

Complaints about shoddy workmanship on new homes are now at such high levels that Whitehall is starting to take note.
Ciara Leeming reports

It seemed an opportunity that was too good to miss.

When staunch Manchester City FC fan Alan Jones drove past hoardings at The Way – a new affordable housing development near his club's ground – he pulled straight over to find out more.

It was not long before he bought off plan and relocated to Manchester from Oxford. But a year after moving in, his dreams have crumbled.

'We've faced fault after fault,' says Mr Jones. 'Twelve windows had to be replaced because they were scratched. Ceilings have been replastered because it was all falling off. The kitchen was put in wrong, leaving no room for a dishwasher. Lead blew off the roof in the high winds and smashed our shed. The render was cracked and three internal doors have had to be replaced. A number of electric wires had not been screwed in properly. The list goes on and on.'

Mr Jones is not alone. *Inside Housing* met residents of more than 10 neighbouring properties, and all told a similar story. The Way, a £75 million, 550-home mixed tenure development being built in the run-down neighbourhood of Beswick, is a flagship project for both the developer – Lovell – and the local pathfinder, New East Manchester.

So far, about 100 homes have been finished. Once complete, 447 properties will have been sold on the market, 76 to local housing association, Eastlands Homes, and 27 offered through shared ownership schemes. They are currently selling for about £195,000. Much of the £4.9 million of housing market renewal cash, plus £650,000 of council regeneration money, spent in Beswick since 2003 has been ploughed into The Way – the focal point of the area's renewal.

Other public money came from the Housing Corporation, English Partnerships and the North West Development Agency. Homes built just 28 years earlier were among those cleared to make way for the scheme. Some of the residents forced out were offered places at The Way, while others have moved away.

The development – one of several being built by Lovell for NEM – is eye-catching and has won several regional awards. Designed by architects Bowker Sadler Partnership, the houses and apartments boast stark white walls, steeply pitched zinc roofs and exaggerated overhangs. Inside they are open plan with large windows – designed to appeal to those with a taste for loft conversions. Once finished, the streets will be lined with trees.

The Way's other selling point is its construction method. Huge prefabricated panels are assembled offsite, in the largest such project in the country. The insulated panels, made by Kingspan TEK, offer high thermal efficiency and in theory, the system should dramatically cut overall build time.

For some, however, the reality has been imperfect. Jonathan Cross and his partner bought their three-bedroom terrace off plan and finally moved in in December 2005, after a series of delays. The couple are locals who wanted to reinvest in east Manchester. They love the concept but have been beset with problems.

Mr Cross says: 'We've had in excess of 300 faults, ranging from minor to major. We've had two en suite showers, two kitchens, six front doors and three lawns. All the rear windows had to be replaced, we've had problems with our patio doors and tiles replaced.'

'All the properties were fitted with Whispergens – a combined heat and power system which keeps breaking down. We're all meant to be having them replaced, but Powergen has taken them off the market,' he says. 'On top of this, the builders have breached their planning consent and built the houses bigger than they should have. Ours ended up approximately 60 square feet bigger, and we've been advised by the council's planning department that a retrospective application is now needed.'

'The whole experience has been stressful and inconvenient. Between us we've lost more than 20 holiday days to sort things out. We believed in what we were being sold. They said the development would be a high standard and that we wouldn't find anything like this in the city. Now we just feel worn down by the whole experience. Everything has been a battle.'

Frustrated by Lovell's customer service and refusal to deal with them collectively, residents – acting as New Beswick Homewatch – approached Manchester Central MP Tony Lloyd. He has gone as far as to raise the matter twice in Parliament, calling for more control of the building industry.

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Joan Alexander and Charlie Connor, residents of The Way, who say they have had constant problems with their home since they moved in two years ago

Quality control

Flouting rules

In one Commons debate in January, he said: 'Lovell has consistently breached the planning permission it had been given, the contractual agreements that it reached with those to whom it sold properties and all the agreements that ought to have been contractually tied by government monies going into that sort of investment.'

'We must get a contractual grip and ensure that where public money is invested in large-scale developments, the contractors know that their performance will be measured not simply by those at the bottom end — those who move into the homes — but by those all the way up to central

government, who will insist that there is a contractual price to pay when contractors do not deliver the job and the housing that they have undertaken to build.'

The MP tells *Inside Housing* that developers must engage householders in dialogue when problems arise. 'Regeneration is not just about bricks and mortar — it's also about community renewal,' he says.

'We need to make sure people moving to these areas are made to feel they are being treated fairly and acceptably. It's not too much to ask.'

Both the developer and urban regeneration company play down the

situation at The Way. Lovell regional director Nigel Yates says: 'The scheme is highly innovative both in its design and through its use of an advanced structural insulated panel system to create energy-efficient, high-quality sustainable homes.'

'Lovell takes customer service extremely seriously and the issues raised have either been dealt with or are in the process of being resolved.'

Eastlands Homes echoes his views, and NEM chief executive Tom Russell adds: 'We are aware that a small number of residents who have moved into their new homes at The Way still have some outstanding snagging issues.'

'We have met with them, local councillors and MP Tony Lloyd to discuss their concerns and are liaising closely with Lovell, which is working to resolve the problems as quickly as possible.'

In this summer's housing green paper, *Homes for the future: more affordable, more sustainable*, the Brown government set out plans to increase house building by 20 per cent — with 3 million new homes by 2020.

So is the house building industry able to cope? Beswick is not an isolated case. A survey by the Home Builders' Federation found more than 90 per cent of new build owners reported problems after moving in.

The National Consumer Council puts the number of minor defects in the average new home at around 100, and says that one in four buyers would not recommend their house builder to a friend.

It is calling for statutory protection for buyers when things go wrong and wants a user-friendly complaints procedure and a mandatory minimum 'snagging period'.

The properties in Beswick have a 10-year warranty with the National House Building Council, for which Lovell is responsible for the first two.

NCC spokesperson Carl Belgrove says: 'Many people face delays when moving in and have to pay for rented accommodation; others get poor after-sales service; and as many as 90 per cent of people are left with snagging problems such as faulty wiring, badly fitting doors or leaking windows when they buy a new property.'

'Yet consumers have more rights when they buy a kettle than a newly built home. Outdated laws are not geared up to help homeowners put things right when they go wrong.'

Disquiet is now spreading towards

the government. Economist Kate Barker's 2004 review of housing supply found that customer satisfaction is declining — particularly when it comes to after-sales service.

The report called for a code of conduct for new house sales and requested an Office of Fair Trading review of the sector if progress was unsatisfactory — which it has been.

In June, the OFT launched a study into the £20 billion-a-year market. Due to arrive next summer, the report will examine ways to improve people's experience of buying new build, as well as the

quality of those homes.

But while the government looks to the house builders for answers, some within the industry warn that pressure is being heaped on developers to use technologies that have not been properly tested.

An extreme example is Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust's Caspar development — an award-winning block of cheap and green city-centre flats in Leeds that were discovered to be potentially unstable in high winds (*Inside Housing*, 1 March). It is being bulldozed just seven years after completion.

The Bedzed scheme, built by Peabody Trust in London, also faced problems. It combined wall and roof insulation, triple glazing, energy efficient appliances and wind-driven ventilation. But the technologies have not worked well, with many almost permanently out of action.

Terry Fuller, chair of the Home Builders' Federation's affordable housing group, says: 'Many house builders have signed up to building regulations which require sustainable homes, and eventually zero carbon emissions. But the technology to deliver it may not be in place at the moment and longer-term maintenance is often not yet available.'

'The industry is being asked to run before it can walk. This is politically driven but the people who are left with problems are the residents.'

'I have huge sympathy for both parties — the householders and the builders, who are also under great pressure from competition.'

'There will always be teething problems with new technology, and the builder has to recognise that early enough and put them right,' he adds.

'Unfortunately, customers need to be living in the houses for developers to know about the problems. I suspect Lovell is learning a great deal from what's happening in Beswick, and will know what to do in the next phase.'

Getting these issues right will be essential if the industry is to meet government targets, but this is unlikely to happen until planners and developers make quality more of a priority.

While most major building companies have a design champion on their board, regional managers tend not to be assessed on quality, according to Matt Bell, director for campaigns and education at the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment.

'The [housing] green paper would incentivise local authority planning teams to judge on quality for the first time, and that is good news,' he says. 'At the moment, speed is seen as more important.'

'Within the house builders, regional managers are given incentives on the number of completions, commercial margins and customer satisfaction. In other industries it would be inconceivable that they are not assessed on product quality.'

'We need to get the volume house builders judging on quality and not just volume and speed,' he says.

'Quality will help unlock the numbers. If we focus on delivering quality of homes, it will be easier to get 3 million homes built in 13 years.'

Residents of The Way gather outside the show home, which is currently covered in scaffolding



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Lloyd Wright Avenue, The Way

