

RURAL HOUSING MODELS: OLD MILL COURT, SION MILLS, N. IRELAND

Homes completed:

Dec 2019



Housing Need

The need for additional new-build social housing was clear from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's waiting list which showed that there was a substantial number of people in housing stress within the area as well as a lack of suitable housing. There was also a need for the provision of specially adapted homes for people whose lives had been impacted by disability or illness.

Accessing Land

A brownfield site within a residential area in the village was identified following a study by Rural Housing Association as being suitable for the development. Following approval from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, the project was able to proceed.

Partnership Working

Rural Housing Association worked closely with both the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the Department for Communities to assess the need for the project and ensure it was designed to meet the needs of those on the waiting list.

Community at the heart of social housing

The village of Sion Mills in County Tyrone is in one of the most deprived rural areas in Northern Ireland, with high unemployment and a lack of social housing meaning that many families and individuals on low incomes struggled to find suitable housing within their budget. The Old Mill Court development was completed in December 2019 as part of Rural Housing Association's commitment to providing affordable accommodation.

Community Engagement

Supporting the regeneration of rural communities is at the heart of Rural Housing Association's efforts to provide affordable accommodation in villages like Sion Mills, and effective community engagement from the outset is vital to achieving that goal.

From the project's inception, Rural Housing Association and architects GM Design prioritised engaging with the community in order to better understand the needs of the local area.

Locally held consultations during the planning process provided a vital platform for individuals and businesses to have their say, ensuring that their feedback directly influenced the design of the development and local school children chose its name.

Old Mill Court has also been designated as a 'Housing for All' scheme or Shared Neighbourhood, a community relations plan designed to create more inclusive and connected places to live through a programme of activities in the local area.

As part of this, an advisory group made up of local statutory and voluntary organisations working in the area has been set up to identify how to address any issues that arise. So far, activities have tackled issues such as social isolation and loneliness, diversity, health and wellbeing and COVID-19 emergency support such as food delivery services.

There is also a five-year activities and projects plan for the development.

For more information on Old Mill Court see:
www.ruralhousing.co.uk/old-mill-court-sion-mills-co-tyrone/

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Designing the Homes

In 2014 Rural Housing Association and GM Design Associates created the Rural Design Guide for Social Housing which provides a framework to help planners design social housing schemes in rural areas in a way that is sympathetic to their surrounding environment. The principles set out in the guide were then used in the design concept for Old Mill Court.

One example of this is the reflection of the heritage of the local village and surrounding rural location in the new development.

The architects studied historic buildings in the area, including Herdman's Mill and Sion Stables. They then looked at the materials and detailing used in local historic buildings to help identify features within the architecture of the wider village that could be replicated in the design of Old Mill Court, ensuring that its features are appropriate to its setting and that it does not look out of place with the rest of the village.

What's in a name?

When it came to deciding a name for the development, Rural Housing Association and GM Design Architects opted to let young people in the area choose.

A competition to name the project was held in conjunction with the local primary school with the winning name, 'Old Mill Court', submitted by a pupil in primary six.

Keeping the Homes Affordable

To ensure that the homes in the Old Mill Court development are kept affordable, the properties are managed by Rural Housing Association.

Rural Housing Association is responsible for the allocation and renting of the homes to tenants and continues to work with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to allocate homes using the housing waiting list.

As the properties are designated as social housing, all rents within the scheme reflect the local housing allowance rates for the area which ensures rent is set at an affordable rate for tenants.

Funding

Old Mill Court was developed as a Housing for All scheme which meant that it received funding from the Department for Communities and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

Additional funding was secured to develop the comprehensive five-year community relations plan for the area as part of Rural Housing Association's commitment to supporting the regeneration of rural communities.

The project was also part financed through Dankse Bank.

The Homes

The 14-unit development is made up of a mix of one, two and three bedroom properties, including two homes designed to provide for those with complex needs.

The scheme was built by a local firm, the Kevin Watson Group, which worked closely with the architects, GM Design Associates to develop a the project in line with Rural Housing Association's Rural Housing Guide.

"As part of our five-year plan for the area, tenants of Old Mill Court have the opportunity to participate in regular activities to promote the development of positive relationships within the scheme as well as community relations initiatives to foster interaction between the tenants and the surrounding community.

"This proactive approach to building vibrant and connected communities is a tangible example of the impact a comprehensive community plan can have on reconnecting communities and building a sense of belonging in rural areas.

"And to ensure the sustainability of the community engagement work we have also established a tenant steering group which will help direct community relations activities in the future."

Stephen Fisher,
CEO, Rural Housing Association

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