

“No complaints were raised – a testament to the council’s dedication to listening to residents”

Alan Thomas, managing director, Aston Group UK



Sixty years is a long time in housing. When Aston Group’s forerunner, Aston Heating, was launched from a kitchen table in 1964, the average UK home cost just £2,999 – that’s around £50,600 in today’s money. The post-war social housing boom was in full swing; more than 186,000 social homes were added to the nation’s stock that year, the vast majority of them built by councils.

While the picture today is very different, the need for new social housing is just as urgent. Sites and funding may be in short supply, but this has driven housing associations and local authorities to become ever-more creative in their efforts to boost the supply of this vital national resource.

A recently completed scheme by the London Borough of Waltham Forest exemplifies this approach. The council contracted Aston Group – we’re a provider of building services for new build and refurbished residential and commercial properties – to build eight new homes for social rent on its Sansom Road Estate by converting and building onto underused space – in this case, a corner block that contained drying rooms and storage space.

Work began on this £1.4m project in 2022. It’s fair to say that developing this small infill site did present challenges, not least how to minimise disruption to neighbouring residents, while ensuring they weren’t deprived of useful amenities. But the site provided opportunities, too. The six flats and two maisonettes were built to high energy efficiency standards, deploying technologies such as air source heat pumps and high-performance insulation.

It’s worth noting that no complaints were raised by residents during the construction process – a testament, we believe, to the council’s dedication to engaging with and listening to residents throughout the project, conversations that fed directly into how the builders on site went about their work (as Waltham Forest’s cabinet member for housing, Ahsan Khan, explains, right).

Maximising the utility of underused spaces like this won’t solve the housing crisis on its own, but it can play an important role – and we hope that over the next 60 years, the creativity and innovation behind schemes like this can fuel a new era for social housing.

Alan Thomas, managing director, Aston Group UK

Converting underused space

Waltham Forest Council’s Ahsan Khan explains how a small corner block was used to meet housing need in the local authority

£1.4m
Cost of Sansom Road project

2022
Year that work began on Sansom Road

Waltham Forest Sansom Road

Ahsan Khan is Waltham Forest Council’s cabinet member for housing and regeneration. He met with *Inside Housing* to talk about Sansom Road, and to share what the council has learned from this scheme.

How would you characterise housing need in Waltham Forest today?

We’ve probably got the worst housing crisis since World War II, and certainly the worst within my lifetime. Local authorities, councillors and housing associations are all looking at how we can maximise affordable housing.

How do you identify infill sites like this, and what are the benefits of taking this approach to development?

The council is always looking for opportunities to build on infill sites via our estates capacity reviews. It’s about making the most of all of our options and assets to look at ways in which we can bring forward more low-cost affordable housing. There are opportunities for residents to feed in as part of that process, too, by alerting us to sites they feel could be better utilised. The obvious advantage of infill is it responds to some of the demands we have around housing need, by maximising space in our housing estates across the borough to bring forward low-cost affordable homes. The secondary benefit is around some of the energy efficiency improvements that you see as part of that.

The Sansom Road scheme specifically saw benefits through new retrofit technologies such as triple-glazing and heat pumps. That really helps with our climate commitments, as well as providing low-cost, affordable housing that is fit for purpose, while lowering bills for residents who move into those properties.



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The corner of Sansom Road before it was redeveloped

What did you learn from the scheme at Sansom Road?

The key learning was around engagement and conversations with the residents who were utilising those drying rooms.

If you get that wrong, you’ll get significant pushback from the residents who feel like they are losing some amenity space. So it was crucial for us to really have a strong presence, going above and beyond the traditional letter drops – for example, allowing for conversations on the site with residents who’ve got questions; reassuring them that despite the reduction in space, we can retrofit the remaining drying rooms to ensure there is enough capacity for the whole of that estate.

I was really pleased with the feedback – we didn’t receive any objections to this proposal. For me, that’s testament to the engagement that we undertook with residents, and the way in which we listened to their concerns and shared what we felt were the scheme’s wider benefits.

This project has actually helped us to change the way we engage with our residents on regeneration schemes, as well as in our repairs and homelessness services.

How did you minimise disruption to residents during the construction process?

During that engagement with residents, we listened to their feedback on things such as vehicle traffic and contractors’ movements on the estate.

We took several measures in response. As one example: it’s a corner site and as such, it’s quite confined and difficult to work around – so we built up the scaffolding on the outside at the start of the job to allow for materials to enter that way, as opposed to via the stairwell.

That was an additional expense for us as the client, but it was the right thing to do to ensure that residents were not inconvenienced [by contractors] using those stairwells, or by the potential mess and dust that might have been created as a result.

What advice would you give other housing providers that are looking to find and use infill sites like this?

The key piece of advice is to continually map sites, so you can keep looking for opportunities on your housing estates.

Finding a good partner is also important. In this case, for us, it was Aston Group. They were a great partner as a contractor, and really had an expertise in some of the new technologies around retrofit – and that was important as part of making that project a success.

The final point I would make is again about communication and engagement with residents. It’s something that I’ve been really keen to embed in the work we do across housing and regeneration, and for me it’s those conversations on the doorstep that I believe can provide the gold standard in terms of engagement. ●

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