

## Taking off – Hertfordshire Residential Community

An innovative partnership approach

### Overview

This case study looks at the delivery of a new Hertfordshire residential community through an innovative partnership approach.

### Background

Hatfield is located approximately 22 miles to the north of central London. The town benefits from excellent trunk road connections (A1M, A414) and is within ten miles of the M1 and M25. It is also well served by rail connections to London and the north.

It has a population of over 32,000. The area initially developed around the activities of Hatfield House, the childhood home of Queen Elizabeth 1st. Subsequently, Hatfield made good use of its position on the Great North Road to trade locally-made products with buyers from the north and south. In 1920 the adjoining area of Welwyn was developed by the creation of Welwyn Garden City as the UK's second Garden City (following Letchworth).

Welwyn Garden City was later to be designated as one of the UK's first New Towns in 1948 and Hatfield itself was redeveloped after 1946, also becoming a New Town in the Hertfordshire group. The close proximity of Welwyn and Hatfield led to the creation of one borough council – the Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council – which continues to represent the combined area.

Since the closure of the de Havilland site in 1993, and with no other large main employer, the town has diversified in the nature of its employment activities and population.

The pleasant and convenient locations of both Hatfield and Welwyn Garden City, together with the range of housing types available and accessible employment nearby, have maintained the area's popularity as a place to live.

In order to restore confidence and economic prosperity to the town after the closure of British Aerospace, a master plan was conceived for the total redevelopment of the site.

This followed the adoption of the Welwyn Hatfield District Plan in 1998 and took the form of a Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) document for the redevelopment of the de Havilland site.

This was accepted and approved in 1999. The Master Plan was created by a partnership between Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council, Hertfordshire County Council and St Albans City and District Council in consultation with the landowner, the Highways Agency and the Government Office for the Eastern Region.

It was produced in two stages. The first stage followed public consultation exercises and set out, in broad terms, the approximate location and uses for the site. The second stage built on this initial framework and on further public consultations to produce the final Plan as a template for development of the site.

It was always acknowledged, however, that some flexibility would be necessary due to changes in circumstances and feedback from the public.

## The Project

The project aimed to provide a dynamic mix of housing, shops, business premises, community facilities and a university campus to restore confidence and increase overall economic prosperity to the town of Hatfield. A key concern was that the development quickly became a real community and a sustainable living experience.

The objectives and main elements of the project were:

- To create an integrated mix of uses on the site
- To achieve integration of the site with Hatfield and surrounding towns, with good pedestrian, cycle and passenger transport links
- To promote the use of public transport, cycling and walking as alternatives to the car
- To promote energy efficiency and energy conservation
- To provide careful, high-quality and sustainable design of buildings and landscape to the highest environmental standards
- To enhance the Green Belt and make the area more accessible to the public

The District Centre was planned to be a high-quality safe environment at the heart of the new community. The aim was to create a lively and viable Centre, incorporating open spaces and attractive landscaping, to complement, rather than conflict or compete with, Hatfield town centre.

Leisure and entertainment: coffee bars, restaurants, health and fitness club with swimming pool, gym and exercise studios, lifestyle club with indoor and outdoor tennis courts.

Retail and community facilities: day nursery/creche, local foodstore and unit shops; hotel and conference rooms together with some residential development.

The University campus was planned to provide an extension of the academic facilities of the existing University of Hertfordshire site in Hatfield.

The university precinct would include academic accommodation, administrative offices, residential accommodation for approximately 1,600 students, and extensive indoor sports facilities. With student and staff access in mind, plans were made to optimise pedestrian and cycle links between the two campuses.

The Business Park would have a mix of use-classes to attract both multi-national and local businesses, resulting in high levels of additional employment in the area. However, provisions were made for review and flexibility, depending on prevailing economic and other circumstances.

Careful attention was paid to how the business areas would blend into the overall attractive environment and not be detrimental to the residents' quality of life. The Residential Development and community facilities were a crucial focus of the Master Plan, with the intention of creating a sense of community and of place very quickly. Comprehensive aspects of the development were covered in detail, taking into consideration environmental issues, high quality and sustainable design, together with the needs and well-being of the new population.

## The Impact

In 2005, the Partnership won the Chartered Institute of Housing Award for Excellence in Delivering a Mixed Community. It was also a finalist in the category of Outstanding Achievement in Social Housing.

These successes were naturally a source of great pride to the Partnership and evidenced the effectiveness of a partnership approach in successful delivery.

It was viewed by the Partnership as an endorsement of having put appropriate protocols in place for the needs of the scheme, and of having suitably considered the needs of all community sectors. However, at this mid-point in delivery, it was felt that significant further improvements could still be made for the subsequent phases, and the Award acted as a spur for further improvement.

After the development work the main hangar is now used as a commercial sports, fitness and meeting centre and serving the community. The control tower is transformed into a hotel. The main de Havilland offices – now internally refurbished and extended, providing the major area police station. The gate house – now included as part of a fast-food outlet.

## Lessons Learned

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Delivering the de Havilland project through a partnership structure was a positive and successful experience. In common with all large developments, it offered extensive challenges in creating a sustainable new community with a real sense of place, with the additional challenge of integrating private and affordable housing communities. Difficulties inevitably arose, and their solutions better informed the future delivery phases, as well as the planning and delivery of future projects.

Further lessons were learned from the project to date, and along with those outlined may be summarised as:

- A Community Development Worker should be in post from day one of the delivery. The role should be focused on resolving new resident problems and acting as a central contact point, as well as providing information and activities. The experience and advice of a Community Development Worker should also be incorporated at the planning stage.
- Membership of the various Partnership groups was subject to change as personnel were re-assigned within their own organisations. The lack of personal continuity led to some difficulties and it would be preferable if those accepting group inclusion were to be available for the delivery duration.
- Consideration should be given to encouraging temporary amenities such as mobile shops and services prior to the completion of permanent shopping facilities.
- Community meeting halls/facilities should be phased for completion as soon as possible, and the potential for external delays minimised by chosen location.
- Communication between partnership groups must be clear and effective from the outset, and with a “lead” taken to drive progress.
- Consideration should be given to including representatives of significant local institutions (in this case the University of Hertfordshire) within a partnership at an early stage.
- The appointment of a central co-ordinator from the highways and public transport authorities would greatly improve delivery of an effective and responsive transport system and avoid delays.
- Play space locations, their maintenance, ongoing management and instalment should be arranged earlier. Later installation can lead to resident objections on siting, lack of clear maintenance responsibility and absence of facility.

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Project Images

