement networks, and decision making needs to be made simpler, tapping into private

sources of investment. Overall, vehicle-oriented planning for transport in the UK remains a severe constraint on innovative urban design.

## WORKSHOP FINDINGS

### 1. Transport engineering, sustainable movement and the design of public spaces in new communities

Roads, footpaths, home zones and car parks make up the majority of public space in our new communities, yet are often designed according to out-dated specifications, with little ingenuity and mainly with the car in mind. This situation tends to be the norm in many SUNN communities, including Dickens Heath. This workshop asked whether there are new design approaches which can maximise quality of life, the vital role of play and green space, and what organisational arrangements are necessary to achieve high quality public spaces?

**Masterplanning** The discussion begin by considering if masterplanning should not be led by architects, who tend to over-emphasise the importance of physical design, and who are often over-ruled by traffic engineers. Rather a first principle of masterplanning ought to be that layout, scale and massing are more important than the architectural style of the houses. Key points raised in the discussions include:

1. Masterplans ought to accept people as they are, which today means high levels of car ownership and use, particularly among the kinds of young families that buy into new developments. But it is also important to 'plan for choice' - enabling safe and convenient use of public transport, walking, cycling as well as the car.
2. People might be 'weaned' off their cars if public transport meets minimum quality levels of frequency, comfort and reliability. More effort should be made to encourage people to leave their car at home especially for short trips.
3. Residents of new communities need spaces to meet casually in places such as outside the school, or library, where they may well linger, particularly if there are seats and shelter.
4. The provision of informal meeting space in the mobility plan could also help to attract more of a balanced population to new communities, including 'empty nesters' with the capital to downsize, who are more likely to be around the community during the day. This requires housebuilders to design for market segments with different requirements. It was felt that attracting older people away from traditional villages required innovative designs with plenty of space but low running costs.
5. Planning therefore needed to start with movement patterns, and appropriate densities or 'activity frameworks' (which might have led to a very different masterplan for Dickens Heath if the priority had been to make mixed uses work).



6. Where shopping is essentially local (and not a destination for the surrounding settlements), a simple spine layout, with traffic calming measures, can provide for passing trade, and accommodate both the car and public transport.

**Parking** Discussion kicked off by noting that where complaints about parking predominate, it may mean there are no serious social problems! However, a balance has to be struck between catering for individual convenience and providing an attractive environment.

- The way parking is handled in new communities largely shapes what places look and feel like, and how pleasant they are to walk around.
- Rear parking courtyards tend not to work unless densities are below 30 units to the hectare (equivalent to 12 to the acre, which was the standard used in the original Garden Cities). As they are often unpopular they are better replaced by conventional on-street parking. When provided parking courtyards should be permeable to pedestrians and cyclists.
- The Garden Squares of Dickens Heath are interesting, but may be difficult to replicate as they require a leasehold structure whereas people in Britain prefer to own properties freehold. The Garden Squares provide parking under a green communal area, sometimes referred to as 'undercroft' as it is not below ground. This means that housing does not have to be surrounded by a 'desert' of parking, and people who are less mobile can unload their shopping directly into a lift.
- Undercroft parking is only likely to be viable at densities of over 90 to the hectare (i.e. over four stories) and where land values are relatively high, such as in cities (though it is not clear why it is so much more common on the Continent).
- Parking demands in new communities can be reduced by having a greater social mix, including more older people, and by better allocation of road space.
- The design should be clear enough to indicate how space is to be used to minimise conflicts.
- Covenants that go with the land, along with information for newcomers, could be used to help secure neighbourly behaviour in terms of parking.

## **2. Localism and the potential role of parish councils in fostering community development**

Localism, in terms of new planning legislation, will include some form of neighbourhood planning; it also frequently extends to community development activity and forms of 'hands on' management of community facilities and/or long term stewardship of public space on behalf of the community. This workshop considered the national policy context for localism and the benefits of different organisational options including the statutory Parish Council, the asset-based development trust

and others, what community capabilities are required, and the role of community development in the localism process.

A first question was whether there was anything in current legislation and policy which attempted to define what a local community was. In terms of England's pressing needs for new housing, emerging planning policy seems to imply that local communities would be directly involved in such planning, either off their own bat or potentially in partnership with local authorities, land owners and property developers, even extending, for example, to supermarket companies or volume house builders. The "New Homes Bonus" which hands money to local authorities which agree to build new homes means some neighbourhoods are likely to come under considerable pressure to allow house building though they may be allocated some of the funds. But there is very little clarity in the emerging policy framework of the role of different organisations and how they interrelate.

The discussion, drawing on the example of Dickens Heath, noted that in return for accepting new housing, localities can demand some form of 'quid pro quo'. In the 1990s the original Parish Council within which Dickens Heath was located agreed to development in return for a commitment to developing a new village that was sympathetic to 'traditional' village forms in the area. This has certainly come to pass and the Parish Council can reasonably feel its concerns were met. In terms of broader policy, all that can be concluded at the present time is that neighbourhood organisations will certainly be engaged in bargaining over new housing and other development, attempting to secure benefits for the neighbourhood and minimise the costs. In the most optimistic scenario, parish councils will be welcome partners, working with local authorities, RSLs and others to deliver quality development.

But this raises two further issues with regard to localism and new communities. First, many new communities have no existing residents and no organisation to go to bat for the locality in deliberations over planning. Dickens Heath was a lucky exception in that a rural predecessor Parish Council both spoke for the interests of future residents and helped nurture a new Dickens Heath Parish Council into existence. But where no such helpful organisation exists, there is going to be a real temptation to ignore or gloss over the need for participation, or as one discussant suggested, parish councils '*will be bullied into accepting development*'. There are likely to be real issues around whether communities can take the lead in the process or whether – perhaps manipulated by developers and their partners – they will just be 'also ran's. This in turn will depend on: How the various provisions – community right to challenge, community right to buy assets, getting registered as a neighbourhood planning body, and implementing a neighbourhood plan (which could cost between £17k-£63k) – play out on the ground.



Even when an organisation such as a Parish Council has been launched, a second issue is whether they have the human resource capacity and capability to engage in planning processes, and if they don't, where they get it from. For example, it was noted in discussion that most of the existing functions of parish councils are important but modest in scope having to do with local quality of life, such as attention to litter and park management. But engaging in debate over the appropriate location of significant amounts of new housing in the sub-region, and its relation to the provision of infrastructure, involves sophisticated discussion of strategic issues. It's not that parish councillors can't grasp such issues but that they might be put at disadvantage in debate with professionals, such as planners or lawyers, who spend their working lives in such discussion. It is also the case that 'bargaining' or negotiation over planning and other issues will require strong leadership early on in new parish councils, so leadership skills will be important.

This suggests one key point raised which was that when similar legislation in Scotland (The Local Government in Scotland Act 2003) established a key role for 'Community Councils' (identical to English Parish Councils) the legislation and its pursuant guidance a) established a statutory responsibility on local authorities and all other key players, such as the NHS and the police, to work with communities, and b) established a nation-wide research and learning process, backed up by a strategic framework on community development and empowerment which enable neighbourhood organisations the length and breath of Scotland to meet and learn from each other. Our discussion suggested such support for community development and empowerment appeared to be completely lacking in England. The question was raised whether the National Association for Local Councils should play a role.

In terms of the New Homes Bonus, it will obviously benefit local authorities in areas of high demand for housing with local authorities with low or no demand having no access to this pot of money. This is likely to seriously disadvantage deprived neighbourhoods and local authorities, and increase social polarisation unless compensating urban regeneration funds are also available.

A concluding comment suggested a three stage 'time-line' in the emerging tasks of parish councils in new communities. In the period before new physical development, organisational skills in developing the parish council, negotiation, planning and capable leadership are all critical factors. A second phase is when new residents are moving into an estate and community development efforts are particularly important to build a sense of community from the outset. During a third, long-term phase of parish council activity, the beneficial management of public space and community facilities such as community centres and recreation grounds are important task. Invidiously parish councils face some of their most difficult challenges in the first

phase of their operation when they are least likely to have developed the necessary human resource skills.

Time did not allow discussion of the role of parish councils or alternative organisational arrangements such as asset-based community development trusts in the management of public space and facilities, which may need attention at subsequent SUNN meetings. One final comment was to question the extent to which people understand the implications of the Localism Bill, and whether a 'layman's guide' ought to be available.

### **3. The 'centre' of new communities: in the middle or on the edge?**

For obvious reasons, shops and complementary community facilities, such as the library, the GP's surgery, etc. are usually located together to increase footfall and in the geographical centre of new communities - the traditional village/high street model. But SUNN experience, including pressing problems of low retail vitality in Dickens Heath and other locations, suggests that in the current harsh retail environment this approach may not be workable. This workshop asked what constitutes a 'neighbourhood centre' and whether peripheral locations, drawing in 'passing trade' might also be a design option?

The Dickens Heath experience is instructive. The community, as conceived in the mid-1990s, was intended as a traditional village/small town with higher density housing near the centre and lower density, even single family housing on the periphery. It was to have strong central retail and community facilities environment with a high street which lead away from the community facilities clustered around the village green toward another significant feature, its peripheral canal, giving a second cluster of waterside retailing around an attractive central square. The conception and execution was laudable.

But a radically changing national retail environment conspired with some local factors to undermine the retail strategy. Nationally local retailing has come under severe pressure from the rise of car-based shopping and the spread of out-of-town shopping centres (with parking for up to 6,000 cars) and giant sheds. This has combined with the consolidation of food retailing in the hands of just five major retailers, who then branched into a diverse form of provision in superstores which sell everything from food to clothes to shoes to newspapers to electronic goods. The result is that in the last two decades more than a two hundred thousand local shops in the UK have closed for good, including for example, around 80% of all butchers, fish mongers and bakers. Combined with the current economic crisis which has severely damaged the remaining retailers, retail decline is the norm in many neighbourhoods.

In these circumstances it is unsurprising Dickens Heath's retail environment is suffering. Locally SUNN members learned that the Dickens Heath 'high street' suffers from insufficient parking which pits shoppers against residents for a very limited number of spaces.

A number of points emerged in discussion:

- The need for every community which intends to have retail provision to prepare a hard-headed retail strategy and not rely on out-dated assumptions of the situation of local retailing in Britain. This is not to say some local retailing could not succeed - but that the deck is stacked against it.
- A key issue to emerge from SUNN is that at the early masterplanning stage key questions need to be asked about where local shops ought to be located. There is a suggestion from experience in at least three SUNN communities<sup>1</sup> that shops might have been more viable located on busier roads on the periphery of communities, where they would benefit from the attraction of car-based 'passing trade'. While this runs counter to our traditional notion of shops at the heart of communities, it might well mean that at least local residents would have some shops in walking distance.
- Revising our notions of where shops go then raises a significant question of where community facilities, like the library and surgery ought to go. One suggestion is that such facilities ought to be near shop to increase 'footfall' for all, but also to provide services for both new and existing communities.
- The local retail strategy should consider every factor which might influence retail vitality. For example in the SUNN community of New Earswick local shops are kept vital by both passing trade and reliance on the expenditure for school children. In Dickens Heath, placing the school nearer the shops might have increased trade and they could have shared car parking'.
- Discussion also triggered by the experience of Dickens Heath, particularly the attractiveness of its otherwise poorly rented shopping/canal-side environment, asked whether the village could become a 'destination' in its own right. Parking issues would need to be resolved and the idea generated lively debate.

## CONCLUSIONS

The visit to Dickens Heath provided a chance for learning from a new settlement in the Green Belt in a prosperous area where high standards of architecture were demanded and were financially viable. It showed the real value of sustained local authority leadership over the entire development period of a decade and more, and the great benefit of an active Parish Council. If more new housing schemes were of

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<sup>1</sup> Orchard Park, Lightmoor, Grand Union Village



the quality of Dickens Heath there might be much less local opposition. However, the scheme did raise real questions about the costs and benefits of providing more of a social mix, and of achieving similar quality in areas with lower property values. It also demonstrated, even with best of intentions, the difficulty of achieving retail vitality in a new but traditional high street environment at the centre (as opposed to periphery) of developments. These and other issues will be addressed in the next event, which will be held at the New Islington Millennium Village in Manchester. There will also be a chance to explore ways of improving the construction process.

## **APPENDIX A – LIST OF DELEGATES**

Richard Armitage, Richard Armitage Transport Consultancy

Michael Carley, SUNN Team

Martin Chuter, Trinity Estates

Stuart Clarke, Cambridgeshire County Council

Jacquie Dale, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Nicholas Falk, SUNN Team

Mike Galloway

Jane Green, South Cambridgeshire District Council

Amanda Hack, LHA ASRA Housing Association

John Hocking, Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust

Cllr Richard Holt, Dickens Heath Parish Council

Sarah James, Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council

Andy Lawson, Gallagher Estates

Marc Littleworth, Trinity Estates

James McMillan, Great Places

Jo Mills, South Cambridgeshire District Council

Cllr Charles Robinson, Dickens Heath Parish Council

Guy Scott, Ironstone Development Group

David Simpson, Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council

David Taylor, Alan Baxter & Associates

John Watts, Trinity Estates

Anne Wyatt, SUNN Team