

SOUTH WEST HOUSING INITIATIVE

Specification Heading: 1. Planning & Housing Policy; 4. Design and Sustainability; 7. Customer/Neighbour Satisfaction; 8. Mixed Tenure Management.

Scheme Name: Seldown Park, Poole

Completed: September 2005

Summary

Eco-Rating: Excellent (expected).

Cost: £1,100 per m²

Number of units: 86 flats and houses plus a community centre, all affordable housing with a mix of tenures; affordable rent, shared ownership, key worker and homebuy (a loan-assist product)

Partners involved: Poole Borough Council (original landowner); Western Challenge Housing Association (developer and housing manager); Parsons & Joyce and ROK (local contractors).

As well as achieving EcoHomes 'Very Good', Poole Borough Council stipulated many other environmental/sustainability measures that were to be incorporated into the scheme. These included a home zone, a residential travel plan including discounted public transport and a car club, a very low level of parking (0.7/unit) and a contemporary urban architecture that reflects the character and heritage of the town.

Impetus for the scheme

Poole Borough Council originally owned this town centre site, and wanted to set the tone and send a message out to commercial developers that environmental measures were a necessary and achievable part of any redevelopment.

Why the scheme is a success

Business case

The Local Authority (both planning and Cabinet, who agreed to the sale) recognised that construction to a high environmental standard would make the scheme more sustainable in terms of long-term housing demand. As a result the land was sold to the Housing Association at a discount, mainly to subsidise the 100% affordable housing, but also in order to achieve these environmental benefits. The discount also contributed to the contemporary form of Architecture, which was a condition of planning but would not normally be financially viable in this type of housing scheme.

Gaining buy-in from staff: The amount of buy-in from the association staff was connected to the type of environmental measure being implemented in the scheme.

Passive measures were universally welcomed, but other more controversial measures such as the extent to which car use was curbed, were received with hesitation from some housing association staff, who could foresee management difficulties.

Benefits to contractor

Western Challenge Housing Association will use both of the partner contractors again because of the shared experience.

The type of contract used was a forerunner of the PPC 2000. This was considered to be of great advantage to the scheme due to the fact that the entire project team (ie the Architects, Engineers and other consultants, EcoHomes Assessor and the contractors) attended all meetings, even before the concept design stage. The project team also included representatives from a number of Local Authority departments including Housing Services, Planning, Transportation and Conservation, as well as tree and environmental specialists. The first meeting took place adjacent to the site.

Communication with contractors

Using two contractors, although unusual, meant that Western Challenge was able to benchmark the contractors on the same site. There was no competition between the contractors, as all parties involved in the scheme had been present right from the start and had an equal stake in the work. Each of the contractors bought in to the scheme completely. This was brought about, to some extent, by default, as due to difficulties in purchasing the land, both the developer and contractor parties spent a lot of time together finding ways to lower the build costs, while still aiming for the very good rating.

Working with contractors

This was the first experience of EcoHomes for most of the partners involved, and all went through a shared learning process. Although this was time-consuming, all partners, especially the housing association, feel able to take learning and use them for next time.

Supply chain

Many local suppliers were used, including a local timber frame company, because of a desire to use local supplies and labour. The timber company has now become a fully certified FSC timber supplier as a result of this contract.

'Marketing' the homes in this scheme

The usual allocation process whereby the names at the top of the Council's waiting list are given homes, was not thought to be an appropriate mechanism in this instance. The Local Authority had recently introduced a choice-based lettings system, and a joint housing management cluster was set up immediately after the planning stage. This looked at how to market and allocate the scheme to residents, and how the travel plan will work. The Local Authority and Housing Association need to find residents who are prepared to adopt an environmentally friendly lifestyle, including considering life without a car.

Costs

The Association had to find extra money for the land at a late stage in the planning process. This was found through the contractors and the housing association going through the list of accreditation points and choosing the measures that had the most benefit, but the least up-front cost in order to achieve lower build costs but still achieve a very good accreditation.

Other lessons learned

The local authority stipulated there should be a certain number of dedicated work units in the development in order to reduce the number of journeys to work. The housing association were not convinced that these units would be fully occupied and were concerned that finding tenants from outside the scheme would defeat the object of cutting travel. The work units were therefore replaced by housing live/work units where an additional bedroom had the layout and appropriate technology installed to be used as a work space. This way, housing need can be accommodated if the number of people requesting live/work units is not as high as expected. This approach was presented to the planners as a “live/work strategy” and incorporated as a condition of planning.

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