

Swindon: Designs on Delivery

What do you do when you're not delivering the housing numbers planned for in your Local Plan? This is a question Swindon has been grappling with as they realised that their models of planning for housing that worked in the past are no longer delivering the housing the authority needs. PAS went to speak to David Dewart, one of the managers in the Council's planning team, to find how they are rising to the housing delivery challenge.

David explained that traditionally the authority has relied on the development of large urban extension sites; these are typically associated with volume housing builders. During the recession in 2008 and in the years since, the delivery of homes through this source has not kept pace with housing need. The result has been a steep drop off in the planned housing numbers anticipated and steep drop-off in the Council's housing trajectory.

David was keen to point out that in Swindon this was not necessarily a matter of land banking (which is a common charge in the context of discussion on data showing a lag between housing permissions and housing delivery). He said that in Swindon this was very often more a question of capacity or misalignment between the pace at which volume developers want to deliver and the pace the Council needs. This is in contrast to SME developers who typically have continued the pace of development. In common with many of these large site sites across the country, infrastructure challenges were another common cause for these sites stalling too.

The reliance on large urban extensions as a planning strategy has had consequences not just for numbers but for the form and design of development too. Volume house builders deliver a largely homogenous project, so the result is a lack of diversity in typology and design of homes.

A further consequence of the under delivery has been speculative applications on less sustainable sites in the authority – sometimes developed out on the basis of allowed appeals. This has implications for achievement in the local plan development strategy, but also the “pact” the council has with Swindon's communities. Their starting point is that they are a growth town but the pact is that this growth should not burden existing communities.

A change of tack was needed. Swindon Council's planning department has a track record of innovation and experimentation and they have not shied away from the challenge. In 2016 they convened a series of events called “The Swindon Housing Testbed”. They invited experts – academics, think tanks and sector experts to consider how to optimise the planning service to enable housing growth.

Through this process they explored lots of areas from development management practice including use of conditions and the impacts of their policy framework. They also identified a key change to its planning approach in order to increase housing supply

and choice. This relates primarily to housing land supply and competition and the need to:

- 1. Expand and diversify the sites for housing land; and linked to this,**
- 2. Make the area an easier place for SME house builders to develop**

The objective is greater competition between land owners to create a context where they are competing on price – key to this pushing up the number and diversity of sites available. Importantly, this approach is not about ignoring the role of volume house builders. David highlighted that they remain key to delivery and “ need to flourish as they will do the heavy lifting “ but the SMEs developers *also* need to flourish to tackle under delivery.

So how is Swindon’s planning department implementing this strategic change? They are looking at it across all of their planning functions including as part of their local plan review. They are placing less reliance on large urban extensions as they begin to develop their plan and are focusing on allocating a greater range of sites. They are being more proactive in promoting sites through greater engagement with SME developers and providing information in an accessible way. One such route they are developing involves mapping and codifying site data, taking inspiration from and developing further [the Milton Keynes approach](#).

They are also considering the role of and opportunities for higher density development. Swindon has grown rapidly through urban extensions, but these are often low density – amongst the lowest urban densities in the country.

The role of design is not forgotten in the drive to deliver more homes at higher densities though. David commented that their local design panel has been challenging design approaches that will enable better design outcomes. The Council’s award winning [Residential Design guidance](#) has been successfully deployed in planning appeals and is helping to transform and drive growth Swindon – design is key to their delivery approach.

For David it’s about being ambitious in planning approaches; it’s not just about numbers and a narrow focus on not harming existing communities. Instead it’s about planners playing a central role in enabling well-designed development that delivers tangible benefits for Swindon and its communities.

[Watch our interview with David here](#) to find out more about Swindon Council’s experience designing for delivery – and the need to sprinkle a little planning fairy dust along the way!