



Lands Improvement

Happy, Healthy Places
in new developments:
the spaces in between

By Ben Phillips



Contents

1. Introduction
2. The challenges
 - Policy
 - The role of the s106 agreement
 - Design codes
 - Political
 - The focus is on what is easy
3. Lands Improvement Event - Active Lives
4. Themes for success
5. Next steps

Introduction

A good quality, well-built home is the absolute minimum that a new resident should expect when buying or renting a home at a new development. That, rightly, is the priority.

But the life you lead from your new home, and your happiness and enjoyment of living there, is impacted by so much more than those four walls and the redline of your property.

How can we ensure and that lives on new home developments are positively impacted beyond the bricks and mortar themselves?

We recently asked ourselves, when looking back in years to come at a development that we have delivered, what would we see as evidence of success? And in turn, what do we need to do now to maximise the chance of this happening.

We arrived at a long list, which we distilled down to our placemaking pillars:



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These are all easy objectives to put down on paper, but for many reasons not always so straightforward to achieve.

There are the obvious building blocks: A local school, easily accessible healthcare practices, shops and other amenities. Making things easy and on your doorstep.

However, there is one key area that has been neglected which could, and should, make a big difference – what we like to call activating ‘the spaces in between’.

These are the spaces between the buildings of a new development which should be ‘sweated’ to maximise the benefits that a new development can bring.

Private housing plots account for less than 50% of all space on a new development, with the remainder utilised by roads, SuDs, formal and informal open space.

This presents a huge opportunity to make (or break) a place.

And what are we currently doing with that space?

- **Open spaces**

So much opportunity, but so often delivered so badly. How often do we see expanses of grass with the odd fence and some bins. These spaces don’t meet any leisure purpose or provide community benefit, nor do they fulfil any ecological purpose.

- **Sports pitches**

Well let’s face it, usually football pitches. These are clearly important amenities but utilised by a small percentage of the population for a couple of mornings a week. How are everybody else’s needs being met? How can this space be used more flexibly or be delivered more intelligently?

- **Play areas**

Play areas are usually delivered based on a brochure and a checklist, meeting minimum requirements, with minimal imagination. Who are they for, what is their real play value? Surely, we can do better.

What about key infrastructure?

- **SuDs**

a large part of open space, but often inaccessible and just fulfilling one function. Yes, there are potential health and safety considerations, but can these areas be put to wider multi-use?

- **Roads**

these are designed (in the main) for the sole purpose of getting cars into and out of a development as quickly as possible. Often wider than they need to be, with higher speed limits than are appropriate, and usually a barrier to other movement, activities and social interaction.

Lands Improvement, as a landowner and master developer, is in the privileged position of being able to influence how these spaces are designed, delivered and activated.

We have all seen developments that don’t deliver, either in part or in full, and we see that as a huge, wasted opportunity and negligent.

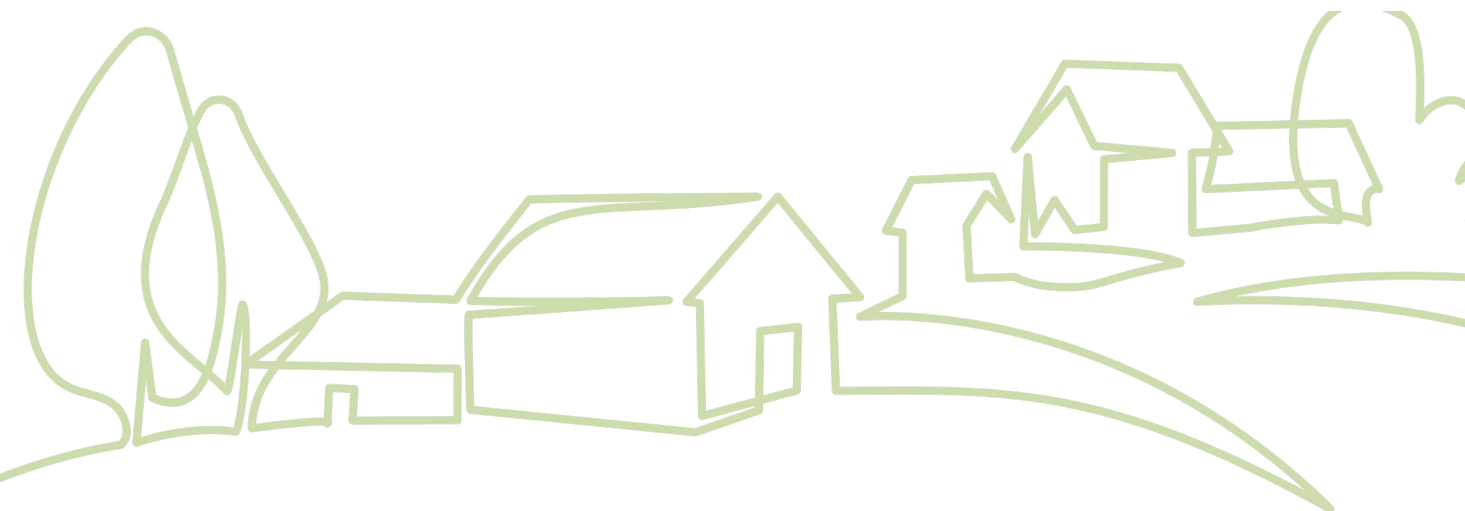
These spaces need to work for the benefit of the whole community and should enable the living of a healthy active life – one that adds significant additional value to a resident than that delivered simply by the bricks and mortar.

The challenges

We have a clear aspiration to deliver healthy, active communities as we have set out in our placemaking strategy, and appreciate the huge opportunity to deliver the spaces in between that can help achieve this goal.

From our experience on the ground, the reality is that delivering these spaces is far more difficult and more challenging than it should be. The barriers are numerous and the stakeholders involved even more so. There are so many opportunities that are being missed, or avoided, which we find hugely frustrating.

Below we summarise our thoughts on what’s getting in the way of delivering better places where everyone can live healthy, active, sociable lives and be part of an organic community.



1. Policy

High level visions v bottom-up guidance

Local authorities (and indeed central government) have visions and strategic objectives which tie very closely to the aspirations for communities as set out above. However, the bottom-up guidance and policy - the building blocks of development - do not generally align to these, they prioritise other department-specific objectives and don't talk to each other.

On-site requirements are so often run through algorithm-generated tick box systems. X units = Y% open space, Z# football pitches and A# play areas. It's a quick way to an answer but gives limited flexibility to get the best outcome. In turn, once these policy metrics have been adopted, it is very hard to break away from them.

Guidance is there to support planning officers. It often takes a long time to draft and adopt, and therefore is difficult and time consuming to update. Even if an officer supports a solution that's not in line with guidance (but which meets a wider objective or is more suitable) who can blame them for not sticking their neck out? Where is their incentive?

The easiest (quickest and cheapest) route for a developer to get on site is therefore to tick the boxes - why invest time, money and resource in a drawn-out discussion with a local authority that has a low chance of success?

Conflicting policies

Policies are written in isolation and so rarely come together in a cohesive form. The task of knotting it all together and weighing up the different objectives often therefore falls to the developer, with planning officers having the final say based on 'planning balance'. There has to be a better way to deal with this at a strategic level to improve the efficiency of this process for everyone's benefit.

Some examples of conflicting policies include:

- Sustainability requirements v active travel needs v parking guidance v adoption criteria
- Urban Design v Highways (e.g. planting trees v visibility splays)
- Ecology best practice v security and safety requirements

2. The role of the s106 agreement

The s106 agreement, made between the landowners and the local authority, locks in the obligations on all parties. For developers this will take the form of both financial and deliverable obligations.

While there needs to be a way of ensuring that developers deliver their obligations, there are many downsides to this rigid approach:

- s106 agreements, especially on large sites, are often entered into years (often tens of years) before the relevant aspects are delivered and, before residents have moved in. The world moves very quickly, best practice moves on, but the s106 doesn't,

meaning when a developer should be delivering according to the latest best practice or resident wishes, they are unable to.

- Non-financial obligations generally lock in minimum, easy to measure deliverables with little or no flexibility to do better.
- It's hard to build in flexibility - by their nature legal agreements don't deal well if things aren't black and white.
- Amending a s106 agreement is a long-winded and costly process, particularly on large sites with multiple landowners.

CIL has its own drawbacks when it comes to delivering the needed interventions. CIL funds are split normally with 75% going towards strategic infrastructure projects across the district and 25% to neighbourhood funds on a more local level (NCILs). While the charging system itself may be clear and transparent for users, how the funds are implemented and in what way they relate back to the development is often more difficult to determine with less opportunities for site-specific interventions. There is a lack of capacity to deliver local level NCIL schemes as well as a variety of methods by which money is distributed, making for a confusing system and resulting in many instances where large CIL funds go unspent.

3. Design codes

Design codes are a hugely valuable tool, especially when combined with monitoring and enforcement. However, we feel these can sometimes put too much emphasis on built form and not enough focus on the spaces in between and how they are used.

4. Political

The nature of politics is short-term. Are councillors willing to push for schemes that challenge the local conventions? Arguably the political rewards are high - to be seen as pushing for better coordinated developments which deliver for the local community needs and health outcomes seems sensible. However, as the results may be many years down the line, it is not usually seen this way.

5. The focus is on what is easy

As a result of all the above, the art of placemaking is replaced by a process - what we need to do to get on-site and start building. It's easier, quicker, simpler and cheaper to just do planning by rote rather than think about what's actually needed in the individual situation. It makes a planning officer's life easier as well, but it doesn't deliver for the community.

These observations are offered without personal judgement as we acknowledge that these are systemic issues.

We don't profess to have all the answers to these challenges, but we believe there is scope on all sides to do better.

So, we decided to put on an event with Create Streets to bring others into our conversation.

Lands Improvement Event - Active Lives

Our event was designed to deep-dive into the barriers to delivering these places, drawing out the changes that need to be made, showcasing what's possible, and commencing on a learning journey together.

We held this event because we want to engage with others who share these aspirations and work together to navigate our way to a better place.

The event attendees included a mix of 60 industry professionals ranging from planning consultants, urban designers, housebuilders, government bodies, agents, active promoters, transport consultants and legal advisers.

With speakers from Homes England, local government, Sport England and active experts looking at bringing active design to life, we held breakout group discussions, delving into understanding the key priorities and challenges for different stakeholders in the delivery of new places.

With a huge amount of positive energy in the room showing to us that many share our passion, we achieved some great outputs from the event.



We want to take the ideas and themes and continue the journey.



Themes for success

There was a huge amount to take away from the event, but we have distilled this down to some key themes:

A vision

The importance of buy-in, between all stakeholders and at all levels, for an overarching vision to guide decision making and priorities. This needs to be led from the top.

Partnership

Creating working relationships where these strategic objectives are jointly brought into and communicated from an early stage.

Community engagement and ownership

Without it, how do we deliver what's best for a community? How is this best done, and when, and how should it be planned for from the outset?

Policy

The need for clear and defined policy to create certainty is true across all sectors and is very much the case in placemaking and the creating of healthy active places.

Resource

It is acknowledged that there is a resource gap with placemaking, with coordinated strategic thinking often relegated behind other day to day priorities, which while understandable is not ultimately to anyone's benefit.

Bravery

Why not be bold as developers, planning officers and councillors?

Next steps...

The event showed us that there is a huge amount of shared aspiration and shared frustration. Over the course of the coming months, we will be hosting a series of roundtable discussions to dig a bit deeper into the challenges and come up with a series of recommendations:

1. We all need to work together. How do we build the trust that is essential to this?
2. How can we better utilise design codes to create healthy places?
3. Parking and highways solutions - recognising the requirement for cars but avoiding dominance?
4. What does 'better' look like? What do we mean by active environments on new developments? How do we make the most of the spaces in between?
5. How can a s106 agreement better deliver healthy active places?
6. Environments for all. An audit of one of our open spaces at our Linnere development – how can it better meet the needs of all demographics?
7. What can be learnt from workshops at our developments?
8. Resident engagement, involvement, and ownership. How do we deliver and manage spaces that are wanted by residents?

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