

# Green investment

A Merseyside housing body has ambitious plans to transform its green spaces with community help, writes **Gavin McEwan**



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**Helena Homes: investing heavily in its in-house landscape maintenance and development function to cover housing estates in the St Helens area**

**W**hile green space managers face ever greater pressure on budgets, Helena Homes has bucked the trend by investing heavily in in-house landscape maintenance and development — most strikingly in its new Green Base facility, at the heart of one of its St Helens estates, which opened last month.

Helena Homes was formed out of a transfer of local authority housing stock 10 years ago, and now manages properties in 49 estates covering 50ha. “That’s a lot of trees, grass and planted areas,” says Liz Ackerley, a trained landscape architect and former garden designer in London, who was brought in two years ago to revamp the housing association’s green space provision.

“An incredible amount of landscape around social housing is just left — the numbers of green space managers in the sector is negligible,” she says. “In St Helens, there are a huge number of ‘backlands’, land-locked areas bound in by houses and forgotten. They have the potential to be pocket plots, but we will have to be quite inventive.”

### **Kerbside appeal**

For Helena, the initial priority was to ensure its houses were up to standard before turning its attention to its green estate. But there is nothing sentimental about this new focus, says Ackerley.

“It’s financially driven. The properties have to have kerbside appeal if they are going to be let. And by improving the landscape, you give people a sense of ownership, improve their health and reduce anti-social behaviour. There is a strong social angle to

Helena’s work — putting people into training programmes to channel their energy positively.”

And while Helena had an idea of where it wanted to get to, she says: “They didn’t know how to move improvements forward. They were thinking of bringing the work in-house, without knowing what that meant in practice. Basically, I had a blank piece of paper.”

Within a year though, Ackerley’s department had taken on sole responsibility for green space management, even bringing in work that it had originally intended to contract out, such as trees and grass care.

“It came down to the quality of maintenance and of the landscape in general, in terms of usefulness and biodiversity,” she says. “But it’s a small department compared with size of estate, so it has to happen in partnership with the community.”

This is why Green Base is so important, she says. "It's a front-facing facility — a hub to get people talking to each other — and it will kick-start other things. We help those who help themselves."

Another main role will be as a training base for green space staff, who are divided into four area teams with separate tree and grass care teams. All now have at least an NVQ level 2 in horticulture, and the team is now moving towards level 3, which Ackerley points out is "more about managing landscapes".

"We have trainees at all levels, each with a mentor," she says. "Before, they had poor training and had not been valued as staff. We want to constantly develop people and bring them through the ranks." This consists of both in-house training and courses at nearby Reaseheath College. "It's a pick-and-mix approach — some will need training specific to them," Ackerley adds.

"Staff should themselves be accredited trainers and assessors — we are working towards that now. And each team leader should have a specialism, whether that's arboriculture, hard landscaping or whatever. We have one guy who is a qualified fitter who can service our machinery."

### Apprentice scheme

Each team also has an apprentice attached to it, a popular scheme that recently attracted more than 30 applications for two places. "Green Base will be a centre for them too, and for apprentices with other organisations," says Ackerley. "After two years, they too will have gained an NVQ level 2. We can't employ them all, but we have links to small local companies they can move on to."

Working with other bodies is essential, she adds. "Land management in housing tends to be a bit of a mess. We own bits, the council owns bits, other associations own bits, so we need to work with them."

Helena has a joint "neighbourhood management project" with the local authority called Renew, and is working with Landlife in nearby Liverpool to seed and maintain vacant "development sites" with wild flowers. "It's very different and more challenging than doing it in parks", says Ackerley. "Might flame guns work better than chemicals for clearing perennial weeds? It's always a question of managing things more cost-effectively."

### Challenging and complex

She admits there is still plenty to do. "It's happening in pockets, in other places not. There are still challenging and complex issues to resolve. But it's only sustainable if we continue to drive it forward."

Green Flag status is now being sought for some areas. "That means developing management plans, which will help us maintain our approach year-on-year," says Ackerley. "It's not just a tick-box exercise."

Helena's efforts have already drawn the attention of other groups, and the Green Base will shortly host study visits by other housing associations in the North West. "Many housing associations are thinking: 'Where do I start?'" says Ackerley, who has also been involved in the past year with

## Community champions

HW's visit to Helena Homes coincided with the launch of a Queensland in Bloom community group, which aims to improve the appearance of the estate that surrounds the Green Base.

Retired resident Morris Unsworth is among those keen to put a previously disused area of "backlands" to work. "We have been fighting for something like this for 10 or 15 years," he says.

With the help of Helena and another resident, he created a showcase allotment in the space last spring. "It's been hard work," he says. "It was just rubble here before and there were only three of us. But



Unsworth: with showcase allotment

now we are getting people interested. The children did a mural for the wall. We can't sell the produce but we ask people for a donation to help with the materials."

Unsworth has also built wooden containers that children have planted up and has ambitious plans to relandscape the remaining space.

He hopes to gain from training at the Green Base, saying: "I know a fair bit, but you're never too old to learn."

His example is one that Helena Homes' Liz Ackerley hopes will be emulated elsewhere. "We will never get everyone interested, but even if we only have one Morris on each estate, that's still way more than our workforce," she says.

"They have drive and ambition and we have the expertise that can help them deliver."

## Green Base

The Green Base has a unique function but is itself a highly unusual building. It is one of the first in Britain to use the Passivhaus approach, developed in Germany, that aims to minimise energy use by maximising natural daylight and heating.

This is achieved through large south-facing windows and a highly insulated and air-tight construction, offering 90 per cent energy savings over a similar conventional building.

It also boasts roof-mounted photovoltaic panels, funded through the Feed-in Tariff scheme, whose surplus power is sold on to the National Grid, while 500-litre butts collect rainwater from the roof for



Green Base: Passivhaus approach

irrigation. Inside, Forest Stewardship Council-certified wood is used and a minimum of chemicals.

"We want to show we can walk the talk," says Ackerley. "We would like to have a green roof and are

considering how that might work as a community project."

A lawn is accessible from the training and events space inside. And also serving as a demonstration, the soft landscaping around the building was specified and installed by the green team themselves.

Costing nearly £500,000, it's not a lot for what it is, says Helena Homes' Liz Ackerley. And it manages not to look out of place. "Some designers were offering us glorified sheds, others miniature *Starship Enterprises*."

She adds: "We've ended up with something in-between, a traditional building that also demonstrates best practice."

**"We want to develop people and bring them through the ranks"**

Liz Ackerley  
Helena Homes

Neighbourhoods Green, a nationwide initiative to promote such green space improvements in social housing.

Originally London-focused, this has become a national forum for sharing best practice, but its financial future is currently uncertain. However, Ackerley believes there is a clear need for such an organisation. "There weren't other people to talk to out there when I started," she says. "We can all learn from each other, particularly when it comes to doing more with less. Otherwise you can become a bit parochial and inward-looking. Ours isn't the only model and we are constantly learning from others and changing how we do things."