

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.

Between 1948 and the late 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.

In 2002, Hackney Council undertook a full structural assessment of the estate. They determined not simply to refurbish the buildings but to work closely with the residents to remake the place. Three years later, Berkeley was selected as the preferred developer partner to work with the Council and Genesis Housing Association 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, 2012 and 2013, Woodberry Down won national awards for the best social housing development.

This paper looks at two of the principal reasons behind its success – partnership working and local participation – and reflects on the lessons it offers to other housing-led regeneration programmes.

- The regeneration will deliver over 5,000 new homes, 41% of which will be affordable, as well as 15 acres of landscaped public open space by 2035.
- 862 homes have already been completed, 556 of these are affordable; and we have another 581 homes being built.
- The development is currently sustaining 470 jobs on the construction site - 20% of these are for local people and there are 38 apprentices.
- 177 new full-time jobs have been created so far to service the neighbourhood.
- 90% of residents say they are satisfied with their lives, compared to the national average of 60%
- 71% of people feel able to influence local decisions, compared to an average of just 40% across the UK.



Site plan with phases

- P2 Phase 2
- P2e Phase 2 Block E
- P3 Phase 3
- P4 Phase 4
- P5 Phase 5
- P6 Phase 6
- P7 Phase 7
- P8 Phase 8

- SA Skinners Academy
- WD Woodberry Down Community Primary School
- RCC Redmond Community Centre

The story so far

In regeneration, bricks and mortar are the easy part. Projects like these are years, even decades, in the making. They demand incredible commitment from the people involved. Having the right plan, a good process, creativity and organisation are all essential. But since this is about much more than just a physical redevelopment, success has to be founded upon listening, talking and building consensus.

First come the hopes and the fears, and the promises of a better future. Then there are questionnaires, open days, exhibitions, debates and disagreements. Not much is clear-cut. So many issues to deal with: crime, housing, schools, work. People get interested and get worried – change is always unsettling. Knock down all the flats and build more than twice as many? No one wants to live here as it is. Where are they all going to come from? Where are the jobs? What's going to happen to us?

Planning Milestones:

- Woodberry Down and Stamford Hill Partnership secures £13 million of Single Regeneration Budget funding in 1999.
- Hackney Council prepares an outline masterplan for Woodberry Down estate, Area Action Plan (adopted in 2004) and urban design framework (adopted in 2005).
- Berkeley is commissioned for the Kick-Start sites in November 2005 and a development agreement is signed in August 2006.
- The application for Kick-Start site 1, including 456 homes, is approved by Hackney Council in November 2007.
- Outline planning permission is granted for the whole development area in July 2009, with Berkeley and Genesis appointed to prepare and deliver the entire detailed masterplan.
- Planning is approved for a new masterplan in February 2014.



Putting policy into practice

When Hackney Council and the community set out on this path, there was a lot of talk about mixing up tenures to break down the monoculture of social housing estates. Woodberry Down had its fair share of problems typical of such places and the estate was cast by the government as a 'national demonstration project' for mixed communities.

Now, with a different government, the language may have changed, but Woodberry Down still finds itself at the forefront of new thinking. It illustrates how localism should work – bottom-up planning, consensus not conflict – and how to accelerate housing supply. It's a model of what the London Plan calls 'intensification', increasing density to help make a place that can now support shops, schools, community facilities and much else besides.

Some of the key features of the masterplan include:

- 'streets for people': giving pedestrians priority wherever possible, creating good quality cycle routes, and making links into the wider area;
- local centres that provide residents with local services within a short walking distance – including facilities around the existing John Scott Health Centre at the edge of the area, which is important for knitting the new community with the old;
- a commitment to high standards of design and construction that pre-date but also pre-empt the requirements of the London Housing Design Guide (2010) on issues such as internal space standards, Lifetime Homes, tenure blind design and private external amenity space;
- reconnecting the place and its people to the natural environment – one of five major new green spaces is the new Spring Park, with landscaped walkways around the northern edge of the reservoirs.

In a context where almost all buildings are being replaced, some continuity with the past has been maintained by using the existing natural environment as a starting point. Mature trees will be retained. To help enhance biodiversity, native species are to be used in new areas of planting. There has also been a lot of thought about local fauna. Boxes suitable for pipestrelles are being placed around the redeveloped estate to help keep bats in the area. Meanwhile, the peace and quiet of the reservoir has been preserved for wildfowl by protecting a strip of land along the New River.



The lessons from Woodberry Down

Partnership working

Partnering does not just happen. It has to be actively sought and it requires continuous attention. From the outset, there has been a close working relationship 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 the willingness of each party to be transparent and recognise the experience and track record of the others.

Four features of the partnership:

1. Sharing goals

Each party has been driven by a concern for place-making, social and economic change and value creation. A masterplan set out the most important structuring principles but when it comes to project delivery, this is not viewed by anybody as a straight-jacket.

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 as soon as they arise.

2. Building relationships

A commitment to successful partnering needs to be shared by the whole team. 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 through solutions together. There has been a major emphasis on resident involvement, and strong relationships have been forged with the local community organisation (WDCO).

3. Sharing risks

By establishing a clear planning framework and providing advance funding, Hackney Council has created the certainty to invest. The Council funded consultants to secure the outline planning permission, while the developer takes on procurement of design, financing of each component of the scheme and implementing the physical project. There are clear lines of accountability and communication between the local authority, residents and the developer.

This has allowed each party to progress activities in a co-ordinated way, with maximum efficiency, sharing risk and helping to maximise the investment return. Circumstances do change, and flexibility has been vital on all sides during turbulent economic times. For example, the timing of Section 106 payments related to the funding of major infrastructure has been adjusted in a way that supported sales.

The Council also funded some of the early Compulsory Purchase Order buy-outs, elements of the demolition and resident decants necessary to enable development to proceed. The Principal Development 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. Integrating delivery of local services

Throughout the UK, funding for community services that have traditionally been delivered by the public sector is coming under intense 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 working closely with the Learning Trust, Primary Care Trust, the GLA and others has meant that a broad range of new community facilities are delivered early in the regeneration programme to support the needs of existing and new incoming residents.

These include:

- The Skinners' Academy and extension to the Woodberry Down Primary School
- a new community centre, including a hall, library and training rooms, built as part of the Development Agreement





- a range of new shops to accommodate existing shopkeepers, who will be transferred as part of the process. Units will also be built for other smaller community facilities, such as a new WDCO office
- 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.

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 that 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 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 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 interactive models alongside food and entertainment to encourage participation; as well as individual door knocking to provide one-to-one contact with residents.

A dedicated engagement team was set-up within the on-site office of the Woodberry Down Regeneration Team. 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 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 that everyone was committed to 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.

Youth employment

For young people wanting to get some work experience and develop their skills, a large-scale local building project should be able to offer real opportunities. At Woodberry Down, this responsibility has been taken very seriously.

Subcontractors have been at the forefront of the local labor drive from an early stage. They regularly attend jobs fairs for local residents of Woodberry Down and Hackney, where they give an introduction to the type of work being carried out and interview anyone looking for work. At the last jobs fair in September, 43 people attended, with 11 jobs offered on the day by our subcontractors and 6 interviews set up for apprenticeships. 40% of attendees were offered employment or apprenticeship opportunities on the active sites on Woodberry Down.

The youth employment programme is led by Berkeley with supporting partners such as K10 (formally Reds10 or Building Lives). As part of the programme, Berkeley has set minimum requirements for subcontractors, which include:

- employment of a minimum of 25% local labour on-site
- engagement in the K-10 and Building Lives apprenticeship schemes
- for those with four or more operatives, employment of at least one apprentice on each site is required.

As a result of this, there are approximately 38 apprenticeships working on Woodberry Down, all of which are attending college or working towards an NVQ level 2. Out of the 38 apprenticeships, 15 of them are provided by K-10 which ensures they are all Hackney residents. Four of these are currently Berkeley Homes apprentices. The remaining 19 apprentices are working direct for our subcontractors. It is anticipated that this figure will increase to 42 apprentices over the next month due to a recent 'Meet the apprentice event' held at the Building Lives Academy in Hackney.

Monitoring this programme is important not only for meeting project targets but also understanding how to succeed with youth employment in future. Berkeley has a designated Local Labour Champion for Woodberry Down who liaises with all the subcontractor supervisors and monitors the overall apprenticeship figures.

Getting young people involved is a key part of building this community and winning 'Hackney STEP Apprentice Employer of the Year' in 2011 was a very significant moment for the project.





A collective enterprise

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

They have had two types of meeting: structured training facilitated by an 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.

The 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 of 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 what they want to be built. For example, 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 so a simple break in the elevation at 1st floor was introduced instead.

Similarly, to help residents visualise their new homes, Berkeley accelerated construction of the first two apartments. These were completed and fully fitted-out 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.

Woodberry Down also illuminates some of the most important ideas about what constitutes ‘sustainable development’ in the National Planning Policy Framework of 2012:

- It supports local strategies to improve health, social and cultural wellbeing, and delivers community and cultural facilities to meet local needs
- There is a clear economic vision and strategy for the area which positively encourages sustainable economic growth
- There are local design review arrangements to provide assessment and support and ensure high standards of design
- It contributes to conserving and enhancing the natural environment

The physical redevelopment will take another 17 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 take more time and money. But collaborating with the people who are going to determine whether a place becomes a successful community is routine common sense.

‘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.’

National Planning Policy Framework (2012)