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Delivering Major Strategic Growth

Lessons from a Case Study of Strategic Growth in
Northamptonshire and Milton Keynes 2003-2013

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Outline

- What does Strategic Growth mean?
- The Growth Agenda 2003-2010: what happened
- Post-Recession and Coalition Policies
- The lessons for Strategic Growth

What is Strategic Growth?

- What does strategic growth mean? It implies long time periods and significant spatial scale and impact; But what are its objectives?
- What type of growth? Why is it needed? Regional economic growth; or housing supply; or major regeneration? Is it about quality or quantity? What are the priorities? How will strategic growth be delivered? How will success be measured? And who is growth for? Who are the winners and losers?
- Often these questions are not clearly posed or answered. And, in the context of Localism, communities have very different views of growth and it is uncertain what we mean by it and how it can be planned or delivered.
- But we can learn lessons from previous plans for strategic growth.

The Growth Agenda in Northamptonshire and Milton Keynes

2003-2013

- Strategic Planning 2003- The Sustainable Communities Plan and MKSM
- Spirit of “utopian optimism”; belief in steady economic growth combined with a vision of creating “sustainable communities” delivered largely in partnership with the development industry. Win-Win.
- Main purpose of the planning system was to allocate substantial areas of land for new housing - as called for by the development industry - 50% of the growth in Sustainable Urban Extension (SUEs).
- Very optimistic trajectories - for example, 80,000 new homes in Northamptonshire between 2001-2021 by volume house builders with infrastructure (including affordable housing and sustainability measures) by cross-subsidy from rising land prices i.e. from planning gain.
- In addition, because of government doubts about local authority capability, Special Delivery Vehicles such as WNDC and NNDC were set up with some top up from Growth Area Funds.

The Growth Agenda – what happened?

- 24 SUEs identified – but only 5 started by 2013
- House-builder delivery model did not match plans and trajectories (even before the recession)
- Copious LA planning documents and sustainability assessments but sustainable design seen as a cost by developers and few sustainable communities/low carbon schemes delivered
- Large infrastructure funding gap – Roof Tax in MK was the exception
- Though local authorities signed up there were community fears that growth would not be “infrastructure led”
- *Growth defined largely in terms of housing land supply - limited linkage of housing plans to jobs, town centre renewal, or place making*

Post Recession and change of Government

- Government saw “planning” as the problem particularly “top down” strategic planning - RSSs, MKSM, WNDC wound up
- Viability assessment brought in to reduce planning obligations
- Switch to localism (to reflect local concerns about growth); LEPs to lead on economic development; LEPs slow conversion to housing planning role
- Measures to boost housing demand (Help to Buy) and supply (Help to Build)
- Market revival but limited compared with (revised) trajectories - SUEs stuck though exceptions in MK – developers preferred smaller sites –
- Continued infrastructure delays – HCA Infrastructure funds, and CIL introduced but limited impact in our area. NEP study of delivery on-going
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- *Wider political concern about affordability, the effectiveness of the volume house builder model, -----search for alternatives (e.g. Shelter, Lyons Housing Review, TCPA and Garden Cities model)*

The Lessons (1)

- **Proactive Strategic Planning is essential.**
- Spatial planning is essential (but on its own is not enough). There must be a strategic plan which links places and spells out infrastructure needs, particularly funding and programming of transport and community facilities. It must prioritise sites and projects (not just allocate land for housing). Need for Unitary Authority.
- **Planning must be backed up by new Local Growth models.**
- The house builder model (and economic growth) on their own cannot deliver strategic growth; local government must be more proactive with powers and capacity to do so (e.g. Centre for Cities and Lyons Housing Supply Report). Towns, groups of local authorities, and community trusts need to be developers in their own right/and set up local SDVs
- Must encourage a wider range of providers including Has, Las, community trusts; pool land and resources; make selective use of CPOs; innovate over capturing land value to fund infrastructure; take stakes in uplift by forward funding infrastructure

The Lessons (2)

- **“Does everything have to be justified in economic terms?”**
- Crucial importance of non economic factors – community, environment, social justice, security, place, quality, nature
- Viability assessment is hugely distorting and misleading. It is not a science and is not objective. There are many different methods with conflicts over inputs, definitions and outputs.
- It is anti-planning as it gives excessive weight to landowner/developer returns , secret deals and commercial confidentiality which can trump other issues. Planning must be about the best use of land from the point of view of need and community
- *“Sustainable growth” has become distorted to mean property market financial viability. Need to resurrect the holistic meaning of sustainable growth*

Conclusions

- Strategic growth requires the re-invention of strategic planning (and joined up government and finance). Localism on its own cannot deliver strategic growth. There must be some layer of strategic planning.
- Planning as a discipline must be re-invented as positive and engaging/ democratic/ fearless/ creative
- Planning must be re-invented as custodian of design quality and protection of the built and natural environment - and as a public service - as guardian of the public interest in the environment, places and neighbourhoods