

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

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I want to do 2 things in this short presentation. First, look in a bit more detail at the concept of placemaking. And second, to offer a vision for how this might be achieved. So, both a theory and a practice.

I want to start with something very practical, or -some might say-, something that should be practical but actually isn't, the planning system. My perspective is that of a non-specialist. I am not a planner.

As I was preparing this presentation, I started to wonder if we should have called the conference, Place- the Final Frontier. Not because I'm a big Star Trek fan but because the world of planning can often seem as arcane as science fiction. Just think the terms we have to chart a course through: SHLAA, SHMAA, LEP, Section 106, NDO, NP, NPPF, CIL.

If these terms can seem impenetrable then the planning system itself can be further confusing. Just when you think you have a sure footing the ground shifts. A lack of a 5-year land supply is announced, for example, altering the rules of the planning game. In some ways planning seems to be the modern alchemy, a series of practitioners searching for an ever-elusive certainty.

This is not to criticise planning officers, I have a great deal of respect for the work they do. They themselves have to navigate often frustrating changes. However, I simply want to highlight the difficulties for communities, lay people, to swim in those waters, especially those who, for example, have undertaken a Neighbourhood Plan with the laudable aim of taking a fair share of development in order to make their community a better place to live yet who now wonder if by doing so they have opened themselves up to an unfair share.

So, Placemaking. What is it? Community First Oxfordshire would call it the creation of thriving, socially active and successful places which have strong relationships with neighbouring communities and where people have a positive sense of belonging. It is undeniably difficult to achieve this.

However, even with the system as is, it not impossible to create flourishing places. It is, I am convinced, a natural human aspiration. We are social beings, most of us, we want to talk to our neighbours and look out for each other, we want to live in places that are safe and which offer a sense of belonging, of community.

And 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.

The challenge is how to strengthen this in existing communities and lay the foundations for it on new developments which are emerging right now across the County. My focus on this presentation is these larger new developments. However, there is much in what I will cover which can be applied, at least in some ways, to other contexts.

The American poet and environmentalist Gary Snyder, talks and writes of a place in space. That is, somewhere which is home to us, where we feel rooted and connected. For a long time in human history this likely meant one place, most likely a small settlement and then a village.

Times have shifted now. We have been a land of migrants for a long time, enriching the new places we move to with the sum of our experiences elsewhere, in turn being enriched by that new place. Long may that continue.

I look at the experience of my own lifetime. My deepest roots are in a Highland village, where I grew up. Later, I moved to Glasgow, a place of fewer roots but where I made a life, the city becoming another element in my identity. Then down to Oxfordshire and a similar process.

Yet what made it more straightforward to fit in to a new place, whether it was Glasgow or Eynsham, was the fact that I was moving into an already existing community. That sense of community might have been weaker or stronger but it was always obvious. There were social events, organisations, things to do. In short, the community had an identity, it was rooted in that place in space. I could, if I wanted, get involved. Whether I did or not, it was on offer to me and that was important thing.

This is not to suggest that all existing communities are super-active and have no issues. It might not be stretching it too far to talk about, for example, a crisis in volunteering. The average age of volunteers is on the rise. The pipeline of new volunteers is a bit thin. This is a major issue in the creation of thriving communities.

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 are 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 that 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. We cannot expect social interaction to develop and thrive in the absence of facilities, community groups, and organisations. 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. We also undertook similar research for South and Vale District Councils and Sovereign Housing Association. It seems that there is an emerging aspiration to more critically consider how we can better create flourishing communities, drawing on solutions that have worked elsewhere.

There are, of course, few things new under the sun. The recommendations that CFO made in these reports and which we are keen to take forward as practical exemplars are derived from what has worked elsewhere and what has been suggested in best practice research. However, we did emphasise certain procedures, which I will come to.

We looked at various scenarios: established social housing estates; New Towns; master-planning on large new developments; Garden Cities; new strategic development locations. These case studies were a vital source of information and insight into themes such as capacity-building, citizen-led action, social cohesion, the role of design and community control of assets.

From this research, we developed an approach to placemaking, which we think offers an effective roadmap to the creation of flourishing communities. However, it is important to say that every community will evolve differently as a result of particular local issues and context and the unique combination of skills and capacity of residents and organisations.

There is not time to go through our recommendations in detail. However, we have given you an overview in your delegate pack and there is more information on our website. There is perhaps much there that will be familiar and self-evident. However, familiarity and obviousness do not always translate into consistently applied practice.

I want to focus on 3 key recommendations, which were strongly supported in both our research and our discussions with communities, LA officers, voluntary organisations and community development practitioners. These, we feel, if effectively supported, resourced and applied across larger development sites could be transformative in terms of building thriving new communities organically, from the ground up.

We wanted to set out a model that covered the whole life-cycle of a community: planning it, building it and sustaining it. In order to be based upon an understanding of place, the conversation between people who will live in the new settlement and those involved in building it should start well before the first brick is laid. Often the local authority and housing associations know who some of the new residents will be, particularly when they are social housing tenants and self-builders. But the creation of a shared vision and masterplan should draw on individuals and organisations living and operating in the locality of the new development.

A way of giving real, structured strength to community involvement would be to establish Site Development Forums. This was the first of our key recommendations. A forum could include the parish or town council, local councillors, a Community Development Worker, voluntary organisations, development management officers, landscape and housing officers, the County Council and the developer. Importantly, the forum, would act as the incubator of

a Residents or Community Association, which would take shape as the development grew in size.

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 we are proposing is different from others that might, on the face of it, seem similar.

There is a common and well-evidenced perception that the balance of power, so to speak, when it comes to housing development is heavily weighted in favour of the developer. 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, ensuring, for example, that S106 timetables and planning conditions are kept to and that the masterplan collectively developed is actually delivered.

Ideally, developer participation in these forums would be a planning condition. What we are seeking to do is reverse the usual dynamic, by creating a formal, authoritative structure that places the community in the driving seat and ensures that its social and material interests are truly at the heart of a new development.

I don't mean to suggest that developers don't take social infrastructure seriously. But some do it better than others. Paul Silver will talk later about the Dorchester's Groups exemplary approach at Upper Heyford. My question is, if it can be done there, why not elsewhere by others?

The second and third of our key recommendations focus on the need for community development support and the provision of community facilities from the outset of the development.

Our research and our interviews emphasised these points again and again.

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.

Likewise, it is essential to have a community development worker available on-site at an early stage to '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.

Usually, community development support and community centres are triggered only after hundreds of new homes have been built. This far from ideal. There could be ways round this. They are not without challenges and risks but not insurmountable. The Planning Authority could forward-fund community facilities and community development support

and recoup the monies from the developer when S106 thresholds are reached. A temporary community facility could be provided at the outset of a new development. S106 agreements could demand lower thresholds and trigger points for the provision of facilities etc.

We are quite aware that there are complications to achieving the placemaking vision. We are, to some extent, talking about a step change in relationships, perhaps a rethinking of planning conditions and Section 106 negotiations. We are also challenging Local Authorities, developers, voluntary organisations and communities to collectively take a more creative, proactive role in building flourishing new places.

I want to finish by briefly looking at some of the potential effects of a less structured approach to placemaking.

Some of those we talked to, who live or work on large new housing developments, made a number of critical points.

They talked of frustration at not being consulted, about a feeling 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. We 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.

The general feeling from a lot of people we spoke to could be summed up as frustration. Of a lack of identity, and a hum-drum if not poor sense of belonging. Yet what was abundantly clear was that people wanted to live in a thriving community, that vibrant place in space. They just need help to achieve it.

That is perhaps the key message- thriving new communities have to be nurtured. There are complications to getting where we need get to but we have the collectives, the individuals, the organisations and the creativity to overcome them.