



# Case Study

Delivering a Park Homes project – the experience of Newark and Sherwood District Council



Action for Warm Homes



## Introduction

Newark and Sherwood District Council was awarded funding to deliver a mains gas extension programme to Fairholme Park in Ollerton, north Nottinghamshire. The project enabled the replacement of expensive-to-run LPG heating, hot water and cooking appliances with mains gas, and was funded via Round 5 of the Warm Homes Fund (WHF). The scheme was delivered via a partnership comprised of four key organisations: Agility Eco (managing agent); UK Gas Services (main heating contractor); Network Plus (individual gas connection infrastructure partner); and Newark and Sherwood District Council.

Newark and Sherwood District Council had previously worked with the WHF, Agility Eco and UK Gas Services to successfully deliver a Category 1 (first-time central heating) scheme at a large, ex-coalfield area housing estate, and had early discussions with the WHF regarding the possibility of a Park Homes project. The council's Energy & Home Support staff had a chance conversation with a resident at Fairholme Park. He was recently retired due to ill health and on a low, fixed income, which led him to enquire whether any support was available from the council to help reduce the running costs of his Park Home. This prompted Newark and Sherwood District Council to look more closely at the site, after which they learned it was heated primarily by bulk/bottled LPG. These two conversations – one with the WHF, and one with a resident – eventually resulted in a project to fit mains gas into 44 Park Homes on the site, of which 42 were completed by the time the project ended.

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### Who did it involve?

Newark and Sherwood District Council's Energy & Home Support Team said that working in partnership with the WHF, UK Gas Services and Agility Eco was the fundamental enabler for the successful planning and delivery of this project. First and foremost, the development of a very positive, mutually beneficial relationship with the WHF was key. Council delivery staff repeatedly emphasised that their work with the WHF grew into a genuinely strong and trusting partnership, whereby the problems and challenges associated with a Park Homes project were worked through collaboratively by funder and recipient, rather than being left to the project delivery team to resolve alone.

Just as important was the relationship Newark and Sherwood District Council and the delivery team developed with the Park Homes site owner. This was described as critical to the success of the project, and was partly enabled by the site owner's positive experience of bringing a gas network to another of his sites. This meant that the site owner understood the benefits of the project but also the likely pitfalls, and was able to work closely with the delivery team

to support the effective design and delivery of the works.

Last but by no means least, council staff explained that the relationships and good communication with key delivery agents were crucial; especially with Agility Eco, who acted as a project manager, and UK Gas Services, who were the main contractors for the heating upgrades and replacement cooking equipment. Newark and Sherwood District Council had worked with both organisations before, and this facilitated excellent communication and a shared drive to complete the project successfully.

### How was it delivered?

Prior to submitting a bid to the WHF, Newark and Sherwood District Council worked with the site owner to send letters to all residents, explaining the ambitions of the project, its anticipated benefits, and proposed 'next steps'. This was followed by a simple questionnaire which aimed to build a better understanding of each resident's individual circumstances, and included questions about the household's heating practices (e.g. their use

of LPG, coal/electric fires). Through this and other engagement work, Newark and Sherwood District Council enhanced its knowledge of key issues facing Park Home residents, such as dramatically increasing LPG prices due to a lack of supplier competition, and the physical labour associated with carrying, storing and connecting heavy LPG bottles, especially for older and frailer residents. This engagement, refracted and refined through discussions with Agility Eco and UK Gas Services, shaped the successful bid, by helping to establish the likely benefits and impacts the project could deliver if it went ahead.

Once the bid was approved, plans for delivery swung into action, but were almost immediately de-railed by the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Understandably, the pandemic delayed the project by six months, with the completion date moving from September 2020 to early 2021. It also caused additional challenges. Newark and Sherwood District Council had planned several community engagement events to keep residents informed as the project progressed. These could no longer take place, so engagement continued by other means: regular letters and emails were sent to residents directly, emphasising that the project was still continuing, and that Newark and Sherwood District Council staff were available to talk through any questions or concerns via telephone or email. The council was strongly supported by a resident 'champion' – the very same resident who had initially asked Newark and Sherwood District Council if anything could be done to help him with his energy costs. At different points in delivery, another long-term resident also helped out by posting letters on behalf of Newark and Sherwood District Council to all of her neighbours, and engaged in wider conversations with them about the project.

Much work also had to be undertaken to reprofile the project, in close collaboration with Agility Eco and UK Gas Services. As the project progressed, previously unforeseen costs and challenges were identified. This included additional costs for longer-than-anticipated gas runs and vertical flues, which led the delivery team to request additional financial support from the WHF. Underpinned by the trusting relationship between Newark and Sherwood District Council and the WHF, as well as a shared ambition to make the project work, the additional support was approved. Some smaller issues were also identified later in the project, such as wireless thermostats installed inside each Park Home inadvertently picking up signals

from adjacent homes. Were it not for the close working relationship and trust between project partners, such issues may have proved difficult to resolve; however, Newark and Sherwood District Council delivery staff explained that every challenge encountered was addressed proactively, with all participants working together as one effective problem-solving team.

Regarding eligibility, Newark and Sherwood District Council emphasised the importance of ECO3 LA Flex. They used a bespoke Statement of Intent (SOI) to confer eligibility on the whole site, partly to ensure that those with incomes marginally above their prior criteria would not be disqualified from support or be expected to pay a contribution. Ensuring that works could be delivered to the whole site through a bespoke SOI also helped to gain the support of residents and the site owner, and removed the need to verify the income and eligibility of every Park Home resident. This would have taken up precious limited resources and, potentially, made the gas main extension works uneconomic.

## Who did it help?

Newark and Sherwood District Council's WHF project helped residents like J<sup>1</sup>, who completed a questionnaire and took part in an interview as part of the evaluation. J was instrumental in instigating the project, and worked with officers at Newark and Sherwood District Council prior to the WHF application to highlight the issues that he and others on the site were experiencing with their previous heating fuel (LPG). Previously, J had difficulties with what he described as his *"big tanks outside."* They were expensive, especially for someone with a small private pension. *"I actually was very conscious of heating,"* he explained. *"There were times that I didn't have the heating on, and I'm lying in my living room under a couple of blankets, with plenty of clothes on."* In addition, J sensed that burning LPG on his hob was negatively affecting the air quality inside his home, and was also dissatisfied that he had no choice in who his LPG supplier was. So *"obviously, when I got the chance for mains gas, I jumped at it because it also gave me a choice of supplier."*

1. J provided informed consent for his experiences and a photograph of his Park Home to be included in this case study.



J's Park Home. Photo and permission to reproduce provided by J.

J's LPG boiler was converted to run on natural gas as part of the project, and he also received a new hob because his old one was deemed too old and potentially unsafe. He describes the main impact of having a mains gas system installed as financial; it has enabled him to reduce his energy costs and sign up to a cheaper supplier offering a dual fuel tariff. The money he has saved through doing this has had a significant impact elsewhere in his life. Living on a fairly rural Park Homes site, his car is essential for his mobility and his social relationships with others.

*"I've got a car, but the car is getting older. Because of where I live, I have to travel at least 10 miles to see my friends or family. I could see me having to change my car in a couple of years, just to keep mobile – I couldn't actually do without it. I drive at least 100 miles a week, if not more."*

J said the money he was saving on his energy costs would eventually be put towards a new car, to keep him mobile and connected to his friends and family.

J was also satisfied with the installation experience delivered by UK Gas Services. *"It didn't cause me any hassle [...] there was no disruption. Every crew who came in, as far as I was concerned, were spot-on, I couldn't complain [...] as far as I'm concerned, I'm very happy."* But more than this, he explained the fact that the project was conceived and went ahead made him feel that someone – i.e. Newark and Sherwood District Council – cared about Park Home residents and the challenges they faced. *"It gave me faith in human nature. When somebody put herself out and came to visit me in my park home and said, 'I think*

*we can do something for you,' and it just went on from there. It was great."* J's is just one experience, but it demonstrates the impact that bringing mains gas to Park Homes can have on older, financially vulnerable residents.

### What lessons can be learned from Newark and Sherwood District Council's experience?

In conversations with Newark and Sherwood District Council's Project Manager, lessons learned and examples of good practice were shared concerning how they set up, managed and delivered the project. These insights can be summarised as follows:

- **Relationship-building with the Park Home site owner is key:** it facilitated the successful delivery of this Park Homes project, focusing on mains gas connections, heating system installations, and the replacement of LPG cooking appliances.
- **Park Homes projects are necessarily challenging, and close partnership-working between local authorities, the project manager, the main contractor, and the funder are critical for addressing issues collaboratively and effectively.** In particular, the close relationship between Newark and Sherwood District Council, Agility Eco, UK Gas Services, and the WHF was referred to as a genuine partnership, without which the project would not have even commenced.

- **Engaging with residents on the ground can build trust and rapport, especially if a 'resident champion' is able and willing to promote the project on behalf of the delivery consortium.**
- **There are numerous hidden costs and challenges associated with Park Homes projects.** Schemes looking to improve Park Homes sites should engage closely with experienced local authorities, funders and residents, to map out possible challenges that have cost implications, prior to the bid submission phase. In addition, funders should be flexible in dealing with local authorities and other organisations undertaking Park Homes projects, working collaboratively and closely with them rather than funding 'at arm's length'.
- **3 LA Flex proved an effective mechanism for enabling this Park Homes project, through the creation of a bespoke EOI that conferred eligibility on the site as a whole.**