SUSTAINABLE URBAN NEIGHBOURHOODS NETWORK (SUNN)

LESSONS AND ACTION POINTS FROM
ORCHARD PARK, CAMBRIDGE

March 2010
SUSTAINABLE URBAN NEIGHBOURHOODS NETWORK (SUNN)

Report of the Orchard Park, Cambridge Event
15th March 2010

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Orchard Park is an urban extension to the North of Cambridge

Orchard Park Masterplan

Sources: Cambridge City Council, South Cambridgeshire District Council and Gallagher Estates
The second event of the Sustainable Urban Neighbourhoods Network took place at Orchard Park, Cambridge, on a beautiful day, and attracted over 40 people representing almost all the member projects. The event was very well received, with positive comments on the opportunity to see first hand how one of the first new neighbourhoods in Cambridge was working out, and to discuss a number of common issues. Introducing the event John Hocking, Executive Director of the Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust, stressed two key issues: sustaining the quality of the public realm and deciding what to cut in order to make development viable at a time when staff were being expected to achieve more and more with less and less.

LESSONS FROM ORCHARD PARK

In setting the scene, Councillor David Bard, who is Portfolio Holder for Planning and New Communities in South Cambridgeshire, explained how there is cross party support for the housing plans, which are giving Cambridgeshire one of the highest growth rates in the country, with a third increase planned for the period up to 2021 involving some 23,500 new homes.

Orchard Park is being developed on the site of a former agricultural land and Iron Age Fort on the edge of post war Council housing in Cambridge City, and lies between the A14 and Kings Hedges Road, as well as on the boundary between Cambridge City and the predominantly rural district of South Cambridgeshire. It therefore occupies a challenging location without the advantages usually associated with Cambridge. It also went through a difficult period when builders stopped work in September 2008 due to the Credit Crunch, leaving a very untidy site.
However thanks to partnership working, work restarted nine months later. So far 587 (321 market and 266 affordable) homes have been built and occupied, including all the planned social housing, plus a primary school (which opened with 18 children), a community centre, and a Premier Inn which also serves as a bar. There is a bus service every 30 minutes. However the sites for offices have not been taken up, and there are proposals for further housing and also for developing a supermarket, which may well replace the planned local centre.

Other features so far include:

- An elected Community Council
- An Innovation Fund of £130,000 for ‘green initiatives’
- Ground source heat pumps, solar water heaters, and a vertical turbine next to the primary school
- Public art and community events, including naming streets for their historic associations

Important organisational lessons (which are explored in more detail below) include:

1. Growth has been planning led, following an extensive process of community engagement and options assessment (see www.cambridgefutures.org)
2. There is partnership working at all levels, reflected in the Quality Growth Charter produced through Cambridgeshire Horizons (www.cambridgeshirehorizons.co.uk/quality)
3. Multi-disciplinary inputs are helped through joint working, for example urban design and development control

Jane Green, Major Developments Manager and Andy Lawson, Projects Director from Gallagher, the lead developer, then explained the thinking behind the masterplan for the development:

- To start with the site was generally featureless and partly used for car sales
• It had been proposed for retail development including a supermarket
• The site covers 32 hectares and measures 1.2 km from East to West and 400m North to South at the mid-point across the site
• The idea of housing was promoted through the Local Plans Process, with an application in 2001, and consultation was difficult without any community on the site
• Use was therefore made of newsletters and a website, a public exhibition, and a community planning day attended by 120 people with outcomes reported back.

The masterplan is based on a number of principles (which were developed by David Lock as masterplanners, and then amplified in a Design Guide produced by John Thompson & Partners), including:
• A loose grid of streets but a hierarchy of roads
• Four distinct character areas referred to as the Park, the Circus, the Square and the Hedges
• The streets are edged by perimeter blocks four stories high and with two and a half storey high terraced homes behind them creating an urban feel
• Buff bricks and exterior render is used to provide colour
• The design is intended to be ‘tenure blind’
• There are focal buildings on the corners
• Kings Hedges Road has been slowed down from 40mph and 60mph in places to 30 mph with four crossing points.

The network members plus a contingent from Cambridgeshire then walked round the site, visiting features including the primary school, open space, different types of development and street, and a house that had been adapted to meet the requirements of a disabled person before returning for lunch at the Community Centre.
Orchard Park Primary School

This colourful school in Orchard Park helps build a sense of community among families with children. To demonstrate commitment to community benefits, it opened early to serve only 18 children. The school currently has 82 children enrolled of which 70% are from Orchard Park and 30% from a wider catchment area. The school has a PAN (Pupil Admission Number) of 15 which makes it a 1/2 Form Entry Primary (120 total) but will expand to a PAN of 30 from September 2011, making it a One Form Entry with a total pupil number of 210. This will require extending the school to add three more classrooms plus associated work spaces.

The school is located next to playing fields on the edge of the site, so acts as a landmark for Orchard Park due to its cheerful design, bright walls and wind turbine. Distinctive features include imaginative outdoor spaces and the school gates, designed and built by an artist craftsman with community input – one of a number of arts-based initiatives.

The children come from diverse backgrounds and many qualify for free school meals, so the school plays an important role in enabling children from different backgrounds to mix and form friendships. However, one delegate reported that a ‘them and us’ attitude is noticeable at the school gates with parents from private housing standing on one side of the playground waiting for their children and parents from social housing on the other.

From the start the school served as a community hub, housing the community development worker until the community centre was finished. There is now an integrated mother and toddler facility with a separate entrance to meet social and educational objectives to strengthen family life. A strong Chair of Governors and Headmistress both work hard to ensure the school serves its neighbourhood in a variety of ways.
A STRONGER ROLE FOR THE PUBLIC SECTOR

This workshop examined good practice in achieving strategic consensus among local stakeholders, the role of local leadership and how to build trust between the public and private sectors.

Promoting growth areas through a strategic, sub-regional partnership – The development of Orchard Park represents ‘planning-led, multi-disciplinary partnership working at all levels’. At the sub-regional level, Cambridgeshire Horizons (CH) delivers Cambridgeshire’s growth strategy, and provides the context for local development. Founded in 2005, CH links all key players in development, including Cambridge City Council, South Cambridgeshire District Council (SCDC) and Cambridgeshire County Council. Growth areas for new communities have been identified, some of which are free-standing, for example Cambourne, and others which are urban extensions like Orchard Park. CH is valued for its role in partnership working and has been very supportive at Orchard Park. However, the local authorities retain responsibility for local delivery and it has been SCDC who set up and chaired the Partners Group and Orchard Park Action Group.

Using a multi-layer partnership to innovate – Orchard Park demonstrates that, given the constraints on the capacity of local authorities in the UK to promote development, a way to strengthen the role of the public sector is to enhance the quality of partnership working around new communities. This enables local authorities to guide development processes while making best use of the skills and resources of partner organisations. In Cambridgeshire, organisational innovation occurs at a number of levels: in strategic partnership, in site-level partnership, including at Orchard Park the establishment of an on-going Parish Council, and within local authorities and other partners, such as RSLs. The Partners Group includes all the developers, RSL’s, CH, County Council and SCDC. The Orchard Park Action Group has now been replaced by the Orchard Park Liaison Group, it includes the local district councillors, representatives from the Community Council (and formerly the Shadow Community Council or Residents Association), the master developer and chair of School Governors. Both groups have met regularly from autumn 08 till the present.

Delivering the strategic vision – CH is a company limited by guarantee so that in addition to promoting consensus on strategic vision, it plays a full role as a grant recipient and financial manager to deliver that vision. CH’s board of stakeholders includes a significant role for the private sector. The board’s main objectives are to coordinate development, secure and manage funding for infrastructure, promote sustainability and promote the wider benefits of development for the community at large.
Using an ‘Integrated Development Programme’ to coordinate public finance – The delivery of new communities is supported by CH’s Integrated Development Programme. It begins with the goals of the growth agenda, including for housing and employment, and identifies the individual strategic infrastructure projects needed to deliver them, and options for financing that infrastructure.

Stressing the benefits of growth – By promoting a strategic vision, CH and its partners make the case for the value of new communities to existing and future generations and for the planned development of Cambridgeshire, thus helping overcome NIMBYism. For example, new communities in urban and village extensions provide ‘customer numbers’ to support libraries, sports facilities, local shops and bus routes. However, one area where NIMBYs have a case is on the impact of growth on traffic congestion, with more needing to be done to provide adequate transport infrastructure prior to development.

Responding to development blockages through a Scrutiny Panel – Despite partnership working, by 2008 a number of factors conspired to give Orchard Park ‘a bad name’. These included a slow-down in house building, the departure of house builders from the site and the requirement of the financing mechanisms for provision of mainly social housing early in the project. The site’s unfinished look generated poor press, culminating with a Guardian article comparing Orchard Park with war-torn Beirut. But bad news came at a time when SCDC was well aware of the problems and had established a Scrutiny Panel to examine the constraints on successful development and fashion a response. As a result, the Orchard Park Partnership Group was strengthened, so that all partners were ‘singing from the same hymn sheet’. Initiatives to strengthen the community were already well afoot, such as early opening of the very attractive primary school, a new community centre and provision of on-site community development expertise to involve residents, provided by an RSL partner. The market has picked up so Orchard Park has largely sorted itself out but from late 2008 through to the first half of 2009 a number of options were explored to help bring forward development. The key areas where work was undertaken included bidding for Kickstart funding from HCA, exploring Private Rented Sector Initiative with the HCA and housebuilders and self-commissioned housing options including cohousing (which is still going ahead).

Establishing a media strategy – To counter bad press, a media strategy was developed which set out to tackle bad news stories about Orchard Park in a pro-active way. Tactics including monitoring the press and responding to each story in a positive, coordinated manner, and stressing positive events in
the community’s development to generate good news stories, such as arts-based initiatives in the local community. This was led by SCDC Communications Manager and much praised by the developers. They engaged the local community in recognising that bad press made local residents feel worse about living there and did not help new homes to be sold. All agreed to quickly respond to any hint of another ‘bad news story’ and to have shared plan of ‘positive press releases’ and one year later they can confidently say it has worked.

**Involving residents in neighbourhood management** – Another innovation in Orchard Park is the early establishment of a Parish (Community) Council. This is in keeping with SCDC’s universal coverage of its district with 103 Parish Councils. (Parish Councils are the lowest tier of statutory governance in England. They are elected bodies which take on variety of neighbourhood management tasks and can have modest tax raising powers.) Orchard Park has a full council of nine councillors, assisted by a professional Clerk. Training has been provided through SCDC to enable councillors to fulfil their role and develop leadership skills. Local district councillors have played a valuable role supporting the new community council. Discussions noted the many challenges faced by parish councils in sustaining their community leadership role, including: strain on officers and members; the need for a skilled and active chair; danger of ascendancy of self-perpetuating minorities; accessing adequate resources; the difficulties of mediating neighbourhood tensions and conflicts; and the appropriate role of statutory bodies in supporting the parish council.

**Coordinating local authority work in placemaking** – Orchard Park’s lead local authority, SCDC, recently established a Planning and New Communities Service to bring together within the local authority: planning, urban design, community development, economic development, facilities management, sports and the arts (SCDC originally set up a New Communities Service in 2008 to bring together the entire above list for growth sites). PNCS provides a coordinated policy and implementation framework within the council and a unified organisational structure for partners to interact with.

**Learning-by-doing in new communities** – Although the partnership structures for both Orchard Park and the sub-region are impressive, the participants in the partnerships stressed their imperfections as well as achievements and the need to ‘make it up as they went along’. This suggests there is no easy route to overcoming the challenges of community building but also the importance of honestly learning from experience. Each community and development is different and needs bespoke approach. Such learning from both success and failure is a tremendous resource to partnership and
the development process. Discussions noted the importance of building learning processes into partnership, the need for understanding how successful partnerships achieve good working relationships, and whether a ‘guide’ to partnership working would be helpful.

DEVELOPMENT FINANCE FOR SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

This workshop looked at alternative funding sources, and different patterns of development, that could lead to faster rates of growth and better community facilities by reducing some of the costs and risks.

Dealing with low land values – It is clear in comparing achievements of community building at Orchard Park with those in less prosperous areas that low land values in less desirable areas considerably curtail what can be achieved in terms of development quality – at least without public subsidy. At a sub-regional level, attention to countering industrial decline and population outflow must underpin the local development of new communities. In places like Newcastle, and even Kings Lynn it does not seem possible to achieve higher standards without subsidy.

Working in partnership – In Orchard Park, adverse market conditions triggered a stall in development and negative media coverage, furthering hampering market prospects. As noted, in response the lead local authority worked quickly to strengthen the local development partnership to address issues, including the poor appearance of the public realm. This appears to have worked in part, although more could be done, but the lesson is that, that even in prosperous areas, the financial viability of new communities should not be assumed. It is in the interests of local authorities and other partners to work with a developer from project outset to ensure financial viability and to have contingency plans to counter adverse market forces, and to ensure that finance mechanisms are in place to deliver high quality design in both private and public realms.

Engaging community support early on – A related lesson from Orchard Park is that early community engagement as the first residents start to move in can help counter negative media and local views, and thus underwrite viability. Orchard Park used public art as a means of community engagement. Park Arts was established in 2008 to support onward creative input into the process of community formation at Orchard Park. Along with the local authority’s Arts Officer, the on-site Community Development Officer (CDO) has supported the group, which has put on a number of events in the community providing opportunities for residents to meet each other. The CDO also organised a Youth Festival which may lead to the establishment of a
Youth Club.

**Linking design guidance to cost** – An area where Orchard Park made early progress was in local authority and developer working closely to ensure that the Design Guide for the area was seen as financially realistic from the developer’s point of view. This resulted in a common vision for what the development process was expected to achieve. An issue however where there is not single developer/land owner, as in Orchard Park, in ensuring that in-coming housebuilders also agree on the design out-turn of the house building process, and then stick to that commitment. This suggests the need for some possible sanctions where housebuilders shift away from a commitment to quality.

**Showcasing options for improving liveability** – The first step to a sustainable house is not expensive, high-tech equipment but good insulation. Beyond this, over-emphasis on physical sustainability can obscure residents’ concerns about ‘liveability’, meaning well-designed living and storage areas, room for family growth and change, as in ‘life-time homes’, and so on. Good show homes should showcase both sustainability and liveability selling points and options.

**Ensuring long-term viability of community facilities** – Orchard Park has an excellent new community centre but delegates raised questions about its long-term viability, at the conclusion of Section 106 commitments. A lesson is that in addition to build costs, long-term running and insurance costs need to be factored into the sustainability equation (as they were at Orchard Park), as do the marketing of its facilities beyond the immediate community.

**Raising value without raising costs** – Looking to the Continent, an obvious area for improvement is to build houses to the same quality faster, thus reducing construction costs. Cambridgeshire has been sharing experience through the Quality Charter process, drawing on study tours to look and learn from exemplary schemes.

**‘De-risking’ development** – The biggest concerns for developers are profit and cost of borrowing. If developments appeared less risky, developers would be more open to commitment around build and site quality. One suggested option is for public sector partners to borrow at favourable rates and use the funds for up-front infrastructure provision. Developments to the South of Cambridge at Clay Farm and Trumpington Meadows are being progressed through the County Council injecting £5 million raised through prudential borrowing, with the investment being recovered at timed intervals through the Section 106 agreement. Similarly this is being done in Scotswood in
Newcastle where public sector partners are providing infrastructure (as an investment) in advance to encourage private sector involvement, with a return expected from 2019.

Providing infrastructure up-front – The expense of providing utilities also makes it hard for schemes to ‘add up’ especially as only the water companies have any obligation to provide advance infrastructure. Again new models are required which recognise that it is in the utilities’ interest for new communities to be viable. New legislation may be required, including that for promoting viable district heating schemes.

Funding long-term stewardship – Long-term management and maintenance is essential for social viability. Long-term stewardship funds paid to a non-profit trust or a Parish Council is one way forward but requires attention to restrictive covenants in title documents before any sales are made. For example at Ironstone, Lawley in Telford each household, irrespective of tenure or property type is required to make an annual contribution towards the cost providing long term stewardship. The charge is the cost incurred divided by the number of homes in Ironstone (the current charge is £250 per annum). This includes a sinking fund, which ensures that future capital programmes can be funded. Some of the items currently included in the 'Community Charge' are; landscaping of communal areas, communal lighting, maintenance of the Integrated Reception System (which provides each home with TV, radio Freeview and Sky through a communal system), an estate warden and stewardship officer, plus insurance, staff, office and administration costs. The scheme is delivered by Ironstone Management Services, which is a joint venture between Beth Johnson Housing Association and Bournville Village Trust.

FOSTERING CONNECTIVITY AND URBAN DESIGN

This workshop looked at the meaning of connectivity, strategies for changing travel habits toward cycling and walking, and the benefits of guided busways and other forms of public transport.

Linking with neighbouring communities – Sometimes Orchard Park is described as a free-standing village but for most residents it is an urban extension of Cambridge city, albeit separated from the rest of the city by a busy road. To counter this, the speed limit on the adjacent road has been reduced to 30 mph, new crossings have been added and Orchard Park’s design ensures it is outward facing toward the road and its neighbours. But many commentators suggested it was not enough and that more ingenuity is needed to link Orchard Park with the city, especially as 30% of the children at
the new primary school are not from Orchard Park. The benefits of better linkage might extend to cooperation between Orchard Park’s community centre and one in the next neighbourhood.

**Cutting traffic speeds to 20 mph** – Some discussants suggest that 20 mph is enough, even for the busy road, as not only do primary school children need to cross but everyone from adjacent neighbourhoods planning to use the guided busway. The benefits of a city-wide 20 mph limit in Plymouth were cited.

**Developing community hubs** – Many residents mentally define their community by its centres or hubs. Orchard Park has an extended hub, centred around its landscaped circus and extending from the new primary school to the community centre. One issue is whether this hub can be reinforced by retail provision or whether the only financially-viable shopping will need to be near the ring road to benefit from ‘passing trade’. A retail analysis by SCDC may shed light on this issue. There is also a risk that the far end of this long, narrow development will feel cut off from the community.

**Promoting cycling** – Orchard Park is said to be good for cyclists in terms of routes to and from the community but more could be done on signage to Orchard Park from the city centre and on cycle storage provision on-site. The example of Cambridge is said to demonstrate that cyclists and pedestrians can mix.

**Reducing car use (and ownership)** – The current development model is still to cater from car ownership but it may time to begin to challenge the *status quo*. A good suggestion is to plan new communities for walking and cycling first, and safe routes to school, and only then for cars, and to make connectivity a goal from the outset. Facilities like car clubs (not yet provided at Orchard Park) can both reduce the need for ownership and provide a point of building community cohesion. The experience at King’s Lynn was that an initial commercial car club was not used by residents but that when it was reconstituted on a community-led, non-profit basis take up was much better and actually resulted in some people selling their cars. In another case cited, a ‘community car’ was donated. A larger message is that reducing car use, and fostering more sustainable transport modes, can be successful as a community project than relying solely on the decisions of un-relating households. But the point is also made that well-run commercial car clubs are going from strength to strength so the market is there for communities of sufficient size.
Making public transport more attractive – At the end of the day, journey time and ease of access to clean, well-run public transport, will determine the extent of modal shift away from cars. Orchard Park will benefit from all households being a short walk from the Cambridge guided busway. The busway will be a good test of modal shift as, at the other side of the city from Orchard Park, it will by-pass two notorious areas of road congestion and link to major employers. It will be interesting to monitor the extent to which it alters transport behaviour. Across the country, if car use is to be curtailed, good public transport needs to be provided at the time residents start moving in – as is common on the Continent. Linking bike or bus to train is also critical, with Orchard Park a rather poor example as two buses are necessary to reach the city’s train station (once the guided busway is up and running residents will be able to take a single bus from Orchard Park through the city centre and onto the station).

Achieving successful home zones – Both Orchard Park and King’s Lynn noted that they felt their home zones were not as successful as they ought to be, in part because they are too timid in design and don’t slow cars to a walking pace. With hindsight, King’s Lynn suggests being more confident with trees, barriers and play equipment directly in the road space to make clear that it is indeed a shared space.

Managing on-site parking – The need for pro-active management of on-site parking was highlighted as a looming issue for Orchard Park. The risk is illustrated by the example of Grand Union Village where residents are ignoring well-laid plans for undercroft parking and using the street wherever possible. Redress of the situation five years after the first residents moved in is requiring a multi-agency initiative of yellow lines, permits, etc. In a nutshell, the lesson is ‘we should have done it a long time ago’ before ‘residents got into bad habits’. Even where it is impossible to plan the ‘perfect parking scheme’ addressing the issue incrementally on a phase-by-phase basis is easier than redressing five years of ‘bad habits’.

ISSUES FOR FUTURE SUNN WORKSHOPS

Clusters vs. pepper-potting of social housing – Pepper-potting was not seen as financially viable at Orchard Park and, in the event, a near collapse in the market sector and Housing Corporation grant requirements meant that clusters of 30-40 social housing units had to be built early in the development process. But there is local anecdotal evidence that such clustering may be reinforcing a ‘them and us’ feeling between social housing and private market residents. Questions include whether such tensions are inevitable or can be countered and managed so that healthy mixed communities can be sustained,
and whether pepper-potting, even if socially desirable, is practical from a finance or a site management perspective? One plus from early build out of affordable housing is that they are there first, which pre-empts the ‘I never knew there would be affordable housing residents next to me’ type of comment from owner-occupiers

**Balanced provision of social and market housing** – The Government’s ostensible commitment to mixed or balanced communities was compared to the reality of Housing Corporation grant forcing early construction of affordable housing by RSLs at a time when construction of housing for market sale was curtailed by market downturn. In addition to questions around the impact of development phasing on the longer-term health of mixed communities, the potential role of ‘choice-based lettings’ in community-building is also of interest. Understanding how new communities grow, and how to balance the mix of housing with the needs of the wider community should help in developing better site briefs. Research has shown that Choice Based Lettings help to support more stable neighbourhoods. At Cambourne, people who move there want to stay and trade up from smaller to larger homes, both in the private and social rented sectors, as their families grow.

**New financial models for infrastructure** – Where the objectors to new communities have a strong case it is over growth causing the generation of yet more traffic congestion. Without new transport infrastructure therefore, growth management is not possible. Especially in the financial climate which is emerging, it could be essential to further develop new and innovative models of public-private sector partnership for the provision of infrastructure. This could include not only transport provision but also the supply of utilities to new communities through Multi Utility Service Companies Organisation (Muscos or Energy Supply Company Organisations (Escos))

**Options for long-term stewardship of the public realm** – Ongoing stewardship of the public realm is crucial to the long-term social sustainability of new communities. One option, used at Bourneville is discussed above but there may be a variety of innovative organisational and financial approaches which would be of interest to SUNN, such as asset backed community development trusts (which is the subject of ongoing JRF research).

**Green features** – There is a question of how measures to improve sustainability can be incorporated as sales features or optional extras that can enable individuals to upgrade their property. They may also be taken up in design guides or codes, and there is an issue of how these are applied.
APPENDIX A – LIST OF DELEGATES

Richard Armitage, Richard Armitage Transport Consultancy
Peter Aviston, Places for People
David Bard, South Cambridgeshire District Council
Sue Beecroft, Cambridgeshire Horizons
Clare Blair, Cambridge City Council
Jon Bootland, Sustainable Development Foundation
Rod Cantrill, Cambridge City Council
Alan Carter, Cambridge City Council
Guy Currey, Newcastle City Council
Jacquie Dale, Joseph Rowntree Foundation
Laura Foster, Norfolk Charitable Trust
Roger Frith, Harlow District Council
Mike Galloway, Orchard Park Community Council
Jane Green, South Cambridgeshire District Council
Amanda Hack, LHA ASRA Housing Association
Richard Hales, South Cambridgeshire District Council
David Hardy, Borough Council of King’s Lynn and West Norfolk
John Hocking, Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust
Julia Holmes, Bedfordshire Pilgrims Housing Association
Kirsty Human, South Cambridgeshire District Council
Sarah Ireland, Bedfordshire Pilgrims Housing Association
Andy Lawson, Gallagher Estates
Fred London, John Thompson & Partners
John Low, Joseph Rowntree Foundation
Sarah Lyons, South Cambridgeshire District and Cambridge City Councils
Carly Meagher, Bedfordshire Pilgrims Housing Association
Jo Mills, South Cambridgeshire District Council
Anne Mulroy, Bridging NewcastleGateshead
Andy O’Hanlon, South Cambridgeshire District Council
John Pym, South Cambridgeshire District Council
Andy Rose, Telford and Wrekin Borough Council
Guy Scott, Ironstone Development Group
John Sparkes, Bridging NewcastleGateshead
David Taylor, Morston Assets
Rachel Underwood, Bedfordshire Pilgrims Housing Association
Mike Vout, Telford and Wrekin Borough Council
John Watts, Trinity Estates
Joseph Whelan, Cambridgeshire County Council
Kevin Whitby, Bournville Village Trust

Project Team
Michael Carley
Nicholas Falk
Claire Farrell
Francesca King
Anne Wyatt