

Co-designing the future: Community-led Regeneration at Serpentine Court on the Lakes Estate in Milton Keynes

Kathryn Eames looks at what Serpentine Court can teach us about the benefits of genuinely community-led regeneration

From October 2017 to December 2018, I led Milton Keynes Council's regeneration of Serpentine Court at the heart of the Lakes Estate in Milton Keynes, as part of my wider regeneration and development role for the Council. At that time, there was a firm commitment by the Administration to take a community-led approach to its first ever regeneration programme, further cemented by the decision to adopt a referendum approach for the selection of the preferred option. But what did this mean in practice and was it worth all the effort?

Serpentine Court



The Lakes Estate was built in the early 1970s as London overspill housing. Completed in 1975, this estate comprised of 1,000 dwellings on the edge of the railway town of Bletchley. It was designed to be quite different from the existing surrounding housing, with flat roofs to maintain the views to the nearby Brickhills and larger than average room sizes. Over the past 40 years very little of significance has changed for homes on the Lakes Estate, and in particular the 199 homes and handful of shops that make up Serpentine Court; in fact, it's probably fair to say that Serpentine Court, with its inward-looking cavernous design, now feels intimidating, unloved and forgotten.

Objectives of Regeneration

The objectives for the regeneration proposal were not dissimilar to many others, i.e. no net loss of council housing; improved access to affordable homes; an enhanced tenure mix; and increased or improved facilities, amenities and public realm. Perhaps more unusually, the Council had no clear (communicated) preference for demolition or not, despite the very poor condition of the homes and the public realm. That said, the local Neighbourhood Plan (adopted 5 years previously) confirmed that demolition was preferred by those they engaged with.

The Team

Engagement with the residents and stakeholders of Serpentine Court to develop the masterplan options commenced in earnest in November 2017. The team was led by the Head of Regeneration, and consisted of a dedicated in house community worker, independent resident advice provided by Tpas, capacity building support from Newman Francis, architectural design by HTA and strategic advice from Create Streets. Arguably the most valuable resource was and is the dedicated community worker, whose knowledge of the area and community, and positive and energetic relationship with the residents was, in my view, the biggest and most significant factor in the successful development of a community led masterplan.

The Engagement

In order to deliver against the community led promise, an ambitious engagement target was established at the outset: engaging with 80% of current residents. This was the trigger point for commencing the community ballot. We also clearly defined *engagement* as the passing of information and subsequent receipt of comments and opinion about the proposals – it had to be two-way to count. So this wasn't about a chat at the shops nor was it about a tick in the box, it was a real drive to enable local residents to shape and direct the future for their area and for themselves. Most importantly, the engagement was about giving a voice to those people who felt forgotten, and a platform from which they could use it.

The engagement programme was focused around monthly co-design events (11 by the time we went to ballot) liberally sprinkled with coffee mornings and drop-ins, but fundamentally it was the ethos of our engagement that I believe ultimately made it successful. This can be directly attributed to 3 key factors:

1. Know your client. Our 'client' was the residents of Serpentine Court. Yes, I had to ensure that what was developed was in line with what the landlord (the Council) would support, was backed by the local politicians, and was deliverable. But really my team were ultimately answerable to the people who put up with that lift that didn't work, those draughty windows, poor insulation, shabby appearance, and that feeling of fear when it got dark and they needed to walk home. This approach was not always popular as it sometimes tested Council policy and procedure, but ultimately it proved invaluable.
2. Feed the right beast. Everyone has an opinion about regeneration and sometimes the loudest voices come from those who don't live in the area. Often it is these people who get the audience with the Council Leader, or who attend, en masse, public meetings and sway key decisions. They are often inadvertently given the power, but the confidence to speak and the ability to be heard must be given to those people whose homes are directly affected, and whose lives are most impacted by the regeneration proposal.
3. Would my mum understand it? And would she want to get involved? My mum is lovely, but she doesn't understand regeneration, housing or council policy (thank God). So when communicating anything, it needs to be presented so that it can be understood by my mum. And events and workshops need to be 'easy, attractive, social and timely (EAST)' and

decisions to be taken by local people need to be meaningful. Otherwise why would they bother?

The Ballot

On the 16th and 17th November, one year after engagement started, the Serpentine Court ballot took place to allow residents and business owners in Serpentine Court vote for one of 3 options: no redevelopment, partial redevelopment and full redevelopment. All options were costed to ensure viability, and both development options had been co-designed with the community.

222 residents, homeowners and businesses registered to vote and of those, 188 people voted (an 85% turnout), with the votes recorded as follows:

(a)	Option A, No Redevelopment	5 votes 2.66%
(b)	Option B, Partial Redevelopment	7 votes 3.72%
(c)	Option C, Full Redevelopment	175 votes 93.8%



Serpentine Court Preferred Option

Number of homes demolished

- 199

Number of new homes proposed

- 391

Density

- 60.06 dwellings/Ha

Parking

- 573 car park spaces proposed
- 768 car park spaces required (in accordance with Milton Keynes Council parking standards)

Conclusion

The ballot decision was ratified by the Council in December 2018, along with a timetable of work needed to develop the option for planning consent.

Done well, the level of work and investment required in order to take a community-led approach to regeneration is far greater than that for a traditional consultative approach. However, we know that successful regeneration is as much about building social capital as it is about improving the place, and social capital can only be built through working with people to empower them to work with technical experts to solve the problems that are important in their communities.

In Milton Keynes there can be no doubt from the ballot turnout and almost universal support for the full redevelopment option that the involvement of the people of Serpentine Court was critical, to both developing a plan that reflected what people wanted and to keeping the Council on track with the programme. And by working in this way, the risk that the masterplan wouldn't be supported was significantly reduced. However to suggest that regeneration is only about the community would be unrealistic; throughout the process a balance must be struck between the community and the commercial, in order for the regeneration to be deliverable and the impact sustainable.

Kathryn Eames is the current Director of Accordus, a project and programme management company specialising in development and regeneration. She previously worked as the head of regeneration at YourMK, a 50/50 joint venture between housing repair company Mears and Milton Keynes Council. She has 15 years' experience in the field of regeneration and development. She is passionate about the benefits of community collaboration in successful place making.