

RURAL HOUSING MODELS: BLENHEIM ESTATE, ENGLAND

Homes completed:
2017 (ongoing)

Housing Need

Targets for addressing this issue were set by West Oxfordshire District Council's Local Plan, but tackling the problem also fitted with the Estate's core strategic objectives: to be the life blood of the local economy, to enhance the lives of the people of Oxfordshire, and to share and conserve the Palace for current and future generations.

Accessing Land

As a landowner, the Estate was in the fortunate position of having access to land and worked with West Oxfordshire District Council to identify land suitable for development.

Partnership Working

The Estate worked closely with West Oxfordshire District Council and the developments aligned with targets for affordable housing set out in the West Oxfordshire District Council Local Plan 2031.



Landowner-retained affordable housing

In an area where house prices are 17 times average salaries, home ownership, and even rental options, are out of reach for those on average income. Hear how one landowner has developed a model for affordable housing which allows for a return on investment in both financial terms, and in terms of their objectives to support the local community.

The Homes

A mix of affordable rental and shared ownership homes were built by a medium-sized housebuilder which was acquired by the Estate before starting the project. The model allows the Estate to retain some affordable homes as rental properties and sell others on a shared equity basis. In addition, the Estate retained a small proportion of the wider build as rentals, with the rest sold on the open market. This provides a cross-section of tenure options.

The affordable rental properties are managed by the Estate using their existing team, supported by an additional housing officer who is also employed by the Estate.

Community Engagement

For the sites in Woodstock, where 150 of the 300 homes being built are affordable, the Estate worked with a local consultation and engagement charity, Community First Oxfordshire, to produce a Community and Infrastructure Delivery Plan.

The plan was developed following extensive consultation including: 12 public consultation events; surveys; direct consultation with over 50 local groups; and targeted consultations with young people (under 16s) to explore the meaning of community and understand how community life can be improved for those of all ages.

Community and Infrastructure Delivery Plan:

www.communityfirstoxon.org/woodstock-community-plan

Oxford Brookes report on The Blenheim Estates / West Oxfordshire

DC Affordable Housing Partnership: www.bit.ly/blenheimreport



Designing the Homes

The Estate's first project sought to deliver the best homes possible for the affordable housing properties, within the parameters of the existing design/planning consent. In addition, the Estate provided kitchen appliances and carpets for the affordable rental properties - items frequently omitted by most registered providers, yet items the team considered essential to make a home. Future developments will be built to PassivHaus standard, providing more comfortable and affordable homes helping address fuel poverty, the climate emergency and general housing affordability. The Estate is also seeking to significantly reduce the amount of land on a development site afforded to vehicles - typically the land given to vehicles on a site accounts for 40%, but the team have designed theirs so that it is less than 20%.

"Estates, large landowners and institutions can look at affordable housing as an asset to be held for the long term. It can generate commercial returns while ensuring a greater degree of control than might otherwise be the case with housing associations.

"We see this as being particularly important for landowners who care about their local communities, and where the developments are on their doorstep, so that they can ensure the homes are affordable in perpetuity and are well designed and maintained for generations."

Matthew Neilson,
Head of Property and Development,
Blenheim Estate

Section 106 Agreements

These legally binding agreements between a local authority in England and a developer are also known as planning obligations. They are used when a development will have significant impacts on the local area that cannot be moderated by standard planning conditions and aim to balance this impact with improvements to ensure the overall development will make a positive contribution to the local community.

Keeping the Homes Affordable

The section 106 agreements (see text box) in place for the development require the homes to be affordable in perpetuity. Allocations for the affordable housing are made by the District Council.

Affordable rent tenancies are initially offered on a 12-month probation. On successful completion of the probation period tenancies of 5 years are offered. These are reviewed at the end of the term to check the tenant still meets the requirements for affordable housing.

This differs from the traditional offer from registered providers who generally issue Assured Tenancies which can effectively result in tenancies for life. The Assured Shorthold Tenancies offered by the Estate help ensure that homes remain available for those in greatest housing need. As the Estate is not a registered provider it is not subject to Right to Buy regulations.

In terms of shared ownership, buyers can staircase to 100% equity, however the Estate keeps a pre-emption right to buy back the property and re-market it on a shared ownership basis, thereby enabling the property to remain affordable.

Funding

Whilst the Estate was able to access private finance to develop the affordable homes, a business case still needed to be made for the development. Using the same proportion and mix of affordable homes on the sites they were able to generate a commercial return from the affordable homes while offering affordable rent properties at 60% of Market Rent.

Accessing Expertise

As the Estate had an existing portfolio of residential properties they were able to utilise their existing property management, maintenance, marketing and finance functions to access most of the expertise they needed. A housing officer with experience in affordable rent management was also recruited to the team early on to support this area. The Estate acquired a local housebuilder - Pye Homes - before the start of the project so that the whole project could be managed in-house allowing hands-on approach at every stage.

This case study was produced for the 2021 Rural Housing Summit from Rural Housing Scotland with support from UN-Habitat and sponsored by Ecology Building Society.