

Summary: 6 February 2014 Weald in Motion

1. Introduction by Tim Leathes, Urban and Civic

Urban and Civic have been developing the 1500 acre site at Alconbury – near the A1 4 miles north of Huntingdon and 15 miles south of Peterborough. It was a former airbase with a 3km long runway from which spy planes and tank busters had flown and numerous underground ex-military features. There were 550 acres of Greenfield land. Development will take around 20 years and capitalize on the highly accessible location with connection to important regional cities and London with the possibility of a new station making a direct connection.

A key first step in exploring options was engaging with local people. This included the team personally attending parish meetings (instead of sending consultants and other representatives) and opening up the site to local people who had never previously had access. This clarified local needs including proposed local amenities and transport routes. They had supported the five neighbouring Parish Councils by hiring them a planner so they could better engage with and understand the development and planning process.

This approach strengthened trust and dialogue with stakeholders, an invaluable part of their planning process. But even with support the process is still lengthy and expensive. The site is being used by numerous small businesses in order to generate an immediate income.

There will be several waves of development reflecting local district council's preference for economic growth not based on the introduction of warehouses and for the 5,000 new homes to be an extension of Huntingdon rather than a separate new town. Early actions had included the creation of allotments and extensive planting along the boundary fence to improve the aesthetics.

Gaining enterprise zone status (against some expectations) for 380 acres of industrial usage (mainly for manufacturing and R&D use) was highly valuable. Some development had to start immediately after winning to fulfil the promise to government and demonstrate commitment Government (who control loans and grants) and the Local Economic Partnership.

There has been an emphasis on forming the principles of the development rather than concentrating on fine details, which has been necessary due to the extensive period of development.

2. Key points made in discussion

- Adopting a framework instead of formulating detailed plans was sensible to avoid the plans eventually becoming obsolete because of changing conditions and regulations
- Two early projects had been agreed: 500,000 trees pledge and an initial 100 homes to learn lessons of what worked in this area.
- Owning the freehold had been advantage because it meant the developers were able to respond quickly to the issues and debates with local people. Patient investors were needed to support that.
- The Enterprise Zone was in some ways just a formality of a red line providing the various financial benefits but it represented a clear signal of the local authorities' support and commitment to planning within this zone.
- Local people want homes for the next generation. They see this is better done on a Brownfield site retaining Huntingdon as the existing town centre.
- It would be important to prevent other developers in the later stages of the scheme from stripping back the development and losing the quality and vision that Urban and Civic brought. Detailed agreements were needed under the planning permission (s73 and s106) to make sure that the long term position was protected.
- But flexibility had to be retained to some degree. It was impossible to prescribe details now for building in 20 years time. Each phase needed to learn lessons from the past and improve where possible.
- Community consultation was always difficult and time consuming. This had to be managed to maintain some flexibility but proper governance. Once local communities had understood that the site was now permeable they were clear about the possibilities for reopening of some of the historic road routes even though this could increase traffic in some locations. There was a clear need for local primary schools and other social infrastructure for the existing and new local community.
- Direct commitment to including those elements in the project by the long term land owner was arguably a better response to meeting the needs of the community than attempting to create more complex structures such as a Community Development Trust.
- There was a debate about the way in which Garden Cities could be created. This was clearly one model but it depended on the scale and single ownership of the site. That might not be easy to replicate everywhere.