



Housing LIN

*Connecting people, ideas and resources*

## Case Study 165

# Taking a collaborative approach to design at The Courtyards in Preston

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# Introduction

The idea of a home strikes a deep, emotional chord within all of us. It represents protection, comfort and a place to be yourself. The communities in which our homes are set often reinforce these feelings. Together, they form the settings for our everyday activities and interactions. Many of us appreciate this more than ever following the upheaval over the last few years.

The home becomes even more important as we age. We will likely spend more time there and it may require adaptation to support our changing needs. However, the same emotional connection and sense of wellbeing need to be retained.



For some, there is still a stigma surrounding the idea of housing for older generations with perceptions that the spaces are clinical or dated, and that moving there is an acceptance of a less active lifestyle. Older people, however, are no less varied in their interests and abilities than the rest of the population, and good design should enable them to continue their usual activities whilst adapting to their changing requirements over time. We believe that providing considerably designed homes which meet the needs of older residents can bring positive benefits in health and mental wellbeing as well as a more independent lifestyle.

## About The Courtyards

The Courtyards is an extra care housing scheme in Ingol, Preston, which was recently shortlisted in the HAPPI category of the Housing Design Awards. It was completed in 2021 for Community Gateway Association (CGA), a not-for-profit, resident-led organisation that empowers local people to shape its services and improve their homes, founded on the principles of mutuality, accountability and engagement.

The Courtyards was conceived as CGA's first new build project aimed at older residents, aged 55 and up. The brief was to create desirable new homes at affordable rent, which could facilitate the care requirements of residents, all whilst set in a welcoming, community environment.

The completed development provides 60 apartments, 40 two-bed and 20 one-bed homes for rent. All are spacious and suit the needs of those that use wheelchairs or mobility scooters.

Sliding doors between some rooms offer flexibility in the way that the spaces can be used. Each apartment also provides generous private, external amenity through either balconies or ground level terraces.

The regularity of their use and their personalisation with plants, bird feeders and ornaments are a testament to the importance of access to outdoor space to all.

To support the residents, a core Lancashire County Council care and wellbeing provision is available 24/7 if required, with individual packages able to be tailored to those with specific needs through a range of organisations, as well as unplanned, emergency care. The support ranges from intensive on-site care to assistance with daily living tasks. Residents can also make use of a specially designed assisted bathroom, which they have dubbed 'the spa'.



The Courtyards also plays a critical role in freeing up larger family dwellings in the area by providing an attractive alternative for residents ready to 'right-size' to more suitable accommodation. The location in an established suburban neighbourhood provides amenities and public transport connections within a short distance, allowing a sizeable reduction in car-dependency.

## Collaboration: Understanding what really matters to residents

At The Courtyards, the key to achieving the brief was collaborating with the right people at the right time. Before starting design work, we sat down with CGA's resident board to understand what they really valued in where they would like to live - in other words, what would make a place a home.

This collaborative approach brought together many voices and shaped the design to be attractive to the target audience and improve the options available to older people in the area. From these discussions, key themes appeared from the resident board: maximising natural light; visual connectivity to the outdoors; and plenty of space for communal interaction. These are all covered by the age-friendly principles espoused in the suite of [HAPPI reports](#).

The principles represent good design in general and make a home easy to live in, but they become crucial when there are physical or mental limitations. All ten principles of the original 2009 [HAPPI report](#) (co-authored by Julia Park, of Levitt Bernstein) are integrated into the design of The Courtyards and their importance to the residents in those initial discussions was a regular point of reference during the design process.

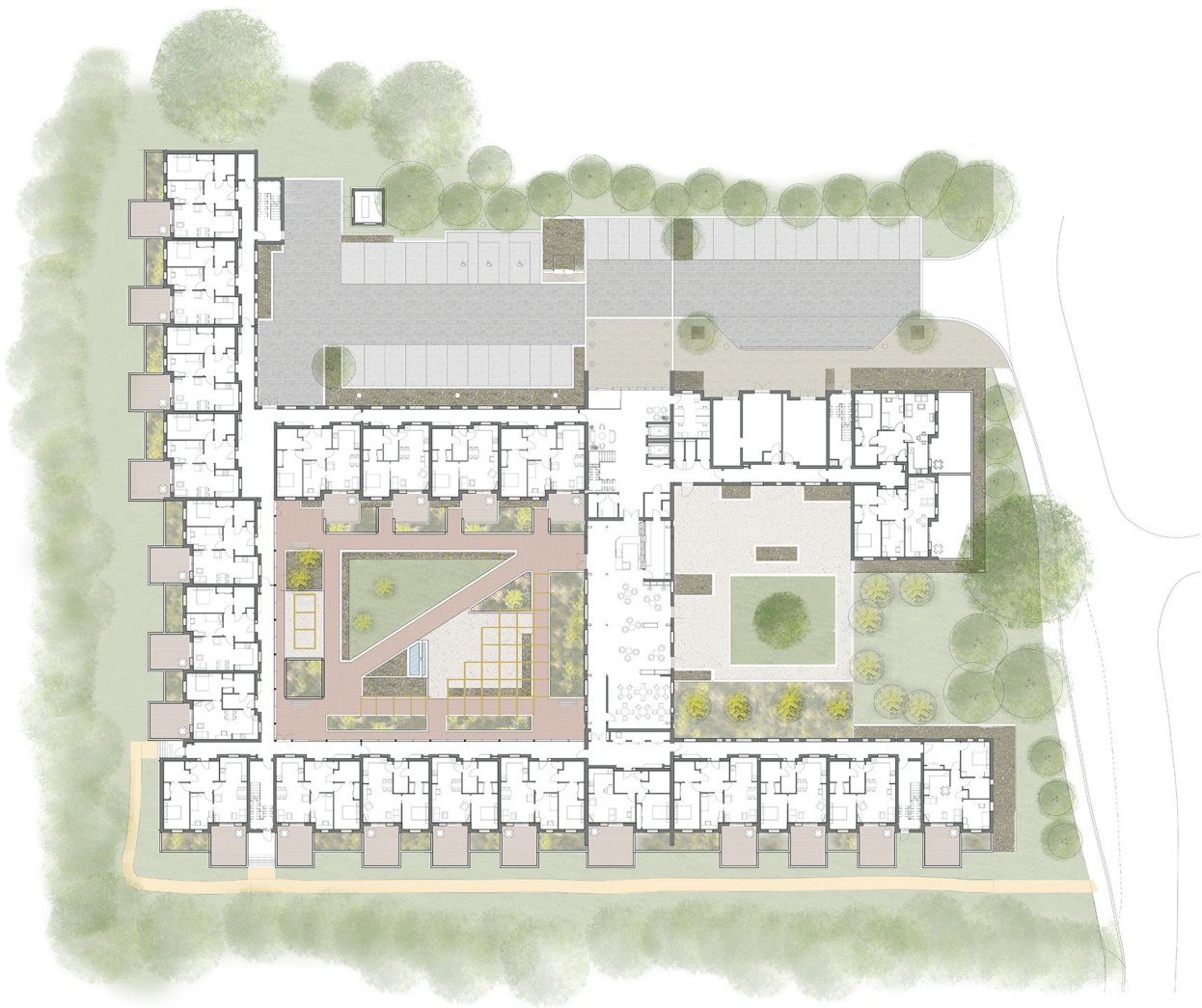
To promote all these principles and their benefits to potential new residents and their families, CGA invested in creating a show apartment. This showcased the quality and comfort available and alleviated in many any preconceptions that they may have had.

*“The unpacking is almost done, and everything is in its new place. There’s nowhere quite like the Courtyards, I’m going to be very happy here.”*

- current resident

## Landscape and layout

The apartments are arranged around two landscaped courtyards which are central to the feel of the scheme (the name gave it away!). Connecting with nature is a key HAPPI principle, and the improvements to both physical and mental wellbeing garnered from just a few minutes listening to birds singing in the surrounding trees or the babbling water feature cannot be underestimated, particularly for those less active.

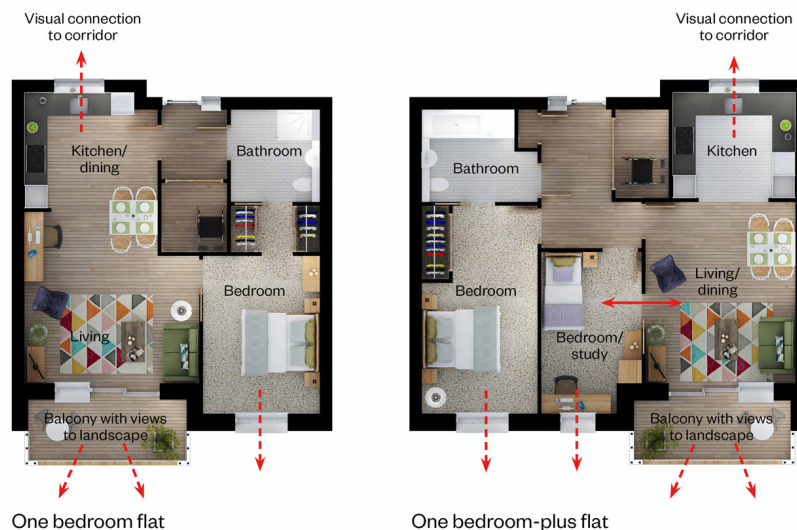


Both courtyards offer walking routes amongst the planting to provide some with their daily exercise as well as a popular outdoor gym. Areas covered by pergola structures and climbing plants provide shaded seating during the warmer months. Small things can make a big difference. Residents have noted how the external spaces being well lit will extend their connection to the outdoors until much later in the evening. Ground floor terraces face onto the central courtyard (accessible to residents only) from several flats, creating opportunities for social interaction and for honing gardening skills.



A ground floor corridor wraps around two sides of the central courtyard. Taking its design cues from cloistered walkways, this space is flooded with light and provides yet another connection to the outdoors, even when the weather does not cooperate. Maximising natural light and views to nature is a common thread throughout the whole project.

Each apartment is dual aspect, with large windows providing light and natural ventilation to the living spaces and bedrooms. A window from the kitchen overlooks the corridor, with corresponding external windows opposite to provide views through to outside. These windows allow for moments of social interaction as neighbours pass by with a friendly wave.



The relationship between the apartments and corridors is crucial in the success of the scheme. For many of us, one of the first signs of being home is the sight of our front door and, as part of the early discussions, it was felt that each front door must feel like a resident's own entrance. A glazed side panel offers an opportunity for personal touches such as a vase, photo frame or recognisable item and each resident has their own post box set to one side. A neighbourly bench is also placed next to each front door, positioned opposite a low-level window, to encourage socialisation and those chance meetings over a morning coffee.



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## Knitting older residents into the community

Creating a community atmosphere has been the key objective of The Courtyards. The importance of this 'neighbourhood feel' for the wellbeing of older people is well documented and integrating this development into the established local area offers numerous benefits. The intent is for the development to open its arms to its neighbours and welcome them in. To that end, a variety of uses are provided at the centre of the scheme in the black shingle-clad 'barn' that references the farming vernacular of the nearby countryside.



Whilst the apartments are arranged around the secure wings of the building, this central area forms the social heart. It provides a clear entrance and houses areas which are open to the wider community such as the thriving bistro (the food is delicious!) and a hair and beauty salon, which is proving hugely successful. The bistro has become a gathering place for many in the neighbourhood, which had previously lacked a convivial setting for a cup of tea and cake, whilst looking over landscaped gardens that diners can spill out into. There are also shared residents' facilities such as a laundry, reading/TV room and spaces for the care and management staff. For the residents, these are not just easily accessible amenities but also bring vibrancy and activity into the building.

Adjacent to the bistro is a multi-purpose, flexible activity space which hosts events for all, such as bingo, parent and baby groups and film nights. This room is sized to feel cosy and comfortable for a small group of residents but also has the capability, via folding-sliding doors, to open up to the bistro to accommodate much larger events.



We held one of these such events in September 2021. Whilst CGA had slowly started welcoming residents in the Spring of that year, during the midst of the pandemic, the obvious health restrictions had meant that no opening event had been possible. So, we decided to host a garden party and invited all residents, family members and staff.

It was a great occasion for everyone to come together over food, drinks and music, and for us to hear directly from residents about their experiences. Many had been living isolated lives in their previous homes, and were now active and part of friendship groups, enjoying bingo Fridays, coffee morning Wednesdays and looking forward to more activities in the future.

*“When I moved to The Courtyards, I literally cried tears of joy. The staff are brilliant, and I’ve made so many friends. There’s a real community spirit that you don’t get on your own in a house.”*

**- current resident**

Those emotional responses to comfort and security were evident from the smiles and a real affirmation that in the understanding of people’s needs, and the implementation of HAPPI principles, homely spaces can be created in which the required care can be provided but which do not impede on anyone’s independence. The feedback we received was fantastic and if ever a reminder was needed that the design of people’s homes can have a profound impact on their quality of life, then this was it.



# Lessons learned

Now, almost two years after the first residents moved in, it is evident that the time taken to define which aspects of a design can make the most difference in people's lives should not be underestimated. These principles were not just a reference during early design stages, but something all members of the design team, CGA and the resident board bought into and referred to throughout the project. This has meant that those key concepts come through as strong in the final building as they did in the initial sketches.

## Note

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Housing Learning and Improvement Network.

## Image Credits

Photography by Tom Biddle.

## About Levitt Bernstein

Levitt Bernstein is a practice of architects, urban designers and landscape architects with over 120 staff working from design studios in London and Manchester. We believe that good design can transform lives and apply this principle to our housing, education, health, arts and commercial projects of all shapes and sizes across the country.

If you found this case study of interest, you can also read about their award-winning over -55s development, Melfield Gardens - an intergenerational scheme for older people and students, designed to a Passivhaus standard - for Phoenix Community Housing in Lewisham. This has been captured in the [Housing LIN case study no.163](#).

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# About the Housing LIN

The Housing LIN is a sophisticated network bringing together over 25,000 housing, health and social care professionals in England, Wales and Scotland to exemplify innovative housing solutions for an ageing population. Recognised by government and industry as a leading 'ideas lab' on specialist/supported housing, our online and regional networked activities, and consultancy services:

- connect people, ideas and resources to inform and improve the range of housing that enables older and disabled people to live independently in a home of their choice
- provide insight and intelligence on latest funding, research, policy and practice to support sector learning and improvement
- showcase what's best in specialist/supported housing and feature innovative projects and services that demonstrate how lives of people have been transformed, and
- support commissioners and providers to review their existing provision and develop, test out and deliver solutions so that they are best placed to respond to their customers' changing needs and aspirations

To access a selection of related resources on housing and older people, check out the Housing LIN's curated pages at:

<https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/browse/Housing/HousingforOlderPeople/>

And for more information about how the Housing LIN can advise and support your organisation on community-led approaches to shaping your 'offer' for an ageing population, go to:

<https://www.housinglin.org.uk/consultancy/consultancy-services/>

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