

Lessons for localism



The former Atkinson Morley Hospital sits on a traditional, residential street in Wimbledon village. From a distance, this is just another example of the changing nature of healthcare in the UK: a site sold off because the buildings and location made it surplus to the modern requirements of the NHS.

But locally, this has been contentious. The NHS Trust had gained planning permission for a modern development with a high number of small units and apartments which residents did not think sat comfortably within the surrounding area. So when Berkeley bought the site in early 2010, it came with local opposition thrown in.

Over the next 15 months, they worked closely together with Merton Council and the local community to create a new scheme that would satisfy everyone. In July 2011, the council's planning committee unanimously resolved to grant permission for a new proposal. Two local community groups and two ward councillors spoke strongly in favour of the application.

"At the committee meeting it was incredible everyone was supporting it, including the local councillors," said Richard Bowyer of the local Scouts Association. "All the discussion was about the Scouts and the Metropolitan

Open Land, with not one mention of the actual development proposals."

This briefing paper examines the process that delivered a better quality scheme and a positive consensus at the planning committee. In the context of a new National Planning Policy Framework, it examines how the developer, council and community were able to arrive at a solution that everyone could support and asks, are there lessons here for localism?

'We find that by engaging with people and listening to them, they are willing to work with you. Localism is about engaging and having a debate. It's a partnership with the community. It's about working together.'

Tony Pidgley, Chairman of the Berkeley Group

The process

So what was the difference between the two applications and how was it that a community previously hostile to development on the site could change their position?

The answer lies in a number of related factors. These included a different design approach; the treatment of a much-loved piece of Metropolitan Open Land; and above all, the level and nature of community involvement in preparation of new plans.

The initial planning consent for 94 houses and flats had been secured in the face of considerable opposition. Adding further fuel to the fire, the site had previously been sold by the NHS to an offshore company that had failed to implement the planning permission and done little to listen to the community.

Local people had concerns about the number of units in the original scheme. They thought the design was out of keeping with the local vernacular. And they felt that proposals for the Metropolitan Open Land – specifically, the payment of a lump sum to the Council to bring the land back to use under its management – were not going to deliver a long term solution.

So Berkeley realised at the outset that early and constructive consultation was crucial. The site sits within one of the most articulate communities in London and the list of stakeholders included a large number of active community representatives, the site's immediate neighbours, the wider residential community, local ward councillors, the MP and the Council's political administration and planning department.

To collaborate with them, Berkeley devised a consultation programme based on six core principles:

- 1. Engage early and set out a clear process** – outline the scope of the consultation from the outset and the programme timeframe, showing when and how people can get involved.
- 1.2. Engage appropriately** – make sure stakeholders are engaged in a logical order and timely manner.
- 1.3. Make engagement accessible and valuable** – use a mix of techniques to encourage wide spread involvement that will produce qualitative and quantitative feedback.
- 1.4. Analyse, understand and amend** – ensure good analysis of feedback by the development team and thorough exploration of all potential solutions.
- 1.5. Report back** – on all the views gathered and communicate how proposals have been influenced by the consultation; or where not, why not.
- 1.6. Communicate the results** – to ensure the community understands how and why the scheme has progressed and the timeframe for the next stages.

These principles then translated into a five stage programme:

Stage 1: Early engagement

The first round of engagement began before the site had even been bought. While they were considering the deal, staff from the developer met community representatives to establish a clear understanding of their ambitions for the place. Cllr Andrew Judge reflected: “My key impression was that they sought to consult from a very early stage pre-application.”

This relationship was developed through two workshops in June 2010, one for stakeholders and one for immediate neighbours of the site. At the first event, discussion focused on articulating everyone's different aspirations for the site, not simply communicating the developer's intentions. The second began with a number of residents clearly suspicious of Berkeley and hostile to the idea of the site being developed at all. It revealed the real extent to which the relationship between the previous landowner and the community had broken down. The development team did not present any plans. They simply created time and space for people to have a debate, and a working relationship slowly began to emerge.

Stage 2: Consultation on emerging proposals

By October 2010, six months after the site had been bought, proposals were ready for consultation. This involved a meeting with the Council's Cabinet Member for the Environment; a meeting with the three Wimbledon Village ward councillors; two further workshops with stakeholders and community groups where the design was considered; two presentations to the Merton Design Panel; and a two day public event, attended by nearly 200 people.

Samantha George, one of the Ward Councillors, reflected: “We appreciated having the Managing Director from Berkeley come to the meeting with us ward councillors. It demonstrated some commitment. There were a range of views presented, so you felt nothing was being hidden and there would be no surprises when you saw the whole scheme.”

Stage 3: Reporting back

Four months later, final proposals reflecting many of the issues raised were ready to be shared with the community and submitted as a full planning application. A further round of meetings and events was held to inform everyone of the final plans and how their previous comments had influenced them. This included meetings with stakeholders and community representatives, and a two day public event at which, this time, there was almost unanimous support for the proposals from those who attended.



Above: The derelict hospital acquired by Berkeley



Stage 4: The run up to committee

Discussions continued almost right up to the committee and centred on treatment of the large area of open land and how it could become a community asset with management and funding secured for the long term. The debates were not always easy, as Pat Keith, a representative from an umbrella group of local resident associations, comments: “There were two things we were not happy about. One, the attempt to make the playing fields a water park. Two, proposals for moving spoil from demolition onto the Metropolitan Open Land. However, Berkeley agreed to change both of these proposals, so we considered it a successful negotiation.”

Samantha George continues: “They had a lot of patience and were willing to continue the discussion until issues were resolved, rather than just ignoring them and carrying on.”

Stage 5: At committee

By July 2011, officers at Merton Council were ready to recommend the application for approval by the planning committee. A key element to the proposals for the committee was retention of the same amount of affordable housing as in the previous scheme. Berkeley's application reduced the total volume of dwellings but maintained the number of affordable homes.

On the night of the committee, the Scouts spoke first, followed by a representative from all the local resident associations and other amenity groups. They were followed by two of the three ward councillors. All of them spoke strongly in favour of the application and commended the developer for its approach. The only debate was how much money from the S106 pot should be given to the Scouts for their new hut. There was no mention of the proposed new buildings, the design layout or tenure mix. One of the councillors admitted to being pleasantly surprised to be supporting an application at committee.

Timeline:

2003	Hospital closes
2004	First application for conversion to residential use submitted by NHS
2006	Site sold with planning permission to Laguna Quays but sits untouched
April 2010	Berkeley buys the site and starts developing a new scheme through engagement with the community
February 2011	A new planning application submitted
July 2011	Outline permission granted by the London Borough of Merton
November 2011	The Localism Act gains Royal Assent
December 2011	Full planning permission granted
Spring 2012	Start on site



Above: Front entrance to Atkinson Morley Hospital in the 1950s

Lessons for Localism

So what does this tell us about localism? Above all, it shows that residential development in sensitive locations and in urban areas can be delivered with active community support. Every context is, of course, specific and this one had particular characteristics. There was a common desire to see a derelict site brought back into use. It had an existing, unpopular planning consent. And there were well-established community representatives recognised as a legitimate voice with whom the developer could engage. But nevertheless some lessons become apparent.

1. Attitude

The consultation process that Berkeley undertook did not break new ground. It was a simple process of early engagement with key representatives, followed by public consultation, then feedback and promotion of the final proposals. This process has been followed on many schemes and had very different results. So what made the difference?

Subsequent interviews with local stakeholders reveal a very open-handed approach from the developer. They had tea with representatives of the community before they had even bought the site. They followed up with mobile phone numbers and email addresses and ensured that they were available for discussion throughout the process. There was a visible commitment from senior staff to deal with local people on their own terms and when it was convenient to them. They found common ground and a way forward by adopting a particular attitude rather than by using a new process to engage the community.

2. Involvement

The Localism Act includes a statutory requirement for pre-application consultation. This applies to all residential developments of more than 200 dwellings. The Act seeks to ensure that developers consult with communities, consider their views and account for the proposals made. It is unlikely that depth of collaboration will be a material planning consideration in determination of the application but it will be material in the local planning authority's consideration of whether to accept and validate any application received.

The process led by Berkeley at Atkinson Morley suggests this new regulation is common sense. In fact, it will often make sense for schemes half the size of the threshold set by the Act. Working together with the community is frequently a more effective way for developers to secure planning consent quickly for the most appropriate scheme. Early engagement pays dividends, and the shift from a system in which people can comment to one where they can collaborate should be welcomed, irrespective of the demands on staff time or planning budgets.

3. Relationships

The role of councillors in facilitating planning is crucial. Historically, their involvement has been significantly

curtailed. However, the Localism Act abolishes the concept of predetermination (from 15 January 2012) and the Standards Board regime will also disappear. Councillors still have to follow a Code of Conduct and have an open mind when they take part in planning decisions, but previous actions will not be evidence that they do not do so.

This new clarification of the rules on pre-determination can help elected representatives secure more of the right development in the right place. At Atkinson Morley, the ward councillors and cabinet member were actively involved in debating and shaping the scheme before it came to committee. The positive consensus at the end of the process was precisely the result of an effective relationship and a healthy dialogue over the course of the previous 18 months.

4. Control

In the debate about localism, a variety of terms are used to describe who should control the development process. Planning reform has been variously hailed as putting communities 'in control' of local development; enabling local people to 'shape the look and feel' of their neighbourhood; and marking the shift from consultation to collaboration.

On this site, the process was clearly led by the developer and the scheme is a Berkeley one. Merton Council was consistently involved and had the final decision to grant a planning consent. The local community was highly influential and secured many of their key requirements.

It was not in any strict sense an example of the community acting as client, in the way suggested by the Bishop Review (Design Council, 2011). Yet this proved a very effective distribution of roles and power. The lesson for localism is a pragmatic one: no one should be in a position to veto development or insist upon it. It is usually possible to find solutions that work for everyone.

