

DELIVERING SUSTAINABLE GROWTH (OR GROWING PAINS)

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Whether it is the plight of refugees crossing continents to flee conflict or debates on immigration and our relationship with the European Union, the movement of people and the effect this has on communities have rarely been so topical. Too often, these debates are rehearsed in isolation, with little consideration of the wider changes occurring in our society. Digital connectivity and technology have transformed the way we communicate and conduct business, but this technology has complemented rather than replaced face-to-face human interaction as our preferred method of communication. In many ways, space and time are just as important now as they ever were, with accelerating urbanisation at the global scale reflecting many people's preference to be close to the health, social, employment and leisure opportunities that urban areas are better able to provide. Even in advanced economies such as the UK, decades of decline in our urban areas is being reversed, with the population of our biggest cities surging since the turn of the millennium. It is these cities that will continue to be the engines of growth in the future, pulling in people from across the country and beyond, many of whom will settle and may start families.

Urbanisation and a rising and increasingly footloose population presents many opportunities, but with opportunity comes challenge (see LDA Design's Population Dynamics briefing). There is growing recognition that we need to move away from now 'typical' models of planning for growth, which have contributed to a chronic housing shortage, inequality, unsustainable commuting patterns, poor quality environments and the potentially devastating effects of climate change. LDA Design has been working with clients to identify what change will look like in the years to come and explore ways in which both the public and private sectors can lead.

It is clear that spatial planning will play a crucial role in joining the dots between people, places and sectors, identifying opportunities and steering the development

of our towns, cities and regions to ensure that population growth can be accommodated to the benefit of both existing and new communities. There is a clear political consensus in favour of devolving powers to local areas, and the creation of Combined Authorities with strategic planning powers in some of our largest city regions is an important first step in facilitating more sustainable and effective growth patterns. City regions will be able to more comprehensively align infrastructure delivery with development planning and sustainability objectives, with the private sector playing a key role in shaping these plans through representation of the Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and Land Boards. The potential of this new approach to planning is truly exciting.

However, this devolution of powers must be matched by a culture change that reclaims planning's mantle as a broad-based enabler of positive change. Planning authorities and developers must recognise their responsibility to lead from the front in planning for a different future based around integrated transport networks, climate resilience and strategic green infrastructure, decentralised energy and an understanding of the carrying capacity of the landscape. Those places that lead the charge will inevitably be the ones to benefit the most. LDA Design is already helping the Leeds City Region and Oxfordshire LEPs to ensure that strategic regional growth will be sustainable by working with the natural environment and delivering necessary infrastructure.

One of the key challenges we face is the cost of providing critical infrastructure to support new development. Responsibility for delivery will increasingly be met by a variety of actors as local government budgets continue to shrink. Effective coordination and joint-working between the public, private and community sectors will be crucial to identifying investment priorities that unlock potential and ensuring delivery. A more collaborative and flexible approach to masterplanning will be key to ensuring that

developments are neither held up by a lack of infrastructure funding nor compromised by a failure to provide such infrastructure at the appropriate time. LDA Design's early involvement in the development of the Exeter Science Park is an example of how a robust evidence base and intelligent phasing can generate infrastructure funding to unlock housing growth of the wider strategic area in even the most challenging of circumstances.

The nature of infrastructure investment will evolve to reflect our rapidly changing lifestyles, work patterns and needs. For example, as cities grow, high quality public transport networks and cycle infrastructure may replace traditional roads as the most cost-effective and efficient form of transport investment, while digital connectivity and smart networks could come to define when we travel or even the need to travel. The implications of driverless cars on our networks and cities have yet to be fully explored. Creative approaches that combine revenue generating decentralised energy infrastructure with residential and commercial development will help fund new homes and climate resilient development, while also providing opportunities for community ownership.

More broadly, the need to boost the supply of housing in the UK will increasingly give rise to innovative development models involving Starter Homes, shared ownership, build to rent and more flexible hybrid models that respond to the market for affordable and adaptable housing products. The Chancellor's recent announcements on funding for Starter Homes, along with the passing of the Custom and Self-Build Housing Act 2015, are welcome first steps towards diversifying supply and are likely to attract new entrants to the market. Furthermore, the Government's renewed interest in garden towns and villages, supported by a commitment to revise the New Towns Act 1981, could herald a step-change in the scale, quality and long-term value to the economy of housebuilding in the UK. LDA Design has championed such a move through our involvement in the Policy Exchange's Garden Villages initiative. The importance of matching the spirit of the garden cities agenda with the success of the new town delivery model cannot be understated. The failure to keep pace with housing demand over the past 40 years is a major market failure. A renewed focus on boosting supply over a sustained period would go much further to help meet demand and alleviate inequality than relying solely on shorter-term demand side measures such as Starter Homes, important as they are. In the meantime, local authorities need to make the most of their existing housing stock, by finding innovative ways to fund improvements for the benefit of tenants and seeking to increase supply where feasible. LDA Design's ongoing masterplanning and architecture work at Conwy Close for Reading Borough Council is demonstrating that it is still possible to provide high quality, environmentally sustainable social housing at scale.

There is no reason why the drive to build more quickly should come at the cost of good design either. Place making will be essential to gaining local support for new development. Communities are increasingly seeking to shape development outcomes in response to poor quality

development in the past. Tools such as neighbourhood planning will continue to grow in popularity, with Redcliffe Forum in Bristol showing that these can be used proactively to facilitate large scale development that meets community aspirations while remaining commercially viable. Though not always easy, working with the community is a win-win approach that increases the desirability and value of development while reducing the chance of lengthy delays in the planning process. It also has the potential to bring a diverse range of people together for the common good, boosting social capital that is vital if we are to create genuine places where cohesive communities can thrive.

Perhaps the greatest consideration of all as we plan for the future is the socio-economic polarisation that continues to blight both our urban areas and those smaller towns in our industrial heartlands and coastal regions. Many of these areas have been hit hard by the rapid pace of economic and societal change, as mines, factories and resorts have closed, with little to replace them. These areas often also face challenging demographic pressures and physical isolation. Therefore, there is a risk that as we focus our efforts on empowering and growing our largest cities, combined with a piecemeal approach to spatial planning and infrastructure, they will get left even further behind. The interventions required in these places will be very different, and will involve hard choices where the built environment no longer reflects an appropriate scale or function. Through our work with the Regenerating Coastal Towns Initiative in the South West, and projects such as the Hayle Harbour Masterplan, we demonstrated that these places can be given a new sense of purpose and set on the path to a more prosperous, sustainable future.

We are faced with a golden opportunity to plan for a growing population, while making our infrastructure fit for purpose and towns and cities more sustainable and prosperous. But this opportunity can only be grasped if all those involved in development – both public and private – recognise not only the responsibility we have to change, but the value that will come from doing so.

Further information

For further information and discussion, please see our LDA Futures briefing series on our website: <http://www.lda-design.co.uk/news-views/lda-research/>

If you would like to discuss how you could take advantage of some of the opportunities set out here, please contact:

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