

Builder in bloom



Fleur Homes won gold in the Best Small Housebuilder category of the 2018 WhatHouse? Awards. Managing director **JOFF BROOKER** describes what the win has meant for the Norfolk business



Fleur Homes was founded by me and my wife, Juliette Hopkins, in 2007. A design-led housebuilder, based in Holt, north Norfolk, we specialise in creating residential developments in some of Norfolk and Suffolk's most attractive settings.

Fleur's success can be attributed to putting good design and sensitivity to the local environment at the heart of the business. We combine this with building a top professional team, selecting desirable locations, bespoke house design and thoughtful landscaping.

We were delighted with our gold award for Best Small Housebuilder last year, especially as it was the first time Fleur had entered the WhatHouse? Awards. We had little idea what to expect, but knew we were up against some fierce competition. The

day turned into a great moment for us all and really validated our approach, our hard work and the quality of our product.

Of course, the win and the acknowledgment it brings was also a boost for our clients, many of whom were buying homes off-plan at the time. As an invaluable accolade, the prestige of the award will equally help give future buyers the confidence to purchase a Fleur home.

The timing of the win could not have been better, as 2019 has seen some big changes for Fleur. This includes a repositioning from Fleur Developments to Fleur Homes to better reflect our business and a move to new premises to accommodate growth, transforming an unloved commercial property into a cool, high-spec office space with room to expand further. Our Awards triumph allowed us to promote our rebranding and office move far more effectively, resulting in plenty of local and regional press coverage and we also thoroughly embraced social media.

One benefit we hadn't anticipated was the ability to attract high calibre candidates for new roles within the company. As a growing business located within a rural area, attracting the right team can be challenging; however, the WhatHouse? win put Fleur on the map nationally, with young professionals now more likely to view Fleur as a good career move and worth a possible relocation to East Anglia.

With the award raising Fleur's profile as a legacy developer – Fleur Homes frequently works within conservation areas – a whole range of positive knock-on effects has been generated. ►



The Fleur board: (l-r) Joff Brooker, David Gluckstein, Jamie Bird and Juliette Hopkins.

WhatHouse? Awards | 2018 best small housebuilder – gold

Not only has there been increased interest from investors, banks and agents offering land opportunities, but also, most notably, landowners looking to build in highly sensitive areas.

Where they might have been fearful that a new-build development would be detrimental to their surroundings, Fleur has given landowners confidence that it can, in fact, be enriching. With a portfolio of developments requiring a delicate touch, our homes demonstrably reflect the local vernacular, usually in tandem with spacious and highly attractive landscaping.

We were also approached by Savills on behalf of the Royal Family's Sandringham Estate in Norfolk and following a competitive pitch that Fleur won, we are now working on the delivery of four sites with the estate.

In addition to winning the Sandringham contract, this year has seen work on our Northshore Place development in Brancaster Staithe, Norfolk – a site of 10 open market and two affordable homes – where seven properties were sold offplan before the build had even started.

Two more Norfolk sites are due to begin early next year in Docking and Wensum Valley and the pipeline of new projects across the region is growing to fit our 10-year growth plan.

While the company is thriving, the landscape for housebuilders is still not as straightforward as it could be. Virtually every project comes with its frustrations, with several factors, all beyond our control, hampering build start dates. It can lead to voids when we can't get onsite and this is very tough to manage without a strong land bank to fall back on.

Delays in land registration have increased, currently taking many months from ownership. Until we are the registered owner, the developer cannot order key infrastructure, utility and highways works. An improvement in resourcing is vital if we



are to see sites progressing much more quickly from planning approval to a start onsite.

We welcome the recent move to reduce pre-commencement planning conditions, but the technical approvals required from statutory undertakers and utility companies have resulted in serious delays. In one case, Fleur was unable to secure technical approval for a short run of adopted road for over 10 months – a factor that not only delayed the delivery of homes to customers, but affected local sub-contractors and craftsmen, many of whom simply cannot afford to wait 10 months for work. In turn, these delays cause challenges with

bank finance, when programmes are extended beyond traditionally typical loan terms. This has meant seeking more flexible investors and banks who understand these issues, such as Close Brothers Property Finance, which is very supportive, along with several joint venture partners, which will share the rewards of some of Fleur's exciting future projects.

Juliette and I, together with fellow directors, Jamie Bird and David Gluckstein, are in no doubt that the WhatHouse? Award win has been invaluable in this key year for the company, helping to raise our profile and accelerate the growth of the business. 

