

**BUILDING
PROJECTS**
**FARROW COURT
ASHFORD**

Opening the book on ageing

In redeveloping a retirement housing scheme to provide a distinctly hotel-style alternative for residents, Ashford Borough Council also decided to apply an open book approach to encourage collaboration. Jack Wooler reports.

Farrow Court, now completed to the south of Ashford, is a £17m social housing project that caters for a range of elderly residents. The scheme is at the forefront of current Government policy to integrate housing, health and adult services into communities.

Designed by architecture practice PRP, the development has been constructed around an existing, smaller supported housing scheme for older people, building 104 new homes. The fully dementia-friendly new build is council owned, council run, and council built via contractors Bouygues UK.

It has been conducted using a collaborative 'open book' approach, whereby Ashford Borough Council, consultancy firm Pellings, and Bouygues worked collectively as partners to reach decisions at each stage of the build.

The project is now a flagship scheme in the borough. Hoping to engender a non-clinical feel, in contrast to many dilapidated care homes or lifeless hospitals, Farrow Court is an open, modern apartment development with extensive accessibility features, more akin to a hotel than its institutional counterparts.

The scheme

In June 2013, planning permission was granted, with a 'meet the buyer' event held shortly after to offer local tradesmen and businesses the opportunity to be involved in the construction of the scheme.

The planning process was reportedly stress-free. Previous residents of the old flats on the site were excited about their new home, and locals were keen to see the old building replaced with a modern

structure, as well as impressed with the numerous community aspects integrated into the build.

Work began on site in September, and during the programme £3.6m of funding was formally added to the contract so that 12 homes for people with learning disabilities could be built as the last of the project's three phases. In addition, and timed to take place during dementia awareness week, members of council staff attended training sessions to become 'dementia friends'.

On completion of the first phase, the residents moved across from the old, subsequently demolished, building to the new units, allowing the commencement of phase two. This has been built on the site of the old building and forms a separate part of the new unit, with a connecting walkway.

The existing scheme's residents moved into their new homes by November 2015, with work on phase two beginning at the start of 2016. Work completed in November 2017, with the new residents moved in.

Daniel Scarsbrook, planning and development surveyor at Ashford Borough Council, details the demographic shifts that form the backdrop to the scheme: "In 2025, 40 per cent of Ashford's population will be aged over 50. Eight existing outdated council-owned sheltered schemes had been earmarked for development over 15 years, to address the challenge of providing homes that meet the needs and aspirations of the ageing population."

Farrow Court was selected as the first scheme to be redeveloped as the large site offered the opportunity to build at a



OPEN TO CHANGE

Farrow Court was designed to be open and modern, in contrast to the reality of many care homes



PHASING

The phasing and demolition was carefully planned to enable residents to move to the new building, and subsequent phases to be built

significantly higher density development than previously existed, meaning residents could then be decanted from another scheme, thus freeing that up for redevelopment.

In addition, the development could be phased, enabling the existing Farrow Court residents to stay in their homes while the first new apartments were built.

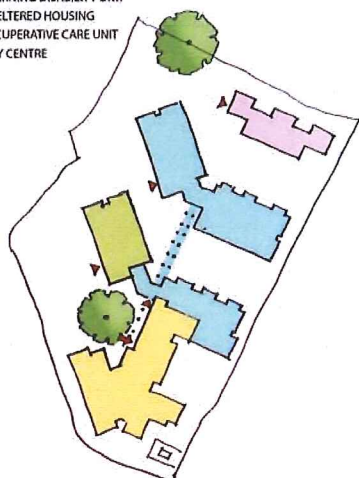
doors from both the bedroom and hall for quick entry across the apartment. Ovens are set above waist height for ease of access, and both thick and light blinds are installed, providing flexibility and privacy with the light either kept in or out. Balconies are included on every room above ground, with patios on each ground floor apartment.

All the apartments are priced for affordable rent at £110.24 a week for a one-bed apartment, and £153.17 for two bed. The homes are of the highest quality for this price range, not just in terms of care standards, but as modern, healthy accommodation.

Along with the new homes, a wealth of communal features have been added to the development. These promote social interaction and a sense of belonging, and an avoidance of isolation, to whatever extent residents require. Among the entertainments on offer are movie nights, game nights and trips out.

There is a large communal lounge with a fitted kitchen in the centre of the facility, with a fitted kitchen and doors leading out

■ LEARNING DISABILITY UNIT
 ■ SHELTERED HOUSING
 ■ RECUPERATIVE CARE UNIT
 ■ DAY CENTRE



High quality environment

Of the 104 new homes, 33 were built as part of phase one for the original tenants, then 71 as part of phase two. These include 12 learning disability units and seven recuperative care units named 'Homebridge', meaning that people can leave hospital and stay in Farrow Court while a care package is arranged or adaptations put in place to enable them to return to their own home. There is also one guest room within Homebridge.

Thought has been put into every detail of the rooms, with large light switches, assisted front doors, wheelchair accessibility throughout, and wetroom ensembles with



to one of the courtyards.

Landscaped gardens are found throughout the site, with individually named courtyards dotted through the development, each with its own unique style and function, and securely designed to enable residents to enjoy them in safety. One such courtyard holds a community garden for growing vegetables, offering familiar outdoor activity to those moving from properties with land.

Age UK has opened a day centre in the building, allowing residents to meet up with friends and make new ones. A range of activities are held in the centre, where residents are encouraged to join in and build a sense of community, and the charity also sells cooked meals. The centre provides an additional, lively hub to the scheme, full of life and happy residents.

Farrow Court has its own hair salon, run by an external hair and beauty firm, and open six days a week. It's not only for residents, but also friends, family and the local community. A therapy room is used by a regular chiropodist, as well as for beauty treatments. For basic amenities, a grocery shop is to open soon, for the use of all residents and the public, and laundry facilities are available on a pay per use basis.

Design for dementia

The scheme is the first fully dementia-friendly housing scheme in the borough of

Ashford. The Alzheimer's Society states that there 850,000 people with dementia in the UK, and that by 2025 there will be one million people, and two million by 2051. 80 per cent of people living in care homes are reported to have a form of dementia or severe memory problems, with over one in six people aged 80 and over suffering from such neurological disorders.

To combat this incipient issue, Farrow Court has been sensitively designed throughout to support residents with dementia. The corridors on each floor are decorated in individual tones for increased contrast, and the graphics used in the signage enable easy recognition. 'Memory shelves' have been installed in front of each apartment, with residents encouraged to place an item that represents themselves in some way. These range from cuddly toys, to flowers and pictures, helping to bring not just a sense of individuality to the homes, but to provide residents with tangible reminders of where they are.

The design combines complimentary building typologies, including the various recreational areas such as the Age UK resource centre. During the design stage, careful consideration was given to Housing our Ageing Population – Panel for Innovation (HAPPI) and the Housing our Ageing Population – Plan for Implementation (HAPPI2) reports, which

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COURTYARDS

The unit contains a variety of internal courtyards, including one with a communal vegetable garden

highlighted a number of standards that housing for the older population should meet. These standards have been incorporated in the design of Farrow Court, ensuring residents are offered a mixture of property sizes and designs, and incorporating communal facilities.

Small breakout areas are spread throughout the scheme in addition to a main lounge, adding to the scheme's open feel. Residents have a say in what these are used for, with a pool table in one, a mini library in another, and another still with comfortable seating and a stereo system (Classic FM is a popular choice).

The well-judged design ensures the development is both roomy and welcoming, while providing the sense of security that residents require. This allows them to live independently, with access to support as and when required.

Daylighting has been employed expertly across the build, with large windows on every corridor and room. The entire building is airy and light, the antithesis of the stereotypical dark, dank and often nightmarish care homes of old.

"Plentiful natural light is very important in sheltered housing," says PRP associate director Andrew Robson. "It positively impacts on residents' moods, reduces solar gain, and illuminates important areas such as circulation routes, stairs and lift landings."

Installing windows in the right place can also ensure that residents are able to see the outside world from their seat or wheelchair by utilising "carefully positioned mid-rails (in line with Lifetime Homes guidelines) across floor to ceiling glazing to avoid blocking the line of sight."

Anne-Marie Nicholson, partner at PRP, echoed this sentiment, stressing its particular importance for those with dementia: "If the corridors are endless, relentless, artificially lit, then you don't know what floor you're on, what time of day it is, what the weather's like."

"If you get out of bed in the middle of the night, you don't know if it's dark or light outside."

On the balconies, frameless glazing has been used to maximise daylight into the apartments. The balconies are semi-recessed with surround to provide privacy, but reduced to maximise daylight. On the surrounds of the other windows, timber panels provide a break in the brick facade. This timber theme is continued to the ground floor, across both the patio doors and around the windows.

Ashford Borough Council's chief executive, Tracey Kerly, is extremely proud of what she says is an "innovative development." She adds: "The design is exceptional, delivering a significant difference in quality. The careful attention to detail to exploit the use of natural light

and space has created a building that is functional, appropriate for its use, and has a real sense of place."

Collaboration

An 'open book' process was utilised in the build, with all parties assisting in putting together a successful funding bid submission, and collectively guiding research on this specialised project. Each party was also involved in the consultation process, with all available expertise employed to inform what was a robust brief.

As part of the collaboration, greater cost certainty could be achieved from the outset, buildability could be scrutinised, and full buy-in to the design could be achieved. This made realising the required design quality more achievable.

James Green, partner at Pellings, explains how the open-book idea was initiated: "Ashford Borough Council had previously worked with local contractor Denne (now BYUK), including on a large PFI project, and had developed an established relationship at high level.

"Accordingly, there was a willingness to work together on both sides to deliver this high-profile scheme. To appoint Denne directly, the council had to use an OJEU-compliant framework. In turn, to demonstrate value for money for a direct appointment, Denne suggested an open book relationship whereby the prelims and overhead and profit would be fixed and the individual work packages tendered to the market."

He continues: "In this way the council could demonstrate value for money. This approach is fairly rare, especially with local authorities," he concludes. The same arrangement has been carried forward to the next project, which is currently on site at Danemore, Tenterden.

Green reveals what the transparency means in practice for a consultant: "For a normal contract you are often kept at arm's length and not aware of the deeper issues.

"The nature of the relationship – open book plus the historical element – brought greater transparency." He added: "This was amplified by the duration of the project."

He believes the process fostered a greater understanding of the challenges faced by the contractor and how they impacted both costs and programme.

Green continued: "We were able to see the costs for each package and be involved in the selection of each sub contractor."

Daniel Scarsbrook of Ashford Borough Council explains some of the extra benefits



this system produced: "A risk register was produced by Pellings, and risks were allocated accordingly at the start of the project. We were working together to overcome the challenges of the project.

"Generally the approach was more collaborative. With the contractor proactively keeping costs down, they had a vested interest as it could affect the profit share."

James Green adds: "There were cost pressures from the sub-contractor tenders due to the rising market at the time. Accordingly, each package was reviewed in detail by the team, including to consider any cost savings before proceeding.

"It meant we could all work together to make sure the design pre-planning sat within the budget before being submitted for approval."

He says that despite the open-book contract being a novel approach, it was "not particularly challenging," adding that "it was refreshing to work in an open environment without the usual confrontation."

Setting a precedent

The project is notable for a run of success, with simple, speedy planning, a straightforward and successful build, smooth tenant changeover, and both critical and communal acclaim. The scheme, which also appears to be an exemplar of open-book collaboration, was named a joint winner of the Residential-Major category of the 2016 Kent Design and Development Awards.

Providing a hub for the local community and sheltered care facilities, from bingo nights to a public salon and restaurant, the scheme is a thoughtfully-designed gift for not only its residents, but also the local area. It could even be part of a new paradigm of what supported housing can be, far from the depressing care homes of the past, and instead offering a hopeful future. ■



A wealth of communal features have been added to the development to promote social interaction