

Community-led Design and Development

Technical Paper: Leading new build housing for your community - how to get started

Introduction

All new housing starts somewhere; however for community groups often good ideas for new homes that may have substantial merit never develop any further. There may be many reasons for this. Housing and community development is a complex process that can last a number of years; it needs significant technical expertise and obtaining funding and financing can be challenging.

This paper is based on the experience of some community groups and Tenant Management Organisations on housing estates. It will outline some initial topics and suggest tips that may help community groups get started with a project. This paper will show how to put some structure and framework around the initial idea to develop it from a concept into an action plan. This will then allow it to be tested and explored in more detail to show that it is viable and allow informed decisions made by the community.

What motivates a community group or tenant management organisation to want to develop housing?

If you asked this question to each group or organisation that has commenced on this journey you are likely to receive a multitude of different answers. Most responses can be linked to the fact that local people know their area well and feel strongly that they want to influence what happens there. They know the needs of the local population and what their problems and issues are. They may know of vacant land that could be put to good use for the local community; they may wish to raise the quality of housing and public space near them – to produce something more attractive, useable and an asset to the neighbourhood. There may also be the sense that if the community have been able to shape and influence new homes that they will feel greater pride in where they live.

What benefits can a community group or tenant management organisation provide?

It is precisely because of their personal knowledge of the community and the locality that community groups and tenant management organisations are often uniquely placed to achieve successful outcomes that others find difficult to deliver. Being able to speak on behalf of and articulate the needs of the community, being known and trusted by the community and, in the case of Tenant Management Organisation, a proven record of service delivery, all add considerable value to the community-led model.



Individual benefits include:

- unlocking infill and sensitive sites
- sense of ownership for local people if they are involved in the design and create something suited to the location and the people who live there
- meeting local needs may lead to less opposition to new development
- providing an opportunity for all parts of the community to feel involved and give their views – including harder to reach groups like children, young people, older people and people with different health and mobility needs.

Challenges for community groups and tenant management organisations getting started

When you start thinking about new housing it can be daunting to work out where to begin. Many groups have found it beneficial to start talking with their tenants and residents about the estate as a place – rather than leaping into talking about new housing straight away. These initial conversations and projects can form a very helpful foundation for further projects in the future that could be more explicitly about new housing. Initial conversations and activities could include:

- activities celebrating the local history of the estate
- community events that bring different parts of the community together (big lunches, summer parties, family fun days, litter picking days). These can build a shared understanding of how the place has changed over time, find out who lives on the estate and unearth their skills and aptitudes
- finding those people who may want to be involved in other projects such as a housing project in the future. There will be key “connector” people who could potentially work with hard to reach groups that may not come to formal events eg newcomers to the estate; those whose first language is not English; people with young children and young people/teenagers.

The results from running various events may highlight that there are a range of projects you could carry out in advance of any discussions about housing – this could include public space improvement projects, activities for children in the school holidays, setting up clubs or groups to bring different people together eg projects to encourage food growing. Each of these smaller projects can help demonstrate to residents that new positive activities are occurring on the estate, that people’s views and opinions are being listened to and that improvements are coming about, whether they are for the social or environmental benefit of the community. Importantly they are locally- and community-led.

Such smaller projects can also help in applying for funding from various bodies such as your local authority, local charitable foundations, the Health Service and the Police. Many potential funders will want to see evidence of how you work as a group, what projects or events you have managed to deliver and who was involved. Typically a funder may want to focus on a particular demographic (eg older people) or type of project (eg a project to improve people’s health) and the more information you can provide to show you meet their criteria the more successful you will be in securing funding for what you want to do.

Once you have conducted various general events you may wish to bring the focus onto the built environment of your estate – the action plan below starts really from the point where you are ready to start talking about housing with your residents.

Action Plan		
Activity and Context	Responsible	Timing
Do a Problems and Opportunities Survey: this is a tour of the estate conducted by residents to record both known problems and to identify areas of specific potential. Potential might include e.g. unused buildings or spaces, or proposal to establish a community growing project. See the capital growth website for a case study on Wenlock Barn estate's project.		
Do a Cabe Spaceshaper consultation: Spaceshaper is a practical toolkit for use by anyone – whether a local community activist or a professional – to measure the quality of a public space before investing time and money in improving it. It could be used to help consult on attitudes towards specific outdoor spaces on the estate, expressly with people who live next to them. See the Spaceshaper page of the Design Council website.		
Do a footfall and lighting survey: Understanding how people actually move around the estate could inform new ideas for improving the public realm. Lighting can often be the cause of resident feeling unsafe walking around at night. See the footfall survey by Space Syntax for Wenlock barn on its website.		
Agree your overall aims based on the research you have done above: this might be to improve public spaces, create more playgrounds, parks and streets better lighting or more housing for older people, in addition to considering new housing. Bring a working group of people together to discuss and agree where change might happen in the short and long term.		
Build contacts with other Tenant Management Organisations or community / resident groups that have similar circumstances to yours or have experience of leading projects involving housing. Try contacting London Community Foundation, and look at case studies on Leathermarket Joint Management Board, Ethelred Tenant Management Organisation and Brixton Green.		
Funding: look at potential funding streams to finance both the planning / community engagement stages of your initiative and the cost of the development work itself.		
When you have some initial information to share draft a proposal of ideas to put to residents, along with questions for them to think about. These might include 'where are our older people going to live in the future?' 'How can we improve the quality of our existing housing?' You will need to think about a range of ways to share this information and involve a wide range of people as possible (see Design Briefing Paper for ideas on inclusivity and how to involve people).		
Find an independent enabler to help you to work out what your options are for new development or other improvements on your estate. They can help you to devise a series of events to communicate and consult with residents. Make the most of existing activities – fetes, sporting events etc to speak to people and hear their views.		

Remember at this stage the main aim is to get some clarity to allow you to be able to test out your initial ideas by holding well informed conversations, being able to start telling your story in a coherent and understandable way. Use the action plan to think about what your main messages are and the best way of telling them. Use it also to set your priorities for what follows.

Next Steps

Once you have started meaningful engagement by using your conversation you will want to think about what comes next. There are a number of useful resources and toolkits that can assist – the Routemap on the Design Council Cabe website can help point to the steps you could take in moving your project forward. You may also be interested in the Brixton Green community group and Ethelred Tenant Management Organisation case studies.

Tips

- Be really clear about what you want to achieve and your vision.
- Know what your key messages are.
- Carry out as much local research as you can, it will make you better informed.
- Visit others projects to learn from their experiences.
- Focus on the overall strategy rather than the details at this stage.
- Use your existing networks and build and expand new ones. This will assist you in promoting your project and could provide sources of useful expertise.
- Plan for the long term and realise that you may need to run projects over a number of years – as part of this think sensibly about who within your group should lead projects. Encourage others to lead projects or parts of a project from time to time to avoid over reliance on one person.
- Plan regular communication with residents to help bring them on the journey.
- Consider if you will require partners to achieve your vision and what added value they can provide.