

GREEN LIVING

Scotland's first community-owned Passivhaus development has been life-changing for three families in Closeburn and is set to revolutionise community-led housing projects with a focus on energy efficiency, environmental impact, comfort and affordability. **Anne Armstrong** reports

PHOTOGRAPHY TOM MANLEY PHOTOGRAPHY

The Passivhaus development at Closeburn



Samantha and Lee Austin
and their children



It might have been the coldest winter in recent years in Dumfries & Galloway, but it's been a warmer and greener one for the residents of an innovative new housing development in the village of Closeburn, near Thornhill.

Three families have enjoyed their first autumn and winter in a small terrace of super energy-efficient homes in Scotland's first community-owned Passivhaus development. Designed and built to meticulous standards and highly insulated, these homes generally need 90 per cent less energy for heating and hot water than standard houses, and have very low running costs.

'These new homes will grow and sustain the community, as well as providing safe, warm and affordable places to live'

The project was developed by the Nith Valley LEAF Trust (NVLT) in partnership with Dumfries & Galloway Small Communities Trust (now called South of Scotland Community Housing) to help tackle a need for affordable family housing in the village, while also addressing fuel poverty and climate change. It is already winning top awards.

Jakob Kaye, project officer for NVLT, says: "We hope that this project will prove to other similar rural communities that this is a game-changing solution to various issues."

NVLT is a community development trust which aims to help sustain and grow the local population, support local services, and address climate change. With the support of South of Scotland Community Housing (SOSCH) from 2017, it identified a need for family housing in Closeburn, but also wanted to deal with issues of fuel poverty and climate change. Levels of fuel poverty in Upper Nithsdale are some of the highest in Dumfries & Galloway, with no access to mains gas and traditional stone

properties being reliant on solid fuel, electric storage heating and other inefficient heating sources.

Their ambitious solution was to deliver three new Passivhaus homes, working with John Gilbert Architects and contractors Stewart & Shields.

A gap site was identified in the village, owned by Dumfries & Galloway Council, and secured by NVLT by community asset transfer and the support of the Scottish Land Fund. The development was funded by a range of organisations, with the largest grant - of £300,000 - coming from the Scottish Government's Rural Housing Fund. The homes will always be rented at affordable rates.

Kevin Stewart MSP, Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning, says: "This ambitious project shows what a community can achieve when empowered to take local decisions. These new homes will grow and sustain the community, as well as providing safe, warm and affordable places to live.

"Good quality, affordable housing is

essential to help attract and retain people in Scotland's rural and island communities."

The three, three-bedroom homes built in a small terrace in Castle Crescent, just across the road from a playpark, have maximised the use of timber – Scottish larch – and have been rendered with a hint of colour, reflecting the rural setting.

Passivhaus buildings provide a high level of comfort for those living in them, while using very little energy for heating and cooling. They are built with meticulous attention to detail, rigorous design and construction, according to the principles developed by the Passivhaus Institute in Germany.

The houses are highly insulated and

have triple-glazed doors and windows. They are air-tight, going through air-tightness testing to stop draughts coming in and heat escaping through any gaps. They are ventilated carefully using a mechanical heat recovery system, so that outgoing warm air is filtered and re-circulated back into the house.

The natural heat given off by household appliances and human activity means the homes need only small heating systems to keep temperature levels at comfortable levels. A combination of all these things adds up to a significant reduction in fuel consumption for those living in the houses. It also means low carbon emissions, and they are well on their way to meeting

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zero-carbon homes standard.

This is the third Passivhaus project to be completed by John Gilbert Architects and Stewart & Shields, who are involved in a series of 'Passivhoos' collaborations across Scotland to deliver social housing to Passivhaus standard.

In looking for residents for the new homes, NVLT offered tenancies to three families who are helping to sustain the local primary school and support other businesses and services within the community.

New neighbours Gemma and Connor Sharpe and their young son; Samantha and Lee Austin and their two small children; and Kasia and Pawel Wilczynski, and their two daughters, have all enjoyed settling into their new homes since last summer.

Gemma and Connor's young son will now be the third generation of his family – following in the footsteps of his dad and grandad – to attend the village primary school. They say it was "mind blowing" at first getting used to the house being theirs. "The houses are really lovely," says Gemma. "We were really excited to be involved with this project and feel like it has been a good thing for the community, as it has provided more housing to keep people within the area and making use of space that was otherwise wasted."

While moving and settling in during the Covid-19 pandemic had been a different experience, Gemma said NVLT had been helpful in dealing with any queries or issues about their homes as quickly as possible.

Samantha and Lee are delighted to at last have a long-term home after two previous tenancies were cut short when their private landlords wanted the properties back.

"We love our new house," says Samantha, who was also able to realise her dream of starting her own childminding business from home.

"We are so happy with it. It has been amazing to finally have somewhere secure after being given 28-days' notice twice and made homeless with two young children by private landlords. To finally have somewhere we can call home and know we are safe, is amazing.

"I definitely think if there is more



The homes are super energy-efficient, with low running costs

The Closeburn Passivhaus project is a new approach to housing and regeneration



Gemma and Connor Sharpe and their son

‘As the first community-owned Passivhaus project in Scotland, we certainly hope it will inspire the communities we work with’



Kasia and Pawel Wilczynksi and their daughters

opportunity for the Trust to build more houses, they should, as bringing more people to the village and community is always a positive.”

Care home worker Kasia and Pawel, who works on a local farm, say they enjoy how light and airy their house is, with its large windows; and the park across the road is a real bonus, especially for their younger daughter. They found the house to be quiet and warm when they moved in, thanks to the high insulation levels, and went well into the autumn without having to put their heating on.

In February, the Closeburn Passivhaus project won a prestigious SURF award, which are open to all community regeneration projects in Scotland, in the housing and regeneration category. The ‘Passivhoos’ collaboration also reached the longlist for The RIBA Journal’s MacEwen Award, in the ‘new approaches to housing’ category.

SOSCH, whose change of name reflects it being able to support communities across

the whole of the south of Scotland, is currently supporting 16 community organisations to deliver projects, including in Whithorn, Wigtown and Langholm.

Mike Staples, chief executive of SOSCH, hopes the Closeburn project will be the first of many of its kind. “It was always our objective that this project would form a template for future community-led housing projects in the region, and we are already planning similar developments elsewhere,” he says.

“What’s interesting to us is that other community organisations across Scotland have been very inspired by this project, and when we are working with new groups, they often say, ‘that’s what we want to do’.

“As the first community-owned Passivhaus project in Scotland, we certainly hope it will inspire the communities we work with, and beyond, to consider reaching for the highest levels of energy efficiency in the delivery of homes.”