



JOHN HARVEY, ASSISTANT HEAD OF PLANNING, NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL AND DAVID TAYLOR, DIRECTOR, ALAN BAXTER ON THE PLANNERS' PERSPECTIVE

The Road Ahead, Velux training centre, 4 December 2002

JOHN HARVEY

I will set the scene about what we have been doing in Northampton for the last few years since PPG3 and then David Taylor is going to follow up with the most recent stuff that has been going on in the south-west district.

I am not your typical development control engineer. My background is very much in traffic and safety, accident reduction and safety audit.

The obligations that PPG3 places onto local authorities. Seven requirements, three of which relate directly to transport. They are the obvious ones that you would think I would be honing in on: accessibility, ease of traffic movement, car dependence. No. There is one that is more important than that, the one at the bottom. It is promoting good design. It is actually this creativity, attractive - it is living environments where people want to choose to live. It does not matter if we get all the elements right, if it is somewhere people do not want to live then we have failed. It is joint, it is working together to make the right environment. It is easy to say.

How do highway layouts contribute to that? Let us have a look at a typical highway authority's regulatory function. It is a bit of a caricature here. I suppose I should say at this point this is my presentation, not the borough council's.

My view, then. Highway authorities do a great job forcing square pegs in round holes. You come to us with what you want to build and we chop the corners off it and put our design curves on it and our templates and we make it fit the regulations. We homogenise. There is a culture of no risk and almost, in highway engineering terms, lack of imagination, lack of individuality. It has a really demoralising effect on developers.

Why? Why do highway authorities operate like that? Let us look at it from the other side. We have got a lot of prescriptive highway guidance out there, a lot of it not cancelled. I think if you stood it all together it would stack 1m high, much of it contradictory. There is also a lack of training. I have put spatial awareness and two-dimensional thinking. Most development control engineers, in my experience, tend to be at the older end of their careers, shall we say, and perhaps set in their ways and not open to change. They have been brought up in a culture of designing for cars first. Hey, and the safest way of making

The Road Ahead, Velux training centre, 4 December 2002

development must be to separate modes. It must be. To make things safe, let's put in lots of visibility, because that is obviously what you need for safety if you are a motorist, is it not?

Cul-de-sac mentality. How many of you have put designs forward based around cul-de-sacs? That is pre-PPG3, pre-DB32 as well probably. There again, making safe for the motorist, minimum parking standards. "Hey, let's design roads that two juggernauts can pass safely. It does not matter if it is in the middle of a housing estate. Let's design for that." Again, this cul-de-sac issue again.

Okay, it is not all bad. How do we break it? We have got some ideas. In Northampton, we use a development team approach. We get the highway engineers in at the earliest opportunity. We have got highway engineers located in the same areas as planners - and building control officers. It causes friction and we have some explosive arguments, but at least we can give a consistent response to it.

The other thing I like to do, I like to promote. Why have we got the rules? Don't just blindly follow those rules.

Why is it there? What's behind the requirement and is it still valid? Actually try and get some contributions from the staff themselves that are setting the rules. The guys who are banging the table and saying, "You can't do what you want." Just step back for a minute and ask whether you are asking for something that is still relevant, still sensible. My favourite, common sense audit. This needs some explaining - or does it? If it feels right, it probably is. But the three golden rules. I am audit based, my background. Is it safe? Is it sensible? Is there a maintenance liability? Let us be audit led. Let us not be unduly prescriptive.

In the last three years, Northampton has worked with developers in promoting, I think innovative development which does reflect the change in attitudes.

The Road Ahead, Velux training centre, 4 December 2002

I will go through this in chronological order, so let us start with something that is on site today. This is something that David is going to pick up on later. I want to leave you with the image - look at this one [1]. A 60 mph dual carriageway that is right on the outskirts of Northampton. The main urban area starts about where I am standing now with a roundabout. You can just see the flow off the roundabout. That is the A45 Weedon Road. A 60 mph speed limit. South-west district lies both sides of that dual carriageway. The other slide is Upton Way [2]. That is the gateway entrance to the south-west district. These two slides will come into context when David does his presentation. I think David has got some pictures of what it will look like, but just cast your eyes on those. These were taken Monday this week.

Let us go back to what we know and love. Let us go back to my favourite. Let us go back to cul-de-sacs. A typical wood and fields development south-east of Northampton, a typical cul-de-sac [3]. Sells well. I do not know what we do about pedestrians though. "I know what we'll do, we'll put link footpaths in between the cul-de-sacs so that we can link the cul-de-sacs together." I can almost keep my traffic engineering section busy doing nothing else than shutting down link footpaths because once people move in these things suddenly appear overnight because they do not buy the property realising there is a link footpath next to it and they do attract use by youths, perhaps less desirable members of the public that use these areas, particularly in the evenings, and we get a crime and disorder problem. But I am told by our local police, not unreasonably, that this is very good, this is a defensible space arrangement: cul-de-sacs, lots of overlooking, it is what people want. You can park your car out the front in the safe knowledge that it is overlooked by your neighbours. Fine, that is what we should be doing perhaps.

One thing, sorry. This is a perimeter road, a distributor road [4]. A little bit further on, where it goes into the housing development there is a nice scene of back fences six foot high wooden fences all the way round. Superb? I don't think so.



[1]



[2]



[3]



[4]

The Road Ahead, Velux training centre, 4 December 2002

Let us look at factory conversion units. There we are, a couple of factory conversions in Northampton. The top one is interesting [5]. It is a mix of the red factory in the background and new build at the front. It matches in well, good use. There is some ground floor parking under that unit. I think it is one space per unit off street there. The Light Box unit on the other hand - back to what Philip was saying earlier - that has been accepted with no parking, but it works [6]. There is a residents' parking scheme there. I think the Light Box contributed towards the changing round of a couple of bays immediately outside, but basically that has gone in with no parking

My favourite. I apologise. PRP are in the room, I am told. They are not the most flattering photographs of the Express Lifts development [7, 8]. Again, taken earlier this week. A large building company. This scheme was innovative, if nothing else. It is very innovative in terms of its governance arrangements. It is based on the Atlanta, Georgia, condominium basis. There is a tremendous amount of ownership of the people that move in here, community ownership, in Express Lifts. It is 411 units of two, three and four bedroomed flats and town houses. I believe the density is 55 dwellings per hectare. 411 units off a cul-de-sac. It makes me as a highway engineer shudder. However, there is an emergency access point, so there is a second point of access. Very, very high quality. Lots of stainless steel. Absolutely superb buildings. I apologise if I do not do the site justice.

The arrangement on site. This was thrashed out, I would say, a couple of years ago, the actual layout here. We did have problems in terms of identifying the public realm and, as you can see in the bottom photograph, there is quite a wide space between these blocks and it is all block built. I describe it as a transition scheme. I think perhaps a couple of years ago we were not quite as confident as now, so it is not quite as tight as perhaps we would do now. But it is a very innovative scheme.



[5]



[6]



[7]



[8]

The Road Ahead, Velux training centre, 4 December 2002

Where do we go now? Scholars Mews [9]. That is about three, four years old, basically built to the old rules but with innovative materials. That is quite an interesting one. The quality on there is superb because the investment has been put in, the materials have been put in, it is right in the heart of Northampton town centre and it is really, really good.

SRB Regeneration [10]. It is difficult to think that a few years ago these were all rubbish tips and breakers' yards. Not the most innovative design, but it is quite compact, a lot of units in there, and it is pushing it forward, one and a half parking spaces per unit again.

Believe it or not, we do welcome innovation. We think we can give you a whole package approach and we think the way forward is to keep planning highways and building control together. That enables us to balance the attributes, which means we must not get the balance wrong. I am sure there are lots of people here that are going to say, "Hey, highways dominates. Highways rules. Highways stops us doing what we are doing." We want to think, "Highway rules have got a place, but they have got to be balanced equally against planning and the environment and all the other attributes that make good design." Oh, and Northampton is not an easy touch. Just because I am saying we are amenable to innovation, do not think we are an easy touch: we do not let developers get away scot free. If we are not after parking contributions, there are still other contributions and circular 1/97 still applies in Northampton.

The problem is, it means more effort by all parties to achieve something different. We will do our bit. We look forward to you gentlemen there doing your bit, bringing the schemes forward to us.

What I would like to do now - I think that is as good an introduction as I can give to David to show what work we have been carrying out. Has it only been twelve months?



[9]



[10]

DAVID TAYLOR

Definitely. It feels a lot longer. John and I have been old sparring partners for a little more than twelve months, me on the consultants and developers' side of the fence and John on the other, but that sparring has been actually very creative and I think John has set the scene on some of the issues that have come through in that year, problems, I am sure, that are common to everybody here in the room. I do not think we are actually saying anything new.

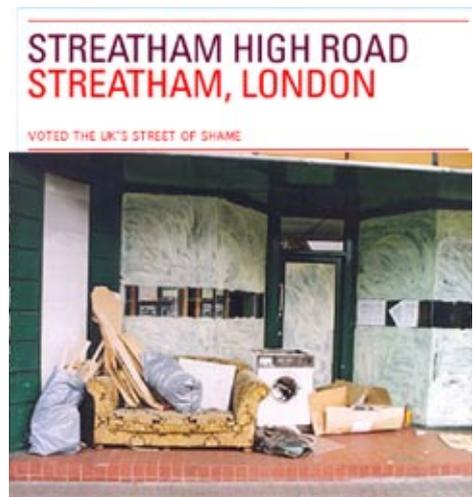
I am going to change tack from what John was talking about. We are talking about housing. But I am actually going to show a slide of best street in Britain. It is perhaps the answer to this problem. David said, "What is the road ahead?", someone asked. The road ahead is actually a street, it is not roads.

Here is the best street in Britain, voted in Cabe's Mori poll recently, Grey Street in Newcastle [1]. There it is. Here is the worst street in Britain, Streatham High Road [2]. For anybody who knows Streatham High Road, this is the pits. Boy, it's really bad. This is a classic view of what goes down there.

Why am I showing the worst streets in Britain? Because I found it very strange that people were not voting for their own street. When you think that we can create that sort of place in the centre of a city like Newcastle. It is obviously very special and we cannot do it everywhere, but we can do that sort of thing. We accept that and we accept that, [3] which is abysmal and dire. If that is the case across the country, if we are going to accept these sort of public spaces, then that is clearly why we are here today.



[1]



[2]



[3]

The Road Ahead, Velux training centre, 4 December 2002

About a year ago CABE asked us to take hold of some research that culminated in the publication called Paving The Way [4]. This came out in - I think it was - about July.

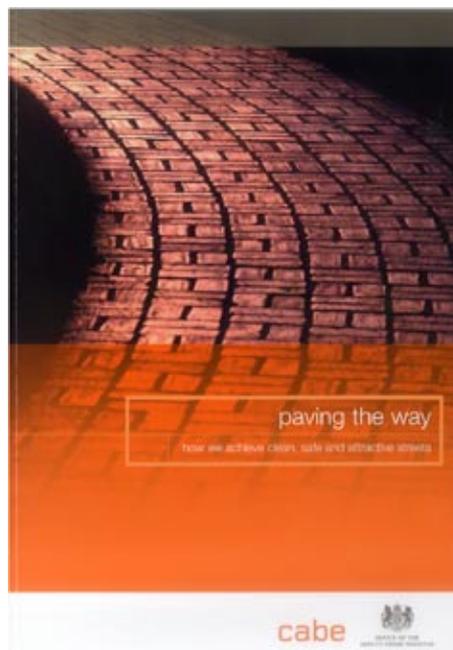
What are the impediments that are actually stopping all of us producing really good streets: the streets that we live in, the streets in our cities? How can we do it? This was a fantastic piece of research for us because it allowed us to go completely across the country, to review the issues with everybody like you in the audience here, going right down to the muddy boot level, from section 38 officers right up to planning control officers, through to local politicians. We took ideas into Europe. We found out how they were actually looking at problems there. We then tried to draw on all of that experience to give some recommendations to Office of the Deputy Prime Minister on what could be the way forward.

Those recommendations came through in twelve parts that are included in that publication. I am not going to go over those in any detail, but I do want to touch on a couple of them and how they relate to the debate that we have got today. The twelve recommendations can be brought down into four issues: highway guidance, cross-sectoral management, design skill and longer term maintenance. I am going to talk about the top two.

Highway guidance. We all know what this is. It is the classic chestnut. Since all those new PPGs have come through, there has not been one change in highway legislation. The only change that has happened is when we wrote Places, Streets and Movement in the late 1990s which was actually a design compendium to DB32, so it did not actually even change DB32. So there is a huge problem there in actually changing that culture of legislation that needs to happen.

The messages I am getting are that, with the force that the Civic Trust and others are putting on ODPM and Department of Transport now, there is a move to accommodate change, because clearly they are influencing the deliverability of PPG3 and the density criteria and everything that is happening. I am not going to home in on that one today, that has been hit long and hard and I think is moving forward.

The one I want to look at a little bit is this one, cross-sectoral management. John touched on that in his talk. It is this whole issue of planning authorities wanting one thing, the Highway Authority having a different remit, developers actually putting forward schemes that can meet the planners' aspirations for that area only to find that those schemes go through the whole process and may even be bounced out of court when they get right down to section 38 agreements and all the issues to do



[4]

The Road Ahead, Velux training centre, 4 December 2002

with highway adoption and everything like that.

There is this whole tendency in the country to look at things in sectorial compartments and John's team has been in the same room dealing with the issues as one. It is fundamental for this country and we have got to do it a lot more.

We are all looking at things far too compartmentally so how can we actually cut through departments to actually get everybody thinking on the same wavelength?

I am just going to show you an example of a scheme that has come through on the western area of Northampton for a very large expansion of the whole of Northampton, using a different approach to the way the scheme has been designed and developed and using something that blends everybody's skills rather than pulls them apart. It still uses current highway guidance. In this way, you can actually generate a very, very different scheme.

Here is the slide [5]. John showed you earlier the Weedon Road. That is this road here, going out towards the M1, which is down here. The route of that layout through six fields in Northampton, there is a football pitch there and there is Northampton off towards the east. The area we are going to be talking about is this piece of land here. It is a major expansion to the west of Northampton, as I have said.

In 1999, I think it was, there was an initiative that was launched by the Prince's Foundation that looked at an enquiry by design process to compare what would happen if you looked at that piece of land on a "by-the-rules" basis or an "by-design" basis. A charette was organised. The results that came out of that charette I will show you here, but basically here is the "by-the-rules" solution [6]. Here is the Weedon Road running through, that road running down, the edge of Northampton here and you can see a fairly standard cul-de-sac arrangement that is really perhaps just a further expansion of the sort of thing we had been doing up to the late 1980s, early 1990s on suburban development here. Not doing anything for public transport, huge problems with permeability that John mentioned, with accessibility on the cul-de-sac arrangement. It does not help to promote the density issue at all and fundamentally lacks sense of place. It is just another area that is being built on the edge of Northampton.

If you break the rules up, which is what they did in that Enquiry by Design process, the results of this were produced in the Sustainable Urban Extensions publication produced by EP and



[5]



[6]

The Road Ahead, Velux training centre, 4 December 2002

what was the DETR. A completely different plan can emerge [7]. Here again is the Weedon Road, but looking at that total area as a place in its own right, with mixed use, with a variety of functions, generating a place, permeable streets and actually starting to take on board the character of the site, the landscape, existing buildings and other functions.

Quite importantly perhaps, where the last scheme had the Weedon Road running through here with all these back fences going onto it as a main trunk road into Northampton, this one is starting to say, "Here's a route that is taking traffic. We can use that as our pump primer for some commercial development and shopping on the road. That is something that can fuel, rather than thinking that we are going to have a local centre off-set from that.

The difference in that approach to the one before comes through quite loudly when you see the facts. The "by the rules" approach generated 3,700 homes for that site. This approach, which was called Inquiry by Design, has 6,400, so well over 2,000 more homes on the same area of land; a retail space, the previous one had 700 metres of retail and this one generated 13,000 m2 retail; employment, the previous one nil, this one 70,000 m2 of employment. What went the other way was open space. The previous one had 52% of the land used as open space; this one has got 28%. So a complete re-use and a different way of working that piece of land that can generate major benefits for Northampton.



[7]

The Road Ahead, Velux training centre, 4 December 2002

So let us just come through to that cross-sectorial management. How can you deliver something like that? We all know the issues to do with Highway Authorities, the issues that come through, "Can you get this adopted?" and so on. That is fundamental to a plan like that. You cannot at the moment get that simply through our planning system.

So what was set up here was a charette process that was coming through from the work that people like Angus Deraney are doing in the States, to bring everybody together in one room for at least a week to bash their heads together, to get a common view on what the development can actually achieve. The charette for the first phase of this site, which is this piece of land here, happened in February - earlier this year - just under a year ago. It was an incredibly stimulating event, because it was one where planners, highway engineers, politicians, consultants, landowners were all together in a room for a week and reviewed the scheme and produced at the end of the week the plan for the first phase.

That was important because it was allowing people to buy in on issues. The plan that I have just shown you can be blown apart by detail. "Can you put lights on buildings? Can you have porches?" There were huge debates on that plan about access routes from garages. There was a big debate about what speed you would leave your garden when you hit the road. I said, "You are going to get killed because somebody will leave that garage space at 45 mph." I thought that that was nuts. These are real issues, aren't they?

The Road Ahead, Velux training centre, 4 December 2002

I am going to show you this slide. This is where I link to the Building for Life initiative. Martin and his team have set up a website which is incredibly useful because it is showing really good exemplars across the country of you can do things. This is one in Shaftesbury constructed by Westbury Homes [8]. It is a very recent scheme, Dorset Vernacular, looking at new highway standards, very strong urban form. I think the image says it all.

What it does in that charette process is, it can instantly take a design issue like a light on the building and show to people that it is possible and as soon as engineers like me actually have something which proves that it can be done elsewhere there is a huge relaxing approach that comes into the design: "Someone else has done it, it's safe, therefore I can do it. I have got a defence if something goes wrong."

So that charette process and using schemes like this was really creative and we generated this plan within a week that was for just over 1,000 homes, very high densities, vertical street layout and incorporating things like sustainable urban drainage systems, mixed use through the centre core here, a new school, all the things you would expect to come through within the PPGs [9, 10, 11].



[8]

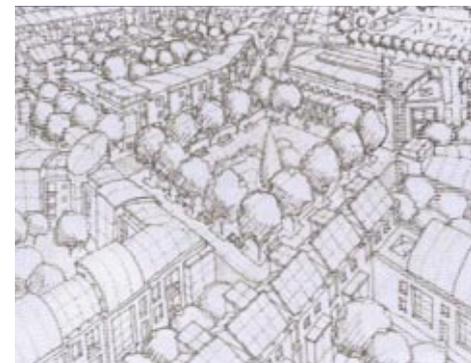


[9]

The Road Ahead, Velux training centre, 4 December 2002

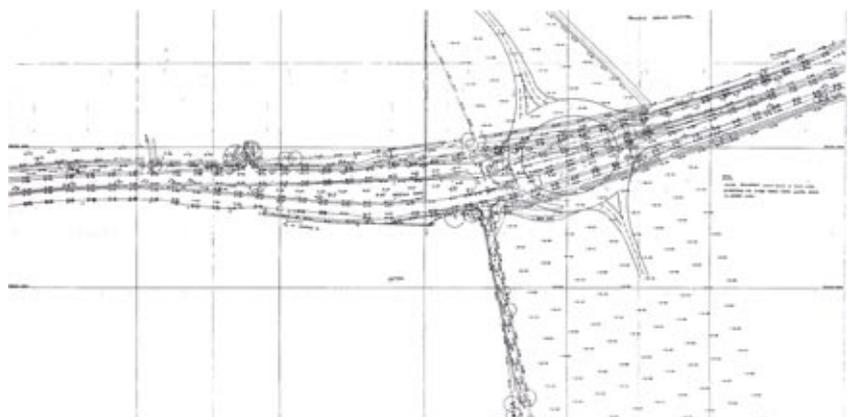


[10]



[11]

It was also incredibly stimulating from the point of view of strategic planning as well. This is where everybody got very excited. This is the Weedon Road [12]. I am sorry that it is not a very good slide, but the thing that was in the local planners' mind was, "Let's have another ruddy great roundabout." Northampton has got loads of them. "We'll have another one." There it was, planned, 120 metres across. "This is coming in. We can have 500 houses off that. Rural, yeah, great." A highway engineer's dream. I have a few slides like this. They're great.



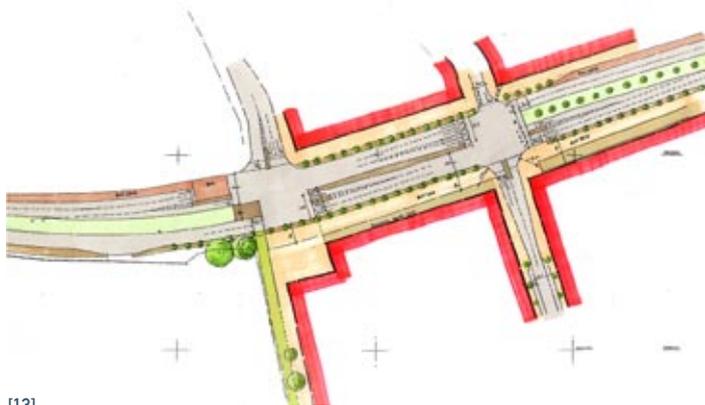
[12]

The Road Ahead, Velux training centre, 4 December 2002

This is what we did [13]- it was not our idea but where it came from was the fact instead that if you start thinking of the Weedon Road rather than the road that John showed you, more of a street and start thinking of giving benefit to this area, you could change it into something that is a street with an active frontage on it so you can capture passing trade and you can do all the things that start to create a good urban form: the complete opposite of looking at a place in terms of highways.

We started looking at that and, of course, it was completely no-no. What was interesting was, getting everybody in the same room at the same time, somebody took that as a challenge. It was somebody in John's department who said, "I am going to produce that." That was the big challenge. As soon as that was bit - and it was bitten big time - that became the way we were going forward and it is now embodied in the plan.

The roundabout has gone. The Highway Authority have picked up on the idea of having active street frontage, an urban street which is very ritzy [14] - we ought to show a slide of France [15]. We have all got these, haven't we? I am not saying that Northampton is going to be like France. I am just a bit wary of showing these - going on holiday and coming back - but why can it not be better? It can certainly be better than that.



[13]



[14]



[15]

The Road Ahead, Velux training centre, 4 December 2002

I am not going to talk about the highway issues that went into that: it was the fact of the buy-in. That for me was so important. The battle actually broken quite quickly.

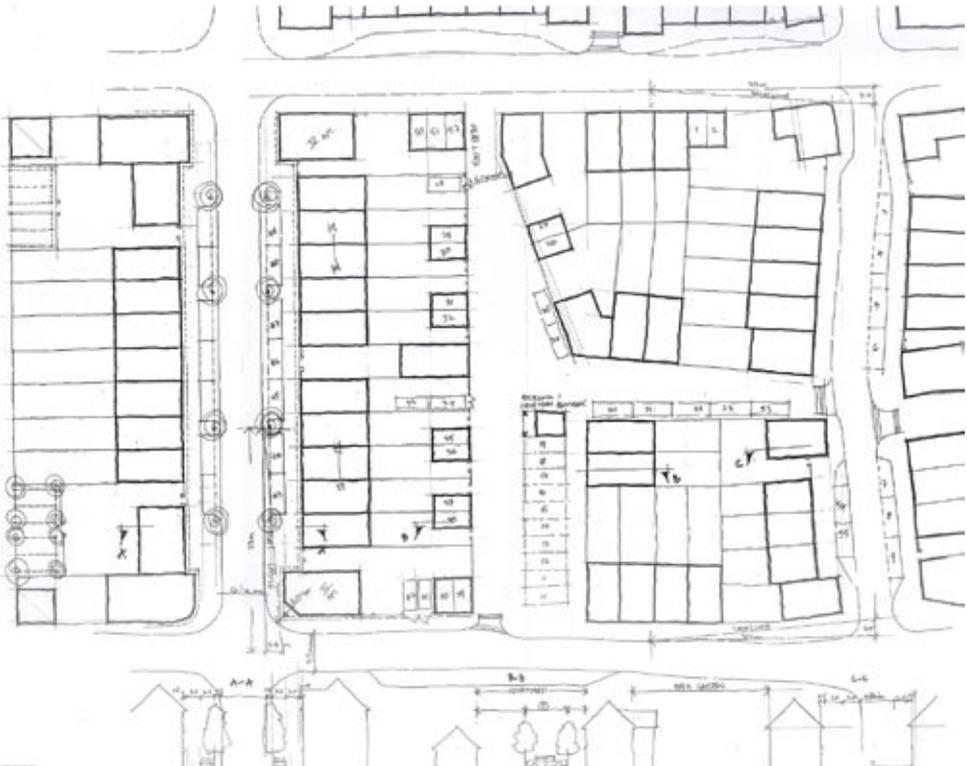
I will just conclude with a few words on how that plan is taken through to completion, because again that buy-in and that cross-sectorial approach to the way highways are dealt with needs to be seen through to the finished product. This is the plan evolved now [16]. Again, it is exactly the same mix as the one that came out of the charette. The school has been moved slightly and there is a slightly different disposition of uses. There is the Weedon Road coming through. That plan received outline planning permission a couple of months ago. The charette was in February; outline planning a couple of months ago; construction new year. Eighteen months from start to finish, going from 3,000 houses on one site to 6,000, bringing all the PPGs on board. That says something, I think, and it says how that method of working can bring things through.



[16]

The Road Ahead, Velux training centre, 4 December 2002

How can we maintain the quality of a scheme like that through to the detail? We decided to release parcels of land here with a master plan and a code [17]. The way we have developed the code with John and his team is to look at detailed blocks like these, look at the car parking arrangements, look at the disposition of housing units, where mixed uses are. There is lots of variety of things in there. We brought on board all of the highway guidance that is still unchanged from the highway guidance that is actually in the cul-de-sac type arrangements, but things like sight lines are clearly much reduced because we have got 20 mph zones and we are promoting home zones and other things like that. Car parking on street, trees in streets.



JOHN HARVEY, ASSISTANT HEAD OF PLANNING, NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL AND DAVID TAYLOR, DIRECTOR, ALAN BAXTER ON THE PLANNERS' PERSPECTIVE

Design for Homes The Road Ahead conference, Velux centre, December 4, 2002

[17]

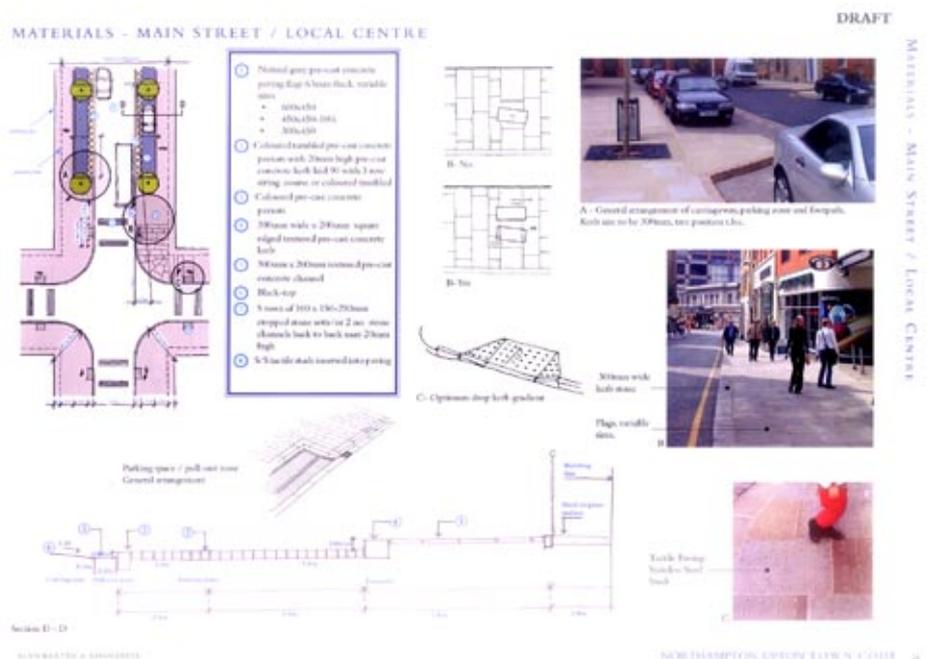
The Road Ahead, Velux training centre, 4 December 2002

all sight lines, all the highway geometry that is needed to get through the relevant highway rules and then actually comes right the way through to things like detailing the pavements and looking at samples of materials that can come through, approving new samples of materials that can be used [19]. There is a whole process that is going through now where John and his team are looking at different types of materials used: "Can we have York stone rather than standard flags in certain areas." So bringing all that right the way through to the beginning of the process so that it is not held to the end and scuppers things at the end.

Section 38 guys are involved in all of this right at the beginning before planning applications are even made. The result of that, as I say, is what I hope is a plan that is very different from the sort of plan that has been promoted locally there but fundamentally one where everybody involved in the development of the plan has been fully involved from the start and therefore there is a huge degree of ownership and also a plan that has come through very quickly, which I think is very different from a lot of the ones we are working on together that just get caught in this morass of debate over highway standards, PPGs and all the other things that are coming through.

I did not want you to go away from the meeting thinking, "Isn't it all terrible?" So here is one way that might be explored in other ways when looking at different schemes, whether they are on brownfield sites, big urban extensions or other things that might yield benefits in the future. I will leave it there.

JOHN HARVEY, ASSISTANT HEAD OF PLANNING, NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL AND DAVID TAYLOR, DIRECTOR, ALAN BAXTER ON THE PLANNERS' PERSPECTIVE



[19]

Design for Homes - The Road Ahead conference, Velux centre, December 4, 2002