

# Housing Learning & Improvement Network

The Health and Social Care Change Agent Team (CAT) was created by the DoH to improve discharge from hospital and associated arrangements. The Housing LIN, a section of the CAT, is devoted to housing-based models of care.



## Housing for Older People from the Chinese Community in Middlesbrough

An example of a local community development partnership between a housing association and a Chinese community association, involving housing for older people, a community centre and retail/business space .

### STRATEGIC PLANNING IN PARTNERSHIP FOR EXTRA CARE HOUSING

**Housing Association:** Tees Valley Housing Group

**Community association:** North of England Chineses Association

**Local Authority:** Middlesbrough Council

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## **Aim**

To provide attractive and sustainable housing for Chinese older people, as part of a mini-Chinatown located in the town centre and comprising, in addition to the housing, a multi-purpose community centre and space for commercial development.

## **Key Strategic Issues**

- Identified housing need, due to social isolation and other factors, among older people in the small Chinese community in Middlesbrough and its surrounding area;
- Recognition of the advantages of creating a cultural hub, which would draw in members of the community for social, educational, leisure and business activities;
- Growing role of housing associations as key agents in neighbourhood renewal and community investment, which is actively promoted by Government, the Housing Corporation and the National Housing Federation;
- Needs of black and minority ethnic communities for cultural-specific and sensitively designed services, including housing and support.

## **Local Service Context:**

In 1996, the North of England Chinese Association approached the Mayor of Middlesbrough with the idea of developing a housing scheme for Chinese elders. Tees Valley Housing Group (TVHG) became involved and commissioned consultants, Banks of the Wear Community Projects, to work with the Chinese Association in developing plans for the new scheme. Banks of the Wear Housing Association, which became part of the group structure within TVHG, was already managing the first purpose built sheltered housing scheme in the North East for Chinese older people – Mascot House in the centre of Newcastle, opened in 1994. TVHG was therefore able to draw directly on this experience. The Head of Community Investment at TVHG was appointed three years ago, with a specific remit to work with the Chinese community on the new scheme.

Throughout the long planning phase, there was concern that there might not be sufficient demand for sheltered housing among Chinese older people, given that the total Chinese population was quite small (1,200 recorded in 2001 Census). An initial study commissioned by Middlesbrough Council found that there was sufficient evidence of housing need to merit further investigation (Middlesbrough BC, 1999). This was followed by a feasibility study and options appraisal funded by Tees Valley Housing Group, which took place in 2000 (Banks of the Wear, 2000).

The research demonstrated strong interest in the idea of developing new community facilities, with over 80% of respondents (all ages) saying they would like to see the following: a Chinese school; a community building; sheltered housing; a library; adult education; and a medicine centre. The study also found evidence of considerable social exclusion among older people in the Chinese community and *'a defined but limited need for older person housing'*.

A group study visit to the Tung Sin Chinese Housing Association and other Chinatown developments in Manchester identified a number of learning points for Middlesbrough (which did not have its own Chinatown area):

- Chinese people, particularly older people, find city centre living attractive, even in quite noisy locations;
- The proximity of community and commercial facilities adds to the sustainability of housing schemes;
- With appropriate support systems, it is also possible to develop mixed Chinese/non-Chinese schemes;
- Social housing schemes in city centre locations can become 'priced out' of the market, in the wake of the success of a Chinatown development, as land and property values rise.

The feasibility study recommended that there should be a development of twenty apartments, including approximately twelve for older people. The scheme should be a flexible use development, which would allow variation as demand emerged. It was therefore decided to proceed with the housing as a general needs development of twenty apartments, with priority to be given to Chinese elders.

The study also recommended creating a 'mini-Chinatown', by locating several new facilities and services on a single site: the housing for older people; a new community centre; and commercial units for Chinese shops, restaurants or other businesses. The commercial development, it was proposed, should start with two anchor businesses, ideally a Chinese supermarket and a restaurant.

From the perspective of the Chinese Association, this plan incorporated a number of objectives: to provide social contacts, cultural resources and activities for the residents of the apartments; to build a social and cultural centre designed to accommodate traditional celebrations, festivals and family events; to offer a base for activities such as learning the Chinese language or health awareness training, which would be open to everyone; and to promote commercial/retail businesses with a Chinese theme.

Middlesbrough Council was keen to support a Chinatown development as it coincided with several corporate objectives:

- Economic revitalisation of the town centre;
- Increase in town centre living;
- Improvement in public space and streetscape;
- Improvement in evening economy;
- Increase in tourism potential.



### **Design:**

The housing development, called Tia Hua Court, finally opened in March 2005 after nearly ten years of planning. The Chinese Association selected the site from a number put forward by the local authority and then worked alongside the architects and TVHG. Proximity to the town centre was an important consideration, given the aim of drawing in people from around the area for special events and regular activities. All the apartments have two bedrooms. Two are fully wheelchair accessible and the others have generous space standards. There are four floors, with a lift and a communal lounge, kitchen and roof terrace at the top.

Detailed consultation with the Chinese community has taken place to ensure that cultural needs are incorporated into the design. This has resulted in different layouts and specifications for the kitchen area, wider corridors and a greater use of glass to ensure light and airy communal areas. There is no apartment number 4 as this is unlucky. The apartments are all connected to the Chinese satellite TV channel, at a cost to tenants of £0.46 per week.

The location of the community centre on the same site is expected to add to the appeal and sustainability of the housing. The steering group have set up a limited company and registered charity to own and manage the community centre.

The centre will be open to all, although the particular needs of the Chinese community have been paramount in the design. It will have a large hall accommodating 350 people, a bar, kitchen, training rooms and a library. The ground floor has been substantially re-designed, as the original design included a turning entrance ramp which would not allow 'straight in' access, as required by feng shui. The rooms at the centre will be available for hire to Chinese groups, other voluntary or community groups and anyone else on a policy of equal charging. It is planned to recruit a centre manager once the centre opens in 2006, at which stage TVHG will reduce its involvement.

### **Tenants:**

The concerns about possible low demand for the housing have proved to be unfounded, with all twenty apartments allocated to local Chinese people aged over 55. There is also a waiting list of some 4-5 people. This follows promotion of the scheme through the distribution of flyers, adverts in the North of England Chinese Association newsletter and a trip to Newcastle for prospective applicants to look around Mascot House, the sheltered housing scheme there. TVHG also arranged a meeting where the Housing Benefit rules

The tenants have come from a range of tenures and housing situations, including council tenancies, living with family, private tenancies and owner occupation. Most of them have good physical mobility and support from their families, but the great majority (all but two) speak little or no English.

Both TVHG housing management staff and members of the Chinese Association agree that the opportunity to live independently, but with ready social contact and companionship, has been a strong driving force behind the popularity of the scheme among older people. The warden of the Newcastle sheltered scheme commented that many Chinese elders suffered from 'sheer boredom', as they did not know how to use even the most basic services and community amenities. Overcrowded households, language barriers, lifestyle differences between generations and limited contact with family are some of the key factors leading to friction or social isolation.

### **Support:**

The warden from the Newcastle sheltered scheme has been able to provide a certain level of support during the preparation and moving in phase, which has proved invaluable. This support has centred on issues such as access to benefits and services and any problems with the apartments themselves. Members of the community association have also been available to help with practical matters (e.g. door spy holes too high). Full furniture packages have been provided by TVHG for about six tenants, who then rent the furniture for an extra weekly charge.

Now that the tenants have moved in, TVHG housing managers are looking at their needs for additional support. They already have the facility to link in to the local community alarm scheme if they wish; this is paid for by the local authority Supporting People budget if they are on Housing Benefit.

An initial request for Supporting People funding to provide other forms of housing-related support through a part-time warden (e.g. assistance with correspondence; mediating with health, social services and other outside agencies) was turned down. However, this is going to be reconsidered after twelve months, once the scheme is fully up and running and the support needs become clear. A key factor here will be the level and nature of family support, as so many of the tenants do not speak good English. It is also hoped that people may come to rely on some of the more able tenants to provide information, advice and assistance.

### **Resources:**

In line with the development plan, the capital funding bid to the Housing Corporation was for general needs housing, rather than for sheltered housing to 'Category 1' standards. The total capital cost of £1.64 million was met by Housing Corporation Grant (54%), TVHG own funds (40%) and Recycled Capital Grant (6%). TVHG has also funded the considerable costs of capacity-building and project development through its Community Investment programme.

The community centre, which is due to go on site in early Summer 2005, will cost £890,000. Almost half of this (48%) has been committed by the European Regional Development Fund, while the Big Lottery Fund is providing 34% and smaller amounts are coming from a charitable foundation and Middlesbrough Single Regeneration Budget. In the short term, Tees Valley Housing Group has offered a £25,000 loan to make up the remaining shortfall and allow the project to go ahead. The proposed retail and business element comprises a two-storey shop/restaurant/office facility adjacent to the community centre. The land is owned by TVHG and it will be offering an all-in-one 'land, design and build' package to interested parties.

### **Benefits of service:**

As the tenants have only just moved in, the benefits of the scheme have yet to be demonstrated. The expected benefits, for individuals and for the wider Chinese community, include:

- Increased social contact and engagement, both among tenants and, when the community centre opens, between tenants and the local Chinese community;
- Greater involvement of older residents in cultural events and festivities;
- Improved access to services, such as health, social care and financial benefits;
- Improved mental health and well-being of tenants, through living independently and avoiding social isolation;
- Preservation of Chinese culture and identity, both in the design of the living space and in the community centre activities;



- Larger numbers of children, young people and adults learning the Chinese language, through enrolment in the Chinese school to be based in the community centre.

### **Challenges and learning points:**

- One interesting lesson from this project is that the development of a popular housing scheme does not depend on having a large population among a particular minority ethnic group. Indeed, it can be argued from the Middlesbrough experience that, where numbers are relatively small, older people and others who may need support to live independently or engage in local life are more isolated and therefore have greater needs for sheltered or supported housing.
- Those involved in planning the Middlesbrough development emphasise the long time it has taken to go through each phase of the process. The role of the Chinese community has been central and there have been lengthy discussions and negotiations on the preferred site, the building design and many other aspects of the scheme. Around ten to twelve members of the Chinese Association have been especially active.
- A strong partnership between the Chinese Association and Tees Valley Housing Group is very evident and there is a high level of confidence among the partners.

It has been important to define clearly the roles of each partner and the criteria on which funding has been agreed. This applies, for example, to lettings policy for the housing and to charging policy for hire of space in the community centre.

- The Chinese Association in the Middlesbrough area is a small and cohesive group which has remained focused on the original goals of the project. It is noted by members of the partnership that it could be much more difficult to make progress in other local areas, where the representatives of particular black and minority ethnic groups may not speak with a single voice.
- Tees Valley Housing Group has been prepared to invest substantial resources in the project over the long term, both in staff time and in direct financial support. This has been an essential element in the success of the development to date.

References: Middlesbrough BC (1999), *Chinese elders housing needs study*  
Banks of the Wear Community Projects (2000), *Chinese community housing and resource project Middlesbrough*, BOW unpublished report

**Case study prepared by Lynn Watson, Pathways Research, 2005**

Other Housing LIN publications available in this format:

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The Housing LIN welcomes contributions on a range of issues pertinent to Extra Care housing. If there is a subject that you feel should be addressed, please contact us.

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