

Residents and guests celebrate the opening of Devonshire Place

More than 60 dignitaries, guests and residents gathered for the official opening of Cotman Housing Association's latest sheltered housing scheme, Devonshire Place.

Located close to the heart of Norwich city, the scheme has been specially designed to offer independent living to people with severe or enduring mental health problems and is a radical departure from the usual institutional care setting.

Built for Cotman by its own development company, Icen Homes, Devonshire Place will be managed by Julian Housing Support which has extensive experience in providing homes for vulnerable people. The scheme cost £1,935, 468 to build of which £1,373,091 was received in grant.

On hand to cut the ribbon was Devonshire Place resident Kerrie Wooltorton. Kerrie is a

former resident of Bakery Court, the first ever scheme of this kind which was opened by Julian Housing Support five years ago. The aim of Devonshire Place is to build on the important lessons learned at Bakery Court and to offer this unique style of living to more people who need it in Norwich. Kerrie, 23, spent much of her teenage life in institutional care, but has now fully embraced the chance to live more independently. She said: "I couldn't live in a flat on my own but I am looking forward to moving in here. It is hard and there is a lot to learn but I couldn't go back now."

Ray Thompson, Cotman Housing's Vice

Chairman, gave a speech to mark the opening of the scheme. He said: "This is an important and groundbreaking scheme for Cotman and is a fine example of partnership working. We are positive it will provide much needed supported living and is a truly modern and pioneering scheme."

Tom Wilson, Julian Housing's Chief Executive said: "Bakery Court proved that this style of living helps people take ownership and pride in their lives and it is important to offer them an alternative to life in and out of psychiatric wards."

*Front Row: Ray Thompson, Kerrie Wooltorton, Rachel Bedwell, Vivien Hiscox, Sarah Dixon
Second Row: David Hunt, Ken Barnes, Stuart Mudie, Simon Woodbridge, Bernard Smith, David Egar, Tom Wilson, Stuart Thomas*

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Editorial

If this edition of Raising the Roof had to have a one word title it would be PARTNERSHIP. This phrase is overused by both the voluntary and statutory sectors and often describes the relationship between one organisation and any other that it is in contact with, regardless of how well or how poorly that relationship is maintained. The stories VHG covers in this edition of Raising the Roof highlight what can be achieved when all parties to a partnership actively play their parts: Better workplaces, better homes and, a reduction in homelessness. *The problems that can lead to poor and ineffective partnerships are as follows:*

- A lack of commitment to or, understanding of the goal
- Unequal power in the relationship leading to tensions
- Partnership existing purely at a management level and not translated to front line workers between the partner organisations
- 'Blaming' rather than joint problem solving
- Undervaluing the role and skills of external organisations
- No communication of expectations

There are other, more complex issues but it is my opinion that most problems can be unpicked and traced back to the key headings above. I would challenge VHG members and statutory partners to examine their relationships with the external organisations that they work with and check that the problems listed above do not apply to them. I am not arguing that organisations shouldn't challenge one another to improve practice or review policy – debate is also a sign of a healthy partnership. It becomes destructive only when the goals and expectations haven't been agreed before the work starts.

As is illustrated by the news in this edition, successful partnership with clear goals and expectations leads to happy, healthy communities. We cannot afford to be poor partners if we are going to part of the solution for housing and homelessness. We need to play our part and support our partner organisations in playing theirs. We need to help solve problems, encourage front line staff to train together, learn together and , to enjoy working together to achieve the best outcome for our clients.

Emma Daniel
Chief Executive – VHG

Restructuring at Norwich C positive move to the new

I am very grateful to the Board of VHG for the opportunity to write about what we have been doing at Norwich City Council in the former Housing Needs Section, since for the past few months we have been very inward looking, focused on changing a service where 2/3rds of the staff were newly appointed and most of the rest in new roles.

The result has been an extensive training programme to equip everyone to deliver the renamed "Housing Options" Service.

The name is significant because our vision for the future service is to work with all our partners' to:-

- support and help our clients make informed choices about their housing options;
- be proactive in preventing homelessness;
- deliver a service that is genuinely fair and equitable;

- continually develop and support highly skilled and motivated staff to deliver the service;
- be outward looking, recognising and adopting best practice; setting stretching targets to continually improve our performance.

Fine sentiments I can hear you saying, but ones, which we are practically backing up.

For example:-

- our new homelessness prevention fund which can be used flexibly to prevent homelessness;
- a switch of resources (both staff and funding) to enable more accommodation in the private sector to be available to our clients;
- on-going training and development for all our staff. Here, I am delighted that we will be doing so much of this via VHG's training programme;
- choice-based lettings;

Diversity Works for Cambridge City Council

Cambridge City Council is ranked in the top three Councils in the UK in a new corporate Equality Index showing the UK's top 100 employers for lesbian, gay and bi-sexual (LGB) staff.

Stonewall, the leading national campaigning organisation on gay rights, has published the results of its index which show the Council to be ranked 23rd out of the 1,700 public and private sector organisations that took part in its survey.

A member of the Council's LGB staff support group said: "The council's support of its lesbian, gay and bi-sexual staff helps us to feel

recognized and protected so that we can get on with doing our jobs free from discrimination and harassment. It's good to feel included and part of a diverse workforce."

Stonewall Chief Executive Ben Summerskill said: "The organisations in our 2005 Top 100 have demonstrated a clear commitment to meeting the needs of gay staff."

For further information about the Stonewall Diversity Champions Scheme go to www.stonewall.org.uk/stonewall/diversity_champions/ The scheme brings together employers who are at the cutting edge of delivering diversity in business and public service and focuses on the new challenges and opportunities for employers addressing issues of diversity in the workplace. To receive an information pack contact Adrian Bradley on 020 7881 9262 or email diversitychampions@stonewall.org.uk

City Council and it's Housing Options Service

- a complete review of our allocations policies;
- far less reliance on Bed and Breakfast accommodation, which is both expensive and often not suitable for our clients.

However, there is still much to be done, which is why I am so grateful to Emma, who is working with us on a Voluntary Sector Day

to give us and our voluntary sector partners the chance to meet and talk informally, especially give you the chance to give us feedback and ideas for improvement.

Lynda Peacock
Head of Strategic Housing Services, Norwich City Council

Colchester 'Making the Right Choice' for decent homes

Colchester held a 'Making the Right Choice' conference for Councils around the country in order that they could learn from the success that Colchester Borough Council has had in overcoming the challenges of meeting the 'Decent Homes' targets.

A three way partnership of Colchester Borough Council, its arms length management organisations (ALMO) Colchester Borough Homes and service delivery partner Inspace was formed in September 2003. The aim of the partnership is to provide an improved service to Colchester Borough Council's tenants and to ensure that all of its properties meet the Government's 'Decent Homes' standard.

Already the partnership has achieved a great deal, over the past year 5,000 more repairs have been carried out for £200,000 less due to the new partnership. Also, 566 homes have had new bathrooms and kitchens with further homes receiving new windows, doors and central heating.

Tim Young, Chair of Colchester Borough Homes, said: "One of the real achievements of the partnership is it has helped us communicate better with our tenants and find out more about the kind of improvements they would like to see. For example tenants have been at the heart of plans to refurbish Walnut Tree House sheltered housing complex to make sure that it fits the needs of the people that will be living there. By working together we are able to achieve a great deal more for those who need our help the most."

Bedford Praised for Homelessness Success

Andy Gale, Specialist Advisor from the ODPM (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister), gave the seal of approval to Bedford Borough Council's initiatives on the prevention of homelessness.

He said, "Bedford Borough Council has made tremendous achievements to eliminate the use of Bed and Breakfast and reduced homelessness acceptances since the launch of its first homelessness strategy."

Since the launch of its first homelessness strategy in July 2003, the council has:

- Established a new housing advice team at the Town Hall
- Stopped the use of Bed and Breakfast accommodation for homeless people
- Encouraged lettings in the private sector through the landlords forum and by implementing a tenancy deposit guarantee scheme
- Funded a direct access hostel for young single homeless people
- Provided money to deliver 88 homes for rent in 2005/06

Bedford Borough Council's housing needs manager, Dawn Parker, says: "Working with

our partner stakeholders is a key element to producing a successful homelessness strategy. It was rewarding that so many organisations, whose clients are affected by homelessness, were present to discuss how we can further our efforts to work jointly to tackle homelessness issues."

This partnership working is set to continue as key stakeholders attended an event hosted by Bedford Borough Council to develop the new homelessness strategy for 2005/08. Representatives from the voluntary sector and RSLs including Bedfordshire Pilgrim's Housing Association as well as the Primary Care Trust and Social Services attended the consultation event.

Training Dates

6th April 2005

Successful Keyworking

Clare Pastorius

20th April 2005

Diversity and the QAF

Clare Pastorius

27th April 2005

Risk Assessment –

Assessing and managing client risk

Clare Pastorius

4th May 2005

Working with Drug Users

A guide for non-specialists

11th May 2005

Eating Disorders

(1/2 day session 1 -5pm)

Louise Young

18th May 2005

Working with People who self-injure

Louise Young

**FOR A COPY OF OUR 2005
TRAINING BROCHURE PLEASE
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VHG

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A day in the life of...

After a quick look through my email I do a council tradition and have my first brew of the day!!

At 9.30 I have a meeting to attend regarding a new scheme, which will enable people on a low income to access the private sector.

I am on duty today at 2.00 so I check on the diary for people who are booked in for the Drop

In Session; I check their current housing situation and whether they are on the common housing register.

My first case was a gentleman who was in serious mortgage arrears. I arranged for him to see the debt advisor so he could go through things with him, and try and stop the repossession of his property. The next appointment brought a gentleman who was having problems with his landlord about the disrepair of the property. The Solicitor had issued an invalid notice on behalf of the landlord. I took down all the details as we only have half an hour slot, and will deal with this later. I then saw a young single woman who has been asked to leave by her parents. My first point of call is to contact her parents and try and reconcile them with a view to mediation if there is a chance of them reuniting.

Following my appointments I am able to go through each case in more detail

contacting the appropriate agencies and make any referrals. I also contact and write to the solicitor in regard to the wrong notice. These cases are now mine until I am

Barry Allard

Housing Options Adviser

Norwich City Council

able to reach a conclusion.

We are in the process of introducing a number of new initiatives to help with prevention of homelessness, which is the main aim of our service. We have just set up a Homeless Prevention Fund, which is to be used to help people before they have to present to the Council as homeless. This can be in a number of ways including help with deposits, rent arrears etc. Our role is to interview people and assess whether they meet the strict criteria, which we have to apply to check to see if they are eligible for assistance.

With these new initiatives and the complete restructuring of the Housing Options Department at Norwich City Council the future of homelessness and housing advice is looking very positive, our aim is to reduce homeless acceptances and the use of bed and breakfast, which is well within our reach with all these changes!

Ipswich Council Tenants Vote NO to transfer option

Ipswich Borough Council tenants want their homes retained by the Borough Council –that is the outcome of a huge consultation exercise. The Stock Options Appraisal exercise is now coming to a close and the Council Executive will decide on the 26th April whether to keep its 8,500 homes or transfer them to housing association or to create an arms length management company to look after them.

The Option Appraisal Steering Group has

now considered lots of detailed technical and financial information and tenants' views and will recommend that Councillors opt for no change in the ownership and management arrangements. This follows a number of road shows and meetings and a survey of tenants and leaseholders which brought 94% preference for stock retention. A quarter of tenants and leaseholders responded to the consultation.

VHG

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