

Steve Skidmore

Estate of development Community venture

A generous housing association and active involvement of the residents has increased drug awareness, decreased youth boredom and changed the character of an isolated Gloucestershire housing estate. A client's view of community regeneration.

Ventura Farm is a 180-property housing estate in Willsbridge, South Gloucestershire, situated between Bristol and Bath. Jephson Housing Association developed the site nearly twenty years ago. It contains two bedroom flats and bungalows and three and four bedroom houses.

Although semi-rural, the densely populated estate has many problems more associated with the inner city, such as drug dealing and other anti-social behaviour. Inhabitants are socially isolated simply due to the estate's locality and lack of public services. Without any consideration for recreational facilities or resources for young people it has long been deprived of community involvement.

In a bid to tackle these and other problems local residents were encouraged by Jephson Housing Association to form a residents' association and in June 2000 Ventura Farm Residents Association was formed. The association has four elected officers – Chair, Vice-chair, Treasurer and Secretary. It also has eighteen members that attend regular meetings, take part in organising events and help out with community activities.

The enthusiasm of the Residents Association has encouraged a strong and reliable voluntary sector. A working partnership has also been created called the Willsbridge Partnership Group. The group meets

four times a year and is made up with representatives from parish and district councils, community workers, health, social and environmental workers, Neighbourhood Watch and the Residents Association.

Working with this range of agencies has proven to be of great benefit to the estate and has encouraged a positive input of resources. The Residents Association has developed into an enthusiastic and committed team and now is a major voice in the community structure.

In February 2001, as a result of the Residents Association's sustained voluntary commitment, Jephson Housing gave them use of a bungalow as a community/resource centre. This has been a major step in the regeneration of the community and opened the door to endless restructuring possibilities – the Housing Corporation has put Jephson Housing forward for a model of good practice award.

Many needs of the community can now be resolved through use of The Bungalow. It provides access to health and welfare agencies through a weekly Health Visitor Surgery, along with a mother and toddler group and other health promotion activities. Police and councillor surgeries have also proved popular.

Residents now have the opportunity to meet others on the estate and make new friends at coffee mornings and other organised activities.

The Bungalow also meets the needs of young people by having a weekly Kiddies Club for children aged 5–10 run by volunteers, and a weekly session for young people aged 11–15 run by two employed youth workers.

The Bungalow Resource Centre is also used for delivering educational courses: Positive Parenting classes, a babysitting course and playgroup training. There has been a certified First Aid course, a computers for beginners course and a fully accredited Community Development course.

As a community building The Bungalow has created a central meeting point for local residents and produced a welcoming community spirit. It provides residents with a sense of belonging.

Ventura Farm has a well-established neighbourhood watch group. It has six street coordinators to cover four streets and offers free membership to every household on the estate. Part of the neighbourhood watch strategy is to help reduce the availability of drugs in the community by assisting Avon and Somerset Constabulary with information gathering and encouraging residents to come forward with information that may be useful.

The neighbourhood watch group is looking to improve street lighting and make play areas and car parks safer. There has been an overall



Steve Skidmore

is a member of the Management Committee of the Ventura Farm Residents' Association.



The kids from Ventura Farm

reduction of crime on the estate even though there is a lack of police presence, such as community policing. Ventura Farm has become a close knit community and people are more aware of what is going on around them and are willing to make an effort to protect their built environment.

Funding

Oldland Parish Council has given grants to the Residents Association and neighbourhood watch group. They have shown their continued commitment to their parish by employing Ian Bone as a community development worker who is temporarily based at The Bungalow. Ian has proven to be a great asset to Ventura Farm, helping with funding applications and creating links with outside agencies.

Funding for running costs has come from the Henry Smith Foundation and South Gloucestershire Council who are working hard to improve services to the area.

South Gloucestershire has also funded a bandstand type youth shelter, and the English Basketball Association along with the Sports Lottery Fund has installed

a basketball court. Both facilities have helped steer youths away from areas where they were causing nuisance, and have reconciled an abused play area.

A grant from the Greater Bristol Foundation has partly funded two youth workers to provide one two-hour session a week for three months.

The Residents Association is desperately seeking more funding for youth work as it has proved to be very successful in showing a marked change in improved behaviour and attitude of the young people towards other members of the community. A grant of nearly £5,000 from DrugScope is used for a new parent lead Drug Education in the Community initiative (DEC).

Drug Education in the Community is used as a platform to deliver information on drug awareness and to implement further crime distraction measures to the local community. The crime distraction measures stimulate relief from boredom, as it is felt that young people are more likely to drift into drug use from boredom. This will be achieved by providing access to computers and the Internet, and to develop a youth forum to get young

people involved with decision-making.

Young people are to be involved with the design and construction of a woodland walkway along a nearby railway embankment, which has been neglected and suffers from fly tipping and discarded syringes have been found in the area. The National Lotteries *People and Places* will fund the project.

There are also plans to create links with other communities that have similar problems. Links with Bristol Drugs Project have been made and a member of the management committee has attended drug awareness courses.

It is hoped that in creating a friendly and welcoming environment The Bungalow will be approachable by people seeking help and advice and will be able to point people in the right direction.

Fund raising events have played an important part in bringing the community together. In the summer of 2000 residents formed a fund raising committee and organised a 'Fun Day' on the local green. Local businesses donated prizes for raffles and stalls and food for a barbeque. A bouncy castle was hired and volunteers ran cake

stalls and a wide selection of fun, game and activity side stalls.

The day was rounded off with a huge tug of war competition between the four streets that make up the estate. Although no activity or food cost more than 20p a total of £300 was raised. Other events held include a jumble sale that raised £80 and a children's Christmas party and disco. More recently 70 residents enjoyed a day trip to Weston-Super-Mare at a cost of just £1 per person.

This summer young people have organised their own event in The Bungalow called Neighbourhood Kids, a sort of fun day. In the lead up to the fun day, parents organised a week of free activities in The Bungalow for the children. Volunteers aged between 5 and 15 spent several weeks planning and creating ideas. On the day there was a range of activities including bouncy castle a small jumble sale, and several stalls. The day was great fun and well organised. The youngsters have decided to purchase a snooker/pool table for The Bungalow from the £40 they raised.

Communal development

Major progress has been made in the last 12 months. Partnership working has been the key element to create a sustainable project, with the people of Ventura Farm playing the lead role.

Adventurous plans to develop a new ecology-friendly community building on a disused and abused railway embankment are well under way.

There has been a reduction in requests to move off the estate, a reduction in crime and fewer children excluded from school.

In developing a community that feels good about itself, has pride in what it is achieving and feels good to live in, it is felt that young people will not become interested in drugs.

Drug awareness is an integral part of the development of the estate, not something tacked on as an afterthought ■