

Community-led Design and Development

Technical Paper: Involving local residents in the design of small and infill sites

Introduction

Involving local tenants and residents in the design of small and infill spaces can help to unlock land for new homes while also raising the quality of both the new homes and the place as a whole. This paper, based on experience of proposed and actual development, will outline the benefits of involving local people and describe some steps you can take to ensure that they make it a better place to live for new and existing residents. It also provides some tips to illustrate how resident involvement can be organised.

You may be interested in the two case studies that relate to this paper that are available on the website: West Howe, Bournemouth, is an area of multi deprivation on the edge of a large town, while the village of Stretham in East Cambridgeshire is an area of high property values in a rural setting. While they represent very different types of area both places have had a similar approach to involving residents, as have the aims. These are:

- to help unlock potential sites and areas for development, including affordable homes
- to ensure that development is of a high quality
- to ensure development contributes to the overall neighbourhood with benefits for existing residents.

Need for new homes and underused space and smaller sites

Many local authorities and housing associations own small underused and/or underdeveloped areas of land that could be put to better use for housing, particularly at a time when the pressure for new homes is so great. Building homes on these sites can also provide an opportunity to tackle social and environmental problems at the same time. Infill sites in existing social housing estates might include garage courts that are no longer fit for purpose or green areas that are not used and have no particular function. Some estates have empty offices, disused drying areas and underused car parking areas. At the other end of the spectrum there is pressure for new homes to be built in villages and towns where property prices are high and few affordable homes available. The suggestion of new development here is often greeted with well organised opposition.



Challenges of small and infill sites

Small and infill sites can provide important opportunities to make the best of publicly owned land, but they are often sensitive, and almost always complex because of the impact on, and proximity to, an existing community. In existing housing estates there may be existing problems with layout or poor maintenance, but the good news is that new development could potentially resolve these. Such challenges include:

- poor quality or degraded open space
- spaces that feeling unsafe and attract antisocial behaviour
- streets and spaces that are not well overlooked – “eyes on the street”
- dominance of parking areas, making a place feel bleak and hard
- poor access, especially on foot, to local facilities, eg schools, shops and work
- inadequate provision for bins, recycling and access for refuse lorries.

It may take time to build confidence with residents who may have suffered from anti-social behaviour in the past that good design can help reduce these problems.

Small greenfield sites on the edges of settlements have their own complexities and sensitivities. Local people often raise concerns about:

- interruption of views and threats to existing green areas
- poor quality design and construction of housing
- access, especially on foot to facilities, school, shops, parks, public transport, work
- traffic congestion and speed, especially when improvements to roads are not perceived to be adequate.
- parking in surrounding streets.

Although the opportunities presented by new development may not be immediately obvious to residents, influencing the design at an early stage offers a chance of addressing some of these issues. Involving residents in design helps identify issues and solve problems. Don't neglect this opportunity – it can avoid local opposition in the years ahead.

Benefits of involving residents

Involving local residents in design has multiple benefits in addition to helping identify and solve problems. The benefits set out below are based on Design Council Cabe research on the experiences of many organisations leading on housing projects, whether community groups, housing associations or local authorities:

- **reducing opposition to new development:** Change is often resisted by people wherever it is proposed. Apart from a natural human anxiety about change, opposition to development is exacerbated by a general antithesis to the design and lack of quality in new development. People's experience of recent development is often disappointment about its quality and failure to respond to the character of an area, integrate effectively into existing areas or provide or improve local services
- **building trust:** People often feel that the quality of their lives is ignored by developers and local authorities. Involving local residents in the design of such small sites provides an opportunity to build trust.
- **raising quality:** proper involvement ensures that new development does benefit from local knowledge and respond to the needs of existing communities.

- **reducing delays:** Working with residents in the design of small sites takes time and patience, especially in the early stages of project development; but the risks of not involving residents are great and leads to delays later on. Opposition slows development, causes stress and increases public resistance to development
- **improving health and wellbeing:** in addition to creating a more attractive place, Public Health England has recognised that giving people a sense of control over the environment close to their homes has recognisable health benefits, and builds confidence and skills.
- **building sustainable communities** and creating places where people want to live.

Getting involved in local plans and linking in with estate improvements

As a local resident interested in getting involved in development happening your area the best the starting point would be local planning documents - a Neighbourhood or Community-led Plan or estate plan. These plans set the vision for the area, allocate sites for housing and set criteria for how this should happen. Such plans are invaluable in identifying small sites and beginning the process of gaining local acceptance for their development. You are then in a good position to get involved in design of actual development of sites. This will help to ensure all small scale developments connect effectively with their surroundings and take the opportunity to achieve multiple benefits, for example by using the investment to rectify existing problems. Both West Howe and Stretham and Wilburton Community Land Trust started with the recognition of the need to develop a plan for the area (see case studies).

It may be many years before you see a plan come to fruition. At an estate in Islington, London (part of the New Deal for Communities programme in the 2000s), new homes are now being built on small sites on existing housing estates, with resident engagement and support. Extensive resident involvement in the design of the area began over ten years earlier, including preparing estate plans for improving the spaces around blocks of flats and looking for potential sites for houses.

Case study: Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation

Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation has taken the opportunity to create new homes wherever possible in conjunction with ongoing estate improvements. Their 'Hidden Homes' initiative is making better use of underused areas on estates to create much needed homes, returning flats that had been used for offices to homes and converting redundant community spaces to create family housing. These sites involved the people from the housing waiting list in their design, some of whom had special requirements. It demonstrates how, with imagination, redundant spaces can be converted into homes.

Steps for engaging with tenants and residents in the design of small and infill sites

Involving local residents may require different ways of working, and also some additional resources that can help get the process going:

1. skilled support and facilitation, preferably from independent providers. Facilitators need to be skilled in engagement techniques as well as having an understanding of design. Working with designers from the outset (preferably those who will be designing the scheme) is essential to respond to needs and explore options, including those that would not have been conceived of by residents and officers themselves. When referring to design this will need to include: urban design, masterplanning and place making, roads and streets, landscaping and play as well as architecture (see Design Briefing Paper).
2. initial funding for that support. West Howe and Stretham and Wilburton Community Land Trust had seedcorn funding to carry out the initial engagement, and without this the whole project would have been at risk. Speak to organisations that may be able to help with funding, including Locality, Parish Councils, local authorities and social housing providers.

Listed below are some techniques you could use for your site. The important thing is to plan well ahead the steps you will take, keeping it proportionate and relevant to the needs of the project. Each project will be different depending on the starting point, its resources and its potential. The following points can be adapted to almost any project.

Some techniques for engaging with tenants and residents	
1	Identify the area around the site that will be affected by development, and residents whose needs must be considered.
2	Develop contacts with residents by speaking to people known to be active in the area: ward councillors, community workers, tenants' groups, people connected to local community organisations and facilities such as community centres, schools, churches, etc
3	Initially work with a small group of interested people as a Working or Steering Group. You could expand membership of an existing group eg Tenants and Residents' Group or Parish Council.
4	Appoint and work with a community engagement facilitator, who has design expertise and skills, or ensure that a design team is part of the process; preferably the design team that will be carrying out the work.
5	With the facilitator organise workshops and visits to successful projects with a view to raising aspirations, an understanding of design principles and what can be achieved; be careful not to raise unrealistic expectations.
6	Analyse the area to find out what works well, defining characteristics that are valued, and problems to be addressed. Do this on site as part of walkabouts and note findings down on maps of the area.
7	Ensure that this work, and all subsequent project work, is broken down into manageable parts. This is essential to include as many people as possible, avoid some individuals becoming overloaded but also to ensure a focus on delivery.
8	Develop Vision and explore options

9	Be inclusive and work with as many relevant organisations as possible. Working with local councils is crucial, both District and County Councils in non-unitary authorities - County Councils are essential if there are issues with streets, roads, traffic and speeds.
10	At key moments share progress on developing the Vision, initial ideas and designs with as many residents as possible and elicit their feedback. This can be done in a variety of ways: by organising exhibitions, through newsletters, at events etc, whatever local people consider to be most effective in their area. Aim to reach as many people, and groups, of all ages and backgrounds as possible by going to places where they meet, including workshops and events in schools, youth clubs, old people's day centres etc.
11	Use questionnaires to ascertain people's views.
12	Keep records of all events. Along with questionnaires these are invaluable evidence of engaging and seeking local views.
13	Report back on the outcome of wider engagement and ensure that it is used to inform concepts and designs.

This process of working with small groups and then holding wider consultation may be repeated at every key stage from initiation to completion of a project including:

- development of the vision
- development of the framework plan/masterplan – layout of the site, detailed and final designs
- detailed designs for buildings, open spaces and streets, at concept stage as well as at detailed design and final design stages.

Tips

- Involve people early to avoid objections later.
- Organise meetings and events as close to the site, and where people live, as possible, using local community venues: community halls/centres, pubs, churches, sports and leisure centres, schools etc, and in good weather consider being on site with tents.
- Arrange meeting times to suit those who will be attending, and provide refreshments.
- Organise wider engagement and consultation events in conjunction with other community events that will attract significant numbers of people. Organise activity for children - face painting, competitions, balloons etc. Be proactive in engaging with people and do not expect them to come to you.
- Be respectful and never suggest that people live in a run down or unattractive area.
- Work in partnership.
- Try to consider other wider social and environmental concerns such as climate change.
- Be positive and have fun.