

The Old Oak and Park Royal challenge

Liz Peace explains the challenges of London's largest Opportunity Area and potentially the UK's biggest regeneration/development project

During my 13 years at the British Property Federation I devoted a lot of time to talking about and promoting the concept of 'regeneration'. Much of the debate hinged on what was actually meant by the term and indeed I came to be firmly of the view that it was not a descriptor that could or should be applied to fairly bog-standard redevelopment that would almost certainly have happened as a result of normal market forces. In my book, regeneration is definitely about those projects that require a degree of public sector intervention in order to overcome challenges that the market simply will not take on.

This definition can be applied in spades to one of the most exciting genuine regeneration opportunities around at the moment, namely Old Oak and Park Royal, which is managed through a Mayoral Development Corporation of which I was invited to become Chairman back in Spring 2017. So from talking about the theory, I found myself catapulted into the centre of a real project with a vast number of meaty, some would say almost insoluble, challenges.

Old Oak and Park Royal occupies some 650 hectares of west London – an area roughly the twice the size of New York's Central Park. It is an intriguing mixture of industrial brownfield land, crisscrossed by railway lines, a traditional trading estate (that's the Park Royal bit) and an area of common land roughly the size of Hyde Park known as Wormwood Scrubs. There are also some small but significant residential communities around the periphery, and a very large stretch of the Grand Union Canal running through the middle. What gives this site such regeneration potential is the plan to locate at the southern end of it one of London's two HS2 stations – the last stop before the new trains rush on into Euston.

This is also where HS2 meets Crossrail – and for good measure we also have the West Coast mainline to the north, the Great West Main line to the south, two tube lines and three different branches of the London Overground. In fact, it must be one of the best-connected – but currently and ironically least accessible – sites in the country. But it does offer the opportunity to build a new community the size of Woking, with potential for some 25,500 homes and 65,000 jobs, and for that community to be planned and designed as a truly sustainable, modern suburb fit for the 21st century with a low carbon footprint, excellent facilities and a wholly innovative approach to modern living.

The new homes will contribute significantly to meeting London's housing needs. That said, this ambitious target will require some high densities of development and our challenge is to ensure that the project delivers these densities whilst creating a place where people want to live, work, raise their families and visit. The development needs to preserve and build on the history and heritage of the area and be inclusive

to meet the needs of people from a variety of backgrounds and incomes. As set-out in the framework of our Local Plan – which has just finished its second round of consultation- we aim to:

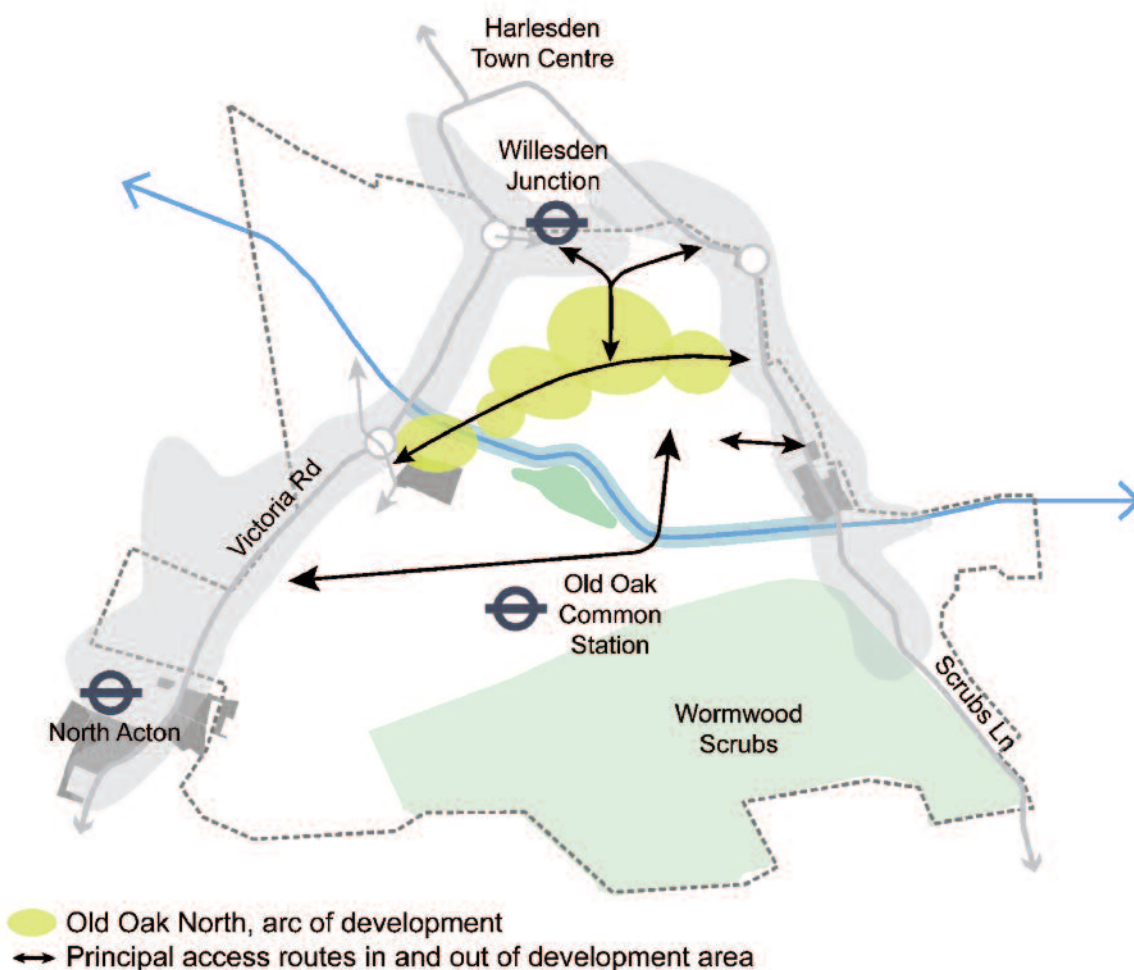
- Deliver Lifetime Neighbourhoods in high densities, with affordable homes, family housing and a range of other housing types;
- Ensure the continued success and growth of Park Royal, as well as delivering a new commercial quarter in Old Oak, providing new employment opportunities across a range of sectors and skills levels, including apprenticeship opportunities during construction;
- Ensure that development delivers high design quality, with excellent architecture, public realm and internal space standards; and
- Deliver best practice approaches to sustainability, promoting economic sustainability through the creation of a resilient development that can respond to changing needs, social sustainability that improves the health and well-being of people in the area, and environmentally sustainable development that delivers on the ambitions in the Mayor's new draft London Environment Strategy.

The challenges of London's largest Opportunity Area and potentially the UK's biggest regeneration/development project are many. Despite the plethora of railway lines, the site is currently difficult to access by road and will need a considerable investment in transport infrastructure – particularly bridges – to ensure access and full permeability. It will also need the full range of utilities, not to mention all the other infrastructure vital for a modern well-served community – schools, community facilities, shops, workplaces, cultural places and green space. And for all that infrastructure, the bill will be enormous and require us to use the full range of means at our disposal – developer contributions, possible borrowing against future business rates, various infrastructure and other funds from central Government and from the GLA family and long-term investment from the private sector in both the UK and internationally.

There is also the not insignificant issue of the existing occupiers of the Old Oak section of the site – Network Rail, Transport for London, the world's biggest independent second-hand car dealership, two significant waste recycling businesses and a whole host of small enterprises that will need to be relocated if we are to maintain the commercial diversity of the area. And of course, we will have a brand new HS2/Crossrail station occupying a large part of the site which will in due course offer considerable development potential over and around the main station structure. There is also the 'cause celebre' of the new depot and stabling for the Crossrail trains which was planned and partly built before the full



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potential of the site for a major regeneration project had been appreciated and which sterilises a large portion of the site to the north of the HS2 station.

With projects as large and complex as this it is quite easy to be totally overwhelmed and to adopt the typical 'rabbit in headlights' stance. Where do you start? How can you get homes built early in the process? Who will fund infrastructure without any immediate economic benefit? Who are going to be the first investors to risk their capital in such a vast enterprise? What do we do about the Crossrail depot?

Well the answer, after an initial period of panic, has been to identify and eliminate the 'noise', particularly that caused by the issue of the Crossrail depot, to focus on what is deliverable in the next 3 to 5 years, to work out what the minimum infrastructure needed to support those early deliverables might be, and then to come up with a carefully costed ask that we can present to the various potential funding bodies. We are presenting this in the form of a business plan which concentrates on development of the northern part of the Old Oak site in an arc from Old Oak Common Lane through to Scrubs Lane and possibly also including Willesden Junction (see map) which we have called Old Oak North. We already have broad approval from our own board for this approach which will now form the basis for discussion with the Mayor of London and the GLA, with other stakeholders in central Government and ultimately with potential investors.

Of course, as a non-executive chairman I cannot claim

responsibility for more than a small portion of this progress. We have an excellent executive team, including experts in infrastructure, commercial development and planning; a master planning team led by AECOM that is helping us identify the possible design solutions to some of the knotty access and infrastructure problems; and commercial and financial advisers who can highlight the optimum financial outcomes for our plans. We have also invested heavily in community engagement to ensure that the residents in and around the Old Oak and Park Royal area have been able to contribute their thinking to our aspirations – a process which is becoming even more important given the opposition that major estate regeneration is provoking in some parts of London.

It's been almost nine months since my appointment and two and a half years since the establishment of the Mayoral Development Corporation. My role has been and continues to be to offer strategic direction, to liaise with our principal stakeholders and find out how we can meet their aspirations, and to lead the board in considering how best we can deliver on what is undoubtedly a tremendous opportunity – but also one with considerable potential problems. Having spent my thirteen years in the British Property Federation talking about regeneration and trying to influence both national and local government policies that support sustainable development of difficult brownfield sites, I consider it a great privilege to be able to lead such a massive regeneration project where I am doing it for real. ■

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