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The Green Thread: How Nature Can Transform Resident Engagement in Retrofit

Case Study

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Introduction

Southern Housing Group, in partnership with the **UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology (UKCEH)**, has pioneered an innovative approach to resident engagement by embedding nature-based interventions within its housing estates. Piloted on an estate in Bracknell, Berkshire, the project introduced wildflower planting, bird and bat boxes, bug hotels, and resident-led wildlife activities to create green spaces that residents could see, shape, and take pride in.

This case study explores how Southern Housing Group is using nature as a strategic communication tool building the resident trust and community relationships that retrofit programmes depend on. By speaking to residents in tangible, visible terms rather than technical ones, the approach delivers meaningful co-benefits for health, wellbeing, and the local environment, while creating a replicable model for housing providers looking to improve resident engagement across their retrofit programmes.

The communication gap

Retrofit programmes bring with them a language that can feel unfamiliar to many residents. Terms like cavity wall insulation, air source heat pumps and EPC ratings are second nature to practitioners, but for the tenants of those in homes planned for retrofit, this technical vocabulary can be confusing and can translate into hesitation or disengagement.

This is not a reflection of residents' appetite for change. Research consistently shows that people care deeply about their homes and communities. A study from **The Good Care Group** found that over 41% of people view their property as crucial to their mental health, demonstrating the emotional connections people have to their homes. Getting communication right to residents is essential, the challenge lies in finding the right entry point. Communication that finds a common ground, which is personal and grounded in everyday experience rather than policy ambition is important to residents' engagement.

Nature offers a different kind of conversation starter, one that residents can see taking shape around them, and one that invites participation rather than simply asking for cooperation.

Nature-led resident engagement in Berkshire

In 2019, ecologists at **UKCEH** began an eighteen-month collaboration with **Southern Housing Group**, piloting a nature-based engagement model on an

estate in Bracknell, Berkshire, alongside partners including **Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust** and **Bracknell Forest Council**.

The partnership trialled several nature-friendly measures and communication strategies, including:

- Neighbourhood planting
- Putting up bird boxes
- Offering free plants for private gardens
- Providing residents a chance to get outdoors and learn about wildlife on their doorstep through dedicated wildlife days.
- Coffee mornings to share wildlife stories and participant's own ideas to help wildlife.

The feedback received was striking. Residents became increasingly engaged with housing teams, with trust built natural through a shared ambition for improved living standards. The accessibility of activities, from native planting, to birdwatching, offered a diverse range of entry points for people wanting to connect with nature and their neighbours. It is precisely this personal, specific, and tangible engagement that generic retrofit communications struggles to cultivate.

Nature in place-based retrofit

Nature is a core foundation within the retrofit agenda. The agenda views homes and surrounding ecosystems as interconnected as a whole. Place-based tailors energy home improvements to the needs of the local community and supply chains rather than using a one size fits all approach. Place-based retrofit delivers retrofit at scale and quality. Nature focused retrofit is a key component as it addresses environmental, social, and economic challenges simultaneously. With place-based retrofit, this considers the wider and long-term resilience of communities.

Nature-focused retrofit often provides visible and tangible improvements that residents can immediately experience. While measures such as insulation or heating upgrades may be hidden, green infrastructure improvements are highly visible, helping communities better understand and connect with the retrofit process.

This case study can be viewed as an early adapter of place-based retrofit through integrating nature-based solutions with wider community and environmental objectives, with many of the principles being promoted by the **National Retrofit Hub** and other organisations, including whole-place thinking, community engagement, climate resilience, and long-term stewardship.

Nature as a vehicle for community engagement

Integrating nature-based solutions within retrofit programmes creates highly visible local benefits, helping residents connect with, contribute to, and take ownership of neighbourhood transformation.

Possible outcomes:

- Community planting days involving local schools and residents.
- Creation of community gardens or orchard spaces that encouraged regular participation.
- Resident involvement in the design and maintenance of green spaces.

Impact:

- Increased local ownership.
- Stronger community and social connections.
- Greater support for wider retrofit measures and sustainability initiatives.

Summary

Evidence specifically related to nature-focused retrofit remains relatively limited, a growing body of research from the fields of environmental psychology, and green infrastructure demonstrates the positive role that nature can play in supporting wellbeing, place attachment, and community participation. As place-based retrofit continues to emerge as a holistic approach to decarbonisation and area improvement, there are opportunities to build upon this evidence and better understand how nature-based interventions can support retrofit objectives.

Key Takeaway's:

- Residents should be supported in understanding the practical advantages of retrofit measures.
- More guidance to be provided in understanding.
- Nature-focused communication tools and activities approaches align with emerging place-based retrofit guidance.

Relevant Resources

Referenced in the Case Study:

[Live-in & Visiting Care](#) | [CQC Outstanding](#) | [The Good Care Group](#)

[National Retrofit Hub](#) | [UK Retrofit Knowledge & Collaboration](#)

[National Retrofit Hub – Place based Retrofit in Practice](#)

Additional RISE content:

[Biodiversity Net Gain](#)

[Biodiversity Net Gain in Housing](#)

[Developing your approach to resident engagement](#)



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