Community engagement – The Stonebridge Estate regeneration, London

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Introduction to the project
The Stonebridge estate, built in the late 1960s and early 1970s, reflects the spatial planning vision of its time to create a brave new world of “streets in the sky”. In reality this vision delivered a very high proportion of flats (96% in total of all housing) located within high and medium rise tower blocks with deck access. It was not long before the poor quality environment, lacking connections to surrounding streets and local facilities began to show signs of failure, with the housing deeply unpopular with the local community and becoming a maintenance liability for the local council’s housing department. The use of ground floors for services, storage or garages, combined with the scale of buildings and spaces, created hostile edges to the buildings and public spaces that were unattractive, unused and unsafe. The introduction of landscaping, intended to soften the harsh urban environment, only further increased the hostile nature of the environment by creating additional dark areas with limited natural surveillance. The Stonebridge estate, once dominated by grim, grey and unloved concrete towers blocks, has now been transformed into a place with well designed houses set in secure attractive streets that are popular with residents and the wider local community.

The problems of a failing community
Stonebridge suffered from many of the social problems associated with large council housing estates. There were high levels of crime, with half of all residents living in fear of crime, often associated with serious drug and alcohol abuse. The unemployment at Stonebridge was 22% in 1995, in comparison to just 4.5% in Brent and 7% in adjacent wards. In addition there was evidence of low educational attainment, health problems and poor living conditions. The rubbish strewn pathways, abandoned cars, vandalism, broken lifts and neglected buildings, together with congregations of gangs of youths and drunks in public places, were symptoms of a failing
environment and a local community in crisis and desperate for radical change.

Regeneration and rebuilding a place
In 1994, residents voted for the Stonebridge estate to become a Housing Action Trust (HAT) and the Stonebridge (HAT) was formed. From its inception the HAT was confronted with high levels of unemployment, low levels of education, widespread poverty and crime generated by a concentration of disadvantage in Stonebridge.

Although Stonebridge’s regeneration was started in 1997, its vision closely accords with the aims of the New Charter of Athens (2003) by creating well connected places, achieving social balance and cohesion, providing better quality affordable housing and making facilities and services more accessible to all. It embraces diversity and protection of natural resources and open spaces, and promotes sustainability in terms of built design and the use of energy. However, it has only been possible to achieve these outcomes by ensuring that the local community fully participates in all aspects of decision making.

Whilst the aim of achieving high quality design of the physical environment has always been uppermost in the expectations of residents and their advisors, it was recognised that regeneration would need to look beyond bricks and mortar to address social and economic deprivation. Both the HAT and HHT have introduced a range of programmes to support community and resident groups, promote youth engagement, and provide assistance with employment and training. These measures will ultimately narrow the gap in educational attainment, skills, employment and health standards between Stonebridge and the rest of the Borough. To make a real difference to the lives of Stonebridge residents it has been necessary for planners and designers to forge strong partnerships with local people and organisations and to work with a range of partners and agencies to deliver and sustain positive and lasting change.

The project is widely held as a resounding success story. It has attracted considerable national and international interest, having been publicly recognised by the RTPI and the Crown Estate who awarded this regeneration project its Sustainable Communities Award in 2005. The RTPI judging Panel concluded that:

*There has been a remarkable change in the fortunes of Stonebridge. The process of change has been deliberately gradual, and it has been based on a process of public
engagement, which particularly impressed us. The final total number of dwellings is likely to be slightly higher than the pre-existing number of 1750. High density can clearly be achieved without loosing the opportunity for a sociable and successful environment with a full range of facilities. Though some of the old blocks still remain, they will soon be gone. A genuinely sustainable community has been created. The final project will contain a mix of private and public housing. The buildings themselves – well designed and built, with good space standards; the social facilities and open space, which have funding in place for the long term; and the economic and social benefits which have been created will all endure.’

Community benefits
The Stonebridge regeneration is about more than providing new housing. Alongside the improved quality of life that the new homes offer, residents have better access to community facilities and open spaces designed to reduce opportunities for crime and social problems. New amenities include a youth and sports facility of approximately 830 square metres, consisting of sports changing facilities linked to grass and artificial pitches, a cafeteria, multi-function meeting rooms and youth support facilities. It offers multi-sports, arts and performance activities to all ages, whilst Fulham FC, the Jason Roberts Foundation and Middlesex FA provide coaching skills combined with educational development. This facility also received funding from the Football Foundation, the London Marathon Commission and the London Borough of Brent.

The local community decided, as part of the early master planning process, that a new vibrant heart should be created at Stonebridge as part of the sustainable regeneration strategy. The new heart is to be created using the traditional format of a new high street along Hillside, with a mixture of uses and is to provide ample opportunity for social interaction to help bring together the north and south neighbourhoods. At the centre is the new community hub building, designed as a local landmark. This key mixed-use community building, completed during 2009, is called the Hillside Hub and will provide a focus for increased social interaction. The facility will provide a strong mixed-use heart for Stonebridge, with a new community centre, health centre, café, convenience store, residential and a new civic space fronting on to Hillside.

The Local Labour in Construction initiative has enabled local people to gain qualifications and skills in the building trades. Each of the major construction companies on Stonebridge work towards a target of providing 20% of all jobs on site for residents, and in
many cases this figure has been exceeded every year. This on site training for local residents has helped to create a strong sense of local ownership of new buildings. The Stonebridge Training and Employment Project (STEP) has attracted over 3500 users and has supported over 400 people into employment and 240 or employment related training. The After School Support Programme has helped more than 200 children improve their academic ability. These community facilities and new high street have also brought local employment opportunities.

To minimise disruption to peoples lives a complicated develop – decant- demolish delivery programme was required to ensure that, in line with HAT policy, its tenants only moved once.

In 1998, following the granting of outline planning consent, design guides and site briefs were drawn up for the architectural teams. Eight teams of designers were involved in the first phase alone, presenting a real challenge to project scheduling. TORltd coordinated their efforts and provided an interface with the planners, a role that has continued through to the recent final phases.

**A sustainable future**

Although the HAT was dissolved in September 2007, the regeneration effort continues through the HHT which will deliver the remaining new homes and key community buildings. In late 2007 a Stonebridge residents ballot was held to allow residents to determine their future landlords. Two thirds of residents opted to remain with the Community Based Housing Association and this outcome further endorsed the community led approach to the Stonebridge regeneration. The community remain closely involved in continued development schemes and nine tenants are the majority of members (15) on the HHT board. However, fresh challenges lie ahead with the residual sites as the design teams continue to demonstrate that high density living can be achieved at a human scale without recourse to monolithic high rise tower blocks.

The positive effects of the Stonebridge regeneration are beginning to extend outwards to adjacent sites that are outside of the master plan area with proposals being considered for the redevelopment and re-provision of two existing and outdated primary schools. Currently two new exemplar schools that provide modern facilities capable of meeting today’s teaching demands, incorporating the latest in sustainable design and energy efficiency are being considered.
Stonebridge is home to over 4,000 people and is characterised by a rich cultural and ethnic diversity, with over ten different ethnic groups represented.

Approximately 29% of residents are Caribbean, 23% are African, 19% are white, 19% are black British and 10% are Asian or from other backgrounds. Within this context, approximately 32% of Stonebridge residents are under 16 years old, 40% are under 20 years old and 45% are under 25 years old. Within this young community 56% of households had a net weekly income of less than £200.

Terence O’Rourke Ltd (TORltd) was appointed as master planner in 1996 to work with local residents on deciding the future of Stonebridge. Having considered a range of potential options, the local community decided to comprehensively redevelop the existing estate and to get rid of the problematic and dominant tower blocks in favour of low rise buildings. Shepheard Epstein Hunter was appointed as lead architect to deliver contemporary new homes, supported by a variety of other practices, whilst other architectural practices have been selected to design key community buildings.

As master planners, urban designers, planners, architects and landscape architects, TORltd continues to assist in the implementation of the final phases of development. The total project value is around £210 million.

In tackling this tough challenge the HAT and its successor, the Hillside Housing Trust (HHT), part of the Hyde Group, focused upon addressing the root causes of this social deprivation and together with its partner consultants, agencies and the local community have invested time, energy and resources to achieve positive and lasting results.

Local residents played a leading role in setting the vision for Stonebridge’s regeneration, which was to create a popular, safe and pleasant place to live in, with a range of energy efficient housing and community facilities that meet their needs and aspirations. Residents would have better job opportunities and be more self confident, enabling them to make choices about, and take responsibility for, key aspects of their housing, environment and community facilities.

The community-led regeneration of Stonebridge represents best practice and demonstrates that the local community can be closely
involved at all stages of the redevelopment process and help to overcome its own problems.

In 2008 this was followed by the project receiving further recognition from the European Council of Spatial Planners awarding Stonebridge joint winner status for ‘Public Participation’.

‘The Jury was impressed with the way in which this urban regeneration and reconstruction project was approached, in directly involving the residents of this area. It strongly commends the project for its exemplary approach to public participation, and noted the significant effort that this involved, within a challenging multi-cultural and difficult socio economic context.
The role of the planner is evident from the inception of the scheme through to its ongoing implementation over a decade. In addition to providing new homes for residents, educational, employment and service provision was also addressed within the plan.
The project shows how an interdisciplinary approach to problem solving can achieve successful results that are welcomed by the citizen. What is particularly noteworthy is the long term and consistent focus of this gradual approach to regeneration.’

Delivering change
By 2009 some 1,400 new homes had been completed. The quality of life for Stonebridge residents has dramatically improved through the creation of a safer, more welcoming environment and provision of a better urban layout. Most of the large concrete tower blocks have been demolished and replaced by a more traditional grid street pattern with contemporary and innovative new flats and houses. High quality architectural design complements new landscape architecture, with improved community facilities and public open spaces to tackle social problems. The introduction of new private housing in combination with social housing will achieve a more balanced mix of tenure.
Resident have better access to local facilities, including the provision of new shops, community buildings, recreation, health facilities, childcare and public transport. There is a greater sense of pride in the local community. A high quality environment has been achieved that is above the basic requirements of national planning policy guidance. Close partnership with the community has ensured the scheme is supported and that redevelopment has been driven by a true understanding of residents’ needs and aspirations.
Challenges, innovation and positive change

Whilst the achievements at Stonebridge are now celebrated, they could not have been delivered without close and meaningful interaction with the local community, who as key stakeholders helped to shape the master plan. The consultation programme was comprehensive and involved undertaking workshops, site visits, newsletters, exhibitions, the production of various models and a video explaining the possible redevelopment options. Tenants then voted for their preferred option from a choice of three. Following the resident’s decision, TORltd, working in partnership with the local community, the HAT, London Borough of Brent, and other stakeholders, began to develop a master plan capable of delivering all of the key objectives required by the local community. At the time, the redevelopment proposals were far sighted and challenged a number of commonly held views and opinions in respect of residential density, parking and the provision of public open space, so considered negotiations with the planning authority were essential in order to achieve an innovative solution that was deliverable.

However, communicating the proposed changes to a large number of existing residents in a way that was open and accessible to all presented a particular challenge. The public consultation aspect proved extremely successful and was a particularly positive element in the process, resulting in a well supported scheme.

The new master plan, design guides and detailed plans for regeneration and development expressly tackle the estate’s problems. By adopting best urban design practice an environment that discourages crime, promotes accessibility and provides vastly improved homes has been created. A high standard of accommodation improves living conditions, while the new urban environment helps reduce opportunities for crime. There are clear divisions between private and public spaces and all public spaces are overlooked by homes. It was also critical to ensure the new network of streets and spaces was open and permeable. A 20 miles per hour road network incorporating on-street parking and traffic calming provides the basis of all new street designs and amendments to existing roads at Stonebridge. This innovative thinking has helped to shape the environment in a way that has made it more accessible, safer and a more pleasant place.

Sustainable design concepts been applied to the urban environment and are also evident in specific buildings including new homes and community buildings, which are firmly based on the principles of low energy consumption and sustainability.