



Oxford community-led housing: routes to delivery

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OCLT
Oxfordshire Community
Land Trust

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Helping communities help themselves



Executive summary

About this study

In March 2017, Oxford City Council commissioned Community First Oxfordshire, Oxfordshire Community Land Trust and Oxfordshire Community Foundation to undertake this research to explore how community-led housing could be delivered sustainably within Oxford City.

This study identifies a range of feasible delivery routes for community-led housing schemes and identifies the support that is needed if community-led housing is to be a real option for Oxford residents.

What is community-led housing?

Community-led housing is about local people playing a leading and lasting role in solving local housing problems. Genuinely community-led schemes involve:

- a community group being engaged and involved throughout the development process;
- a community entity owning, managing or stewarding the homes; and
- legal protection for genuine and permanent affordability of the homes.

Community-led housing includes a range of approaches, including community land trusts, cohousing, housing co-operatives and collective self-build or custom-build. What these approaches have in common is that they act in the interest of a community and are not driven by the need for profit.

Community-led housing: affordable homes with multiple social benefits

Community-led housing does much more than provide homes. Community-led approaches provide homes that are permanently and genuinely affordable, galvanise local support for new housing, engage the energy and creativity and civic engagement of residents, enhance well-being, increase neighbourhood cohesion, deliver high quality design, high standards of construction and energy efficiency, support smaller builders and suppliers and create demand for innovative building techniques. Community-led housing schemes also have access to sources of funding that are not available for typical housing development.

Community-led housing constitutes a paradigm shift. It offers an entirely different approach to development and ownership of land. Factors such as social benefit and permanent affordability are central to community-led schemes. Community-led housing groups positively value affordability, community facilities, quality and social and environmental features within community-led housing schemes rather than seeing these as costs. Community groups incorporate these elements into their financial and governance arrangements as they design and develop their scheme. When elements such as ongoing cost to residents, social value and enhanced life-chances are included, then community-led schemes become an investment in wider societal goals not just 'viable'.

Community-led housing in Oxford: part of the housing solution

Current mechanisms to deliver housing are not providing enough affordable homes for people who live and work in Oxford. There is an acute shortage of affordable homes, high levels of commuting and

insecure tenure in private rented accommodation. Inevitably this has contributed to increasing levels of homelessness.

This affects most people under the age of 40 and anyone who is earning less than the Oxford median income (£32,416 in 2017) including post doctorate researchers, skilled trades such as electricians and plumbers, public sector staff, nurses, teachers and carers and bus drivers - the people who are needed in order for the city to function effectively.

Extensive outreach work was conducted for the study and feedback showed that many local people are enthusiastic about community-led approaches to housing and that it would meet their needs. This response came both from people who are currently in housing need as well as those who can afford to live in Oxford but who wish to live in a more mutually supportive and neighbourly environment. However, what was also apparent was that there was a generally low level of knowledge about community-led housing prior to engagement activity. Therefore, the full extent of local demand is unclear.

Feasible delivery routes for community-led housing schemes

The viability assessment for this study shows that community-led housing is deliverable in Oxford under realistic assumptions. The delivery routes assessed show that community-led housing can meet the housing needs of people who are earning less than the median income.

The study team concluded that feasible delivery routes that are particularly suitable for Oxford are:

- Single home: mutual housing co-operatives for groups of sharers.
- Small: developing multiple small sites using the same construction methods and design approach for small affordable dwellings for single people.
- Medium: cohousing with 20-40 units on single site with private homes and communal facilities designed for greater neighbourly interaction.
- Large: partnership with developers for community-led housing on larger sites such as on the edge of Oxford.

The study estimates that, with enabling support, community-led approaches could deliver over 1,400 homes and accommodate over 3,300 people in the City within 10 years. *See Table 4.9.*

Enabling delivery of community-led housing

National experience shows that community-led housing schemes are deliverable. Community-led housing organisations are operating profitably at all scales in both urban and rural contexts in the UK. However, the numbers are small with the sector delivering at most 25 community-schemes per year since 1975 nationwide.¹

The Oxford experience is that groups have tried and are still trying to deliver community-led housing schemes but very few have succeeded. Oxford has several experienced and dedicated community-led housing groups who are ready to deliver as opportunities arise, but they need support. The people

¹ Building and Social Housing Foundation (2016)

involved are volunteers putting in enormous effort on the margins of busy lives. Oxford's housing market is particularly challenging. The study identifies the challenges and the enabling support that will be needed to achieve community-led schemes in the City.

Enabling activity that would particularly help Oxford groups and potential future schemes falls into three key areas that are known to facilitate community-led housing in other countries and in the UK: strategic leadership, access to land and access to finance.

Community-led housing will not happen in Oxford without assistance. Every example of community-led housing succeeding in the UK and in Europe has involved some support such as a willing landowner who values community benefits, council strategic leadership or planning policy or partnerships with housing associations or developers.

The government wishes the community-led housing building sector to grow in order to expand the options for additional affordable housing alongside mainstream delivery. The government is providing funding to achieve this through the Community Housing Fund. The Council, community groups and registered providers can all take advantage of this to provide the feasibility work, infrastructure, capital funding and enabling support that is needed.

Enabling activity is needed from a range of actors including local government, housing developers, the third sector and the community. Within Local Government, capacity is needed to meet with groups, sign post them to expertise within and outside the Council, advise councillors, make connections between services and make the links to strategic objectives. Increased capacity for officer roles in housing and planning would enable existing services to be more responsive to community groups.

Recommendations

A summary of priority actions recommended for the Council is:

- Develop a strategy to enable genuinely affordable community-led approaches in Oxford.
- Promote community-led housing within the Oxfordshire Growth Board and Joint Statutory Spatial Plan.
- Appoint a Councillor as Oxford's community-led housing champion.
- Apply to the Community Housing Fund to provide enabling support within the council for community-led housing schemes that are currently being proposed by groups in Oxford.
- Include support for community-led housing in the Local Plan, housing and tenancy strategies.
- Help to unlock sites for community-led housing, for example:
 - require larger sites to include some community-led housing through Section 106 agreements;
 - explore small and difficult Council sites for development by community-led housing groups as exemplar schemes;
 - make local authority owned land available leasehold for long-term investment return; and

- allow an exclusivity period on a site or sites for a community-led housing group to work up a feasible project and then purchase the land.
- Liaise with landlords of empty properties and poorly managed houses of multiple occupation to promote and facilitate opportunities for community-led housing groups to bring the properties back into occupation.
- Set up a revolving loan fund that community-led housing groups can access for cheaper finance.
- Develop practical responses to help support and encourage community-led housing including providing support and guidance for the identification of appropriate sites and working with landowners.
- Add questions related to community-led housing to the self-build register to collect data about interest in community-led housing.

The outreach for this study showed that very few people know about community-led housing. But community-led housing solutions have many benefits that strike a chord with people including genuine affordability in perpetuity, individual well-being and supportive neighbourhoods.

Recommendations to increase awareness are:

- Public events, stalls and talks to raise awareness.
- Training and workshops for professionals to learn from successful schemes, develop replicable models and share best practice.
- Training for community-led housing groups on governance, group process, development so that they can deliver housing themselves or work effectively in partnership with developers.

The third sector is also an important source of support. An advisory support function that recently has been established in Oxfordshire “Collaborative Housing” www.collaborativehousing.org.uk is working in partnership with a range of local experts to support community-led housing groups, local authorities and developers.