

Insights into net zero affordable homes



Olivia Harris
Chief Executive
Dolphin Living

Dolphin Living is an affordable housing charity which provides homes to critical workers in central London, near to their place of work. It currently owns over 800 homes, the majority of which are available for intermediate rent.

We asked Olivia to share her insights into delivering net zero affordable homes.

How important is sustainability to Dolphin Living?

“Our board have made sustainability a key priority for the business. This is something we need to deliver because we are a long-term investor in homes and we want to provide homes to people for many years to come. If we cannot provide homes that are sustainable, that are future-proofed, then this will impact on our longevity as a business.”

And is it important to have the board involved?

“Absolutely. In fact, the focus of our board awayday last year was sustainability. You need the board to drive this. They set the priorities for the organisation.

How have you approached making your homes more sustainable?

“Because we are a relatively young organisation, we own many new homes which perform well in terms of energy efficiency. These are homes with EPC B ratings. However, many of these homes have complex energy systems and how they are designed to perform may not always be how they actually perform. So we are undertaking a review of these properties to understand how they are performing in-use, when occupied. We expect the results of this shortly for the first two properties.

We have some older homes and have separately looked at how these are performing, using EPC as the key metric. We all know that EPCs are imperfect but these are the standard metric that the industry and investors are using. And when we undertake any refurbishment of these older properties we always have sustainability, and energy efficiency, at the front of our minds.”

How hard is it to make your homes more energy efficient?

“There are relatively tried-and-tested measures that we can take such as improving insulation and replacing windows, boilers and lightbulbs. Where we can, we also install movement sensors in the common parts of buildings to control the lighting and consider if there are any other straightforward things we can do.

But we have to be really mindful of the impact on our residents and the inconvenience to them, particularly if they’re remaining in their home whilst works are carried out.

And one thing that we need to be very mindful of is tackling damp and mould. This is a very high priority in the sector. So, for example, alongside making sustainability improvements and improving insulation we also need to ensure that we have good ventilation.”

What about more radical interventions?

“There are risks around adopting new measures and new technologies, and we have experience of this.

A good example would be back in 2012, when we got planning permission for a new block of flats. As part of the permission, we were required to install a combined heat and power system (CHP). It's since been proven that this CHP is not efficient for the size of the block, which means that it's not cheap for residents and at some point it will need to be replaced.

A current concern is around air source heat pumps (ASHPs). In new builds we are now having to install ASHPs but we have concerns about the ongoing maintenance. We hear reports that there is a real shortage of qualified engineers to maintain these systems. So we can put new technology in but are we able to maintain it?

We also need to think about our residents. We can try something new but it might go wrong, so we would need to take it out and replace it. And we are disrupting residents' lives whilst we carry out this work. So having to go back and do work twice is really quite a challenge.”

What other challenges do you face?

“We face a range of challenges and competing priorities in our sector.

Our absolute priority is health and safety. Ensuring our homes are safe and secure. That is non-negotiable.

We are also under pressure to deliver more homes to help tackle the housing crisis.

But we must make sure that whatever we deliver works for our customers. For example, when it comes to deciding whether to redevelop or refurbish our properties we need to consider what the best outcome is for residents. Many of our properties are quite small and don't meet

modern design guidelines in terms of size, outside amenities, the quality of build, and so on. So we can refurbish them, make them more energy efficient, but they're still not going to be high quality homes. A better option might be redevelopment which creates more disruption in the short term but a better long-term solution, although the sustainability cost of rebuilding versus refurbishing also needs to be considered.”

What does a refurbishment entail?

“Sometimes we might do a light touch refurbishment. But often the work needed to improve the EPC rating of a home is much more intrusive, involving ceiling, wall and floor insulation. Which is why at the same time we might replace the boiler and improve the electrics and respond to what the resident is asking for, which might be a new kitchen and bathroom.”

So residents welcome the work?

“The main tension is the intrusion into people's lives when the work is carried out.

If you ask residents what they want, they may tell you that they want lower heating bills but a new kitchen or bathroom or flooring might be a greater priority for them. The benefits of energy efficiency measures may not be immediately obvious to a resident other than if you explain the intention is to reduce energy bills whilst making their home warmer.”

How important is sustainability for residents?

“As an affordable housing charity, affordability is clearly a big issue for our residents. So, sustainability is clearly very important when it comes to issues such as energy efficiency and lower energy bills.

However, in terms of the broader sustainability agenda, I do think that we have more work to do to explain and engage our residents on the issues.”

How do you have that conversation with residents?

“We’ve recently engaged a new customer services director to increase our face-to-face engagement with residents. The first thing we need to do is to listen to what residents have to say and respond. Then going forward our plan is to bring our agenda to our residents, and sustainability is obviously a really big part of that.

We can then have that conversation with residents around their energy use, and whether they are a high or low energy user, and that may be a good way into a wider discussion about sustainability.”

What advice would you give to another property company who is just starting on their net zero journey?

“I’m not sure I feel qualified to give advice as we are still at the very beginning of our journey!

But I would say that sustainability shouldn’t sit on the edge of the business. It should be central to everything you do. We have a team that meets on a regular basis that comprises me, all my directors and relevant managers in asset management and development and we all work together to make sure that we meet our sustainability targets and ambitions. So it is an entity wide approach.

And for us, we need to make sure that whatever is delivered works for our residents. Ultimately our residents are our charitable beneficiaries, so we have to deliver something that works for them – and that requires the whole organisation to be really engaged in that thought process.”

What is the BPF Net Zero Pledge?

The BPF Net Zero Pledge commits BPF members to be net zero carbon by 2050 at the very latest. Becoming a signatory to the pledge requires three actions:

1

To sign up to net zero targets and plans

2

To commit to sharing research, knowledge and insights on an open-source basis

3

To support other signatories and the wider real estate sector to speed the transition to net zero

Sign Up. Share. Support.
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