

## Episode 222

# How easy is it to buy land at Graven Hill?

The show notes: [www.houseplanninghelp.com/222](http://www.houseplanninghelp.com/222)

Ben: We've obviously chatted before about Graven Hill, but that was maybe two years ago, I'm guessing. So, what has changed?

Karen: Well, for one, I can actually show you houses that are built. I think two years ago I was still asking everybody to dream and to picture what their reality might be, whereas now if you drive up to site, you can actually see a broad spectrum of the properties that we wanted to be on that development.

So, we've got a number of people building their dream homes. They've bought their land from us and The Golden Brick. We've also delivered a number of custom builds. There are houses that we have developed that are coach houses, tailored terraces and detached properties where we actually build them to a specification and people get the keys from us. And the earlier they reserve, the more opportunity they get to customise. And lots of the infrastructure.

So, for the first year, it's been all about infrastructure. Putting in the roads, putting in all of the services, and as you'll see, we've got a beautiful gateway park; lots of landscaping. We really have worked with the greenery to make it a really attractive community for people to live in.

Ben: Maybe we could just have an overview of how many houses we hope to build, what the timescale is – we've probably heard this before, but just to bring it into perspective. There's nothing like this in the UK.

Karen: No, this is huge. This is self- and custom-build at scale.

In terms of our master plan, we've got an outline for nineteen-hundred units. Our current master plan that we're working on is for seventeen-hundred-and-forty-one of those units. Thirty percent of them have to be affordable. So, we've got a mixture of affordable rent and shared ownership on the site, and then the open market

are a range of self-build Golden Brick plots to customised plots and a number of apartments.

In terms of where we are in the journey, we always said this would be a ten or eleven year project, I see this really as being year two. We've currently sold eleven percent of the total plots so, just over a hundred-and-eighty, and that's a mixture of ninety Golden Bricks, another ten to the Pioneer Project – so a hundred Golden Bricks, probably fifty affordable, and the other thirty are what we call our custom product.

So, in terms of where we are, we're in year two, plots are going in probably in the rates we thought they would. People are very interested in how they can do their own self-build, but also people are interested in Graven Hill to say maybe they don't want to be so hands on, but they could customise something.

We are building a community of like-minded people. So, the residents who are moving on to the site have either been wanting to build their own house for many, many years but want to be part of a community.

That's the difference about Graven Hill. If you want to do a self-build and you want to buy a big plot of land and have lots of land around you, that's not Graven Hill. Graven Hill is about having the opportunity to live in a community development, have neighbours either side or around the corner, that are similar types of people to you, but you've designed that house to your own requirements. If you buy a plot that can take four bedrooms and you choose to only build two bedrooms, that's fine with you.

The key thing for me is about building that community, but also seeing the range of designs that people want to do, but also the fact that actually some of the designs are quite similar. Lots of people are attracted by the location, but also the fact that the community is about people that want to put some sweat equity into where they live and want to have more of a say in the community facilities. That's what I think is unique about Graven Hill.

Lots of other developers do self-build but they do them on a much smaller scale, between fifteen and sixty plots. Seventeen-hundred-and-forty-one plots is quite a lot of plots.

Ben: You've still got all your hair, which is a good sign.

Karen: Yes. I might colour it more often, but I've still got all my hair.

Ben: Today, I wanted to really underline, how easy is it to buy a piece of land? Because this is the number one challenge that if you're a self-builder, it's looking for land. So, I'd like to just explore that process a little bit with you.

My first question perhaps, before we enter the plot shop and go and have a look around, is really how you've structured the sale of land?

Karen: In terms of the Golden Brick and buying a piece of land, we sell service plots. We're selling you the land, we're selling you the foundation for your design and it comes with all the utilities, the warranty and insurances.

The benefit of that is Graven Hill is able to sell the land to you and the Golden Brick as an exempt sale. So, there is no VAT. Secondly, quite a lot of issues that you get when you buy a plot of land can be in the ground. We take that risk away because obviously we guarantee that plot for you. And we also get you the services.

You'll know that sometimes when people are buying their own plots of land, one of the big costs they have is there is no gas or no electric and they need to try and get the utilities into the plot. That can take quite a lot of effort and quite a lot of resources. You know that when you buy a Golden Brick plot from Graven Hill, you've got those services. They're brought to the edge of your boundary and then you can bring them into your property where you need them to be.

What we also do is we provide a number of easy guides to help you. Planning is a key consideration in the UK if you're going to build your own house. If you buy at Graven Hill, you get something that's called a Plot Passport. In that Plot Passport, it will list all the constraints and all of the freedoms that you've got in terms of your plot design. If you can do everything on that list and get through what's called a compliance check, you can actually get planning permission for your house in twenty-eight days. So, instead of the standard eight to thirteen weeks or longer, you can be guaranteed that in twenty-eight days, you know that the house you want to build, if it's compliant, you can get planning permission.

If you want to do something that's a little bit different and you want to go outside of the Plot Passport, you can do that as well, but then you do go through the reserve matters route. But because of the more plots we work with, we assign you a delivery liaison manager to work with you. They can give you some hints and tips in terms of how to navigate that process.

What we also do is have a design guide. So, depending on the freedoms that you want, you can look at the design guide and say, 'I want to live in this area because I like this pallet of materials.' You can then pick the right plot for you by using our plot finder on our website or by coming to the Plot Shop.

Ben: Plot Shop. It's not something we're familiar with necessarily here. It's come from the continent. Maybe you could explain about that inspiration from abroad?

Karen: When we were looking at whether Graven Hill could come into existence in the UK, part of our due diligence was to visit Almere in Holland, where they had public land and they did something very, very similar.

They had a Plot Shop, and in this Plot Shop, you came and it was like an information hub. You could find out about what houses you could build, the types of products you could use and get a number of tips and hints in terms of being able to build something in Holland. We thought that was a really good concept and we would need somewhere to base ourselves to be able to sell plots at Graven Hill.

Given the amount of infrastructure that had to go into the site and health and safety concerns, we decided to take a unit in the town centre which would enable people to come in and have a look at the plots that are available.

The choice of name, Plot Shop, did come from Holland. We have a lot of people that come in and think we're selling different types of plots, maybe plots for the end of life or something to do with landscaping, but in terms of the plots, literally we're selling service pieces of land.

We based ourselves in the town for the first couple of years of the development; we will then move this Plot Shop up to the site as it becomes easier for members of the public to go on. One of my key concerns, always, is about making sure that we manage health and safety, and with the number of self-builds that we're doing on our site, you've got to make sure that you look after Joe Public.

So, they come to Bicester, park their car for a couple of hours, and then they can come into the Plot Shop and get lots of ideas.

Ben: How are you being found in general? Is it the internet or have you had some people think, 'oh, build my own house, that looks interesting'?

Karen: I think there are probably three areas where people find us. Like any business, we've got a website and we launched our new website in June of this year, taking into consideration some of the experiences our customers had had. We've got very much a plot finder facility.

Secondly, we obviously advertise and use PR in the various areas where people would look for self-build. So, in the trade press, in the magazines, and we also attend a number of conferences.

The third area is the right to build registers. If you want to self-build, everybody has the right to tell their local authority that they'd quite like a self-build plot, and the local authority in their local plan has to make plots available over a three year period. So, what we've also been doing is focusing on the right to build registers in the fifty mile surrounding area of Graven Hill.

Ben: I was just about to say that surely there's no-one on this list because you've got so much going on. But if you're talking fifty miles ...

Karen: Yes. I think if you look at sales to date, probably about fifty percent of our sales have come from what I would call the Cherwell District. That's people who either live in Cherwell District or they work in Cherwell District.

The other fifty percent have come from further afield and they've come for a number of reasons. Some because of the location. They might work in London or Birmingham but actually living in Bicester is a really good place to live, or actually people have been attracted because of the scale and size and being part of a community of like-minded builders.

In terms of advertising and marketing, we also find that it's about educating people, that actually self-build isn't just for your million pounds Grand Design houses, this is a normal community with bedrooms from one to five, and we want to see an opportunity for those first time buyers getting on to the ladder, to those that are downsizing and maybe wanting a smaller house for the rest of their life. So, we're really aiming our presentations and exhibitions at being able to show all demographics that they can choose to live at Graven Hill.

It might be that they start to live at Graven Hill in a house that's a custom build coach house. We had a number of entry points at a hundred-and-ninety-nine-thousand. Once they then move up, normally first time buyers, once they move on if they like living in

the community, they might then decide that they actually want to move on and actually do their own build.

So, we focused it on education, but also on the trade press and also having an effective website. And of course, you're here today in the Plot Shop. The idea is to get people to come into the Plot Shop, talk to our sales team and actually visualise what plot they could live in and then look at the supporting guidance that we can give.

Ben: So, no matter how we've found you, we end up here?

Karen: Yes, most people get here. We do have some overseas buyers, so we use Skype et cetera, but I would say the majority of people get to come to the Plot Shop. If nothing else, they tend to come to the Plot Shop to complete their reservation.

We do coach tours from here as well, once a month on a Saturday or a Sunday. We'll have a number of minibuses that go up to the site. So, you can come to site, have a look around, we show you the whole of the development. We then take you to the areas where we've got plots for sale or actually got houses for sale and then you'd come back here and have an opportunity to talk to the sales team. They prove very popular and tend to sell out.

Ben: Let's have a wander around. Say, for example, I have just walked in the door. What might you do? Lead me through the conversation. I have virtually finished my own build but I won't be building again just yet, but we can pretend.

Karen: So, you'd come into the Plot Shop and basically, that's our shop window. So, before you even get through the doors, you'll see our Plot of the Week and you'll also see what Graven Hill is about.

As you walk in, the first thing that you see is a map on the floor. That actually shows you the hill, and around the hill it shows you all of the residential plots on the site. They're colour-coded to be able to tell you which are the different sizes and whether they're Golden Bricks or custom projects.

As we're looking at the plot here, you'll see a number of greyed-out plots. That's the Phase Two land. The thing that people need to remember about Graven Hill is we get the land in two stages, and the second stage comes in June of next year. So, we're focusing and advertising Phase 1A and Phase 1B.

You'll see here on the floor, this is the roundabout, this is the main development. The majority of these houses here are all under construction. The affordable product that's been bought by

Bromford, they're being marketed so, these are all gone. These blocks here are the landmark entrance into the site, these are the apartment blocks that begin construction in July, and then this is the main drag of the site, taking you all the way up to the hillside plots here. And when you go to site, you'll see that there's a number of hillside plots that have been completed and actually, we've got residents living there. So, look at the beautiful view that they've got.

So, when you come in here, you can step on the map and visualise where you might want to live. We've just released some crescent plots – these are really big plots, four, five and six bedrooms. So, again we've got quite a lot of customers coming in over the last few weeks saying, 'actually, I want that one.' And they're able to stand on it and say, 'right. I'd like to talk about this plot.'

What they would then do, they'd be met by our sales team. The sales team would sit them down and would talk through their requirements. We'd see whether they wanted to do a self-build or whether they wanted a custom build. We'd then take them through our available plots and as you can see here, there's lots of information here about the plots that are currently available. As you can see here, there's a variety of plots.

Ben: This is interesting because I must have seen a very early version of this before they went on sale. It was a guide price or we think it's going to be worth this much.

Karen: Yes. So, what you get here now is, these are the ones we're currently selling. It tells you what the plot number is so that you can reference that back to the floor, but we also have a big plot map here on the wall. You're able to go and have a look then and you can see whereabouts on the site it is. It tells you a notional house type. So, this tells you, you could make three bedrooms. If you choose to make two, that's down to you.

It also gives you the location, and this is important because this links back to our design code. Depending on where you are on the site are the number of design flexibilities that you get in terms of what you can build and get planning compliance in twenty-eight days.

You also then get the size of the plot and then it also tells you the maximum gross internal area that you can build to.

So, that gives you an idea about what you can do. Then what we also do is we give you the land price. This is the price just for the land. Clearly, this is a sales office. And like any sales office, you'll

come in and try and do some negotiation. So, we get many people sitting down trying to ask my sales team whether there is any wriggle room on those prices. And clearly, we want to try and get the most value for money prices we can, but we also want to make sure that the person who's wanting to buy can see the value that they can get.

We then tell you what the foundation type is. Depending on whereabouts on the site you are, you have different ground conditions. Some might need piling, some might be traditional. This gives you an indication of what your foundation costs might be.

The one thing that the sales team will never tell you is what your Golden Brick will cost you. Because until we know what your design is, we don't know the structural calculations to be able to say, in order to support that superstructure, it's going to cost X, Y and Z. But what we have got on our website is a variety of prices for Golden Bricks for different types of properties. So, that gives you an idea. But every single house is unique, so the Golden Brick price will also be unique.

You then have the conversation. They'll probably move you over here ...

Ben: Just to describe, we have what looks like three or four different desks.

Karen: A set of four hubs for people to sit at. They've got a screen, computers and lots of information about the plots. They'll be able to talk to you about the Plot Passport and also what's being built around you.

You spend a lot of time at this wall. We've got a greenhouse here, and on one side of the greenhouse, we have our plot map. We use this very much to be able to show what plots are available.

Ben: Did you say greenhouse?

Karen: Yes, this is our greenhouse.

Ben: Ah, sorry, I see what you mean. It's another contained area, soundproofed.

Karen: We've got air conditioning in here and one of my staff is cold so, she warms herself up in the greenhouse.

Clearly, this shows you the plots that are available. As I said, it's two land transfers. This is Phase 1A. We got an early bit of land and

this is where the My Grand Design programme [is] that will be aired in January. That follows the journey of ten self-builders. We've also got some show homes coming so, people can actually go and have a look at the show homes to think, 'maybe I'll have that house in here.'

Then what you've got here is it tells you what plots are available, and what plots are sold. There's a sticker system, and if there's a yellow sticker on it, it means it's reserved; if it's a blue sticker, it's completed; and if it's red, it's exchanged. I may have got my colours wrong, but that's the reason for the three stickers. So, very much here, we can come up and say 'yes, they've got to exchange,' 'yes, they're reserved.'

And then what we see here is these are the big hillside plots that we talked about. If you look at Plot 131, for my purpose, I sell the land and the Golden Brick. I then hand you your foundation. So, for me, that's a completed sale. You then have a period of up to two years to build your superstructure and move in.

What we've got here, by example, this is Plot 131. They exchanged contracts with us on their land and Golden Brick in October of last year. We then went away and we built their foundation for them. We gave them their foundation in February. They moved into their house in June. So, that's a very quick process. They used a turnkey provider, Dan-Wood, had their house made and brought to site.

If you look here, at Plot 133, again this was another early exchange and completion, but this customer is actually doing a lot more of the work himself. So, he's still building.

On Plot 128, we've got a family with five children. They've moved in. They've completed their house.

So, we're starting to see a number of different things going on, on the site. Foundations being delivered and then people actually getting on site and building their houses, or their contractors coming in and building their houses.

What you've got here is the affordable. Like any other developer, we have to be able to provide thirty percent of the site as affordable accommodation, and we've got a mixture of two, three and four beds affordable rent and affordable shared ownership. We've sold that to a local residential provider, Bromford Housing. So, they're marketing their site there.

What you'll also see is the greenery. One of the number one questions that the sales team get asked when they come in, 'what

houses will be here? What houses will be here?' And the answer is none. We purposefully will keep all that green space.

Ben: It is lovely because that's mature greenery. It's not just a green space. It is trees.

Karen: It's well developed. It's beautiful. It's called Graven Hill for a reason. There's a beautiful woodland up here. And as you can see, there's quite a lot of water being brought in to the site, and this is the Gateway Park as you come into the entrance. The idea being this is a beautiful village community that people will be able to live on.

There's a school on the site. That gets delivered 2020/2021. There's a lovely pub. Everybody wants to know where the pub is, it's here on the village green. A nice village green here. And then we've got a number of local retail underneath the apartments. This is where you'll have your supermarket, your coffee shop, where you might have some local health provision, and there'll be a number of smaller offices.

Graven Hill isn't just about residential. In the Phase 2 land underneath the hill, we also have a million square feet of commercial space where we've done a local deal for twenty percent of that land.

So really, this can be a residential community where actually, you can walk to work because there'll be a number of different trades down here, and from this roundabout you can walk to Bicester Village in eight minutes. We're also served by Bicester North which is probably another eight minutes on top of that.

Ben: Can we have a chat with one of these ladies?

Karen: Yes. This is Gemma. She's our sales manager.

Gemma: Hello.

Ben: Hi Gemma. How are you doing?

Gemma: I'm alright, thank you.

Ben: I'm just interested to know, do the conversations follow a bit of a theme as you get your people in here? Can you detect any similarities?

Gemma: Yes. When they come in, they're either knowing if they want to go down a self-build or looking at the new-build route. But then we can

also convert them differently, depending on if they've got a house to sell, if they're relocating.

We've done an example of that. We have a purchaser who's absolutely desperate to get on to the self-build, however they were living up north, needed to relocate, jobs – so, what we've done is, they've actually bought one of our terrace homes and they will do a self-build in the next couple of years.

So, we work with purchasers probably for a good four to six weeks on average, but some can take eight weeks plus to get them ready to be able to buy a Golden Brick plot.

Ben: What is the minimum time it would take if someone came in here saying, 'I want to buy a piece of land,' to the maximum you've seen?

Gemma: I would say probably about four weeks, because we make sure that they're educated before we do any sales with them, to make sure that they have been financially qualified, they have engaged with some suppliers, so they fully know what they're doing and timescales.

Ben: What the costs are going to be?

Gemma: Yes.

Ben: Education is coming up a few times, isn't it?

Karen: And that's important, the education part, because once you reserve with Graven Hill, you've got seven months to get yourself through the journey to be able to get to a point where you can exchange, and we can build your foundation. Then you've got probably another four to eight weeks until we deliver your foundation, and then two years to build out.

The reason that time scale is important is what we want is people, that when they're building their houses, they know from when they complete, they could be living in a mini building site for a period of two years. But what we don't want them to be doing is continually living on a building site because that's where traditional developers fall down.

That's also why we get accused of, 'why don't you release more plots, Karen? Gemma, why can't I buy this plot?' And the reason being is we release them in phases to be able to cover off getting people moving along at the same timescale, so you're not

continually living in a building site. Because I don't think that would be right for the development.

So, education is probably the most important thing in terms of when you're talking to a customer for the first time.

That said, we have people who come to our shows who have obviously done some due diligence themselves and they turn up with a cheque book or a credit card and they say, 'Gemma, I'd like to buy that one.' And what she tends to do is then book them in on the diary to come to the Plot Shop to talk them through the reservation process.

Ben: Anyone who's worked in sales knows that there are objections that come up sometimes. What are the common objections and are they easy to get over?

Gemma: It's mainly to do with our Golden Brick price because we can't give that ahead or on reservation. However, we've looked at that and have been working on our mix and match product, so we are able to give a land price, Golden Brick price and now a superstructure price. That's been one of the main things from sales that we have to overcome, but we've obviously now put a product in place that answers that.

Ben: Is this a traditional get busy on a Saturday type thing?

Gemma: Yes. The last couple of Saturdays have actually been really manic, but we find because we do spend a lot of time with people, we make appointments. So, it's a lot of appointment service. But then we do get the footfall in on the Saturdays.

Ben: Fantastic. Thank you, Gemma.

Gemma: Thank you.

Ben: Sorry, she was on route to somewhere – we managed to catch her just at a good time – to the printer, fair enough.

Karen: So, clearly there is a lot of space here for people to have a look. If they're buying our custom product, then obviously there's a number of choices. So, they'd get here and they'd be able to pick worktops, windows, doors, equipment that you would put in. That's like a traditional estate agents that you might come into, or a marketing suite.

Also at the Plot Shop, we have our office here. So, the behind the scenes, the people who keep things going, they're also at the back end of the Plot Shop and we obviously have some presence on site.

After they've come and reserved, they will have probably already been up to site either on one of our Saturday bus trips, or the sales team, when they book them in, if they want a trip up to site, the sales team take them up to site.

Having a look at the surroundings I think sells it, because if you just come into the Plot Shop and say – unless you really want land, you look at this and think, 'okay, that looks good,' but actually what I think really gets it is when people go up to site, they see individual people building or actually see the high quality of the finishes of the product that's been delivered as a finished product.

And all of our finished products, like all other developers, are applicable for Help to Buy, and we've seen that the Help to Buy incentive, with the government helping with a twenty percent deposit, has been really, really good for the new housing market. We are also lobbying the government to think about providing something of an equivalent for those who want to build their own home. We're asking if they could consider a Help to Build Fund. Because I think that then would make it equitable about the new houses that are coming out of the ground, but also those people who want to build their own houses, can they get some financial help to be able to get those deposits and monies in place.

Mortgages is the other good thing. There are lots of self-build mortgages available and we've worked with BuildStore in terms of making sure that there's a lender panel available at Graven Hill. But we also have lots of independent financial consultants that are also able to get on the build loans panel and be able to attract good mortgages.

Of course, with the own-build product, you can get normal High Street mortgages. So, we've got a number of people helping there.

Ben: I think we touched on it for a moment about finance, but are there any checks or anything? If I come in here saying, 'I'm having this plot here,' what do you want to know about me?

Karen: Before we can take a reservation off you, you get financially qualified. So, if you're a cash buyer, you need to be able to prove that you've got the cash to go forwards with the transaction. If you need to get a mortgage, then you have to get a decision in principle

so that we know you can get the funds to not only buy the land and the Golden Brick, but also to finish the superstructure.

Everybody has to go through financial qualification, which is currently done with BuildStore at the moment.

Ben: Anything else to see?

Karen: No, I think that pretty much gives you – there are lots of pictures and guidelines and information that we can give to people.

Ben: Let's head back in. Are there any plots that seem to sell better than others, or any trends that you're picking up on as you go through?

Karen: I think in the early days, when we first launched, the bigger plots were very popular, and we had lots of people waiting for them. The three bed plots are probably a bit slower to go, but it's about where they are in the development.

So, I think the bigger plots went well, but also the smaller plots, and we've also seen that people are interested in pocket plots. They're interested in smaller plots to be able to do one and two bedrooms, and that really matches our demographics in terms of getting your house, using Bank of Mum and Dad, and getting your foot on the housing ladder.

We trialled that in one of our custom build projects which are coach houses. We launched twelve coach houses last year, prices ranging from one-ninety-nine up to two-hundred-and-sixty-thousand. They all went within two months.

What we're looking at now in Phase Two, so when we look at the land transfer area two, we need to think about what's sold well on Phase One and what do we need more of in Phase Two. What we will probably see is more of the smaller coach house pocket plots and maybe some more of the bigger plots, and then looking at clusters where we put the Golden Bricks and where we put the custom builds.

And also thinking about the phasing. Because I think I said it earlier, it is important. We have got lots of plots and there are lots of people that say, 'I want that plot.' And you'll say, 'actually that land is not available yet.' 'But can I have it now?' We'll say, 'no, you need to wait until we release it, but you can put your name down on our waiting list.' The important thing for me is that I want people to come and live on Graven Hill and know that whilst they are like-minded people building their own house, wanting to live on a unique community such as Graven Hill, there is a point where you want to

be able to sit in your garden, have a glass of wine, look at the hillside and not see cranes and not hear people doing brickwork or hear people doing landscaping work. So, that importance for me is about bringing that phasing on at the right space and time.

Ben: I was wondering about energy efficiency. I know we're hoping that the whole development is much better built, but if I were looking for a plot, I'd be wanting something south facing. Is that something that has come up a few times, or not really?

Karen: No, it has. Everybody wants a south facing garden. No matter how good your architect is at doing the master plan, not every property can be south facing. We're looking at that again in Phase Two.

In terms of energy efficiency standards, our Plot Passport covers those, and any other product that we deliver as a development company, the energy standards are very high. In some of our terraced properties, they're less than a hundred pounds a year to heat the house. So, we're looking at the future running costs and those energy standards.

Clearly, it would be nice to say that everybody has to have solar panels and we've got district heating and everything. We haven't quite got that at Graven Hill. But we have got lots of people, when they're building their own home, that are looking at the energy costs of running their house and they are building very high energy, rainwater harvesting, we've got solar PVs going on some of the properties.

I think there'll be a really good range of properties and really as much as you can afford to build in, I would recommend people do it because you get the pay back in the future running costs of the house. If you're an accountant like me, you build those types of costs in.

Ben: We know this is a pioneering project and no doubt you've had all manner of headaches. Is it working? You've got this big piece of land. No doubt it cost a fortune to buy. How are you getting on, how are you funding things and how are things going?

Karen: Our business plan is going the way we want it to. Gemma's already alluded to some of the challenges. Golden Brick can be challenging because people want certainty. We obviously had to put a lot of the infrastructure in up-front.

It's such a big site and unique in terms of self-build. If you look at things like Section 106 contributions, they're based on a very traditional development. Occupations are different on a self-build

development because if I sell you a piece of land and a Golden Brick and then I say I've completed the sale, you can't move into that foundation. You've got to put a superstructure up there. And many local authorities and county councils base the need for community facilities on occupations. So, that's interesting in terms of triggers because you don't want to open a school too early and you don't want a bus running around the site when there's nobody getting on the site. That's been quite interesting. We've had some interesting discussions with the District and County Council.

I think the other thing for me is about health and safety. In a traditional development, Joe Public is kept off the site until the houses are ready, you get your keys and you move in. Obviously, here I've got a mixture of houses that we deliver that are completely finished, and those that we just sell the Golden Brick to. Everybody's then responsible for their own plots. They're responsible for health and safety within the constraints of their sites and their plots. But of course, I've then got roads that are open that have construction traffic on. So, you've got to make sure that you've got very, very strong health and safety presence.

Everybody gets health and safety rules, there's construction and development rules. We do have a very efficient health and safety manager who will go around site and if needs be, he will point out things to individuals or their contractors. It's one of the most important things to me because in order for a site like this to work, everybody's got to comply. That's from wearing PPE to driving around the site at the right speed limits, making sure they book their deliveries because what we don't want is three or four cranes on site at the same time. And then you factor in maybe a bus, a school opening, all of those things when you're looking at a ten year project.

So, health and safety is a challenge but it's one that we're working very well with, but the importance there is about having the right rules in place.

And then the biggest thing is there are a lot of stakeholders helping us at Graven Hill, and part of that is educating people. So, when someone comes and reserves, we're very upfront with them. When someone's about to complete on their Golden Brick and we know they've got two, three or four children, we talk to them about how they will ensure the safety of their property and their children whilst living on a quasi-development site. But that's all about learning and each of the phases we learn something new, and we look at doing things slightly differently.

The other thing is encouraging more of the supply chain to come and work at Graven Hill. So a number of our purchasers are choosing to go down the turnkey route. So, they work with a turnkey provider who, once the foundation has been delivered, they then put the house up for them. So, they're not as hands-on. But then we have got a number of people who are hands-on, and I see them up on site every day. Sometimes from week to week, you can really see what they've delivered.

So, health and safety, making sure people have regular communications, and learning. So, what we learnt on the pioneers, what we learnt on Phase 1A, what we learnt on Phase 1B, will all feed into us delivering a different master plan, I think probably, for Phase Two.

Ben: And you talk about changing things from experience. What about other councils who might be tapping you up? Is that happening, or is too early?

Karen: I think probably if you asked me in the first six months of this job what I spent most of my time doing, taking people around the site – not just prospective purchasers and suppliers that we'd like to engage with, but it is talking to other councils.

Obviously, Graven Hill is owned by Cherwell District Council. So, we work with the Council to be able to showcase Graven Hill. Because I think lots of other local authorities see this as an opportunity to be able to provide much needed housing in their areas and it's something that can be done, maybe not on the scale that Graven Hill is done. We do a number of presentations and our non-executive directors also put time into talking to other councillors.

I'm also a member of the Right to Build Taskforce. That's about making sure that people know that everybody has a right to build, and if you tell your local authority that you're interested in self-build, they need to have a look at their local plans to be able to make plots available. Clearly, there are lots of plots available in the Cherwell District area – just come to Graven Hill – but other local authorities need to make sure that they can meet the demands.

I think it clearly is a way of people being able to get on to the housing market because you can drive equity in your own self-build. There are financial products available to help you. If you take out the middle man, you're obviously taking out some costs, and we are seeing people, when they finish their product, that are getting equity between ten and twenty percent.

Again, I am an accountant. What I also see is that sometimes people are using that saved equity by putting what I call more bells and whistles on a house. The reason they're doing that is they're going to stay there a lot longer than if they bought on a traditional development. So, when they get their spreadsheets out and add it up and say, 'where's ...?' Then they realise that they've got gold-plated taps instead of silver plated taps.

So, I now say you get more bang for your buck. You get a better quality house that meets your lifestyle requirements on a beautiful site, as opposed to focusing on it will be twenty percent cheaper. Because I think different people have different ways of what they aspire to deliver.

Ben: Karen, I've really enjoyed having a catch-up with you, to see how business seems to be booming here, which is great. Thank you for your time and we'll hopefully catch up again sometime further down the line.

Karen: Yes. Imagine what you'll see in a couple more years. Thanks.