

EMPTY HOMES COMMUNITY GRANTS PROGRAMME: FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REQUESTS

A total of three FOI requests were made as a result of the failure of either DCLG or Tribal to place information on the monitoring and impact of the innovative £50 million EHCHP programme into the public domain. These requests resulted in access to new information including:

- A) Tribal end of Programme report
- B) Tribal end of Programme survey
- C) An answer to specific questions on programme outcomes

While it is important that the FOI request has brought new information into the public domain, there is a need for caution in interpreting some of this material. A commentary and assessment by the research team has drawn out the key information on learning about EHC GP and identified implications for future programmes.

KEY LEARNING ABOUT EHC GP

- Nationally 1297 HOMES and 3025 BEDROOMS were brought back into use through EHC GP. 112 organisations received EHC GP to deliver 157 projects. This leads Tribal to state the contribution of the programme to the supply of affordable housing as follows:
'although the statistics indicate that the number of affordable homes is decreasing, EHC GP has made a small contribution by bringing 1297 affordable homes back into use' (p.34).
- Table 9 of the end of programme report shows that in all regions except London and the South East, EHCHP either met (within 5%) or exceeded the targets that had been set:

Table 9: – Programme targets and achievements by region at 31.03.15

Region	Target Homes	Target bedrooms	% Homes achieved	% Bedrooms achieved
East Midlands	121	316	101.65%	100%
East	17	84	105.88%	102.38%
London	115	230	68.69%	69.13%
South East	17	76	94.11%	85.52%
South West	60	139	98.33%	104.31%
West Midlands	126	295	101.58%	103.05%
North West	253	616	101.18%	96.91%
Yorkshire & Humber	388	880	101.28%	100.56%
North East	228	498	99.56%	98.19%
Totals	1,325	3,134		

- This excellent performance (which we understand is considerably better than the HCA Empty Homes Programme) was achieved despite the fact that over half of the 112 participating organisations had not been involved in empty property work before, and the need for Tribal (also a new agency to the sector) to build relationships needed to monitor the programme.

Three of Tribal's conclusions sum up their learning from the programme

1. Successful take up in all regions except London and the South East

The overall achievement across all nine English regions is 97%. The least successful region is London, with an achievement rate of 67%.

2. Wider outcomes should have been recognised, measured and rewarded

The programme generated a lot of added value, such as employment, training, apprenticeships, improved neighbourhoods and improved sustainability of voluntary and community sector organisations. As a capital programme, there was, particularly at the start, little focus on programme outcomes. This can be evidenced by the design of the application form and the low score attributed to project benefits by the assessment process. Nevertheless successful project delivery did generate a positive effect on neighbourhoods as well as individuals, but this was not proactively captured, quantified or measured.

3. A future programme similar to EHCGP would be ideal for organisations specialising in this task who do not want to become registered providers

The shortage of new housing across the country is commonly cited as approximately 240,000 each year. Affordable housing within the private and social sector will always be needed. The progression routes for organisations which have participated in this programme are not clear cut. For some, the next step will be to attain registered provider status via the Homes and Communities Agency and continue to identify and refurbish empty properties. There will however be those organisations that although do not wish to become a registered provider, will want to continue the refurbishment of empty properties at local level. For the latter, a future programme that is similar to the Empty Homes Community Grants Programme would be ideal.

These learning points concur with those of the University's two evaluations of the programme in the Midlands and in the North East and Yorkshire and Humberside. It is great to hear that the agency responsible for delivering and monitoring the programme endorses the success of the programme in terms of programme take up and meeting wider objectives and believes that these wider outcomes should be recognised and rewarded. It is also good to hear that a future programme that is similar to EHCGP would be ideal.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE PROGRAMME

Tribal comment on page 28 of their end of programme report that:

The most apparent benefit of successful project delivery is the availability of decent affordable housing. Organisations have however reported other benefits to project delivery, including the provision of training and apprenticeships, an increased asset base, safer neighbourhoods and raised organisation profile.

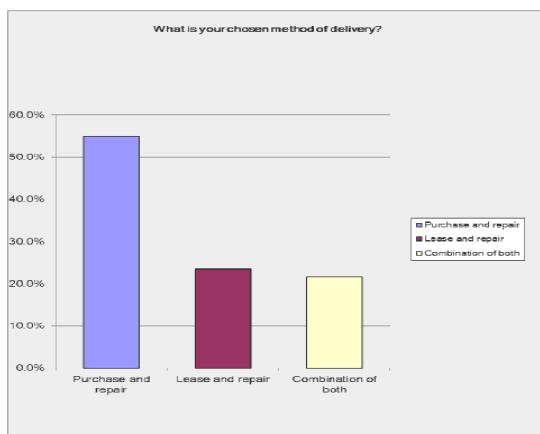
It can be argued that value for money should not just be measured in terms of pounds and pence, but that the added value delivered by projects should also be a factor in grant assessment.

It is unfortunate that the end of programme report fails to quantify these benefits, but a number of case studies are included which complement existing evidence in the University's regional evaluation reports on the wide range of social outcomes achieved. It will be important for any future programmes to include evaluations of wider social outcomes since these form a major part of the argument for the value for money of investment in self-help housing.

While there are no programme outturn figures on the mix of lease and repair and purchase and repair models in the end of programme report, Tribal draws on the end of programme survey to confirm the popularity of purchase and repair, confirming the findings of our own evaluation.

Tribal's Table 6 is a graph showing that a majority of the 57 respondents to the Tribal end of programme survey had used purchase and repair only or a mix purchase and lease.

Table 6:- Chosen method of delivery



- Tribal also comment in their end of programme report that ‘

The rise in property prices made it increasingly difficult to deliver lease and repair projects. The lease and repair model offered less value for money than the purchase and repair model. In year two there was a noticeable shift in project delivery, with many organisations moving from a lease and repair approach to a purchase and repair model.

This is helpful guidance for future programmes. Not only did the purchase and repair model provide ‘better value for money’ to the public purse, but it also provided the basis for more sustainable asset based growth in the sector.

Two of Tribal’s recommendations (7.6 and 7.11) are particularly worth highlighting and endorsing for future programmes:

7.6. More focus on the programme outcomes throughout the life cycle of the programme.

The focus for the Department at the point of inception was on the number of properties to be refurbished in terms of its definition of good value for money. The assessment process did not reward project proposals that sought to deliver added value and to create positive outcomes. Reported project delivery has shown a diverse range of outcomes worthy of recognition. A future programme should factor project delivery outcomes into the application, assessment, and monitoring processes.

7.11 Provision of revenue funding

It is recommended that future programmes have an element of revenue funding. It has been strongly demonstrated that project delivery is very difficult to achieve without a source of revenue funding. The Department should consider including a list of eligible expenditure within the application guidance pack, and to funding no more than 75% of each project budget specifically for capital expenditure, thereby ensuring that the applicant considers the amount of revenue required and seeks to source this prior to the submission of an application.

SOME ISSUES WITH THIS EVIDENCE

Those readers who delve deeply into the Tribal reports will find some irritating inconsistencies in the totals between sections and a lack of detail on grant allocated and properties brought into use. There also remain some important gaps since our third FOI request failed to deliver any reliable statistics on the outcomes of the programme beyond those included in the Tribal end of programme report in relation to the distribution of grant by organisation, purchase or lease and by numbers of homes delivered.

Nevertheless it is important that this information is now in the public domain. The EHCGP was the result of a historic decision by the Coalition Government to provide grant funding for non-registered community based organisations to bring empty homes into use, thereby filling a gap left by larger housing organisations. This funding has been of long term benefit to the sector and to society through the broad range of social outcomes delivered (in relation to new homes, employment and training, tackling neighbourhood blight, tackling wicked issues and building successful community based organisations.

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