

Community-led Design and Development

Technical Paper: Scoping your community-led self-build project

Introduction

There is increasing interest from individuals and groups in building their own homes to suit their own needs and lifestyle. Many people who embark on custom and self-build project are not aware of the range of options available to them, or that there may be others who share the same interest. This technical paper is aimed at community groups, housing associations and others interested in promoting or leading on community self-build projects. It is intended to help you navigate through some of the issues and options to consider as a first stage towards developing a project brief.

This paper is part of a suite of briefing papers, case studies and technical papers for Design Council Cabé's Community-led Design and Development programme. You may also find the Routemap for community groups helpful in setting the scene, as it sets out the stages involved in taking a housing project forward from inception. Briefing Paper 3: 'Good Housekeeping – working with partners and ensuring good governance' will also be a useful source of reference.

STEP 1: WIDER PLANNING & POLITICAL CONTEXT

To help support the business case for your project you will need to identify which national and local housing and planning policies and objectives to take into consideration.

Set out below are some of the benefits of self and custom built projects under a series of generic themes. This should be supplemented with any relevant local planning, housing or economic development policies.

Economic Development

'Custom build' is an additional source of new housing supply which can help to boost the local economy. It has potential to:

- increase availability of attractive, good quality and affordable housing to support local employment
- support localised product and service innovation and development, including off-site production, technology and skills development.



Housing Market Performance

The Government's Housing and Planning Bill seeks to double the self-built supply from 10% to 20% of national (and local) production by 2020. Self and custom build housing can help:

- increase resilience of housing providers and maintain and increase supply during recessions as well as upturns
- kickstart weak housing markets, or new housing areas by early adopters
- offer increased competition within the housing industry for innovation, quality, aftercare and speed of production
- reduce opposition from existing communities to new development if the self builders are 'people they know', or can identify with.

Climate change, sustainable development and sustainable communities

Custom and self-build projects can benefit sustainable development due to:

- the capacity of 'early adopters' to build new intentional communities, or reinforce existing ones, that put community-building and social and environmental values at the heart of the project
- the capacity of these 'early adopters' to bring about a critical mass of collective sustainable behaviours and patterns of consumption to achieve lifestyles with lower environmental impact.

Affordability

- self-building and self-finishing options can reduce cost to the occupier as they don't include a developers' profit
- use of the Government's Starter Homes Initiative, which offers homes at 20% discount to first time buyers under 40, could benefit community-led projects
- use of Help to Buy: Shared Ownership funds could help make housing accessible to first time buyers (See Help to Buy website for further details).

Placemaking

- the capacity of intentional communities¹ to bring some diversity to the design, delivery, governance and ongoing stewardship of a place, especially for new neighbourhoods and settlements.

Housing need and community cohesion

- the capacity of intentional communities to cater for specific housing and social care needs through mutual support and pooling of social capital and funding, eg housing for older people, vulnerable and lonely single people, Black and Ethnic Minority communities and young people (18-21 years). Examples include the Older Womens' Co-Housing Group in London.

¹ Intentional communities are residential communities designed to have a high degree of social cohesion and shared responsibilities, and their members often hold shared social, political, religious, or spiritual views.

STEP 2: SCOPING THE LOCAL CONTEXT AND NEED

Before going too far in your thinking about your project, scope out the local context including target markets, local residents' needs and wants and Council priorities. Key areas and options you should explore are set out below.

Establishing local demand and interest in self-build

It is important to understand where housing demand or need in your local area might be, and how a self-build project can complement and contribute to that. Sources of information include:

- Right to Build Register held by the local council
- National Council for Custom and Self Build's 'Toolkit for Councils' (publication December 2015)
- Buildstore, Ecomotive Local Self Build Register and proprietary providers' website registers
- local trade outlets, specialist suppliers (eg Potton Homes/Kingspan) and professional networks
- local press: print, online, TV and radio.

Visits to, or desktop review of, relevant exemplars

There are several organisations and projects that can provide useful sources of learning. Some examples are listed below:

- Teignbridge District Council is one of the Government's Right to Build Vanguard. It has a planning policy that requires 5% custom or self-build on sites over 20 homes. Its Supplementary Planning Document sets out parameters for preparing a site design code, alongside other examples for self and custom builders. South Gloucestershire, Fareham and Huntingdonshire Councils have similar policies
- National Custom and Self Build Association has a Toolkit for Local Authorities and useful case studies
- Community Land Trust Network, Confederation of Cooperative Housing and Cohousing Networks all have examples of community-led projects with a range of governance structures
- Cherwell District Council has a Local Development Order and design code for its 1,900 home site at Graven Hill, which is dedicated entirely to self and custom build
- Amber Valley Borough Council promotes the use of site specific design codes to control quality
- other local community or charitable enterprises that might act as role models.

STEP 3: AWARENESS RAISING OF SELF-BUILD

A good way to raise awareness of self-build and attract potential self-build participants is to hold a local stakeholder event to share ideas about what the project is for and what it might achieve, and develop a shared approach and vision for the project. Other awareness raising activities might include:

- a launch event and exhibition in the locality, such as a local community hall or school, but with wider publicity

- publicity on line, and through local press, posters and fliers at training centres, Job Centres, shops, cafes, clubs, colleges etc
- creating a website with links to relevant source material. There are several organisations that offer useful information and services. These include the Community Self Build Association, Habitat for Humanity, UK Cohousing Network, National Community Land Trust Network, Confederation of Cooperative Housing, Self Help Housing, Building and Social Housing Foundation, National Custom and Self Build Association, Self build Portal, Sheffield Uni Collective Custom Build, etc.

Awareness-raising of specific site opportunities

The next step is to identify a list of all potential sites. You will need to undertake an initial appraisal of their capacity and how well they fit with your overall brief. Any key design and cost constraints should be recorded.

- prepare a communications plan to attract landowners with potential sites
- start to think about how you will liaise with future neighbours in the area by preparing a simple positive story about what the benefits will be to occupants, neighbours and the wider community.

See also Step 4 below – resident involvement processes.

STEP 4: DEVELOPING YOUR COMMUNITY OF SELF AND CUSTOM BUILDERS

Questionnaire

You should produce a questionnaire to explore attitudes to and understandings of possible housing choices for your self build project. Ideally, questionnaires should be co-produced with actual or proxy members of your priority target group, through a small number of workshop sessions. This will also be a valuable part of the process of preparing a brief for your project; ideally the design professionals likely to be involved in the project should join in.

If you would like to involve younger people as a target group (as Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust intend to do – see case study on Design Council Cabe website), workshops could be held with sixth formers at the secondary school or youth and sports clubs, or through vox pops or drop-in sessions.

The questionnaire design needs to be framed to help participants think about their housing needs and choices from first principles, that is exploring all the options that are open to them about how and where they want to live. Sometimes the wording and content of questions limits thinking and answers to meet the experience and expectation of the questioner. Co-production as suggested above can help to avoid this.

Face-to-face meetings with potential participants and enablers

While questionnaire responses can be completed on line, they are best done in social settings that give the project more local profile and provide socialising opportunities for participants. This can help people to develop new interests, ideas and relationships with each other and start the process of building the shared objectives that will be needed in building project 'teams'. Some groups appoint an external enabler – an independent person who can help steer them through the self-build process, facilitate discussion within the group, act as a sounding board and provide an objective perspective.

In addition, think about other meetings with potential voluntary sector enablers and community development organisations, and individuals working with local residents to gather information. Other stakeholders can help you explore what you need to do to deliver the physical reality of your project eg local builders and developers; banks and building societies; professional consultants; training organisations etc.

Evaluation of responses

Responses should be jointly assessed by full range of people likely to be involved in the project, including the enabler. The assessment should:

- identify key issues
- be followed up with further feedback sessions with participants and stakeholder groups
- provide conclusions and actions required to inform the future shape of the project.

Outputs from this work should be used to give wider feedback to the community and other stakeholders. You will need to balance the need to protect confidentiality with making good use of personal story lines that might appeal to local people and humanise the development process for them, thus reducing potential objections.

Resident involvement processes

As a general principle it is best to involve members of the newly formed group in as many activities as possible to ensure the processes and options are appropriate and relevant to them and their perception of the needs and choices they need to make. It is also a great way for them to learn new skills and acquire positive and creative life experiences from being involved. If it's going to take a long time for the project to happen then the experience has to be a consistently good one that will keep them feeling engaged. A good enabler or group leader can do this by constantly encouraging, motivating and shaping the process.

Don't underestimate how unfamiliar the whole process of designing and developing housing will be to any inexperienced client group. Activities and experiences that build self-confidence are essential. However people will learn as much from each other as from 'the professionals' – all can bring creativity and new thinking to solving problems. The professionals will also be learning from the group and actively listening to what they have to say to inform the design.

Involvement of potential residents in identifying sites will help develop a sense of ownership of the whole project. Where you live is as important a choice as what you live in. Hold neighbourhood walks to identify potential sites, and conduct simple appraisals of what is good/bad and possible/impossible about each. There is value in joint discovery for a group, even if you end up selecting the first site you considered.

If you have a large site or intend to develop others think ahead about how to identify individuals and groups that may have interest in later phases. The very substantial custom build programme at Cherwell District Council came initially from the public interest aroused by a small self-build project for ex-servicemen.

Group commissioning and design of housing

Creating an accommodation brief for the project may require your group to develop skills in collective decision making, and some technical guidance. Understanding the balance between privacy and shared living is vital - the development of a shared idea of how you will live is one of the strongest determinants of success in making the scheme work in occupation. The group will need to review how things are working and manage any changes that may be necessary once people have moved in.

Features to include in the accommodation brief:

- private space: ranges from en suite/studio bedrooms to self-contained flats or houses
- shared space: ranges from living, dining, kitchen or utility functions in shared house/flat to separate communal spaces serving a number of self-contained homes
- adaptability and futureproofing: whether public and private spaces will allow for reconfiguration or change in future
- management and maintenance: governance arrangements, future management costs/affordability and learning opportunities.

Consider whether any technical advisers such as enablers helping construct the design brief should be a separate appointment from the design team. Ongoing independent support to the client group may be a sensible and necessary resource to help the group continue to development its thinking and make decisions.

Ownership and governance

Another key issue to be considered during the design briefing stage is who will own and be responsible for managing and maintaining property, communal spaces, grounds and other assets. Who will make decisions on management in the future? These questions have implications for the design, to ensure your scheme is manageable and adaptable and individual residents understand what they are responsible for.

Project financing and ownership options

Most community-led projects require a range of different funding solutions at different stages in the planning and construction process (see Briefing Paper on Viability). The options available to your group will depend on who your partners are and the access to funds that they have, and the types of housing tenure you intend to include, as this will affect how and when you will receive income. For example income from homes for rent will come in over future years as opposed to receiving capital payments from home owners once the house is completed. Here are a few options to pursue:

- group and individual self-builders' loans (eg banks, building societies and specialist lenders)
- government's Custom Build Serviced Plot Loan Fund and Small Builders Finance Fund (merged in 2016). This can be used flexibly, as long as it's not for land purchase, and money can be bid for when needed
- grants and loans such as Community Buildings Pre-Feasibility Grant and Community Buildings Project Support Grant, and Development Finance Revolving Funds
- Big Society Capital, Triodos and Ecology Building Society etc which all offer specialist loan finance

- Social Impact Equity funds: Community Share Issues, Big Issue Invest, Key Fund etc.

STEP 5: OPTIONS FOR PROCUREMENT AND CONSTRUCTION

Options for developing your project

There are several different routes you can take in developing your new homes, depending on the level of risk you want to take on. Some options include:

- entirely self-managed: Independent self-organising groups and individuals
- enabled development for self-organising groups and individuals, working with eg housing associations, house builders, and/or a professional project manager. Other partner developer options include secondary cooperatives like CDS (Cooperative Development Society); Birmingham Cooperative Housing Services; Registered Providers who have Community Land Trust and cohousing groups within their membership; or specialist developers (K1 Cohousing in Cambridge has gone down this route)
- developer-led, resident-managed housing.

Self-build procurement options

Listed below are some of the ways that your project can be procured. Each involves a different level of commitment from the occupier.

- self-building: literally building the whole dwelling yourself
- self-finishing: taking a property from a constructor and completing from a certain stage of construction, up to decorating stage
- self-commissioning: directly procuring professional design services and contractor or housebuilder to build for you
- participation in training schemes for developing construction and management skills
- working with an enabling partner - house builders, constructors, housing associations or project management professionals who will build the project based on an agreed specification.

In each of these options, the activity may be carried out by an individual or a group, and as conventional home owner or renter. See the 'Good Housekeeping' Briefing Paper for information on different organisational structures for community-led groups.

Methods of construction and phasing

There are several construction options you will want to consider. Each alternative approach to design, construction method, financing and individual/group commissioning will have a different set of timescales and will therefore affect the phasing of your project. Some pointers:

- potential methods of construction include 'traditional' on-site construction; kit or system build, off-site manufacture (ie prefabrication in a factory) or more 'experimental' materials and techniques, such as examples of houses made from straw bales.
- housing associations or other developer partners may have supply chains and preferred construction approaches that can be used to keep costs down.

Please note that this paper provides some initial advice on self and custom build projects only. The context for every project is different, and it is recommended that your group seeks professional advice early on to help you understand all issues and risks that could affect your project.