

High rise hopes

Martin McNamara and Mark Piggott on a housing experiment near Halifax that works

JUMPLES COURT is a 16-storey tower block in Mixenden, a large estate of 10,000 people on the Yorkshire moors outside Halifax. Until 1981 the estate's six tower blocks were almost empty. The area's violent reputation and general decay were compounded by the bitterly cold moorland surroundings; nobody wanted to live there.



The view from Jumbles Court, above, and Pauline Kendall, right, the housing advice centre manager for the Mixenden estate

In 1981, only 18 of the 96 flats in Jumbles Court were occupied. Today all are filled and there is a waiting list.

This dramatic change is the result of a radical scheme introduced by Calderdale Council. The empty flats were renovated and fully furnished in blocks of 12. Mostly young, single people from outside the area were encouraged to move in. The money raised from rents was then used to renovate a further block of 12, until all the flats were occupied.

Pauline Kendall, manager of the Housing Advice Centre in Halifax, has co-ordinated work since the scheme started. She oversees renovation, chooses and buys furniture in bulk from local firms, and interviews and vets applicants.

She shows us around the showpiece ground floor flat with the air of an estate agent: "No matter which window you look out of you get a lovely view of the moors." The flats

are functional but rather bare.

Despite its 1960s "model estate" image, by the 1980s Mixenden had become an embarrassment to the council. The waiting list was growing and much of the housing stock was being sold off (more than 1,000 out of 2,500 properties since 1979). "We had to find some way of using the stock we had", says Pauline.

The project is one of the few of its kind in the country, although many councils have taken a strong interest in how it is progressing. "It's another option," says Pauline. "They've got to be interested." The scheme was approved in 1982 and early in 1983 the first new tenants moved in.

With rents at £25 for a one-bedroom flat and £29 for a two-bedroom flat, Jumbles Court has attracted young people moving out of home for the first time. For many the flats are seen as stop-over points before they move on to other

accommodation — 85 per cent of the tenants are there for only six to 12 months.

But not many of the area's unemployed live there. Jumbles Court has gone from being one of the most notorious blocks in Halifax to being known locally as the "workers' flats." We knocked at all 96 units at two in the afternoon and found only three tenants home.

Of the other five blocks in the estate one was sold off some time ago (unsuccessfully according to Pauline). One is completely empty and due to be refurbished when the money is available. And the other three are in the same neglected, semi-occupied state Jumbles Court was until 1983.

These are reminders of the mistakes of the 1960s; perhaps Jumbles Court is the way forward. "We've learnt that flat living is not good for everyone," says Pauline, "but for young, single people it can be the ideal way."



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