



Upton



Oxley Woods

# QUALITY CHARTER FOR GROWTH IN CAMBRIDGESHIRE

## LESSONS FROM UPTON AND OXLEY PARK

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### Contents

Introduction	1
Community	1
Connectivity	2
Climate	3
Character	4
Assessment	5
Conclusions	6

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# UPTON AND OXLEY PARK STUDY TOUR

## 16<sup>th</sup> October 2007

### Introduction

The October study tour to major schemes under housing development in the South Midlands at Upton in Northampton and Oxley Park in Milton Keynes was very popular, and provided a chance to see how some of the most acclaimed schemes in England are working in practice. Upton is an urban extension, planned in consultation with the community through the Enquiry by Design process, and with a vision of combining traditional appearance with modern performance. Oxley Woods in Oxley Park is an example of applying Modern Methods of Construction, and is being delivered through a form of Urban Development Corporation, the Milton Keynes Partnership.

Milton Keynes has a significant urban design capacity and, for example, is producing a residential design guide. It also has politicians who have grown up in a New Town (and who may be feeling sore about losing development control powers). Both schemes have used Design Codes, and offered possible lessons for the Cambridge Growth Charter under the themes of community, connectivity, climate, and character. They raised issues for how to enable new housing schemes in Britain to reach the same standards as on the Continent, particularly as far as community facilities are concerned, which in turn is bound up with how social infrastructure is to be financed and managed.

### Community

Creating a sense of community is possibly the hardest test for any new place, with concerns over when promised facilities are going to be delivered. Community facilities seemed the weakest point of both places at present. Upton has gone for a policy of pepper-potting social housing, and it is impossible to tell what they are from outside. However this is causing concern to new house buyers we spoke to, who were not aware of this when they bought. Some concern had also been expressed at the level of support available for those in the socially rented units. The resident couple spoken to also complained about the behaviour of some of



Upton



Upton



the children. The planned community centre, originally intended to be provided from the start, is now going into a later phase, and its foundations have been laid on the large open space on the edge of Upton.

Both schemes have schools at their heart, and the Upton Primary School looked iconic. The design of the Oxley Wood primary school came in for some criticism from the group, but seemed friendly enough inside, and the two level design appeared to be working. English Partnerships is still working on the way community facilities are to be managed at Upton. At Oxley Park we understood that the open space was likely to be taken on by the Parks Trust, which has an endowment of income from shop rentals.

One of the good features of the Upton scheme is the scope for extending some houses internally over time into the roof space. The Cambridge group was very concerned about how to mix tenures and lifestyles successfully, with higher levels of affordable homes planned. It was clear there was a lot more that could have been learned if we had had the time, and both places are worth revisiting when more has been completed and occupied.

## Connectivity

Though both schemes are aimed at being sustainable communities they are both car dominated. In Milton Keynes 70% of children travel to their primary school by car. One of the causes is the low density layout of our towns, which makes it hard to run efficient public transport (despite Milton Keynes Council providing buses with a £2 million subsidy each year).

The pavements in Upton were extremely well-designed though cycling does not really feature. Parked cars are largely kept out of the way through internal courts. In Oxley Woods there is a dispute over developers providing two parking places per home. In Upton the standard is one place plus half a place for visitors. Neither development is using charges to regulate car use.



Oxley Park



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There are no local shops or services yet, though in each case the primary school is located where it could act as a community hub. In Upton the primary school is located opposite the new community square, and in Oxley Park some shops have been provided but they are un let. Hence higher densities did not appear to achieve one of their main benefits which is supporting better public transport and local facilities, and by the time these appear it may be too late to change people’s travel habits. There appears to be a bus service running every 20 minutes to the town centre between the hours of 6.45 am – 11.00 pm (which had started half hourly).

There is clearly a problem with new development of enabling visitors to find their way around, a problem that Satellite Navigation does not resolve! It is also due to confusing names, lack of clear signing, and the absence of proper visitor centres (work is about to start at Upton on an education and information centre) and site offices that can serve as an initial destination. (Incidentally, movement was also made more stressful by the main roads between Cambridge and Northampton being dominated by heavy lorries carrying goods from the Continent, instead of going by rail freight.)



Upton

### Climate

Both schemes had made conspicuous attempts to minimize energy consumption, with high levels of insulation, and windows that do not leak. Solar and photovoltaic panels added a note of distinction to parts of Upton, though some felt they could have been positioned better. We were also informed by two local residents that they were not working properly; the reason for this was not evident (but may be due to occupants not being properly briefed on how they worked). Surprisingly, the windows all had small panes and there were no obvious balconies to provide external space for the flats. One segment of new housing we saw is being built to the Building Research Establishments highest energy rating.



Oxley Woods



Oxley Park



Upton

In Oxley Woods the Wimpey houses had achieved a high performance standard through an ingenious chimney, or 'eco hat' which acts as a heat exchanger. There were some fears over whether the homes might overheat in the summer due to their light construction and lack of external shading. The units raised major questions over how new residents were inducted into their new home and neighbourhood.

### Character

The immediate impact of Upton is attractive and striking. The character comes not only from the 3 and 4 storey terraced blocks with high roofs, and which are positioned to create vistas, but also from the very high quality of the materials and design details. Use of local material is evident, and stems from Design Codes that secure local identity, and enable a range of builders to create somewhere that has a sense of cohesion and place. The contrast with the neighbouring 80's development of Upton Grange was noticeable, and it is not surprising that there were initial objections to be overcome.

We learned that in a highly competitive housing market, Upton is proving very popular. Land prices of £800k were being achieved in line with other sites, but house prices were approximately 5% higher, suggesting that quality does pay. The landscape treatment was particularly good, with extensive use of green swales as part of a Sustainable Urban Drainage System. The houses also featured attractive private strips to the front rather than coming straight on to the pavement which enabled them to be individualised (and contrasted with Poundbury) and stops them being paved over to provide car parking. It is impossible to tell the tenure from outside, and most of the private housing is being occupied by the buyers, rather than rented out.

Milton Keynes is completely different, and it is hard to define a general character, apart from a huge variety of house styles, clustered in small neighbourhoods, surrounded by trees, and accessed off a grid road system which makes it more like an American suburb than a European town.



Upton





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While the strikingly modern homes designed by the Richard Rogers Partnership for George Wimpey, and entered in the governments Design for Manufacture Competition, may not be to everyone's taste they do offer something different. They are also selling well, at prices over three times the cost of construction (just over £60,000). Their internal spaces and features were thought to be attractive. Any doubts were over how well they would weather. The question of contemporary design was raised and the point made that the contemporary design of the 1970s was already raising problems, resulting in their being pulled down so sustainability is an on-going concern.

### Assessment

Visitors to Upton tend to be struck by its obvious design quality, and the fact that higher densities have been achieved without a sense of overcrowding. This is due to the way the landscape has been designed, and shows the feasibility of holding rainwater on site through a SUDs scheme. Oxley Woods showed that it is possible to construct homes much more quickly, and hence to respond to demand, by using Modern Methods of Construction where elements are made off-site. This cuts onsite construction (timber frames for walls, ceilings and floors are produced in a factory and delivered as a flat pack and assembled onsite in around 30 days) and reduces the risks of having unsold units.

However prefabrication still does not resolve the problem of how to make the housing more affordable (the units in Milton Keynes are selling for a premium), indeed Councillor Chris Williams suggested that there is no such thing as an affordable home given the current property prices. Upton certainly offers a greater choice than usual in new estates possible due to the number of developers. Both schemes looked highly car dependent compared with some German and Dutch models.

Despite the huge interest the schemes have generated, they lack the kind of visitor centre and local office that would help promote a new ethos. This is probably due to financial restrictions on the local authorities who play much less of a role than on the Continent. The effective removal of local democratic control in a large part of Milton Keynes was a cause for concern for the politicians at least. Other options might have achieved the same results, without alienating local politicians (and their electors).



## Conclusions

A number of conclusions could be drawn from the visit:

### Scheme design

1. There is considerable value in learning more from the experience in the South Midlands Growth Area, and Upton in particular provides considerable reinforcement that the basic principles in the Charter are achievable in Cambridgeshire.

2. English Partnerships is building up a delivery capacity and expertise which is highly relevant to the Cambridgeshire situation, and not just Northstowe. In particular they are using a rolling fund principle, and ensuring that the landscape and infrastructure is completed to a common standard, while enabling smaller builders to develop whole neighbourhoods.

3. Most of the success has been in developing places with character, through consultative design processes (or 'action planning') and design codes with principles such as connecting up every road, and thus avoiding cul-de-sacs. However the other aspects may be just as important to a scheme's long-term success. They raise some unanswered questions, such as how to fund community development and tackle anti-social behaviour (including the presence of construction waste in the ditches).

### Charter process

1. Though 30 people is too large to function as a working group, it enables others to be involved, including those who are new to the process or from other agencies.

2. Discussion of the Charter needs to be taken into different organisations, starting with the three councils involved with the growth of Cambridge itself, so that it becomes more widely 'owned', and connects with other processes, such as Section 106 Agreements with developers.

3. It would be good to build time into visits for reflection and drawing conclusions, perhaps over lunch?

### Next phase

1. Further work could also be usefully undertaken on how to fund infrastructure, which should include how to bring down some of the costs, for example through redesigning roads to use less materials and giving over more space to nature. This could be a joint project with developers, and might also tap into expertise within the university as well.

2. The 'looking and learning' process is proving popular, and despite the pressures on people's time, it is felt to be value in going for another phase. There seems to be considerable interest in focussing on the community theme, and particularly on how to design and manage the facilities needed to build a sense of community early on.



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Oxley Park Primary School



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