By combining cutting-edge green technologies with traditional building techniques, Wakefield and District Housing (WDH) is not only tackling climate change, it is also creating and protecting jobs, providing learning and skills opportunities for its workforce and the local community and engaging with tenants to promote sustainable living and reduce fuel poverty. A delegation of UCATT and unionlearn officials (the TUC’s learning and skills arm) recently visited WDH to find out more.

Beginning at the UK’s largest ‘zero carbon’ housing development, the 91-home Park Dale project in Airdale, Castleton, UCATT Executive Committee (EC) member and WDH Environmental Manager Denis Doody showcased the organisation’s latest new-build and retrofit environmentally-friendly housing developments. He explained how UCATT was working in partnership with WDH to achieve the company’s vision of becoming carbon neutral by 2016. As the largest provider of social housing in the Wakefield district, with 31,000 homes, WDH has a key role to play in tackling climate change.

Code 6 Sustainable Housing

The homes at Park Dale cater for a range of ages and family sizes and were built for WDH by developers Bramalls to the highest (Code 6) sustainable housing standard. They are proof that this standard can be achieved using traditional construction methods. WDH Special Projects Officer for Regeneration Paul Taylor explained how:

- Each home is connected to a central biomass boiler that uses locally produced wood pellets to provide heating and hot water;
- Every house has a south facing roof fitted with 35m² of photovoltaic (PV) panels to turn energy from the sun into electricity;
- The air temperature in each property is regulated by a mechanical ventilation heat recovery system;
- Every wall has 150 mm cavity wall insulation and insulated plasterboard;
- Windows are all triple-glazed;
- A ‘grey water’ system allows used water from baths and showers to be recycled to flush toilets;
- The materials used to build the homes were purchased from sustainable sources, with 80% of timber from recycled material; and
- The homes are designed to be easily adapted throughout people’s lifetimes.

UCATT General Secretary Steve Murphy was extremely impressed with the project. “It demonstrates not only the massive change needed in the way people are employed in construction; but also the opportunities for retraining those with traditional skills,” he said. And for UCATT Acting Yorkshire Regional Secretary Rob Morris, “It shows really forward thinking by WDH and is a really exciting project for UCATT to be involved in. Having the largest zero carbon housing development here in Yorkshire has to be positive, and the organisation has the interests of its tenants at heart.”

Learning and skills opportunities for the workforce and local community

A show home provides the opportunity for local school children and other groups to visit the site to learn about environmentally-friendly homes and green construction technologies. And it doubles up as a drop-in centre for tenants to learn about how they can adjust their lifestyles. Apprentices have also benefitted from unique hands-on practical training in cutting-edge green technologies at Park Dale. For example, all tenants need to do to use the grey water system is press the toilet flush, but behind the scenes is £3,000 of sophisticated kit.

Plumbing apprentice and UCATT member Luke Dickinson had the opportunity to work on the Park Dale development from commissioning through to first fixing and signing off. He can now install and maintain the grey water system. He told UCATT: “It was such an interesting development and I learned so much more than I would have done on a conventional building site.”

Luke and other apprentices are now helping to pass on their skills to WDH’s adult workforce.
“The project is fantastic. It is good for the environment, good for the tenants, and good for construction workers – providing them with the opportunity to develop green skills for the future. We certainly hope to see more developments like this springing up around the country,” said Steve Murphy.

Unionlearn Policy Officer Richard Blakeley added: “I’m hugely impressed by the scale of the initiative and very excited about the possibilities it presents. The display centre is fantastic, giving people living in the local community the opportunity to get interested in the low carbon economy, green living and the skills that will be needed in the future. It’s really visionary!”

The group also visited an example of a PV panel retrofit scheme, incorporating other environmental improvements, carried out in-house by the WDH workforce. This helped to reduce fuel poverty among elderly tenants in Clay Field, Castleford.

“Our ethos is about creating and protecting jobs, including apprenticeships and bringing jobs back in-house. We carry out our own repairs and maintenance and we now have a 90-strong modernisation team,” Denis explained. “WDH has gained National House-Building Council (NHBC) accreditation for new build and ISO14001 environmental management system accreditation.”

Directly-built Sustainable Housing

Next stop: the site of the UK’s first directly-built Code 4 sustainable houses, providing three bedroom family accommodation at South Hiendley, near Wakefield. Once completed the four new homes will achieve 44% lower CO\textsuperscript{2} emissions and incorporate PV solar roof panels, double-glazed windows and 150 mm thick cavity wall insulation. They also comply with ecological requirements concerning surface water run-off.

“Everything but the ground works and piling was done by WDH. Everything else, plumbing, electrical work, solar panel installation, joinery and carpentry was kept in house and our apprentices benefited from learning different trades on the site,” Denis explained.

Austin Road Learning Centre

The group ended its tour at the impressive construction training facilities at Austin Road Learning Centre, to meet UCATT union learning representative (ULR) Jeffrey Meadows.

He believes that WDH provides the best training for craft apprentices in the country. In addition to their education at Leeds College of Building, the green homes initiatives give them the opportunity to learn skills way beyond those of their contemporaries.

“We also encourage older workers at WDH to increase their skills – workers who are finding that their skills are becoming redundant, or their work is too physically demanding and want to learn new skills for example,” said Jeffrey.

A model for a new approach to social housing

Regional Manager of unionlearn Yorkshire and the Humber TUC, Dr Alan Roe, hopes that other organisations can learn from WDH.

“The project provides a model for a new approach to social housing, demonstrating the contribution learning and skills makes when supported by a skilled and experienced workforce. UCATT has demonstrated that investment in skills utilisation and new technologies has far reaching benefits; making green ideas a reality, but also addressing issues of fuel poverty that are vital to the community.”

“Other local authorities and social housing providers can be doing exactly the same as us,” says Denis. “It just requires vision on the part of senior management and a commitment to work in partnership with the trade unions and other organisations.”

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For more information about the Code for Sustainable Homes see www.communities.gov.uk/planningandbuilding/sustainability/codesustainablehomes/