

A case study about partnership working

Woodberry Down



Woodberry Down lies in the northwest of the London Borough of Hackney. It sits beside the Seven Sisters Road, which thunders down past Finsbury Park and on towards central London. To the south of the site are two large reservoirs – secret, tranquil spaces unknown to most people hurrying away from Manor House tube station to the west. Across the junction at that corner of the estate is Finsbury Park, stretching from its Victorian gates north towards the edge of the Middlesex hills.

In the 1960s, 42 blocks of local authority housing stock were built at Woodberry Down. These uniform slabs were emblematic of the affordable housing constructed during that era. They observed the current utopian ideal of large units set in empty open space.

Over the ensuing decades, the estate fell into disrepair and was soon beset with high crime rates, unemployment and the physical decline of the buildings themselves. Increasingly, the area fell victim to its own poor reputation. When they came to film Schindler's List, the production crew chose this location for part of the set.

In 2002, Hackney Council undertook a full structural assessment of the estate. They determined not simply to refurbish the buildings but to remake the place. Three

years later, Berkeley was selected as the preferred developer partner to work with the Council and Genesis Housing on the regeneration of Woodberry Down.

Despite initial work being undertaken in the midst of recession, the early phases have been delivered without compromise on the quality of build specifications, space standards or the public realm. The first new residents have now moved in to homes looking out across the water, past a yacht club to the spires (both sacred and financial) of the City. In 2011, Woodberry Down won a national award for best social housing development.

This paper looks at two of the principal reasons behind its success.

'Planning must be a creative exercise in finding ways to enhance and improve the places in which we live our lives. This should be a collective enterprise'.

Rt Hon Greg Clark MP, Minister for Planning

1. Partnership working

Partnering does not just happen. It has to be actively sought and it requires continuous attention. From the outset, there has been close joint working between Berkeley, Hackney Council, Genesis, the HCA, local residents and other stakeholders. Strong partnerships have emerged over time, for example with the local resident association, the Woodberry Down Community Organisation (WDCO), and the Manor House Development Trust. These relationships reflect a willingness amongst each party to be transparent and recognise the experience and track record of the others.

Seven features of the partnership:

1. Sharing goals. A comprehensive masterplan and design codes underpin the outline planning application and establishes the vision, planning and design principles. (These documents were identified by CABA as best practice). Each party has been driven by concerns for longer term placemaking, socio-economic change and value creation, rather than narrower short-term objectives. Berkeley's reputation and investment goals have helped in this regard.

2. Building relationships. Successful partnering needs to be incorporated across the whole team structure. In Hackney Council, Mayor Jules Pipe and Deputy Mayor Karen Alcock have been instrumental in pushing the project forward. Senior officers in housing and planning have continued to work with the development team, being open with one another on issues and working solutions through together. A major emphasis is placed on resident involvement, and strong relationships have been forged with the local community through WDCO, using a wide variety of engagement methods.

3. Sharing risks. The risks that each partner is exposed to have a strong bearing on the investment return. By establishing a clear planning framework and through advance funding, Hackney Council has provided the certainty to invest. This in turn allows each party to progress activities in a co-ordinated way, with maximum efficiency.

At Woodberry Down, the Council advance funded consultants appointed to secure the outline planning permission. They also funded the Compulsory Purchase Order buy-outs, elements of the demolition and resident decants necessary to enable development to proceed. The Principal Developer Agreement was structured to ensure project viability and enables Berkeley to pay a proportion of these costs back to the Council over time in a way that complements the project financing. This takes real trust and an understanding of commercial imperatives on the part of the Council and a commitment to major investment on the part of the developer.

4. Being flexible. With a project as large and as complex as this, circumstances change. Flexibility is required on all sides and has been necessary to deal with turbulent economic circumstances. In relation to the timing of Section 106 developer contributions, the council has allowed payments related to the funding

of major infrastructure to be better geared to sales. Likewise, the masterplan provides the principal framework for individual projects to come forward, but is not viewed by any partner as a straight-jacket.

5. Sharing responsibilities. Each partner has clear responsibilities that are integrated into the overall development programme. WDCO, as the elected resident body, is the principal voice for explaining local preferences and priorities. It works hard to realise these. Having established the overall planning framework, Hackney Council then works through proactive development *management* as well as *control* to ensure planning requirements are applied, helping to acquire the land and works to secure wider regeneration outcomes.

The developer procures design, finances each component of the scheme and implements the physical regeneration in a way that enables specific social outcomes to be achieved. For example, Berkeley is set to build the shell and core of the health centre, which will then be fitted out and operated by the local healthcare provider. There are clear lines of accountability and communication amongst each of the local authority, resident and developer partner bodies. Berkeley has a dedicated on-site team, with individuals identified as the first point of contact for concerns and enquiries.

6. Talking early. Regular meetings are held between each of the partners at all levels and discussions relating to the content and nature of each project phase are held early in the planning and design process. This ensures that everyone has an opportunity to understand, shape and influence designs and other activities related to each project component as these are advanced.

7. Integrating delivery of local services. Throughout the UK, funding for community services that have traditionally been delivered by the public sector is coming under increasing pressure. Woodberry Down provides an interesting case study of how partnership working between the developer, local authority and other agencies can suggest new neighbourhood-based models of service delivery.

Homes for sale have cross-subsidised the new social rented homes needed to re-house existing tenants, while



close working with the HCA, Learning Trust, Primary Care Trust, the GLA and others has meant that a broad range of new community facilities will be delivered early in the regeneration programme to support the needs of existing and new incoming residents.

These include:

- the new **Skinner's City Academy**, which is set to be followed by the **North East London Business Development & Training Centre** (combining education facilities with managed workspace for small businesses) and an **expanded primary school**. Each is co-located to form a lifelong learning campus.
- the recently completed new **community centre** (including a hall, library, crèche and training rooms), built as part of the Development Agreement.
- a new 2,000 sq m **health centre** (with developer-funding for the building shell and core) and new **youth centre**.
- a range of new **shops** to accommodate existing shopkeepers, who will be decanted as part of the process. Units will also be built for other smaller community facilities, such as a **neighbourhood police base**. The rental stream from these shops is ring-fenced by the Council to fund the ongoing running costs of the new community centre.
- the **Woodberry Works** scheme, which offers NVQ qualifications and has enabled Berkeley to provide full-time jobs for local residents. This has led to the formation of a Community Interest Company, called Woodberry Training Partnership CIC, which is a joint venture between Citrus Training and Manor House Development Trust.
- a range of **open space and play facilities**, including major new parks, a landscaped riverside walkway and new wildlife centre.

All too often, large regeneration projects fail to knit together activities, programmes and budgets in this way. Community facilities struggle to get off the ground or lag behind the construction of new homes. Gallions Reach Urban village in Thamesmead is a case in point where community facilities are now being incorporated into this major regeneration scheme, but late in the process.

By contrast, the regeneration programme at Woodberry Down fully integrates economic development, housing, education and activities for children and young people, safer neighbourhoods and healthy living in one plan for the whole place.

2. Participation

The way that local people are involved in the process of change at Woodberry Down goes way beyond conventional *consultation*, to a much more involved process of *participation* and *engagement*. Local residents and stakeholders are involved directly in design and decision-making as partners in the process.

In one sense, this is enlightened self-interest. If local residents and future users are not supportive, then the scheme is unlikely to succeed in the longer term. Equally, we know from experience that successful places which are respected and well-loved create more social and commercial value.

A serious commitment to local involvement takes time. In the two and a half years that spanned formulation of the initial development framework, a wide range of collaborative processes were employed. These reached out to each sector of the local community and ensured that bottom-up decision-making shaped the overall plan.

Community engagement involved:

- **Workshops and focus groups** including sessions targeted at specific groups such as young people, the elderly, local businesses, and individual minority ethnic groups (with members of the Somali and Bangladeshi communities and Turkish women residents involved through interpreters).
- **Frequent meetings and design workshops** with the local resident association, sometimes run as master-classes on specific subjects such as transport or renewable energy. These ensured that this democratically elected local body was empowered as the representative voice of local people.
- **Roadshows** involving a trailer positioned in different parts of the estate, making it as convenient for people to attend as possible. This was fitted out with informative material (such as exhibitions, physical and digital models) and staffed by team members who were on hand to explain proposals and encourage involvement.
- **Fun days** combining stands with exhibitions and interactive models to inform and engage, with food and entertainment to encourage participation.
- **Staffed exhibitions** held in local venues.
- **Individual door knocking** to provide one-to-one contact.

A dedicated engagement team was set-up within the on-site office of the Woodberry Down Regeneration Team (part of the Council's arms-length housing body Hackney Homes), supported by consultants. Their efforts went far beyond the conventional approach to community consultation.

Importantly, the developer was selected as the preferred partner for the initial 'kick-start sites' prior to the masterplan being finalised and submitted for outline planning permission. This meant Berkeley could work with local residents to synchronise detailed design of the first development site with the big picture of the masterplan. It breathed confidence into the process and showed they were willing to deliver on the objectives and design criteria set by the community. This makes an instructive contrast to attempts at regeneration of the Aylesbury Estate in south London, where a succession of masterplans failed to adequately address the needs of local people, stoking antagonism and bedevilling this major project for many years.

Local decision making

Ever since 2005, there has been a protocol in place at Woodberry Down that ensures local residents are fully involved in decision-making. The Woodberry Down Design Committee comprises 6 – 8 local residents elected through the resident association, together with senior representatives from Berkeley, Genesis and Hackney Council. There are two types of Committee meeting:

- structured training facilitated by the project architect to enhance residents' design skills, tackling topics such as "how to understand an architectural drawing"; and
- design review of each component phase of the scheme as it comes forward.

Design review sessions are held at three stages prior to a planning application being submitted:

1. Early discussion on the fundamentals of each scheme – the layout, massing and other components set out in the masterplan;
2. The draft detailed scheme – addressing more detailed aspects of the layout such as access, parking and build specifications;
3. A final wrap-up to identify any further refinements that could improve the design prior to the planning application submission.

The Design Committee provides a forum for residents to articulate their priorities to those directly responsible for design and construction. After discussing phase 1 of the scheme with residents, the design of apartments in phase 2 became dual aspect. The residents committee also wanted to remove a proposed public walkway through one of the blocks to make it feel completely safe, and a simple break in the elevation at 1st floor was introduced instead.

Information exchange

Good communication is an obvious pre-requisite for positive relationships with the local community. Berkeley's on-site team operates from a site office within the first phase of the scheme and make themselves available locally as a matter of course, so that local people know what is going on.

- Regular meetings are held with the community and between partner organisations, ensuring everyone is kept up to speed;
- Email updates are sent out so that residents and businesses can anticipate and plan ahead in relation to specific construction work;
- The Council also publish a newsletter, part-funded by Berkeley.

Seeing is believing

To help residents visualise their new homes, production was accelerated on construction of the first two units. These were completed and fully fitted-out and furnished nine months early. This allowed local residents to see first hand what the space standards really meant in real life and understand the design specifications being applied. It took more effort and a bit more cost, but it built a huge degree of trust and understanding.

One step ahead

Woodberry Down is at the forefront of a much more decentralised way of placemaking. Devolved neighbourhood-based arrangements have become increasingly sophisticated as relationships between each of the partners have matured.

The physical redevelopment will take another 20 years, with completion due by 2031. But as construction continues apace, ever greater levels of confidence emerge amongst each of the partners in their ability to work collectively.

As localism takes root, Woodberry Down demonstrates in practice the benefits of giving local people the means to shape their neighbourhood. It demands different skills and attitudes. It does, of course, take more time and money. But collaborating with the people who are going to determine whether a place can become a successful community is routine common sense.

