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# Tensions & Prospects for Sustainable Housing Growth

Presentation to The Housing Forum  
Networking Conference for the Midlands

November 14<sup>th</sup> 2012

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# Stating the problem



- Housing growth and sustainable development
- Sustainability as selling point
- Sustainable Communities Plan as response
  - (Greater) SE as growth region
  - Various agencies/various deals
  - Assumptions of stability and growth

# The Project

- Focus on Milton Keynes and Northamptonshire
  - Edge of the South East or South Midlands
  - Targets for growth in a range of plans
- Interviews and documentary analysis
- Challenges for planners, developers, housebuilders
- Community responses



# What now for sustainability?



- Uncertain & demanding – blaming the planning system
- Lack of resources – blaming the government
- Dependence on and expectations about private sector – blaming the developer
- Protecting the status quo – blaming the community

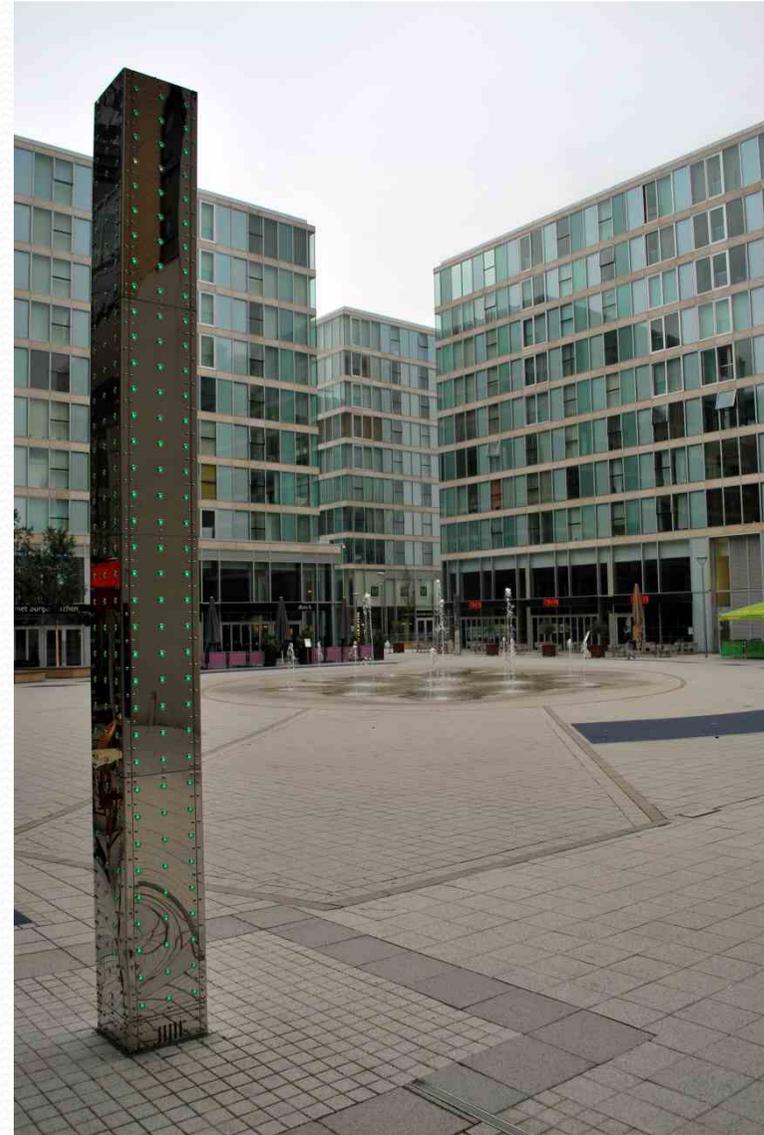
# Uncertain & demanding – blaming the planning system



- Sustainability standards adopted by local authorities to make growth more “palatable” and to improve practical qualities
- House-builders lukewarm to sceptical, seeing ‘sustainability’ measures as good PR but potential extra cost to facilitate local initiatives
- Local strategic appraisals described as “*fundamentally flawed; you cannot dictate private sector decision-making*” (Housebuilder)

# Problem of planning

- *There is no problem in principle about sustainability but the planners did not know what they wanted. Value & viability drive everything but the planners do not look at this. There is nothing about the word sustainable that changes development criteria”( housebuilder)*
- *planning is adversarial by nature” (housebuilder) but also about clarity and knowing the rules of the game on both sides*



# Lack of resources – blaming the Government



- Expecting developers to deliver infrastructure
- Transferring costs through imposing standards
- *“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”. (Govt officer)*

# Failure of delivery mechanisms

- *It has not achieved anything: there few examples of planning permissions granted and infrastructure schemes delivered” (Developer complaints about LDVs)*
- *A shift to numbers away from quality “the idea was to facilitate growth not to aim for quality” (public sector)*



# Dependence on the private sector – 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 more infrastructure” (LDV officer)*



## Limited ambition



- *There was a real desire to improve standards but developers saw it as an imposition. There was never a meeting of minds. Very few 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)*



# Keeping the status quo – blaming the community



- Thousands of objections to West Northants Core Strategy – only 123 supported growth
- “Only 186 said they wanted to ensure that future development is based upon sustainable development principles”

## But .....

- Responses to growth are very localised
- New infrastructure is wanted to support housing quality – “the response was always going to be about infrastructure”
- “People could see tangible benefits for an expanding town.... [this] took the political heat out of growth plans”



# Moving beyond blame?

- *“Sustainability 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.”* (Interview with housebuilder)



# Responses



- *“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 interview).*



## Concluding remarks

Key issues do not go away :

- can balanced growth and development be negotiated without strategic planning?
- what future policies can be supported by all stakeholders?
- definitions of sustainability still elusive, even if everybody wants it
- how can we overcome tension between long-term and short-term priorities?