

Report on the Placemaking Conference – 8.11.16

Thousands of new homes will be built in Oxfordshire over the next years, often in large developments. The challenge is how to turn these developments into thriving, active and successful communities where people have a positive sense of belonging.

Lord Matthew Taylor, former chair of the National Housing Federation and the Rural Coalition and a leading proponent of 'Garden Villages', was the keynote speaker at the Community First Oxfordshire and Diocese of Oxford Placemaking conference, which took place at Oxford Abingdon Hotel on 8 November 2016.

130 delegates from District, County and Parish Councils, voluntary and community groups, churches and housing associations attended.

Other speakers included: **Tom McCulloch**, Director of Community Development at Community First Oxfordshire; **Paul Silver**, CEO of Dorchester Living; **Martin Gorick**, chair of the Diocese of Oxford New Communities Group; and Councillor **Alex Hollingsworth**, Executive Board Member for Planning and Regulatory Services at Oxford City Council. The conference was expertly chaired by **Alison Webster** from the Diocese of Oxford.



Community First Oxfordshire wants to keep the Placemaking conversation going-
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Presentation notes

Lord Matthew Taylor- Neighbourhood Plans, Garden Villages and the Making of Thriving Communities

Lord Taylor gave as context a picture of the country we live in and the myths around that. There was significant housing need in the era between the last two great wars and immediately afterwards, due to rapid population growth and big changes in how people live with people moving into cities, and very large scale industry.

People saw the unacceptability of the slums, and slum clearances were an attempt to create better lives for people. Planning developed at this time with the Planning Act in the 1940s. The garden cities idea evolved into the new towns. This development was led by the private sector but garden cities were a utopian concept about changing people's lives from slum dwellings to towns that provided all that people needed.

The Planning Act was brought in to allow communities to take control. Policies included green belt and new towns. Green belt designations aimed to protect existing places from sprawling development and preserve the historic setting of places. There was also a sense that what was really needed was reinvigoration of inner cities, not development on the edge. We wanted to renew our cities, improve them, use brownfield, but not lose the historic setting. As well, new places were needed to house the baby boom.

But net migration then fell in the 1970s and 80s. After the baby boom the population was falling, so building levelled off, the issues became more about tenure not about new build. At this time, the new towns programme stopped, government land was sold, and the prevailing view was that more homes were not needed. There was a particularly rapid contraction in London.

This gave the government the opportunity to make a 'free' offer to expand the green belt to protect the existing communities. This offer was at no cost to government and no loss in terms of housing provision. The expectation was that population would decline projecting forward 30-40 years. But this decline did not happen because of net in-migration, higher birth rates for the last 15+ years, and because of higher rates of divorce and increasing number of older people living longer. So we now need 250,000 additional homes per year just to house people.

There are now two critical issues: Neighbourhood Planning and Garden Villages.

Neighbourhood Planning

The Living Working Countryside: The Taylor Review of Rural Economy and Affordable Housing (2008) identified the need for housing. Keeping things as they are is not necessarily sustainable- villages need some growth too.

Neighbourhood Planning is about empowering communities to make this decision. For example, a NP can produce a design guide to control quality, say where housing should be, can help to limit the housing numbers to meet 'our share', or take higher numbers, as there are possible trade-offs that could be transformational such as a new road alongside sufficient numbers of new homes. Additional homes can enable young families to live in the village and so support the local school and businesses. Nothing will give you as much opportunity to really transform your community as Neighbourhood Planning.

Most of what we build will not be in villages and a lot of what we build cannot be through urban regeneration either unless we want high rise development. England is 9% developed and half of this is parks and gardens. Housing is only 1% of the built environment. In the south east outside London, when people are asked how much of the land is developed, the average answer is 45% whereas the actual figure is 12.2%- half of which is parks and gardens.

The reason that this feels higher is that all the building has been urban sprawl at twice the density of government policy, tiny homes with no garden, and half of buildings are apartments when only 2% of people want to live in flats. There is typically no shop or pub or facilities. Housing estates are built slowly so that they don't devalue, on the edge of town and along the roads so that it feels like huge amounts of development going on, because homes are built on the bits that should be green belt.

Why don't we go back to the original ideas of planning, protect the area around existing places, look 20-30-year horizon to think about what they want their place to be like, including parks and gardens? Why don't we create what we used to, protect historic communities, allow them to have a vision for development that they control and create new settlements, take land that has low agricultural value as the new towns did, use the uplift in land value to put in the pubs, community shops and parks and everything else that make communities good places. Plus, encourage urban regeneration. Then you would not have so many people opposed to development as we would not be building horrible things in the very places where people are most opposed to development.



Tom McCulloch - Director, Community First Oxfordshire: A Place in Space - A Theory and Practice of Place-making

The full text of Tom's presentation is available on the CFO website

A thriving community is easy to recognise. We know it when we see it, somewhere which offers the amenities and the relationships which allow us to positively identify with a place, where we feel we have both a stake and the opportunity to become more involved.

However, there is a big difference between existing communities, where community activity and identity is apparent, albeit to a greater or lesser extent, and new communities, where there is often only houses. What does community mean in those places? Look at the thousands of homes coming in large development sites - how do we bring together the sum of the experiences of all those new residents and bring into being another identity? How do we create a place in space from a near-anonymous starting point?

We cannot build hundreds of new homes on the edge of a town or village and expect a thriving community to just emerge. The provision of physical infrastructure on new developments, like water, sewage and transport connections, often comes in for much criticism for not being adequate or provided in a timely manner. Yet the provision of social infrastructure is equally vital.

CFO was recently commissioned by Cherwell District Council to research best practice in community development on new housing estates. CFO also undertook similar research for South and Vale District Councils and Sovereign Housing Association.

Tom considered 3 key recommendations which emerged from this research. If effectively supported, resourced and applied across larger development sites they could be transformative in terms of building thriving new communities organically, from the ground up.

1- Establish Site Development Forums on large new developments.

The forum would do a number of things. It would bring an awareness of local knowledge, history and heritage; allow for community input into section 106 discussions; ensure the best siting of any required community facilities; discuss management options for community facilities; allow community input into design of the new development and consider how best to develop links with adjacent neighbourhoods.

The forum's credibility and mandate is vital. And this is where the model that CFO is proposing is different from others that might, on the face of it, seem similar. Only a planning authority can ensure that there is real strength to a site development forum. It would have to act as a real 'enforcer' when required

2- Provide community facilities from the outset of the development

A community facility or centre acts as a focal point for a new place. It is a vital part of getting a community off to a good start, helping bringing new and existing residents together and identifying common needs. Where facilities are not provided in a timely manner, new arrivals are more likely to keep to themselves and social isolation is more likely to grow.

3- Provide community development support from the outset of the development

A community development worker on-site at an early stage can 'kick start' the process of bringing people together, generating new activity, building links with neighbouring communities and generally act as the fulcrum and facilitator of a network of support for the new community

What are the potential effects of a less structured approach to placemaking?

CFO's research suggested a number of things- feelings of isolation because of a lack of facilities, about anti-social behaviour because kids had nowhere to congregate, of people making their social connections off-site because of a lack of a community feel and few organisations on site. CFO also heard about vulnerable people whose needs were being overlooked. Some of these issues and others could have longer-term consequences. Problems that could be addressed via better community engagement could well become structural, requiring more resource-intensive intervention down the line.



Paul Silver - CEO, Dorchester Living Group: 'Community Building' - Our Experience from Heyford Park

The slides from Paul's presentation are available on the CFO website

Dorchester Group are different to a normal developer, and see themselves as a community builder. They don't just look at the urban environment, buildings and spaces between but look at the way community forms, including the social infrastructure that is needed. People prefer to live in places that are a vibrant community and this gives a better return on its investment.

There are four key elements in the Dorchester approach:

1. Sustainability - how to create a place that is efficient
2. Value- investing in physical and social infrastructure
3. Community –responsibility to consult, but also engagement through talking to local people
4. Creating a sense of place with its own identity - leave a legacy, create value from a sense of place

Typically, the developer sees itself as the project manager, going out to operators who will run facilities such as a supermarket. But to set up a Free School the Dorchester Group had to engage with the community to find out what people wanted. They set up a business unit for this and found out what local people wanted, which turned out to be a small local village-type school, with people known by name, teaching across all school years.

Dorchester Group created a business plan to achieve this. It is a 'big financial nightmare' as they have to fill school just to cover overheads. Ideas from the community changed the way that Dorchester Group works. They have converted a sports centre which was never viable on its own and made it available to the school and the wider community.

Dorchester Group knew that more houses were needed as the Local Plan emerged, so they put to the community that it either hides under the carpet and has no influence on developers or gets involved. This led to the Mid-Cherwell Neighbourhood Plan, which combines 10 parish councils. The strategy is to use the large brownfield site at Upper Heyford rather than building rings around pretty villages.

Dorchester Group is not doing this as charitable activity. 90% of their buyers will come from the local area- they are listening to the consumer. They don't build in a straight line, and are using the mature landscape, setting houses back, giving people a sense of space and a feeling of a quality environment, with a balance of community businesses on site.

To deliver quickly you don't just deal with one demographic, but also need to provide for a range: rent and sell, ageing population, smaller household sizes. Renters now form 18% of dwellings.

Dorchester Group has quantifiable benefits from its approach. 95% of their buyers come from a 10-mile radius (average is 80%) and they sell to 25% of their visitors. 25% of buyers choose to buy because of the school. The approach adds 20% to gross development value, so there is value in investing in the long term vision and profit stream. Developers need to be prepared to roll up their sleeves and be an operator as well as a project manager.



Martin Gorick - Archdeacon of Oxford: The Role of the Church in Creating New Communities

The slides from Martin's presentation are available on the CFO website

Question: When you last moved house what was it that helped you feel a little bit at home in that new place?

Martin talked about his experience in Stratford. Here, a new development was opposed by local people, which led to piecemeal development around the edge. When people began to move in they did not feel welcome. The main estate was called Trinity Mead and it was promised schools, housing and shops etc. which took a very long time to develop.

It was a challenge to bring the new community into our parish and give them a warm welcome. The Christian message is "I came to bring Life, Life in all its fullness". Human flourishing is in our DNA as human beings. We should provide a welcome for the new people and change the narrative from opposition to welcome.

So how do we respond positively creatively? Moving into a new house on a building site is not easy. Nothing happens in terms of infrastructure until 500 houses built and occupied, only roads and homes. The church can help- it still has a strong volunteer base. Show homes could be a base for community activity. Or a house could be bought and used as community space- if developers would get on board with this it would help.

At Kingsmere, Bicester, church volunteers bake a cake and take a welcome pack to new residents, straightforward things that help communities to flourish. The church can often be a source of help, not the only source, but a key one which has a presence throughout the country.



Alex Hollingsworth - Oxford City Council: Building New Urban Neighbourhoods: A View from the City

Community is not bricks or roads or buildings, it is the people who live in it. Different groups of people make their own places.

In Oxford, the places that people make are more complex and overlap, work, families, places of worship, global networks. Complexity is the cloth from which our communities are shaped. A challenge for placemaking is how would you best manage this change this complexity, particularly when the development is big. Bricks and mortar create a new space.

The biggest new Oxford development for 35 years is Barton Park and soon The Northern Gateway. There may also be other new developments on the northern edge (land owned by Christchurch) and south-eastern edge. Eventually, all of these developments will happen. They will be significant new spaces, home to several thousand new people.

Decisions at outset can have lasting consequences (for example the Blackbird Leys development). It is now viewed as successful but in its first 10 years it was not clear it would turn out well. The problem was caused largely by concentrating large numbers of people with challenging needs in the one location, giving Blackbird Leys a reputation for crime and deprivation. It has taken a lot of work but the deprivation gap is shrinking.

Lessons learnt:

- Make sure any new development is a mixture of people
- Agencies have a role- they can help or hinder but in the end the people end up making the place

Major change can happen even when major new development has not taken place. Social change, mechanisation, and the impact of wars etc. all bring change and new people. In Oxford as house prices have risen, a family house can now have group of young professionals each paying for one room what the family once paid to rent the whole house.

We cannot order everything to our whim, some forces of change are inevitable. We can't command the tides and villages could not avoid the mechanisation of agriculture but what is not preordained is what we do in response. Decisions are needed to support and enable people to make their own places. We need to make sure the schools are there, a framework of facilities and spaces, and make sure there is room for the different places people want to grow and thrive in.

Three crucial things: 1- people make places for themselves; 2- churches, councils and voluntary groups can make it easier, and 3; choosing to do nothing in face of change can sometimes be the worst choice of all.



Question and Answer Sessions

The following main comments were made after the first Q+A session:

- Need Affordable Housing to provide homes for young families etc. But affordable housing through housing associations is not affordable and often not available for those who need it
- From a village point of view, a problem is the protectionist stance, first fighting development being done to us, then failing and finding that we have a new community on our doorstep that we need to relate to. We then need to switch psyche to involving this new community that we did not really want
- Have experience of having done a Neighbourhood Plan in a green belt village where we were not allowed to do anything. However, in the end developers will come along and will be allowed to develop in the green belt but the community cannot control this
- What plans are in place to have well manned housing departments so that communities can get plans through earlier?
- With new communities coming in, the parish council has to make it clear that the communities are wanted, but the design of the houses is not [needs to be much better].

Lord Taylor responded:

- **Affordable housing** - don't start by telling community they need affordable housing, but start by engaging the community on the future needs of that community. We have a massive shortage of housing which drives up prices. People in the middle are being increasingly squeezed out and the only way to solve it is by building more homes so that house prices will begin to go up by less than wages. Homes do not cost much to build. The land they are built on is what costs so much.
- **On green belt** – the origins of this policy was protecting historic communities, it was not intended as a blanket to make huge swathes of countryside unavailable for building homes. Why force ourselves into a straitjacket? We need to give ourselves more discretion. As long as we ration land and keep green belt, the value of the sites will be such that it drives development of tiny boxes, high density and lack of community facilities. Unless we can make enough land available to

reduce prices enough and also capture the value uplift of land above agricultural value for use for community facilities.

- **On planning departments** - planning fees need to cover the costs of dealing with administration of the planning departments. Planning has become regarded as planning development control, but really it should be about the future vision for communities which is a strategic issue that the chief executive should be concerned about. Planning needs to be more about creating fantastic places.

The following main comments were made after the second Q+A session:

- NP experience- lots of people uninterested, resistance to development. Not enough engagement
- Are NPs the right vehicle to deliver place making at the local level? They make communities think about what they want and encourage dialogue but the risk is that it becomes too complex- groups become planners but are not professionals. The best NPs are enhanced parish plans which are a lot simpler and the local plan system should be capable of delivering what communities want.
- The Diocese of Oxford is heavily involved in community engagement. In recent years it has committed £3-4m to buying houses in new developments, thereby embedding community workers in the area. £400k has also been provided to sustain this activity, all raised through donations.
- Concern about state of planning system, descending into a lottery with different inspectors giving different opinions. Parish Council role is very difficult.
- How do we mobilise people to be involved and volunteer?

Speakers made the following responses:

- Paul - role of the church for whole community at Upper Heyford was outstanding
- Martin – best way to generate volunteers is to have paid worker or resident on the estate from the beginning. Community activity needs energizing and focusing
- Alex – one thing government could do to enable planning is to stop changing it, need more council houses
- Tom – communities should undertake NPs despite the difficulties, because it is a process of engagement in the community. Question is how communities can engage with the planning system to get the best outcome. Main concern is getting the community infrastructure right. We know what the solutions are but they need to be consistently applied across all new developments

Biographies

Alison Webster - Chair

Alison Webster works as the Social Responsibility Adviser for the Church of England Diocese of Oxford. She has also worked for the Student Christian Movement, the Christian Socialist Movement and the Institute for the Study of Christianity and Sexuality. She is Chair of an arts charity called Amaka Beautiful Child (ABC), which works with young people towards personal and social transformation through poetry, art, music and drama.

Lord Matthew Taylor of Goss Moor

For 23 years until 2010, Matthew was a Liberal Democrat MP. In 2007, he authored “The Taylor Review, Living Working Countryside” and, in 2009, founded the Rural Coalition. During his chairmanship of the RC he wrote a major report, “The Rural Challenge” (2010), making recommendations on delivering the “Big Society” in rural communities. In 2012, he was asked to lead an independent review of the Government’s planning practice guidance, bringing it into line with the National Planning Policy Framework. Matthew recently authored “Garden Villages – empowering localism to solve the housing crisis”, which calls for a radical new planning approach to create financially viable new garden villages.

Tom McCulloch – Community First Oxfordshire

Tom leads on Community First’s community infrastructure and Neighbourhood Planning (NP) activity. He has helped build CFO into the “go to” local organisation for communities seeking high quality NP support. Tom is a former board member of the Cherwell Community Land Trust and has led research on social and community infrastructure and best practice in placing-making on new housing developments for Cherwell District and South Oxfordshire and Vale District Councils.

Martin Gorick – Archdeacon of Oxford

Martin Gorick was appointed Archdeacon of Oxford in 2013. He works closely with the Bishop of Oxford in the city, and across the three counties of the Diocese. He also holds senior responsibility for Interfaith Relations and for Anglican chaplains in healthcare, prisons, armed forces, schools and universities. He is Chair of the New Communities Group which helps to map and lead the involvement of the Church of England in major new housing developments across Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Berkshire.

Paul Silver – CEO Dorchester Living

Paul is a Chartered Accountant and his previous experience includes working as a mergers and acquisitions advisor to the Housebuilding sector at Deutsche Bank and Citigroup. Paul joined the Dorchester Group as an Equity Partner in 2003 and runs its UK Regeneration business and its UK Housebuilding business. Paul was instrumental in founding the Heyford Park Free School, an all-through school located at Heyford Park and sponsored by the Dorchester Group. Paul is both Chairman of the Trust and the Board of Governors for the School.

Alex Hollingsworth – Councillor Oxford City Council

Alex is a councillor at Oxford City Council, where he is the Executive Board Member for Planning and Regulatory Services. Alex was educated at the London School of Economics then the University of Texas and is currently a part time mature PhD student at Oxford Brookes University. He also runs a small antiquarian bookselling business, and acts as a consultant and advisor to local publishers. He is particularly interested in issues around planning, housing and Oxford’s city centre, where he lives with his partner and two children.