

Colliers Gardens Bristol

Extra care housing for older people.

The 50 flats for older people, owned and managed by public sector provider Brunelcare, won a RIBA award for architects Penoyre and Prasad. The £7 million building costs were funded by the Housing Corporation and the scheme was completed in 2006.



Colliers Gardens, Bristol © Ays Tomlinson

Key features

- The facilities offer a range of choices to the older people living at Colliers Gardens. The two-bedroom accommodation is popular and the design enables people with dementia to continue living at home.
- Informal communal areas have proved popular and the communal dining room is a natural hub.
- There is still a debate over the concept of a 'home for life' and the value for money of extra care housing. The space and design of the building has succeeded in fostering independence, but there is still an issue about ensuring black and minority ethnic elders are fully included in the project.

Design and planning

The flats are on two floors in spurs branching off from either side of the main circulation area, with an informal communal seating area on the upper level. Skylights bring daylight flooding into the building from above as well as the sides, bringing a real sense of connection between the inside and outside. However, not all the windows open and it can get stuffy. A double-height communal lounge and dining room provides a social hub at the front of the building beside the entrance, and opens onto the communal gardens through a glazed façade. The internal glazing to the entrance hall and arrival point allows residents to keep an eye on who is coming and going.

The scheme is used by local people who join in events organised by the Colliers Gardens social club. The building also houses a therapy room, hair salon and IT room.

The main corridor changes angle, and runs along a slight incline, making it seem more like a winding path than an institutional corridor. Windows on both sides look out onto the gardens, which are designed in a circular pattern for people with dementia. The use of colour coding and different textures in the internal circulation areas also help people remember where they are.

The accommodation is well planned, designed and specified, with an extremely pleasant atmosphere, even though the site is slightly isolated. It is a former allotment garden at the back of houses, with no direct access to a main road.



Residents' views

Residents and staff at Colliers Gardens' enjoy living and working here.

Frail, older tenants have got used to the building and like having a choice of facilities. One woman books one of the two assisted bathrooms three times a week, instead of using her own wet room. However, she regrets the closure of the shop, particularly as the shopkeeper would bring things in for her.

The flats also work well for a disabled man and his wife. He is able to sleep in the second bedroom of their flat if he is having a restless night and uses a computer in the room to surf the internet. One of the staff says that the man would not be able to have this quality of life in his old home, or even in a sheltered housing scheme. Here he can enjoy independence, mobility and choice about what he wants to do within a well-designed, and accessible environment. One member of staff says that the communal areas work like a street where people meet and interact with each other.

In the evening, the residents hold their own informal meetings to discuss the building's affairs.

The communal facilities are sustained partly through their use by people from outside Colliers Gardens. Non-residents use the main entrance but cannot get into the residential areas of the building, ensuring

the privacy, safety and security of tenants. In addition, residents from the local Chinese community are encouraged to participate in social activities or eat in the dining room. This seeks to ensure that the scheme is inclusively managed.

Staff views

One member of staff thought the design was too lavish and that a sheltered housing scheme and a nursing home close to each other would be better. Many of the residents of Colliers Gardens are relatively young and mobile and, because they are out a lot of the time, the communal facilities and catering services appear to be under-used. This view is a challenge to the idea of 'independent living' and building environments that meet both existing and future care needs.

Learning points

The scheme allows residents independence and the potential for social interaction. However, there is a lack of consensus among those who manage the building about the cost of design quality. This reflects a broader debate about the design of specialised housing for older people, with critics believing that a home for life is unsustainable.

Brunelcare is developing a new, cheaper, scheme, designed to be readily adaptable with flexible internal

partitioning, additional drainage, under floor heating and individual metering for flats. It will also be adapted to solar heating and combined heat and power (CHP) when that becomes economical.

Brunelcare is also hoping to secure a site for a scheme which will combine sheltered housing and a nursing home in one place, enabling residents to make an easy move to a place providing a higher level of care.

Design and architectural features

- Grouped flats
- Informal communal areas
- Communal lounge and dining room is a natural hub.

Points for residents

- Choice over which facilities to use
- Two-bedroom accommodation
- Design for people with dementia
- Facilities offer a choice of lifestyle.

Management issues

- Still a debate over the concept of a 'home for life' and value for money of extra care
- How to ensure inclusion of black and minority ethnic elders
- Space and design fosters independence.



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