

## **Case study: Serpentine Court, Bletchley (Milton Keynes Council)**

### **1. Background**

Serpentine Court was built in the early 1970s and forms the central “superblock” of the Lakes Estate, Bletchley, arranged in two halves, separated by a central pedestrian tree-lined footpath that provides convenient north-south access. There are no vehicular connections through Serpentine Court. Serpentine Court faces inwards, with residents parking provided in courts on the outer edge of blocks and delivery access for the commercial units limited to the parking courts and main estate roads.

This block of mixed-use development forms the theoretical, commercial, community and physical heart of the Estate. It has an architectural character which is different from that of the remainder of the Estate. Changes in the national economy, patterns of employment and the recent way in which some of the accommodation has been used by Milton Keynes Council to house people in need of social care has reduced the vibrancy of the area.

In September 2017 work began on the development of a master plan for Serpentine Court. The programme plan is aligned to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) National Regeneration Strategy and the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) Design Stages, and takes a community led approach to regeneration.

### **2. Resident Engagement**

From September 2017 to July 2018, a wide variety of methods were used to engage and involve residents in the development of the regeneration master plans for their area. Engagement was led by the Council’s regeneration team, the Serpentine Court Steering Group and Tpas, the local Independent Advisors. Support has been provided by a wide range of stakeholders including ward councillors and the Parish Council, local schools and early year’s providers, Public Health and Milton Keynes Council (MKC) services.

Of the 196 occupied households, 176 (89%) were engaged i.e. there has been an exchange of information or ideas about the regeneration of their area.

The day-to-day resident engagement work has been carried out by the Community Participation Officer (CPO). From the start of the project and up until July 2018, the same CPO was in post and she reported to the SCSG every month on her activities. She asked for advice on how, where and when to contact residents and worked hard to engage people.

The CPO has worked with stakeholders by attending the meeting hosted by the local health care body, and regularly visiting Sir Herbert Leon Academy to speak with the students who are affected by the regeneration.

The Thursday coffee morning, which residents named ‘Regen-a-tea’, has been a success story. It began as a social event for Somalian residents and has blossomed into a thriving activity where members of the wider community can drop in for some social time and learn about the latest developments in the regeneration process. Residents believe there is a learning point to be taken from Regen-a-tea – many residents like to learn about regeneration in relaxed, informal setting with their friends in support.

In support of the activities carried out by the professionals, the SCSG members (see below) have acted as ambassadors for the regeneration, and as community communicators. They

have all spoken with friends, family and neighbours about what's happening daily. They have strong networks and deep roots in Serpentine Court and have used the community grapevine to spread news and reach vulnerable and anxious neighbours who don't have the confidence to come forward and ask for advice. They have worked next to MKC and Tpas staff when they perform door-knocking exercises and are 'hi-viz' thanks to their t-shirts, which they wear when we are on SCSG duties. MKC created an easily accessible webpage where documents have been uploaded and events have been promoted.

### **3. Serpentine Court Steering Group (SCSG)**

The formation of the Serpentine Court Regeneration Group, as it was then known, was advertised widely through flyers and the promotional work of the Community Participation Officer. An open recruitment event was held in September 2017, and the whole Serpentine Court community was invited. The new steering group – which would later be re-named Serpentine Court Steering Group (SCSG) – was provided with a model terms of reference, which were worked on by the group and turned into a document that was right for Serpentine Court residents.

In March 2018, the SCSG decided to firm up the membership. The residents took the view that in order to be effective, the SCSG needed to have a consistent membership that was committed to attending meetings and working, collectively. Fourteen residents volunteered to be permanent members and they came from diverse backgrounds. There was one private tenant and a local business, but no leaseholders. Tpas also helped form a separate resident Leaseholder Group to engage with the regeneration process, because the leaseholders felt that their circumstances and legal relationship with the council was different to tenants.

Throughout the existence of the SCSG, all residents who wish to attend have been welcomed in the role of an observer. They are encouraged to take part in the meetings by asking questions and providing feedback on any issues affecting the community. Between March and August 2018, 10 residents attended as observers. No one has ever been turned away. The SCSG has also welcomed guest speakers from YourMK, HTA, Groundworks as well as councillors. Meetings are run professionally, and residents are in charge. Tpas take the minutes, and agendas – set by the Chair and her team of deputies - are circulated in advance and put on the web. The Community Partnership Officer also supports every meeting.

SCSG has held MKC to account and there has been a healthy dialogue between the parties. MKC has constantly listened to residents' views and made changes to the project plans as a result. For example, they have been consulted over public exhibitions, ballot arrangements, design of buildings and estate layout, resident engagement, stakeholder involvement, etc.

### **4. The Independent Tenant Advisor - Tpas**

Residents chose their own Independent Tenant Advisors (ITA). Tpas was appointed in November 2017, following a resident vote at the 'Independent Resident Advisor Selection Event'. Since then Tpas has been with the SCSG and residents every step of the way. In early December, Tpas delivered an introductory letter to everyone home on Serpentine Court and placed posters in the communal areas. The Tpas consultant, or another member of the team, has attended every Steering Group meeting and Project Board, and delivered a series of training sessions for the SCSG on tenants' rights, rent and council tax setting, the Right-to-Buy and regeneration finance (in conjunction with MKC). From January 2018

onwards, Tpas held a surgery at Spotlight every Wednesday morning and a freephone, email and webpage have been set up.

## **5. Resident Newsletters**

SCSG produces regular newsletters with help from Tpas. Residents have complete control over the contents of the newsletter, and it they are timed to

## **6. The Housing Needs Survey**

The Housing Needs survey - carried out over summer 2018 - had a specific purpose, but residents viewed it as a resident engagement activity. The team met with every household to discuss their future housing needs and used the interviews to explain the regeneration process and signpost residents to MKC, SCSG and Tpas. In the survey, residents were asked, 'How well informed do you feel about the proposals for Serpentine Court?' 24.84% replied 'Very well informed', 24.18% replied 'Well informed', 24.84% responded 'Adequately informed', 18.30% replied 'Poorly informed' and 7.84% 'Don't know'. Most households interviewed (74%) said they are adequately or more than adequately informed.

## **7. Public events**

A series of public events have been held to provide the community with project updates and to show the designs as they have been emerging. Once the SCSG had found its feet, the members began to take a prominent role at these events. They were consulted over the set-up and style of each one and their views were taken on board. The members hosted the registration process and we greeted residents as they arrived. We were on hand to capture residents' views and support them by being friendly faces who speak their language. These events have been open to anybody and SCSG has promoted the last two to the wider Lakes Estate, as they value the views of their neighbours.

## **8. Campaigning**

For the Cabinet meeting in July 2018, SCSG began promotional campaign in support of the regeneration proposals, by ordering 'It's Our Time!' t-shirts, featuring their own logo. By the time of the family fun day at Dinosaur Park in August 2018, they were giving out wristbands and balloons. They sought funding to build a 'yes' campaign with posters and banners as the build-up to the ballot began. SCSG is a resourceful and creative steering group, which has been supported by MKC and local councillors to express themselves.

## **9. Involving residents at a strategic level**

Since March 2018, the SCSG Chair has attended the monthly MKC Project Board meeting, or one of her deputies has stood in. MKC acted on the advice of Tpas in changing the membership of the Board to include a resident representative. The Chair is allowed to have an input at meetings, and she has helped to shape some of the ways in which the project is being delivered. She has found the access to architects, consultants and senior MKC managers empowering and they have taken views of her members and other residents she represents, seriously.

## **10. Residents Charter**

The Resident Charter has been developed by Tpas through consultation with the wider body of the residents of Serpentine Court, the Serpentine Court Steering Group and the Leaseholder Group.

The Charter aims to enshrine the guarantees residents expect from the Council over the course of the regeneration in a legally binding document. The entitlements to receive their fair share of the benefits; to adequate compensation; to have affordable housing choices, and to be treated sensitively and to be taken seriously, are all laid out.

The document has been split into two parts; part one of the document contains a set of universal principles, and part two sets out a list of terms and conditions, some of which have significant cost implications, and which will require dialogue and negotiation between residents and the Council before they can be agreed.

It is intended as a dynamic document that will require revision over the course of the regeneration and it acts as a basis for ongoing negotiations between the Council and residents over the detail of policies, procedures and design of the built environment as they are brought forward by the Council.

## **11. The ballot**

At its meeting on 2 January 2018, Cabinet approved:(a) A ballot containing a clear Yes and No option with this No option being clearly defined and explained by Milton Keynes Council;(b)The use of the Council's Elections Team to oversee the ballot with the threshold for turnout and age to be presented to Cabinet for approval by June 2018;(c)The ballot only being triggered once 60% of residents and 80% of households (within the red line) have been formally engaged; (d)That the ballot will be restricted to those residents and home owners who will be directly affected by the regeneration proposals i.e. those who live or own a home within the regeneration 'red line'.

The ballot took place on Friday 16th November 2018 (4-9pm) and Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> November (10-2pm) and was overseen by the Council's Election Team. 3,222 residents, homeowners and businesses registered to vote. 3,318 people voted, with the votes recorded as follows:(a)Option A No Redevelopment - 5 votes 2.66%(b)Option B Partial Redevelopment - 7 votes 3.72%(c)Option C Full Redevelopment - 175 votes 93.8%See Annex A for the Declaration of Result of Poll

## **12. The 5 Opportunity (Infill) sites**

The Neighbourhood Plan identified 5 opportunity sites on the Estate and MKC has been working up proposals to develop the sites. In addition to engagement within the 'red line', all public events have been open to all Lakes Estate residents, with personal invitations being sent out for Design Code events and a week-long 'Options Week' in August. Comments and feedback from residents from the wider Lakes Estate have been captured and considered in the development of the regeneration options for Serpentine Court.

During the detailed design stage in the run up to submitting a planning application, the Housing & Regeneration Service has, through its selected architect, carry out further stakeholder engagement to ensure the final design secures as much local support as possible.