

12. Ashford Borough Council, Kent – embedding community and stakeholder involvement in all major schemes

For the last decade Ashford Borough Council has been leading active engagement with residents and businesses through site based design workshops for major schemes. The approach was developed in partnership with the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) and has led to effective involvement in forty projects – from plans to deal with major expansion of the town to sensitive prominent town centre sites; from major housing schemes to distribution parks.

The workshops are used to inform and develop towards masterplans, development briefs, in some cases design codes and have led to better quality schemes coming forward.

Key aspects of the approach are:

- Bringing interests from all perspectives together, not being worried by differences of opinion but embracing, discussing and challenging them in a supportive, friendly environment.
- Seeking to work towards consensus around key principles of making better places and communities – not accepting the lowest common denominator.
- Injecting independent, national experts to challenge conventional wisdom (e.g. highway engineering standards) and to show new ways of designing places.
- Recording results in a comprehensive way so that all points raised are tracked and dealt with – this gains strong buy-in from participants. The outcomes are tracked from the workshop through to the development brief finally agreed.

- Following up the workshop – often the same evening – with wider public exhibitions/ surgeries where one to one discussions with relevant players can take place.

The evidence from the forty events suggests that this approach is a success. Some developers have experienced radical changes in design approach which can lead to significant improvement in architecture and quality of place.

Service providers have worked together to plan future provision in a more ‘joined up’ way that will meet people’s needs better. Furthermore, because places are more balanced and of higher design quality they are better able to support local services and public transport.

The process itself is seen as having a genuine influence over the results which leads to strong community and political support. Crucially, confidence is engendered early in the design process for the private sector and progressively enhanced at each stage of discussion. Ashford and their partners believe that these workshops reduce the risk of costly surprises, changes of tack or major delays.

Design workshops have been so successful because they expose the issues that matter to people early in the design process, when changes can be made. This builds confidence around emerging projects, helping to generate consensus rather than conflict, and results in better places.”

Councillor David Robey, Planning and Development Portfolio Holder, Ashford Borough Council