

RTPI South West Awards for Planning Excellence 2018.

Category submission – Excellence in Planning Delivery

Submission by the Directors of the Norton Radstock Regeneration Company
July 2018

“Never give up; for even rivers someday wash dams away”

Arthur Golden American Author

Preamble

The Board of Directors of the Norton Radstock Regeneration Company appreciate the opportunity to put forward the development on the former railway land in Radstock for an RTPI award in the category “Excellence in Planning Delivery”.

The project has taken 18 years to complete what in numbers terms is relatively small. However we are pleased to record good feedback from new residents and existing businesses, and to see the uplift in economic and social activity. It has not been an easy ride for anyone involved: hurdles have included some focussed opposition, the challenging local political context, the 2008 downturn and a clash between the needs of the town and the desires of the first appointed contractor.

However Radstock now has the homes, community spaces, wildlife habitats, cycle linkages, commercial space and growing provision for the appreciation of this unique site’s former uses.

We are starting to see a wider impact, as was originally intended, in supporting regeneration – not just through planning obligations (Section 106) but through the effectiveness of the Company sticking to the spirit of its Memorandum and Articles.

Those involved are being rewarded by the gradual upturn in the economy of the town, and the enthusiasm of the residents for their new environment.

Description

Planning, regeneration, place making, ecology and history and residents are a significant part of this site’s development.

Radstock was a town at the heart of the Somerset coal field. Railways and engineering piggy-backed on mining and provided a supply chain to the industry. With the closure of the last pit in 1973 and the slow decline in railway engineering the 1980s brought about a classic post industrial context.

This was physical – with derelict land and properties, plus an infrastructure that cut a swathe through the town but served no economic purpose. It was also social – deprivation, low educational attainment, the loss of the traditional ‘social network’ surrounding mining communities and poor health outcomes.

Environmentally the place looked and felt run down, and economically it was on its knees.

During this period local government reorganisation was under discussion – the move from Avon County Council and Wansdyke District Council to Bath and North East Unitary Authority in the mid 1990s did little to give a voice to the needs of Radstock.

By 1999 such was the pressure for action the area was considered for a Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) award. The list of interventions was far greater than the sums secured.

Community Engagement (as requirement of SRB) resulted in high expectations – the community was ready, the decision makers were not. A voluntary SRB board struggled with the challenge of working together across a large benefit area, complex SRB rules and an expectant community(it included the nearby town of Midsomer Norton).

The largest SRB ‘project’ was for former railway land in the centre of Radstock.

A planner working on the SRB project was determined to set up a not for profit company to take this project outside the SRB and Local Authority parameters as a way of breaking the log jam of decision making within a complex bureaucracy. A Company, now known as Norton Radstock Regeneration Company (NRR) was formed. It used SRB money to purchase the land and vest it in NRR.

NRR, made up of volunteer Directors drawn from local people and business took on the challenge of delivering a mixed use development that would ‘knit’ the town back together, using the development as a catalyst for wider regeneration and capturing any development profit for reinvestment locally in regeneration projects which themselves could generate vitality and income.

A notable element is that now in 2018 development has been delivered by a local company whose profit is ring fenced for reinvestment in our community, by Directors drawn from that community and local business. The unpaid Directors have necessarily partnered with developers, government agencies, registered providers, community organisations and the local authority to deliver the development.

On the ground 190 units of housing with a mix of tenures and sizes which people enjoy living in. Under 55% of the site has been built upon, and there are large areas both on and off site for habitat retention and improvement. The development links into the National Cycle Network and local cycle routes, including eventually to the local school. New commercial premises have been let. NRR is receiving capital receipts, which it is investing in a historic building on the site (the “Brunel” shed, built in the 1860s for broad gauge operation) for use for community and business use.

It is a development that aesthetically works well in the landscape and urban context, has enabled a developer to make profit, has impacted on neighbouring (brownfield) land and property with additional investment now being made by their owners. The former railway lands are beginning to be genuinely referenced as part of a ‘place’ – not a soulless development within Radstock.

Award Criteria

“Regeneration is the process of renewal, restoration, and growth that makes genomes and cells, organisms, and eco systems resilient to natural fluctuations or events that cause disturbance or damage”

Dictionary definition of Regeneration in nature

Planning Content and Skills

The success of the project is down to a collective team effort from many stakeholders. A Chartered Town Planner was at the heart of devising and establishing the 'vehicle' known as NRR.

The key challenges were at first obvious – a derelict site in need of redevelopment. Originally, site allocation in a local plan, along with the intention and hope of securing a developer to meet the policy aspirations, was not forthcoming. When it was (as in 1998) the local community objected strongly (on the grounds that it was not going to meet local needs) and planning permission was refused. The market could not deliver the right scheme.

The project needed to be decoupled from the SRB Board and programme. The project also couldn't be delivered by the Local Authority, politically or practically, and the credibility the Council had with local people was a significant barrier.

The challenge was acknowledged: the market couldn't deliver, the SRB Board couldn't and neither could the Local Authority. So a new model was devised and set up.

The concept, establishment of the Company and the land purchase was led by a planner, and supported and financed by the regional Development Agency for the SW, and Bath & NE Somerset Council.

Once formed, the Company of volunteer directors appointed a town planner as its General Manager.

Various models were considered to fund and deliver the development including raising bank finance with NRR taking on the development risk. In commercial terms this was unviable. Directors decided on a development partner approach but based on some key parameters and red lines.

The initial developer selected was Zed homes (an off shoot of Bed Zed) but whilst their scheme was very attractive in particular in meeting the environmental aspirations of the Board, the density, layout and formulaic design solutions were not considered palatable given the local context and site constraints.

A more traditional approach was secured initially via Bellway Homes, who withdrew from the project and replaced by Linden Homes. This was partly in response to the actions of an objector group who took the planning authority to judicial review, and partly to Bellway's concern about the number of affordable housing units and commercial provision.

Mindful of developer' typological approach, NRR insisted on choosing the design team (landscape and environmental led) for the development of the detailed plans. They required an open book viability approach that meant NRR could 'trade' potential value and mix for scheme and building enhancements.

Key design and place-making considerations and improvements delivered have been:

- Reinstatement of an old road network, severed by the advent of the railway, to reconnect the town centre
- Retention of a significant linear wildlife habitat, for wildlife and to provide a green link that connects with the National Cycle Network and local cycle network links
- Replacement town centre car parking behind the main commercial buildings to 'hide' the visibility of parked cars, and to bring parking closer to the local primary school. A footbridge is committed through S106 obligation to link to the school via a footpath.
- Provision of some commercial units to connect disparate commercial areas of the town centre
- Key vistas and walkways through the development to provide links and long views through the site and to existing buildings of local heritage merit

- Retention and investment provided by the developer of the Brunel Railway Shed.
- Attention to the layout and mix of housing within the site
- Use of materials that respect the historic context and careful architectural detailing on key buildings
- A landscaping scheme that capitalises on the surrounding rural area and brings the countryside into the town.

Sustainable Development

Sustainable development is at the heart of NRR: from its Company Memorandum and Articles through to the way it has sought to influence the development of its land and into the future by generating income from retained assets. The company is investing all its overage payment into the town.

Public value has been a significant consideration and the main motivation of the NRR Board who are all volunteers; many of them have been board members since the earliest days of the company.

The Short Term public benefits can be summarised as follows:

- Putting the decision making about the development into the hands of a company with local people on the Board
- Ensuring that through the evolution of the master plan, and later detailed area plans local people were consulted, engaged, and informed
- Securing private and public investment into the site to commence decontamination, removal of dangerous structures and maintenance of wildlife habitat
- Providing access rights to Sustrans to connect the National Cycle Network through the site.

The medium term benefits have been:

- Construction employment and training
- Provision of new housing, including social housing, with a mix of house types and tenures
- Infrastructure investment to reduce congestion, improve air quality and provide for safe walking and cycling as a positive alternative to the car
- Provision of new commercial premises, some on site and some off, as a consequence of the infrastructure improvements and the investment confidence
- Retention of historic buildings and artefacts for local interpretation and use
- Modern health care facilities (dentist) brought into the centre of the town
- Enhanced and connected wildlife corridors and habitat management plans to enhance biodiversity
- A Company owned locally, generating income from its assets and only completing its work when it has put the investment back into community regeneration initiatives

The long term benefits:

- Good quality housing provision that has low energy costs and good environmental performance
- A mature landscape, supporting wildlife, people and providing connectivity with nature and the countryside beyond
- A SUDS system that supports wise use of water, and flood prevention
- Connections to other sites with development potential within the town centre to continue the knitting together of the town and reducing the pressure for new greenfield site development

- A restored historic building at the heart of the scheme that will provide a place for community activity and economic development (current ideas a bike workshop and micro brewery)
- And most importantly, a town that is now reunified and equipped to face the opportunities and pressures of the 21st century

Of the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals the key achievements help to support goals relating to Good Health and Wellbeing, Sustainable Cities and Communities, Responsible Consumption and Partnership for the goals.

Community Engagement

NRR prefers community involvement, asking people to participate rather than just comment. Action starts with the Board, taking the messages back out to their communities of interest, raising the profile of the project and listening to ideas.

Two significant periods of ‘planning for real’ were held which shaped the Board’s objectives, the choice of development partner and then the master plan.

Regular attendance by the General Manager and Board Members at existing community forums to engage and inform were held; both formal and informal. For example, presentations and Q+A sessions at the Working Mens Club, presentations to the Town and District Council, opportunities to speak at Rotary Clubs etc. and attendance at local residents associations get togethers. Other activities included engagement with faith communities, the local schools and FE College, the Chamber of Commerce and other local forums.

Inclusive Planning

What NRR sought to avoid was gentrification through development. This was the focus of the work on the open book viability throughout the design and development process – the focus was not to maximise the return on capital employed or indeed the overall profit on Gross Development Value, but on delivering a new area of the town that harmonised with and complemented the existing.

Radstock’s social economic profile has historically tended more towards labouring and manufacturing professions as opposed to managerial. The barriers to equality have typically been associated with gender, health, education and skills inequality.

While not all of these barriers could be tackled through the development a lot of time was invested in working on initiatives with the schools and FE college to support their bids for improvements as well as involving their students in specific engagement sessions about the plans and proposals.

Some physical interventions such as a bridge link to the school were designed specifically as part of the designed layout to encourage safer and more direct routes for parents and children.

Outcomes

Community	Economy	Environment
Housing with 28% genuinely affordable units with a mix of house size and ownership	New shops/ business premises to support the local economy and provide new job opportunities	Unimproved habitat for 3 red data book plant species on 45% of the site
New shops and dental surgery	Construction jobs	Bat enhancement corridors with associated landscape and lighting features and new bat roosting boxes
Brunel shed building: an	Restoration and re-roofing of	S106 funding of £68k for roof

historic broad gauge engine shed restored to its original structure, with new community-facing activities envisaged	the Brunel shed ready for commercial and locally focussed employment funded by overage investment	restoration and accommodation for displaced bat population in Brunel shed. Extension of unimproved grassland habitat
New cycle and pedestrian routes	Private and public sector investment within the site	Water quality and decontamination to support the white clawed crayfish and otter populations
Improved road access and safety measures	Better access to facilities	An ecological management plan to maintain habitats on and off site
		Cycle connections and improved pedestrian routes to remove reliance on the car

Good practice

NRR has sought to learn throughout the development, sharing the experience through other organisations. Its general manager and chair were engaged in a European wide project, Multiple Intensive Land Use (MILU), hosting EU partners as well as visiting venues across Europe to learn and share ideas. In addition the general manager also attended and presented ideas and the model of operation to the Community Land Trust Conference. A planning academic has evaluated the scheme. This evolved into a research project that was subsequently published.

The key learning points are summarised later. The overriding one has been the need to accept that regeneration can be very challenging but does work if it is motivated and delivered by energetic and committed people.

Social Value

NRR remains committed to creating social value through relationships: between board members, with partners, with opponents, with opportunists, with developers, with nature, with business and local people. For example, it went out of its way to meet with and understand the concerns of objectors. It has found that a part of its role has been to engage existing organisations. For example since the completion of the affordable units it has become involved with Curo (the Council's affordable housing provider), in understanding the challenges facing many Radstock residents and the importance of regenerating a sense of pride in their town.

NRR was established to deal with a regeneration that was proving too risky for elected politicians, and came at a time when "value for money" in social terms was becoming ever more critical but elusive.

The lessons learnt from delivering the project

- With consultation comes questioning and, occasionally, downright opposition. Early in the project we found that planning and development entirely via consensus is nigh impossible and leads to compromises no one subscribes to. NRR had to learn to listen carefully and then tailor decisions in accordance with its brief and vision.

- Vocal opposition can be painful but must be understood: there was a vocal and well organised group of residents who felt that building on land that had developed a "transitional habitat" should be conserved. The development has responded by protecting over 40% of the natural habitat for biodiversity and public enjoyment.

- The snow-ball effect can start earlier than you expect: one adjacent brownfield site has already been sensitively redeveloped, and there are further plans in the process of submission.

There remain some infrastructure and traffic management issues to be resolved, mainly by the local council.