



## A Catalyst for change: The role of Extra Care Housing in the regeneration of Dee Park, Berkshire

Oak Tree House is a 60 unit extra care housing scheme owned and managed by Catalyst Housing Ltd, situated in Dee Park, Reading, Berkshire. It is the first purpose-built extra care housing scheme completed in Reading.



The Dee Park Estate is currently undergoing a major regeneration to create a mixed tenure estate of flats and houses, developed in partnership between Reading Borough Council and the Dee Park Partnership (DPP), a Joint Venture of Catalyst Housing Ltd and Willmott Dixon Prime Place, and designed by architects HTA Design LLP. This case study describes the achievements to date.

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## Introduction

*'When we saw the new flats we were so impressed - it's so spacious compared with what we had. They've thought of everything. When people say - oh, the old people's place - I have to put them right: it's independent living, and that's what we are - independent.'*

(Muriel Cook, Oak Tree House resident)

*'You have to start by asking questions - what's the essence of the sort of place you want to live in? Understand what people want to do in the place they live; work with them and use their suggestions. We relocated the whole site because residents came up with a firm idea to put Oak Tree House at the heart of the regeneration. As a result the tenants have ownership of the scheme and they're proud of their homes. That's produced such a lot of benefits across the whole estate.'*

(Caroline Dove, Partner, HTA Design LLP)

*'Involving the local young people in activities at Oak Tree House has really helped communication between the age groups. Now there's friendliness and people know each other, Oak Tree House residents are less intimidated by youths on the estate and the young people say hello to them. It's a better atmosphere.'*

(Kirsty Daniel, Coffee Couture café)

## Oak Tree House: Scheme Overview

Oak Tree House consists of 60 new homes for rent (48 x 1 bed and 12 x 2 bed flats); it was built as part of the first phase of the regeneration of the Dee Park Estate. Other amenities within the scheme:

- Office for Scheme Manager and Care staff
- Restaurant for residents
- Residents' lounges
- Assisted bathroom
- Hairdressing facilities
- Guest suite
- Private balconies and communal garden

## Contract Summary

- Contract Value £5.5 million
- Contract type – Design and Build
- Construction type – RC frame
- Contract Programme – 78 weeks (May 2010 – November 2011)
- Developer – Dee Park Partnership
- Contractor – Willmott Dixon Housing
- Architecture, Landscape and graphic design – HTA Design LLP

<b>Sustainability</b>	The building achieved <b>BREEAM level Excellent</b>
<b>Landlord</b>	<b>Catalyst Housing Ltd</b>
<b>Tenure</b>	<b>Rented</b>
<b>Care Provider</b>	<b>Radis Ltd</b> commissioned by Reading Borough Council

## About this case study

This case study looks at Oak Tree House from the following perspectives:

- Dee Park Regeneration
- The Residents' Journey
- Creative Engagement – Design and Culture
- Cohesive Community – Social and Support Mix
- Active Community- Lively Diary of events
- Connected Community – Social Capital
- 'Coffee Couture' Café approach to Community Development



*'The best way to get to know someone is over a cuppa,' social life at Oak Tree House*

Resident engagement and involvement is a key feature of DPP's regeneration approach and this has been especially true of the development of Oak Tree House. The tenants have had a hand in shaping the physical environment, the gardens and most especially, the culture and ethos of the building that contains their homes. The prevailing atmosphere is warm, welcoming and enabling. It demonstrates Catalyst's commitment to building successful communities and working with residents to realise the potential for community development.

## Local Context – Dee Park Regeneration

The original Dee Park was a 1960's Reading Borough Council-owned estate of 1100 properties, comprising a mixture of houses, bungalows, blocks of low-rise flats, a Primary School and a small shopping square. There was a pub onsite - The Oak Tree - and two sheltered housing schemes, Orrin Close and Helmsdale Close. Many of the existing buildings, particularly the flats, included concrete construction with poor thermal efficiency. Over time, some of the properties, particularly the flats above the shops at Lyon Square, had become more difficult to let and there were incidents of antisocial behaviour.

Reading Borough Council took the decision to undertake an ambitious regeneration of the whole area, with the aim of increasing density, making better use of the land, re-providing flats and introducing new shared ownership and private sale properties to create a new social mix. The Council also aspired to achieve other social and environmental benefits and an improved street layout, to increase connectivity between the two sides of the estate.

Following an extensive bidding process the contract was awarded by Reading Borough Council (RBC) to the Dee Park Partnership (DPP), a joint venture between Catalyst Housing Ltd and Willmott Dixon Prime Place. HTA Design LLP, as well as being architectural and landscape

design partners, took a leading role in ensuring that tenants were fully involved in the project, enabling them to contribute significantly to shaping the final scheme design.

When complete the regeneration scheme will provide 705 new homes (426 shared ownership and private sales; 279 social rent), new community facilities including shops, a new school, a Children's Centre and improved hard and soft landscaping. Catalyst Housing Ltd will be the largest landlord at Dee Park.

## **New for Old – Orrin and Helmsdale to Oak Tree House**

The Oak Tree House core resident group came from Orrin Close and Helmsdale Close, the two existing sheltered housing schemes. They had their own local management arrangements – originally Wardens, then peripatetic managers- their own social activities and their own communities. There was little inward/outward relationship with other older people on the estate and none into the wider community of Tilehurst.

When asked about life in the old sheltered housing, Oak Tree House residents said,

*“We used to have a social club for tea parties and outings, which we paid for from our club subscriptions.”*

*“Not everyone had a garden – and no balconies.”*

*“We thought the flats were nice, they were our homes, but really they weren't very well-laid out.”*

Residents were enthusiastic about the change in lifestyle that extra care housing would offer; early misgivings about the pending move were addressed through close working with Catalyst and RBC officers during the initial stages of the regeneration planning.



*Muriel Cook showing her Oak Tree House flat:  
'They've thought of everything'*

Some of the residents had lived at Dee Park since the early days of the estate, moving into the sheltered blocks as they grew older. There was a close community within the estate, with extended family living there and networks of friends and former work colleagues. Understanding the residents' emotional connection with 'home', and how this would translate into the new scheme, was recognised by DPP as a key factor that would have to be incorporated into their approach to resident engagement, to ensure the eventual success of the scheme.

The main concerns for residents were to remain independent and to maintain the community links they had established. They fully understood the benefits offered by extra care housing as they grew older and they embraced the concept of 24 hour care onsite for those who need it.

Residents' favourable comments about the new development:

*“When we saw the new flats we were so impressed – it was so spacious compared with what we had. They've thought of everything.”*

*“We realised how small the Orrin and Helmsdale flats were once we saw Oak Tree House. In all ways the new place is better. I was over the moon with my new flat from the start –and I still am today.”*

## The Residents' Journey

### Creative Engagement – Design and Culture



*Design Workshop in progress*

Acknowledging that losing their sheltered homes would be difficult emotionally for the residents, DPP's strategy was to maximise the opportunities for Orrin and Helmsdale residents to become involved with the planning and detail of the development; to talk to the residents early, before the design was fixed.

This strategy gave residents significant input to the evolving project, which later proved to pay dividends in fostering a strong community spirit within Oak Tree House, and has also been influential in the wider estate.

Caroline Dove, Partner at HTA Design LLP, explained their approach to tenant consultation. "You have to start by asking questions: what's the essence of the sort of place you want to live in? Understand what people want to do in the place they live; work with them on that and use their suggestions. Don't assume: don't go to residents with a final concept and just ask them to choose the colour of the front door."

DPP held Resident Workshops at different stages of the development, starting at the introduction stage to explain the initial ideas for design, the potential site for the new building and the general orientation.

Residents were strongly in favour of locating Oak Tree House at the centre of the regeneration scheme. This led to DPP changing their original plans, subsequently siting the building in an area that was more challenging from a technical point of view, but which positioned the new building at a focal point, which residents liked. This emphasised that residents are the heart of the development and the new estate.

Siting it close to the bus stop, the shops and other facilities, meant that Oak Tree House had a role in the community beyond a successful older people's housing scheme. Unlike the old sheltered housing, the new building has an immediate presence on the site, occupying a corner location passed at all times of the day by local neighbours and visitors alike.

It became evident to DPP that the location created potential for interaction with the wider community: Oak Tree House would become a prominent landmark building offering space for activities open to all, with scope to extend services to groups from other parts of town. This embodied Catalyst's ethos of 'creating communities'.

Development Workshops included:

- Materials – external elevations; colour of brick; treatments
- Communal spaces – design; layout; features; welcome; ambiance; active space
- Interior design – colours; quality; wayfinding
- Landscaping – garden; scope for residents to take on some gardening

The residents critically evaluated various options and came to a consensus about what they wanted, which would influence how the space was used and affect the overall culture of the scheme.

The concept of 'legacy' was important both for the designers and the residents: the joint intention was to create a space that would be successful as comfortable housing and as a building of lasting architectural worth for future generations. This intent was embodied by the planting of a new oak sapling, to complement the original oak tree for which the pub was named, and which was preserved by the only Tree Preservation Order on the site.



*The original oak tree at Dee Park, the inspiration for Oak Tree House*

## Connecting Internal and External space

At design discussion stage, residents were clearly in favour of bright, welcoming and light-filled public spaces. As a contrast to Orrin and Helmsdale's traditional design featuring corridors with quiet, dark corners, the new scheme was to be large, bright and welcoming.



*The welcoming double height entrance to Oak Tree House, looking through to the restaurant*

The residents' priority of the feeling of welcome and a friendly ambience has been realised in the public foyer space used as a waiting area. It is an active space, with people moving through to the restaurant, going out to the bus stop, passers-by looking in, or sitting chatting with friends.

HTA used the site's constraints, caused by differing levels, to a design and social advantage: it permitted a double height

space at entrance level that is overlooked by the first floor lounge, thereby creating connections between the outside/inside and upstairs/downstairs. This means that wherever people are sitting or walking through, there is a sense of connectedness and involvement with the community.

The design maximised the natural advantages of the wide local vistas and all flats have clear views: towards the Oxfordshire countryside; across Louse Hill Copse local wildlife area; over the surrounding rooftops and into West Reading streetscapes. All corner flats are a good size and have particularly benefited from the views; even in one instance where the resident spends long periods in bed, the orientation of the flat means that the view provides year-long interest.

Each flat has a balcony, or access to a patio at ground floor level. 'The balconies were absolutely essential to the success of the scheme,' said Caroline Dove, 'it was a cost well worth investing, in terms of the return produced in quality of life,



*Views across playing field from upper flat– and an anniversary message from The Queen*

access to a private outdoor space and fresh air. The residents love them and they are a huge improvement on the design of the old sheltered blocks.'



*Balconies overlooking the garden*



*Graphic design and colour scheme*

One female resident expressed her happiness with the blend of inside/outside: "I love to see the wildlife and the garden from my flat – there's squirrels and kites and Louse Hill Copse is close by. I'm in my glory with it all. Lovely.'

The interior design scheme has produced a high-quality hotel appearance, which the residents chose. The décor has been personalised to the scheme and uses a graphic theme of oak trees and nature imagery.

Each floor level is distinguished by an individual colour scheme, which helps with wayfinding. The high standard of finish is 'style, not styled', utilising a natural palette in keeping with the locality. The design team produced a final finish for longevity, robust

enough for the varied uses and hard knocks expected in a large residential building, but primarily a range of surfaces that are attractive and make a positive visual impact.

## **Cohesive Community – Social and Support Mix**

Fundamental to the success of Oak Tree House on opening day was the approach to allocations, which was entirely choice-based. Residents were offered their selection of aspect-street view or garden-floor height, balcony or patio access. As far as possible resident preference for neighbours was included; although on occasions some compromises had to be made, discussion with tenants from the early stages meant that the moving process went smoothly.

In terms of the care model, it was not possible to establish at the outset a formal scheme across care needs such as 1/3 low needs, 1/3 medium needs and 1/3 higher needs, as the first priority had been to relocate the two existing sheltered housing schemes. Not all of these residents required care at the first occupancy and were seeing its provision as an insurance policy for future years; RBC balanced the care provision with residents with higher care needs from elsewhere in Reading, once the original Dee Park residents were housed.



*Youth Project at Oak Tree House restaurant*

Once the initial allocations were made, Oak Tree House became part of the formal Extra Care Housing Waiting List system, run by Reading BC's Personal Budgets Team.

Catalyst's approach to dementia care at Oak Tree House is to create an environment that is inclusive and supportive. Residents have integrated their neighbours who have early onset dementia with the rest of the community and there is observable care and consideration towards these individuals.

Generally, Oak Tree House provides an enabling environment for individuals living with various health conditions and for life changes such as bereavement. Residents are tolerant and understanding when neighbours face difficulties: *"we all know that one day we might need them to be there for us,"* as one resident commented. One man noted, *"I had problems when my wife died, but the people here couldn't have been more helpful or understanding. I can't fault the staff and the neighbours are lovely."*

Resident Muriel Cook summed up the general view, *"We understand when people need time to deal with health or other things –but there's always a warm welcome back when they're ready. There's no cliquy-ness here, everyone's welcome."*



*An enabling and supportive environment – Radis care providers at Oak Tree House*

## Active Community - a Lively Diary of events

Visitors to Oak Tree House will be impressed by the lively social events that go on five to six days a week. Scheme Managers set up and promote a wide range of activities, encouraging



*Barbeque time at Oak Tree House*

the residents to get involved and also to run their own. One resident commented, *"We brought the tea parties with us from the old sheltered housing, but we do far more as well now – there's plenty going on."*

Regular themed events have included Hallowe'en parties; a 'Bad Taste Fashion Show'; very popular barbeques and 'Bake Off' events; Choir practice sing-alongs; 'The Mad Hatter's Tea Party' and film night. Most days there are informal coffee mornings and it is rare that the teapot gets a chance to get

cold! *"It takes time to find out what everyone likes to do, but the best way to get to know someone is over a cuppa,"* says Muriel Cook.

Health and exercise play a significant part in the social activities, with Tai Chi and Armchair Tai Chi both regular diary fixtures. The Summer Sports Day allowed residents to be as active as they chose to be, whether joining the Egg and Spoon Race or enjoying seated games.

Other residents are involved in gardening: the garden was designed with HTA Design LLP's landscape team, but it was handed over to the residents on completion and they have now taken over, changing and adding plants to suit their preference.

There is an established group of willing volunteers, including relatives to assist with the heavier work. Most of the residents who have balconies take pride in window box and plant pot gardening, which adds colour and texture to the external spaces for everyone to enjoy.



*A beautiful display in the Oak Tree House garden*

There is a regular Lunch Club, which is opened up to non-residents who visit Oak Tree House, including the residents of Asantewa House, a sheltered housing scheme for BME elders, situated in central Reading. This scheme is now part of Catalyst Housing Ltd, following a transfer from L&Q Housing Association.

Social and cultural events are run at Asantewa House by the Reading West Indian Women's Circle; since the opening of Oak Tree House, as well as the Lunch Club, Asantewa residents also join in other events at Dee Park. This has had a positive effect on community relationships, connecting West Reading more closely with the centre and offering the opportunity for

friendships to flourish between two groups of residents that otherwise might have had little contact.



*The Oak Tree House restaurant is always busy*

One of the Scheme Managers commented, 'Loneliness is not a characteristic of Oak Tree House: the lively programme of activities contributes to the friendly and supportive atmosphere. We bring in residents from outside the estate and the Oak Tree House restaurant is always full.'

Residents said: *"the quality of life is fantastic – a very warm atmosphere. I'm really happy."*

*"Our friends in other places are really envious of us now!"*

*"My family is so glad I came here – and so am I"*

One of the benefits for Catalyst in extending the catchment of Oak Tree House is that the building's capacity is fully utilised, making more efficient use of the space and increasing value for money of the scheme in use.

The success of the Asantewa House and Oak Tree House joint events point the way for Catalyst to develop other ways of connecting communities in future.

## Connected Community – Social Capital

### Coffee Couture & community development

Coffee Couture is a café situated in Lyon Square, run by Kirsty Daniel and Dominique Grandison, residents of Dee Park, who have lived there all their lives. The Café has been supported by DPP and Catalyst financially and in officer time to enable some events; day to day, however, it runs independently. The independent ethos of the Café has brought social benefits to the estate; it has contributed significantly to the success of the community-building aspects of the regeneration project.

Coffee Couture has developed into an estate community hub in the true sense of the word: Dee Park people see it as a place around which local life moves. It has become a venue for a welcome break and a source of advice and help when needed, delivered in an unthreatening, informal way.

The key to the success of Coffee Couture and the value it brings to the area is that Kirsty and Dominique embody everything that a connected community needs, facilitating social improvements through their daily work. They are experts in the local area: they know everyone and are able to be the intermediaries between a resident and ‘the authorities’. They have strong ties with Oak Tree House and frequently organize social events, or assist with catering at the scheme.

Kirsty and Dominique have unique access to hard to reach groups and have been able to make powerful interventions in the lives of individuals and families, without losing their status as ‘one of us’. As Kirsty commented, *“It’s about reaching out, having a connection between people.”*

The stories included here show the effectiveness of Coffee Couture in bringing parts of the community together around Oak Tree House.

#### **Mr T – a connected community supporting its residents**

Mr T is a man in his 70s. He had been living alone in his flat for many years and was determined to remain independent. He had long-term health conditions and received social support from his neighbour who lived close by. He received regular community medical support from the District Nurse.

Kirsty and Dominique at Coffee Couture Café had visited Mr T frequently, attempting over many months to draw him into social events at Oak Tree House, which he had resisted. They were aware that Mr T’s friend was providing him with social and practical support and, while not ideal, it appeared to be maintaining his independence. The situation would have remained the same, but with the potential to deteriorate, had action not been precipitated by a crisis. This occurred when the community nurse visited to carry out a regular medical check and she was unable to locate Mr T at his flat.

Eventually he was discovered at his friend’s house, in an unwell state. It was evident that the neighbour had been doing much more than providing social support and had been acting as his unofficial carer for a considerable time. The situation had now become too complex and demanding for her to cope with alone and her own health was affected.

Oak Tree House management were involved and arranged for a care assessment by Radis, along with visits from Housing support officer. Community Development team

liaised with Coffee Couture over social support for Mr T's rehabilitation and to reinforce the caring network around him, taking pressure off his friend.

Following the initial health crisis, Mr T received the help he required and an appropriate care package was put in place via Radis from Oak Tree House. In recuperation, Coffee Couture encouraged Mr T to join the Oak Tree House lunch club and his friend regained her own independence. Both she and Mr T have returned to a relationship based on friendship, not caring, and both are now involved in social activities with Oak Tree House and the cafe.

This case illustrates the connectedness of the services and support networks developed by Catalyst, as the case brought together: two Sheltered Housing Managers at Oak Tree House; Health staff; Kirsty and Dominique at Coffee Couture; Radis Care Team; and RBC officers. In all, around ten professionals gave support to Mr T, through the initial involvement of Coffee Couture, co-ordinated by Catalyst.

This story is a good example of Catalyst and Radis' successful 'hub and spoke' approach to delivering care and social support to residents outside of Oak Tree House, in their own homes. There is the potential for Catalyst to build on the success of this model in future and evaluate the case to extend the service into the wider West Reading area.

### **Coffee Couture and Oak Tree House bringing generations together**

Local Youth Worker Patrick Nwachukwu and Coffee Couture have been instrumental in bringing young people from the Dee Park estate into Oak Tree House as part of specific events or work experience. This has led to better relationships between the generations, helping to reduce suspicion and unease on the part of the older residents, while young people have benefitted by gaining insight into the concerns of older people and enjoying demonstrating their skills, being appreciated for their talents and abilities.

Kirsty said: 'Involving the local young people in activities at Oak Tree House has really helped communication between the age groups. Now there's friendliness and people know each other, Oak Tree House residents are less intimidated by youths on the estate and the young people say hello to them. It's a better atmosphere.'

Events produced by local young people have included: a Street Dance performance; an afternoon Ladies' Pamper Session of chair-side manicure and hand massage; young people acting as waiting staff in the Oaktree Restaurant. Oak Tree House also hosted 20 young people from 8 – 19 years in a 'Bake Off' competition, making cakes in the Oaktree kitchen, which were judged and displayed to their families.

*'Events like the Street Dance performance helped to break down perceptions on both sides of the age gap. It's about reaching out, having a connection between people. It's a lot easier to say hello to a 'hoodie' at the bus stop when he's just served you a cup of tea.'*



*All ages at Oak Tree House  
Hallowe'en Party*

Kirsty and Dominique are able to use their local knowledge and connections to gain access to 'hard to reach' groups of individuals in Dee Park. This plays an important part in identifying people who may be at risk through social or health factors.

### **Oak Tree House and Coffee Couture – A Joint Resource for Identifying and Managing Risk in Hard to Reach Groups**

One of the groups of Dee Park residents that could benefit from support in and from Oak Tree House is the significant cohort of single men in their late 50s and older. Coffee Couture staff have direct access to, and local connections with, this group via the café and their personal role as local residents. This gives Kirsty and Dominique the unique ability to build relationships where mainstream services cannot reach.

Loneliness and social isolation are health risk factors for this group, but compounded with lifestyle issues and their sense of personal independence, it is less easy for these men to request help.

Kirsty and Dominique are active in encouraging individuals to join in at Oak Tree House, for example offering invitations to events involving food – both as a way to ensure they get good nutrition, but also to encourage social interaction and build up relationships.

For some of these men, the ultimate aim may be to work with them to the point when they are ready to move to Oak Tree House to take advantage of the care and health support available to residents. It is a long process, however, and establishing trust is essential.

Dominique said, *“at least if these men are still talking and going to the café, they are known about and they know that help with a friendly face is available when it’s needed.”* Regular liaison with Oak Tree House provides an informal way of monitoring the specific needs of a hard to reach group of residents.

## **OAK TREE HOUSE CASE STUDY: LEARNING POINTS**

### **Design:**

- Understand what people want to do in the place they live, and work with residents to develop ideas: gain insight into day to day life by talking to residents.
- Ask questions at the start – what’s the essence of the sort of place you want it to be? – invest time in thinking it through; aim for a flexible approach to design so that it evolves in response to discussion with residents.
- Develop a joint approach to foster a sense of involvement and an intention to ‘pass it on’, to create a legacy for the community; the sense of place and the sense of history are important to residents.
- Attention to the interior details; wayfinding; colours are important, with the aim of making it personalised: this all adds to the identity of the building, fostering a sense of pride in the residents.
- Offer as much choice as possible through the project, including choice of flat and amenities, to aid residents’ ownership of their home.
- Consider current and future applications at the start, such as building in wi-fi for connectivity around the scheme.

## Community development:

- Critically evaluate the levels of local resource from the start, such as opening with two Managers rather than one, so that capacity is available to ensure success.
- Consider how to provide sufficient resources to do effective outreach work into the community and to realize the potential for community building
- Supporting /investing in local initiatives that are community-driven, and from the community, such as Coffee Couture, pays dividends in social inclusion; health benefits; community cohesion; reduction in anti-social behaviour and vandalism.
- Look for opportunities to enable existing residents to become local experts and build trust between communities.
- Consider how expanding resources in one part of town can lead to increased opportunities for residents in another, such as providing transport to a Lunch Club and social activities. Look at the resulting benefits and cost efficiencies to the organization by ensuring that buildings are used to capacity.

Catalyst's approach to community building has been successfully realised during the regeneration project: the developing role of Oak Tree House in the transformation of Dee Park has also established the potential to create a similar model in other locations.

## Acknowledgements

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## Note

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

## 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 and Wales involved in planning, commissioning, designing, funding, building and managing housing, care and support services for older people and vulnerable adults with a long term condition.

For further information about the Housing LIN's comprehensive list of online resources and to participate in our shared learning and service improvement networking opportunities, including 'look and learn' site visits and network meetings in your region, visit: [www.housinglin.org.uk](http://www.housinglin.org.uk)

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