



BUILDING A LEGACY:

THE IMPACT OF EMPTY HOMES COMMUNITY GRANTS PROGRAMME IN THE NORTH EAST YORKSHIRE AND HUMBERSIDE

Key Findings Summary



October 2015

The Housing and Communities Research Group has recently completed a second regional impact study of the Empty Homes Community Grants Programme in which approaching £50million grant was allocated to 110 community based organisations to bring empty homes into use. The 150 page report 'Building a Legacy' (Working Paper 3) presents an analysis of the programme's impact across two regions: North East and Yorkshire and Humberside including 11 depth case studies. This short summary is included as our Foreword to the study but is published separately here to introduce a wider group of readers to this little known example of what can happen when we move away from large scale procurement models in housing and give smaller locally based organisations a chance to show that they can do.

When endorsing the decision of the Coalition Government to fund the Empty Homes Community Grants Programme (EHCGP) in 2011, Liberal Democrat Housing Minister, Andrew Stunnell signed up to '*building a longer term legacy*' in which the number of community-led organisations increases and they have better access to funding and loans, better partnerships with LAs and housing providers, are better networked, more sustainable and have a better understood business model. (DCLG Press Release November 2011).

This research in the North East and Yorkshire and Humberside finds that EHCGP has indeed left a legacy in these regions of nearly 30 locally based organisations with a track record of bringing some 750 empty properties back into use for over 1,500 residents. These organisations now have the capacity and aspiration to bring many more back over future years with a wide range of social outcomes from community safety, accredited construction apprenticeships, and better homes accessible to those least able to access them in the market or through social housing.

Some have now succeeded in registration with the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) thanks to the track record built under the EHCGP. Many more who do not wish to register as large scale housing providers have indicated that if funding similar to EHCGP were to become available in future years they would be keen to develop at a similar level of output. The purchase and repair option has enabled many of these organisations to acquire assets with benefits to their balance sheet, income streams and long term sustainability. Already some organisations have used this asset base to borrow to expand the scope of their activity and to leverage funds equivalent to over four times the value of the grant itself. The lease and repair option has also given organisations a longer term income stream. On some occasions property owners have paid back the repair costs over a period alongside management fees to enable the organisations to reinvest this income in longer term service development.

The programme has certainly contributed to the viability of construction teams through enhanced workflow. This has enabled richer and longer-term training experience to be offered to trainees and apprentices. In one case this had enabled the organisation to grow from 10 six month traineeships in 2010 to 18 staff and three levels of experience, with ten trainees beyond NVQ2, five apprenticeships, and 3 trade team leads reporting to the same construction manager five years later. The qualitative differences in the training experience offered were captured by an apprentice joiner excited by the challenge of installing a new staircase into a three storey townhouse.

EHCGP has delivered excellent value for money, making a small amount of grant go a long way, attracting further funding including grants, soft loans, social finance and conventional bank lending. Financial leverage has been estimated at between 50p to £1 for every £ of grant across the programme based on a survey with a 59% response. In one case leverage reached £4.5 of spend

from all sources for every one pound of EHCGP grant, and 2.5 homes improved for every one funded under EHCGP. Benefits to tenants, volunteers, the wider community and third parties have been estimated in one case to deliver between £3.24 and £5 of social value for every £ invested depending on the assumptions. While the methods and assumptions used in such quantifications of benefit may be disputed there is no doubting the real benefits enjoyed by participants who converged on the view that EHCGP had been ‘the best thing’.

But EHCGP has not just been about value for money and bettering that offered by large scale procurement models. It has demonstrated the value of local knowledge in negotiating deals with owners of empty homes and local trust in securing programme participation from long term unemployed people. It has rewarded volunteering by providing routes into training, work and housing for people initially joining in litter picks and garden clearances and intrinsic rewards of ***‘seeing when it’s all finished and somebody moves into that property and you know that all the volunteers have done a bit to help....’***. It has provided solutions to *‘wicked problems’* tackling property abandonment, blight and associated anti-social behaviour; offering housing options to those excluded from the mainstream including ex-offenders, people with mental health issues and for single people in work without homeless priority or resources to access decent private rentals.

Over and above these tangible benefits, the legacy being built by EHCGP is that of a grass roots housing sector, occupying the niches once served by fledgling housing associations, interested in individual properties and streetscapes, working with local people to craft tailored solutions to difficult and messy problems. A distinctive feature of this sector found in several parts of the region covered in this study, in Leeds, in the Tees Valley and in Hull, is the development of a collaborative culture of peer learning and mutual support in which new entrants are welcomed and enabled to grow as part of the sector. As one longer established organisation put it ***‘We’ve worked with these organisations to help build the infrastructure and look at things like bidding for grants and meeting each other and going to visit schemes; good old-fashioned community building’***.

Reading this report it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that a legacy has indeed been built. Something important to but recently missing from the third sector housing scene in England is being recreated. A gap in the market is being filled and new opportunities fashioned for *‘good old fashioned community building’* to take place. The magic of housing as both a physical asset and a source of rental income is being rediscovered as a basis for sustainable community-led action in a period in which organisations dependent on revenue support have found survival an increasing problem. Learning from this programme connects well with BSHF’s wider work on Global Habitat and exemplifies *‘can do’* approaches that are practical, sustainable and transferrable and that should contribute to a *‘new social urbanism’*.

