

Brownfield Land Regeneration Case Study:

Stevenage Borough Council: Kenilworth Close, Stevenage

This study highlights how having a dedicated housing delivery team, fully supported by members, can work in partnership with planning to deliver above and beyond plan allocations.

“Having that collaborative approach ensures that we are delivering for every person we can in the community. I think that’s very important and that’s what we want to achieve as planners” (Local Planning Authority case officer).

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Introduction

- Kenilworth Close, was constructed as the first phase of the New Town development and now deemed in need of regeneration. The site comprised a former community centre (the Bragbury Centre) and two blocks of assisted living housing which were dated and past the end of their useful lives.
- The community center closed during the Covid-19 pandemic and the trustees felt unable to continue running it under those circumstances.
- The site contained large areas of greenspace between the buildings, typical to 1950s suburban development. The planning and housing teams agreed that the site could be redeveloped at a higher density than stated in the 2011-31 plan.
- Permission has been granted for 236 units across four applications (see later in this case study for more details), 229 on the Kenilworth Close site itself.
- 50% of the housing will be affordable (council) housing, and of the 50% market housing, the council will 50:50 profit-share the receipts from the market housing with the developer.

1. Executive Summary and Key Success Factors

Planning

- **Shared Vision.** Officers and members shared a vision: '**working for the common good**' -meeting the needs of vulnerable communities, people in housing need, the elderly with extra care needs; and extending the term to refer to a wider sense of social justice for current and future generations. This vision drove the development approach and choice of partners, to ensure both the successful redevelopment of the site, and the provision of high-quality affordable housing.
- **Effective, early engagement including Pre-Application advice.** Through early ('pre'-pre-app) engagement, planning officers were able to ensure all statutory **stakeholders** (e.g., water authority, highways) made an early input and agreed on necessary measures for the proposed development to go ahead. This allowed the development to be brought on site without delays and ensure the application had adequately addressed all technical issues before it was submitted. Planners also used this time to deal with public objections and concerns, with consultations and workshops run with the architects and the housing delivery and planning teams. Despite several objections at the time of application, public opinion has been more positive as the development has proceeded.
- **Collaboration and discussion across the council.** The key to the success in this site has been the level of collaboration between housing development, planning, (council) housing management, supported housing, parks and greenspaces, co-operative neighbourhoods, and subsequently with key private sector players.

Key Planning Tools

- **The overall scheme was submitted as four separate (full) planning applications.** These were considered at the same time by the planning committee so that the scheme could be seen as a totality. This was important as it really helped with decision making. Potential issues on individual elements of the site could be set against the objectives of the overall scheme. This approach allows parts of the scheme to be worked on sequentially so that changes to one particular application/phase do not slow the overall development.
- **Amendments to the proposals.** The proposals increased the housing density dramatically (from 65 to 235). This was done by reducing the greenspace - unused large green verges (2835 sq m within the Asquith site) rather than high quality amenity space, and by the relocation of the Bragbury Community Centre. An alternative location was found for the Bragbury nearby aided by the Land Release Funding (LRF) funding. The new landscaping and design aim to make the open space more useable and beneficial for residents. This increase in density (and therefore units to be delivered on site) added to the council's **windfall housing** aspirations

Site Identification

- **The site was identified for housing in the local plan**, and the previous housing stock had been designated 'red assets' (in a poor state of repair and not suitable for modern habitation) by housing services. -..

Site Viability

- **The government's Land Release Funding** was instrumental in allowing the local authority to invest in bringing this site, and two other small sites, forward for development in a timely manner because of the financial certainty it provided. This was particularly important because of the need for new community facilities. To achieve maximum density and therefore viability on the sites, the Bragbury centre was demolished with alternative new facilities planned offsite. This also led to an increase in community facilities within the assisted living accommodation on the Kenilworth site.
- **The New Town legacy** meant that the council owned most of the land, which eased site assembly and lowered potential costs. Post second world war, the Ministry of Housing and Local Government established development corporations to purchase land for the development of new towns, of which Stevenage was the first. This work was then passed on to the Commission for New Towns in 1961. In 1999 this became English Partnerships, who then passed on powers to the Homes and Communities Agency and land ownership subsequently fell to local authorities.
- **Land remediation, resident re-location.** The site did not face land remediation issues as much of it was 'green' although it was classed as previously developed land and on the brownfield register. In terms of relocating those living on the site, the existing two blocks (Asquith and Walpole) of assisted living housing were both under-occupied. This meant the council were able to temporarily rehouse those in one block while the other was demolished and whilst the new accommodation was being built.

Leadership and Governance

- **Strong, visible leadership.** This was evident across the council. The Head of housing development and the Portfolio Holder for housing were frequently photographed together in press reporting on the site's development.
- **Creation of an in-house team.** The council created a Housing Development Team to bring together individuals with the right housing and planning skills. This included bringing together skills such as site assessment, communication, negotiation and future visioning, to promote a financially viable site, rather than rely on the private sector to lead in this area.

Key Lessons

- **Ambition.** Councils can lead development for market and affordable housing; not just attempt to steer it. In so doing, wider aspirations (high quality assisted living accommodation in this case) can be met as well and turning a profit for the local authority.
- **Early Collaboration & Dialogue.** Establishing this before the pre-application stage is important. Planning has a key role in leading this - between both statutory consultees, council stakeholders and members of the public. However, this needs to be underpinned by a shared vision across the council because resources are needed to support the process.
- **Community engagement - small concessions can go a long way.** There are some significant hurdles to overcome such as giving communities confidence about the better deployment and use of green space and play areas. And there are practical things councils can do - community reactions can be negative to any level of change but are likely to improve if you can bring communities with you during the development and small concessions, such as a temporary fish and chip shop in this case, can make a big difference to public views.
- **Investment** (in this case grant funding) works as an enabler to creativity by minimising risk to all parties.

2. Basic Site Information, Key Stakeholders and Dates

The site

Local Planning Authority	Stevenage Borough Council
Previous land ownership	Stevenage Borough Council (with some minor private treaty purchases)
Current land ownership	Stevenage Borough Council (with some minor private treaty purchases)
Type of location	Suburban, 2.9 miles south of Stevenage town centre on the edge of the built-up area
Previous uses	Community centre, small parade of shops, sheltered housing
Size of site	3.34 ha (two main application sites are 1.6ha and 0.5ha but overall site is wider including non-brownfield land)
Current stage in the planning process	Full planning permission granted for four separate applications which make up the overall scheme. The first is physically separate, and included in the overall package as it has

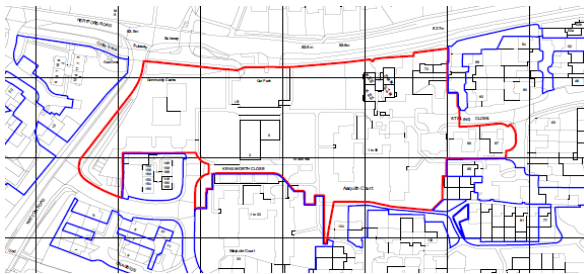
produced receipts from the sale of market housing which has underpinned the financing of the affordable housing in the other applications.

Current status of site	First stage completed December 2021 and all 7 units sold. Development under way on the second stage: this is the first major part of the Kenilworth Close brownfield redevelopment development scheme- providing 169 units of accommodation. Subsequent two stages are being reviewed for some minor changes, but this has not been formally taken forward yet.
LRF Funding Received	£900,000
Main developer(s)	Stevenage Borough Council and Hill (developer)

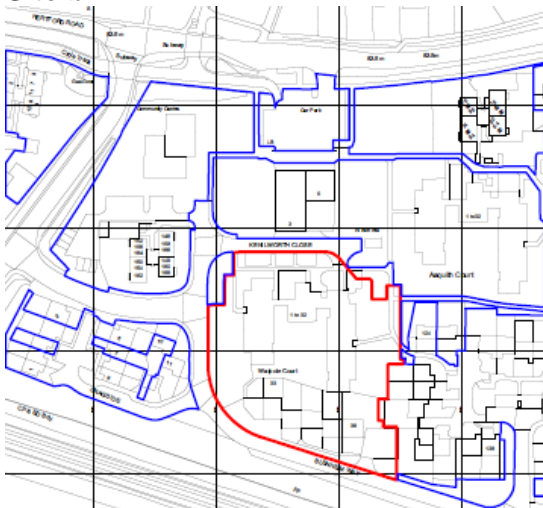
Site Maps

Site Plan / Aerial Photograph / Zoning Plan

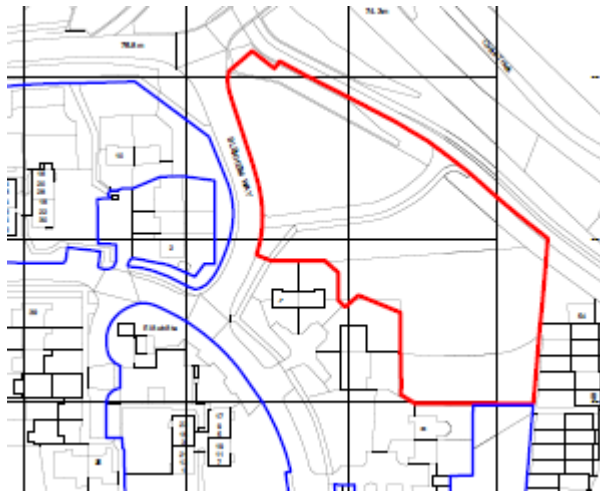
Site a



Site b



Site c



Source: from Kyle Smart site location plans, via Stevenage Borough Council planning applications portal



Key Dates in Planning History

2015	Housing Development team established with remit to look into strategic and practical housing development issues in the borough. Kenilworth close identified as key site
December 2018	Four applications for Kenilworth Close site approved at planning committee
May 2019	Local Plan 2011-2031 adopted. This plan was taken as a material consideration in the assessment of the above applications (and all applications from January 2016 onwards) because of its 'advanced stage'
Late 2019	Demolition starts at main site (Asquith) and construction starts at Malvern Close
2020-2021	six discharge of conditions applications

December 2021	Malvern Close development (7 units for private sale) completed. Funds from this used for next stage
January 2022	Construction of 169 homes (including all the affordable accommodation for the overall development) begins at the Asquith site.

Key Stakeholders

Key Public Sector Stakeholders	Key Private Sector Stakeholders
- Stevenage Borough Council	- The Hill Group
- Hertfordshire County Council	- Kyle Smart Architects

3. Planning Strategy, Site Allocation & Key Decision Dates

The site is largely brownfield within the built-up area of Stevenage. Housing remains the predominant use, and was allocated as such in the local plan. The planning strategy in terms of land use was therefore relatively straightforward. Although the local plan was not adopted when the planning applications for Kenilworth Close were approved, it was at a sufficient stage of development to be considered material. The inspector had approved it, subject to modifications, and the Plan was subject to a holding direction placed upon it by the then Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), which prevented its adoption whilst MHCLG were considering whether or not to call it in. Moreover, the overall designation for the site had not changed drastically from the 2004 district plan and was just made more up to date and in line with other policy. The proposed developments did increase the density of housing from the plan allocation, but this was in line with policies supporting windfall developments, and through negotiation and mitigation, loss of greenspace was successfully resolved.

Strategic vision and oversight

Through discussion between housing development and planning, it was decided that the overall approach would be to submit four separate planning applications for the different elements of the scheme: Malvern Close, Asquith, Walpole and the new Community Centre. This enabled the development to be broken down into four separate chunks.

First, the **Malvern Close** application. This was solely for market housing and was needed to provide the finances to enable the rest of the development. This application was more controversial than the other three as it entailed taking previously undeveloped land out of the Green Link (part of the original New Town design). Although the planning report acknowledged that this development would be contrary to some policies for the preservation of the Green Link, it was deemed that the development would not impact on its structural integrity. It was further judged that the site did not have wildlife or recreational value. Although the application had to be judged on its own merits, by bringing this to the same committee as the other three which pertain to the Kenilworth Close development, planners and housing development officers were

able to showcase them as a set piece and allow councillors on committee to see the overall strategy as well as the individual applications.

The **Asquith** application, as the second stage and central in terms of delivery of units (169 out of 236), contained all the affordable housing. This was to ensure this aspect was fully and swiftly delivered as it is critical to the 'common good' ethos/vision, and also to replace units for all residents of both Asquith and Walpole courts. The development entailed the demolition of the Bragbury community centre. Although this was not functioning as a community space post-covid, policy requirements insisted on replacements being found for any lost community facilities. The application for the new **community centre was** therefore vital to the overall scheme. By applying for this as a separate development, the council obtained more flexibility in its delivery alongside wider reviews of neighbourhood assets/centers.

Planning decision process – key dates

Four main applications for Kenilworth Close:

- a) 18/00398/FPM: *Demolition of the existing Bragbury End community centre, **Asquith Court** and various residential dwellings and the construction of a mixed use development with 169 no. dwellings (Including independent living) and 4no. retail units across various blocks.*
- b) 18/00399/FPM: *Demolition of the existing **Walpole Court** sheltered scheme and associated parking and the construction of 51no. apartments and 9no. houses along Blenheim Way.*
- c) 18/00400/FP: *Proposed development of a **new Community Centre**, cycle path running through the site, associated parking and landscaping*
- d) 18/00401/FP: *Land bordered by Ashdown Road, **Malvern Close** and Hertford Road, Construction of 7 no. new dwellings comprising of 2 no. five bed, 2 no. four bed and 3 no. three bed dwellings with associated parking and access.*

Applications a, b, and c here form the main part of the scheme, with the seven dwellings in application d being key to the financial leverage needed to fund the other aspects of the site.

These were all approved by the planning committee on **4th December 2018**.

There are two other applications which also relate to the Land Release Funding (LRF), and the council's wider strategy of housing development. The LRF funding, secured to ensure a new community centre will be provided in this overall development, allowed the council to develop these sites, as well as the large ones at Kenilworth (a, b and c above). The funding gave them confidence to pursue development at these sites knowing they had secured the money needed to replace the community centre at the Kenilworth Close development. Although they are not directly part of the project, they have been included here to demonstrate the wider benefits of both the funding, and more broadly the ability this gives housing development and planning to develop affordable housing on brownfield sites.

- 17/00586/FPM: *Erection of 6no two bedroom and 9no one-bedroom flats with associated parking. (Former March Hare Pub, Burwell Road). One subsequent variation of condition on this.*

- 17/00389/FPM: Erection of 43 residential dwellings with associated access, internal road layout, drainage, landscaping and infrastructure. (Gresley Way) Two NMAs and one variation of condition

(58 units in total)

S106/CIL

As Stevenage Borough Council (SBC) is the applicant, the S106 was processed with the county council as the enforcing authority. The S106 was drawn up between the two authorities by an external legal company to avoid any conflicts of interest challenges. The councils were subject to the same planning obligations as any other developer in accordance with the requirements of the relevant development plan. Importantly, because the planning permissions were secured before a developer was contracted, it ensured that these contributions could not be reduced on grounds of viability when a private developer was brought in to deliver the build as all obligations/cost were clearly established at the contracting stage. The developers therefore won the tender for a scheme for which full planning was already agreed, including costs for S106, so they could offer a development knowing what it had to achieve.

Stevenage Borough Council Financial Contribution

- Open outdoor space £5,715.85
- Children's play space £6,333.78
- Gardening Club £4,500.00
- Greenspace and Ecological Improvements £25,000.00
- Community or Ecological Amenity Infrastructure £85,000.00

Total £126,549.63

Hertfordshire County Council

- Primary Education £88,690.00
- Secondary Education £32,706.00
- Library £10,184.00
- Youth Services £841.00
- Sustainable Transport £26,000

Total £158,421

Overall total £284,970.63

4. Key site challenges

While this site is relatively free of the common issues often associated with brownfield land (e.g. contaminated land, or access), there are two key challenges facing the development of this site.

Public objections.

It is not unusual to receive public objections to proposals for significant changes to established neighbourhoods. Concerns about the increasing scale and density of the new developments were addressed by the council, placing the focus and emphasis on the quality of the new development and the poor state and low usage of the greenspace prior to redevelopment. The

site prior to development was described by the housing development manager as *'a sort of unorganized spread of play areas, Uh, the public open space and residential buildings'*.

Community facilities

Loss (albeit temporarily) of local facilities were also a concern for the community – many of those interviewed for this project cited the importance of the local chip shop, and how the scheme worked to secure it temporary premises before their new unit was built. This is a good example of small, but effective things that can be done to gain the trust and support of more of the local community.

5. LPA skills and resources: means of deployment onsite

Collaboration- against silos

Almost every local authority representative who was interviewed for this project noted the importance of taking action to overcome 'silo working' by the council teams. This meant early engagement by both planning and the housing development team with parks, housing services and local communities. In practice this meant coming up with compromises about the loss of green space with the parks department, as the Housing Development manager said: *'the colleagues in parks and landscapes in particular, realized that we weren't just about maximizing density, it was about creating the right type of space and ... making sure that appropriate contributions were made towards green space and green infrastructure and play equipment.'* This meant that the Parks and Amenities team did not raise an objection to the planning application despite it resulting in a significant reduction in structural open space. Instead, a financial contribution was secured via the S106 and replacement planting in the soft landscaping via a condition. The development is also providing a central lawn as a community focal point.

In terms of community involvement, time was spent talking to elderly residents of the assisted living accommodation proposed for demolition about what was happening, how it would be managed and what they wanted in new accommodation.

Ethos

The local authority set the tone for the ethos of the development: it was about inclusion and affordability, and something for the people of Stevenage. This was mentioned by all participants and summed up very well by the planning officer: *'having that collaborative approach ensures that we are delivering for every, every person we can in the community. I think that's very important and that's what we want to achieve as planners'*.

This went beyond just those working in/elected to the local council. The architect and the house builder also have established relationships with the council and are trusted to carry on this ethos in their work as expressed by the architect *'None of our projects get a brief. It's a case of: "what do you think we can do here"?' This allows for creativity and flexibility, without a fear of the project diminishing.*

The housing developer also commented both on the importance of developing a good working relationship with the local authority, not just because of track record and relationships, but also ethos:

‘Stevenage is a place that has worked for us in the past. We had another site there a couple of years ago which sold well, and Stevenage has always been somewhere where we were looking to expand our portfolio. And we’re always looking to be the preferred partner for not just affordable housing providers but for local authorities as well.’

Funding

The Land Release Fund (LRF) funding enabled the development to go forward. *‘The land release funding allowed us to move with confidence in delivering some of our other schemes as well’* (Head of housing development). It allowed the council to develop housing for those most in need (rent capped, not shared ownership) because they knew that they had additional funding to replace the community centre. It gave the council added flexibility and scope to think creatively about their assets and aims. This view was re-enforced by the Co-operative Neighbourhoods Programme Manager who said: *‘I think these sort of external funding pots we’ve got are pretty crucial to delivering a lot of good outcomes for residents.’* As the focus of the LRF money was to build a new community centre, this made the project more policy compliant and popular with local residents who did not therefore feel they were losing an asset. As the housing development officer summed up: *‘It made it as a site a lot more viable and gave us the confidence.’*

Skills- in house, or not

Through the creation of a dedicated housing development team in the council, fresh thinking was brought to considering the opportunity represented by the available sites. The head of housing development notes: *‘those initial plans didn’t marry up with the aspirations that the Council had about developing more, and I saw it as a brownfield opportunity with some other red assets (stock described as ‘beyond their useful life cycle’) in our housing stock’*. The housing development team brought in the planning team to use their skills and experience to maximise the site’s potential with a fresh outlook. The DM planning officer was able to ensure that this could be done in a way that complied with local policies at the same time.

Other skills were sought elsewhere with the architect firm leading on translating consultations into the approved scheme. Because of the strong working relationships and shared ethos, this is not really a lack of LPA skills, more a delegation of them. As the housing development team manager said *‘having the architects on board early, we were able to create workshops so that they could do a design of what a new independent living flat would look like. And we’re talking about talking to people that were in bed sits or would have communal shared, communal facilities and [some] had sort of shared bathroom which as well’*.

The architects led conversations between different parts of the council who had stakes in the scheme as well as being part of public consultations: *‘When we won the project, we then spent a lot of time with Stevenage, holding workshops with all departments and from maintenance, even the legal people’*. The Co-operative Neighbourhoods manager said: *‘The challenge is finding those people who have very few hours in a day, finding those people who don’t traditionally engage and finding those people who might engage if they didn’t spend all their time working’*. He went on to say that their approach was to ask open, qualitative questions which were quick and targeted as a way of getting beyond just hearing from the usual suspects.

Before



After



Photographs provided by Simon Nuttall of Stevenage BC

6. Key links

<https://www.hill.co.uk/all-developments/hertfordshire/aspects>

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCGtqTCEVjInBJx_bW9U4c3Q/featured