New Towns’ Summit II

Friday 21st November 2014, Stevenage

Hosted by Stevenage BC, Cllr John Gardner, Deputy Leader
Chaired by Richard Summers MRTPI, RTPI Past President

Attendees: David Ames, Letchworth Garden City; Michael Barker, Telford & Wrekin Council; Dianne Cooper, Harlow Council; Peter Davis, TP Bennett; James Doe, Dacorum BC; Jonathan Entwistle, Milton Keynes Council; Elain Harwood, English Heritage; Katy Lock, TCPA; John Pye, Stevenage BC; Derek Rowell, Basildon BC; Trevor Saunders, Welwyn & Hatfield BC; Matthew Winslow, Basildon BC
Scribe: Andrew Matheson, RTPI

After individual introductions, Cllr John Gardner welcomed everyone to Stevenage, the first of the designated New Towns.

Cllr John Gardner, Stevenage BC
John could recall, when living as a child in Corby, the radio announcement that a programme of New Towns was to be initiated and being excited at that prospect. He recalled that Lord Reith’s Committee in 1946 had been given the task “To consider the general questions of the establishment, development organisation and administration that will arise in the promotion of New Towns in furtherance of a policy of planned decentralisation from congested urban areas; and in accordance therewith to suggest guiding principles on which such Towns should be established and developed as self-contained and balanced communities for working and living.”

John noted in particular that the New Towns were based on the principles of social justice, a concept with which their makers had struggled valiantly and modernised over 3 decades, even across periods of substantial social change. He further noted that in 1946 – in contrast to the present approach - there had been a national lead on the location of the New Towns, identifying “the areas in which they are to be fostered”.

Looking more particularly at the central area of Stevenage, he observed that the original basic concept had stood the test of time although adjustments had been made to accommodate social change:
- More leisure and non-retail uses
- A recent reversal of previous policies on dispersal of uses
- A broader inter-mix of uses is returning.

Stevenage established, despite local opposition, the first pedestrianised town centre in the UK (modelled on Dutch examples); part of the area has since been designated a Conservation Area with the aim of retaining and enhancing its distinctiveness.

[Further reading: Stevenage: A Sociological Study of a New Town by Harold Orlans]
Context - Richard Summers MRTPI, Summit Chair
Richard noted that this Summit followed the success of the first, held in May in Letchworth Garden City. In the RTPI’s Centenary Year both Summits have been seen as an opportunity for the experience of the New Towns, in establishing what planners now like to described as ‘sustainable communities’, to be explored, compared and updated. There has been considerable enthusiasm from the current generation of planners to both celebrate and acknowledge the many remarkable achievements that have been embodied across the 32 UK New Towns; the Summits have provided a good opportunity to learn and provoke further thought about what might be feasible for another generation of new communities or, as there is now an apparent preference to describe them, Garden Cities.

The Heritage of the Post-War New Towns - Elain Harwood, English Heritage
Elain considered the heritage of the New Towns’ centres. Her opening reference was to the work of Sir Herbert Alker Tripp CBE who, in his 1942 book Town Planning and Road Traffic, had looked forward to post-war reconstruction and the issue of growing car ownership. He had advocated the need for segregation of traffic from pedestrians and cyclists and strongly recommended the provision of a fast ring road around town centres from which arterial roads, and then neighbourhood roads, would radiate. He advocated the need for precincts which would be inward-looking, offering insulation from traffic & noise, set away from the major roads. He thus rejected the traditional ‘high street’ lined with shop frontages and called for separate service roads for the pedestrian-only precinct.

Elain had identified that perhaps the first UK pedestrianised central area had been made in Coventry in 1957, with a second area made in 1960; bomb damage had led to the idea and opportunity being identified. The masterplan for the pedestrianised area in Stevenage whilst drawn up in 1947/9, was not actually opened until 1958 with the core of the town centre established by 1959. Peter Shepheard CBE masterplanned the central area and brought the distinctive idea of covered arcades for weather shielding when he became Assistant Chief Architect for the Stevenage Development Corporation.

Elain also highlighted the contribution to new thought on New Town centres by Sir Frederick Gibberd CBE, the masterplanner of Harlow. He considered himself an urbanist (despite the low densities in most of the Harlow neighbourhoods), and for the central are drew on the writings of Camillo Sitte. Sitte had stressed the sense of episodic movement through streets and squares where views open up unexpectedly and where great attention is needed for small details such as public art, frontages, entrances and paving. The High in Harlow is composed of a series of squares linked by walks.

Cumbernauld in Scotland, begun in 1955, gave the lead for the fully enclosed town centre. It was a compact New Town and abandoned the notion of neighbourhood centres in favour of a large centre within walking distance of most neighbourhoods. Their town centre was devised by Geoffrey Copcutt as a single, vast, extendable structure built on stilts and accommodating every function from shops to public services to penthouse flats. Later New Towns adopted and adapted the concept eg Sielmersdale and Runcorn.

Milton Keynes, the last of the New Towns, brings the story full circle. As originally conceived in 1968, the central area was to be a series of open squares turned inwards from the grid, but as reconceived in 1970, it became an indoor centre of avenues and squares with just one of them as an open area.

Our approach to Central Area Conservation - David Ames, Letchworth Garden City Foundation
David considered the conservation of the nationally important Letchworth central area. He noted that the centre of Letchworth was planned around civic square gardens, but few of the civic buildings were actually constructed. The central plan incorporated a strong community
element, it was to be easily walkable and bring a sense of vitality to the town. Whilst the central area is a declared Conservation Area, its greatest protection is afforded by the Foundation being the freeholder of all the buildings. The Foundation has always given great care and attention at all levels – extending to the special corner design features. He acknowledged that the Foundation does not always have to make ‘commercial’ decisions, often choosing to pursue other longer-term objectives, such as attracting a particular use or user and not compromising good design. It can also pursue ‘catalyst’ projects with the aim of reviving or redirecting commercial interests.

Present plans are to squeeze central uses into a smaller footprint and combine these with more leisure uses and 100 flats. There will be particular attention to family-friendly uses to complement the retail offers. The Foundation will continue to invest in the public realm and will provide a cinema and theatre. The Letchworth centre will aim to be complementary to other neighbouring centres with no wish to compete with any ‘head on’. Because of the way that it has been established, the Foundation has the capability to set a good example and show broader thinking than the more commercially driven mall owners and some local authorities.

Managing Change at the Centre - James Doe, Hemel Hempstead
James spoke of how the Council has been managing the change at the Hemel Hempstead town centre. He noted that Hemel Hempstead is a valley town with the centre located on the valley floor. An attractive and unique feature of the central area is the Jellicoe Water Gardens, though these had become rather overgrown in recent years and are due the restoration that is now promised thanks to Heritage Lottery funds. Pedestrianisation in the 90s seemed to sap some of the centre vibrancy that was more evident in the 60s. The main shopping buildings, in the hands of pension funds were evidently decaying. In the early 00s major, partnered redevelopment was seen as the route to enabling the regeneration of the civic areas and to including a college building alongside remodelled housing. However, the company involved went into administration in 2010 and, probably to the benefit of delivering a sustainable revitalisation, revised proposals were set within a framework masterplan with 7 character areas, allowing ‘bite-sized’ regeneration projects all delivering toward the overall goals. The initial implementation scheme saw a new cinema with some new residential accommodation.

Work with the County Council is concentrating on the Old Town area where some major public realm improvements are expected to invigorate the night-time economy of the central area. Alongside the restoration of the Jellicoe Gardens there are schemes to reinstate/develop visual axes to/from the Gardens. One location to exploit this will be the new Town Square, itself providing a focal point along an otherwise very linear central area, and bringing back interest to the old markets area. Alongside this scheme the bus station will be relocated freeing up some space for complimentary uses. The linearity of the central walk will be further softened and broken with a spine of trees and ‘play on the way’ stopping points for children. People will be invited to go for a SPREE (shop, play, relax, eat, enjoy).

By these means there is an aspiration to attract back some of the middle-income spend that might have migrated to other centres. And overall some 1800 new homes are planned.

The new, more gradual, careful, small-scale and sequential approach has the Council providing a lead and confidence with the opening spend; these initiatives have the prospect of attracting in private investment within the established framework. That approach has also been echoed in Harlow and, as described later, in Basildon.

Stevenage Centre: the Issues and Prospects - Peter Davis, TP Bennett
As the first of the New Towns, the development of Stevenage was imbued with the pioneering, post-war spirit, “a vision of a Britain remade”. The town centre, whilst based around the ‘old town’, was specifically designed as a ‘new offer’, whilst being careful to work
within the landscape and A1 connectivity. Space for the centre was built-in around the central core; this had the effect of establishing a gap before the residential areas started – in part giving a landscaped, green setting - but the forethought has proved helpful is assuring flexibility as town centre uses have changed (whilst not necessarily growing significantly).

The pedestrian-only central area, ‘fed’ by peripheral service roads, was designed from the outset. Pevsner at the time celebrated its “urbanity”. Mixed uses were also there from the outset in an overall design assuring ‘light, colour, space, frivolity, conviviality’. The most recognisable image of Stevenage is the iconic clock tower (now listed) but the canopied shop-fronts have also survived and provide a significant link between the phases of shopping development.

The centre is now exhibiting three ‘generations’ of building – and some gaps within the ring-road collar. A current re-evaluation has identified both weaknesses and positives. The concerns relate to ‘prairie’ landscapes (predominantly surface level parking), the consequences of movement segregation: confused circulation & barriers to interconnectivity (especially uninviting subways), the loss of ‘vibrancy’ over time, the tendency toward zoning affecting the ‘evening economy’. Whilst some may bemoan the lack of any significant structural change over the last 15 years, many regard this as a blessing, allowing Stevenage to retain a distinctive offer. The elements valued are the Town Garden, the Town Square, the sense of order about the precincts, the offset views between the interlinked spaces, the excellent public art and the human scale. Perhaps underused is the centres cycleability – but this is in part perhaps due to the success of its walkability (with prams/buggies etc).

Prospective improvements will be pursued through a Regeneration Strategy and include – in a manner with echoes of Hemel Hempstead - in manageable chunks:

- A pedestrian ‘circuit’ with special attention given to key junctions to 'pull' the visitors around
- Ensuring the effectiveness of all accesses to the central area
- Improved transport connectivity
- Taller, statement buildings at entrance points
- Ensuring the retention of the mixed use pattern in the manner of concentric circles with the core area for retail, the next ring for the evening uses (restaurants etc), the outer ring for higher density with office and residential uses, some in the taller, entrance blocks, the whole surrounded by residential areas with an increased population of 150,000.
- Potential Heritage Lottery Fund support for the heritage status of the central area.
- The town and its centre can be a canvas for contemporary architecture but there is a recognition that there is a need to work hard on the towns heritage as there is evidence that people are falling out of love with the poorly maintained but heritage respected older buildings. The significant challenge with the latter is the monumental scale of investment involved since the centre was established over a relatively compressed timescale and has all been ageing at much the same rate. Local authority intervention has involved buying up property to assure its quality and respect for the Conservation Area status – an exemplar that echoes Letchworth, whilst recognising that all central area owners need to work in tandem.
- Accommodating a new Debenhams department store, off-centre but interconnected by bus services.

Continuing Expansion - Michael Barker, Telford
Telford central area benefitted from a Concept Plan prepared by Gordon Cullen – who developed the concept of townscape – though this was not always followed! The town boasted the first Carrefour in the UK and was built as a single level, pedestrianised centre. Although Telford is an amalgamation of existing places with their own shopping areas, Telford was promoted as the new centre for the New Town. It now boasts 3 department
stores, an IMAX cinema and an ice rink, all juxtaposed with the immediately adjacent 500 acre Town Park.

The current Central Telford Action Area Plan proved controversial for the owners of the Shopping Centre which had been sold off at the demise of the Development Corporation; commercial interests were potentially a barrier to new investment and competition. However the Council has pressed ahead with their Southwater proposal, ‘creating a new, vibrant heart’. This is a £250m investment – but with an income stream for the Council – that will assure improved leisure facilities, new (including affordable) housing, a state-of-the-art public library within high quality public realm, and addition retail/office and food provision. Alongside these proposals the existing bus station site will be redeveloped and the ring-road will be made friendlier to centre uses by making it two-way with ‘shared’ uses, in part to reduce speeds and its impact as a barrier to pedestrians. The proposal is within the context of the Council’s positive attitude to growth with a target 2031 population of 200,000+.

A Tale of 3 Centres: Basildon, Laindon & Pitsea - Matthew Winslow & Derek Rowell, Basildon BC

Basildon New Town occupies around 50% of the Borough, predominantly located between the east-west A127 and A13 in South Essex. The New Town area is now home to over 110,000 people who live in planned neighbourhood communities and a large commercial centre called the A127 Corridor which is home to a number of multi-national advanced manufacturing, R&D, aerospace and defence and financial processing companies.

Basildon New Town was unique in its origins given it was not designated principally to accommodate London’s overspill, but was seen by the local Urban District Council and County Council as being the only intervention possible for addressing the unplanned Plotland communities that existing around the small villages of Laindon and Pitsea, which by 1945 were home to 25,000 people in 10,000 substandard dwellings.

Basildon Development Corporation vision was for Basildon Town Centre to be built in the centre of the New Town area and for it to be designed as the “magnet” centre for shopping, education and recreation to serve whole of New Town. Once the land was exhausted, the New Town’s retail and office needs would be accommodated in “Overspill Centres” at Laindon and Pitsea gradually replacing the other “old”/outdated centres with purpose built town centre precincts. Basildon New Town was therefore to get three “Town Centres”.

Basildon Town Centre – quite constrained in terms of land area and until 1990’s had only seen piecemeal development. Late 1990’s Council invested £3m in public realm works to create new public square and Town Square retail enhancements. This improved confidence and interest from market and Council decided it wanted a project to comprehensively look at town centre’s future potential.

In the 2006 Development Framework was approved to “reinvent the New Town principles”, improve circulation, mix of uses and address highway over-engineering. Included proposals for 2000 houses, a new Civic Hall/theatre, an enlarged station and new Transit Mall, offices, reduction in parking and efforts to reduce the barrier impact of the dual carriageway to the north. This generated further interest and in 2008 the Council launched EU tender for a Development Partner.

In 2009/2010, Barratt Wilson Bowden appointed. This has been followed by a more detailed Masterplan (2012). This added provision for a new College site at the centre, a better located market, and a Waterside community residential area on the site of the former Swimming Pool. First phases are advanced in respects of delivery - 900 homes & £1m parkland upgrade, new college, relocated market and public realm enhancements.
Developing the proposals alone has involved spend in excess of £500,000. By contrast Pitsea and Laindon, both with local community support, have not commanded the same degree of public ‘investment’, or intervention and there have been mixed results.

Pitsea Town Centre was not completely demolished by the Development Corporation, which retained some of heritage of old Pitsea, including its market of almost 90yrs. The shopping core is now largely in the ownership of a single company, London and Cambridge Properties. Local residents wanted a Masterplan to change its fortunes, as they had seen possible in Basildon Town Centre. Local people were keen to retain a local identity, whereas the owners wanted to maximise land values and increase residential component. Council prepared Masterplan in 2007 which explored different development scenarios to inform the private sector activity. The compromise is now coming forward with a new Morrisons & Aldi, alongside a relocated, but enhanced outdoor market, 150 affordable housing units and public investment in public realm improvements. Other smaller private landowners have also been investing in their premises on the back of this bigger activity.

Laindon Town Centre has had a more problematic history ever since in 1972 the then Development Corporation sold the shopping centre to an investment company; it was only 6 years old and has changed hands many times since. There are presently 30% vacancy rates and the centre looks decidedly ‘unloved’, with very few high street multiples and poor maintenance. The Centre is based in part of the New Town which has higher housing density, 20% of Borough population live around it. Low modal income of £13k. 4k households living in poverty, above average health problems.

There has been no Masterplan for Pitsea given the very little control and influence the public sector has in the area. Previous owner looked to redevelop it with new residential scheme, but this has never been built out. Whilst a regeneration company bought it in 2007 this went into administration in 2012 when the anchor supermarket pulled out of the regeneration proposal and it has been in the hands of administrators ever since. There has been no delivery of promised improvements. A ‘Love Laindon’ community group is now attempting to exert pressure for the local authority to do something different by raising money for its own improvements. Local people want to Council to buy the centre with a view to reinventing it as a ‘slow town’ environment, combining retail and community needs for local people. The prospects for progress are at this time still unclear given its ownership status but, unlike Pitsea, there seems to be a mounting pressure for the public sector to take the lead and get a better deal for local people and traders.

Milton Keynes Central Area Business Neighbourhood Plan (BNP) - Jonathan Entwistle, Milton Keynes Council

The Plan has been prepared by an Alliance: 4 Town Council reps, 4 Milton Keynes Council reps, 8 business (commercial & voluntary) reps. The Centre is a major employment area but it also has 2,500 residents (with prospects to double); the retail offer is the major footfall attractor. The Centre has become a magnet for new commercial investment but not all proposals have been in line with the original design approach adopted for the centre of the New Town. The BNP idea was born out of the wishes of some to be more pro-active and forward-thinking rather than (negatively) reactive to ideas to further develop the centre of a rapidly expanding town.

The Alliance has worked well as a forum within which alternative views and aspirations can be worked through into firm and, hopefully, realistic proposals that have good support on the basis of a better understanding.
The proposals have reached the stage where they have completed examination by an independent Examiner. The Examiner, picking up on a local suggestion, has recommended, using the discretion given to him by statute, that the required referendum should extend beyond the Plan area to the whole District ie all the businesses and residents that the central area is designed to serve. The Council is presently considering options for meeting the costs of this one-off, large referendum.

**Deliberations on the Day - Richard Summers, Summit Chair**

Everyone agreed that the second New Towns Summit had been a great success and had given planner representatives from a selection of different New Towns a valuable opportunity to compare their past achievements and future prospects.

It was suggested by several participants and agreed by everyone that it would be helpful to establish the "New Towns Summit" as an annual or even bi-annual feature of the RTPI programme of activities, to help keep the profession's expertise and experience in new town planning alive and up to date for the future.

Richard Summers, as conference Chairman, concluded to general assent that now is a time when most New Towns are coming to the end of their master planning and town building phases. They are moving into a "business as usual" phase of managing change, development and regeneration that is common to most other established towns. He suggested that the RTPI and the TCPA should continue to work together to promote the benefits of planning and developing new garden towns in a strategic context to meet the housing and employment needs of the future as part of sustainable and balanced communities.