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High-rise ambitions

In Portsmouth, an ambitious project is currently underway to transform an ailing high-rise apartment block in a deprived part of the city into a modern super-insulated building refurbished to Passivhaus standards. In the first in a series of articles following the project, Claire Clutten speaks to Steve Groves at Portsmouth City Council about why they chose refurbishment over demolition.

Wilmcote House is in the Somerstown area of Portsmouth, a particularly deprived part of the city. The block was built in the 1968 when high-rise living was reaching it's zenith as people bought into the utopian ideal of cities in the sky. It was also an efficient means of achieving high density in a relatively small space and during the post-war period, there was an accelerated need for more new homes and high-rise fitted the bill. The block consists of 100 three-bedroom maisonettes and seven one-bedroom ground floor flats.

Following a major refurbishment programme in the 1990s, an area housing office was installed on the ground floor along with a concierge, a prevalent feature of most high-rise blocks during that period. The apartments were originally constructed with gas supply, however after the explosion at Ronan Point this was removed. The building is electrically heated with night storage heaters.

In 2000 a big regeneration masterplan was put together for the city, Steve picks up the story: "It was all about demolishing blocks and rebuilding, creating a utopia...everybody gets a house with a garden etc and the reality is, the work goes on for a long time and it never really delivers what it promises."



What Steve is alluding to is the fact that demolition and rebuilding is often seen as a panacea, the answer to many of the problems afflicting tired run down housing estates. In some situations this may prove true, where the housing is structurally unsound and increasingly unsafe for tenants to live, for example. However sometimes decisions are taken without any real thought to the short, medium and long-term consequences of demolishing buildings on estates.

In places like Portsmouth, where high-rise accommodation accounts for a significant proportion of the council housing stock, demolition is far from a practical solution, as Steve points out: "I think sometimes some of the issues get missed when you look at demolition options. In terms of our long-term strategy, I think it's wrong to just evaluate Wilmcote House on it's own, that's just one high-rise block and we've got a dozen other high-rise blocks that also exceed 11 storeys, so what do we do if the case is right for demolishing one, do we demolish all the other blocks? That's when it becomes unaffordable."

"If you focus on new-build to improve the energy efficiency of your stock, it's only a small proportion of the whole housing stock for us in Portsmouth. We could never keep pace with

The analysis we did of our repairs demand highlighted over a two-year period that 80% of residents had reported problems with their windows and a third had reported condensation...



demolishing and rebuilding to meet our housing demand as opposed to refurbishing our existing stock."

Political pressure

The council did not believe knocking down Wilmcote House was in the best interests of the local community, despite facing political pressure initially to demolish the block.

For Portsmouth City Council, other key factors also influenced their decision to have an alternative to demolition. A strong sense of community exists within properties like Wilmcote House, which if residents were to be decanted to allow for demolition, would be broken — it would be unlikely the council could rehouse all tenants in the same area so inevitably they would become dispersed across the city.

Also, moving house is a stressful process, one most people are reluctant to repeat in quick succession, therefore another point the council considered was it is likely once decanted, the residents would settle into their new homes and no longer want to return, reticent about going through yet another upheaval.

There are approximately 70 children living in Wilmcote House aged 12 and under. With schools across the country struggling to cope with ever increasing intakes year on year, would the council be able to rehouse residents together in areas with sufficient school places and not disrupt their education, another essential consideration.

Steve continues: "We were able to demonstrate that financially, it wasn't a viable option. It's not just about the cost of demolition, although that is a significant factor, you have to factor in the cost of rebuilding and the indirect cost of decanting, as that is not just something you do in five minutes, but over a prolonged period of time, your rent loss can be over a number of years."

"Then there is the disturbance allowance and before you know it you're talking about a cost in excess of £20m to demolish and rebuild, and that's not withstanding the other issues such as can you get the same density again if you're rebuilding on that same site."

Resident feedback

In 2010 the council became more heavily focused towards the plight of Wilmcote House. A small but extremely vocal residents group had emerged with the ear of local politicians and they were making a lot of noise about the building and what they wanted to see improved. The main cause of their consternation was the amount of money they were spending on electric heating and hot water. Residents wanted

RESIDENTS FEEDBACK - WHAT YOU TOLD US



We asked
Are you in favour of the energy efficiency improvements and roof renewals?

1. Improve Energy Efficiency

yes No not sure Blanks



You answered
Massive support for better insulation and new windows to reduce heating costs and damp problems.

Comments on the existing situation

"Heating bills are too high . . . its freezing in winter . . . we have damp and mould problems . . . windows let the cold in . . . there's never enough heat or hot water when I need it"



We asked
Are you in favour of the overcladding to the street facade? Are you in favour of removing balconies and extending living rooms?

3. Street Face Double Glazed Windows

yes No not sure Blanks



You answered
Massive support for overcladding and replacement windows to the street facade. Generally in favour of enclosing the walkways but against loss of private balconies.

Comments on the existing situation

"People are always throwing stuff off the walkways . . . I need my balcony for drying clothes"



We asked
Are you in favour of enlarging the living rooms and having entrance halls? Are you in favour of replacing the heating with a more efficient system?

5. Enlarge hallways / Living Rooms

yes No not sure Blanks



You answered
Majority support for changes to the living rooms. Everyone in favour of more efficient heating systems.

Comments on the existing situation

"We need cheaper bills . . . easier to control . . . I want hot water for the bath when I need it . . . can we have a shower?"

WILMCOTE HOUSE - IMPROVEMENT WORKS



a more efficient heating system.

Steve picks up the story again: "Traditionally as a council we would have gone down the route of putting more efficient heating in, that would have been our default position and certainly was what we looked at in the early days to appease residents. That's when you start considering if there is a more efficient form of electric heating or looking at district heating options."

"At Portsmouth City Council we've moved away from traditional planned maintenance schemes, we tend to evaluate the whole block, sounds common sense but it wasn't beforehand, so for example we might identify a decoration scheme, but once we survey and evaluate the whole block and identify that the windows are failing too, then we would prepare a window and decoration scheme, that's how we approach it."

"The same happened here, we approached it with the initial demands about heating and when we started evaluating the whole block we realised that there were other issues. In that initial evaluation in 2010/11 we identified the roof was leaking and the decorations were in an appalling state in the communal areas. The analysis we did of our repairs demand

highlighted over a two-year period that 80% of residents had reported problems with their windows and a third had reported condensation, there were lots of repair issues.

"We'd got to the point where the project wasn't just about a heating scheme; we needed to do a scheme that was more of a whole building solution. We recognised as a council that we didn't have the expertise to do that sort of scheme to a high-rise block, so we went out to tender for consultants and that's when we first started getting working with ECD Architects."

It was ECD Architects who introduced the council to the concept that actually, to solve the problems plaguing Wilmcote House, it's not about the heating, the first priority is to get the fabric of the building right.

Next time...
Next issue we focus on Portsmouth City Council's partnership with ECD and hear from James Traynor at the architects about the fabric first approach being applied on this project, the initial feasibility study undertaken and Southampton University's involvement in monitoring the properties.