Case study: Upper Horfield Regeneration

This case study explores how tenants and residents can become involved in decisions about the design of a regenerated estate to create a successful place.

Project name: Upper Horfield Regeneration Scheme
Location: Bristol
Organisations involved:
- Housing Association: United Communities (incorporating Bristol Community Housing Foundation)
- Developer: Bovis Homes
- Local authority: Bristol City Council

The opportunity

Upper Horfield estate, made up of approximately 650 homes, was originally built in the 1920s as a public housing project to rehouse those living in substandard dockside tenements. The homes were some of the first in the country to be constructed using an innovative reinforced concrete method to allow quick and economical construction. However, over time the concrete panels deteriorated and the landlord, Bristol City Council, found they were uneconomical to repair, and it could not afford to replace the homes in their entirety on its own.

The solution was to create a partnership between the Council; a community housing association set up specifically for the project- Bristol Community Housing Foundation (the Foundation); and a private developer, Bovis Homes. From the start, the Foundation had strong tenant and resident involvement with representation on the board and residents taking part in key decision-making.

Top tips

- Including younger people in the decision-making process can benefit behaviour outcomes and create positive opportunities for young people.
- Much of the ongoing success of Upper Horfield as a place to live has been the focus on a wide range of community activities and improvement of community facilities.
- Achieving good design means looking beyond the front door of the house to think about the quality of the streets, spaces and facilities being built.
What they did

The partnership was particularly innovative – the scheme was delivered without external public subsidy (bar the land – see below) and involved the new housing association taking the lead in managing the financing and procurement of the project. Bristol City Council’s contribution was to hand the land of the estate (40 acres) over to the new housing association at no cost, on the condition it would provide 401 new homes for social rent (of an eventual total of 925 homes across the estate).

The Foundation, with input from tenants and residents, sought out a private developer partner. The contract with the first development partner was terminated when it sought to change the design and disregarded design principles that residents had wanted. The Foundation then selected Bovis, which paid £17m to the Foundation for half the site to build 524 private houses. It was also required as part of the agreement to build all of the social housing for a fixed price.

This sum, however, was insufficient to pay for all of the social housing, so the Foundation also secured bank finance, and continues to manage the rental income to ensure the estate is maintained and the loan is repaid over 30 years.

Given the dependence of the Foundation on rental income, a key part of their approach has been to involve a credit union, which gives tenants access to regular financial and debt advice from a trustworthy source. This helps keep rent arrears down. To date, it has helped more than 10% of tenants.

What tenants and residents wanted for their neighbourhood

– Residents wanted to avoid artificial separation between the different tenures. As a result, the private and social rent homes are mixed together approximately 50:50 along each street.
– Residents were particularly interested in how the public spaces in the new scheme would provide opportunities for children and young people to play and for families to interact. To reduce vehicle speeds and improve the feeling that the street is a space to be used, its design includes a single surface treatment for cars and pedestrians, integrating parking spaces and extensive landscaping.
– Older children were involved in the design of play spaces within the estate, including a basketball court, so their needs were addressed as well as those of very small children.
– A ‘Young Rangers’ project and a regular youth club was started to encourage young people to take pride and keep an eye on the new play area.
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Challenges

– Dealing with residents’ anxiety: By involving residents from the start, the Foundation built a relationship and a feeling of trust that homes and the neighbourhood would ultimately be a better place to live.
– Losing time and adding costs: Changing contractors lost time on the project, which can have cost implications. However, adhering to residents’ desired designs resulted in a place that everyone is happy with, ten years on.
– Designing streets and spaces that worked for everyone: The Foundation saw the value of involving people in the design of outdoor streets and spaces, meaning those walking, cycling, playing or driving all felt as though their needs were addressed.
The Foundation has always seen the regeneration of the estate as more than the replacement of housing, with a system of community support activity and projects running from the initial planning and design stage through to the present day. These include:

- an antisocial behaviour plan
- ‘Pride of Place’: an initiative to support local management and involvement in all the green spaces on the estate
- youth work to encourage good behaviours to encourage local young people to feel proud of where they live
- new food-growing spaces and a community garden to provide a space for community activities.

The use of a housing association that was set up just to deliver this large regeneration scheme has helped tenants feel that they are part of the decision-making. The Foundation’s decision to change contractor helped to show the wider tenant base that their needs were being listened to.