

Blaby District Council: delivering affordable housing through joint working with EMH Group

The National Housing Federation (NHF), The Local Government Association (LGA) and PlaceShapers are working together to support our members to form partnerships where this can benefit all parties. This case study is one of a series from across the country to share best practice and information about the types of partnership that can work.

How many and what sort of homes are being delivered?

The group has developed 439 affordable homes in the district across a range of tenures since 2008.

How did the partnership get started?

The partnership was first established in 2008 as part of the stock transfer promise to Blaby and the former council tenants, which led to a stock improvement and the development of the first new homes completed by emh group in the district. The transfer agreement included the demolition and redevelopment of an estate to create 49 new homes in a tenure mix more appropriate to current needs, and the building of 25 new homes over the first five years.

Project summary

The partnership is based on a mutual objective of providing good quality affordable homes to meet a range of housing needs. Blaby is small compared to other local authority areas around Leicester, but it has made a political commitment, backed by capital and strategic support, to address local housing needs, and chosen a development partner with a common vision. Since the transfer, every successive chief executive at the council has actively supported the partnership, testament to its political and strategic strength in delivering on its promises to the people of Blaby.

Formal agreements are put in place in relation to specific projects as they arise. For example, one of the latest schemes to benefit from the partnership between emh group and Blaby is the development of 46 homes - 23 for affordable rent and 23 for shared ownership - at Warwick Road in the village of Littlethorpe. The site originally had outline planning approval for 31 units based on a market housing development. However, when the opportunity became available for emh group to purchase the site from the developer and build affordable homes instead, a revised planning approval gave the go ahead for 46 homes. In the case of the Littlethorpe development, there is a formal funding agreement in place for the capital contribution from Blaby, and the council have confirmed support for the scheme as part of the Homes England grant allocation process. The group's social landlord, emh homes, will provide nominations to the council once the homes are completed.

Another extremely successful project has been Oak Court, an extra care scheme with 50 apartments set in a mixed tenure development in the village of Blaby. The scheme met the priority needs of both the Blaby and Leicestershire County Council older person's strategies. It was also used to pilot a reablement scheme in support of the county council's priorities.

The partners also work with the Leicestershire rural housing group to identify exception sites, and have been able to draw on New Homes Bonus funding made available by Leicestershire County Council to meet rural housing needs.

The group has plans to deliver more homes over the next few years. In July 2018 emh group was named one of eight ambitious housing associations across the country chosen by the Government to deliver more affordable homes. Securing £30.5m from Homes England to increase development in the region, the group is now able to increase its output of new homes by 80 per cent over the next four years. This will see around 600 affordable homes being built in the region each year for the next four years. This decision provides greater certainty and flexibility over grant funding, and will enable emh group and Blaby to be more proactive in pursuing opportunities within the partnership in the future.

What have been the greatest benefits and what challenges have you experienced along the way?

The open and positive partnership which has developed over the years enables both parties to work with one another at short notice and translate opportunities into realities wherever possible.

emh group has benefitted from the council's strategic support and the financial contribution they have made without which it would be much more difficult to acquire sites.

A strong partnership is one where both parties can articulate key business objectives and identify areas of synergy in order to be able to respond to opportunities as they arise. This commitment and agility of both parties is one of the key strengths in the partnership, enabling much-needed affordable homes to be delivered swiftly and efficiently in the district.

What would be your message to other councils and housing associations looking to do something similar?

A successful partnership has to be built on shared objectives and the common values of openness, trust and commitment. When development opportunities arise, from whichever direction, both partners must recognise the challenges faced by the other in order to successfully agree upon the best option to take forward. It is the spirit of collaboration that powers the partnership, a commitment to the best possible outcomes for local people.