

# Reinventing New Towns Through Heritage – 3<sup>rd</sup> UK New Towns Sharing Day

23<sup>rd</sup> January 2020, Milton Keynes Central Library

## EVENT SUMMARY

### WELCOME TO THE DAY

Shane Downer, Heritage and International Partnerships, Milton Keynes Council  
Moderator for the Day

### PRESENTATIONS

#### **Basildon: Basildon at 70: New Town DNA**

Paul Brace, Assistant Director of Public Spaces, Basildon Borough Council

2019 was the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Basildon being designated – a good time for reflection. Focused on identifying the DNA – what makes Basildon? Came up with slogan “So you think you know Basildon? Think again.”

It is the economic powerhouse of Essex, but has an image and reputation problem both internally and externally.

The 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary gave a chance to focus on deprivation challenges, also:

- Found that residents didn't trust the council.
- Needed to engage with the community and foster civic pride.
- It was important to have events that could be sustainable for the next few years.
- Wanted to encourage physical activity.
- Ford got involved for the first time – one of largest and most prominent local employers.

Held various events including:

- Vintage Tea Dance = held on a Saturday, brought together isolated older people and young people.
- Backside to Trackside = challenging people to run 5k. 50% of participants are still running and the local leisure centre provider is looking to roll out the scheme to its other venues.
- New Town Sounds = music essential to the DNA of Basildon (brutalist architecture reflected in the music of Depeche Mode). Local musical acts performed in the town centre over one day – a total of 53 hours of music - which brought in business to town centre. Being repeated this year and looking to turn into a Borough-wide festival.
- Christmas Lights Switch-on = made it a more community-focused event with more cultural activity, did away with “celebrities” and stage, proved more popular.
- Basildon Heroes – highlighting people from the local community that deserved recognition, nominated by the community and decided by a panel of community members and two council representatives.

Legacy - catalyst for town centre regeneration. Town centre has lots of empty retail units, but looking to bring in a cultural offering through redesign and get more of a mix of creatives and business.



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**Harlow: *Conserving our USP (urban sculpture park)***

Dr. Alina Congreve, Harlow Sculpture Trust

Prior to the Second World War, public art was about memorialising. Post-1945 saw a shift towards the democratisation of modern art. New towns provided an opportunity for the holistic display of art and also fostered a feeling that people deserved and are worth it. However, it was also seen as quite paternalistic.

It's important to take into account the context of public art – usually outdoors and doesn't exist independently of its location or the people who live with it. This is important to remember when places are redesigned and reshaped. Often physically fixed to the architecture and use non-traditional materials, which creates conservation challenges.

Public art in new towns often encapsulates the trends of the time and so takes on a wider national importance. Sometimes criticised for not living up to visions (e.g. "Florence in Essex") but they have achieved much more than unplanned developments.

In 2019 Harlow undertook a major project to conserve its public art – around 100 pieces.

Professionals were brought in to undertake the work.

- Residents' reactions in the past were taken into account – many would be concerned at what was happening and make enquiries. The 2019 project recruited volunteer "sculpture guardians" to explain to the public what was happening with the artworks, leaving the conservators to get on with their work and not be interrupted. When the project was complete, these volunteers moved on to running sculpture tours etc.
- School engagement was an important part of the project, especially utilising the Big Draw initiative. Schools had the opportunity to adopt a sculpture.

The public art in Harlow is a living collection, which is developing constantly.

- First experiences in using section 106 agreements to fund new artworks.
- Set up an Artist in Residence programme.

Guided walks are a good way of promoting public art – Harlow are developing a leaflet and an app. Civic pride in public art can help to create and maintain social cohesion.

**Stevenage: *Stevenage Reimagined: Stevenage's Cultural Strategy one year on***

Jo Ward, Curator, Stevenage Museum

Noted that Stevenage has had a very similar experience to previous speakers e.g. also looking at redeveloping the town centre since their 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

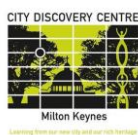
Stevenage was the first post-war new town (11 Nov 1946) and it had the first ever pedestrian-only town centre. The designated area also had very tight boundaries, which means they have to give careful thought to redevelopment as there is no expansion room.

The Arts Council advised that culture should be at the heart of the town centre redevelopment.

- Music and public art is at the heart of Stevenage, so continues this.

Important to have dialogue with the community and have a plan – cultural strategy. The redevelopment needs to bring together disparate people and communities, and involve everyone.

Ownership = control – need to own the land and buildings in the town centre in order to achieve their redevelopment. Much harder to work with private owners.



**Welwyn: Welwyn Garden City Centenary 2020**  
Dr. Malcolm Day, Welwyn Garden City Foundation

Welwyn Garden City is celebrating its centenary in 2020; past experience with the local authority has meant they are being kept at a distance and the celebrations are being led by the community.

Events and activities include:

- Big school involvement – found them quite hard to get on board, but increases parental awareness of the centenary. Schoolchildren have been planting bulbs.
- Sport for All – various sporting and physical activities, 50 events.
- Festivals showcasing the creativity of the town.
- Centenary Walk – a 20.20km waymarked walk that points back to the town centre at various points so that people can do partial sections. Partially accessible to people with disabilities.
- City of Trees – created walks highlighting some of Welwyn’s 19,000 trees.
- Centenary Garden – offered a plot at the Chelsea Flower Show, designs were created but there was no funding to accept it. Want to use the designs in the town centre.
- Planning symposium – held in town centre so attendees can walk around during the sessions.
- Ebenezer Howard statue – new statue commemorating the founder of the Garden City movement. Wanted it to be an accessible statue e.g. on the same level as the viewer.
- Welcome to Welwyn Garden City – new signage with an image. Visual improvement of the bus and railway stations.

**Q&A Session part 1**

How can change be managed in towns based on planning ideas from the early – mid 20<sup>th</sup> century?  
How to incorporate the social and digital changes in the way we live and work?

- Alina: it will happen whether you plan for it or not. Talk to local communities and adapt what is sympathetic from the original plans.
- Paul: it is a difficult balance, especially in retail. Need to make sure we keep what makes our towns unique, but futureproofing is important. Need to involve communities and have spaces that are adaptable.
- Malcolm: important to identify what your heritage is, so you can know what needs to be recognised as special and unique.

What are your experiences with the integration of overseas migrants and engaging new communities in the town’s culture and heritage?

- Alina: talked about Harlow’s experience with the “Brexit murder” – many factors to blame, including the loss of spaces and events for young people. The community came together and the peace march was held around a piece of public art.
- Jo: from anecdotal experience has found that the communities themselves are interested to find out about the local area and its history. The museum plays a key role in this. They have a programme of exhibitions that include those related to specific communities.
- Paul: highlighted a particular problem of towns close to London, whose local authorities are dumping residents in low grade housing outside their area. Difficult to engage people who don’t want to be there. Need to use cultural offering to draw out communities.



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How can we ensure that we retain a local identity to new build housing?

- Alina: respond to the consultation on government proposals for local authorities to lose their current controls.
- Jo: noticed the fact that many new towns no longer have the ambition to lead the way and be innovative like they used to.

#### WELCOME TO AFTERNOON SESSION:

Sam Crooks, Mayor of Milton Keynes

Sam highlighted the shared ethos of new towns – a can-do, innovative attitude – and the challenge of reinventing ourselves with renewal and refreshing for the future. Important to prevent blandness – need to maintain the vibrancy of new towns and continue to build character.

**Milton Keynes: New Town = New Voices: New Vision**

Pamela Roberts, Project Manager, New Town Heritage Explorers

New towns have experienced major population growth, and with new people comes new voices and visions. Milton Keynes has cutting edge design and architecture of considerable international note and we need to decide what to conserve.

New Town Heritage Explorers is a project to document design, architecture and people's stories. It has two strands:

Heritage Toolkit – identify the characteristics of new town design

- Aim to develop the toolkit, test it out and roll out the practical usage.
- Important to engage various stakeholders and communities with expertise and opinions.

Young Explorers – engaging young people in design and architecture

- Incorporate the voices and views of young people into the toolkit.
- Involves making field trips to map local areas – young people feed back to their parents and raise awareness.

Important to recognise social diversity and what this brings to the city.

Helps people to feel empowered about getting involved in the decisions that affect them.

Encouraging young people to consider design and architecture careers.

#### **A New Future for New Towns: presentation and workshop**

Katy Lock, Director of Communities (FJ Osborn Fellow), Town & Country Planning Association

In 2014, the TCPA undertook a project to capture the growth and renewal challenges of new towns, and identify their legacy. What could we learn from new towns to take forward in development and planning in the present?

2.8 million people live in new towns, they are some of the most economically successful areas in the country, but also contain some of the most deprived areas. What can be done about this, what can be done to prevent this?

New towns suffer as a result of the “great new towns robbery” – where development corporations were wound up and the area stripped of its assets (passed to government organisations the



Commission for the New Towns and successors). This meant they had all the features, but no resources to draw on.

Peterlee has no-go parks and difficulty in land use and ownership. Skelmersdale has really strong community organisations and a fantastic forgotten park. Cumbernauld suffers with challenging built heritage. Cwmbran's water gardens are to be demolished.

There is a varying ownership amongst new towns of their new town identity – some embrace it and use it, including marketing etc; some choose not to recognise it, or ignore it.

A feeling that the government hasn't finished the job with new towns – needs to complete the investment that was committed to. There are renewal issues that could be the responsibility of new development corporations.

Identified that there are real opportunities for business to invest in new towns.

## Q&A session part 2

In July 2002 the Select Committee on Transport, Local Government and the Regions assessed the effectiveness of the new towns and concluded that: "While many New Towns have been economically successful, most now are experiencing major problems. Their design is inappropriate to the 21st Century. Their infrastructure is ageing at the same rate and many have social and economic problems. Many are small local authorities which do not have the capacity to resolve their problems.

[...]

The new towns are no longer new and many of the quickly built houses have reached the end of their design life. The masterplans dictated low density development with large amounts of open space, and housing segregated from jobs, shopping and business services. These created a car dependency and are now not considered sustainable. Low density developments are expensive to maintain. Roads and sewers are in need of expensive upgrades."

This was the position in 2002. Reinvention. Your experience and impact on heritage and culture positive or negative?

- Louise: the quote could apply to anywhere, not just new towns. There is a stronger sense of pride in new town communities.
- Malcolm: a reduction in the powers of local authorities is one of the main reasons for this. Expertise has been lost and there is a lack of respect for departments and subject areas in which they have no experience.
- Paul: the future was thought about when new towns were designed, need to make the case for the power of new towns to obtain the resources to cope. Culture and heritage will contribute to this.
- Pamela: culture and heritage can drive regeneration agendas and reach those people who don't think issues of planning and architecture are for them. Need something different to a top-down approach to create a sense of ownership.
- Alina: culture and heritage build bridges, but they have their limits. Shouldn't be used to paper over the cracks in our declining welfare state.
- Katy: new town pioneers came because they bought into an advertised way of life, changes could bring about disruption to this.



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How can we manage the tension between original new town residents and newer?

- Katy: need to be transparent about explaining decisions and involving communities.

*Comment*

We need to hold the government to account in its responsibilities for planning towns and cities and foster a culture of city planning in local authorities, who have lost so much expertise.

How do we weigh expensive signature buildings against grassroots culture and heritage work?

Example of MK Gallery.

- Alina: need to do the stuff that goes with it such as outreach and schools work.

Do the communities in more “traditional” towns and cities have a sense of pride and ownership like new towns?

- Louise: heritage feels more personal in Milton Keynes – things were designed and built for you. The clearer vision demonstrates that the place was designed for people, which increases the residents’ sense of ownership.

How can funders help new towns?

- Katy: NLHF enables the unlocking and sharing of resources. Could be helpful to unlock sources of funding from elsewhere, so as not to rely just on them.
- Alina: has found NLHF supportive during its projects. Can help with a structured sharing of outputs and developing new business models.
- Shane: can be difficult to unlock the big funding for new town projects as new towns and their heritage are not very well understood. Would be beneficial for NLHF to have some training on this.
- Paul: the smaller projects need less red tape. Go where the energy is and make it easier.

*Comment*

Local authorities could be utilising the experience and expertise of ex-development corporation staff, who have experience of navigating the complications with national government.

Our design around green space and landscape can give new towns an advantage. How do we exploit this to our own advantage and share our successful model with others for future growth?

- Katy: The TCPA promote The Parks Trust model for stewardship. It’s important to have management and financing plans.
- Louise: Envisage future new towns and ensure the lessons are learned from previous.
- Paul: Unfortunately, Basildon exploit green space in a negative way by building on it. Play areas are a particular problem – lots of small ones, which are difficult to manage and under-used.



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How can we provide more support for paid grassroots activities?

- Pamela: Need to recognise the expertise of cultural and heritage organisations and reward this. Upskilling is vital to help navigate the funding sources.

*Comment*

New towns are in a weaker position as there has not been a comprehensive survey of architecture and heritage. There needs to be a campaign to evaluate and assess these.

*Comment*

New town buildings should at least be recorded before being demolished.

*THANKS*

Shane Downer brought the day to a close and thanked the Partners, the Presenters and the audience for contributing so much to the day. Each presenter was presented with the Mayor's Shield of the Borough Crest as a thank you for giving their time to the event.

Shane also thanked Katy and the TCPA for their work with MK Council on developing ideas around a UK New Towns Network and looked forward to the results of the workshop, to the WGC100 events and other new town events in 2020.

He invited the audience to return to the next UK New Towns Day in Milton Keynes on Wednesday 20<sup>th</sup> January 2021.

END OF DAY

