

Flexible living for the future

by Stephen Ingram, Development Manager at Two Rivers Housing

Two Rivers Housing is about to welcome tenants to the first of its brand new 'flexi-flats', specifically designed and built to adapt to changing needs and future-proof its assets.

These one-bedroom homes are built to a very high quality and higher-than-average space standards, offering between 57m² and 61m² of floor area, which is roughly equivalent to the average private housebuilder's two-bedroom flat. But their unique design means they can be readily adapted for the future to reflect letting and benefits policies changes as well as customers' aspirations.

This innovative step comes in response to current high demand for affordable one-bedroom homes. Yet, acutely aware of how trends can change, we have taken a longer-term view of people's needs and designed a unique living space that can convert to offer two bedrooms with minimal disruption.

Whilst there is huge general demand for new affordable homes of all sizes, we have a responsibility – as both a housing developer and long term custodian of these homes – to make sure their design and construction are flexible.

The scheme

Orchard Place at Stonehouse, near Stroud in Gloucestershire, is a combination of one and one-bed flexi (affordable rented) flats built across two blocks with a central communal space. The 11 flats – six of which follow the new flexible design – are ranged over three storeys, using the roof space to maximise the full potential of the development on a restricted town site.

The scheme – in keeping with Two Rivers' desire to encourage sustainability and environmentally-friendly practices where possible – incorporates a covered bicycle storage area and a refuse and recycling enclosure. The ground floor flats have the added benefit of a rear courtyard space.

The dominant affordable housing need in this area is for one-bedroom homes for single people and couples. Legal advice has been taken to make sure our flexi-flats comply with current Housing Benefit requirements.

The flexible design concept seeks to:

- Provide a one-bedroom home, whilst allowing for a second bedroom to be created in the future if required, with limited physical construction works and costs.
- Create a home with an increased space standard and a sense of space. The flats are 57m² / 61m², which is 45% to 65% larger than typical one-bedroom apartments developed for open market sale.
- Create block configurations over multiple floor levels which allows development in scale, thereby improving cost efficiency.
- Achieve a scale of development which makes it financially viable to include lifts to ensure mobility is not a barrier to lettings.

- Deliver a scale of development which allows a different management approach to be adopted and financially viable.
- Deliver a scale of delivery which enables a real contribution to meeting affordable housing need to be achieved.
- Provide extra storage space.
- Incorporate a utility cupboard for noisy white goods.
- Provide increased circulation space.
- Use glazed areas to maximise natural light.
- Raise the height of ceilings to create an increased sense of space.
- Build energy-efficient homes which are cheaper to run and more environmentally-friendly. We are currently looking at Passivhaus principles as a means to further reduce energy consumption for residents and reduce the overall long-term maintenance costs of our new homes.
- Create improved private spaces via balconies etc.
- Improve the quality of external communal space.
- Improve cycle storage/external storage space.

Management

The management approach is fundamental to the flexi one-bedroom home design and will be a key feature of how this is received and judged by stakeholders. For this reason, the design proposals have been developed through close work with the Director of Customer Services and Head of Housing to 'design-out', where possible, any potential management issues. That said, there will always be a requirement for pro-active management to ensure a successful sustainable development.

Build costs

The design concept allows us to provide variable block configurations. Build costs have been provided for different numbers of homes in blocks and over different numbers of storeys. This shows how improved value-for-money outcomes can be achieved, eg it is estimated that the build costs for a two-storey block of four homes would cost £85,500 per home or £973.80 per m² decreasing to £55,119 per home or £745.60 per m² for a block of 32 flats homes over four storeys. Storey heights are determined on a case-by-case basis dependent upon a number of factors such as overlooking, access/parking and any other planning officer consideration.

Financial viability

The housing management costs per home progressively increase as the scale of the block increases, whilst the build costs progressively decrease as the number of homes in a block increases. These factors influence the total development / scheme costs per home. The total scheme costs and cost per home are based on a land cost assumption of £15,000 per home. This shows the total scheme cost ranges from £92,230 per home for a scheme of 4No homes (2No storeys, 2No per homes per floor) to £70,166 per home for a scheme of 32No homes (4No storeys, 8No homes per floor).

Two Rivers Housing's flexi one-bedroom flat meets priority affordable housing needs in our operating areas, complies with Housing Benefit requirements and creates

flexibility to meet future needs arising from changes in policy, as well as customer aspirations.

The design methodology enables us to build spacious quality homes which are attractive, affordable and financially viable to develop.