

The logo features a stylized graphic of two overlapping, curved shapes in shades of blue and green, resembling a ribbon or a swoosh, positioned above the text.

RTPI SOUTH WEST
AWARDS FOR
PLANNING
EXCELLENCE 2020

Awards for Planning Excellence Case Study

Palm Cross Green, Modbury

Entered by Place Studio

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constraints planners had to overcome. **It is crucial you demonstrate the planning value of the project throughout the submission.**

Award criteria

1. Background

Please outline the background to the project:

- context
- timeline (including phase in project, eg. in recognition that some planning work may have been done earlier)

Although the start date of our work was some years ago, this submission was only considered to be possible now in order to be fully confident about the eventual success of the project as built, not just the community engagement.

Modbury is a small country town of around 2,000 people in the South Hams district of Devon, rich in history and character. It lies midway between Dartmoor National Park and some of the most unspoilt beaches on the South Devon coast. Plymouth is 12 miles to the west.

Modbury is unique within the South Hams, having all the amenities of a small town yet retaining the community spirit of a village. While its rural setting, Conservation Areas and undoubted historic charm make it very appealing, it is the welcoming spirit and sense of community, shown by the people of Modbury, that makes the town such a desirable place to enjoy family life. The town is also a centre for people from the outlying farms and villages who make good use (if not recently!) of the good selection of local shops and services, pubs and cafés.

Modbury prides itself on being a walker-friendly location. There are numerous, well maintained and well signposted footpaths through and around the town that take in both the splendid natural environment and the town's history. So strong is Modbury's concern for environmental matters that, in 2007, the retailers were inspired to band together to become the first town in Europe to go 'Plastic Bag Free'.

In the South Hams Local Plan of 2006, a site on the western edge of town – **RA1: Palm Cross Green** - was allocated for development to include around 80 dwellings (over two phases) and 0.5 hectare of employment land. The allocation also required improved pedestrian safety at the Green, strategic landscaping to address the site's prominence, provision of open space and play facilities and cycle and footpath links to the town centre.

Some recent housing developments in the town had generated discussion about the implied level of growth for Modbury so, although there was no serious concern about this specific allocation, concerns emerged that it might be a 'foot in the door' towards further development to the north.

Bloor Homes took up their option to develop the site and, in early 2014, appointed a team of consultants, including Place Studio. Our role was to plan, manage and report on the community engagement, working extremely closely with the core planning, landscape and design teams.

Final details for the planning application were submitted in 2016 and the application was approved. Bloors started construction in 2018 and, as of now, only the last few of the new homes remain on the market.

2. Outcomes

Please outline what positive impacts the project has provided for:

- the local community
- the economy
- the environment

Great care was needed from the outset to engage a strong, articulate and highly engaged community. This suggested the need for a very robust engagement process for the project. (More about the process follows later.)

In line with best practice principles, the engagement (relevance to the **local community**) started very early, with an open public 'drop-in' over two days in April 2014. This was attended by over 170 people – a remarkable 10% of the population, most staying at least for 30 minutes, many for much longer, including those who joined one of the 90 minute, in-depth workshops. One workshop produced the attached Illustration 1 as a potential overall site layout. Note in particular the green area running from south east to north west.

A medley of further events and activities took place over the next few months, including a workshop with the local Chamber of Commerce about the proposed business unit on site (relevance to the **local economy**). Instead of the anticipated concerns from local businesses, there was unanimous support for the unit; indeed there were some initial requests for options on space there!

The main final event was another open drop-in, this time attended by over 220 people. As well as seeking views on what was by then a nearly final design, those attending this session were asked how well they thought the proposals overall were responding to the key issues which the community had raised, i.e. had we done our job properly? This could be scored out of 5 (5 being the best). The overall average score was 3.6/5 and a typical positive comment was:

"Living opposite and not wishing to be a NIMBY, I obviously have some concerns but overall should praise the 'openness' of those concerned, thanks."

The majority of the less positive comments were not about the consultation as such but about a disbelief that Bloors would respect the engagement outcomes. Instead of this happening, there was a clear and direct line from the community-generated sketch plan to the basics of the final layout (relevance to the **environment**). See next page for images of the sketch plan and layout. People's concerns, no doubt based on previous experience, had proved wrong. In fact, the layout changed again before the application in several detailed ways as a result of further local engagement; for example, moving the allotments to respond to concerns such as those raised in the quote above. (This was a particular reason for delaying this submission until the scheme was built and demonstrating the community influence.)

Though our work ceased at this stage, we have continued to watch the project through its construction and marketing stages. The informal comment back to us from a journalist who visited the development and talked to local people about it was extremely positive and a photo of the scheme is used (positively) in the recent Modbury Neighbourhood Plan.

472 words

Below: Community generated sketch plan



Below: Aerial sketch view of near final scheme shown at drop-in 2 sessions



3. Planning contribution

Please outline how the project has benefitted from the involvement of a planner or planners:

- providing strong and effective leadership and vision
- working in partnership with others
- managing implementation and delivery

Community engagement is widely acknowledged to be central to good planning, both in terms of plan-making and planning applications. Though undertaking engagement is a formal requirement for plan-making, that is not yet fully the case for pre-application community engagement in England; it can be 'encouraged' but not 'required'. In addition, a whole suite of recent documents stress the key principle of starting early – 'front-loading'.

Place Studio have always been advocates of front-loading pre-application engagement, and also of other key principles such as agreeing a process, using a range of methods, working in breadth with 'everybody' and in depth with key stakeholders, reporting results in detail and checking that people feel their engagement has been of value.

In the Modbury example our work involved:

- Agreeing the basics of the process with South Hams District Council and Modbury Parish Council.
- Running two open drop-ins, each over two days, very widely advertised and well attended (very unusually, more people came to the second than to the first).
- Running in-depth 90 minute workshops during both drop-ins for those signing up.
- Running an invited stakeholder workshop between drop-ins 1 and 2, to interrogate, confirm (or not) and take forward the emerging ideas.
- Using various local newsletters and networks and setting up a dedicated project website.
- Arranging specific meetings, e.g. with the adjacent school headteacher and with immediate neighbours.
- Producing an extremely thorough final Report of Community Involvement; a full audit trail.

Throughout all of this, we worked extremely closely with the Bloor Homes team and with their planning, design, landscape, ecology and highways consultants, using our own design skills to provide **clear leadership and vision** on how community ideas could be incorporated into the emerging designs. In all senses this was a **partnership** approach in which we provided clear leadership and vision not just with the team but also within the local community.

As Paul Talbot of Bloor Homes stated: *"We appointed Place Studio to undertake our community engagement for the Modbury project, already confident that their expertise and good practice would assist in arriving at a high quality, locally responsive development that the people of Modbury could support. Place Studio, as predicted, were exemplary in their approach and quickly gained the confidence of the local community."*

Though Place Studio were not involved in **implementation and delivery**, the remarkably clear line between early community aspirations and the final built result show the positive effect of our work.

402 words

4. Sustainable development

Please outline how the project has supported:

- positive short, medium and long term public benefit
- a balance of economic, social and environmental objectives
- the UN's Sustainable Development Goals
- aimed to prevent or mitigate climate change

The clear **short term** public benefit was relatively speedy progress with a planning application that could be shown to be built on strong community input and support. The **medium term** benefit (though this reflects more on our Bloor Homes contact than with ourselves) is that the principles of the development that emerged at the very first event were sustained all the way through to construction. The **longer term** benefits are less easy to define, although the scheme has sold very well, including to some people from within Modbury, the minor references to the project in the recent Modbury Neighbourhood Plan and the journalist's comments suggest that the designs are well liked locally.

The process itself, the inclusion of a welcomed business development and the qualities of the final scheme show clear attention to **economic, social and environmental objectives**.

In relation to the **UN Sustainable Development Goals** (those which apply most directly to a practical project started a few years ago):

- SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being: Footpaths and cycleways were included both across the site and into the wider landscape. Play areas and open spaces are central to the layout.
- SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth: The small business unit was strongly supported locally (when the expectation had been that Bloor Homes would try to have it removed).
- SDG 15: Life on Land: There is a large amount of green space and some allotments.
- SDG 17: Partnership for the Goals: Collaborative approaches have always been a part of sustainable development principles and, as we show in this submission, that is all absolutely central to the approach we took.

269 words

5. Community benefit

Please outline how the project has provided:

- positive and constructive engagement and dialogue with local people and businesses
- a better quality of life for people, especially for disadvantaged communities
- tangible benefits for communities such as facilities, infrastructure, jobs, training etc

We understand why this section is required, because community benefit is too often still viewed as some sort of added value beyond other more mainstream ones. However, it should be clear that, for us, achieving community benefit is an absolute bottom line of every plan or project on which we work.

To that end, there is little we can add to what was outlined in the 'Planning Contribution' section. Our approach to all engagement work includes a rather subliminal emphasis on capacity building. Although this was little needed with the 'movers and shakers' in the community, the diverse mix of those attending and contributing to the two public drop-ins suggests some local capacity building. We also aim for our work to spin off into other, later community activities. So, although this may again be the result of an already active community, it is notable that the consultation on the Modbury Neighbourhood Plan was developed through a coherent overall programme of mixed types of activity, as for Palm Cross Green.

With that in mind, the project shows clear benefits in terms of **engagement** (certainly accessing well beyond 'the usual suspects'), **quality of life** and **community and business facilities**.

Finally, one further comment from a local resident is relevant:

"We needed these houses and felt you had responded well to us as a community; an attractive layout seeming to encompass many of the ideas suggested by the community at the open events and the workshops."

243 words

6. Leading practice

Please outline how the project:

- is creative and innovative
- is an exemplar that is transferable across the UK
- promotes equality and diversity

As stated earlier, community engagement is widely acknowledged to be central to good planning, both in terms of plan-making and planning applications. But that is not always the case for plans or for projects as here. In our view, it should be. Our engagement work at Modbury followed a similar approach to the work we have undertaken with Bloor Homes on projects in Totnes and Salcombe, and is in line with all our other work, constantly aiming to demonstrate *best practice* in community engagement and ensure that such approaches become *standard practice* nationally.

One of our team was commissioned to write a book about engagement in the RTP1 series entitled 'The Craft of Collaborative Planning', which captures best practice from around the world. No project we have ever done fulfils every one of the main principles but our approach to Modbury serves to highlight some of the really key ones that are still, too often, overlooked:

- Developing a coherent, overall programme which enables the results from a variety of activities to be brought together into a consistent, overall set of arguments. Too often what happens is just a medley of unrelated activities (often the latest fashionable one or two).
- Developing and agreeing the process with key players. Once an overall process is agreed, all the remaining discussion is not about whether certain activities were included but solely about how well that programme was delivered and how much affect it has had.
- Front-loading or starting early, perhaps the most important principle of all, when the norm continues to be a single exhibition late in the process of plans already decided, or appearing to be so.
- Have access to planning and design skills in the engagement team to enable genuinely close working with planners, designers and others. This type of work is too important to be just PR!
- Using a variety of methods that can 'get through' in different ways to different people at different times. Too often there is a reliance on exhibitions and websites.
- Building up a full 'audit trail' that can enable anybody – including, if necessary, an Inspector - to track back from a comment made at an early drop-in to what went in the final application.

It is this range of methods that makes this project both **innovative and creative**, encouraging the involvement of a very **diverse** range of people from the local community. It is also an **exemplar** for others because there are reasons to believe that some level of pre-application community engagement will soon become a requirement. Our leading-edge work on this project, and many others, helps to provide genuine proof that such activity is appropriate, beneficial to all and technically and financially possible.

Significant credit is also due to Bloor Homes for staying true (as many developers would not) to the results of the engagement.

472 words

For help with your submission, please view our 'How to win' guide [here](#).