

Whiteley Village, Cobham

LIFE IS GOOD FOR ELDERLY PEOPLE LIVING IN A VILLAGE SET IN IDYLIC SURREY WOODLAND. AND THE FOOD ISN'T BAD EITHER, WRITES KATHY BOWRY.

In 1907 the owner of a large Bayswater department store was shot dead: a tragic event, but not all bad news. William Whiteley, the victim, had specified in his will that the then considerable sum of £1,000,000 be used to purchase freehold land '... as a site for the erection of buildings to be used and occupied as homes for aged poor persons'. Building officially began on 21 July 1914.

The resultant Whiteley Village, run by Whiteley Homes Trust (WHT), near Walton-on-Thames in Surrey, is a unique concept in seamless care for elderly people, consisting of independent living in cottages and an extra-care complex – Huntley House – providing residential care and nursing care.

The 240-acre woodland surrounding the residential area of the village (all of which belongs to the Trust) offers a variety of secluded and interesting walks with an abundance of wildlife. Villagers start their retirement enjoying independent lives in rented Grade II listed almshouse style cottages built within an octagon.

It sounds like Paradise but Paul Martin, Deputy Chief Executive at Whiteley Village, identified a serpent in the garden - notably a problem with the caterer who had been operating in the village.

Martin takes up the story: "Whiteley Village is a unique care environment, offering care, housing, and support for around 550 older people. We had been using a contract caterer for a number of years, and at some point in the past they had introduced cook/chill catering. The current WHT management team was unhappy with the service being offered, and our attempts to remedy the problem

had floundered on two particular points:

- The catering team had become 'deskilled' and was not capable of responding to our demands for improvement.
- The large multi-national catering company we used then was unable to provide a strong, local management presence. The management was too distant and too removed from the point of service to deliver the change required.

"We had little in-house catering experience," Martin continues, "but we were aware of the need for drawing up a clear specification of what we required, and of ensuring that the correct people were invited to tender for what could be a very attractive, and very profitable contract. I therefore entered into an agreement with Andrew Etherington of Andrew Etherington Associates for him to act as a consultant for WHT.

Etherington's first move was to consult with the stakeholders – matrons, managers and residents - about what they wanted. The next step was the development of a new services specification.

When this was complete Etherington oversaw the management of a competitive tender for the catering services which resulted in the appointment on 6 August 2007 of Caterplus, one of the largest privately owned providers of catering and hotel services involved in the care sector.

"Andrew was able to discern the difference between our 'care based' catering requirements and the commercial opportunities that also existed within the village. He proved able to produce written



specifications, in the language of the trade that described what we aspired to. He was able to advise on the whole tendering process, meaning that we operated within realistic timescales.

"His knowledge of the trade ensured that a selection of suitable companies were attracted to the work, and he then provided the tools to enable us to short-list, and ultimately select, the most suitable company from those that had shown an interest.

"Three months on and our decision to work with Caterplus appears to have been the perfect choice. They are a smaller company than their predecessors, but have a much more visible management presence (even the MD turned out to serve on day one). They have brought fresh ideas, new skills, and a standard of catering that matches the standard of the other services being delivered by the WHT.

"Caterplus is developing the commercial side in the Village Hall and Club. A Sunday carvery and Friday fish and chips are already established, and catering facilities for those hiring the Hall are developing apace.

"Andrew agreed a fee for his consultancy work from the outset. He delivered all we asked for within the agreed financial and time boundaries. Then, as is probably typical of the man, he continued to keep in touch to ensure that the practicalities of changing a contractor were being achieved without unnecessary problems," concludes Paul Martin, who can safely be described as one very happy client.



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