



## Grand redesigns: sheltered housing 'chic'

This case study highlights the award winning improvements made at Castle Court, a remodelled sheltered housing scheme on the site of a previous care home in the former mining community in Annfield Plain, County Durham.



The approach adopted was one of sheltered housing 'chic'. This was achieved by working closely with residents to help inform the architecture, interior design and landscaping to create the high quality environment desired.

Written for the Housing Learning & Improvement Network by  
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## Introduction

Castle Court is a two storey building that provides older persons' apartment accommodation within the town centre of Annfield Plain, County Durham, and is owned and operated by Derwentside Homes.

The building originally was three separate adjoining buildings that were redundant and obsolete including a former Durham County Council owned residential home, a Primary Care Trust office building, and the Castle Court sheltered home leased by Derwentside Homes.

Perfectly located, the original Castle Court building provided 32 bedsit units which failed to meet the demands and requirements for tenants suffering a gradual decline in the demand for the outdated accommodation and spaces provided.

Derwentside Homes are passionate about delivering modern, high quality accommodation for older people, and have a track record in ensuring needs and expectations are met as residents get older. To achieve this goal, Derwentside Homes embarked on developing a strategic brief with the intention to remodel the three buildings with a complete makeover resulting in a series of high quality, high specification homes. This approach built upon the established successes achieved at earlier remodelling schemes at Haven House and Magdalene Court with Blake Hopkinson Architecture, with Castle Court being the next stage of the evolution of the 'brand' on a larger scale to a prominent site.

Through a careful and considered design approach, the building was remodelled to provide 41 luxury one and two bed apartments for the rental market. An additional five new build two bed bungalows were delivered within the site boundaries to provide rent to buy accommodation, offering tenants the ability to buy their home after a set period.

Castle Court is also cited in the recently published CIH/Housing LIN briefing, 'New approaches to delivering better housing options for older people: the role of retirement housing'.<sup>1</sup>

## Aims and objectives around remodelling this building:

With creative thinking and vision, old buildings can be brought back to life to serve today's changing market and incorporate flexibility to address future needs and requirements. The remodelling strategy and evolution of the Derwentside Homes 'brand' therefore looked to establish and set new standards for the client in terms of accommodation for the over 55s.

The requirements and input from residents was at the fore in establishing the brief, with resident led consultations establishing the aspiration for the remodelling.



*Image of the remodelled external courtyard linked to the internal communal spaces.*

During the evolution of the scheme, the residents were at the heart of the design evolution and were fully consulted throughout and were an essential partner in the process. Resident support and endorsement in the design proposals through consultation events and workshops

<sup>1</sup> [www.housinglin.org.uk/\\_library/Resources/Housing/OtherOrganisation/NewApproaches\\_June2014.pdf](http://www.housinglin.org.uk/_library/Resources/Housing/OtherOrganisation/NewApproaches_June2014.pdf)

were essential in achieving a successful conclusion to the scheme and ensured the residents had a sense of belonging and ownership once they took residence.

By recycling a large and otherwise redundant building, a significant carbon footprint saving and cost benefit has been made. The alternative would have been demolition and the construction of new build accommodation to the current site with a higher construction cost and a higher environmental impact.

### **The design approach – ‘sheltered housing chic’**

The design ethos and approach to the scheme utilised a holistic design approach to deliver a high quality co-ordinated solution. This approach relied on the strong co-ordination of the central themes through the architecture, interior design and landscaping to create the high quality environment desired.

The essential design driver was to create contemporary living accommodation with a strong sense of place. It was essential for the long term sustainability of the building that the quality of the accommodation satisfied contemporary living needs with high levels of desirability. As evidenced in the HAPPI reports<sup>2</sup>, the older person population is increasingly of a generation that demand a high standard of living accommodation to meet their contemporary lifestyle demands through flexible living and furniture arrangements. Another key element was to provide residents with a home that they were proud of, where they could have their own identity and protected space, but also the ability to come together within a series of welcoming, visually interesting internal and external spaces.



*Image of the remodelled internal space providing open plan communal kitchen facilities to the communal lounge/ dining area.*

The communal areas are welcoming and flexible and offer different opportunities for casual and formal interaction for the residents, whilst being attractive, functional and adaptable in use.

As with all existing buildings undergoing remodelling proposals, achieving the design concept and vision presented a number of challenges in working with the existing constraints of the buildings and infrastructure. A major obstacle was to reconcile the fact that the building had been physically split into three uses for a long period of time, and by bringing the building back into a single use a new sense of character and place was achieved for the development.

Often a side benefit with remodelling existing buildings is the creation of dwellings and communal spaces that afford greater flexibility in the level and variety of spaces achieved through a creative approach to tackling the buildings constraints. For example, the apartments tend to be to the higher end of the floor area scale typical of one and two bed apartments thereby providing more generously proportioned spaces along with fully fitted kitchen and bathroom spaces. Likewise, communal spaces and potential ‘dead’ spaces have been brought

<sup>2</sup> Homes and Communities Agency (2008), *Housing our Ageing Population: Panel for Innovation*. London: HCA All Party Parliamentary Group on Housing and Care for Older People (2012), *Housing our Ageing Population: Plan for Implementation* London: Housing LIN.

into life through the creative positioning of the main communal lounge spaces, which has benefitted the scheme with the introduction of upgraded communal washing and drying areas, a hairdresser/ treatment room, and a IT/ cinema suite.

Alongside the design vision, the scheme also sought to integrate best practice design standards pointers, such as Lifetime Homes<sup>3</sup> and the Housing Corporation's Design and Quality Standards<sup>4</sup>, incorporating where practical whilst working with the existing building constraints to achieve the maximum spatial benefit to the converted spaces.

The existing building had an established external character, which was traditional in form and architectural detailing and was of its time, having been constructed in the 1980s. It was showing signs of wear and age and required an uplift in its appearance to secure its long term future.

The scheme looked to retain and build upon the some of the key elevation themes such as the asymmetrical roof rooms and large scale window openings to communal lounge areas, along with new design elements such as bespoke projecting bay windows, a new main entrance extension to create a defined single point of access, infilling of balconies, over cladding and signage which were used to create a positive effect and an appearance befitting of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

To strengthen the identity of the building interior themes are applied throughout the internal spaces to unify the interior and to provide a strong sense of character and place. The use of high quality contemporary finishes applied to the interiors spaces draw reference from boutique hotel and high end leisure interiors, and have helped Derwentside Homes to deliver a model of accommodation which moves away from the archetypal image of older person accommodation, whilst still maintaining functional spaces that meet today's and future resident's needs and requirements.



*Image of one of the communal lounge spaces providing residents with relaxing places to meet and socialise.*

The finishes are robust and low maintenance but give an overriding sense of superiority. Changes in colour, textures and tactile finishes play an important role in creating character and defining spaces especially in communal lounges, the entrance lobby, informal meeting areas and entrance to apartments.

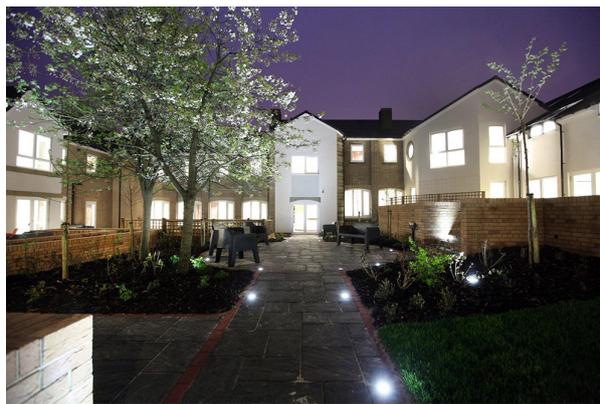
One of the building's strengths is the attractive well-appointed central courtyard which informed the creation and positioning

of the internal communal spaces to achieve maximum benefit from the setting, with the external landscaping design playing an important role in completing the design strategy. The landscaping is an integral part of the building and provides high quality external spaces that are well used and form an important focal point for the residents. The central courtyard space is key to this, forming an important and secure break out space for residents, with direct connections to communal spaces and corridors.

<sup>3</sup> Lifetime Homes (2011), *Lifetime Homes Design Guide*, [www.lifetimehomes.org.uk](http://www.lifetimehomes.org.uk)

<sup>4</sup> Housing Corporation (2007), *Design and Quality Standards*.

The remodelling provides interaction opportunities between indoors and out, with level access and screen doors which can be opened up to spill external space into the interior. The courtyard is designed with a number of landscape themes for residents including sitting spaces, a herb garden, a skittle rink, bird feeders and raised shrub beds. The space has been designed to be as attractive as possible for visual break out without creating a maintenance burden for Derwentside Homes.



*The remodelled courtyard provides a focal point for residents at all times of the day through the use of accent feature lighting.*

### **Construction perspective:**

Regeneration specialists Keepmoat were appointed as the contractor to deliver the remodelling works, who worked closely with the principle designers, Blake Hopkinson Architecture who have the expertise and track record to deliver a range of innovative ideas and concepts that have been fulfilled in the finished scheme.

Throughout the process, Derwentside Homes, Keepmoat and Blake Hopkinson Architecture embraced the design and value-led partnership approach resulting in the design exceeding the expectations of the residents.

Keepmoat and the design team needed to work very closely together to achieve the maximum impact possible from the available budget, concentrating resources onto areas of the scheme which would have the maximum benefit for the residents. A rigorous approach by the design and contracting teams established the optimum solution for major and minor remodelling works in forming the internal spaces, ensuring that the design incorporated the existing structure and drainage arrangements where possible, remaining mindful of the end target of ensuring that maximum quality could be achieved within the set budget.



*Image of the remodelled street elevation to Castle Court with communal spaces picked out in the rendered elements.*

The approach to procurement allowed a greater proportion of the budget to be allocated to the visual elements of the scheme which enhance the finished internal and external environment providing the residents with enhanced visual and functional benefits with which they will come into contact on a daily basis.

The remodelled scheme included an enhanced building envelope with increased insulation providing a performance akin to Code for Sustainable Homes Level 3 standards.<sup>5</sup> Internally, a wholesale replacement of mechanical and electrical elements with modern energy efficient fittings further helped to reduce the building's energy footprint. The five bungalow units were delivered to meet Code for Sustainable Homes Level 3 standard of performance.

<sup>5</sup> Department for Communities and Local Government (2010), *Code for Sustainable Homes*.



*Image of the remodelled elevations with new projecting bay enclosures providing comfortable living spaces to the apartments and increased articulation and visual interest to the elevations.*

### **Providing an ‘age friendly’ development:**

Derwentside Homes have found that tenants living in Castle Court have a spring in their step due to the varied programme of activities organised by the residents’ group, ranging from cheese and wine afternoons, a steak pie and Guinness night for St Patricks day, to trips to the local theatre. The inclusion of an exercise room allows regular exercise classes such as arm chair exercises, carpet bowls, darts and snooker.

Six of the original tenants returned to Castle Court following the remodelling works. One tenant returned to a fully adapted apartment providing him with the ability to live independently, which would have otherwise meant going into long term care. The other tenants enjoy remodelled and extended one and two bed apartments meeting current design and space standards which are a massive improvement from their previous small one bed flats. The apartments vary in size and layout and have showers and bathing facilities and specific wet rooms to suit tenant needs.

One tenant with dementia has benefitted immensely from having an open plan kitchen as the layout now means she is reminded to eat and drink and the outlook onto the landscaped courtyard have increased this tenant’s confidence to have the ability to join in all social activities. Two other ladies were reunited when they moved in on the same day. Work colleagues from 30 years previous, they rekindled their friendship and have made more friends since.

Most tenants to the ground floor apartments have patio doors leading to well-kept garden areas, whilst a delightful sun room ensures you will always find someone reading or having a glass of wine.

Through the design approach adopted, the remodelled building has provided a safe, friendly place where people aspire to live and is a focal point within its community. A selection of resident’s feedback is testimony to the schemes success:



*Image of the remodelled communal interior spaces*

*“I absolutely love it! I wish I had done it years ago – I just love the freedom.”*

*“It’s wonderful! I’ve had a better social life than I’ve ever had and feel so secure!”*

*“There are a few similarities (to the previous building) but most of it has changed completely – it is much bigger now and the best thing is I now have doors leading out into the courtyard which is lovely. Everyone here is so friendly – there is a real sense of community spirit. I feel very lucky to live here.”*

*“It’s great to be back, I’m so happy again and feel so much younger. I join in with all the social events and the mix of young and old has been great, the older ones are never left out of anything. I couldn’t be happier, it has honestly taken years off me.”*

*“I still have to pinch myself – it far surpasses what we expected. It’s not just the size of bungalow but the fact we have the added security.”*

### **Conclusion / Key learning points:**

The remodelling of Castle Court provides a successful conclusion to the vision of Derwentside Homes, Keepmoat and Blake Hopkinson Architecture in breathing life into a series of redundant buildings that provide a range of homes that are once more integrated into their community.

The scheme illustrates that older building stock can be brought back to life to satisfy the lifestyle requirements of today’s older person population, providing high quality accommodation that can equal if not exceed new build accommodation.

For Derwentside Homes, the remodelling of Castle Court has reinforced their presence within the community of Annfield Plain and has provided them with accommodation that has a strong demand for lettings and long term sustainability to the building. The vision became a reality.

The building was awarded the RICS North East Renaissance Residential Award 2014 for its innovative and high quality approach to elderly living.



*Image of one of the remodelled communal lounge spaces.*

## About the author

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## Note

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

## About the Housing LIN

Previously responsible for managing the Department of Health's Extra Care Housing Fund, the Housing Learning and Improvement Network (LIN) is the leading 'learning lab' for a growing network of housing, health and social care professionals in England involved in planning, commissioning, designing, funding, building and managing housing, care and support services for older people and vulnerable adults with long term conditions.

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