

# BRIEFING PAPER

## SMALL INFILL / BROWNFIELD DEVELOPMENTS

NEW URBANISMS, NEW CITIZENS RESEARCH PROJECT

RES-062-23-1549



Professor Pia Christensen  
Dr Peter Kraftl  
Dr John Horton  
Dr Sophie Hadfield-Hill

October 2013





## Background: the New Urbanisms, New Citizens research project

During 2009-13 researchers from the Universities of Warwick, Leicester and Northampton completed a major research project investigating the experiences, issues and needs of young people (aged 9-16) living in new and rapidly-expanding communities in the 'Milton Keynes / South Midlands' (MKSM) Growth Area. The project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

The project team conducted in-depth ethnographic research with 175 young people living in four case study communities. These communities were chosen to represent different models of 'sustainable' urban development, including:

- a large-scale extension (4500 dwellings) to an existing town;
- a new stand-alone residential village development (800 dwellings);
- a smaller infill development on a brownfield site (150 dwellings);
- an exemplar development showcasing sustainable construction, planning and design innovations (e.g. photo-voltaic panels, wind turbines, sustainable urban drainage, exemplar eco-housing) (2000 dwellings).

This briefing paper summarises our key findings and evidence-based recommendations relating to the planning, design, construction and development of small infill/brownfield developments.

### *Young people play a major role in community development and cohesion*

- Young people are crucial to the vitality of the public realm in new communities. Through their extensive outdoor activities (playing, walking, cycling, making and meeting friends) they are very active in building and maintaining links within and between communities – arguably much more so than many adult residents.
- Young people make extensive use of 'left-over' spaces (e.g. land awaiting development) and designated green natural spaces (e.g. woods, fields, water features). Consistently, young people told us that some relatively 'un-finished' or 'un-managed' natural spaces should be left in new communities for all residents to use.





## *New developments can create feelings of 'us' and 'them'*

- Young people and families are acutely aware of a 'dividing line' between 'old' and 'new' communities. Even in small infill developments, connectivity between 'old' and 'new' communities can be limited because of physical barriers (fences, roads), path layouts, and a mutual feeling of 'us and them'.
- Families in new infill developments often feel that they are not 'welcome', and find it difficult to make links to neighbouring communities. Many young people feel they do not 'belong' and can find it difficult to make friends with peers from the surrounding community.
- In all case study communities, young people recognise (and are sometimes stigmatised through) community tensions. Even in very small infill developments, particular areas have very quickly acquired a 'reputation' as 'dodgy', 'unsafe' or 'unpleasant'.

## *Young people in new communities often feel disillusioned by planning and decision-making*

- Most young people in new communities feel disillusioned with decision-making and planning processes. Many feel disappointed by the 'broken promises' of planners, developers and Local Authorities.
- Young people living in infill developments often feel frustrated at the limited or outdated infrastructure, amenities, play spaces and community facilities which surround their new community. It can also feel challenging to join existing youth groups and activities in adjacent communities.



## *'Unfinished' communities create problems... but also opportunities*

It is difficult to fully evaluate the success of planning innovations in infill developments (e.g. shared surfaces, civic spaces, or pepper-potting of housing types) because so many new communities are 'unfinished' as a result of the post-2008 slowdown of development caused by the economic recession. In some instances this has delayed the creation of community facilities and infrastructure within developments. In many communities, opportunities exist for planners, developers, Local Authorities and local communities to work towards the 'completion' of a community.



## *Young people want more opportunities to be involved in their community*

Many young people are very keen to be more involved in the wider community: they feel they are an untapped resource of knowledge and ideas. However, there is disillusionment with forms of community engagement (e.g. committees, councils, residents' associations) that generally do not include young people's perspectives or participation.



## *General recommendations*

Many problems, tensions and anxieties have arisen in infill developments because of **connectivity** issues. Connections between 'old' and 'new' communities, and access to amenities and services, can be limited. The strategic planning of new developments should include a **connectivity audit** to identify potential issues and opportunities. A **connectivity strategy** should be implemented by planners, developers and policy-makers to address these issues and opportunities.

There should be greater capacity for **public engagement** with the planning and development of new infill developments. Planners, developers, policy-makers and agencies should implement a **communication and engagement strategy**. This strategy should encompass provision of: accessible updates about development progress and timescales; opportunities for local communities and potential/present residents to engage with planning decisions, Local Plans, Joint Core Strategies, Neighbourhood Plans and other strategic processes; feedback about outcomes of engagement activities.

In particular, there should be greater capacity for **children and young people's participation** in planning and strategic decisions. Children and young people are an untapped resource of knowledge and ideas in new communities. They can provide important insights about the success, management and maintenance of outdoor spaces, and make valuable recommendations about the design and management of future developments. There exist examples of consultation with young people in this regard: for instance, the *New Urbanisms, New Citizens* project team supported North Northamptonshire's Joint Planning Unit to consult with primary school pupils to inform the review of a major new regional Joint Core Strategy for North Northamptonshire.





## General recommendations (Continued)

Planners, developers, policy-makers and stakeholders should provide opportunities for **community building projects** as residents move in to new developments. Supporting activities such as community arts or archaeological projects, community clubs and activities, or events (e.g. opening of a community centre, an annual fête) could provide important stimuli to community development, both within the new development and more widely. Care must be taken to ensure that community building projects are inclusive (e.g. to all ages and parts of the community). Partnerships with local voluntary organisations or education providers can facilitate community building opportunities.



Planners, developers, policy-makers and stakeholders should recognise that community development is an **ongoing process**. Master-plans for new developments could involve some degree of **flexibility**. Planning for *later*, ongoing **public involvement** as residents move in to new communities (e.g. in the first ten years of a new development, as priorities and needs emerge) could be explored. Mechanisms could include leaving parcels of land aside for community groups (including young people) to subsequently agree their use, or working groups (involving public and private sector partners) to identify emergent needs.

If you have queries or comments, you are welcome to contact the project's Principal Investigator:

**Professor Pia Christensen, School of Education, University of Leeds, Leeds, LS2 9JT, United Kingdom.**

Email: [P.Christensen@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:P.Christensen@leeds.ac.uk)

Tel: +44 (0)113 3430250

You may also be interested in other project briefing papers on: **large-scale urban extensions, new village developments, eco-design, and shared surface road/pavement layouts**. These can be downloaded from the project website.

Please do get in touch. We would be happy to provide further details and data to planners, policy-makers and other stakeholders involved in community development.