



A spot of D.I.Y.

Phil Brennan reports on the Mia Court project in Harlow – winner of APSE's Best Housing & Regeneration Initiative – which enabled tenants from the council's waiting list to build their own homes – and gain valuable new skills in the process

While self-build is increasingly common among owner-occupiers, the Mia Court scheme in Harlow is believed to be the first involving tenants from a council waiting list.

Harlow LBC won the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) award for Best Housing & Regeneration Initiative 2007 for the project – which enabled an under-used garage site and a dilapidated council house in Ryecroft, Essex, to be turned into affordable social rented homes for 12 households.

The site had been attracting anti-social behaviour and was also being used as a 'rat run' for traffic, causing concern to local people. So the Mia Court project provided a locally-led solution for what was formerly a problem site.

But what made the initiative really special was the fact that the tenants were involved in the building of the apartments themselves. This meant that well as securing accommodation for them, it enabled them to obtain new skills and competences. While self-build projects do not equate to professional construction skills and qualifications, the knowledge and confidence the self-builders acquired can be of use their home lives and a step towards future job opportunities.

The people who were involved in the self-build scheme had all been Harlow LBC's housing register for some time, but were not in the highest priority band, so may well have had to wait for a considerable time to be housed or re-housed. By taking part in this scheme, they were able to access appropriate affordable housing much more quickly.

Equality of opportunity and social inclusion were important aspects of the scheme. One of the apartments was designed specifically for use by a wheelchair user. Most of the tenants are on low incomes, and in recognition of their contribution to the building of the apartments, they receive a 25% rent reduction for a period of seven years.

One of the real benefits of the scheme was that by the time the tenants moved in, they had been working together on the development – and on their

training courses – for some time, so had already developed good relationships. So they were a ready-made community in many respects.

The project got off the ground because Harlow LBC worked in partnership with the Community Self-Build Agency and Warden Housing Association (now known as Home) to explore the possibility of developing some new affordable homes on the site through a self-build scheme. The site was identified as being suitable for this purpose.

The site was sold to Warden and funding was secured from the Housing Corporation, with other funding contributions being sought and accessed by the council and the Self-Build Agency. Planning permission was obtained for 12 self-build apartments, including one suited to the needs of a wheelchair dependent person. The partners organised a range of awareness-raising events aimed at local people in housing need, and also placed a series of advertisements. A team of prospective self-builders was identified, which included both men and women, and the Self Build Agency began working with them, using team-building exercises to increase their confidence, trust and sense of being a team.

With support from Harlow College as well as the other partners, the self-builders develop a range of skills and experiences. This included acquiring IT skills, interpersonal skills and project management skills, as well as those skills usually associated with the construction industry.

Over time it will be possible to undertake a detailed cost-benefit analysis. In the meantime, the Mia Court scheme has been praised by the Audit Commission and has exceeded the original expectations of all the partners. One of the self-builders comments: 'The flats here look so different; so bright and green and refreshing...If you're willing to take risks and make sacrifices, good things happen'.

The scheme won the latest APSE service award for Best Housing & Regeneration Initiative, which was sponsored by Cognito Ltd, because it is a tremendous example of a council working in partnership and giving tenants the support to get on and make things happen for themselves. It shows how addressing housing needs in a holistic way can be a catalyst for developing skills and forging sustainable new communities.

Cllr Mark Wilkinson, chair of the council's housing committee, commented: 'Mia Court has transformed the area...The residents involved had been on the housing register for some time and were not likely to get a council home for many years. Not only did they get a home, but the scheme gave them many new skills for future life.'

Phil Brennan is APSE's principle advisor responsible for housing