

# Three Oaks Homes



## The Journey So Far



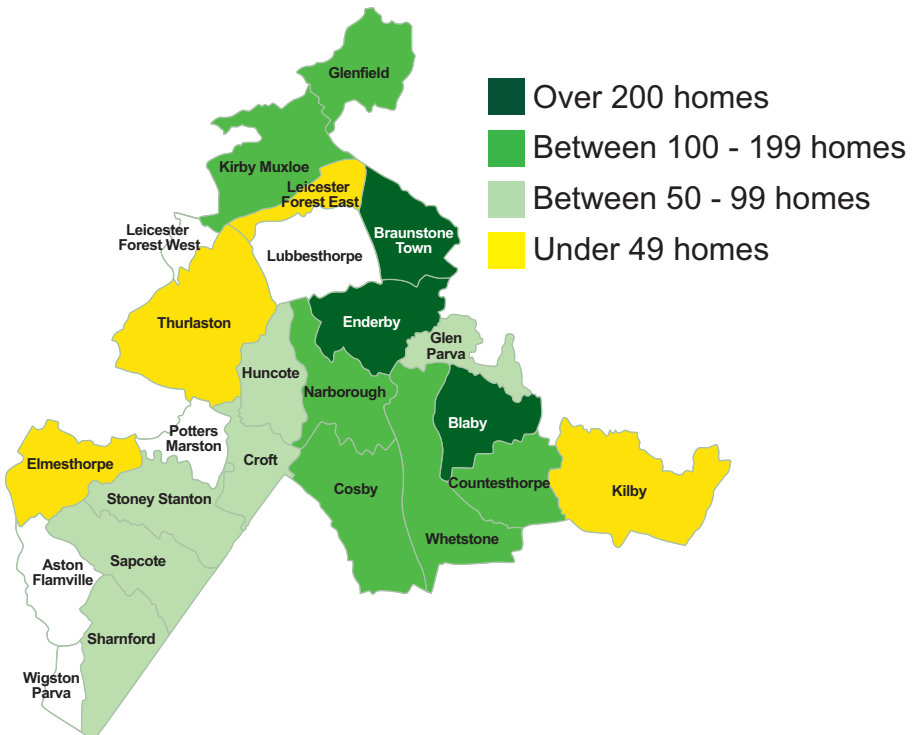
A member of the National  
Housing Federation



## About Blaby

The district of Blaby is located in the south west part of Leicestershire and covers 50 square miles. It has 24 parishes but no main town and the M1 and M69 run through the district. In 2003, its population was estimated at 91,600 and it is forecast this figure will be around 97,000 by 2016.

The projected increase for the over 50s is 37.5% by 2030 and the oldest group (over 85) is expected to increase by 129%. Ethnic minority residents make up 5.9% of the population. Three Oaks Homes owns around 2,200 homes in the district, 56% of which is sheltered housing for the elderly and disabled. The remaining homes are general purpose.



## The Beginning

Blaby District Council (BDC) began a Stock Option Appraisal (SOA) of its housing stock in August 2003 to find out what needed to be done to meet the Government's Decent Homes Standard. An SOA group was set up and included tenants from the then Tenants Steering Group (TSG). This was a management group consisting of tenants and councillors who were supported by BDC officers and consultants, including an Independent Tenants' Adviser (ITA).

By March 2005 it was decided, after all the options had been looked at, that a Large Scale Voluntary Transfer (LSVT) was the only way forward. The council accepted this recommendation and it was agreed to appoint a partner Registered Social Landlord (RSL) to maximise the valuation and assist the local authority in managing the costs and risks associated with transfer.

## Tenants lead

When asked about Government's Decent Homes Standard, tenants decided to raise the bar further still and produced The Blaby Standard. Then, in September 2005, the TSG became Blaby District Tenants Federation (BDTF) and the following month the tenant participation contract was co-signed by the federation and council. Tenants were taking a lead and it was decided the BDTF would choose the ITA and be responsible for managing the associated consultancy budget.

## Taking shape

In July 2006 consultants, including legal experts, were appointed to help navigate the complex journey towards transfer and the important task of choosing a partner RSL began. An open day in August 2006 attracted 18 RSLs, all with an interest in becoming the chosen partner. Nine followed this up with a formal expression of interest and a shortlist of six was finalised that September.

The PST met again in October and agreed to invite the shortlisted RSLs, including East Midlands Housing (EMH), to present their proposals. A visit was paid to each RSL followed by an open day in December for tenants to meet the bidders. Eventually the choice was whittled down to two strong candidates, both of whom gave a final presentation in January 2007 to the PST and its wider support team.

## Decision time

On the 15th of that month the PST reached a consensus to recommend to the Housing Transfer Steering Management Group for the preferred partner to be EMH. This recommendation went to Cabinet on 2nd February 2007 and was ratified by the Full Council four days later.

EMH brought with it experience, management and staff who could help prepare for the tenant ballot. The selection of the preferred partner also strengthened the triangle of tenants, the council and TOH/EMH. By February a shadow board, formed in autumn 2006, had 14 members; five tenants; five councillors and four independents and just one vacancy. Tenant Colin Norman was appointed as chairman.

Board members chose the name, Three Oaks Homes, to represent the triangle of parties and in recognition of the oak woodland in Blaby. The name was synonymous with strength, durability and growth. A corporate identity was developed to accompany the new name.

March to June was an incredibly busy period during which training, a policy review and achievement of charitable status was among the work undertaken.

The Housing Corporation, which regulates social housing, paid its first visit and tenant representatives spent many hours working with the council on the Formal Offer Document until it was as they wanted it. It was circulated to all tenants in September 2007.

The final few months before the October tenant ballot was a hectic time. A mobile unit was bought and staff, the BDTF and members of the shadow board toured the district to meet tenants face to face and discuss what transfer would mean to them.

Chairman Colin Norman said:

***“Meeting tenants face to face was a great success as every time the mobile went out it carried a team of very knowledgeable tenants and BDC and EMH staff.”***

Then, following training, began the door knocking. Every council-owned home in the district was visited to explain the reasons behind transfer. A video was made to illustrate the benefits and this was distributed to tenants.

In October 2007 the ballot papers were sent out by an independent firm with experience in working on Government ballots. By mid November the results were in. There had been a 75.6 per cent turnout and 79 per cent of all votes cast said ‘Yes’ to transfer.

## **Post ballot**

The decision was made at the beginning of the partner selection process for TOH to become part of a group. Consequently EMH set up a shadow board for the new parent organisation in April 2008 that included independent members and the chair of each partner association within the group: TOH, EMH, Foundation Housing Association and Midlands Rural Housing.

The process of registering TOH with the Housing Corporation took place in parallel to registering the new parent association, East Midlands Housing Group (EMH Group).

TOH's managing director, Bruce Kerr, was appointed to start work in August. There was governance training for members of the shadow board and a 30 year business plan for TOH was developed.

A business plan for TOPS (Three Oaks Property Services), the newly named Housing Works Unit, was also agreed. A number of tenants from the BDTF formed a steering group to help choose the contractor who would carry out the major works contained in the offer document promises.

Monthly editions of Staff News and quarterly copies of the TOH tenant newsletter, Branching Out, were produced to keep future customers and staff informed of progress. The shadow board lost its "shadow" status and TOH was registered as an industrial and provident society with charitable rules. It also gained its 15th and final board member, a fifth independent.

In October 2008 the Full Council followed in tenants' footsteps and voted 'Yes' to transfer. Three Oaks Homes was registered with the Housing Corporation on the same day. The BDTF changed its name to Three Oaks Homes Tenants Federation.

Building work to office space, to be leased from the council, started, ensuring that TOH had its own self contained office space and reception area.

Detailed consultation took place with staff who were transferring to Three Oaks Homes, and arrangements were put in place to ensure that their terms and conditions, including pension rights, were protected in line with TUPE legislation.

Final negotiations between all parties culminated in a successful transfer of homes on 3rd November 2008. Three Oaks Homes has arrived.

An official launch took place three days later, to which all TOH staff, the TOHTF and board were invited, among other guests.

Colin said: *“At TOH we will use the motto of*

***Tenants Respect Unity Security Transparency***

*in all we do. We look forward to a new beginning with the customer and their services put first.*

*All at TOH are certain that, within two years, all the stars will not only be in the sky.”*

**Colin Norman**



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