Gentoo Sunderland had originally intended to refurbish Hahnemann Court, a 228 unit 1960’s block of apartments. However after a survey revealed problems with asbestos and the structural condition, projected refurbishment costs exceeded £14m therefore a replacement was the only alternative. Using resident feedback, Gentoo designed a new retirement village adjacent to the original site, at a cost of £16m for 110 apartments. However, prior to agreeing contracts and starting works the country was hit by the collapse of the housing market.

Gentoo’s business model to renew homes relies on sale units subsidising those for social rent. With sales on existing developments halted, expenditure for this development was a significant risk. Simultaneously, Gentoo Ventures had completed a block of 52 apartments, City Green, within the City Centre. All apartments were originally sold ‘from plan’ but the economic decline saw purchasers withdraw mid construction leaving Gentoo with 52 unsold apartments.
Behind City Green, developer McCarthy & Stone were constructing a 58 unit retirement complex, Benedict Court, but housing market conditions meant this development was mothballed incomplete. Completing both blocks was an innovative alternative for Hahnemann Court. Following consultation and overwhelming support from residents, Gentoo purchased Benedict Court to provide 110 homes.

**What did you set out to achieve?**

Our original objective was to replace an aging deck access complex with 110 new purpose built homes with support facilities for our elderly residents. This replacement had been halted because of the volatile housing market, which at the time affected Gentoo’s overall renewal and investment programme, and left us with the problem of fulfilling our promise to customers to improve their housing situation.

It was incredibly important to find a solution which kept this close-knit community together, many of whom had been neighbours for over 40 years, providing the accommodation and additional services they required at an affordable cost. The replacement accommodation needed to offer residents a safe and secure retirement complex, which benefited from amenities and facilities that were easily accessible. Additionally, an alternative solution was required for our City Green development, where sales would not be achieved to ensure the City Centre continued to prosper and that we achieved a return on our investment.

Given the economic challenges facing us, we also hoped to provide this replacement scheme at City Green at a significantly reduced price in comparison with the estimated costs at Hahnemann Court, meaning we could deliver an exemplar scheme at social rent levels.

In effect this project had 3 key objectives:

- To provide a solution for existing residents who required modern facilities
- To provide a solution for an unsold City Centre development belonging to Gentoo Group
- To provide a solution to a private developer’s ‘mothballed’ City Centre development.

Added to this the Primary Care Trust were looking for a new City Centre doctor’s surgery and having previously worked together on successful projects, Gentoo were keen to assist.

**How were these aims and objectives met?**

This replacement scheme has been an overwhelming success for all involved. It has provided 110 new homes in a prime City Centre location, utilising existing stock and completed a mothballed development, both of which would
have remained empty for some time.

Gentoo Ventures, who owned City Green, acquired the neighbouring McCarthy & Stone building to provide the extra accommodation required. They also negotiated and completed the lease of the ground floor to the Primary Care Trust to provide a medical facility.

Through effective partnership working, City Green offers residents a safe and secure retirement complex, with a doctor’s surgery in a prime City Centre location - within walking distance of shops, the main transport interchange, the Civic Centre, and Age UK’s Sunderland headquarters and facilities.

The complex also benefits from a communal lounge and kitchen, laundry facilities, garden area and guest room. The facilities are available to all residents and are linked up to Gentoo’s 24 hour CCTV concierge service.

A Care and Support Worker from Gentoo will be attached and based within City Green and at customer’s requests, the existing Neighbourhood Housing Manager from Hahnemann Court, who has an excellent relationship and understanding of the customers, will move to the new scheme as Scheme Manager.

Gentoo has managed to complete the development, purchase and finish the McCarthy & Stone building and agree terms with the PCT for the new City Centre doctor’s surgery, expending less money than was proposed for the original Hahnemann Court replacement building. With the support of the City Council the Group also secured a grant from the Homes & Communities Agency of just over £2 million to enable delivery of this development at social rent levels for a grant rate of around £18k per home.

What challenges did the project face, and what lessons were learned?

Time-scales and finance were major factors in this project, given the length of time and resources Gentoo Sunderland had already spent with existing customers on designing the retirement village on the neighbouring site to Hahnemann Court. Finding a solution for our unsold City Centre scheme and negotiating and completing the McCarthy & Stone part completed development were also key challenges.

Recognising the need to utilise existing resources, engaging other main agencies within both the public and private sector and taking a flexible approach to problem solving has proved pivotal to this projects success. Employing the expertise of other business divisions and taking a holistic approach to project development meant that through collaboration, Gentoo were able to deliver City Green within budget to satisfied customers.

Involving and liaising with our elderly customers and their family members was very important and key to the City Green success. Engaging family members and ensuring they understood that Gentoo wanted the best for their
relatives and that they were trying to help them find a suitable, comfortable and secure new home was an important factor in our work.

Regular updates involving various media including news articles, presentations, public meetings and magazine, were used maintain interest and understanding of the scheme. Residents were also shown around the site prior to making their decision.

In hindsight, committing to such a high specification new build retirement village raised customer expectations, however no-one could have foreseen the economic difficulties encountered. The customers involved have been an inspiration to everyone within Gentoo and have been marvellous in their understanding of the problems and working to find an excellent solution. Gentoo staff have maintained belief and remained positive to make the plans a reality. Essentially, Gentoo has given customers the best possible solution that they fully support in a prime location.

**How was the success of the project measured?**

From approximately 110 existing customers remaining in the scheme, 80 customers were really interested in the alternative scheme and this number has remained steady throughout.

Existing residents were able to choose their preferred block and apartment and provision was made for neighbours to move together if they wished. Many of the residents have resided in Hahnemann Court since it was built in the 1960’s. The first moves took place on April 19 2010 and all moves were completed by the end of May, 2010.

City Green has ensured that the community spirit of Hahnemann Court has been retained. City Green proceeded due to the high levels of interest shown from the existing customers and the purchase of the McCarthy & Stone building was completed ensuring sufficient accommodation for everyone who wanted to move.

The success of this innovative project can be measured by the 73% of existing customers who have moved into the City Green development, showing community spirit remains strong with customer and family satisfaction levels extremely high. Gentoo will continue to measure the success of the project through customer satisfaction surveys and customer feedback sessions from our continuing staff engagement with residents.

Financially, success has been measured through reducing the Group’s exposure by not proceeding with the original replacement retirement village and utilising an existing new build scheme now fully occupied - which would have been virtually impossible to sell in the current market.

This scheme enabled all divisions of Gentoo Group to become involved in its delivery, utilising the skills and expertise of each to provide much needed
social housing. Partnership working with the City Council, the HCA, the local PCT and private developers has also allowed for much needed regeneration and continued investment within the City Centre to complete stalled developments and maintain employment.

What were the key positive outcomes?

A replacement for an aging scheme was not going to happen - a solution was found to our desire to rehouse existing customers to vastly superior accommodation with improved facilities for a population, many of whom were in their seventies and older.

Gentoo Ventures had completed a block of 52 apartments, City Green, within the City Centre. Originally sold prior to the development commencing, all purchasers withdrew mid construction due to the economic decline. They are all fully occupied now. Nearby, McCarthy & Stone were mid-construction of a 58 unit retirement complex, Benedict Court, but again housing market conditions meant this development was mothballed incomplete. We completed a failed private developer scheme.

Another positive gain from the completion of this scheme was the ability to provide much more than just accommodation, City Green is now a retirement complex which provides residents with a doctors surgery, quite literally on their doorstep, its situated within walking distance to the City centre’s shops, main transport interchange and Age UK’s Sunderland headquarters and facilities. This development also delivered a key strategic requirement for the PCT.

This development not only benefits the residents of City Green, but the area as a whole, providing much needed investment to a prosperous City, as part of our plans for City Centre regeneration.

Another encouraging outcome is the overwhelming support and enthusiasm of Hahnemann Court residents, who had already suffered disappointment when plans to remain within their existing locality could not be realised. They worked with us to develop alternative accommodation, which met their needs and which is now fully occupied and they are delighted which was our main goal.

How did the project demonstrate positive practice in equality and diversity?

Sunderland is a socially and ethnically diverse city. In relation to equality and diversity there are some key population statistics for the city that are significantly different from the national average, one of which is that we house a higher than average percentage of disabled people or people who have long term illnesses. In addition the 2001 Census statistics also show correlation between age and disability, and because we are living longer; nationally the
predictions indicate that by 2021 over 5 million people in the UK will be over 80 years old; we need to consider the appropriateness of the accommodation we provide today for future generations.

As City Green was initially designed as luxury apartments for city living, aimed at both young professionals and the affluent retired, the suitability of the building needed to be considered in association with the profile of the customers who would be residing there. We therefore obtained a substantial amount of information on the potential occupiers to determine how we could alter the building to suit their requirements, and as such altered the interior of the flats, changed the flooring and provided medical and community facilities along with a support framework and additional security.

As communication was pivotal to the success of this project we ensured we engaged and involved customers throughout the process, however, we took into consideration the age profile of our customers once again and ensured we included their family members in all correspondence, presentations and visits to ensure they were happy with our plans for their relatives. We also included additional site visits to accommodate the residents.

**What elements of the project could be replicated by others?**

Fundamentally, the replication which can be attained from this project is the inspiration to work with others during economic difficulties to deliver solutions which think ‘outside the box’ but deliver outcomes which are beneficial to all. Through working with our partners, local businesses and Gentoo divisions we were able to complete developments which would otherwise have remained incomplete, blighting the city skyline and inflicting financial strain on those involved. This project re-injected much needed activity into the City Centre and construction industry but also allowed us to provide new accommodation and quality facilities that many would struggle to deliver in such difficult conditions.

Collaborative working was pivotal to the success of this project, working not only with partners and stakeholders but also engaging heavily with our customers, another element which is easily replicable across the sector. The provision of cross organisational solutions such as facilities for the PCT who were desperate for a new doctor’s surgery and had time bound resources available is a key learning point and one we will continue to learn from.

Extensive communication including family members is critical when seeking to deliver alternative solutions for customers who are more mature in years. We engaged and involved customers throughout, this included regular newsletters, presentations, videos, use of show homes and site visits. Various events were hosted by Gentoo Sunderland, including a Christmas lunch and various get-togethers with the strongly knit residents group.

Whilst the primary customers were the residents, the purchase of Benedict Court benefitted the whole city and therefore a number of press releases were
What has your initiative achieved that wouldn’t have been possible previously?

Our new build business model, like many social housing providers, is based upon sale units subsidising those for social rent. With the housing market crashing nationally, house builders were forced to halt any plans for future developments as financially uncertainty placed greater emphasis on investment and sales which could be realised. In this situation, there was an absolute need for innovation:

- Gentoo had an unsold development
- McCarthy & Stone had an incomplete, mothballed building
- Gentoo needed to complete a promised new scheme for customers living in deck access accommodation we wished to demolish
- The local Primary Care Trust had funding for a new doctor’s surgery but were struggling to find a City Centre site.

All of these issues involved significant financial exposure but more importantly existing residents required a solution.

This was the first time Gentoo had changed a development from solely private sale to social rent, purchased and completed another developer’s build and asked approximately 80 residents to reconsider the locality in which they wished to reside. This innovative solution required buy in from the Local Authority, Primary Care Trust, our customers, Gentoo Board Members, local community and others, and required the expertise of many more to make this vision a reality.

A key strand of Government thinking is value for money and not working in silos. This project clearly demonstrates what can be achieved with effective cross agency collaboration.

How have you worked with key partners to make this a reality?

We developed this solution following intensive consultation with residents, staff, stakeholders and Board Members in addition to working closely with the Primary Care Trust, Sunderland City Council and the Homes & Communities Agency. Communication hard work and a desire to make the solution work from all involved were key.

The success and indeed the reason for proceeding with this alternative scheme was the approval given by existing residents throughout a
comprehensive consultation and decision making process.

Prior to proceeding, residents of Hahnemann Court were presented with a number of re-housing options including the City Green site and possibility of purchasing the McCarthy & Stone building to provide a 110 unit scheme which would allow all residents the option of moving. This option proved very popular with 80 residents expressing an interest in moving.

We continued to work very closely with both residents and their families (who also received copies of all correspondence) during this process including the use of regular newsletters and updates to show what the finished schemes and apartments would look like. This included artist’s impressions, video footage taken from inside the scheme, photographs from existing McCarthy & Stone complexes, external site visits, and show homes.

Residents were then able to choose their new home from detailed plans which had been converted into imperial measurements and this was prioritised by length of tenancy. Further consultation was also undertaken on fitting out the communal area and an interior designer worked with a group of residents on choosing the decoration and furniture for the area.

Overall the range and type of consultation methods used proved extremely effective as all but one of the original list of interested residents have gone on to sign up for their apartment upon completion and feedback from residents has been outstanding.