

Olympic Games: Keeping the legacy alive

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Four years after the Olympic Games were hosted in London, the regeneration plans for the park have been adapted to say the least. But has the LLDC managed to adhere to the legacy promises that won the UK the Olympic bid in the first place?



When Lord Coe pulled off the stunning coup in July 2005 of securing the right for London to host the 2012 Olympic Games, it was pretty clear that one word encapsulated the reason why the UK capital won: legacy. And, while that word meant one thing to athletes hoping to inspire the next generation of sportspeople, for the people of East London it meant the potential to regenerate one of the most stubbornly grim and deprived parts of nearly central London. 2012 was to be the “legacy” Olympics.

The level of ambition was not small. Originally the London Development Agency promised that 9,000 homes would be built on the site of the Olympic park, of which half would be affordable, and that legacy uses for all of the venues would be nailed down before the Games took place. There was to be a construction academy and a pilot of mutual home ownership on the site. Many of these original promises - such as the construction academy - were dropped or amended before the Games even took place. However, the idea of the park being converted into a dynamic new community built to high standards and giving homes and jobs to thousands remained core to the whole enterprise. And, riding on the back of a booming development market in London, this vision is already becoming reality.

However, on the eve of the opening of the Rio Games and one month on from the EU referendum, the question is not only whether that legacy has been successfully delivered so far but also whether it can continue to be so in the harsher economic climate now looming.

Eleven years on from Coe's triumph of securing the 2012 Games, even the most churlish anti-Olympian cynic would concede that the park in Stratford which hosted it has not fallen into disrepair and disuse, as some predicted. No Athens, Montreal or Sarajevo white elephants here. David Edmonds, chairman of the body delivering the regeneration, the London Legacy Development Corporation (LLDC), is evangelical - as you would expect.

"By any international standards, it has been extraordinarily successful," he says, reeling off a list of Olympic facilities, such as the aquatics centre and velodrome which have been successfully converted and under constant use, with two million people thought to have visited the aquatics centre alone. In total, he says 11 million have visited the park since the Games.

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David Edmonds, LLDC

Meanwhile, the Olympic village has been converted to flats and let out, a major office development is going up next to Stratford's Westfield shopping centre and tenants have been forthcoming for the potentially problematic media centre complex, now branded Here East, with 5,500 people working there already. The first major residential development, Chobham Manor, is being built out by Taylor Wimpey, with 165 homes nearing completion, and plans are well advanced for the first phase of the second housing scheme - East Wick and Sweetwater. Only the Olympic stadium, soon to be the home of premier league football club West Ham, has caused the body real problems so far - but even here the conversion will be finished in time for the start of the football season.

Hospital pass

While the body may have had a tail wind from the market, these things have been achieved despite it being sent some pretty tricky hospital passes by the Olympic Delivery Authority, which built the park for the Games. When Margaret Ford was appointed chair of the LLDC's forerunner, the Olympic Park Legacy Company, in 2009, she was facing the prospect of a mountain of debt to service, and decisions already taken that could have left the stadium in legacy as - essentially - a small windswept concrete bowl, and placed the vast 1 million ft² permanent media centre shed supposed to drive legacy job growth far from the commercial heart of Stratford. Both of these decisions were taken partly out of a desire to fulfil "legacy" promises - on job creation and the athletics legacy of the Games - but, according to Ford, both were set to cause huge problems.

"So many important decisions for the park had been taken when we got there. The media centre is a mammoth, inflexible building, where Hackney had quite rightly been very keen to see a creative cluster. I felt that the cluster would have been more likely to develop incrementally in a group of smaller, more flexible buildings and so had huge reservations about making that anything other than a temporary building."

Her chief executive at the time was American Andy Altman, now managing principal at Washington developer Fivesquares Development. He says: "The International Broadcast Centre was my greatest fear. I was very worried about it as it was such a big building with such high expectations of what it could do. It couldn't have been further from transport links. I was very worried about the design - it was a big shed in the park, and transforming it into something with life and vitality had the toughest odds."

Altman says this hurdle was crossed by actively seeking potential tenants - rather than just securing a developer and trusting it to them. This finally saw BT Sport, Loughborough University and others taking space, with a consortium of developer Delancey and data centre provider Infinity SDC taking charge, something Altman says was "a very big deal" for the site's legacy.

Ford says: "As it happens, Here East has done a bloody great job of letting it. But, if there'd been a strong commercial legacy voice around the table when the decisions had been taken, then there might have been a different outcome."

As a consequence of these early decisions, Ford says she spent much of her time working out how to make the best of the situation - changing the plan for the stadium and media centre, and negotiating with the Treasury to restructure the body's debt so that the ability to generate quick receipts for the Treasury would not end up driving the body's decision-making. She finally struck a deal in 2011. This left the body free to re-plan the park in a less overtly commercial way, by

dropping the number of homes promised from 10,000 to 8,000, and including more traditional family housing in terraces and streets in place of super-dense, high-rise blocks of flats.

But the regeneration has had its political ups and downs, with Ford unceremoniously edged out of the body just before the Games by then London mayor Boris Johnson, six months earlier than she'd planned, to be replaced by Daniel Moylan, a Kensington and Chelsea councillor with little development experience.



Overachiever?

Given this backdrop, you could even be forgiven for thinking the body has overdelivered. Not only has it got the promised regeneration rolling, it has also added a new, unthought of string to the park's bow, in the form of a cultural and education district - Boris' "Olympicopolis".

The LLDC already has a deal with University College London, and is finalising development agreements with the London College of Fashion, the V&A and the Smithsonian Institute, with a spokesman for the body saying planning applications will be submitted in December. The body's chairman says this area is now the LLDC's main focus: "The culture and education district is a huge challenge. We're working with four very eminent, world famous institutions, making sure we work together harmoniously on a quite complex development project. That's the big challenge." The LLDC is investing so much into this that the body will not break even this year - as originally planned - and not now until the early 2020s.

Despite this progress, the regeneration has not been without its critics, and has prompted as many fears as hopes from local people worried about their community being transformed into a developers' playground. Newham councillor Terry Paul, who represents the Stratford ward right next to the Park, as well as advising borough mayor Robin Wales on skills issues, says: "People welcome the opportunity all this brings, but they're wary of the increase in house prices. Those fears aren't new, but they're more acute now." He's also not a fan of losing control of planning to the LLDC. "I'd rather it was local elected councillors taking the decisions, standing up for local people."

Above all, critics raise the issue of affordable housing. While the original outline planning application for the Olympics in 2004 promised 50% affordable housing, this has since been dropped to 35%. Even that ambition has not been met, with Chobham Manor set to deliver only 28% and East Wick and Sweetwater just 31%. "If I could wave a magic wand, I'd have a lot more affordable housing," Newham's Paul says. His colleague, councillor Conor McAuley, agrees: "The quality of

what's been done so far is good. But we'd query the level of affordable housing not being what we were expecting. If you compare prices on the park with people's incomes locally, they can't afford them. So are they meeting people's needs?"

The number of homes planned has also dwindled, with the 2010 reduction to 8,000 homes followed by a further slashing to today's target of just 6,800 - well down on the 10,000 promised in 2009 - and rumours the numbers will fall further given the need to accommodate Olympicopolis.

Surrounding boroughs also have concerns about whether enough is being done to ensure local people benefit from the development and job creation in the area. Tower Hamlets mayor John Biggs, who also sits on the LLDC board says: "Everyone believes the rhetoric but whether the resources are adequate to do the job is a different question. And I remain a little disappointed."

How affordable?

The election of Sadiq Khan as London mayor means affordable housing, at least, is one area that will now change. LLDC's Edmonds says the body is reworking its plans in the light of Khan's electoral promise to deliver 50% affordable housing in new developments.

"Very importantly, we are now looking of course at the policies of the new mayor, and we're looking at the plans for the sites we have yet to develop to ensure that we revise the plans so those targets will also be met. On new sites, we will certainly move to 50%. They're being revised," he says.

"We're doing the work at the moment, working through what the implications are. We're in detailed discussions with the GLA."

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Margaret Ford, formerly OPLC

This will not affect the Chobham Manor and East Wick and Sweetwater schemes which have already been procured but will apply to all future housing sites, he says.

This pledge is welcome news to the surrounding boroughs, although, as Newham's Paul says, it does raise questions over why "what has been done in the past has not been maximised". But the implications of raising the affordable housing level could be huge - requiring additional funding or a big change in the development value expected from the open market sale homes. Edmonds says the change "doesn't necessarily mean" homes will come "later or slower", but admits they are looking hard at density - so fears that the volume of housing will fall further are definitely misplaced. "We're planning for 6,800 homes and the work we're doing now could well push that up. Part of the complex equation is density - the number of homes you can build on a site."

Could building more market sales homes to pay for more affordable homes lead to exactly the kind of high-rise design Margaret Ford and Andy Altman were trying to avoid when they redesigned the park in 2010? Altman says it is a risk the LLDC will have to work hard to avoid: "High density can be done well or done poorly. It'll come down to paying a lot of attention to the design, and will take a lot of back and forth with developers."

Edmonds says: "I genuinely don't think we are going to lose that vision. The whole ethos is we are very conscious of the need to build communities - we're not building housing estates. There is no pressure to produce something that gets more houses at the expense of a crap environment or crap community or crap social development - quite the opposite."

The other big risk Edmonds now faces, of course, is the economy - which is now entering a more difficult phase, with the RICS earlier this month finding buyer enquiries in London drying up and a far larger proportion of surveyors expecting price falls in London than in any other part of the country. Andrew Atkins, development director at the Balfour Beatty and Places for People joint venture developer of the Sweetwater and East Wick scheme, says it is aware of the need to keep build rates up whatever happens to sales.

However, the scheme, which was in early 2015 - ironically - brought forward by six years to benefit from the strong housing market, is partly insulated by the fact only a third of the homes are for private sale, with the rest split between various affordable tenures and private rent. A planning application is just about to go in, with a final development agreement to be signed at the end of the year so construction can start in early 2017. "Of course Brexit is a concern,"

Atkins says, “but we’re flexible enough to respond. Our mix does give us certain known parameters - we have the market sale element, but can use the other tenures as a buffer and a break.”

He confirms the JV is still committed to marketing the homes in the UK only. “The LLDC is absolutely committed to delivering on schedule, and we will pull out all the stops to honour that commitment.” Tower Hamlets’ Biggs says: “Obviously, everybody wants everything done tomorrow, but some things will slow down. However, it may be that simply allows people to revisit the models that they’re working on, rather than abandon the whole show.”

Edmonds says he expects to hold developers to their existing promises. “I don’t think we can speculate or predict what the outcome will be. I think the issue will be, given the downturn in the private sector housing market following recent events, we’re going to want to look carefully with the developers [of Chobham Manor and East Wick & Sweetwater] to ensure they can keep the planning commitments made to us.”

Clearly, the building out of the planned regeneration of the park was always going to be something that adapted and changed in the years after the Games. But right now, it feels almost as if, after four years of pretty fair weather, the real challenge is just beginning.