

Hockerton Housing Project

The residents of the five houses at the Hockerton Housing Project (HHP) generate their own clean energy, harvest their own water and recycle waste materials causing minimal pollution or carbon dioxide emissions. The houses are amongst the most energy efficient, purpose-built dwellings in Europe. Each family has their own home and as a community share food growing, site maintenance, management of the community facilities and run a sustainable educational business.

One of the prime movers in the group had been the builder of the Autonomous House for well know eco-architects Robert & Brenda Vale back in 1993. He was inspired by the experience to think about what could be done on some 25 acres of farmland that his family owned on the edge of the small Nottinghamshire village of Hockerton. Following a 'holiday' in France where a number of friends were invited to discuss the details of the project. A design and planning process that would take the best part of two years with Robert Vale was embarked on that would result in the UK's first earth sheltered, self-sufficient ecological housing development.

The timing was perhaps right for such a project. Local Agenda 21 had just become next big thing at the local council and support for the idea was forthcoming from both local councillors and council officers. Much of the two years was spent negotiating what is known in planning jargon as a 106 agreement that details the special

conditions that are attached to the planning permission for the project. Part of the agreement included a five year management plan that covered a number of strands integral to the project inc: Employment, Community, Transport.

There was a small turnover in membership in this period, with people leaving for the usual variety of reasons – personal relationships - didn't believe it was going to happen. These people were replaced by some low key carefully targeted advertising in the Smallholder magazine HYPERLINK "<http://www.smallholder.co.uk/>" <http://www.smallholder.co.uk/>, holding stalls at local green fairs but mostly through networks of friends.

The group admit that they are a very 'task orientated' bunch with a builder, engineer & scientist amongst their number concentrating on details of project management and problem solving as they went along perhaps to the detriment of some of the social side of building community.

"Sometimes I wish we had dealt with some of the more touchy feely issues before we had started out – but then if we had been less task focused it may never have happened at all."

Funding was through a development loan from the Co-op Bank with families taking out individual mortgages on 999 leases, some from the Ecology building society.

The overall project is managed by limited company that all households are members of. There is also a trading company that runs the business side of the community which everyone belongs to. The actual building work was carried out by a partnership formed for the purpose. This enabled one member to be employed as an overall project manager and to VAT be claimed back. The work was carried out through a combination of local contractors and members putting in work depending on their skills. Some putting in more than others but resulting in a roughly 50/50 split between work done by contractors and that done by members.

Along the way there were trade offs between environmental and financial matters to be made but by and large members were generally happy with the outcomes of the various debates that happened.

"We spent most time talking about what now seem like very superficial things. I remember one meeting when we just went on and on about door handles."

Looking back they caution against being too fixed about things from the start. Taking the view that it's not possible to plan for everything and think it was good that there was space for things to emerge as they went along.

"We never spent much time talking about what name to call the project, it could perhaps be seen as a bit pretentious taking the

name of the local village, though this hasn't been a problem. It's a bit long for the website address!"

Since the initial building programme was completed a number of other 'projects' have taken place. These had mostly been conceived of at the start but had been deliberately phased partly for cash flow reasons, but mainly to let things grow in a flexible organic way. This approach has allowed time to be taken over controversial projects – the support from the local council wobbled when they tried to get permission for two wind turbines. It also gave a chance for projects to be tested financially before major community investment in time and resources were committed to them. The latest building to be finished houses workshops, an office for the business side of things and a lecture/meeting room which also doubles as a space for social events.

Over the years the project has established itself as an exemplar of sustainable development. As a result of this, it has developed a range of services through the creation of a small on-site business. This workers' co-operative provides a level of employment for its members, whilst promoting sustainable development. Its activities include running guided tours, workshops, talks and consultancy work.

How the work involved in keeping the community running is done is enshrined in the property leases with each member being committed to doing 300hrs of work for the community per year.

This covers work on the land and tending livestock, general maintenance & land management, building repairs managing the energy supply systems andWith 50% being 'waged' ie: paid for by the community and 50% being voluntary or income reduction work. Allowances are made for individuals' abilities with jobs being made easier where possible for people who for whatever reason are finding it difficult. It has though raised a number of questions like - What do you do when there is a discrepancy between what you have set as a 'legal' minimum for hours required to put into the community and the actual hours that are required to do all the work involved?

"People visit us and go away with a very idealistic view of community life without seeing the day to day tensions and compromises that go on - In the end you really do have to live it to know it."

