

Speed dating for eager boroughs and developers

Sitematch launched in London, concentrating a number of pre-application meetings into a single day. Colin Marrs reports

On March 3rd more than 100 property developers joined 50 senior council officers from 27 London councils to gather at City Hall for the inaugural Sitematch London event. The event was timed to take place the week before a swathe of the capital's development community decamped to the South of France for MIPIM. With most councils choosing not to attend that event, Sitematch London provided developers with an opportunity to meet and discuss priority development sites which would not be promoted in Cannes.

The event adopted a speed-dating format, with 486 15-minute meetings taking place throughout the day. Before the event, councils had identified up to eight sites each of which were available to view on a dedicated website. During the day, the developers had the undivided attention of the key planning and economic development officials charged with helping to unlock any barriers standing in the way of development.

With more councils charging for pre-application discussions – up to £3,000 per meeting in some London councils – the day provided a cost-effective way of developers to get access to planners who will be making decisions on some of the most lucrative real estate opportunities in the UK. Apart from the cost, organising pre-application meetings can often be a logistical nightmare. According to one developer on the day: "Just getting through by phone to hard-pressed planning departments can often prove difficult, and arranging a time to meet can take weeks."

For a fee of £199, developers were given access to the online prospectus of the council's sites for a year, and were allowed to attend up to five meetings at the Sitematch London event. This allowed firms to hold mini pre-application meetings with a number of councils – most of which will not be attending MIPIM – in just one day. This intensity of information gathering would be impossible in normal circumstances.

As well as the sites identified by the councils, attendees were able to discuss other opportunities they had sourced themselves, and to find out about relevant planning policy and economic development priorities in the borough. Ian Harribin, managing director of Complex Development Projects said: "I came down to Sitematch and have 15 minute meetings with local authorities and it saved me hours of leafing through documents. Also it's my opportunity to tell councils why we are different and what we can do."

The format also worked well for councils – concentrating a number of pre-application meetings into a single day meant that officers were able to return to the office with more time to focus on their core planning functions. It also provided them with an opportunity to market their key sites and build initial relationships with developers in a more time-efficient manner than the usual pre-application meeting format.

Sitematch London organiser 3Fox International assigned

each council a special advisor from one of the participating planning consultancies. These advisors helped the councils identify their key sites, and provide information on location, site size and designated use classes. The advisors attended on the day to provide logistical support and support to council officers meeting with developers.

Toby Fox, managing director at 3Fox International says that it is early days in assessing feedback from the event, but says that the number of attendees demonstrates that enthusiasm of London's private and public sector development community for the concept of the event. Fox says: "It was difficult to spot a council that was not engaged in discussions at any point during the day."

Fox says that developers were notably pleased when they were able to discuss sites with planners as well as economic regeneration officers. He says: "They got more out of that than just meeting either type of officer alone. One said to me that this enabled them to tease out any potential policy conflicts within the council and to gauge how the councils would overcome these."

Outside of the formal meetings, there was an opportunity to network with contractors, housing associations and other members of the development world. On a splendidly sunny day, the balcony of the top floor of City Hall, overlooking Tower Bridge, provided a spectacular backdrop to these discussions. One developer said: "After coming to the event today, I now have more leads than a dog handler."

Fox says that the event will not necessarily lead instantly to deals – although one developer reported that he had got on a shortlist for a scheme he would not otherwise have known about – but to spread understanding and build relationships which can be built on at follow-up meetings. As with a normal speed-dating event, some encounters will fail to spark any interest, but Fox is hopeful that many could lead to further meetings and some potentially long-lasting relationships.

In the morning, before the first formal meeting of the day, the event hosted the ceremony for the official departure of 80 built environment professionals taking part in the Cycle to Cannes charity event. The riders raised money by cycling from London and arriving at MIPIM the following week. The spectacle of the lycra-clad bike riders provided a suitably colourful start to the events of the day.

One of those on the ride was Brendon Walsh, property and regeneration director at the London Borough of Ealing. Fox says: "It was my conversations with Brendon that initially planted the seed which grew into the Sitematch London event. The event would not have happened without Brendon – in preparation for the event, he talked to all councils in London to explain the concept and encourage them to take part."

Walsh, says: "While in discussion with Toby on the way back



from MIPIM, we identified that very few local authorities were prepared or able to attend the conference and we felt it was an opportunity missed." The pair did more research and found that fewer than half of the biggest 50 councils in the UK attended MIPIM. Fox says: "We thought this was risible, given that this is a country which is trying to promote itself as being open for business."

The pair set about exploring why councils were failing to attend, and found out that the main factor was that of public perceptions. In times of austerity it is hard for a council to be seen to be spending money to go to the south of France, despite the benefits for investment the trip could reap. Fox says: "We thought that was a shame, and had a feeling there might be a way for us to help them promote their key schemes."

When Fox contacted councils to ask them about their priority development sites, he found that 78 per cent of councils said that they did not have that information and moreover did not have the resources available to provide it. Fox says: "I came to the conclusion that if I was a major investor, and received this response, I probably wouldn't look at London."

Then it occurred to me – why don't we see if we can promote the sites on the councils' behalf?" Walsh says: "The idea came to us that if we could facilitate a way to complement MIPIM, by getting the public and private sectors into one room for a no-frills event that was purely about making introductions and doing deals, there could be significant benefits for everyone."

Since 2004, 3Fox International has been producing magazines, websites and networking events for local authorities promoting their regeneration projects around the UK. Fox says that costs for councils are kept down by attracting private advertising to help subsidise the products. He says: "For a minimal outlay, these councils get high quality events and resources

to promote development within their patches."

These principles were applied to Sitematch London. 3Fox International researchers drew up proposed lists of sites for each borough – often by poring over local development framework documents – which were then approved and amended by council officials. Once the sites were agreed, the company started marketing them to developers interested in opportunities in London. Fox says: "We took the idea to the GLA, where we sat down with David Lunts, executive director of housing and regeneration. He pledged his support, and agreed to let us hold the event in the City Hall."

The support of Lunts helped get London mayor Boris Johnson on board with the idea.

Johnson wrote to all the local authorities encouraging them to take part. In his letter, he said: "This initiative is a significant way for us to work with the private sector, to attract their interest and to stimulate investment in our city." Sir Peter Rogers, advisor for regeneration, growth and enterprise at the GLA also provided support at the event and is helping explore how to take the event forward.

As for the future, Fox says: "There will definitely be another Sitematch London event in the future. The sheer numbers and quality of those who attended shows that there is a demand from both developers and councils to meet each other in a focused, cost-effective environment. We are examining the format, and will learn from the experience we gained through the inaugural event."

In the meantime, councils are being encouraged to add more sites to their profile on the Sitematch London website. Developers will be able to register an interest in the sites, and 3Fox International is looking to hold another event later this year. Fox says: "We are also looking to extend the concept to other cities around the UK and to other public sector bodies which hold land." ■



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Sitematch London is at www.sitematchlondon.co.uk