

project dossier

projects

■ Design and construction ■ Technical ■ Project management

Sussex Housing & Care owned one flat and eight flatlets for senior residents in a three-storey converted Edwardian property at Seaford, East Sussex. All were in dire need of a makeover, if they were to provide high quality, affordable accommodation within the SHC portfolio of care homes and sheltered housing.

David Johns Associates was asked to advise on potential refurbishment, as part of the Partnering programme that the Chartered Building Company has developed over time with this respected charitable housing association. Within the project team, DJA worked with architect, Robin Spike, of Chilton Waters & Stutchbury.

Renovation appeared increasingly uneconomic, given the practicalities of compliance with Building Regulations governing sound and

thermal insulation. And there were accessibility issues, embodied in the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act.

As a result, an initial new build design proposal was presented, to provide seven enhanced sheltered flats following the original footprint and massing. But here, costings were the sticking point. Then, the project team reviewed viability and pursued a design concept that incorporated two additional sheltered flats, effectively increasing the long-term income that SHC could recoup against the project costs. It was this value added approach that swung the client's decision to push the button on new for old and so upgrade the sheltered accommodation offered to residents immeasurably.

Sally Rowat reports





VALUE ADDED

In its heyday, Falfield must have been an outstanding example of early 20th century traditional domestic architecture, set in a prime position above a south coast seaside resort. With an impressive winding staircase, gracious proportions to the main reception rooms and fine detailing, it was clearly constructed as the ideal location for affluent owners anxious to 'take the air'.

But in 1947 the distinguished property underwent a dramatic change of use. A benefactor donated the house to a newly formed local housing association, with a mission to 'give effect to a widespread demand that in old age there should be security, and that no-one should find themselves stranded, with nowhere to go, and no-one to befriend them'. The only condition made clear why the gift was made: the benefactor's sole surviving relative should be allowed to remain living there, during her lifetime.

So it was that Sussex Housing & Care (as it rebranded in 1999) acquired Falfield and set about converting the building into what were effectively seven bedsits. Each had a tiny kitchen, often with no ventilation, and bathroom facilities were shared. By post war standards, it was possibly still classed as 'gracious living'. But by the early 21st century, the sheltered flatlets failed to meet just about every health and safety and building regulation. Given that SHC prides itself on being the only local charitable housing association providing a range ►

of high quality housing and trusted care for over 700 older people, a major rethink was overdue.

David Johns Associates already had a Partnering/Open Book agreement with SHC (and within it, to date, has completed six major refurbishment and extension programmes at care homes in the Association's portfolio). In 2000, the company's Director, David Davis, was asked to team up with architect, Robin Spike, to examine the feasibility of refurbishing Falfield, and present the best case scenario for 21st century sheltered living on the site.

"The more we examined the options for refurbishment – exploring the practicalities before making drawings, the more it became obvious that to make the existing units conform to the latest sound and thermal Building Regulations, and adapt the accommodation to meet DDA requirements, would be uneconomic," remembers David Davis. (David Johns Associates specialises in office and care home renovation to bring buildings into line with the demands of the Act.)

"We put together an initial new build design proposal, presented to the local planning authority. It showed that the best option for the client would be to demolish the Edwardian house and replace it with seven purpose built flats, all with accessible facilities and an eight person lift." But it was still borderline: would the rental income that SHC could recoup from the seven units, stack up against the cost of the project?

What swung the decision to rebuild and not refurbish was the design development of the scheme by architect Robin Spike, working in conjunction with DJA to review viability in keeping with the principles of value engineering. At the rear of the original three-storey building had been a single-storey extension. The initial proposal was now adapted, to add a further two floors in this area, so creating a three-storey block across the same footprint. The planners accepted this revised design concept.

"The ability to design nine new sheltered flats within the planning constraints, without loss of the total number of units, is what determined the outcome," explains Robin Spike. "The Partnering agreement between David Johns Associates and SHC meant transparent costing from day one, and some fine tuning towards the end to keep costs down. And while some of the proposed architectural features had to disappear to keep within budget, I could work with DJA to secure the design and procure a purpose built building, that fits well within its environment."

Falfield sits alongside the SHC residential and nursing care home, Cheney's, another Edwardian house set in landscaped grounds. In 2005, the charity's Head Office was

also relocated to the Cheney's complex from Lewes. Working again with Chilton Waters & Stutchbury, David Johns completed this 21-week office conversion and refurbishment, having won the contract on this occasion in competitive tender. "The SHC Development Committee wanted proof that we remain competitive in the marketplace – and we proved we are," says David Davis.

Once on site at Falfield, there were problems to be solved from the first. The new block was to be of a traditional construction, with deep strip foundations set within the footprint of the previous detached structure, to form a horseshoe shape with the other SHC properties. "When we started to excavate the foundations, we came across vast swallow holes in the chalk, which had to be filled with concrete," says David Davis. "As a result, the foundations ended up 4 metres deep and 4 metres wide. We worked closely with Building Control and with Stephen Wilson, the Structural Engineer, and won their trust and understanding to progress the work at each stage."

Complementary materials were specified for the brickwork and tile hanging, to blend with the surrounding environment and properties. "It was necessary to design the third floor within the roof space, to ensure that the external roof profile married with the former roof," explains Robin Spike. "The intricate structure incorporates very wide soffits and large overhanging eaves, with bay windows and complex roof trusses allowing us to accommodate three flatlets within that space." Fitting this roof construction – which was contractor-designed in conjunction with a specialist supplier and brought to site – required in-depth knowledge and skill from the DJA team, who had similar experience from other projects.

Lynda Kivity-Ray, Sheltered Housing Manager for Sussex Housing & Care, is responsible for the charity's 19 sheltered housing complexes. Falfield is the smallest of these, and the most recently upgraded. She attended all the site meetings, working closely with both DJA and the architect, to ensure that the best results were achieved all round.

"Internally, we previously had nine small bedsits, which were well below today's decent homes standards and for that reason had been wound down," she confirms. "In their place, we now have three two-bedroom flats and six one-bedroom flats, each with its own living space and bathroom facilities. We undertook a survey of two of our other sheltered housing schemes, to get residents' thoughts on their kitchens, then borrowed what worked best in design and layout for Falfield." The three ground floor flats were all designed around DDA compliance, with an electronic door opening system to one flat, variable height kitchen ►

units, and shower and toilet combined as wet rooms, all suitable for disabled residents. And the eight-person lift ensures disabled access throughout the block.

Recognising the needs of visually impaired residents, the Manager also suggested that the front doors on each floor should be painted a different, distinctive colour – red, blue and green in rising order. “This way, residents can recognise whether they are on the right floor, just as soon as the lift doors open. The DJA electrical contractor picked up on that concept and added the same colour rings around each of the hallway lights, which has proved even more helpful.” It is, she says, a building that now looks and feels good, conforms to current regulations, and is popular with its elderly residents who want to continue independent living in a sheltered environment.

And of the contractors she says this: “I found them incredibly approachable and know that at every stage they took enormous care to ensure a secure working environment and minimum impact for the residents in the Cheney’s care home next door. David Davis always responded to our queries immediately and we had immense confidence in the site workforce.”

Michael Goulden, Chief Executive of SHC for 22 years until his retirement in 2007, was impressed by the way the Sussex-based contractor has amassed an in-depth knowledge of the Association, its properties and its residents as successive projects evolved.

“The DJA project managers and operatives who work on these contracts demonstrate huge commitment, professionalism and understanding,” he observed. “In many cases, our residents remained in the care homes while refurbishment took place, and we knew we could rely on their teams to reduce hazards and diminish risk.” The Falfield site was also opposite a primary school, which called for additional safety measures to be put in place during the nine-month construction period. Despite this, the project finished on time and within budget, and with Sussex Housing & Care expressing satisfaction that once again DJA had delivered for them and for those in their care. “They make their presence as normal as possible, so not to cause alarm to the elderly. This really is partnership, in every sense of the word,” concluded Michael Goulden.

David Davis confirms that DJA is proud to be a working partner in the charity’s continuing modernisation programme for its sheltered housing, care homes and offices over more than a decade.

“Partnering is the way we like to run our business,” he says. “It is both an attitude of mind and a series of procedures that commit us to focus on creative co-operation with the other parties involved. Trust is the essential component.” ■



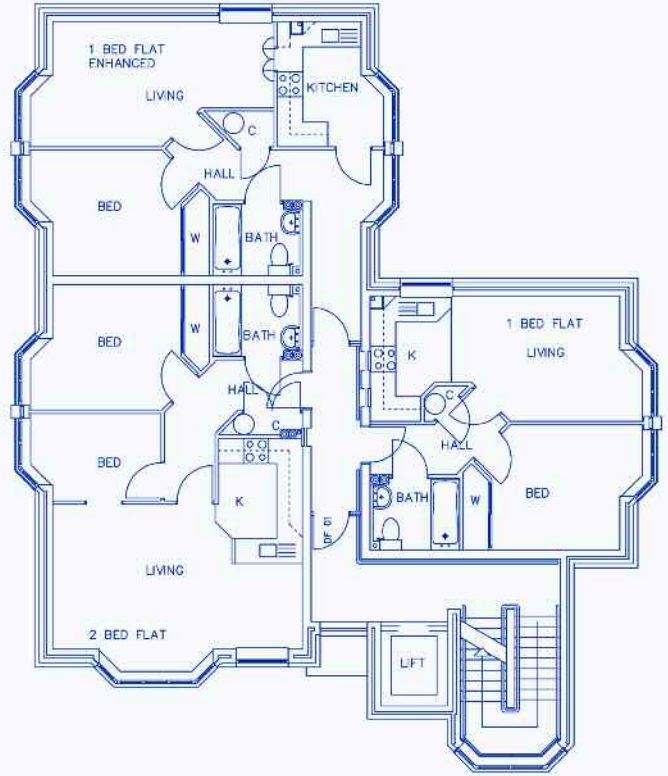
▲ The intricate roof structure, incorporating very wide soffits and large overhanging eaves, contains two third-floor flats within its space.



▲ Residents can access their flats via a contemporary staircase, or an eight person disabled lift.

Cover Complementary materials were specified for the tile hanging and brickwork, to blend with surrounding properties.

◀ The purpose built block provides nine accessible flats, replacing an obsolete flat and eight flatlets, on the footprint of the previous detached Edwardian house.



Project team

Client: Sussex Housing & Care

Contract value: £677K

Contract duration: 36 weeks

Architect: Chilton Waters & Stutchbury

Quantity Surveyor: Bailey Partnership

Structural Engineer: Stephen Wilson Partnership

For further information about this and other projects, please visit the David Johns Associates website: www.davidjohns.co.uk

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▲ Robin Spike, architect, worked in conjunction with DJA to design nine new sheltered flats within planning constraints.

▼ DJA works closely with Sussex Housing & Care to progress the charity's modernisation programme for its sheltered housing and care homes for elderly residents.

▼ Falfields in 2001. By this date, the sheltered housing offered by SHC in this converted Edwardian property failed to comply with certain building regulations.

