

Garden City Visioning Event – Key themes and Outcomes

17th September 2015

Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council's Garden City visioning event identified a number of key themes and issues that should be considered when planning for Welwyn Hatfield in the 21st Century.

With regard to Garden City Principles, workshop participants noted that:

- A garden city is not just about image, it is a whole package of elements, a combination of economics, governance and place making.
- Garden city principles developed from analysis of issues facing the population at that time, some are still relevant today but there are contemporary issues, such as climate change, that also need to be considered.
- Place is about people and making sustainable communities, not just bricks and mortar. There needs to be engagement, and strong leadership, a clear vision and commitment to achieving it.
- There must be a strategic approach to growth, with clear principles identified in the local development plan.
- Garden cities were innovative, we must not be afraid of innovation.

A number of key considerations and priorities for the borough were identified:

- Clear and open debate involving all key stakeholders.
- Creation of a clear vision and strong governance, with commitment and consistency from leadership to implement it.
- Community engagement, stewardship and empowerment.
- Need to address the housing crisis, the need for homes which are affordable, of mixed tenure and sensibly address pressures for higher densities
- Place making and masterplanning are very relevant, there is a need for an overarching set of design principles which adopts a legacy approach to building quality and design
- Creation and maintenance of multi-functional and usable green space which is linked to the wider natural environment.
- Suitable mix of community infrastructure located in flexible and highly accessible 'hub' spaces.

Looking at the principles above, the following topics were addressed in more detail:

COMMUNITY:

- The need for local democracy and involvement of local communities in the development process to help facilitate community ownership, confidence and enthusiasm from relevant stakeholders. Maintaining quality of life for existing communities whilst creating new mixed communities that are safe, and well connected.

HOUSING:

- Needs to facilitate mixed communities – lifetime homes to allow up and downsizing within the community. Mono tenure should be avoided. Pepper potting affordable housing may not always be feasible for developers, though it was one of the more successful aspects of parts of Welwyn Garden City– clustering likely to be more attainable.

GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE:

- Functionality is important for 21st Century. Green spaces must be valuable and useable, create connections to maintain and improve biodiversity. There need to be a variety of different types of open space located to fulfill differing roles. (e.g. edge of urban area can act as buffer to rural landscape, in urban area can foster community spirit).

EMPLOYMENT:

- There is a need to plan for the economic future of the Borough and the changing employment patterns of the 21st Century. There is a need for opportunities to work locally but also for high speed broadband and flexible housing types to allow people to work from home as well as flexible and affordable start up units.

TOWN CENTRE:

- A healthy Garden City has a healthy town centre, there is a need for remodeling of existing spaces, larger retail units and to enable a shift from a retail to a leisure economy. Clustering of units can create the necessary critical mass and use of events, cultural activities and markets can help draw people into the centre.

INFRASTRUCTURE:

- Need to create local 'hubs'- adaptable and flexible mixed use areas conducive to community activities. Accessibility is key, planning cannot determine healthy sustainable behavior but it can help encourage it. Sustainable transport routes which discourage use of the motor vehicle seek modal shift by encouraging cycling, walking and use of public transport. Timing is important for influencing behaviour, if the infrastructure (including green space) can be put in place prior to the housing it is more likely to be used.

DESIGN:

- Early design is important – we should learn from best practice to achieve integration. Design should not just be about 'look' but about functionality.
- There should be an overarching set of design principles which take a modern approach to design to reflect modern lifestyles but enable neighbourhoods to have their own identity.
- Masterplans work, but too much prescription stifles creativity, it is better to have clear blocks/parameters and allow flexibility inside these. Design codes should encourage a coherent design but should not be so rigid they stifle variety / creativity.
- Building heights should define where you are within an area, they should be used appropriately as they have the potential to have a greater negative impact upon existing neighborhoods than higher densities.
- Inclusion of greenery is important, landscape framework and intelligent soft design is key to quality and 'curb appeal'.

DENSITY:

- High density does not necessarily mean poor quality, we can increase the efficiency and quality of open space and use high quality design to disguise high density.
- There is a need for smaller sized accommodation in the borough, this goes in hand with higher densities. Parking is an issue, use of home zones, small courtyards and landscaping.
- Possibility of releasing poorer quality land from the Green Belt, protecting the remainder, and developing usable high quality, biodiversity rich green space rather than big gardens.

DELIVERY AND FINANCE:

- There is a need for strong leadership and governance. Budgetary challenges mean ever more importance to have the right people involved and a strong dialogue with those working on the front line.
- There is a need to create certainty in the development process – political consistency and commitment assisted by the use of masterplanning and SPD.
- Developments need to be viable for developers, there is a need to unpick and understand viability so that the private sector can be satisfied and willing to invest. It is questionable whether land value capture will ever be achieved, arguably this already exists in the form of planning obligations (S106 and CIL). What other alternatives are there?
- Need to think about creative funding streams for maintenance of infrastructure. In light of local government resource constraints perhaps the most favored approach is to create facilities from planning obligations and hand over to a Community Land trust to maintain. There is also the potential to develop and use income generating assets as part of community infrastructure projects.