

Brownfield Land Regeneration Case Study:

Newcastle City Council

Newbiggin Hall

Contents

1	Introduction	3
2	Key Findings and Success Factors.....	3
	Planning	3
	Key planning tools	3
	Site identification	4
	Site viability	4
	Leadership and governance	4
	Key lessons	4
3	Basic site information, key stakeholders and dates.....	5
	The site	5
	Site maps	6
	Key dates in planning history	6
	Key stakeholders	6
4	Planning strategy, site allocation, key decisions dates	6
	Newbiggin Hall Masterplan	7
	Planning decisions process, key dates	7
	Working collaboratively	8
	S106/CIL	9
	Key site challenges	9
	LPA skills and resources	9
	Master planning	9
	Effective stakeholder engagement	9

Newcastle, Newbiggin Hall site.

“I think sometimes it's about not relying on the market itself. Sometimes you must take the lead as the authority. If we're going to do this, we need to ensure that it is done and people don't just half finish it and half bake it.’ It's about taking leadership and putting our money where our mouth is... and doing the scheme ourselves.” (Housing Officer)

1 Introduction

- Newbiggin Hall is a housing estate located in the north-east of Newcastle. Its neighbourhood Centre had been in serious decline, with more than half of the shop units closed. Redevelopment of the site involved replacing a partially vacant parade of small shops, associated parking, and low-grade open space with new retail units and new dwellings.
- The renewal of the local retail offer and the diversification of the housing choice has been an aspiration of the local authority for many years.
- A brief was produced for a masterplan to be created. The project is now being delivered through Newcastle City Council’s municipal housing company, financed through the Housing Revenue Account with additional finance from Homes England and the North of Tyne Combined Authority.
- The process has been managed by the Housing Investment Team working with Planning. Planning has played a key role in providing the detailed development framework for the site, ensuring that the build is of the expected quality and coordinating specialist inputs to ensure delivery.

2 Key Findings and Success Factors

Planning

- Planning provided a development framework by producing an indicative master plan. This identifies the spatial opportunities and the broad aims and objectives of redeveloping the site to include a mix of housing and retail uses.
- Planning facilitates on-site delivery through pre-application discussions with developers. This ensures the appropriate mix of uses, high design quality and other material considerations are discussed and negotiated to ensure the viability of the development.
- Planning ensures conformity to the agreed scheme through planning conditions.
- During the planning application determination process, the planning team manages stakeholder inputs, including liaison with consultees, including members and the community.

Key planning tools

- The Newbiggin Hall master plan provides a framework that informed the initial marketing of the site, appointment of a developer and delivery. It specified (in broad terms) the requirements for the site in respect of the mix of uses, site layout, open space, flood risk, design excellence, highway works, landscape and ecology.

Site identification

- Newbiggin Hall (neighbourhood) was designated as a Local Centre and a Growth Centre (i.e., targeted for development of new houses) in the Local Plan (comprising the Core Strategy and Urban Core Plan for Gateshead and Newcastle upon Tyne 2010 to 2030).
- The scheme presented an opportunity to replace vacant retail units and unviable housing with modern fit-for-purpose new homes, a new retail store and affordable homes.
- Market confidence was boosted by an earlier phase of new affordable dwellings – 12 family houses and one bungalow - on the adjoining site, that was delivered in 2018.

Site viability

- The principal constraint of development at Newbiggin Hall is adverse ground conditions, specifically problems related to historic mining activity.
- Additional problems (including asbestos presence) became apparent during the demolition process.
- These have been remediated in part with monies from the North of Tyne Combined Authority, making possible the development of new homes.

Leadership and governance

- Newbiggin Hall required a multi-disciplinary approach to deliver the development. It has been led by the Council at corporate level and funded by Housing Investment. It has required multiple specialist inputs including planning, to deliver the development.
- The local authority proactively intervened to deliver aspects of the development. The authority eventually delivered the scheme itself through direct municipal provision.
- Elected members played a key role in the liaison with the local community and ensuring that planning officers followed up on the concerns of the community. They made sure that key stakeholders did what they said they were going to do. *“It was key for us to control communications ... local members will be right on to us... So, they played a pivotal role in that”* (Planning Officer)

Key lessons

- **Having clearly defined outcomes for the development.** Being clear about the outcomes, what is being delivered and how, helps to steer the development and keep things on track. *“The key thing was identifying what we wanted... whether it was an assisted living block or ... a dementia care facility ... or whether it was just ‘we want 25% affordable housing’...that mix was dependent upon the area for which we were working”.* (Housing Officer).
- **Having a masterplan provides a clear planning framework for the site.** This has informed all stages of the planning process, from procurement to development management. *“It’s not a detailed master plan for the area... keeping it very simple to concept statements and ideas...developed in conjunction with internal colleagues, whether that be transport, flood authority... assessing the application they’ve helped form ... and from a very early stage identify the opportunities of a site and trying to lead the developer to maximize their opportunities”* (Planning Officer).

- **Front-loading the site investigation process.** The principal challenge in developing the Newbiggin Hall has been viability caused by poor ground conditions, many of which only became apparent as the scheme progressed. This underlines the importance of front-loading and resourcing the site investigation process. This is something the authority have learned from this development and embedded in their processes.

“Bringing sites forward... we need to make sure there's sufficient money put in up front to test these different scenarios... doing a lot more site investigations, intrusive surveys... so we start to front load that end of the system. That (information) is released - here's our idea of a master plan concept statement, here's our site investigation etc.... so all that information goes out as one package so the developer knows what they're bidding on” (Housing Officer).

- **Retaining expertise in-house.** The development has been expedited efficiently, in no small part, due to the accumulated expertise of brownfield regeneration, retained in-house, and the relationships built up with external partners.

“We're already an investment partner with Homes England. We've been delivering schemes in partnership with Homes England for over 10 years, and we know about taking commuted sums from the big developers on their large private developments and how we use that. So, we have got the expertise and the structures in place” (Housing Officer).

- **Cross-departmental working.** *“A big learning...close collaboration... a good thing has been the close working relationships to planning, ecology, the flood survey ... everyone's been willing to come together for meetings as and when required”* (Housing Officer).

3 Basic site information, key stakeholders and dates

The site

<p>Local Planning Authority Newcastle City Council</p> <p>Land ownership Newcastle City Council</p> <p>Type of location Urban, neighbourhood centres within large post war residential development, neighbourhood is mostly residential but includes four primary schools and two churches.</p> <p>Description Site comprises existing neighbourhood centre, comprising small parade of shops, plus parking area, and green space with multiple trees.</p> <p>Size of site 1.79 ha.</p> <p>Main Developer(s) Newcastle City Council</p> <p>Current stage in the development process Retail units complete, work due to start on residential uses</p>

Site maps



Key dates in planning history

2016: Newbiggin Hall Masterplan published.
 2018: Detailed application (ref. no. 2018/0640/01/DET), submitted by Gentoo Homes, for demolition of existing neighborhood centre, proposes new retail uses on western portion of site, retail uses of remainder considered by Planning Committee, 3rd August
 Case officer reports notes “no relevant planning history.”

Key stakeholders

<p>Public Sector Newcastle City Council North of Tyne Combined Authority Homes England</p>	
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4 Planning strategy, site allocation, key decisions dates

The current Local Plan is published in two parts:

1) the *Core Strategy and Urban Core Plan for Gateshead and Newcastle upon Tyne 2010-2030*, the strategic spatial planning framework for Newcastle and Gateshead, adopted in March 2015 and

2) the *Development and Allocations Plan 2015-2030*, which sets out development management principles and policies, adopted in June 2020.

The latter was in only in consultation at the time of the Newbiggin Hall application and, thus, had little weight. A number of saved policies from the Newcastle Unitary Development Plan, adopted in 1998, remained relevant.

Policy NN3 of the *Core Strategy* designates the Newbiggin Hall estate, including the present site, as a *Neighbourhood Growth Area* (one of five in the city), targeted to accommodate 300 new homes. New development would be subject to a masterplan and would require a diversity of housing types – with a minimum of 75% family homes, enhanced local education provision and other local facilities, mitigation of air and noise pollution and flood risks, retention of rights of way, open space, etc.

Newbiggin Hall Masterplan

A key document is the *Newbiggin Hall Masterplan*, led by Planning and published June 2016. Initial market testing, led by the Estates Department, prompted development proposals for retail or housing uses but not both. The master plan sets out a scheme to deliver retail and housing on site. It provides:

- a profile of the site,
- development brief, including i) a summary of recent developments, including new homes, on adjacent sites; ii) broad development scenarios, based on the relocation of an existing GP surgery and additional residential units, and
- bid evaluation criteria for potential contractors, including guidance on uses, open space, flood risk, design excellence, highway works, landscape and ecology.

The document has played an important role in

- market testing and attracting a developer via tendering through the Strategic Housing Partnership, and
- expediting a timely development management process.

“The masterplan was a very, very useful tool because it was developed with input from all disciplines who would then be subsequently dealing with the planning application. It was developed so that when the Council went out to the market through the bid process to acquire a developer... all the developers are bidding on that concept. That then allowed schemes to come in that would comply with the guidance. (Planning Officer).

Planning decisions process, key dates

The planning application, submitted by a private developer, was considered by Planning Committee, 3rd August 2018. The application was for:

- the demolition of the existing neighborhood centre
- proposed new retail uses on western portion of site
- retail uses on the remainder of the site

- erection of commercial retail buildings (5 units including food store and pharmacy) and subcontracted to specialist retail developer
- 43 residential units (8 two-bedroom houses, 30 three-bedroom houses and 5 four-bedroom houses)
- Consultations were conducted with 162 neighbouring properties; a single objection (loss of open space) was received.
- The statutory consultees – Flood Authority, Transport, Public Safety, Contaminated Land, Economic Development, Northumbrian Water, Coal Authority – raised no major objections, and required some (standard) conditions.
- The proposal was deemed to be in accordance with NPPF plus local policies CS1 (Spatial Strategy), CS7 (Retail and Centres), CS10 (Delivering New Homes) and CS11 (Providing a range and choice of housing).
- Planning consent was granted with 36 conditions, described by planning officers as ‘standard’ and including submission and implementation of a remediation scheme, reporting of unexpected contamination and remediation work (coal mining).

The designation of Newbiggin Hall as a Neighborhood Growth Area in the Core Strategy supported the planning decision process: *“The site was already allocated as a district centre, so there was no policy objection to putting new shops in there, because otherwise I think you’d be looking at...sequential tests ... that sort of policy really helped us...”*. (Planning Officer).

Working collaboratively

The Newbiggin Hall Masterplan was also instrumental in expediting the progress of the development through the application process: *“Once a developer had been selected, we would pull together our Development Team, ... the same urban design, landscape officer all sitting in the initial meeting, and then we would develop a strategy and time frame with the developer to undertake a number of focused meetings with the different disciplines ... In some ways you’re starting to assess the application as it’s being developed. So that by the time they come to submit their planning application, most of the design details have been approved or viewed by internal colleagues and by the planning officer.”* (Planning Officer).

The planning decision process itself, especially concerning the housing element, might be described as routine *“a bit of back and forth on some aspects, but pushing on an open door as there was no principle against it... the application came in with its various reports about contamination, coal mining, ... nothing unusual about that. Newcastle’s riddled with mining history so that’s normal...”* (Planning Officer).

The retail element of the scheme was less straightforward, especially at delivery stage. In a nutshell, there were issues with the development being built in accordance with the plan. The scheme was eventually appropriated by the local authority and some minor amendments were tabled.

“It wasn’t a massive change, it was some of the houses were bit different in a very slight change to the layout” (Planning Officer).

To avoid going through a whole new planning application and to try and get the builders on site as soon as possible, the council sought consent for the change through a planning variation.

S106/CIL

Developer contributions were re-negotiated on the grounds that the proposed development represented an important regeneration project which contributes to the replacement of much needed retail provision. The inclusion of retail units impacts the viability of the overall scheme, as does the diversification of the local housing offer, introducing homes for (part) sale in a neighborhood historically dominated by social renting.

Key site challenges

The primary challenge of developing the site has been ground conditions. Remediating historic mining related subsidence affecting the viability of the development. A change in the requirements of the Coal Authority added to the remediation costs of the proposal in its formative phase. It was at this point that the retail developers withdrew from the development. The city council chose to continue the scheme, acting as developer itself, having secured agreement for part funding the remediation work from North of Tyne Combined Authority and construction of the housing element from Homes England.

The costs of remediation increased as the clearance of the site progressed. *“Nothing is straightforward with Newbiggin Hall”* (Housing Officer). New problems emerged, e.g., asbestos, bats. However, the problem of viability became less acute once the city council had decided to, itself, act as developer to provide shared ownership housing. *“We were quite confident that there was a market for that product, basically diversifying our housing offer if you like.”* *From our point of view, where we do our appraisal is a cash flow appraisal over 30 years. So, these are like market rent or shared ownership. So, we have an income which allowed us to be more relaxed about the sales risk because it's not an outright sales risk.”* (Housing Officer).

LPA skills and resources

Master planning

The drafting of the Newbiggin Hall master plan represents the best example of the contribution of planning to the development framework for Newbiggin Hall. *“What we did in planning is we provided the help, assistance and guidance through the masterplan concept statements...the feedback we got from the developers throughout this whole process has been very, very positive... they found they weren't wasting a lot of time putting bids together because ... they knew if they followed the initial concept statements and the ideas ...they found that they could just focus upon that layout and fine tune their designs around that without putting a bid in which was a complete nonstarter. So, it was quite useful in the end because we were then just starting to score the design quality.”* (Planning Officer)

Effective stakeholder engagement

The Newbiggin Hall development benefited from a strong corporate lead from the Housing Investment Team which bore ultimate responsibility for liaising with internal and external stakeholders. *“We effectively project manage the scheme in the Council, we would have had assistance from development management to do the developer guidance for the site and the master planning ... from property services in terms of the leaseholders and the land acquisition... transportation and highways in terms of what's required to get the planning through, plus things like number of car parking spaces and all that type of stuff”. “And it's important the element in terms of how the development links up itself but how it links with the wider road network and what sort of section 278 we need. Then there's flood management in terms of sustainable urban drainage systems... and then procurement being responsible as*

budget holders to seek funding from Homes England and from the North Tyne Combined Authority” (Housing Officer)

The process of collaboration between the Housing Investment Team and development management was also a defining characteristic of the process. *“Ordinarily with an application it would be just us and the developers, whereas with this, the Housing Team were on board right from the start ... that helped a lot in terms of having somebody else to discuss or to mediate between, for example, the flood team asks for something, we go back to the developers and ask for it... having the Housing Team there to mediate and to present that stuff to the developers helped”.* (Planning Officer)

Councillor’s role

Elected members, for their part, played a key role with the liaison with the local community. *“When we were liaising with the shopkeepers, the leaseholders, the Members were really good at getting information from us to the shopkeepers and vice versa..., acting like a conduit ... it was really key for us in order for us to control communications”*