

West London Working Together

- *Creating viable new developments*
- *Improving existing environments*
- *Encouraging strong and inclusive communities*

Establishing a West London Urban and Sustainable Design Forum

A Report for West London Partnership

January 2006



Project brief

1. The Economic Development Strategy Implementation Plan for West London commits to establishing a sub-regional Urban and Sustainable Design Forum 'to develop and promote best practice with partners.' The brief is to:
 - suggest a definition and scope of 'urban and sustainable design';
 - propose draft terms of reference for the Forum;
 - suggest an operational structure and issues which the Forum could usefully address.

Policy Context

2. Improving urban design, urban management and creating a quality of life for all communities that is 'sustainable' is a central objective of national social, economic and environmental policy – ensuring a better quality of life for everyone now and for future generations.
3. The key drivers for this include the growing recognition that there are finite natural resources, the impact of the use of resources on the world's climate and the desire to promote greater social equity.
4. Sustainability is now also forming part of the Audit Commission's more stringent Comprehensive Performance Assessment of local authorities. 'Sustainable communities and transport', 'safer and stronger communities' and 'healthier communities' from 3 of the 5 assessment criteria for corporate management.
5. Pressure on businesses to demonstrate their corporate social responsibility is also increasing. Although the Chancellor of the Exchequer has recently announced that new regulations will not be introduced requiring businesses to demonstrate their impact on the wider social, economic and

physical environment, it is clear that private businesses increasingly need to embrace 'sustainability'.



What is urban and sustainable design?

6. An initial complication is the variety of interpretations of the elements which combine to make up the overall concept of 'urban and sustainable design'. First, though, it is vital to emphasise that it is not just about 'design' in a visual or aesthetic sense - it is a much broader concept embracing social, economic and physical elements.
7. Five themes of urban policy form the constituent elements of the overall concept of 'urban and sustainable design':
 - *urban design*
 - *urban renaissance*
 - *sustainable communities*
 - *liveability*
 - *sustainable development.*
8. 'Urban design' is generally defined as '*the art of making places for people.*' But, while the concept of 'good' urban design embodies sustainable development principles, much of what is written about 'urban design'

focuses solely on the physical design & ‘feel’ of buildings and spaces.

‘Good urban design’ is often characterised by the degree to which a particular physical development achieves key abstract design objectives:

- *character* – a place with its own identity;
- *continuity and enclosure* – a place where public and private spaces are clearly distinguished;
- *quality public realm* – a place with attractive and successful outdoor areas;
- *ease of movement* – a place that is easy to get to and move through;
- *legibility* – a place that has a clear image and is easy to understand;
- *adaptability* – a place that can change easily;
- *diversity* – a place with variety and choice.

9. Buildings, structures and spaces then become the physical expression of these objectives and influence the pattern of uses, activity and movement in a place, and the experiences of residents, workers or visitors.

10. But looking at urban design in this relatively narrow sense does not guarantee sustainability. Others, therefore, see urban design as a much broader concept also embracing construction methodology and materials, urban management, relationship between uses, accessibility, environmental impact, etc.

11. This broader view of ‘urban design’ has been described as the concept of ‘*urban renaissance*’ focusing attention on the factors that make urban living desirable. The concept has 10 key elements:

- *sustainable transport*
- *intensifying the use of urban land especially around transport nodes*
- *mixing uses*
- *vitality and viability*
- *convenient access to services*

- *urban management*
- *high quality sustainable design*
- *prioritising people over cars*
- *maintaining the public realm and reducing pollution*
- *vision – maintaining a long-term vision.*

12. ‘Urban renaissance’ embraces more of the principles underpinning the concept of ‘*sustainable communities*’ and the Government’s vision of urban living where:

- *people shape the future of their community, supported by strong and truly representative local leaders;*
- *people live in attractive, well-kept towns and cities using space and buildings well;*
- *good design and planning makes it practical to live in a more environmentally sustainable way, with less noise, pollution and traffic congestion;*
- *towns and cities create and share prosperity with investment helping all citizens reach their full potential;*
- *good quality services – health, education, housing, transport, finance, shopping, leisure and protection from crime – meet the needs of people and businesses.*

13. In London, the Government has set the key tests for sustainable communities as those which:

- *are prosperous*
- *have decent homes for sale or rent at a price people can afford*
- *safeguard green and open space*
- *enjoy a well-designed, accessible and pleasant living and working environment*
- *are effectively and fairly governed with a strong sense of community.*

14. Adding to the confusion of terminology, the Government has also introduced the concept of ‘*liveability*’ which focuses on physical and environmental issues. This combines part of the narrower definition of urban design (the

'feel' of public spaces) with elements of urban management ('clean, green and safe' public services).

15. Then there is the whole concept of 'sustainable development':

'Development using & impacting on natural resources in ways that meet current day needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs'.

The crucial feature of sustainable development is a concern with both the environment and human welfare. Both elements need to be reconciled and integrated rather than simply traded off one against the other. In essence, therefore, it is about constraining current behaviour for the sake of future goals.

16. Linking these 5 constituent concepts together, a definition of '**urban and sustainable design**' is suggested as:

Fostering and maintaining places for people & businesses that:

- **respect the natural environment and the resource needs of future generations;**
- **provide decent homes in a mix of tenures available for everyone regardless of income;**
- **provide a full range of supporting infrastructure and services in an attractive, accessible and healthy environment;**
- **facilitate economic growth and prosperity;**
- **promote the highest possible job skills level among local people matched to the needs of local businesses;**
- **encourage a strong sense of community identity while respecting a diversity of views and values.**

Promoting a coherent approach across West London

17. **West London Partnership** (and its individual members) is determined to create a more sustainable sub-region. The Partnership intends to be at the forefront in making West London a flagship of sustainability. This requires a coherent and collaborative approach between all the various forces that influence the shape and form of our urban environment – at all levels (national, regional, sub-regional and local).

18. The Partnership's primary role is by influencing the behaviours and decisions of others (including its individual members) and promoting a shared understanding of urban and sustainable design. In doing so, the Partnership will be aiming to:

- *improve the elements that make living in West London desirable;*
- *address the issues which communities living and working here find less desirable;*
- *create a social, economic and physical environment to serve the needs of existing residents and businesses as well as accommodating projected population and household growth and in a way which respects diversity, promotes fairness and equity, and does not prejudice the availability of natural resources for future generations.*

19. This is an ambitious agenda but the Partnership's history of the private and public sectors working together on issues of common interest breeds confidence that it is realistic. The Partnership wants to promote West London as a showcase within London and the country for collaborative, innovative and practical working.

Tensions

20. This concept though does have its tensions. For example:
- *between 'individual' and 'public' good;*
 - *between 'economic growth' and 'environmental good';*
 - *between 'social good' and 'economic profit';*
 - *between increasing community participation in planning and development decisions and maximising the use of existing social and physical infrastructure.*
21. The 'normal' way of dealing with these tensions has often been to trade them off against one another to achieve an overall compromise. But that does not guarantee sustainability. Viewing the individual elements of the definition of urban and sustainable design as integral elements of the same concept is the more desired perspective but achieving that is a significant challenge. This is especially so when different interests have different perspectives on the concept of 'sustainability'. So the Partnership needs to challenge some of those perspectives. The notion that high quality design inevitably means a more expensive development depends on what perspective you take.
22. Many examples exist where good design and better quality materials have resulted in faster sale/letting times, higher prices/rents, and lower operational and maintenance costs over the lifetime of the development. Studies have also shown that pupils reach higher standards of achievement in well-designed schools, patients recover faster in well-designed hospitals, higher trading levels are achieved in high quality shopping environments, crime levels are lower in well-designed public spaces and employee satisfaction and output is higher in well-designed offices. There is clear evidence from many studies that there is a 'design dividend.' But, while well designed buildings and spaces are important, sustainability also requires appropriate investment in the social, economic and physical infrastructure to support and take full advantage of the new

development. Improving the sustainability and design quality of the existing urban environment – especially across the suburbs, is also a major challenge.



Challenges in West London

23. As well as acknowledging and confronting the above tensions, particular challenges in West London need to be faced. These stem both from the need to accommodate the projected population and household growth across the sub-region and the need to improve the existing social, economic and physical environment for the benefit of existing residents and businesses.
24. Reflecting population and social changes, the number of new homes in West London each year needs to increase by nearly 1,000 over previous targets (a total of at least 3,900 new homes need to be built a year). This means maintaining the same average construction rate as in 2002 and 2003. This must include an adequate supply of affordable homes (which requires funding from either the public or the private sector). This growth also needs to be matched with appropriate supporting infrastructure – transport network capacity, new jobs and retail development plus social and community infrastructure. And to achieve that overwhelmingly by

redeveloping 'brownfield' land to protect, as far as possible, the supply of green space. The key to meeting this challenge is by increasing the density of development. The planning policy frameworks are in place to achieve that – the issue is how to deliver it in high quality sustainable designs on the ground meeting social, economic and physical objectives.

25. Funding the required number of affordable homes while also securing investment in the necessary supporting infrastructure is a huge challenge. Increasingly, private (as opposed to public) investment is seen as necessary to achieve this but often local authorities are presented by developers with the prospect of having to choose between individual elements in negotiating s106 planning agreements, eg. affordable homes or investment in schools. The recent announcement by the Chancellor of the Exchequer of a possible Planning Gain Supplement aims to give greater certainty in this and West London will want to make an effective contribution to the consultation on the principle of this approach and how a supplement could best be operated.
26. A further challenge is to gain general community support for new development. It is an important aspect of sustainable communities that local people should have more say in how their community will develop in the future – but in many parts of West London (and nationally) there is strong opposition from vocal local people against further development (and especially higher density development) in their areas. By no means is there widespread community 'buy in' to the concept of sustainability – or especially not when 'sustainable' proposals are perceived as conflicting with 'individual good'.

Best practice?

27. Many case studies exist of both good and bad physical designs. An evaluation of Millennium Villages shows some successes as well as remaining challenges. A recent study of new housing developments by CABE suggests an improving trend in design among private housebuilders. Other studies of mixed use developments also show good practice – but it is not universal.
28. The November 2005 update report by members of the Urban Task Force chaired by Lord Rogers of Riverside highlights some progress but also spells out the many remaining barriers to delivering high quality, sustainable schemes. The major challenge remains - developing fully integrated approaches achieving all the objectives of urban and sustainable design.
29. One element of that is tackling the shortage of professionals with the full range of urban design skills and an understanding of the roles and motivations of all the interests needing to be involved in delivering urban and sustainable design projects. The skills agenda is an important component of the overall approach to sustainability. The Academy for Sustainable Communities has just been established to spearhead this aspect and the work led by Urban Design London (see para. 32) will also complement this. The Partnership will need to dovetail its work with both of these organisations.
30. There are many 'Design Forums' established around the country relating to local areas, often with a strong involvement of the local 'Civic Society'. In West London, Councils have variously set up Urban Design Panels (Ealing), prepared Urban Design Masterplans for larger sites (Brent, Ealing, Hammersmith & Fulham), have conducted reviews of the implications of specific aspects of sustainable development (Brent), are preparing local

area frameworks (Hounslow) and all embody sustainable development principles within their Community Strategies. What are needed though are good examples on the ground of sustainable urban design. A report published in December 2005 by the ODPM cites the Grand Union Village in Northolt as an example in London of successful collaborative working delivering new homes and supporting infrastructure with effective community engagement.

31. The 'WestFocus: Sustainability into Practice Programme' led by West London Alliance in conjunction with Westminster University, promotes the sharing of sub-regional knowledge on sustainability. This programme was launched in 2005 and it will be important to consider how this can be integrated into the work of an Urban and Sustainable Design Forum.
32. At a London-wide level, Urban Design London has recently been formed to champion the importance of urban design. This has a particular focus on the range of skills needed among the various professional disciplines that need to be part of delivering sustainable development on the ground. An important aspect of UDL's approach is to see a 'Design Champion' in every London borough at the political level.

Need for collaborative working?

33. A key message from research on urban and sustainable design is the need for 'collaboration' – both between a range of professional disciplines and with the local community.
34. The key disciplines within Councils are the planner, highway engineer, landscape architect, housing and education staff. Not only must they work closely together, they must also work in collaboration with the developer's 'side', including the architect and other professional support in assessing

and influencing the scheme proposals. A key part of that working together must be about keeping everyone's eye on 'the bigger picture'. This requires an increasing willingness (and ability) to listen to other people's perspectives, helping everyone to achieve, as far as possible, their desired outcomes from a particular development. The ODPM case study on Grand Union Village (see para. 30) stresses the importance of that co-ordinating role within local authorities in securing project implementation.

35. What value can be added by working at a sub-regional level to deliver the 'urban renaissance'? It is important not to duplicate work at a local borough/neighbourhood level nor that which is more appropriately handled London-wide. It also needs to dovetail with (and not duplicate) existing sub-regional work in relation to, for example, waste management. What is distinctive about sub-regional collaboration on urban and sustainable design? The answer lies in focusing on those issues which, by tackling them at a sub-regional level, help to promote high quality developments at the local level.

Deciding the nature of the Forum

36. A forum is a medium for open discussion and debate. To be effective it needs to engage representatives of the public, private and community sectors. But how big should it be, what form should it take, what range of professional interests should be involved, how should community interests be involved, how should it relate to other regional and sub-regional organisations, how often should it meet and what operational structure should it adopt? These details need to be worked out in consultation with partners using this first stage report as the basis for more detailed discussions.

37. Particularly as the cornerstone of an effective approach to sustainability is promoting integration and collaboration, it will be important that a new West London Forum sits comfortably within the existing network of organisations promoting a stronger approach to sustainability and urban design and complements the work of other West London working groups and bodies. The new organisation of Urban Design London, sponsored by the Association of London Govt., CABE, Transport for London and the London Development Agency, is looking especially to promote greater urban design skills within the public sector and to increase the profile of urban design among borough politicians. West London Alliance's 'WestFocus' programme and West London Partnership's existing working groups, together with those of West London Business, need to see their work dovetail with the proposed new Forum. Some rationalisation of these groups may be necessary.

38. It would help achieve a more integrated approach if the new Forum is a joint initiative between the Partnership and Urban Design London.

39. Membership should include representatives from:

- *the six West London local authorities*
- *West London Business*
- *Urban Design London*
- *Registered Social Landlords*
- *residential and mixed-use developers active in West London, eg. Bryant Homes and St George*
- *architects*
- *large employers*
- *transport operators*
- *community sector organisations*
- *energy conservation specialists*
- *London Development Agency*
- *professional institutes, eg RIBA, RTPI, RICS*

- *academic institutions, eg. Westminster University.*

40. In suggesting this broad membership, it has to be recognised that it is likely to be difficult to maintain the interest and participation of members beyond an initial period. A combination of larger meetings with keynote speakers (meeting say every 4-6 months) together with smaller working groups focusing on actions needed to take forward specific aspects is likely to be a more effective working arrangement. These working groups could channel their findings and conclusions through the wider Forum on a programmed basis. The number of working groups which can be sustained will crucially depend on the level of resources which can be generated/attracted by the Forum.

Forum objective and terms of reference

41. The overall aim of the Forum is suggested as:

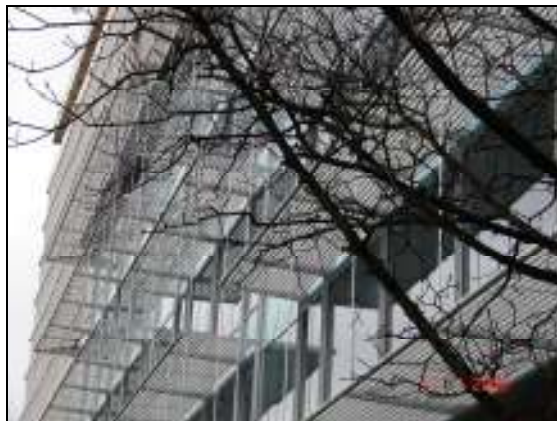
To share best practice and promote West London as a flagship of top quality design and sustainability in:

- ***creating viable new developments;***
- ***improving existing environments; and***
- ***encouraging strong and inclusive communities.***

42. Terms of reference are suggested as:

- a) *to focus on ways in which sub-regional collaboration between the public, private and community sectors can deliver new development fully reflecting urban and sustainable design principles;*
- b) *to identify the key sub-regional issues inhibiting high quality design where collaborative action can help to break down barriers to progress;*

- c) *to develop, share and showcase best practice within West London in delivering high quality design and promoting sustainable communities;*
- d) *drawing on best practice, to consider how the existing urban and suburban environment in West London can most appropriately be made more sustainable;*
- e) *to help improve communication to the wider community on the benefits of new development designed in accordance with good urban design principles.*



What issues might the Forum address?

43. As stated before, it is important that a sub-regional Forum focuses on issues most appropriately addressed at the sub-regional level. Such issues could include:

- *high density living – sharing best practice in securing decent accommodation for small households and larger families;*
- *mixed use developments – sharing best practice in promoting integrated developments;*
- *a sub-regional approach to s106 agreements and the possible ‘planning gain supplement’ – defining infrastructure projects of*

sub-regional benefit and working out ways of pooling contributions across the sub-region to help fund them (this will particularly need to link with the work of the West London Transport Group);

- *identifying ways to maximise affordable housing (recognising limitations on Social Housing Grant) while also funding required new infrastructure;*
- *energy generation and conservation – sharing and showcasing best practice on generating 10% + energy on-site and using good design to minimise energy consumption;*
- *exploring how good designs promote biodiversity;*
- *highway design standards and design approaches to highway safety – do current design regulations and guidance stimulate good urban design? If not, how might they be modified?;*
- *integrating transport planning and urban design – this will need to link with the work of the West London Transport Group;*
- *maintaining the design quality of new public realm with limited local authority highway maintenance budgets;*
- *sharing best practice on communicating with and consulting local communities on urban and sustainable design – and preparing publicity material advocating a more sustainable approach;*
- *skills – identifying the professional barriers to greater integration and skills gaps and working with others to fill them, eg. UDL and academic institutions;*
- *‘Designed for Business’ – demonstrating how profitability and sustainability can be compatible;*
- *improving the regulatory framework – exploring the need for, and benefits of, greater consistency in interpreting urban and sustainable design policies across West London, promoting greater cross-sector understanding of the differing perspectives of the development industry and the public sector (in both its regulatory and promotional roles) and assessing the potential of*

different tools, eg. planning briefs and design codes, to speed decision-making.

44. In preparing the work programme it will be vital to develop and maintain strong links with Urban Design London to ensure programmes of work are complementary. UDL has already established a sub-regional network of specialists within the West London Councils to discuss urban design issues and the wider Forum so discussions are needed to dovetail this into the wider Forum.
45. There could be real value in focusing on two or three flagship examples of sustainable developments of high quality design – not as completed schemes but to gain a commitment from the various interests involved that, firstly, their schemes could be opened to this kind of scrutiny and assessment and, if so, to agree that the challenges and solutions found in each development during the design process are shared with Forum members to draw out lessons learned for the benefit of other developments. This might operate as a form of ‘peer review’ similar to (but much broader than) the design review process operated by CABE.

Examples of developments which might be used are:

- *Wembley*
- *Former Southall Gas Works*
- *Dickens Yard, Ealing Town Centre*
- *Guinness site redevelopment, Park Royal*
- *Grand Union Village, Northolt.*

One or more of these could be used to test the potential for, and implications of, zero carbon development with the lessons learned being shared widely.

46. It could also be useful to work on one or two examples of how urban and sustainable design objectives should be given greater weight in preparing

area strategy documents, eg. using, as pilots, the frameworks which need to be prepared for the Opportunity Areas (re-named as Urban Renaissance Areas?) within West London.

47. Launching a sub-regional awards scheme would also be useful in stimulating and sharing best practice and in increasing the profile of the sub-region within London and nationally. Examples of award categories might be for:
- *involving communities in development decisions;*
 - *most sustainable urban design;*
 - *best energy conservation project.*

Ideas for other award categories could be invited from potential Forum members.

Resources

48. How can the Forum be resourced? If it is to achieve the aim of promoting West London as a showcase and sharing and developing best practice, it will be important that the Forum not only has a high profile person as chair but that there is also a small, dedicated staffing resource. This should come under the umbrella of West London Partnership (itself a partnership between the public sector West London Alliance and the private sector-led West London Business) and Urban Design London. One post is needed (initially this could be part-time or provided via a term consultancy) to work with the Partnership Director in promoting the Forum and aiming to develop a network of other individuals within Forum member organisations to increase the profile of the Forum and develop the work programme. Both this new position and the Director could be a really useful resource, especially in terms of inputting best practice, for Councils and other Forum members to draw on in formulating and negotiating schemes.

49. A staffing and operational budget of £40,000 is estimated as needed to launch and operate the Forum in its first year. A higher sum could be needed in subsequent years to enable the Forum's work to grow. The estimated first year's costs comprise £20,000 salary (part-time)/consultancy costs and £20,000 operational budget. This might come from a combination of sources:

- London Development Agency recognising the potential significance of the Forum's work in promoting economic performance and social inclusion across West London;
- London Climate Change Agency (itself part of the London Development Agency);
- Private developers;
- West London Councils perhaps utilising appropriate s106 funds – gaining specific agreement with a developer(s) as necessary to use the funds in this way.

50. Preliminary discussions with developers suggest that there will be interest in supporting the Forum and contributing to resourcing its work.

51. Sponsorship might be sought for specific events to supplement the base funding requirement.

Next Steps

- Test the ideas in this report in one-to-one discussions and a workshop with the six West London Councils, West London Business, the LDA (including the Climate Change Agency), Urban Design London and some developers.
- Identify and target potential members to get early sign-ups to encourage greater participation, including seeking funding commitments.
- Firm up ideas for the first year programme of activities and prepare a more detailed business case.

Acknowledgements

This report has been produced with the support of funding from the London Development Agency

