KENT DESIGN

Meeting to shape our built environment

Roundtable: Responding to 'Fixing our broken housing market'
Tuesday 13th June 2017
Maidstone Museum

Attendees

Andy von Bradsky, Jane Briginshaw, Adam Tillion, Chris Blundell, Rob Jarman, Robert Rummey, David Hill, Louise Reid, Hilary Satchwell, Chris Lamb, Mark Bottomley, Garry Hall, Richard Morris, Kelvin Hinton, Gordon Young, Sonia Bunn, Wendy Lane

This roundtable focused on the Government White Paper 'Fixing our broken housing market', which sets out a broad range of possible reforms designed to increase the supply of new homes. Our meeting brought together a wide range of experts from in and around Kent to discuss how the proposals within this document could help to improve housing delivery in England, but also addressing how design quality could remain a key consideration as housing delivery increases across the country. The modern extension of the museum, with its striking design and airy spaces, provided the perfect venue in which to explore the future of design quality. This event attracted considerable interest and was fully booked soon after it was announced, which demonstrates how important this subject is for the country as a whole but Kent in particular, given the expected levels of growth in the coming years.

Our meeting started with an introduction by Chris Lamb, Director of d:se, setting out the format of the meeting and establishing the areas for discussion. This was followed by short opening talks from Jane Briginshaw and Andy von Bradsky. Andy began by setting out his considerable experience of working with DCLG and latterly with Lord Heseltine, working on estate regeneration national strategy, which is up and running. This strategy references design quality, and this aspect of the strategy has been enthusiastically promoted within the DCLG. This marks a shift from previous emphasis, which was more focussed on quality, cost and speed of delivery, and the desire to push quality further up the agenda is in recognition that not enough attention has been paid to it recently. The concern is that, without care and attention, we would end up carpeting the countryside with standard housing products and losing the character and identity of places in the process.

Andy's view is that the White Paper captures the issues well, showing a deep under-standing of the challenges surrounding house building, such as speed of delivery, diversifying the market etc. The emphasis on design quality within the White Paper was good to see, as this is a critical aspect for increasing the acceptability of new homes. The scale and ambition for new housing numbers presented by Government – 1 million new homes by 2019 – is significant, and how you ensure good quality is maintained is a real challenge. This challenge will fall on all sectors of the industry; designers, developers, and local planning authorities. DCLG has its own design quality department, which has a strategy and action plan behind it, waiting to be launched.

The key issues for the debate are: How do you get local communities more engaged in the

design process? How do you make development popular? Public Attitude Surveys, which Government relies on, suggests that 40% of people feel that new development will ruin their area. Here, lessons from neighbourhood planning and estate regeneration are useful, with opportunities to use similar engagement process within more mainstream planning and housing approaches. A key barrier to accepting new housing isn't just design and quality; concerns that infrastructure delivery will not keep pace and that local services will come under pressure is top issue.

The tools available to help people engage with design need to be made more widely available; in Kent, the Design Review and other support available through d:se helps a great deal in this regard, and could be a model for elsewhere in the country. Building for Life, whilst not the full answer, is useful, but training around this need to be made more available as people have to know how to use it for it to be effective. Flagship awards and other forms of recognition from Local Authorities can help encourage quality from developers, although funding these can be problematic. The key is that tools need to be used properly. DCLG has to demonstrate quality on its own programs to be persuasive to the industry. To increase supply, more council housing is planned, and this is an opportunity to deliver new housing to higher standard than you might otherwise get. Build to rent also offers a new delivery model, and the demands of the sector helps to keep quality high. Most importantly, there is an understanding that quality and value are linked, which bodes well for policy initiatives around the role of design in boosting supply.

Jane followed on from Andy's introduction, exploring the themes he raised in more detail. She raised the importance of the youth vote in influencing the outcome of the 2017 election, many of whom cite housing as a key concern. Changing how the HCA operates is being explored to allow for more public-sector delivery. Studies are being undertaken on how you prepare a place to accept new housing, including how the market works in that area, what the local community needs in terms of knowledge and skills, and what other enabling factors can be addressed through engagement and planning. This is key for speeding up delivery. A worry is that Local Authority confidence is low, with capacity issues slowly being resolved. Sharing resources – both people and knowledge – is becoming commonplace. Still, within Local Authorities there remains confusion on what you can do to bring forward social housing, but confidence is coming back to the sector. This hints towards an optimistic future. A more strategic approach for Housing Associations is being encouraged, with a bigger focus on quality, not just on numbers. There is a recognition that current quality within social housing is not where were need it to be. This will involve housing associations taking more risk, but will require them also recognising the opportunities. Jobs and skills around housing delivery fit well with the wider Housing Association remit. Housing Associations working with Local Planning Authorities to deliver on strategic sites could be a key mechanism for good quality housing, and this is supported by the White Paper. The policy ingredients are there, which combined with the potential role of Local Authorities and Housing Associations going forward, give reasons to be cheerful.

For the group, one comment in particular stood out: 40% of communities feeling that new development would be detrimental to the quality of their place. Some were surprised that it was as low as it was, and there was a recognition that this number fluctuates dependant on the type of community you speak to. Not all communities fear growth, and brownfield sites are more commonly supported for redevelopment by local communities. Infrastructure going hand in hand with new housing helps to make new development acceptable. Better quality new housing is needed to demonstrate that things don't have to be negative. Housing that meets local need also helps to soften concerns from local people. The Local Authority perspective sees improvements from the house building industries, although the formulaic approach often applied to sites alienates people and stops them feeling listened to. Employment and housing need to go hand in hand, and new development needs to

not only deliver new housing, but make the lives of people in existing communities better. New housing if often thought of only as additional traffic, pressure on services, and a loss of valuable open space. This needs to change and is changing. Targeting housing design to meet local needs will help people buy into the concept. New housing helps keeps families living close together, and this is important to many communities. Most people recognise the need for new housing, but accepting it in their own place is a tougher challenge.

40% do not support new housing for the reasons already explained, but what of the remaining 60%? What do they value from new housing? We need to engage these people to find out their motivations, and maybe there are valuable lessons that will help convince the other 40%. Is it a perception vs. reality issue? Or something deeper? Are we allowing the current engagement processes to compound issues around design? New housing, shaped by a vocal minority, often exhibits the very design features that cause issues; buffered and disconnected, remote and poorly integrated with existing communities. We need to break the cycle of creating dormitory estates that give nothing back to existing communities. Knowing how far to push on quality, and more importantly where, is how to get developers on board in this regard. When to engage with developers needs more thinking; even pre-application engagement is often too late, but the resources to do this type of work need to be put in place. The White Paper suggests initiatives to improve the situation, although there is fear that this is a long-term problem that no Government has tackled satisfactorily.

So we need the housing numbers, but is the planning system fit for purpose? The same planning process is, in essence, used for a domestic home extension and for a new urban extension, including time pressures and resource issues. A more bespoke process for larger developments would help speed up delivery without allowing design quality to slip down the agenda. In some of the London boroughs, small applications are being looked at differently to free up resources for larger, more complex applications. Could this be adopted within Kent? Previous fast-track systems have failed, and have eroded trust with the public, so this issue is tough to address.

There is a role for Local Authorities in setting out their quality aspirations. Places like Manchester, who set out their design requirements in a Guide, are a useful model for Authorities in Kent. Infrastructure providers need to be brought into the conversation in the plan-making process so that they can plan for new housing. Again, resources around engagement are lacking and would go a long way to solving some of the issues around the acceptability of new housing.

Social media is a key route to winning public trust and gaining input, especially for young people. Ebbsfleet is a good example of this. Again, this is a resource-intensive process and needs to be carefully moderated, but could offer a route for speeding up consultation on new development. The White Paper is strong in this regard, promoting more meaningful engagement as part of the planning process. Long-term engagement between the developer and the local area help, and Housing Associations are good at doing this as they have a long-term interest in their projects. Do we need a more educated and engaged public? Other countries, such as Denmark and Norway, see the built environment as part of their cultural heritage and help people develop an interest in it from a young age. Programs that do this would be valuable. Working with schools and young people to help them influence their futures needs to be part of the way we engage.

Do we need a new delivery model that can work within the existing planning system? A greater role for partnership working between Social Housing providers, Housebuilders and Local Authorities, with patient investment in long-term sites, joined up strategic planning and a more collaborative approach to delivering quality would be valuable. The White Paper is moving in this direction, offering more scope for rethinking how we work across the sectors. The role of community and political champions was raised; the importance of

these people in bringing complex and contentious projects to fruition is critical. A threat to this is the electoral cycle; bringing forward large, complex housing schemes simply does not fit within the normal political framework, which makes such projects vulnerable to changes at the political level. Can this be addressed in Kent? Bringing politicians together from across the area to share their experiences could be one route to starting this kind of strategic thinking. Training for elected Members could be part of this. Housing Associations are outside of the electoral cycle and are embedded in their local communities; is there a role here for them to make the case for more homes?

Delivering more housing will require increases in density in certain areas. Increasing density increases concern, and here, good design quality has a real role to play in alleviating fears. Bringing good examples to the attention of the public would help to demonstrate that higher density can be done well. Planning in general could be more engaging generally, and the public are likely to struggle to connect with the plan making process due to how difficult and dry it is to read. Kent has many great towns and villages, and a consensus on how to grow them, what infrastructure is needed, and the quality of new development is needed.

In summary, the key discussion points brought to light the need to get more people behind new development, and to not allow the form of new development to be shaped solely by appeasing those opposed to it. We also need to investigate rethinking the planning application process, because both small and large planning applications absorb similar resources. We mustn't forget the need for good designers, not just good plans. There was a recognition that consultation will only add value if done early, and in a meaningful way. There is an opportunity to better utilised Housing Associations as they have a long-term interest in their areas, but there is also scope for consortiums across the sectors to look beyond site boundaries to plan strategically. Here in Kent we need to celebrate the good more to promote local design quality. One possible step towards achieving increased delivery without sacrificing quality is to set up a Members forum, bringing together wider strategic thinking, and there is a role for Kent Design to work more proactively with members. Density in key locations is a key topic that warrants further investigation, maybe at another roundtable.