

BIRMINGHAM MUNICIPAL HOUSING TRUST

Birmingham City Council is changing the perception of public housing



Birmingham Municipal Housing Trust was established in 2009 with a remit to build new council houses on council owned land for the first time in the city for 30 years. The initial aim was to build new high quality homes for rent, applying good urban design principles to regenerate poor areas of municipal housing, kick start stalled major regeneration schemes, add value and change perceptions of council housing generally and poor housing estates in particular. As the project has grown over the last five years, it has been expanded to build market homes for sale. To ensure successful delivery, pioneering contracts with developers were put in place so that upfront costs for building are minimised whilst cross-subsidy from homes for sale is maximised. To date 977 homes have been built on 35 sites with 1531 more homes under construction or in the pipeline.

BUILDING ON DESIGN QUALITY

From the outset BMHT was designed through a small multi-disciplinary internal team of a planner, urban designer, landscape architect, arboriculturist and housing development manager; as the project grew, a highways officer was included. Proposed development sites go through a rigorous preliminary

assessment process via the internal design team, after which regular pre-application design team meetings guide the design process. There is a presumption in favour of retaining trees, protecting the amenity of neighbours, working positively with difficult topography, and a commitment to building in secure-by-design principles, providing usable public open space (where there is a need or planning requirement), integrating development into the neighbourhood, both physically and through the architecture, and providing high quality external works in both public and private areas. There are also several major housing regeneration schemes that will be delivered through BMHT (200+ homes) where masterplans include sites for retail as well as public open space, focusing on place making, access to local facilities and public transport, in addition to the detailed housing design and delivery requirements.

REGENERATION THROUGH DESIGN

The initial focus of BMHT schemes was to make 'failed' housing blocks and estates work, by creating well designed homes and neighbourhoods. Developments are carefully designed to integrate within communities, to complement the overall housing need and tenure mix of the wider



community. Many development sites had poor quality, overgrown, unsightly land formerly occupied by obsolete council properties, causing blight and detriment to neighbouring properties and residents. By delivering new homes on these sites, local communities are being revitalised and reconnected rather than split or separated by wasteland.

In several instances, the layouts of whole estates have been revisited to overcome the problems created by Radburn layouts in association with poor quality housing. This has involved wholesale clearance, road closures and the creation of new development layouts that are integrated, connected development blocks where the public and private realms are clearly defined.

NEWTOWN

Newtown in north Birmingham, about two miles from the city centre was one of the first large scale regeneration areas delivered by BMHT. The existing housing was system-built and poorly laid out along Radburn principles. There were a limited number of roads and an extensive network of segregated footpaths. Many houses were only accessible from footpaths. The area was beset by associated anti-social behaviour, safety and security issues.

↙ After – Newtown Master Plan
← Before – Newtown 'Radburn Layout'
←← Community Involvement

Alongside new housing, the project included the redevelopment of a primary, secondary and special school and the creation of a new public square and community hub, The Lighthouse. These are fully integrated within the new housing.

The layout, as with all BMHT schemes, follows good urban design principles such as active frontages, properties backing on to each other, clear demarcation between public and private space, well connected permeable road layouts overlooked by the front of properties that avoid creating left over or dead space which could become a magnet for anti-social behaviour. Property types and sizes are mixed together and are tenure blind, and great care is taken to deliver well considered, context appropriate, distinctive and innovative architecture that is generally contemporary in character. Place-making principles are embedded from start to finish, with clear outcomes shown in the high quality finished schemes.

A key facet of the multi-disciplinary approach is to ensure space and quality standards were prioritised. All BMHT sites are within existing communities in the urban area, and projects take inspiration from and are integrated with their surroundings; they also address the fundamental issues as to why the original built form did not create a desirable living environment.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

BMHT projects place community involvement and feedback at the heart of each development. All sites developed involve detailed public engagement and consultation, with larger sites, such as Newtown, providing training to residents on the principles of good urban design, so that they can make an informed assessment of the layout and appearance of new schemes. Local school children in Newtown benefited from a 12 month Young Design champions bespoke training initiative, helping to shape proposals for new open space and public realm.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

There is a constant review of the process and measures put in place to address any identified gaps or weaknesses in the process that could potentially diminish design quality. Notably a BMHT external works design guide and a guide setting

out best practice in design, construction and marketing of BMHT homes for sale have been prepared, a house types catalogue establishing house footprints and space standards is in preparation, and modifications are being made to tender documents to clarify design requirements and ensure delivery of consistent high-quality design in all aspects of development. A framework of pre-approved contractors is in place with key performance indicators set to monitor schemes and design quality.

The integrated design, planning application and delivery process – a BMHT innovation – means that any local authority can be in the driving seat to take responsibility for new homes in their area. They can control standards for new house building, defying the image of council homes of the past as uninspiring, bland and easily identifiable. ●

→ New housing in Newtown
↓ New square, housing and community building in Newtown



KINGS CRESCENT COMMUNITY ORCHARD

Hackney Borough Council promotes a community-led pocket park



The Kings Crescent Community Orchard has transformed a left-over space on the perimeter of the Kings Crescent housing estate into a communal pocket park and 'front garden' to the estate. An early pilot project in advance of the implementation of extensive regeneration proposals, it was developed and implemented in close co-operation with residents. The design comprises simple elements that are sensitive to the garden's setting – the multi-storey housing blocks, the Victorian terraced housing, and the green corridor leading towards Clissold Park. The scheme won a bid for part-funding from the Greater London Authority's Pocket Park Programme, and the remainder was funded by Hackney Council's Estate Regeneration Programme.

BACKGROUND

Creating a high quality built environment is at the heart of the regeneration of Kings Crescent Estate. Proposals for the transformation of the estate include refurbishment of the existing 275 properties, 490 new build properties and the complete re-organisation of the public realm. Critical to the transformation is the comprehensive restructuring of the existing estate into an integrated piece of city. Proposals seek to generate a clearly

defined hierarchy of routes and open spaces that connect into the surrounding streets. Proposals also include a range of play spaces, including a multi-user games area, communal gardens, food growing areas within courtyards and along the central street, and soft landscaping including over 80 new trees to create a high quality living environment.

THE SITE

The Community Orchard site is located on Queen's Drive on the edge of the existing Kings Crescent housing estate. The modernist layout departs from the traditional road layout surrounding it, resulting in poorly defined and under-used open spaces along its boundary. The estate has been further affected for over ten years by the loss of usable green space due to the demolition of part of the original housing stock. Two meaningful open spaces were created by the gardening clubs on the estate. Residents, with the support of London Wildlife Trust had a desire to continue food growing and include opportunities for wildlife in this unused grass area. In recognition of this desire muf, with the support of Hackney Council, applied for match funding through the Mayor's Pocket Park scheme to deliver the project.

DESIGN DEVELOPMENT

The design aims to create a friendly boundary to Kings Crescent estate that supports the wider community by providing opportunities for planting, play and repose. It will:

- help build a sense of ownership
- transform what is currently perceived as a leftover space with an inert frontage into an activated 'front garden' and welcoming way into the estate
- initiate the transformation from an inward looking to an outward looking and connected estate
- benefit the existing and future residents of the estate, the residents of the housing opposite, and passers-by of all ages
- encourage the residents of the ground floor flats to actively use this new garden and so increase access to green spaces, and
- augment what is classified as a green corridor, creating a destination, a stepping stone on the route to Clissold Park.

The publicly accessible street side orchard and garden comprise tree planting, soft landscaping, a boundary treatment to create informal seating and the addition of lighting and paths. The orchard makes a way-in from the street facing side of the estate and complements two existing growing spaces. It is prototyping elements of the forthcoming wider estate regeneration.

THE PROCESS

A community orchard is always as much defined by its use and users as by its form. The Kings Crescent Community Orchard was initiated by a group of residents keen to be involved in the delivery of changes to their environment, to combine social benefits of cohesion and community capital with physical improvements. The group is already operating two gardening clubs within the estate, and is currently supported by Growing Concerns community gardeners. Residents are actively involved in the creation of the garden, throughout design and delivery, and through planting, maintenance and enjoyment of the park. Steps were taken to invite residents to join in and shape the proposals. These included:

- Communal planting of fruit trees in advance of finalising the proposals for

✓ The orchard as a prototype for the forthcoming masterplan.

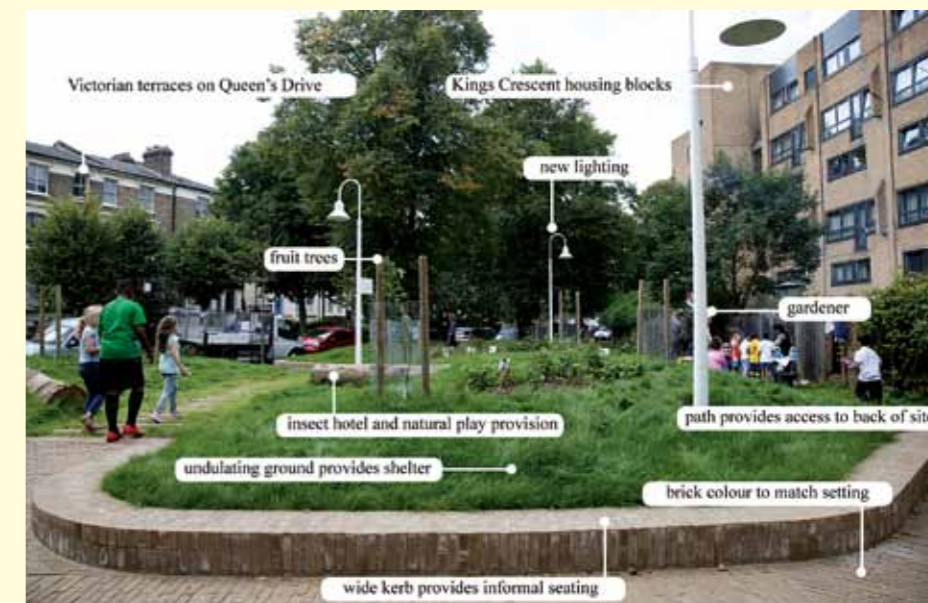
✎ The community orchard as a growing space, a wildlife garden, and a front garden for the estate.

the hard landscaping. This was done to enable future users to mentally picture the site's potential and to help shape the emerging designs;

- Marking out the design in chalk. This was done so that residents could picture the emerging design, and have a say in the detailed design. For example, residents decided that informal seating should be provided throughout, with formal seating arriving later; and
- Regular planting workshops with a community gardener to provide gardening skills, and to establish a varied group of users and residents to take on the long-term maintenance of the garden.

The Community Orchard includes a variety of fruit trees and edible plants offering education for children on growing food. The planting and insect hotels increase the biodiversity along Queen's Drive. The design encourages greater use and includes informal seating providing an overlooked area for informal play. The Orchard is overlooked by residents whilst its edge is raised to give a sense of enclosure and provide seating, with sloped access from the pavement. The paths and boundary wall harmonise with the adjoining estate and the Victorian terraces. Lighting columns juxtapose the utilitarian feel of street lighting and appear more domestic in shape and height.

The community orchard is visited by residents from the Kings Crescent and from the terraced housing opposite and acts as a shared front garden open to the passer-by. On-going engagement with users means that the site is well used, and that vandalism has been kept to a minimum. The garden is used by all generations: toddlers climb the insect hotel on the way to the park, young children use the site for role play and attend gardening sessions, and a handful of parents and seniors look after the plants and the garden. The garden has become a prototype not only of the material palette and formal language for the wider estate regeneration, but also for ways to enable the potential of residents and users to contribute to the wellbeing of Kings Crescent Estate and its wider setting. ●



- ↑ A community BBQ allows for play, gardening, and socialising.
- ↗ Knitting the estate into the wider context using a shared material language.
- ↑↑ A planting workshop held with residents.
- ↗ A gardening session planting edible fruit bushes. (All photos courtesy of Grant Smith)
- The plan showing a modest space with rich possibilities.



SOUTHWATER, TELFORD

Telford & Wrekin Council promotes quality through a town centre regeneration scheme



Telford is a second generation new town built in the 1960s and 1970s on former industrial and agricultural land. The town comprises a number of existing smaller settlements, such as Wellington, Oakengates, Madley and Dawley, but its centre was purpose built and is dominated by a retail shopping centre. For many years the shopping centre has been separated from the surrounding commercial development by a series of car parks and a net of highways,

with pedestrian bridges linking it to the residential development beyond. The separation of the centre together with the poor leisure and cultural offer has meant the town centre has lacked vibrancy and a sense of place as well as a night-time economy. These issues were recognised by the Council and its partners as a significant barrier to the growth and sustainability of the town.

In March 2011, the Central Telford Area Action Plan (CTAAP) was adopted and

set out the vision, policies and objectives within which proposals could be brought forward to transform the town centre into a vibrant and successful place for all by 2016. At the heart of this plan was a vision to regenerate an area known as Southwater, as well as a wider intention to transform the one-way system of roads that separated the centre from its surroundings.

Southwater was first developed in the 1980s and became the focus for cultural and leisure activities in the town, featuring a library, ice rink, bingo hall and the International Convention Centre, as well as being close to the Town Park, a green space covering 170 hectares and enjoyed by 750,000 visitors per year. However in spite of all these activities, Southwater reflected a microcosm of issues that Telford as a whole was experiencing. The architecture was generally bland, overbearing and anonymous, with the built form doing little to enliven the space. The public realm was of poor quality and lacked definition with existing spaces not having a clearly defined function. In spite of attempts to define gateways, these typically lacked presence and were divorced from adjacent buildings, leaving weak relationships and linkages to other parts of the town. The Southwater area is the main connection from the town centre to the Town Park, but its location had never been exploited.

The Southwater Regeneration Programme has been the single largest investment in Telford, intended to enhance the convention quarter and wider town centre. The total investment for the project is £250m with £41m from the public sector and £40m from the private sector for Phase 1. Southwater has secured existing employment of circa 400 jobs and will create more than 300 new jobs. Subsequent phases will deliver over 100 new residential units within this area.

In order to deliver Phase 1, the Council worked in partnership with the Southwater Event Group, the former Advantage West Midlands and the Homes & Communities Agency and set out a vision which aimed to create:

- A vibrant and sustainable heart for Telford Town Centre – including a night time economy
- High quality buildings and public space that will transform the image of Telford

✓ Aerial photo as work was starting
 ✓✓ Aerial shot post completion
 → Two night views of Southwater post completion
 ✎ The redeveloped Southwater
 ✎✎ Revised masterplan of Phase 1 in context

- Improved cultural, leisure, retail, and event facilities as well as new homes and offices
- A greatly enhanced convention quarter
- New jobs, new opportunities and inward investment
- A place in which people will want to work, live, visit and enjoy, and
- A place to be proud of.

Southwater Square was intended to form the vibrant heart of the new Southwater and was conceived to have a role that extended beyond the boundary of the site to provide a truly urban space for Telford. The size of the square was to be large enough to create a bold new place, but sufficiently compact to promote a lively and populated street scene. The space was to be framed by a series of civic and commercial buildings carefully designed to maximise the number of building entrances and active frontages to reinforce its lively urban character.

In spite of changes to the original plan, Telford & Wrekin Council commissioned a number of the buildings and all of the main infrastructure and public realm works. An enabling works contract was completed in 2012 and includes a central energy centre. Sites were marketed and partnerships formed between the Council and Citygrove Developments. Building contracts were started in 2012 to construct the facilities that form two of the three sides of the new Southwater Square.

Phase 1 of Southwater comprises a leisure hub featuring an 11 screen cinema, an 85 bedroom hotel and seven restaurants delivered by the private sector, with the public sector delivering a remodelled and refurbished ice rink, a new building for 'first point' for customer services including a new public library, retail space and café facilities, a multi-storey car park and new public realm works including a new lake and four public art projects developed with over 700 people involved, and a new visitor centre in the Town Park.

Whilst subsequent phases of Southwater will deliver new residential as well as further commercial and leisure activities, these have yet to be commenced on site. However Phase 1 has transformed this side of the town centre, creating an attractive place where people are now able to linger by the new lake or sit in one of the new cafes and restaurants which line



the public realm. The public art created by two arts organisations, in consultation with the public and local community groups, has created a more distinctive look and feel to the public realm. In order to safeguard its investment, the Council has set up a new management company to run Southwater in the longer term.

LESSONS LEARNED

The regeneration of Southwater was a highly ambitious initiative in a very challenging climate. Whilst the Council never lost sight of its overall vision to deliver a high quality environment, it learnt to develop a more flexible approach to respond to the market demand, which it did in close partnership with Citygrove who advised on the type, size and mix of uses. ●

