

The
ISSUES
Project

SUE Success Stories: Sustainable Eastside

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1 Introduction

With 90% of the UK population living in urban areas, improving urban sustainability has become a pressing issue, not least in the regeneration sector. The rise of the sustainability agenda in this area has required dramatic learning in all sectors to cross the ‘sustainability divide’: moving from sustainable development good *intentions*, to *implementation*.

The Sustainable Eastside research project was supported by EPSRC’s SUEplus fund from May 2003 through to June 2008 to explore how sustainability is addressed in the regeneration decision-making process, and to assess the sustainability performance of completed development schemes against stated sustainability aspirations. At the time, the Birmingham Eastside regeneration project, located in the rapidly changing socio-economic and urban environment of Britain’s second largest city, was the largest city-centre redevelopment scheme in the UK. Researchers at the University of Birmingham and Birmingham City University approached a number of practitioners, including property developers *ISIS*, and were subsequently invited to observe and participate in all meetings relating to the *ISIS* development in Eastside, Warwick Bar. The Sustainable Eastside research team were later asked to contribute to *ISIS*’ sustainability policy training sessions. This case study highlights the permanent impact this knowledge exchange partnership had on the working practices of *ISIS*, the firm’s stakeholders, and in turn, the practitioner community.

1. Eastside Sustainability Research project (SUE Plus)

The Birmingham Eastside regeneration project involved a largely industrial area of 170 hectares just to the south-east of the city centre. The University of Birmingham (UoB) and Birmingham City University (BCU) began the Sustainable Eastside research project in 2003 to examine barriers to, and enablers of, the uptake of the sustainability agenda in the regeneration of Eastside.

Central to this project was integrating the researchers into the processes of various stakeholders active in Eastside, including planners, developers and their consultants, and the community itself. The academic team pursued relationships with a number of developers undertaking work in the Eastside regeneration area, although the most active relationship developed with *ISIS*, possibly attributable in part to their own pursuance of a sustainability agenda which included transparency and inclusiveness in the development process.

Researchers observed *ISIS*' Warwick Bar project team meetings, fed back observations and findings, provided an evidence base for some sustainability related aspects of development, and provided formal training to *ISIS* focused on the development decision-making process and sustainability. The Sustainable Eastside research team also provided *ISIS* and other stakeholders (including Birmingham City Council) with evidence-based technical information (i.e. on utility infrastructure, land use mapping, and biodiversity issues) developed through the EPSRC funded project. In return, *ISIS* provided access to their staff for interviews, to project team meetings and plans, and to other practitioners in the field.

At one of the formal training sessions run by the Sustainable Eastside team for *ISIS* in July 2007, the need for sharing knowledge and best practice within the organisation was identified; as a direct result, an internal network of sustainability policy champions was established by the firm. The research team provided technical information to those policy champions that aligned with the team's technical knowledge: biodiversity, energy, water, selected aspects of urban design, and so on. A researcher from another SUE funded project VivaCity also participated.

This case study highlights the successful relationship struck up between the academic research team and property developers *ISIS*, the positive influence the researchers had on the creation of the *ISIS* sustainability champion scheme and the permanent impact this knowledge exchange partnership had on the working practices of the firm and its partners.

Evidence in support of these impacts is drawn from personal accounts from the academics and practitioners, as well as evidence from a recent sustainability audit undertaken for *ISIS*' stakeholders *igloo*, which highlights the benefits of the partnership and recommends *igloo* itself adopt the sustainability policy champion scheme (planned for 2011). (Urbed 2009)

2. Drivers and Barriers

Drivers

The practitioner's perspective

'We hoped by mixing with them their brilliance might rub off on us'

Mike Finkill, ISIS (2010)

ISIS Waterside Regeneration was formed in 2002 as a joint venture between British Waterways, AMEC Developments (now MUSE Developments), and *igloo* Regeneration Fund to develop some of British Waterways' waterside property portfolio. *ISIS* specializes in the regeneration of waterside brownfield sites in urban UK locations. The firm has a sustainability charter central to its business model against which every potential development is evaluated. The firm only engages in development where the 3 dimensions of the charter can be gainfully addressed: regeneration impact; environmental sustainability; and waterside urban design. In its role as a regeneration specialist, *ISIS* strives to balance its commercial agenda with its dedication to sustainability.

ISIS perceives its sustainability agenda as providing a competitive advantage in the market place, particularly with public sector clients. To maintain and enhance its performance, *ISIS* draws upon knowledge and expertise networks to maximise the sustainability of its developments – thus identifying, developing and sharing best practice. Given the pioneering nature of the product at the early stages of Warwick Bar's development, data was often lacking to substantiate the case for the innovation and it is with this in mind that the firm welcomed a knowledge exchange partnership with the academic team.

The academic's perspective

In the last 10 years in particular, the research councils have focused on improving collaboration between academic disciplines and between academics and practitioners, with the goal of making academic research more useful. To incentivise this knowledge transfer from academic institutions, grants from the UK research councils are now graded on dissemination to, and impact on, non-academics. For the academic researchers, engagement with stakeholders is indicative that the research is yielding useful knowledge; involvement with developers brings attention from (thus opportunities to engage with) more developers, improving dissemination (and hopefully the resulting impact) of the research findings. Through discussing their collaboration with *ISIS* in various fora, the Sustainable Eastside team's work has come to the attention of other practitioners who have then expressed interest in engaging with them. Furthermore,

proof of impact has led to new funding opportunities and research avenues, as well as publications and dissemination networks.

Barriers/Challenges

‘Developers trade in product; academics trade in knowledge’

Lombardi, Finkill, Rogers (2008)

Both the practitioners and academics agreed that crossing the sector divide did not come without its difficulties, particularly with regards to temporal differences and the treatment of knowledge. Time constraints often mean practitioners need to act quickly, without the luxury of time to fully explore all options, whereas researchers often plan for certain research to endure months or years, expecting to publish only a few academic papers as a result of the lengthy research project. Thus, the close collaborative problem solving in the interest of advancing the sustainability agenda was recognised by both parties as a source of potential conflict.

3. Impact

Perhaps the greatest benefit as perceived by *ISIS* has been credibility with stakeholders about its sustainability agenda: public sector partners (Local Authorities and Regional Development Agencies) are increasingly including a sustainability requirement in their tenders for development: for example, Birmingham City Council's vision for Birmingham's Eastside regeneration project was at the time that it be 'an exemplar of sustainable development'. These public bodies then include sustainability amongst their criteria for selecting development partners. The external validation of *ISIS*' efforts to lead in sustainability has demonstrably influenced public agency bodies when bidding for work, a commitment which was evidenced in part by external auditing, and in part through transparency of process, and including the university researchers in their process.

Through the information exchange, both *ISIS* and the research team had a chance to validate their work on sustainability. *ISIS* tapped the evidence-based research of the universities to advance its thinking on the cutting edge of sustainability, and to validate (or disprove) assumptions about best practice; and the research team grounded its observations and analysis in practitioner experience rather than theoretical constructs to improve applicability of its work.

The combination of different perspectives also stimulated learning. For *ISIS*, a new perspective developed as researchers engaged with *ISIS*' knowledge processes, asking questions and challenging assumptions. For the researchers, involvement with the practitioners informed new research questions which has fed into new grants and studentships. Furthermore, introductions and invitations made through *ISIS* have enabled the researchers to access more practitioner and policy circles than they might have otherwise.

Although the policy champion scheme has since been halted due to redundancies at *ISIS*, the benefits of the scheme were cited in the firm's recent sustainability audit and will soon be adopted by *ISIS*' stakeholders *igloo*.

4. Conclusion

By means of close collaboration and information exchange, both *ISIS* and the research team had a chance to validate their work on sustainability and the combination of different perspectives also stimulated learning: for *ISIS*, a new perspective developed as researchers engaged with the firm's knowledge processes, asking questions and challenging assumptions; for the researchers, involvement with the practitioners informed new research questions.

Furthermore, as a direct impact *ISIS* increased its credibility with stakeholders about its agenda and commitment to sustainability, so much so that the benefits of the scheme were cited in the firm's recent sustainability audit. Although the policy champion scheme has since been halted due to staff cut backs at *ISIS*, a reinvigoration of the scheme is planned by *ISIS* and stakeholders *igloo* in 2011.

5. References

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