

CASE STUDY

Attwood Green

OVERVIEW

The community of Attwood Green represents various inner-city council estates in Birmingham and previously known as: the Central Area Estates representing Lee Bank, Woodview, Benmore, Five Ways and Clydesdale Towers. The demise of the City's manufacturing base over the past 25 years has produced a legacy of empty factories and mass unemployment.



Communities within the Central Area Estates have been hit particularly hard by the economic decline and attending social deprivation.

The £550 million project involves the demolition of 1400 homes, the refurbishment of 1200 homes and the construction of 1300 new homes for sale and rent. The regeneration project started in 2000 and is expected to be completed by 2014.

The regeneration of Attwood Green is viewed by many as an innovative approach to urban renewal and may provide a good practice framework for similar projects.

BACKGROUND

The Central Area Estates were developed in the mid 1950's, 60's and 70's to provide superior housing for the residents of the dilapidated terraced slums. As tower blocks and low rise maisonettes the replacement dwellings offered the novelty of high-rise living. Such innovation, however, proved to

be flawed. The high density living and low durability of the dwellings and escalating maintenance costs led to the environment becoming degraded and when allied to economic downturn in manufacturing, meant the housing estates were no longer viable. Local residents, dismayed by the lack of expenditure and degradation of the surrounding environment, led a high profile campaign, calling for the City to regenerate the housing estates.

Income and Employment

The Indices of Deprivation for England in 2007 showed that Lee Bank was within the 2% of the most deprived neighbourhoods in England.

Housing

The 1991 census revealed that 97.2% of Lee Bank residents lived in rented accommodation, the vast majority (92.6%) being council tenants.

Health

The Central Area Estates have experienced higher mortality levels and have below average life expectancy. The 2001 census reveals that more than 30% of Ladywood residents described their general health as 'not good'.

Crime

The Central Estates have in recent times been associated with and stigmatized by the prevalence of drug related crime including violent crime and prostitution.

Education, Skills and Training

Statistics published in 2003 revealed that 22% of Birmingham's working age population had no formal qualifications, compared with a national average of 14.8%.

Cultural diversity within the community is responsible for wide ranging educational requirements. Schools are often presented with pupils from a multitude of backgrounds and faiths. For many such pupils there is little or no ability to communicate or understand English. One in 5 adults displayed below average literacy and numeracy skills.

THE PROJECT

Visionary Planning

A primary redevelopment vision for the Central Area Estates of the City was outlined in the late 1980's. Having become steadily degraded over the preceding decades the need for change had become evident.

In 1998, Birmingham hosted the Highbury Initiative. This event was attended by professionals as well as local stakeholders, with the aim of developing the city centre. The vision was of the community as a vibrant hub, characterised by thriving business, quality accommodation with entertainment and leisure facilities befitting such a diverse culture.

As part of these ambitious regeneration proposals, the Lee Bank housing estate was earmarked for a substantial overhaul, with the City estimating the cost to be approximately £200 million. Following two unsuccessful attempts to receive funding from the Central Government's Estate Action scheme, it was clear that funding would have to be sourced elsewhere.

The solution which emerged was that of the Estates Renewal Challenge Fund (ERCF). The ERCF was a controversial initiative acting as a vehicle to transfer council owned housing stock into the private sector. This funding route was widely supported by the majority of residents but was rejected by the City Council in 1996.

Optima Housing Association

Local activists unhappy with the actions of the City arranged a number of high profile 'direct action' stunts designed to attract widespread media attention - including rooftop protests and bill board advertising. Such desperate and prolonged action finally succeeded in the pressuring the Council into allowing residents self determination with regard to an ERCF stock transfer. Following this, tenants voted with a significant majority (62%) to transfer the responsibility for the housing stock from the City to an independent social landlord with charitable status known as the Optima Community Association. Following this move, 2800 homes were transferred from

Birmingham City Council to Optima in June 1999.

Optima and Birmingham City Council entered a partnership in which to undertake a regeneration of the 5 estates including Lee Bank. Optima are a unique social landlord in the sense that it is defined as a private company, combining distinctive traits from both the public and private sectors. Having been established in 1999, Optima are regulated by charity law under the auspices of the Housing Corporation.

Optima in partnership with the City work very closely with architects and design teams to create a vision of how the community should be developed. A key commitment to this process was to engage with local residents and to encourage their participation. Links were developed with established local housing associations representing the 5 estates. In addition those residents not involved in housing associations could still become involved by means of site walkabouts, road shows, social events and formal meetings.

The commitment to the community is represented in that seven of the fifteen members of Optima's Board of Directors are local residents. Such local influence has dictated all aspects of decision making and has proclaimed the regeneration of Attwood Green as a national standard bearer for inner city renewal.

The Master Plan

The regeneration of the Central Area Estates began by re-branding the communities into what was to be henceforth known as Attwood Green. The regeneration of Attwood Green has been set against a 10 year timescale with completion due in 2011 with the construction of 3500 new homes, 1122 of which will be available for rent.

The ERCF provided a grant of £49.8 million for the development of Attwood Green. Additional funding from the private sector and other sources was also expected. In partnership with the City, Mercian Housing Association and Crest Nicholson house builders, the objective is to provide a sustainable community through the process of regeneration. In addition, the project will receive funds from the private sector and other sources.

As Optima state:

'Communities aren't just about houses, they're about people: the homes they live in; their skills to get jobs; their children's education; their health and fitness; their safety and their involvement in making decisions about the area they live in.'

The area of Attwood Green falls between two districts, Edgbaston and Ladywood. Despite the City maintaining a strategic direction, increasingly more power is devolved to district level. This has required effective collaboration between the district strategic partnerships with regard to interpretation and implementation of City plans.

The vision of Attwood Green is consistent with Birmingham's 1990 City Centre Urban design Strategy which envisaged a 'barrier free' city, free from the 'concrete collar' of motorway intersections which had surrounded the city centre and impeded pedestrian movement. This strategy was incorporated into the 1993 Unitary Development Plan. The transformation of the city centre has seen a formerly depressive environment become a vibrant and colourful hub where people want to live and work. These themes are continued in the publication of The Big City Plan, outlining a vision for the city over the next 20 years.

Park Central

The Lee Bank Estate is no more. The largest of the 5 estates and the one which the casual observer would be most familiar with has undergone not just a physical renewal, but an image makeover in the first major phase of the regeneration of Attwood Green.

In 1999, a two stage design competition was launched by Birmingham City Council and Optima in which contenders were given a flexible brief based upon the initial Master Plan and invited to propose imaginative design solutions in accordance with sustainable regeneration. The winners, Crest Nicholson & Gardner Stewart Architects, were announced in September 2000. Outline planning permission for the £261 million regeneration scheme of Park Central was granted in April 2002.

Alongside new homes, the development of shops, hotels and leisure facilities means employment for the local community. Importantly however, the plans have not neglected the importance of green spaces where people can relax and enjoy the ambient surroundings.

Park Central in Attwood Green provides a good example of a flexible masterplan set within strong development frameworks, where different services and new facilities have been planned, but will be located on streets where they can share catchments with neighbouring developments
Bailey et al. (2007)

The new housing will be released to the market in a series of phases with Crest Nicholson envisaging the completion of 250 units per annum. The demand has been phenomenal with the first two phases having already sold off-plan.

Mixed Income Housing

Park Central today is a mixture of social rented and private property situated within the same blocks and rows. Unusually however, it is impossible to tell the difference between them, such is the quality of design and build. The area is characterised by thoughtful and innovative use of public space evident in 'Sunset Park' and 'Moonlit Park'. The immediate perception is one of exclusivity. However, this is one urban development that is not the preserve of the wealthy.

Indeed the key to the success of Attwood Green is mixed development. John Calcutt, chief executive of Crest Nicholson, was quoted in *The Times* (28 May 2004) as saying, 'it was a mistake in the past to push all poor people together. We need to stop wasting tens of millions of pounds all over the place on repairs and improvements when what we really need is to use the money on redefining the social mix.'

THE IMPACT

Critical to the regeneration of Attwood Green is the empowerment of the community in all stages of the process to create an outcome which proves sustainable. Residents constitute 7 out of the 15 board members of the Optima Community Association. In addition, there are 4 residents associations and a neighbourhood forum. Such community involvement in the regeneration of Attwood Green has seen

Optima receiving national recognition including the Chartered Institute of Housing award for Sustainable Communities in November 2002 and The Deputy Prime Minister's Award for Sustainable Communities in 2005.

Many families from the clearance areas have been involved in the planning and design process and have proudly returned to brand new homes with gardens

Optima

Of the inherited stock, over 1150 have been refurbished to a standard which exceeds the governments Decent Home Directive, including external cladding for insulation, new windows, rewiring, the improvement of communal areas and grounds.

Optima have also demolished some 1350 homes that were deemed unpopular or poor quality. The tower blocks and maisonettes will be replaced by 1122 new homes comprising 275 houses and 847 flats in a mixed use and mixed tenancy development.

LESSONS LEARNED

The City of Birmingham Council was unable to ensure sufficient funding from Central Government sources necessary to regenerate the area. The City was compelled to act within the ERCF framework following residents' campaign of direct action. Following their successful bid, the City fought to win concessions from central government, thus guaranteeing Optima the flexibility needed. The City's intervention ensured the regeneration partnership greater freedom from Central Government limitations.

Optima's 'community association' status has greatly benefited the organisation in terms of establishing both distance and proximity. Optima was set up as a private company, limited by guarantee and registered as a social landlord, regulated by the national Housing Corporation rather than the city council. Optima's status as an organisation independent of the City worked to its advantage in terms of engaging with local

residents, many of whom felt they had been ignored by the City Council. Residents were actively encouraged to become involved with the new organisation.

In accordance with feedback from residents 1350 unpopular and substandard homes have been demolished including a number of the prefabricated concrete tower blocks which had symbolised the area. These have gradually been replaced by lower density accommodation, with resident influenced design.

The success of Attwood Green will inevitably depend largely upon the quality of management. Already, a plan to reinvest future profits to maintain the development has been devised. This innovative financial model was developed between the City, Optima, Crest Nicholson and Gardner Stewart, where the land was granted to the developer under license. The removal of the burden of land value enabled the developer to be unhampered from requiring a quick financial return. Instead a 'virtuous investment cycle' is envisaged where future profits will be reinvested in public amenity projects.

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