

## **TCPA Conference: A new future for New Towns**

Held on 12 March 2019 at St Martin-in-the-Fields, Trafalgar Square, London  
Notes by Tony Evans.

The conference aimed to explore what lessons we can learn from the original New Towns to inform a new generation of Development Corporations and to secure the growth and renewal of existing New Towns.

Attendees were a wide range of Councillors and Officers from a variety of both New Towns and areas where further New Towns are proposed together with consultants and others involved in various aspects of planning and delivery. Tony Evans attended on behalf of the Harlow Civic Society (we were the only voluntary organisation represented). Also attending were representatives from Harlow Council: Councillors Mark Ingall and Danny Purton and Brian Keene, Managing Director.

### **Summary of Key Points**

- Need for Master planning and strong design principles
- Need for Community led Development Corporations with significant powers to deliver at scale, pace and quality.
- Place making is key, not just building homes
- New investment is needed
- Land values must be based on current not future value to make purchase affordable
- Local authorities must collaborate (especially with the ending of Regional planning)
- Local Planning Authorities must be more assertive in their expectations of developers
- Generating Civic Pride is an important part of renewal and development
- Community stewardship of assets is needed

### **Introduction**

Mary Parsons (MP), Chair TCPA, Group Director Placemaking and Regeneration, Places for People

MP said it was important to look back to the last time we had large scale planned development and learn the lessons of the 32 New Towns: they contain 5% of UK social housing and 4.3% of owner occupied.

Places for People are key players in the Gilston developments and are also launch sponsors for our own Architectural Design Awards. In my view, we are fortunate in having the involvement of MP and her organisation in local developments as I believe their principles and approach are in line with that of our Society. I am hopeful that this will prove to be the case in practice!

### **Opportunities for growth and renewal in UK New Towns**

Katy Lock (KL), Projects and Policy Manager (Garden Cities and New Towns ), TCPA

KL gave an overview of the history of New Towns from their designation to the wind up of Development Corporations and transfer of assets.

New Towns have common challenges:

- Town Centre regeneration
- Managing the public realm
- Infrastructure
- Employment
- Educational opportunities
- Accommodating housing growth within tight boundaries

There is a need for a New Town renewal fund.

Key Lessons:

- A stronger role is needed for government in determining locations (not to be left to private sector)
- Must be development for long term innovation, not experimentation
- Modernised Development Corporations are needed to deliver Places (including social and community, infrastructure and employment, not just housing) with quality, scale and speed
- New Towns can pay for themselves and give positive return on investment
- Require Community Stewardship of assets
- Public support and meaningful participation is essential.

It was pleasing to note that Harlow's sculptures were mentioned as an example of community assets generating civic pride and pictures of them shown in this and other sessions.

### **Learning from the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on New Towns**

Dr Lisa Cameron (LC), MP for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow, Co-Chair of the APPG

LP was brought up in the New Town of East Kilbride and has a clear pride in her town and the benefits it has brought to the area, whilst recognising the challenges it faces.

She outlined how the cross-party APPG was seeding ideas for renewal of New Towns with government and in particular with the Chancellor of the Exchequer. This has included regaining the benefits of Development Corporations and the need for building quality homes.

LC reminded us that the New Towns were all built in a short period of time, so they all need regeneration now. They all have areas of deprivation and funding is needed to address issues. We need to join up across the UK to promote the New Towns agenda and the APPG can be used as a key part of this process.

### **Government's commitment to new and existing New Towns**

Steven Howell (SH), Head of Garden Communities, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

SH set out the context for a new generation of New Towns and Garden Cities. Not enough homes have been built over recent decades. Rate needs to increase to 300,000 per annum.

It is not just about building houses. For example, the National Infrastructure Commission has made proposals for development in the Oxford-Cambridge corridor.

Programme is for 24 communities ranging from 1500 to 40,000 homes in size. This includes the designation of Harlow and Gilston as a Garden Town. The call for proposals had 100 applications with more than 1 million homes. Needs to be a joined up approach including national and local government.

Community led Development Corporations are proposed and some are in the process of being set-up (eg, North Essex). There is a £10 million fund for developing proposals for New Towns. Homes England is to work up schemes of delivery. Aim is to build more, better, faster and longer lasting.

Collaboration is encouraged between local authorities (we have the example of Harlow, Epping Forest, East Herts and Essex and Herts County Councils. Aiming for a more strategic approach than the current piecemeal; though it was pointed out that regional planning has been dismantled.

Infrastructure is a key issue. SH said that developments should be jobs led rather than housing and that they must be balanced.

There was some discussion of the important issue of land value capture. Original Development Corporations were able to buy land at existing use value. This is an area that needs addressing for the future developments.

The damaging effect of the permitted development rights allowing conversion of redundant office buildings was highlighted by the audience.

Government believes that new Community led development process can deliver at speed, scale and quality. There is now a commitment to high placemaking standards and high standards are expected in local plans. Building Commission has been established to determine what is needed from government and other parties in order to achieve quality.

One lesson mentioned was the need for a flexible masterplan, able to adapt to changing circumstances.

The audience expressed a certain amount of scepticism about the approach and commitment of government.

### **New Towns Delivery Masterclass – Building Britain's Newest City**

Talks by three people involved in the development of Milton Keynes (MK), followed by discussion.

Lee Shostak (LS), TCPA Honorary Treasurer, former Planning Manager and then Planning Director for MK Development Corporation (1975-1980)

John Walker (JW), Technical Director Garden City Developments CIC, former Planning Director and Deputy Chief Executive at MK Development Corporation

(1972-1992) and Chief Executive of the Commission for New Towns  
(1991-1999)

David Lock (DW), Strategic Planning Adviser at David Lock Associates Ltd, former Strategic Planner and Planning Manager for Central MK at MK Development Corporation (1977-1982)

LS gave a summary of the development of MK. Housing went from 40,000 to 250,000 and 160,000 jobs have been created. Noted that all loans made for the development have been paid back. MK Development Corporation had significant powers, a strong board and attracted significant talent. They knitted together existing communities, achieving a diverse, sustainable and socially balanced community.

JW commented on the youthful and optimistic team at the development corporation. They had influential board members and early on had a good relationship with government. With the change of approach adopted by the Conservatives in the 80's, they changed their positioning and presented MK as a facilitator of private investment, while maintaining their place making role.

He also commented on the new community led development corporations. He said these could have similar powers to those of the New Towns, but that the local authority and development corporation roles should be kept separate. Local authorities will set up the development corporations (to whom they will be accountable) and define the strategic approach, but should not interfere in the day to day operations.

DL talked about the pioneering spirit and being able create a 'place' in all aspects. He mentioned how MK had made significant infrastructure investments in advance of being required and used this as a defence against cuts to planned programmes ("the infrastructure is already in place, so it doesn't make sense to reduce the scale of the build"). He said the scale of the New Towns was large enough to justify the staff, to generate excitement and 24 x 7 engagement and for people to make their careers based on the developments. He emphasised the importance of holding onto the vision of each New Town and ended with a plea "Don't trash our dream".

LS said that councils do not have the skills for managing programmes. Public consultation is key to build consensus for delivery. He is sceptical about delivery plans. For new areas there is a need for options for capital investment in transport.

### **Growing Hertfordshire's New Towns**

Cllr David Williams (DW), Leader Hertfordshire County Council

DW gave a good presentation on Herts New Towns. They have been nodes for growth and built on the Garden City heritage started in Letchworth and the original Welwyn Garden City. Employment is key to sustainability. All have decaying infrastructure.

In Stevenage the centre is being regenerated by:

- Residential densification
- A Public sector hub

- Some more retail
- New food services.

In Hemel Hempstead, the old Kodak building is being made into residential properties and a new hub is being created in the centre. Urban extensions are proposed.

In Welwyn Garden City, there are significant areas for growth with urban extensions and the Birchall Garden suburb.

Important that planners give robust expectations to developers.

DW mentioned Harlow-Gilston development and related this to the ideas of Howard of a network of garden cities. Confirmed the intention that local authorities involved will adopt the same design principles.

Some points to be adopted from their experience:

- Masterplanning
- Exploitation of assets
- Public realm improvements
- Culture and Leisure
- Densification
- Food and Beverage services
- Public sector hubs
- Workspaces

New ways of working:

- Local Planning Authorities to be commanding and confident
- Cross boundary issues
- Statements of common ground
- Joint strategic plans
- Herts Growth Board
- Infrastructure prospectus and expectations
- Proactive engagement with key stakeholders: Homes England, Department for Transport
- Local Authorities working together
- Employment is key

### **The Growth and Renewal of Cwmbran New Town**

Craig Mead (CM), Senior Planner, Torfaen Borough Council

CM described how Cwmbran provided housing for existing local industry in South Wales. He highlighted the local debate about the future development of the town that was initiated by the Council. Renewal is being based on the development of the Brecon and Monmouth canal and a marina. Open spaces are protected.

## **The Breakthrough Basildon Borough Commission**

Paul Burkinshaw (PB), Assistant Director of Corporate Services, Basildon Borough Council

PB presented the Breakthrough commission set up by the council to focus on the issues and barriers to inclusive growth for all communities in the Basildon borough. Some themes:

- Branding – a reboot of the new town. Building on the heritage and unique characteristics. Celebrate being a new town
- Generating Civic Pride
- Investment in the built environment
- New Civic catalyst board
- Move to longer term planning – PB said this was aided by not having annual elections for part of the council – full council for full term.

## **Are we learning the lessons from the New Towns**

Hugh Ellis (HE), Director of Policy, TCPA.

HE gave a robust summing up of the day.

He called the New Towns the greatest achievement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in planning and delivery. Their development was fun and engendered a pioneering spirit. We are not learning the lessons of their development.

The Development Corporations had great power to deliver change. How should this be evolved with democracy and participation.

Government has no urban policy. Need a national programme with new money and a partnership between local and national government.

Need consent for new developments and a national conversation. For new towns there were discussion for ten years before the first designations in 1947.

Land values are a major problem – need to be based on current not future value. A fundamental issue that must be addressed by government.

Stewardship of assets is at the heart of making it work.

Currently we are building poor places:

- Permitted development
- Add-on estates

Must be better than this.

Not just about the built environment. Need Arts Trusts and civic events to bring life to centres and generate civic pride. Must be proud about what happens.

Local Planning Authorities must be more assertive in their expectations of developers.

He ended by saying “this is where the future begins”.