

## **Oak Green Way: Assisted Self-Build Project**

### **Background**

Options for Life is a voluntary organisation which has been supporting people with learning disabilities in the community since 1988. Some of the people supported by Options were living in housing which was not very good quality, including one person on a housing estate which was going to be demolished. Options for Life also needed more space for its activities.

In the mid-990s, a local housing association called Black Country Housing and Community Services (BCHA) was planning an Assisted Self Build project. This means that people helping to build their own houses.

### **Aims**

People with learning disabilities and non-disabled people, called “self-builders”, would help to build ten new houses and a base for Options for Life’s activities. By doing this, they would learn new skills which could also help them to get paid jobs afterwards. As well as having a mix of houses (from 1-bed to 4-bed), the project would have facilities for other local people, including a café.

### **Key Actions**

In 1996, BCHA had a meeting to find a partner for a self-build project they were planning on land which was owned by Sandwell Borough Council. Options for Life agreed to become project partners.

First BCHA had to find a suitable plot of land. This needed to be near shops and on main bus routes. The land which was chosen was owned by Sandwell Borough Council.

It took a long time to find the money for this scheme. By 1999, there was a Housing Corporation grant to pay for the houses. The Community Fund (lottery money) was paying for two-thirds of the cost of building the base and Sandwell Regeneration Partnership paid for one third.

A steering group for the project was set up. It consisted of people from Options for Life, BCHA and Sandwell Council. Before starting to build, the group visited other self-build schemes to learn about their experiences.

A one-off meeting was held at a local church hall before the work started on the site to tell local people about the self-build project.

The self-builders interviewed and chose the consultants for the project. A project manager was employed to co-ordinate the building works and support the self-builders.

As this was an “assisted self-build” project: a company called Kingfisher constructed the outsides of the houses, and the “self-builders” helped to build the insides of their homes.

Each self-builder had to work on building their new home for an average of 21 hours a week. Before they started, they had some training in health and safety and in basic building skills. They also had some help from local college students studying construction trades, along with staff from local companies, and local volunteers.

Each self-builder was able to choose things for their new home including the colour of paints and style of kitchen fittings, so each house is very individual.

All the self-builders, including those with learning disabilities, have become much more self-confident, they feel they have done something special and now feel a part of the community.

The base is a drop-in resource, which is used by the tenants but also by other local people. There is a friendly, welcoming reception area where people can get information and advice and can access email and the internet from the computers provided in the café. There is also a communal laundry, an art studio and meeting rooms. The base was recently used for one of the tenant’s daughter’s birthday party.

### **Overcoming Problems**

- The original plan was to have five houses for people with learning disabilities and five houses for other people who also needed housing, but it was only possible to find three non-disabled tenants. If any tenants with learning disabilities move out in the future, it would be preferable to find non-disabled people to move in so that there would be a 50:50 balance of tenancies.
- Some self-builders found it difficult to work 21 hours a week while the houses were being built because they had other responsibilities such as children to look after but friends and family members helped out.
- It was difficult to find a training provider for the self-builders, particularly to fit in with the timetable for the project but after many phone calls, a training provider was found who was willing to help.

### **Learning Points**

- Large ambitious projects like this are possible.
- Ideas can be turned into reality, even though it can take a long time
- The self-builders stuck with it, even when they had to work on the building site in the middle of winter.
- The project manager is a key person who needs to have both technical skills and knowledge, patience and “people” skills.
- The steering group worked well together and played a very important part in getting this project off the ground.
- The project manager’s role is a demanding one; they need to have technical skills for a self-build scheme but also personal skills.

- It can take a long time to find the funding from several different sources.
- Self-build is not just about developing technical skills. Team-building, self-confidence and a sense of achievement are invaluable.
- The Borough Council played an invaluable role throughout the project by providing the site and supporting the funding applications.
- The staff involved in this project also gained a sense of achievement, not usually found in more conventional housing developments.

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