

PIONEERING REGENERATION

Creating Streets in Rochdale's Lower Falinge



Nicholas Boys Smith


CREATE
streets



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Foreword

The findings of this independent report are drawn from work Create Streets carried out for Rochdale Boroughwide Housing in 2018.

We would like very warmly to thank Gareth Swarbrick, Clare Tostevin, Gemma Wood from Rochdale Boroughwide Housing and Vinita Dhume from Levitt Bernstein for their kindness, time and help in sharing information with us and in showing us around on our first visit to Lower Falinge. The findings of this report are entirely ours. All errors of fact and judgement remain, of course, our own.

Nicholas Boys Smith

Director, CREATE streets

Introduction: the project

Rochdale Boroughwide Housing (RBH) are currently master planning the regeneration of around 480 homes in Lower Falinge working with local residents. Lower Falinge is on the north western edge of Rochdale's town centre, separated from the centre by St Mary's Gate, a four-lane dual carriageway. The regeneration re-introduces streets and brick houses and links up with the historic street pattern surrounding the site. It is part of a wider regeneration of central Rochdale and aims, in conjunction with Rochdale Borough Council (RBC), to link to the Rochdale Heritage Action Zone to the south. Working with Historic England the wider vision for the zone is to 'transform a failing, retail dominated street into a vibrant area of mixed-use development that acknowledges and celebrates heritage' to the benefit of local residents and businesses and to help support a profound sense of local community. The regeneration of Lower Falinge is part of a larger regeneration project that includes the adjacent College Bank neighbourhood, but the plans and process there are much less advanced than Lower Falinge. The focus of this report, therefore, is solely on Lower Falinge.

In 2018, Create Streets worked as a critical friend on the site, reviewing the project's strengths but also its challenges. Rochdale Boroughwide Housing commissioned the report to help ensure that the estate regeneration project is carried out in an exemplary manner with exemplary results. We focused on the urban design and form of the project and also on the best way to ensure that residents' preferences are really influencing what is built and how.

Our analysis and recommendations were drawn from Create Streets' extensive expertise and research on urban design and the development process as well as our practical experience of estate regeneration in the UK and abroad.



Creating walkable Streets in Phase one – complete with street trees

Creating Streets in Lower Falinge is the right thing to do

- **Overall, this is an excellent project.** With a passionate, considerate and intelligent client and an architecture firm that really know what they're doing, RBH are moving in the right direction. There are some challenges, but all of our thoughts and recommendations about how to tackle them should be taken in the spirit of how to improve the project even further.
- **The vision is spot on.** The underpinning vision and strategy for RBH's approach to Lower Falinge is unquestionably correct – to build a more beautiful, more mixed, better connected, more 'finely grained' bit of the town, better taking advantage of its central location and able to provide not just affordable housing but also market housing and mixed use.

Particularly exciting is a potential to link through Toad Lane and Hunter's Lane to Yorkshire Street and along Edmund Street to St Edmund's Church.

- **RBH are learning and improving as they go.** Phase two is more successful than phase one – due to a better approach to urban form and much better use of bricks with the two colours to create simple and inexpensive texture and patterns. The phase two continuation of the historically important Toad Lane is particularly successful.



The existing estate in Lower Falinge

- **RBH are right to be retaining the historic mill.** The four storey brick building on Toad Lane, currently Cascada Bathrooms, is being retained. This is right. We would love to see something special and maybe even radical done with this building. Something that really emphasises that it is part of Rochdale's history, but that Lower Falinge could be a celebrated part of that history in the future too. The future of the nearby JW Taylor Mechanical Engineering Building is not yet decided. We would urge that its potential is also unlocked, and not lost.

- ***RBH are right to be keeping some of the existing buildings in the neighbourhood.*** RBH's approach keeps some existing buildings and incorporates them into the new street pattern. This is in line with resident wishes and also helps to keep some of the existing qualities of the neighbourhood.
- ***In the future RBH should do the following:*** ensure they favour simplicity and predictability in house structure and urban form wherever possible; ensure future blocks have clearer 'backs and fronts'; and think more about how to work with residents and Rochdale Council to support more active travel. This might include making alternatives (whether that's walking, or car clubs) more convenient and appealing.
- ***Connecting past and present, town centre and regenerated neighbourhood.*** RBH should also continue to focus on improving the links between Lower Falinge and the historically important town centre (which is currently a heritage action zone). Working with Rochdale Council to 'tame' St Mary's Gate and better link Redcross Street and Toad Lane to Yorkshire Street will be crucial to this.
- ***Supporting the Rochdale Pioneers Museum.*** This is also an important opportunity to support the historically important Rochdale Pioneers Museum on Toad Lane which celebrates the town's globally-significant role in the birth of the co-operative movement. Done well regeneration will link this museum better both to the town centre but also to Lower Falinge.



Garages on Toad Lane before their replacement with terraced homes

The overall urban design of the improved neighbourhood is very good



New improved layout with streets, gardens, a new public square and houses

- ***The fundamental urban framework will be improved out of all recognition*** with better-overlooked public spaces and more clearly defined private spaces;
- ***The awareness of the town's heritage*** creates a neighbourhood that is less visually removed from its surroundings, but which nevertheless retains a distinct character;
- ***It provably responds to many of the comments made in workshops*** ("no private gardens" etc);
- ***It is likely to create buildings with lower long-term running costs*** (above all on Lower Falinge) with higher efficiency ratios and less internal semi-public space;
- ***If fits better to the data on more popular places;***
- ***Local connectivity beyond the site is improved;*** and
- ***Local connectivity within the site is set to improve*** with the replacement of most of the confused 1960s urban form and the ugly barriers.

The early phases are very well designed though difficult challenges are emerging on parking and block structure

Phases one and two were designed by OMI Architects. The first consisted of 26 family houses and bungalows, constructed predominantly with dark bricks. It was completed in 2015. Phase two is mostly a terraced street of red-brick houses. It was completed in late 2018.

In Phase one there are positive elements of the urban form and design. Key ones are:

- *The reintroduction of streets with street trees* and clear, coherent connections;
- *An improved degree of private space*, separate from public space; and
- *The use of two brick colours* as a way of providing simple and cost-efficient horizontal variegation, which is a positive.

Phase two is particularly good:

- *A revolutionary rediscovery of Toad Lane* with a marvellous row of new houses running down it in just the right place to 'make' a street;



Pioneering regeneration in Toad Lane

- ***A really clever use of inexpensive detailing*** via black bricks within the red bricks. By having patterns of this type of detail on the ground floor, above and beside windows, RBH are creating far more 'texture' than is usual in modern development and (we hope and assume?) at not too great a cost. They should keep doing this; and
- ***Good variety in a pattern.*** We love that RBH have made the house on the corner, closest to the older buildings, a different colour. This is a clever and inexpensive way of adding interest.



The new Toad Lane – with the corner house picked out in grey

In these houses RBH have (should they wish it) the heart of the 'façade pattern' for the rest of the development. RBH should ***keep things simple*** by continuing to use this approach, replicating it as far as possible for the rest of the site.

However there are challenges. These include:

- ***Confused backs and fronts.*** Particularly on phase one, the positioning of spaces between some buildings leaves some 'confused' space which is neither safely public nor private;
- ***Blank facades on phase one.*** Blank facades tend to discourage walking and active use of space. They are not 'walking architecture'. There are a couple of these and they should ideally be avoided in future phases;

- ***Small windows and doors on some new homes.*** Not only do these make insides darker and less valuable, they also have a similar effect as blank facades on the exterior; and
- ***Do worry about the public realm.*** The new Toad Lane has emerged from the scaffolding and is looking excellent. However, the public realm still needs work with trees and ideally less asphalt.

Phase three is composed of three blocks around a new green open space, 'Pioneer Park.' It is a mixture of 22 two and three-storey family homes and two five-storey buildings containing 33 flats. The architect is Levitt Bernstein and the planning application was submitted in August 2018.

Many of the underpinning design principles are excellent and very well aligned to a high probability of good outcomes for residents and the wider neighbourhood. The main positive elements of the urban form and design we would stress are;

- ***Much of the design follows a 'narrow fronts many doors' principle.*** In our experience this is aligned with greater levels of neighbourly interaction as well as making for (what most people feel to be) an attractive street scape;
- ***The main green space (Pioneer Park) is well located*** in the centre of access routes. (Greenery has most positive wellbeing impact when people encounter it regularly);
- ***We are very encouraged that windows and doors seem to more prominent in Phase three,*** compared with Phase one. If RBH come under any planning or cost pressures to do otherwise we would strongly urge them to stick with more clearly articulated facades. Keep windows and doors big!

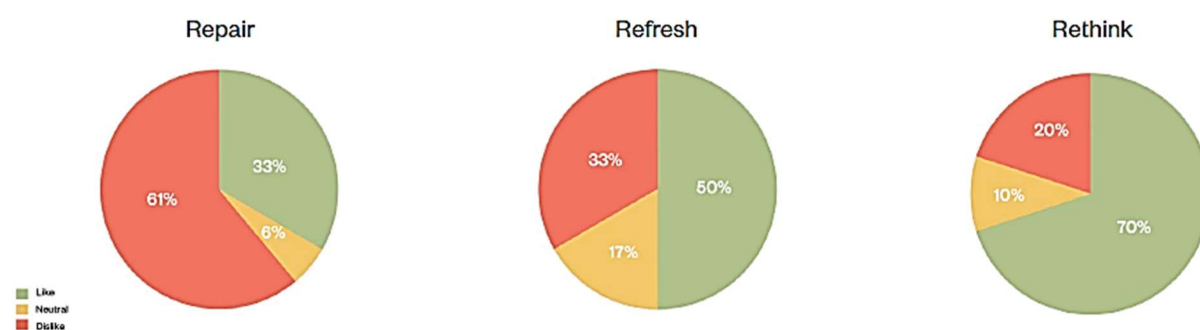
Will parking undermine the urban form? However, RBH are coming under pressure on parking requirements. The number of parking spaces per home required by policy is well in excess of current usage on the site. Having to attempt to incorporate this has weakened the previously strong block structure. This threatens to undo many of the qualities of the overall scheme.

Additionally, and partly as a response to parking requirements, some of the designs of the blocks have become rather complex. We would urge RBH to keep it simple! A straightforward set of designs on a traditional block structure can be both popular and inexpensive - as phase two has brilliantly demonstrated.

The process is thoughtful and fair

The overall process is excellent. There is a clear commitment to 'doing it right,' rather than doing it quickly. This has helped to build up trust and demonstrates that RBH are undertaking an iterative process *together* with the wider community. RBH recognise that they might not have all the answers to start with, but are learning and trying to get there in conjunction with the residents. The success and popularity of the Lower Falinge project so far seems to bear this out. Key positives include;

- The genuine co-design work undertaken;
- The clear data-trail of workshops run and resident views; and
- The unimpeachable evidence of polling support for the options RBH are selecting on Lower Falinge:



Feedback from workshop 2, held on 16th March 2017: 'Residents were able to vote either like, neutral, or dislike for each of the three options. These charts show that there is support in favour of higher levels of intervention, an increase in comparison with the feedback from workshop one. The rethink option has received a very positive response.' (Source: College Bank & Lower Falinge Spatial Strategy, September 2017.)

However there will be real challenges in the future

Of course all is not plain sailing. Real challenges lie ahead.

Money. Property values in Rochdale are not high, not much if at all higher than build costs. This means some level of support will be necessary.

Ironically, in trying to do the scheme by slowly building a positive and robust relationship with residents, some sources of funding, we understand, are proving harder to access than they would be the case if the approach were more rushed. Funding streams need to support RBH approaching regeneration in the right way for this neighbourhood.

Fast roads. The taming and framing of the wide and fast roads in Rochdale (St Mary's Gate and more broadly) is absolutely crucial to the successful delivery not just of RBH's plans but also of Rochdale's renaissance more broadly. Rochdale Council and RBH need to work together to ensure the intensification, beautification and speed-reduction of the fast roads that thread through the town centre. Taming this needless intra-urban speed is crucial to the long-term economic success of the town.

Parking. Another critical tension is parking. Local parking policy seems to directly contradict the broader strategic aim to promote active travel and reduce car usage. The number of cars required per household is unnecessarily high and the spatial consequence of this is undermining a safe and popular urban pattern. There is a danger that parking requirements will dictate the scheme's block structure leading to unclear backs and fronts and some of the errors of the past. This would undermine some of the potential improved outcomes for residents and the wider neighbourhood. The expectations that every household should have a car (which is not at present the case) need to be reduced. How can Rochdale promote car-sharing and more walking?

College Bank. Proposals to make changes at nearby College Bank are much more controversial than at Lower Falinge. Further detail is being worked up on options around both refurbishment and redevelopment. RBH are wisely approaching College Bank more slowly than Lower Falinge.

The policy context

RBH's aims are well aligned to national and Greater Manchester policy about good place-making and certainty of planning process. They should be supported.

National Estate Regeneration Policy. Lower Falinge and College Bank ticks numerous boxes on estate regeneration best practice:

- **It improves the urban design** that reflects the local area and local people's wishes;
- **It allows residents to move only once** (straight into their new homes);
- **It mixes new development with retaining some existing buildings** where possible; and
- **It genuinely involves residents in the key decisions.**

However this slower phase-by-phase approach could lead to challenges in securing funding. This is understandable. Funding supports new homes. However, it leads to a paradox. RBH might be better able to secure funding if they just knocked down the whole neighbourhood and rebuilt it from scratch. But would that be the right approach? We do not think so.

We recommend that funding streams should recognise that estate regeneration needs to be a careful and slow-moving process. This would incentivise best practice, and help support those who want to do things in the right way for that place - both in Rochdale and more widely.

Greater Manchester Policy. RBH are also trying to do the right thing in relation to Greater Manchester's strategic focus on encouraging walking and cycling. Lower Falinge focuses on pedestrian connectivity and reducing the car's dominance over the town centre. This ought to be strongly supported by The Mayor, Andy Burnham, who is committed to encouraging cycling and walking. (The appointment of Greater Manchester's first Cycling and Walking Commissioner has given this ambition a high profile.)

However, Rochdale Borough Council's parking policy at Lower Falinge does not yet appear to be in line with this approach. The amount of parking demanded is an *increase* on the existing very low usage. This doesn't seem wise: Whilst being 'new,' the development will be housing the same number of residents who currently live on the neighbourhood. There is therefore no need for the large amount of car parking space required by RBC. Lower Falinge could be an example of how Greater Manchester's strategy is successfully used in practice. But political vision and policy detail need to align to make it happen.

We should be helping good intentions lead to good outcomes. Lower Falinge could be a celebrated success story, demonstrating the link between strategic policy and specific, positive, results.

But it needs more support. It needs further financial support, so that it can continue to proceed. And it needs political support, to ensure its qualities aren't undermined by conflicts with local highways practice and parking policy. We are confident that a bit more joined-up thinking could support some really pioneering regeneration in Rochdale, worthy of its past and, we hope, of its renaissance to come.

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Create Streets exists to help solve the housing crisis and to help communities and developers co-create beautiful street-based places of sufficient density that will be popular with the wider community, are likely to be correlated with good wellbeing and sustainability outcomes and which are likely to prove good long term investments based on the historical data of value appreciation and maintenance costs.

Our goal is to make it easier to build high density, beautiful, street-based economically successful developments, that have strong local support and which residents will love for generations.

