

PARTNERSHIP WORKING AT DERWENTHORPE: ARE THERE LESSONS FOR THE INDUSTRY?

The award-winning mixed housing development of Derwenthorpe in east York can provide valuable lessons for house-builders, clients, housing associations and residents.



The development of around 500 homes – a partnership between the Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust (JRHT) and David Wilson Homes (DWH) – has four phases.

The first phase of 64 houses was completed earlier this year and DWH was invited to re-tender for the second, third and fourth, which it did successfully.

Work has begun on the remaining phases, which will see 425 new family homes built – 253 for sale and 172 for shared ownership and affordable rent.

The environmentally and socially sustainable development won the Housing Design Awards' concept award in 2010 and project award in 2013.

So what can be learned from Derwenthorpe?

- Building on-site, life-sized prototype houses allows innovations, technical specifications and layouts to be tested and measured.
- Splitting the project into phases allows residents to give feedback, which can influence the design and servicing of future homes on the site.
- Mutual trust between parties and creating an agreed vision is essential to avoid 'dumbing down' the project's principles and standards.
- Investing in infrastructure and landscaping early lets potential house-buyers see the neighbourhood, rather than a building site, making sales easier.
- Environmental measures need to be carefully explained and marketed as cost-saving so they are not a deterrent.
- Working with residents and having the courage to change things that have not worked as well as anticipated is important.

NOVEMBER 2013



Sharing the vision

JHRT's development director, Nigel Ingram, says the partnership with DWH is a little like a marriage arranged by the European Commission (EC). It has its ups and downs – a consequence of the EC's initial formal tendering processes bringing them together – and both parties have had to learn how to work with each other. But the outcome is greater than the sum of its parts.

European procurement laws meant JHRT had to use an invitation to tender for the development opportunity. DWH – part of Barratt – was attracted to the site, not least for its location near to its York office. DWH had, in fact, been interested in the site for ten years, says its managing director, Paul Newman. From around 16 expressions of interest, DWH emerged victorious. This was principally because of the amount of money the firm offered for the land, but also because they took JHRT's nine principal objectives for Derwenthorpe seriously, rather than dilute them by building standard housing.

Any builder not only had to work to the planning permission and performance standards outlined, but also had to understand more subjective points about creating a sense of place, a development that fits its surroundings and a community that will still work well in decades to come. Nigel says: "They convinced us they would not try to dumb them down and so that's how the relationship started."

Paul says DWH wanted to join forces with JHRT because it knew its prospective partner's size and work as a "forward-thinking" institution with an important research and influencing role for the wider industry. DWH was also keen to continue the work it had begun on zero-carbon homes in Britain's first zero carbon community – Bristol's Hanham Hall. DWH's technical director, Gavin Birch, adds that DWH had the national profile JHRT was looking for, with powerful sales, marketing and customer service operations and the in-house ability to provide the technology they were interested in.

"The two organisations were probably a good fit for each other," Gavin says. "As a vendor they are unique, as they were prepared to accept significant upfront costs. What was attractive was that they were going to be custodians of the landscaping and the green development."

Creating a community

A development agreement was signed by the parties in March 2011. This meant JHRT would pay DWH to build 25 affordable homes and DWH would pay JHRT for 39 plots of land, on which it would develop additional homes for sale. Crucially, despite their tenure, all the homes would look the same and be built to the same standards, with DWH recognising York's policy of pepper-potting affordable homes across the site.

Paul says: "If you want to buy a new-build house in York you have to accept you will be very close to, or next to, a social housing unit – that's just life." Phasing also allowed each side to form a working relationship without committing to the full project, so there was scope for either to leave the project.

The method was to create 'serviced plots', where houses would be built with infrastructure, landscaping and roads and sewers to service them, as opposed to infrastructure being gradually

added. JRHT took care of planning permission and section 106 costs – a planning clause in which a developer is obliged to contribute something for the good of the community. This reduced the element of risk in the development.

DWH paid an initial lump sum for the land, and paid for the rest of the land as and when people bought homes. But significantly JRHT only handed over the land when the housing was completed. “We felt we were an equal partner, rather than handing over all our cards,” says Nigel. “It was a relationship for the 21st century. It was set up that way, and we stuck to our guns.”

A key decision was to invest in well-planned public spaces at the earliest possible stage, so that prospective buyers could see what they were buying into. Infrastructure and high-quality landscaping including green space and play areas were considered a far more enticing prospect for visitors than living on a building site for six months.

“They were buying a place rather than a plot,” say Nigel. Gavin adds: “They could see the vistas, the outlook and the commitment to quality.” DWH now tries to persuade its new vendors with land holdings that this principle of early investment in landscaping is best.

Paul says: “You deliver the increased land value throughout the lifecycle of the site, not at day one. When it got green and it became obvious it was a very attractive feature, it became a big selling tool. It became a place, and people were buying into a place – they didn’t have to use their imagination.” Homes sold quicker than the firm’s national average as a result.

Thinking ahead

Building homes that will be as appealing in decades to come as they are now is another aspect of Derwenthorpe’s success. Homes were hooked up to the fibre-optic communications network. This was paid for by JHRT as part of servicing the site, because, at this stage, it did not know that DWH would win future phases. The development has a partner telecom supplier that was willing to invest upfront and build infrastructure following a three-year service agreement.

The development has a Sustainable Urban Drainage System (SUDS) feeding into a ‘balancing pond’, which prevents flooding and has been landscaped to entice wildlife. The site is an urban extension, so needed to be well connected with other areas. A plan for the whole site was produced by architects PRP in 1999. It included four different access points into the site, dividing it up into quarters, with a Sustrans cycle link through the middle. This meant there was no ‘rat run’ while work was done on some of the feeder roads and a new one was being built from the nearby village of Osbaldwick.

Sustainability and the environment are central themes at Derwenthorpe, rather than afterthoughts. It is a low-carbon community, drawing on some of the lessons learned in another, environmentally-experimental JRHT scheme built in New Earswick in 2006-7 with only moderate success. Because Derwenthorpe’s houses are so thermally efficient, most of the energy needed was for hot water. So a communal heating system comes from a biomass boiler at an energy centre. This was recommended as the best low-carbon method for 500 homes.

There are three sustainable transport measures. First, the Sustrans cycle track from Wigginton, through York to Selby; second, an electric bus which will be on-site next year; and third a car club, to which each household has two years’ free membership, to encourage

residents to think about whether they need a second car. Each household also gets £150 to buy a bike or a bus pass.

Designed for life

Good architecture has also had a major bearing on Derwenthorpe's success. Houses are an average of 100m sq and built to Lifetime Homes standards – industry-wide design principles determined by housing experts. The contemporary look is a 21st century interpretation of the Arts and Crafts movement used when Joseph Rowntree built the 'garden village' of New Earswick in York around a century ago.

Designed by Richards Partington Architects, the homes' distinctive features, such as steeply-pitched roofs, painted brickwork and striking dormer windows, have been well received. The 2.7m-high ceilings have been so popular DWH has used them in other projects. Some ideas have been dropped for the future phases, however.

One example is the Mechanical Ventilation with Heat Recovery system (MVHR), which has been replaced by an extract system called Mechanical Extract Ventilation (MEV). Another is the segregation of space to form winter gardens. Residents said they would prefer the extra floorspace, but they will still be available as an option for future buyers. JRHT was the energy service company (ESCO – a business that provides and manages energy services), supplying heat to residents, building the first 3km of heating pipework from the energy centre to the 64 homes. The next 7km of pipework and boilers will be covered by a 25-year concessionaire agreement between JHRT and a company called Dalkia that specialises in communal heating.

While Ipsos Mori focus groups were commissioned to consider some of the features, it was the partnership's ability to test key elements of the scheme by building two prototype houses on Temple Avenue, adjacent to the site, in 2008/09 that provided some of the most practical feedback.

See <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/temple-avenue-project-energy-efficient-homes>

A successful match

So how has JRHT and DWH's relationship panned out? Paul says: "It was a happy marriage in all. Like all things, it was tough in the beginning. It's quite straightforward now in that we know them, and they know us. We've always said to them since the phase two bid process that this is our site too. We have got a responsibility here.

"We now know that we're both tied in for the long-term, so there's a lot more trust and a lot better understanding between all parties. We've done the hard yards."