



Report of the Suffolk Design Management Process Roundtable 1

Roundtable 1: Housebuilders

4th December 2019

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Date	4 th December 2019
Meeting location	Taylor Wimpy East Anglia, Castle House, Kempson Way, Bury Saint Edmunds IP32 7AR
Attendees:	Mark Chapman, Taylor Wimpey Gary Lee, Persimmon Homes Will Vote, Rose Builders Suzanne Newman, Flagship Homes Liz Mcgee, Crest Nicholson Edward Gilder, Badger Building Bryan Wybrow, KLH Architects James Bailey, Boyer Planning Andy Von Bradsky, MHCLG Dawn Edwards, Orwell Housing Graeme Brown, Barnes Construction, Daniel Sheldrake, Barnes Construction Charles Coulson, Concertus Karen Chapman, SGPB Kay Bonning-Schmitt, SGPB
DSE Team:	Chris Lamb, Design South East Kieran Toms, Design South East Garry Hall, Design South East
Purpose:	<p>To discuss the Suffolk Design Management Programme and our long-term approach to embedding high quality design into future developments.</p> <p>To get the perspectives and input of the housebuilding industry, so as to have a rounded understanding of the development process to go with the input from applicants in workshop 4 and officers in workshops 1-4.</p> <p>The session was conducted under Chatham House rules, meaning the outcomes of the discussion could be reported but not be attributed to any one individual in attendance.</p>

Introduction:

A large amount of ideas, thoughts, analyses and suggestions were shared and debated in the roundtable. The below gives an outline of the different views and opinions that were shared. The notes below are not intended as definitive ‘findings’ from the session, but rather to give a sense of the key points made. Sentences in quotation marks are direct quotes, whilst the rest of the text gives an impression of the main points.

Principle of a new approach

- There is a need for the approach it be trialled. Nobody is against trialling it – get the Local Authority behind it.”

Statement of Common Ground (SoCoG)

- “This would be a very useful process to go through... if you’ve got a particularly contentious site” It could be beneficial “if you have a really good tick list of everything you’ve gone through”
- SoCoG could include a series of caveats: agreed set of reasons viewed as valid for not delivering - an agreed set of reasons why you might not have a typical outcome. This will allow flexibility and will be useful both for flagging up potential difficulties and for allowing for flexibility where circumstances change unavoidably. It will also allow for criteria such as “You can’t go beyond *this* stage until you’ve addressed *these* things (e.g. until you’ve sorted out drainage.)”
- “The SoCoG could evolve over time. It would demonstrate a willingness to work together. it could be a good thing for everyone: the public, councillors, Inspectors and so on.”
- “It could link up well with the Charter, if the Charter is saying what’s sustainable and healthy.”
- “Early on we need to be working out what it is about each site that is unique. The SoCoG would help.”
- It would be useful to understand the hierarchy: of what is needed at each location and each place. What are the ‘must haves,’ what’s are the ‘would like to haves’?

Developer / Council Interactions

Currently:

- “Throughout the development process now we sit in many different rooms with many different people and have very different conversations. Some are technical and are some higher-level design. There needs to be the opportunity for the right people to sit in the room together and ensure these decisions are made in sync with each other.”
- “There has been a lot of talk about pre-app. But one issue is that if you go to talk to the District Council you don’t get the County Council present, and so you miss out on valuable input. Without the right people you cannot make the

right decisions. So we need to have all the right people in the same room at the beginning of the process.”

Resources

- There often isn't anybody for 'design' in councils. Key thing has got to be a willingness /ability to engage on these issues from council's side. Councils need to have sufficient design officers / design resource.

Consistency

- New Councillors come on the committee and things change, so training needs to be continuous. Whilst councillors of course have political considerations, we do want consistency in decision making.
- At early stages we engage with the policy officer, not a development manager: it can be quite difficult to get the policy team to engage with detail.
- Things can be very officer-dependent -sometimes local guidance is chosen to not be pursued, and it's not clear why this is.
- For example, on one development, after 12 months of work, we were told that there was insufficient capacity at the junction to proceed with the development at all. It would have been helpful to know that 12 months earlier!
- There is not always consistency in the relationship and feedback between members and officers. The Local Planning process has helped councillors understand and join up their thinking with officers. Members know what to expect having gone through that process.

Communication

- There is a lot of fear and misunderstanding about what each 'side' might say and do. This can lead to decisions being made that are trying to second guess the other side's perspective, rather than making the best decision.
- We want a more collaborative approach to decision-making
- “There should be more phone calls!”
- Contractors are very often involved at an early stage. They should also be involved in the early key meetings and decision making between the LPA and applicant.
- Design often happens far too late in the process. “Talking about roof tiles late in the process is fine, but we need to engage with and decide the fundamental underlying approach much earlier on.”
- Clarity and consistency on design and requirements is needed – for example with Highways Design. We've got sites being built now that were designed with verges. But these verges have no trees, because later down the line Highways have got involved and said to take them out

What are the potential risks of the SDMP approach?

- We should avoid overcomplicating smaller, simpler sites.

- We need to avoid this just being a document saying “*how to make the planning process even longer*”
- The scale of approach needs to be dependent on what the application is. We need get it to something that makes things more efficient. As a rough calculation, there are 25,000 planning application per year, we can’t do this for all of them. Maybe 5 -10 dwellings or more should be the threshold, as there is Planning permission in Principle for sites of up to 10 or more. So proposals of fewer than 10 units are less significant. We should follow this, and only require this process for development of 10 homes or more. We have to keep things proportionate.
- In response to that: “if you’re doing a 10-unit scheme and you **can’t** agree a SoCoG, there’s something wrong with it”
- The criteria for this approach could depend on the type of applicant. So anything commercially-driven would have to go through this process. Others, such as self-build, for example might not have to go through it.
- There needs to be a balance of future trends with the reality now. For example, EV Charging requirements are often excessive considering current demand and can end up being unusable even if compliant.

Outline the benefits of development better:

- A large amount of CIL money is sat in the bank, which is not a good use of funds. We should make more of conscious effort with communities, to demonstrate how development will help them. This could include publishing CIL benefits earlier, and making it clear what the offer is and what the benefit for the community is. We need to make it clear that new development is not only the new homes in the community - but is also the new playgrounds, and new schools etc., which are paid for by developers through CIL.
- Some councils have clawback system which incentivises councils to spend the money, and also encourages developers to know that money will go to good use and won’t be wasted.
- SoCoG should include CIL commitments. This will allow us all to think about legacy and to think about the long term. This is precisely what CIL and s106 should be used for.

Involving other stakeholders

- There is sometimes a problem with land promoters who can get planning permission and add value, but then break all the promises later, under the banner of the developer rather than the promoter. There needs to be a consideration of the different approaches when engaging with each other and making decisions, particularly early on.
- Involving an RP earlier on developments would help developers better understand the restrictions of funding. If they come up with a scheme they can sell, and get planners on board, then it’s worth more – but also everyone will know that it can and will be built. This is mutually beneficial.
- We don’t always get consistent advice one place we’ve got an 1,100-unit scheme that we want to get right, it’s part of our legacy. It’s a complex site, with 3,500 units overall and 3 landowners coming together. Sometimes we’re

getting advice from Essex Place Services to inform us on design: Sometimes we're going through the local council. Sometimes we'll speak to them both and their advice will contradict each other and also that of the people delivering the schools.

- Community Engagement could take the form of charrettes – getting everything out in the open and making decisions together

PPA / Pre-App

- We don't engage with pre-app because we don't often get value from it. There needs to be more transparency about what we get for our money. "Pre-app isn't supposed to subsidise the rest of the planning process or system." For a 44-home scheme, we were charged £9k. That amount of money pays the salary of one officer full time for 2 months, but it is not what we get.
- There needs to be transparency about what you're getting. "At the moment we ask for PPA and we get 2 sheets of paper and a 4-grand bill."
- We were told it is not about making money – but it doesn't always seem that way. For us it's about paying for a service and getting that service. If you got a consultant to do £30k's worth of work, you would get more detail about where the money goes and where the fee is going: a more itemised set of work. PPA doesn't do that at the moment
- Some PPAs seem to have been made up on the hoof, and so in the future a lot of people would treat them with scepticism until we've seen a lot go through the process. We want consistency.
- Pre-app advice always comes with a caveat: that members may disagree. We need to find a way to join up the approach within councils.
- Pre-app often with a timescale: only valid for 3 months for example. We should be able to agree on some things which can last a bit longer, particularly if the site is complex.
- Could the pre-app fee be deducted from application fee? Council say: Fees are statutory, and set statutorily – we can't change, but they also say that these fees still doesn't cover the costs, so they charge for other things, indirectly. If councils were able to charge their own fees they could pick where they charged and don't, and where they get the money from, and there could be more consistency and clarity about fees and the purpose of fees.
- Some firms have a PPA for every large site: this includes a clawback, which makes them highly effective.
- It would be good to have PPA consistent across Suffolk

Examples of Good Design Processes / outcomes

- Every example of good design we get is in Cambridge
- One reason why Cambridge is good is because of consistency of design. This is not necessarily very expensive, but they have quality, even when operating with standard house types.
- Norfolk and Norwich, for example, have pretty hefty guidance on design and design codes
- Surrey's PPA approach is often effective.
- There is good practice: Waveney define what their expectations are – they've defined pretty well in terms of numbers – they could have gone further.

Local Plans / Allocating sites

- Before fully committing to support a new approach or not, we want to know about the National Design Guide and the National Design Code approach. It is not clear yet fully what it is.
- *“When developers bid for land there's a clear expectation of what is expected in policy terms”*
- Design Codes to go in the local plan: site analysis and design principles should be discussed before the LP Allocation, not after - it's too late then.
- We need to having policy and DM officers together in the LP process. We're trying to re-invent the wheel. People are willing to invest money as part of their submission, but we don't get the chance to talk it through with policy person
- There is a natural deselection of stuff which has been over-promoted – things go into the Local Plan, then quietly disappear if they can't be done. This can cause a huge amount of pain for local authorities, but it also means only the right things get delivered. We need to find the right balance between what is and isn't in the Local Plan.
- If you can get that right early on, takes a lot of heat out of the process: everyone knows exactly what's expected of them
- Flooding Guys: Drainage systems can take up 20% of your land. So at a call for sites we could assume 20% of site is drainage. We could also say these are the s106 requirements. But the system lacks that vision at the moment.

Conclusions

In a wide ranging and open discussion, there were a number of specific areas which emerged as key and which seemed to have broad general agreement. There is a desire for more early collaboration and collaborative design making The desire for more consistency around decision making seemed to go hand in hand with this- working together and being more open about how decisions are made will help bring a consistency of delivery. This in turn will loop back around and encourage increased collaboration in the future as trust and confidence in the approach increases.

Community input and support is crucial for the approach to work in the future. Any Design Codes developed could have a community input into them. Whatever the specifics and variances, it is clear that the things that underpin good design need to be robust and set out and agreed upon earlier in the process.

Whilst there was plenty of positivity, there are also clearly a number of specific challenges and needs that must be considered in order to deliver this new approach. Key was that resources need to be more readily and consistently available.

Managing design with PPAs will work and will help to get design principles fixed early, but this will likely require stakeholders collaborating in workshop-style ways from early in the process. For this joined-up approach to work all the way through beyond the decision making process, there needs to be a consistent approach to training for elected members, so that they have as much information, knowledge and experience as possible to be able to make informed decisions that deliver the best quality design possible across the county.

There were various thoughts and ideas about the role of various tools and updating the way existing ones are used. The idea and principle of a Statement of Common Ground is supported, but care needs to be taken (and further discussion needs to take place) about what goes into it and the precise form it takes. The CIL and s106 requirements of sites need to be set out much earlier. The benefits of these need to be publicised and demonstrated better as well.

The progress to date is very much welcome, and lots of excellent work has gone into moving Suffolk Design forward – together we can address these challenges, and there seems to be the will to do so.

Next Steps

These comments will be taken into account and the SDMP will be updated in advance of the CMT Roundtable.

There were a number of useful recommendations and ideas brought up in this workshop which can be progressed and advanced in the coming months, as part of Suffolk Design's ongoing evolution.

The principle of the public and private sector coming together in forums like these and working collaboratively and openly was seen as a major positive from this event and should be a principle that underpins all future Suffolk Design work.



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