

## Case Study – Moulsham Lodge

### Submission to the RTPI Awards for Planning Excellence 2021

#### **Moulsham Lodge delivers 26 stunning new homes including eight for people with learning disabilities on a technically constrained brownfield site in the heart of Chelmsford.**

The Moulsham Lodge site is located just over one kilometre south east of Chelmsford City centre. Prior to its closure in 2005 and demolition in 2013, the site was occupied by a former community centre building which was last used for a variety of community uses.

In 2010, Essex County Council, in collaboration with Essex Police and the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner, worked with the Moulsham Lodge Community Trust (MLCT) to find them a permanent home. In March 2018, as part of broader plans for the existing site, the council purchased a former police station nearby before agreeing a long-term lease to MLCT, putting an end to years of uncertainty and protecting the long term future of a local community organisation.

Parallel to this, Essex County Council's residential development function, Essex Housing, was launched in 2016 to help address housing need through partnership working, with a particular focus on specialist housing such as extra care and learning disability provision. Essex Housing brings forward residential development projects on surplus property assets across the county to deliver great quality homes, enable people with additional needs to live independently and shaping fantastic places for people to live, whilst also maximising returns to help pay for important public services and improve outcomes. Essex County Council is also uniquely positioned as the statutory provider of residential accommodation for people with disabilities in the county council area.

To provide the right level of care in the right location for vulnerable adults in a challenging economic climate, it is essential that Essex County Council makes the very best use of surplus or underutilised property assets. The former Moulsham Lodge community centre site was identified as one such asset.

In late 2016, Bidwells was tasked with securing planning permission for the residential development of the Moulsham Lodge site. This was to include 31% provision of specialist accommodation.

Bidwells oversaw an extensive pre-application engagement exercise with the local planning authority and local community. Three pre-application meetings were held with Chelmsford City Council to refine the scheme's design and a public exhibition was held to involve the local community in the proposals prior to the scheme's submission in March 2017 under reference 17/00625/FUL.

Bidwells led the negotiations with Chelmsford City Council during the application's determination period and, following the grant of planning permission by Chelmsford City Council, also advised on the discharge of pre-commencement planning conditions. Construction of the scheme commenced in November 2017 and was completed in December 2019. The 26-dwelling finished scheme includes 31% provision for adults with learning disabilities.

### **Outcomes for People and Communities**

Prior to the demolition of the former community centre onsite and without an alternative location for a new facility, the Moulsham Lodge site was in danger of becoming a long-term liability. It was derelict, performed no function in the community, was a blot in the streetscape and was an ongoing security and holding cost to Essex County Council. Securing the Community Trust's long-term future freed up the site for development and met Essex County Council's other strategic outcomes.

Delivery of the project helps to meet market housing need through the delivery of new homes on previously developed land, reducing the pressure to develop on greenfield land and the Green Belt.

It improves outcomes for residents of the County by maximising the impact of tax payer's money and developing a publicly owned asset where additional value has been achieved through maximising the independence of people with additional needs, as well as reductions in the cost of providing health and social care services.

Jobs have been created in the remediation of the site, its construction and now through its operational use with on-site care provision. These are a key driver of economic growth and regeneration.

Most significantly, the scheme provides eight residential dwellings as specialist independent living accommodation for people with learning disabilities. This is accommodation where public sector partners have retained nomination rights and those who live there might otherwise require other provision which would not promote their independence and improve outcomes for individuals as effectively. This:

- Reduces the need for residential care or out-of-county placements;
- Increases the proportion of people living in their home and exercise control over their own lives;
- Increases the number of people who are appropriately supported to gain their independence following a crisis event; and
- Decreases hospital admissions by providing housing with care to meet the needs of residents (reduces the risk of falls etc.).

### **Planning Contribution**

The site had a challenging planning history, to which the policy position needed to be fully understood and addressed as part of the planning application. The site became available to be considered for residential development once the previous community centre use was decanted to an alternative nearby location.

The site was subject to significant technical constraints to development, including three utilities easements running across the land, an ecological buffer zone running along the entire western boundary of the site, and protected trees. These constraints played a major role in shaping the design and layout of the development and it was necessary to maximise the opportunity to ensure it was viable to deliver housing. As such there were only two areas within the site that could be meaningfully utilised for proposed building development. Development was optimised within these two areas to ensure the project's deliverability. This required the effective coordination and provision of planning advice to the multi-disciplinary project team by Bidwells throughout the process.

The scheme followed an iterative design process in which the design evolved in extensive collaboration with planning officers and councillors at the local planning authority, across three pre-application enquiry meetings. To ensure the local community and councillors felt engaged in the proposals for the residential redevelopment of the former community centre site, the scheme was subject to a local exhibition where information boards were put on display and time was taken by project team representatives including Bidwells to keep people informed of the proposals.

A new case officer assigned to the planning application was not satisfied that the scheme's specialist form of housing provision met the local planning authority's definition of affordable housing. As part of the submission, the scheme proposed 31% of the dwellings to be set aside for learning disabilities and, as statutory provider of specialist housing, it was the applicant's previous understanding that these would be classified as



affordable housing. However, the officer's stricter interpretation of the policy meant that the proposal would not be accepted because the nomination rights would be reserved by Essex County Council's public sector partners, not the local planning authority.

Therefore, we needed to navigate around this issue and, working with the housing and planning officer, it was agreed that it was necessary to demonstrate that it would be unviable to deliver policy compliant affordable housing as part of the scheme, in addition to the specialist dwellings. Accordingly, Bidwells recommended the completion of a viability appraisal. Due to the technical constraints and the proposals to deliver specialist accommodation, the appraisal demonstrated that the development would be unviable to deliver any affordable housing in addition to the specialist housing provision.

Accordingly, we resolved this issue and planning permission was subsequently granted.

Bidwells also supplemented the original planning application process through assistance in the implementation of the delivery of the site. Bidwells advised on the discharge of pre-commencement planning conditions in addition to the matter of temporary advertisement and marketing hoardings, ultimately seeking planning permission for these also.

### **Outcomes for climate action**

The scheme incorporates a range of sustainable measures as a means of addressing the impacts of climate change. For example, the development includes renewable energy technology in the form of photo voltaic panels, provision of cycle stores, extensive communal green space and gardens incorporating public art, retention of existing shrubs on the western boundary of the site for badgers and other wildlife, electric car charging points, and through the fabric of the buildings to reduce the energy demand of the development. As its first priority the scheme's energy strategy minimised energy consumption through suitable orientation and the performance of the building envelope, facades and services. This was particularly challenging given the limited developable area within the site.

The scheme's surface and foul water drainage strategy incorporates heavier rainfall intensity allowance to allow for the effects of climate change over the lifetime of the development.

The scheme utilises sustainably located previously developed land within close proximity of Chelmsford city centre. Development on this site reduces the pressure on developing green field and Green Belt land, and its location maximises opportunities for residents to travel by sustainable means, including by bicycle and on foot.

### **Outcomes for sustainable development**

The scheme has taken an all-encompassing approach to growth and development, promoting a balance of economic, social and environmental objectives. In doing so it embodies several of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

The Moulsham Lodge scheme provides a better quality of life for people, especially the vulnerable in our community. The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable; the scheme vastly improves outcomes for people with learning disabilities because, instead of living in an institutional setting, more individuals can live in the community, with the right support, and close to their families and friends. The benefits to the individuals, their families, and to the State is not just better care support, but also freeing up hospital and care units and reduced health costs. Improved healthcare through people living more independently in the community also means that there are significantly more people with learning disabilities who live longer lives. This means that the development supports both Sustainable Development Goal 3 "Healthy Lives and Promotion of Well-being" and Goal 10 "Reduced Inequality".

Jobs have been created in the remediation of the site, its construction and now through its operational use with on-site care provision. These are a key driver of economic growth and regeneration, in line with Sustainable Development Goal 8 “Decent Work and Economic Growth”.

The project team considered how development would integrate with the existing ecosystem and biodiversity of the site, with particular regard to the site’s proximity to badger setts which needed to be sensitively mitigated, in line with Sustainable Development Goal 15 “Life on Land”.

The scheme also incorporates a range of sustainable measures as a means of addressing the impacts on climate change and in doing so supporting Sustainable Development Goals 7 “Affordable and Clean Energy” and 13 “Climate Action”. For example, the development includes renewable energy technology in the form of photo voltaic panels, efficient building techniques and sustainable drainage.

### **Community Engagement**

The project team held an information session in the Moulsham Lodge Community Trust Centre on Friday 7 April 2017. Display boards then remained in the community centre for the following week detailing the scheme with floor plan drawings, elevations, and perspective views of the full application.

There was good awareness of the proposed application and several immediately adjacent residents to the scheme attended separately to discuss the proposed scheme in detail.

□ One resident was against residential development on traffic grounds and would have preferred access to be from the opposite end of the site. However, the consultation provided an opportunity for the design team to fully explain the key constraints (including the badger setts running along the northern boundary) which prevented vehicle access from that side of the site. This gave the resident assurance that the option had been fully considered.

□ Another resident expressed concern, being one of the closest properties to the development. The design team were able to explain the efforts made to reduce overlooking by only having bathroom windows on the 1st floor rear elevation with obscured glazing and design changes to reduce the height to only two floors immediately behind the house that were set back further from the property than the former community building before it was demolished.

Once the planning application was submitted there was also the statutory consultation process and information on the proposal remained available at the Moulsham Lodge Community Trust Centre during that time – helping to answer nearby residents’ questions.

Essex County Council:

- Supported the Community Trust to identify another property within the locality;
- Secured a lease with Essex Police for the surplus police station through partnership working; and
- Through the project to develop the existing Moulsham Lodge site, Essex County Council purchased the freehold of the police station, transferred the community use here and then agreed a long-term lease with Moulsham Lodge Community Trust.

Moulsham Lodge Community Trust continues to thrive and plays a vital role in the vibrant local community.

### **Leading Practice**

This scheme was delivered on a very technically constrained site that was previously without an alternative location for its former community use. Through partnership working with the relevant stakeholders and affected organisations, a new home was found for the community centre and the redevelopment of the site was achieved in a way that met Essex County Council's wider strategic objectives and benefits the taxpayer.

The site is located in an area where there were neighbouring residential buildings overlooking one of the two areas onsite that could be meaningfully be utilised for development. We had to find a solution that diverted mains gas around the perimeter of the site. There was also significant additional complexity and building work needed to bridge over an attenuation culvert. By working through the various technical problems and exploring different options, we found a solution which delivered an outcome that was favoured by the local planning authority. This was achieved by front-loading our engagement with them, so that it was possible to agree the scheme's broad principles and detailed design before the application was submitted. This meant that such issues did not arise during the lifetime of the application.

The scheme delivered 26 new dwellings, eight of which provide independent living for adults with learning disabilities. This supports those most in need in the Chelmsford area, in a location which is sustainable, integrated within the local community and close to key facilities. The proposal includes homes of a high specification which exceed minimum space standards and are of a considered design ensuring a good standard of accommodation for all residents. The scheme supports mental health and wellbeing through provision of cycle stores to encourage active travel, retention of a number of existing mature trees and shrubs, secluded communal gardens to promote community spirit and integration, public art, landscaped gardens and improved accessibility to a network of local bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure. The development also provides a new built edge to the public right of way which runs alongside it.

### **Does the scheme or project have particular significance to the region?**

Essex is not alone in facing the challenge of delivering more high-quality new homes which benefit the whole community. It's approach, however, is different and is effective.

Across the 12 district, borough and city councils, there is a need to plan for 144,000 more homes by 2036 to meet housing needs. Providing high quality homes, which people want to live in and are where people want to live, is Essex Housing's goal.

Essex County Council is not a housing authority but is serious about helping meet the challenges of housing growth across the county, because of the wider benefits it brings. The Essex Housing team was created to identify surplus land/assets across the county and provide end-to-end development management services for the use of any public sector partner. By taking an unrivalled partnership approach to housing delivery, the team are delivering great quality homes, shaping fantastic places for people to live, whilst maximising returns to help pay for important public services and improve outcomes.

In the first few years of operation, Essex Housing has established a significant development programme working closely with public sector partners across the county. The team lead the way in public sector housing development and deliver much needed general needs, affordable and specialist housing to help meet the needs of residents. The current development pipeline comprises of over 1,000 dwellings of which 47% are specialist or affordable. The benefits the team provide to the county council, public sector partners, and residents of Essex are all interlinked due to their very nature. As public sector leaders, the main focus is always on the outcomes of a given scheme, even when sometimes that may benefit another organisation financial, more than theirs.



Essex Housing utilises vacant or under-utilised assets; provides housing to help meet general, affordable and specialist needs; generates cash returns, income and revenue savings; supports economic growth and regeneration; provides high quality developments, wherever possible utilising surplus brownfield land/protecting the Green Belt, and combining residential development with rightsizing and renewing the operational estate. This in turn has assisted Essex County Council in achieving its corporate objectives.

The redevelopment of Moulsham Lodge has delivered 26 well-designed new homes including eight specialist dwellings for people with learning disabilities, on a technically very constrained site that was previously without an alternative location for its former community use.

Through partnership working with the relevant stakeholders and affected organisations, a new home was found for the community centre and the sensitive redevelopment of this surplus public sector land was achieved in a way that provides a better quality of life for people with additional needs in the community, the local environment and benefits the taxpayer.