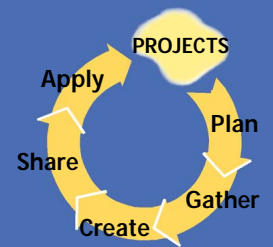


# Amicus Group

## Learning about partnering



### Background

Amicus Group is a family of Housing Associations committed to best practice and innovation in the management, maintenance and development of good quality affordable housing for rent. It manages over 15,000 homes in London, Kent, and Sussex, and it has developed or refurbished over 1300 homes since 1990. The Group is a key player in the Amphion Consortium, a 'club' of 17 housing associations founded in 1998 to carry forward the Egan agenda in the social housing sector through a process of partnered production of high quality prefabricated housing. Amicus has developed 94 new build homes under the Amphion programme.

Amicus based their pilot trial of the Learning Toolkit on one of its Amphion projects, a 19-home brownfield redevelopment at Hoystings Close, Canterbury. The properties were built using proprietary Tee-U-Tec technology, based on closed-panel timber frame construction, although site and planning requirements meant that it was not possible to utilise templated designs.

The project had several managerial complications. Amphion entered into a Partnering Agreement with Beazer Partnerships in 1999 for the supply of timber frames. A year later Beazer was acquired by Persimmon Homes, and the timber frame manufacturing business (Torwood Homes) was subsequently sold to its management and became Partnerships First in October 2001. The negotiations between Persimmon and Partnerships First, and the setting up of the frame factory in Ipswich, were a constant backdrop to work at Hoystings Close. This had an adverse effect on the resources available, staff morale (Persimmon were downsizing parts of the Beazer organisation) and the efficiency of supply routes.

The construction method was not the only innovative aspect of the project. With project management advice from Davis Langdon and Everest and legal advice from Trowers and Hamlins, Amphion developed new approaches to pre-contract project management (including fast-track appraisal and pricing methodologies with open book pricing) and to contract (including early versions of the PPC2000 form of contract).

And for site-specific reasons the project was at the upper end of costs normally experienced and it was completed after target completion time.

The end product has been a success — resident satisfaction is reportedly very good — but there were clearly lessons to be learned. With no previous experience of structured learning, Amicus used the Learning Toolkit to get the most out of the experience and learn lessons about partnering, project management and prefabricated construction which could be shared throughout the Amphion Consortium.

### Developing partnering in Amphion

Amicus have always sought to be innovative across the full range of their activities. In construction, they have welcomed the Egan agenda as a framework for managed processes of innovation, to improve quality and predictability, and to secure progressive cost reductions. The Amphion Consortium provided an opportunity to share learning and to spread the high initial costs of R&D and of developing a long term partnering framework with a major national housing developer. This enabled more strategic thinking than would have been possible under either project-specific or strategic partnering arrangements at a local level.

Amphion have always recognised that one of the key challenges in partnering is to get staff in both organisations fully committed to the ideals and the practicalities. To achieve this, they organised a series of consortium-wide partnering workshops involving staff from project manager to Director level to share ideas and practices, and develop shared objectives, common



Contact:  
Chris Blundell  
Group Development & Regeneration  
Director  
Amicus Group  
60 Bell Road  
Sittingbourne  
Kent ME10 4HE

[cblundell@amicus-group.co.uk](mailto:cblundell@amicus-group.co.uk)

[www.amicus-group.co.uk](http://www.amicus-group.co.uk)

approaches and team spirit. The workshops were seen as a success in producing intellectual and emotional buy-in, but this has not always flowed through to site-level. Driving the consortium forward in a difficult funding climate and against the backdrop of the changes of ownership at (what became) Partnerships First took considerable energy, and with hindsight it is likely that there was insufficient support for site-level staff within contractor and clients alike.

Hoystings Close was a case in point. The partnering ethos allowed issues of timing, liaison with utilities and so on to be approached with a common purpose rather than simply as problems for the contractor to resolve. However, when programmes slipped the familiar problems resurfaced — a blame culture, reluctance at site level to acknowledge delays, and consequential issues of programme and costs.

## Using the Learning Toolkit

Amicus chose Hoystings Close for their trial of the Learning Toolkit both because its innovative aspects and its difficulties made it an ideal learning opportunity, and because it was typical of the kind of project likely to come forward repeatedly within the Amphion programme. They undertook a Hindsight Review based on:

- a **desk review** of project records
- a **combined review and dissemination workshop** for seven senior team members from Amicus, Partnerships First, Davis Langdon & Everest and Trowers & Hamlins, held one week after practical completion, and
- **individual interviews** with people who were unable to attend the workshop.

Everyone invited to the workshop undertook a desk review of their project records before the event. This gave a clear view of the key events and issues which would most repay review.

The workshop followed Learning Manual guidelines throughout. It was held while memories were fresh, without time pressure and well away from office interruptions. The key events identified in the desk reviews were displayed on a flip chart to help guide the discussion, with space to note lessons learned. The workshop leader took care to pace the discussion, and to encourage everyone to contribute and to challenge and debate, starting with what happened, and then moving on to why it happened and finally to doing better. Despite the strains during the project, participants spoke remarkably freely and constructively. Numerous new insights emerged into why things had happened and how difficulties could be avoided in future projects.

The follow-up interviews each lasted about an hour, giving time for each interviewee's point of view to be fully explored and issues to be followed through. Amicus found that this provided a richer picture in some respects than the workshop discussion, but the issues which emerged were the same.

## How it worked

Everyone involved found the structured approach and the guidelines given in the Learning Manual very helpful. The Hindsight Review process teased out numerous lessons which would otherwise have been missed, and the effort has paid dividends in new insights at all levels from site to director, both about project specific issues and — perhaps more valuably — about how teams operate, particularly in a partnered environment.

The framework provided by the Learning Manual was felt to be clear, simple, and open. The Amphion Quality and Procurement Group have since recommended a Hindsight Review as a key project milestone in all Amphion projects.

## Lessons learnt about Learning from Experience

- Involve the relevant people, at all levels: project and site staff can benefit just as much from structured learning as top management. In a partnered environment, the best management intentions can be undermined if project staff fail to buy in.
- Workshops need to be skillfully facilitated — and facilitation is a skill that needs to be learned.
- Hold Hindsight Reviews to crystallise lessons for subsequent projects *and* Foresight Reviews to ensure that best use is made of them.
- Support a learning culture by giving positive encouragement to staff to be open, both in seeking support and resources, and in communicating progress and issues to be addressed — it does not happen automatically.



*“That was the most productive meeting we’ve had in 3 years of partnering — it focussed on the issues that make a difference”*  
*(a Director of Partnerships First)*

The Learning from Experience project was supported by DTI under the Partners in Innovation scheme