

Coblehaugh: An account of the redevelopment of a children's home

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History of the project

The original building was purpose-built in the 1950s and provided residential care for up to 20 children and young people in Inverurie, Aberdeenshire in north-east Scotland. Over the years as residential care practices developed, this number reduced to a maximum of six young people resident. The decision to re-develop Coblehaugh was made following a best value review of Aberdeenshire Council's Residential Child Care Service in 1999. Informed by this, a report to the Social Work and Housing Committee in 2001 on the provision of residential care for young people concluded that the current buildings, including Coblehaugh, were no longer 'fit for purpose' in terms of size, layout and physical condition for the type of residential care that Aberdeenshire Council wanted to provide.

A Residential Buildings' Group consisting of the team manager from Coblehaugh, the social work manager, representatives from children's rights, children's services, education, health and property was established to take the project forward. This was chaired by the head of children's services.

An independent consultancy firm undertook an options appraisal to look at the way forward. The following options were considered:

1. Do nothing
2. Do minimum
3. Remodel existing accommodation
4. Demolish and rebuild on the existing site
5. New build on adjacent site A using part of the grounds belonging to another council property (wooded area)
6. New build on adjacent site on open grounds
7. Acquire an existing alternative building and remodel
8. Put service out to tender and get a private / voluntary organisation to build the unit and provide the service
9. Build the new unit then put the service out to tender
10. A social housing provider builds the home and Aberdeenshire Council lease the building from them
11. The site at Coblehaugh and wooded area is sold to a developer. As part of the sale conditions, the developer is required to build the new unit on the preferred site to the specifications of the residential buildings' group.

The final decision was to rebuild Coblehaugh on an adjacent site which was owned by Aberdeenshire Council and therefore did not need to be purchased, reducing the overall capital cost.

Consultation Exercise

In the initial stages, a consultation exercise took place to look at the following issues:

1. What should the service provide?
2. Where should the new Coblehaugh be located?

The current staff team, representatives from children's services and colleagues in education, health and the police were asked to feedback on these issues. During this consultation exercise, high on the agenda was what were considered the 'gaps' in current service provision, particularly in relation to young people who need specialist education provision and those who have specific health needs. Therefore, in the early stages a lot of consideration took place as to how the new Coblehaugh could be developed in order to meet this demand.

As a result, this led to the scope of the project becoming very wide and veering off the original remit - which was to develop a new building whose size, location, style and links to the community would provide for the needs of a group of young people who needed residential care. As such, the then head of child care made the decision that this would be the sole focus of the redevelopment of Coblehaugh.

In relation to where the new building should be located, the options appraisal undertaken by the independent consultancy agency determined that the best option was for the building to be built on an adjacent site. The reason for this final decision was that it would lead to less disruption for the young people and the staff team, in that neither would need to decant to another building while the work was undertaken. There would be no impact from a human resources point of view on relocating staff. The current Coblehaugh had been in location for nearly 50 years and was an established unobtrusive part of that community (most local people were unaware of its existence). There was a view that as a result of this it was unlikely there would be objections at the planning application stage. Furthermore, the Council already owned the land where the new house would be built, decreasing the overall capital costs. In terms of location, Inverurie was deemed to be most suitable for meeting the needs of young people in the central and south of Aberdeenshire. It also had good transport links with the nearby city of Aberdeen.

The next stage was to plan and consult on the design of the new building.

A working group was tasked with carrying out the consultation exercise, which included interviews and questionnaires, with the following groups:

1. A group of ex-residents from each of Aberdeenshire's children's homes
2. The current group of residents in each of the homes
3. The staff team at Coblehaugh

At this time, the manager of Coblehaugh and Aberdeenshire Council's architect also visited four different authorities who had either designed or built new children's homes, or had converted existing buildings. Consideration was also given to the [Designing with Care](#) report of research in relation to the interior design of children's homes. This was a valuable exercise in that we were able to learn from those authorities what worked and what didn't work so well and incorporate these findings into our overall plans. As part of this exercise, significant thought was also given to what was considered the optimum number of residents for ensuring best outcomes. In the early stages of the project, it was assessed that a maximum of four residents would provide the best outcomes for young people. It was difficult to find any research on this specific issue, however.

At the time, Coblehaugh was registered to look after six young people and was running to full occupancy about 90% of the time. After deliberation, it was argued that the loss of two residential places was considered detrimental to the overall provision of need in Aberdeenshire and the final decision was taken that the new building would continue to provide care for six young people.

Scope of the Project

Once all of the consultation exercises had been carried out, we then moved on to designing the new building. The aim was to provide a modern, homely building that could safely meet the needs of the resident group and the staff team. Consideration was given to the layout of the building to ensure there was adequate social space which could be easily supervised but not in an obtrusive way.

Throughout the process, our architect worked very closely with us. He came to have a real understanding of the needs of the young people who would live in the house and tailored the design to meet those needs.

The overall design was significantly changed at least three times. The initial design of the house was much bigger and included en-suite rooms for all young people. This design was not accepted by the Council's Capital Plan Monitoring Group due to the final cost. As a result, the overall footprint needed to be reduced. The main difference in the next design was that the en-suites would be scrapped; only one bedroom would have en-suite and that was stipulated under the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. There was no legal requirement for young people to have en-suite accommodation and there were very mixed views as to the benefits of having en-suite bathrooms.

There were other issues that needed to be looked at in relation to regulations for disabled access. The building was predominantly on one level but also had a split level with two bedrooms downstairs and two upstairs. There was some debate about whether we would need to have a lift in the building. This was not something we wanted to have. In the end, the design was altered so that all communal space and access to three bedrooms were on the main level, and so we didn't need to install a lift.

Final features of the design

Work started on the new house in April 2012 and we finally moved in on 2nd September 2013.

As the new house was being built on an adjacent site, young people and staff were able to closely watch the house coming to life. We were able to take photographs of the building taking shape and ultimately the old house being knocked down too.

As the building took shape, young people were able to go in with a member of staff and see how things were progressing. They were able to see where their bedrooms were going to be and marvelled at them progressing from a shell to what they have now. As a result, there was significant investment made by the young people who were excited at the prospect of moving.

All of the young people were given the opportunity to have a say in the colour schemes within the house. Advice was given on the use of colours that created feelings of 'calmness'. Young people were also included in choosing curtains, flooring and blinds for their bedroom. As part of the financial planning, we also had funding for new furniture for the whole house. Careful consideration was given as to how we managed this. There was a feeling that it would be good to have some new things but we also needed to take familiar possessions with us as it could potentially be overwhelming for the young people if they moved into somewhere new, with nothing familiar around them. All of the young people were given the option of getting

new bedroom furniture, which they could choose themselves. All of them made individual choices but also took familiar items with them, for example, their own bed.

As stated, the main aim was to design a home that was modern, homely and safe. There are specific features of the design that allow for this. For example, we didn't want to have blind corners in the house. Specific safety elements are in place; these include a mechanism on bedroom doors that can allow them to be opened both ways if entry is required in an emergency situation. We have a front door, back door and one fire exit. These can be alarmed if necessary. There is also a mechanism in place for individual bedroom doors to be alarmed, should this be required. There is also CCTV on the outside of the house.

Our house has six bedrooms (one with an en-suite bathroom) for young people; two sleep-in rooms for staff (doubling as office space); two sitting rooms; one large kitchen and dining area; a utility room off the kitchen; a homework room with PC access, Wii, and x-box; one bathroom and two shower rooms. The roofs are high to create the feeling of space and ceilings are slanted to reflect light. All communal areas are spacious. The materials and finishes used are of a high quality and in certain parts of the house the walls are made with extra-thick plasterboard to protect against damage but with domestic finishes.

The outside of the house is unusual in some of its finishes. It has a sedum roof, the lower half of the external walls is rough cast and the upper half is a timber finish. The purpose of this was to provide a modern building that would fit well within the surrounding trees.

Overall, young people and staff have been very happy with the new home that has been provided and have settled well. Our old house was recently demolished and those grounds are currently being converted into private outdoor space for us which will hopefully be complete by summer 2014.

Reflections on the process

My own experience of the process has been a challenging but interesting one. I have been the team manager at Coblehaugh for over 10 years and I have been fortunate to see the process through from start to finish.

For anyone considering taking on such a project I feel the following areas are important:

- At the very early stages of planning, I spent a lot of time with the architect and colleagues who would be designing our new house. It was very important that they had a real sense of the challenges we face in caring for young people in residential care. The building needed to be designed to ensure it was homely, not institutional, but safe. Furthermore, the finishes in the house needed to be of a high standard but also very sturdy. At times, I needed to ensure that they were kept on task, emphasising that it was a 'home' we were creating and not just another council building.
- Our architect was a regular visitor to the house and became known to the young people who often asked him how things were progressing when he visited. He had a real sense of what we were trying to create and worked really closely with us.
- It was also very important to include the young people and staff team in as many decisions about design and internal finishes as possible. Our new house was built on grounds right next to our old house which enabled the staff and young people to see the building develop at first hand. At an appropriate point, both young people and

staff were able to go into the building as works commenced. This allowed everyone the opportunity to have a real sense of investment in the new house. Not all new buildings will be built on site so I think it's important for the young people that they get a chance to visit and see their new home as often as possible.

- At times I was frustrated at the length of time it took to get to the point where building commenced. However, we have now been in our new house for nearly seven months and have all settled very well. On the whole, I am very happy with the house that we have been provided with and feel that the quality of the home is testament to the value Aberdeenshire Council places on their looked after children (see: www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/children).

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