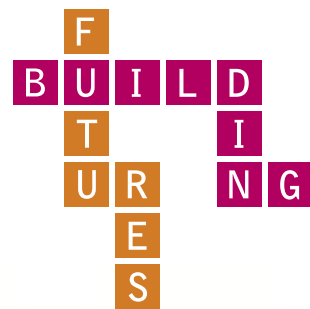


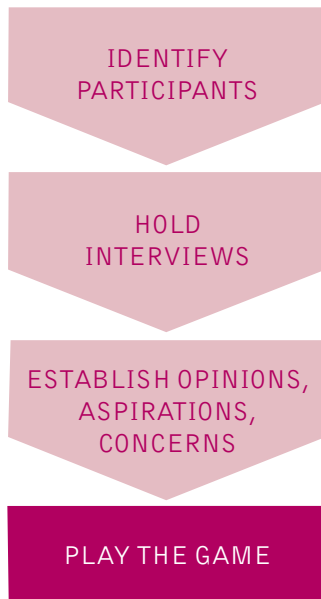
THE URBAN FUTURES GAME

VISUALISING NEIGHBOURHOOD CHANGE



FOREWORD

THE PROCESS



Approaching the future presents a minefield of paradoxes. In 20 years a neighbourhood's urban fabric may have changed little whilst social, economic and political aspirations have shifted. Accessible, miniaturised and affordable information and communications technologies have enlarged local expectations and democratised decision making. We have the ability to make rapid physical changes, but building communities takes far longer.

The Building Futures programme aims to improve the quality of future built environments through thought-provoking projects. Urban Futures is part of the Building Futures programme and explores how we can anticipate and manage change within our urban areas in order to ensure the creation and retention of good quality sustainable environments.

The study looks ten to 20 years ahead and tries to envision how regeneration might be achieved by focusing on two neighbourhoods – one in Luton in the growing South East, the other, Burnley, in the North West, with a declining population and struggling economy. Both of the neighbourhoods selected are inner-city with Victorian terraced housing and low value commercial property. The objective was to develop a game that could engage each of the communities in a meaningful dialogue concerning their ambitions for the future, the opportunities and potential barriers ahead, and their expectations for success.

Public participation in local decision making is crucial to the regeneration agenda. Major resources are expended on public meetings, questionnaires, option selection and communication, but much of this is often perceived as just a stage to be passed through. What we need to consider is whether or not the participation process can be more productively viewed as a continuous process of managing change. Is the initial stage of framing requirements not part of a wider process of identifying options for the future, and allowing for continuous adaptation?

There are many excellent examples of building ambition and capacity through early collaborative exercises, such as "Planning for Real" and "Enquiry by Design." The Urban Futures game is a means at the neighbourhood level to engage the three very different interest groups of policy makers, providers and users, in identifying issues and expectations, envisioning opportunities and setting criteria to assess success.

The approach has three unique attributes:

- It builds on previous experience, by presenting a set of aspirations and concerns which have been raised by previous groups, that can then be used to focus the discussion and speed up the process;
- It recognises different perspectives and the value of articulating and celebrating diversity;
- Issues and opportunities are presented as generic themes and options which can be compared and tested against their ability to adapt to changing future demands.

Games are a means of exploring and expanding understanding. The Urban Futures game imaginatively provides a template to re-establish playfulness, creativity and continuous learning back into the process of regenerating our run down neighbourhoods.

John Worthington
Past Chair, Building Futures
Founder DEGW

PLAYING THE GAME

Pick a card, any card... the Urban Futures game is based around a novel technique using sets of playing cards to prioritise participants' aspirations and concerns.

The playing cards are created following observation of, and interviews with, local policy makers, service providers and community members. The study organisers conduct a series of mainly face-to-face interviews, with around a dozen people from these three groups within the neighbourhood. In this particular study over 20 people were interviewed in each neighbourhood. (See acknowledgements on page 12). They ask about their experience of change and their hopes and fears for the future. The organisers then transcribe and analyse these interviews to identify the participants' aspirations about how their area should be regenerated over the next ten to 20 years, their concerns about how this is likely to play out, the options they favour for change and the criteria they would propose for measuring successful regeneration. The key concerns identified are transferred to sets of standard playing cards. And the card games are then 'played' in interactive workshops with the same key local stakeholders to further clarify the views and options in each area.

Urban Futures is based on the premise that, if you can give people a meaningful framework in which to work, they are able to think constructively about the future of their neighbourhoods. This approach clarifies the realistic aspirations of urban stakeholders, and assesses their concerns. It then tests these against firm economic, social and environmental criteria to identify the viability of their various options for the future.

The game also helps participants understand their underlying motives and intentions, and focuses players' attention on potential actions and their consequences, before they become embedded in formal policy. But perhaps most crucially, it aids effective mutual understanding and consensus building by allowing the sensitive, democratic, anonymous and non-confrontational expression of views by all stakeholders, even those who are more difficult to enroll into consultation. And in providing a range of realistic yet varied options, it can help participants (particularly community members) raise their sights, and look beyond the short-term future and the recent past. The 'twinning' of towns, as in this study, would allow further clarity of vision by exploring themes arising from each town's aspirations and concerns.



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The insights this exercise provides can also tell us what is likely to work – or not – in other places. Options can be tested over varying periods of time and 'backcasting' techniques used to identify what needs to happen for the desired future to be brought about.

ASPIRATIONS

How does Urban Futures identify urban stakeholders' aspirations for their neighbourhood?

The first pack of cards used in the workshop shows the selection of aspirations the organisers have collated from the initial interviews. Participants are asked to choose the cards that represent their 'key aspirations that have to be met if towns like theirs and their neighbourhoods, are to be effectively regenerated over the next ten to 20 years'.

Within the same workshop, these choices are then transferred to capture sheets, which record people's answers in eight columns breaking down the various issues involved. These are: people, housing, community, infrastructure, economy, education, process and leadership. Sticky dots placed in the relevant columns represent each participant's prioritised aspirations.

The capture sheet provides an instant visual guide to areas of concern and consensus that is accessible to all. While it may not be clear which individual has chosen which card, the sheet records the choices made by those involved with providing regeneration, and by members of the community, since there can often be significant differences between the two.

In both case studies participants chose five key aspirations. At first glance the spread of aspirations identified in Burnley Wood (in inner-city Burnley) and High Town (in inner-city Luton) look similar. Dots appear in all eight columns of the capture sheets for both towns, demonstrating a broad spread of priorities. This confirms a diversity of opinion that had become apparent from the initial interviews.

But there are crucial differences between the towns. On the Burnley chart, the dots are concentrated mainly in the education and economy columns. Burnley's five main aspirations emerged as:

BURNLEY ASPIRATIONS

POLICY
MAKERS
PROVIDERS

COMMUNITY

PEOPLE	HOUSING	COMMUNITY	INFRASTRUCTURE	ECONOMY	EDUCATION	PROCESS	LEADERSHIP
				•	•	•	•
				•	•	•	•
				•	•	•	•
				•	•	•	•
				•	•	•	•
				•	•	•	•

Capture Sheet 1

- 1) Burnley's role in the regional economy has to be the major driving force.
- 2) Regenerate neighbourhoods to benefit whole town not just existing residents.
- 3) Provide and market a new identity for the town that people can take pride in.
- 4) Greater university provision to attract and retain university students.
- 5) Insist on adaptable high-quality housing using renewable energy.



In Luton the priorities lie in community, infrastructure and process. Their aspirations emerge as:

LUTON ASPIRATIONS		POLICY MAKERS PROVIDERS	COMMUNITY
 <p>Capture Sheet 2</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Initiatives need to continue, but with real muscle for ten to 20 years. 2) There is a need for a better natural link between High Town and the centre. 3) We need to get people into High Town to spend money here. 4) We need a greater variety of properties to enable people to bring up a family. 5) The basic need is for a place from which to organise. 	<p>✓</p> <p>✓</p> <p>✓</p> <p>✗</p> <p>✗</p>	<p>✗</p> <p>✗</p> <p>✓</p> <p>✓</p> <p>✓</p>

There are also clear divisions between the professional policy makers and service providers, and the communities in each town.

The only aspiration shared by both groups in Burnley is that the town’s role in the regional economy has to be the major driving force for regeneration. The professionals chose aspirations that mirror current policy initiatives, such as providing and marketing a new identity for the town. Residents seem to be thinking more holistically, prioritising greater university provision and adaptable housing using renewable energy. Both sides agree that improved education provision and transport links would be crucial to reviving the economy and housing market, although it is not clear how realistic these hopes are.

People and housing are a particular sticking point in Burnley. ‘People want it like it was ten years ago,’ according to one resident. ‘With all the properties occupied, no anti-social neighbours, low crime levels, better bus timetables and better train connections.’ Housing market failure is seen as a political problem linked to racial tension.

But policy makers are thinking beyond the needs of current residents. They emphasise the need to attract new residents to the inner city to create more balanced communities with a larger middle class and a more integrated racial mix. ‘We are following the democratic processes, but the council, as the elected body, will make the final decision,’ said one council member. Policy makers also value the town’s architectural heritage more highly than residents do.

Luton policy makers are particularly exercised by the town’s inferiority complex and low aspirations. ‘Luton has been labelled a middle-class town with working-class aspirations. We need to give it middle-class aspirations,’ said one.

‘People want it like it was ten years ago, with all the properties occupied, no anti-social neighbours, low crime levels, better bus timetables and better train connections.’

A local resident



IMAGES

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Luton's policy makers have a broader focus on the benefits of linking the neighbourhood with the town and on achieving a continuity of initiatives than residents, who are preoccupied with issues closer to home that will improve the prospects of High Town, such as the need for a community centre and family-friendly housing.

Policy makers see Luton – 'a station on the best commuter line to London' – as a destination for incomers, a commuter town and incubator for budding entrepreneurs. Residents want to stop increasing densification to preserve the remnants of an earlier, more settled community.

The single main aspiration shared by both groups is the need to get people in and spending money in High Town. While Luton's economic future is regarded as secure even without Government intervention, residents feel that the council could do much more to encourage sustainable local business in High Town. 'We need a strategy to support businesses so that they are sustainable in the long term,' said one resident. 'This might mean rent and rate subsidies to help them compete with supermarkets and the Arndale shopping centre.'

CONCERNS

The organisers present participants with a second set of playing cards. This time they have been marked with the main concerns identified in the initial observations and interviews.

They are asked to choose the cards marked with their key concerns 'that, if not managed effectively, will prevent towns like theirs, and their neighbourhoods, from regenerating successfully'.

These choices are then mapped, using sticky dots, onto capture sheets divided into the same eight columns used for the aspirations capture sheets: people, housing, community, infrastructure, economy, education, process and leadership.

Again, five main concerns were identified by the participants. Again, participants in both Burnley and Luton expressed a wide range of concerns about regeneration. And again there were marked differences in focus.

In Burnley, participants are mostly concerned about the failing economy. 'Anyone with money or children has moved away,' explained one resident. 'We've lost wage earners and have lots of people over 60. Before re-housing starts, there will be no children left and the school will close.' Their top five concerns were:

'Anyone with money or children has moved away, we've lost wage earners and have lots of people over 60. Before re-housing starts, there will be no children left and the school will close.'

A local resident

BURNLEY CONCERNS								POLICY MAKERS PROVIDERS	COMMUNITY
1) That in 20 years time Burnley may still be struggling because the town has no economic reason to exist.								✓	✓
2) We need to get back to the community owning and tackling their own problems.								✓	✗
3) The town is working class with low expectations and poor education.								✓	✗
4) Doing something to housing won't fix the economy.								✗	✓
5) To manage the process of transition successfully you need a vision to communicate to people.								✗	✓

Policy makers are concerned that attacking housing market renewal directly will fail. 'I can't see how doing something to the housing will improve the economy, except in the short term,' explained one. Declining neighbourhoods have become a private landlord's heaven. 'It also baffles me why speculators who have invested nothing in the town and will just take the money out of the local economy, should be compensated for houses that are worth nothing.'

Yet compulsory purchase penalises elderly local residents. It pays about £20,000 but if the owner is rehoused in sheltered accommodation they lose this.

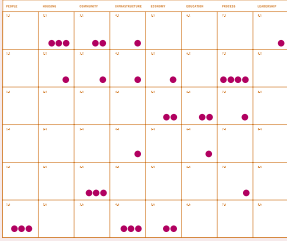
This is one reason why residents are highly sceptical about Government-funded renewal strategies. Government funding means that things have to happen, 'and that works against community engagement,' explained one resident. And policy makers are sceptical about their own capacity to deliver. 'Neither ELEVATE nor Burnley have cracked what being a Pathfinder means.'

But policy makers also believe that 'Burnley has a lot to learn from its four partners and the outside world. But Burnley doesn't have much contact with Manchester or West Yorkshire. Actually it doesn't have much contact full stop.'

'Luton looks just like a northern mill town' observed one local design consultant. 'But it is close to losing what it once had, a sustainable community.' 'People want to preserve the image of the High Street. They don't understand that that isn't a function of local authority planning. The council isn't responsible for providing shops or retail premises.'

To some extent the community recognises that this is due to wider social changes, but it is sceptical about the council's ability to address their nostalgia for the past. There is a feeling of 'consultation fatigue'. 'The councillors we have now are about as much use as a chocolate oven.'

Overall, the concerns of Luton participants focused on infrastructure and the environment. Their top five concerns were:

LUTON CONCERNS		POLICY MAKERS PROVIDERS	COMMUNITY
 <p>Capture Sheet 4</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) That the key issue in High Town is its relationship to the town centre and the railway. 2) People aspire to what it was like 20 or 30 years ago, but you can't go back. 3) People want High Town to be a thriving shopping street. 4) The biggest barrier is engaging the community. People need to get involved in looking after their environment. 5) There is lots of consultation, but the council decides and tells us afterwards. 	<p>✓</p> <p>✓</p> <p>✓</p> <p>✗</p> <p>✗</p>	<p>✗</p> <p>✗</p> <p>✓</p> <p>✓</p> <p>✓</p>

And again the exercise seems to show that professional and residents care about very different things. In Burnley, both professionals and residents feel that the town has reached an economic low point, and fear it will still be struggling in 20 years time. But professionals are most concerned that the town needs to do more to introduce more aspiring households into the neighbourhood and to raise the aspirations of those who already live there. Residents, on the other hand, are more exercised by a perceived lack of vision for the town, and whether the Pathfinder programme in its current form stands any chance of succeeding.

In Luton, both sides share a concern that High Town Road becomes a thriving shopping street. But policy makers see residents as far more backward looking than residents perceive themselves to be, and are concerned about High Town's social and physical isolation. Residents of High Town, on the other hand, are more concerned about engaging people actively in the community, and worry about increasing housing density and its implications for quality of life.

OPTIONS

The aim of the options section of the workshop is to get people thinking more strategically. Participants are asked how much they liked four distinct scenarios devised by the organisers for towns and neighbourhoods like theirs over the next ten to 20 years – commuter village, urban wood, small business incubator and design-led regeneration. These options were chosen as generic choices that were able to be used in both Burnley and Luton but could be used elsewhere. They were then asked to rank them as first, second or third choice.

Yet again, sticky dots representing their choices are applied to capture sheets to record people’s answers.

BURNLEY					POLICY MAKERS PROVIDERS	COMMUNITY
Option 1. Commuter village				3rd		2nd
Option 2. Urban Wood				-		3rd
Option 3. Small business incubator				1st		1st
Option 4. Design-led regeneration				2nd		-

Capture Sheet 5

LUTON					POLICY MAKERS PROVIDERS	COMMUNITY
Option 1. Commuter village				2nd		3rd
Option 2. Urban Wood				-		-
Option 3. Small business incubator				1st		2st
Option 4. Design-led regeneration				3rd		2nd

Capture Sheet 6

Professionals and residents in Burnley and Luton all agreed by a small margin on small business incubator as their first-choice option. This option seeks to address the imbalance in residential and commercial land values by attracting a more skilled workforce with a local skills training programme and incentives for new business.

But in Burnley and Luton there is no one single option clearly favoured by either group. This is significant for the chances of achieving a clear vision of the future in these areas.

In Burnley, the second option was commuter village (in which public funds kick-start housing gentrification but local employment opportunities do not change). This was the second choice of community members and third for policy makers.

Burnley professional regenerators preferred design-led regeneration (which focuses on a liveable environment led by an iconic building or structure to encourage social contact and public green space) as their second choice (in Luton it was their third choice).

Only the Burnley community representatives were prepared to consider the urban wood option (in which demolition returns the area to its pre-industrial status, and outdoor leisure pursuits and a green sustainable lifestyle are promoted) as their third choice.

No-one in Luton chose the urban wood option.

FINDINGS

While Burnley, with its struggling economy and declining population, must learn to manage stagnation, Luton faces immense and imminent change, has a buoyant economy and an increasing population.

The findings from Burnley and Luton highlight how very different the outlooks are for each town, despite having both lost their main industries and therefore reasons for being.

The organisers feel that the immediate future for Burnley is hard to visualise. A creation of the industrial age, it has been all but killed off by the ending of that era. But this means the opportunities for its rebirth could be equally dramatic. With or without a period of dormancy, it is not hard to imagine the town's traditional virtues of work and community emerging in a new incarnation. As the countryside and small town life become simultaneously more desirable and accessible for families, the town could become a 21st-century haven for downsizers and craftspeople, in the same way that Hebden Bridge was discovered and settled by hippies in the 1960s.

The town's short-term priorities, however, are clearer. The town must demand better transport links with Manchester and better buildings, and fight apathy and instil faith in the town's potential in residents and outsiders alike. What is missing from this analysis, however, is any serious consideration of attitudes to and the potential consequences of racial tension in the town.

Paradoxically, Burnley town appears to be more psychologically ready for change than Luton. 'We are up for radical change,' according to interviewee Mike Wallock, Director of housing market renewal in Burnley Council.

Luton's geographical situation in an area of rapid housing growth means it must protect its open spaces, renovate existing characterful buildings and ensure quality new development, in what is historically a town of poor-quality design.

The people of Luton are broadly positive about the recent waves of new immigrants from Eastern Europe and West Africa who are bringing new energy to the area. Developing High Town as a mixed-use, family friendly environment is popular. There is strong consensus that many of the area's problems stem from its isolation from the town centre, so there is a strong case for building a more attractive link between the two to replace the existing footbridge over the railway.

But the case studies clearly showed that in Burnley – and to a lesser extent in Luton – regeneration professionals and the community appear to be pulling in opposite directions. A champion, or a vision for a future built on consensus, appears to be missing.

Part of the problem appears to be that physical artifacts such as masterplans and buildings and landscape designs are being used by both sides as a form of shorthand, to represent the choices for the future. This leaves the underlying choices and issues implicit and unaddressed.

The debate becomes a battle over these physical artifacts: in the case of Burnley, forces are rallied for or against demolition or refurbishment, for instance. Obviously it is preferable that these underlying issues should be clarified before funding programmes begin, to give them a better chance of success.

The game itself proved its worth in both these case studies. Of over 20 people interviewed in each town, all were invited to a workshop to explore these issues. In Burnley, 11 of the 14 who had said they would attend, and nine of the 11 who accepted in Luton turned up. By the end of the workshops, people were requesting copies of the games to play within their own organisations.

There was some consensus over consequences and concerns, and despite their abstract nature, the options were well received and drew clear responses from participants. The consultants responsible for the as yet unfinished master plans for each neighbourhood were very interested in, and drew upon, the outcomes exercise.

But no clearly favoured options emerged. This means that the preferred solution, as selected using this approach, is likely to be a package of measures. The danger of this, of course, is that the plan ends up a mish-mash of ideas that satisfies no-one.

The final workshop exercise – defining the factors people would use to measure whether change had been effective in ten to 20 years time – was the most effective at drawing out a marked degree of consensus within each town.

In Burnley, professionals and the community agreed that improved educational attainment and socio-economic status, as well as continuing long-term regeneration capacity, would signal success.

In Luton, both sides agreed they would look for a range of quality commercial and leisure activities, and a sense of pride, while policy makers would also assess the state of community and race relations, and for the community, success would be made evident in a range of quality specialist shops.

In Luton in particular, a clear convergence on ideas for the future began to emerge even during the workshop. This could be used as a platform on which to build a wider consensus between policy makers, service providers and community members.

WHO COULD BENEFIT FROM THE URBAN FUTURES GAME?

The Urban Futures game can

- Be helpful to any town or neighbourhood facing rapid change
- Engage very different interest groups in meaningful dialogue
- Provide a framework to think constructively, explore alternatives and build consensus
- Codify local experience and acknowledge local perspectives
- Bring underlying choices and issues to the fore
- Clarify options and realistic aspirations.

A particularly helpful aspect of this study has been the way the parallel nature of the case studies highlighted similarities and differences between two neighbourhoods, making the picture instantly clearer in each place.

Other places wanting to use futures techniques may do well to adopt this 'twinning' approach. Towns of similar size but quite different character could very profitably exchange ideas and information in this way.

Gaming can bring a sense of playfulness to the process of regeneration, and by so doing allow the community to break away from past agendas and old animosities. The objective is to reflect new perspectives and consider fresh opportunities.

Paradoxically the freedom of the blank sheet of paper may also be a constraint on generating ideas. Framing the issues and identifying opportunities can be speeded up if there is a proposition to respond to. By providing a pack of cards each articulating an aspiration or concern, the group has a stimulus for debate, presented in a way that some can be retained and others that are deemed irrelevant rejected.

The full report is available on www.buildingfutures.org.uk



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RESEARCHED BY

Ian Cooper, Eclipse Research Consultants, Stephen Platt, Cambridge Architectural Research Ltd.

STEERING GROUP

John Worthington, DEGW; Dickon Robinson; David Rudlin, Urbed; Barry Shaw, Kent Architecture Centre; Charles Landry, Comedia; Helen Walker, ODPM; Simon Foxell, The Architects Practice.

CABE/RIBA STAFF

Cheryl McLoughlin, Gwilym Jones, Gwyneth Jones, Peter Neal, Elanor Warwick, CABE; Tamsie Thomson, Ewan Willars, RIBA.

BURNLEY

Policy makers: David Carter, Programme Manager, Design East Lancashire; Amanda Richardson, Programme Advisor, Design East Lancashire; Helen Parnell, SRB Manager, Burnley Regeneration Forum; Ian Whittaker, North West Development Agency; Michael Przybysz, Anti-Social Behaviour Officer, Burnley Borough Council; Michael Wellock, Project Coordinator Market & Community Renewal, Burnley Borough Council; Mike Cook, Director of Regeneration and Housing, Burnley Borough Council; Mike Waite, Head of Community Engagement and Cohesion, Burnley Borough Council; Stuart Caddy, Leader, Burnley Borough Council.

Providers: Andrew Clarke, Designer, Taylor Young; Hugh Geddes, Architect, Levitt Bernstein; John Smith, Principal, Burnley College; Judy Yacoub, CEO, Community Alliance; Lynne Blackburn, Director, The Participation Works Ltd; Samantha Tedcastle, Director, The Participation Works Ltd; Shahida Akram, Community Capacity Building Manager, Community Alliance; Shelagh McNerney, Designer, Taylor Young.

Community: Andy Thornhill, Community Beat Manager - Burnley Wood, Burnley Police; Brian Fenn, Chair, Burnley Wood Action Group; Colette Bailey, Councillor Rosehill-Burnley Wood, Burnley Borough Council; Philip Chew, Vicar, St Stephens Church; Roger Frost, Chairman, Burnley Civic Society; Sue Cooper, Centre Coordinator, Burnley Wood One Stop Shop.

LUTON

Policy makers: Ian Phillips, Regeneration & Cultural Development Team, GO-East; Michael Hargreaves, Team Leader, GO-East; Nezla Sabberton, Crime Reduction/Urban Renewal Unit, GO-East; Dearbhla Lawson, GOEast; Diane Cooper, Forward Planning Manager, Harlow District Council; Colin Chick, Director of Environment and Regeneration, Luton Borough Council; David Franks, Leader of Council, Luton Borough Council; Ismail Mohammed, Project Leader High Town, Luton Borough Council; Keith Frost, Heritage Conservation Assistant, Luton Borough Council; Laura Church, Acting Head of Regeneration, Luton Borough Council; Sid Rutstein, Councillor Luton - Portfolio Regeneration, Luton Borough Council.

Providers: Anne Clube, UK Funded Programmes Manager, Luton Borough Council; Ashuk Ahmed, Neighbourhood Renewal Worker, Luton Borough Council; Marek Lubelski, Neighbourhood Renewal Coordinator, Luton Borough Council; David Oakley-Hill, Coordinator, Luton Friends of the Earth; James McGinlay, Chief Executive, Marsh Farm Community Development Trust; Andrew Tindsley, Architect, Building Design Partnership; Adrian Piper, Team Leader, Capital Asset Management; David Keene, Urbanist, David Lock Associates; Linda Farrell, Manager, SNAP Social Needs Awareness Project.

Community: John Toombs, Beat Officer, High Town Action Trust; Pam Hagley, Managing Director, High Town Action Trust; Judy Dixon, Resident, High Town Methodist Church; Roger Dixon, Resident, High Town Methodist Church; Dave Magill, Councillor Luton, Luton Borough Council; Josie Fensome, High Town resident, past Councillor and Mayor.

DESIGN BY: Draught Associates
COPY BY: Kate Worsley

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A RIBA INITIATIVE

RIBA 

www.architecture.com

RIBA
66 Portland Place
London W1B 1AD

cabe

www.cabe.org.uk

CABE
11 York Road
London SE1 7NX