Whatever happened to sustainable communities?

Living on the edge of the London City Region

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Stating the Problem

► South East as growth region

► National 'region'

► Limits to growth: labour and housing

► Resistance from residents – anti-growth coalitions

► Vision of developers

► Delivering infrastructure

Squaring the Circle

- ► Building sustainable communities (SCP)
  - The Egan wheel - economic, environmental and social
  - Driving through targets – growth areas
  - Changing governance - local delivery vehicles
- ► Carefully targeted nudges to the housing market, working with developers and house builders

Promises, promises

► Jobs, good-quality housing and the prospect of balanced communities

► This was a promise both for existing residents (who might feel threatened by the arrival of new development) and for future residents (who would be able to take advantage of the amenities being provided)

Market utopianism

► A neo liberal belief in the power of the market (and house builders in particular)

► Combined with active state support through planning and infrastructural development

► Harsh realities of economic recession have made it impossible for the (not so beautiful) dream to be realised

New Climate

► *"There is now a much more nuanced understanding of why a return to the level of delivery seen 4-5 years ago is likely to be slow, particularly in terms of housing completions. Developer confidence remains low with significant constraints on mortgage supply, infrastructure deficits and funding constraints". WN Report*

But issues remain

- ► No active strategy for regional realignment, so population and labour market pressures continue to be major issues for the London city region

- ► Need ways of delivering more housing

- ► Definitions of sustainability still elusive, even if everybody wants it

- ► Looking for lessons

The Project

► Focus on Milton Keynes and Northamptonshire

  ▪ Edge of the South East or South Midlands

  ▪ Targeted for growth in a range of plans

► Interviews and documentary analysis

► Challenges for planners, developers and housebuilders

► Community responses

What now for sustainable communities?

- ► Uncertain and demanding – blaming the planning system
- ► Lack of resources – blaming the government
- ► Dependence on and expectations of private sector – blaming the developer

Blaming the planners

► House-builders lukewarm to sceptical, seeing 'sustainability' measures as good PR but potential extra cost to facilitate local initiatives

► *"the sustainability agenda is an additional cost item for the industry. But it's a given, the industry adapts to the regulatory burden, and it is reflected in the value of the house"* (Housebuilder)

Market realities

► Local strategic appraisal described as *"fundamentally flawed; you cannot dictate private sector decision-making"* (Housebuilder)

► *Value and viability drive everything but the planners do not look at this. There is nothing about the word sustainable that changes the criteria for development"* (Housebuilder)

Blaming the government

► *"No one was in charge of MKSM. Nobody was pushing it. It was not a brand. The growth agenda assumed that if you drew up a plan the private sector would deliver it".* Government officer

► Expecting developers to deliver infrastructure

► Transferring costs through the imposition of standards

So….

► *"It has not achieved anything: there few examples of planning permissions granted and infrastructure schemes delivered"* (Developer complaints re LDV)

► But meanwhile, shift to numbers away from quality: *"the idea was to facilitate growth not to aim for quality"* (Officer)

In whose interest?

► Sustainable development *"is in the public interest but we have no clear understanding of what it means – it is all things to all men"…"before producing guidelines for Sustainability Appraisals the Government should have talked to the [development] industry first." (*Housebuilder*)*

Blaming the developer

► At the core of the vision – working through the market, but also to put pressure on the developers

► *"In many ways our role was to be brake on [unsustainable] growth, to provide weight to local authorities to argue with developers for bigger infrastructure"* WNDC officer

Developer resistance

► *"there was a real desire to improve standards but developers saw it as an imposition. There was never a meeting of minds. Very few of the developments we had when we started got delivered, so you did not get sustainability."* (local authority officer)

Lack of effective tools

► *"Developers were advised to have regard to [..the …] sustainability strategy but it was not policy (it was tokenistic), and did not provide firm standards and officers did not have expert understanding. The emphasis was more physically driven e.g. sustainable construction that could be measured; the 'social - economic - community stuff' was down to the design team.....".* (local authority officer)

Failed visions/alternative visions

► Localism and the assumption of sustainable development – making the incompatible compatible

► Rethinking regional planning for housing growth:

- Thinking beyond the region
- Delivering infrastructure
- Moving beyond target setting