

Briefing Paper 11

Housing Scoping Papers – Self-Help Housing

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Introduction

This briefing paper summarises one of the six scoping papers prepared for the housing work stream of the Third Sector Research Centre. Self-help housing is a relatively small scale and poorly defined sub-sector in comparison to housing associations, the co-operative sector, tenants and community organisations and homeless, advice and support organisations and social enterprises in the homelessness field which comprise the other five scoping papers. However, it epitomises a form of bottom up organisation that once played a more important part in the housing third sector, and one that could play a significant future role if appropriate funding, information and support mechanisms are put in place. It has been argued that the credit crisis and recession have stimulated lasting changes to the policy and institutional landscape, not least to the approach we take to affordable housing and regeneration.



Latch Project, Leeds: A trainee working on an empty property being brought back into use (reproduced with permission of self-help-housing.org)

Self-help housing could play a greater role in making more effective use of under-used resources such as empty housing while enabling meaningful engagement of citizens and communities in longer term social change.

The briefing begins by defining and exploring the origins and evolution of this sub-sector, mapping the numbers and types of organisations and their key roles and functions and characteristics that define their third sector identities¹. The full scoping paper goes

on to consider policy and regulation issues and the funding sources (such as Temporary Social Housing Grant) that could be harnessed to enable this sub-sector to take on a more significant role; perhaps returning to the peak activity enjoyed in the 1970s and 80s.

The full scoping paper uses case studies to illustrate the impact of the self-help model (on inclusive place shaping and building sustainable organisations to meet long term needs of marginalised communities). In this briefing we include a case study that has benefited from community research as part of a major evaluation of refugee housing partnerships undertaken by CURS for the housing associations charitable trust (hact)². The briefing ends by identifying key bodies and field leaders who could support the further development of the sector and suggests further research on self-help housing to contribute to wider knowledge of the third sector.

Defining the Field

Self-help housing is defined for the purposes of this paper as 'involving local people bringing back into use empty properties for their use, organising whatever repairs are necessary to make them habitable' <http://self-help-housing.org/>. Self-help housing is often provided through co-operative forms of organisation but is usually seen as distinct from self-build and squatting although it is not easy to draw boundaries around what is essentially a 'bottom up' community based sector.

It is best considered as a field that requires policy and funding agencies (such as the Empty Homes Agency, Shelter, and the Homes and Communities Agency), support and co-ordination bodies (such as self-help-housing.org, local authorities, housing associations and co-operatives) to work with community based organisations to harness volunteering and civic engagement.

Origins and evolution

The website <http://self-help-housing.org/> refers to early origins immediately after the Second World War when disused military camps were used as temporary housing by local families. However, the municipalisation of unimproved private sector properties by some local authorities in the 1970s and 80s and the availability of a funding stream to make these properties wind and water tight for short-life use provided the stimulus for larger scale self-help housing organisations to emerge. This was particularly the case in London boroughs (e.g. Hackney, Islington, Lambeth and Southwark) that had a ready market of students and young people requiring affordable housing and prepared to contribute time and effort. Institutional capacity was provided by the 'short life user groups' that were supported by local authorities and housing associations to enable short-life residents to undertake repairs, and the availability of government funding in the form of 'mini-HAG grants' (see below).

Some of the TSOs developed in the 1970s and 80s to take advantage of these

opportunities later evolved into larger-scale co-operatives and registered housing associations such as (West Hampstead HA, Ujima, Brighton Housing Trust), which have in turn been swallowed up by larger housing association groups (Genesis, London and Quadrant, Affinity Sutton), very large groups whose activities no longer give any particular emphasis to self-help housing.

There is thought to have been a decline in self-help housing activity after the 1980s, possibly as a result of an upturn in the property market (self-help-housing.org website), but also probably because of a reigning back of local authority municipalisation alongside demunicipalisation programmes for social housing that fitted the increasingly neo-liberal policy climate. It is important to maintain a critical perspective on the 'golden age' of self-help housing in the 1970s and 80s and to learn lessons for the current period. For example renovations and repairs achieved under the Mini-hag funding did not always meet standards that would be acceptable today.

Furthermore, some short life housing groups in the 1970s and 80s had governance and labour relations problems associated with their informal or collective styles of organisation. Initiatives such as self-help-housing.org should ensure that these lessons are learned and applied to today's context and expectations.

Main types of self-help organisations

A variety of types of organisations may become involved in self-help housing. Five main types of organisations are listed in the self-help.org directory.

Table 1: Main types of organisations

Types	Numbers listed	Description
Community Housing Projects	(3)	Two in Leeds and one in Plymouth
Housing Co-operatives	(13)	Most in London, others in Brighton, Southsea, Southampton and Norwich – vary considerably in size (from 10 to over 400 homes) and longevity (several London short life co-ops date back to 1970s)
Housing and Training Projects	(5)	One in London, remainder in northern England (Yorkshire, North East, Barrow), link construction training with housing mainly for young people.
Refugee Housing Projects	(9)	Most in London, manage private and housing association properties on short life basis – some on quite a large scale (e.g Tamil Community HA manages 620 short life bedspaces as well as 106 permanent HA units, West coast HA in Newham manages 120 short-life homes alongside training for refugees and migrants)
Community Training and Enterprise	(4)	Three in Yorkshire or the NE and one in Bristol, include two development trusts.

Source: <http://self-help-housing.org/self-help-housing-now/directory-existing-projects/> accessed August 2nd 2009

There are clear overlaps between the categories (with for example some community housing projects also providing training). The varying geographies of these types of organisations are intriguing reflecting both variations in demand (e.g. refugee projects concentrated in London) and institutional support (co-operatives also mainly London based).

The governance of self-help housing organisations varies, with some adopting co-operative and, in the 1970s and 80s, collective forms of organisation enabling volunteers and residents to become directly involved in running the organisations. Leeds Action to Create Homes Ltd (LATCH), is a well established self-help organisation in Leeds that has adopted a collective form of governance.

Key roles and functions

Case studies of ten organisations on the self-help-housing.org website indicate some core functions performed by all of these organisations and a variety of additional functions (e.g. training and community cohesion) that reflect local origins and aims. The core functions (for which more detail is provided in the full scoping report) are:

- 1. Securing use of empty property through negotiation with owners**
- 2. Securing funding to enable properties to be repaired and brought into use structurally sound**
- 3. Making properties fit to occupy through a mix of professional and volunteer labour**
- 4. Letting properties to people**
- 5. Rent collection and housing management**

Third Sector Characteristics

Self-help housing organisations are generally small and locally based. They have a high potential for harnessing civic engagement and volunteering to promote social inclusion and community cohesion. This is epitomised by the Canopy project in Leeds whose participation in the Accommodate refugee housing project³ provided opportunities to extend its community based approach to create quality homes from disused properties to empower and house refugees alongside other volunteers. This provided a powerful model of community cohesion in action, and homes for young refugees and refugee families. Local young people and refugee

households worked together on the renovation of houses in the Beeston area of the city and played football together. A community research study undertaken by members of the refugee community in Leeds identified the positive outcomes of volunteering in this project⁴ as the boxed example illustrates:

Outcomes of Volunteering: Canopy Project Leeds

"I get courage from the house as I contributed a lot, my energy and a lot of things, I am part of that house...it makes me feel good and I always look at something I helped to build"

"To give something back to the area and Canopy because they have helped me"

"My doctors suggested Canopy to me. I served five years as an apprentice plasterer so I'm qualified and I've actually done quite a lot of plastering for Canopy. I have shown some of these young people how to plaster. I've been involved for about four months. I can paint and decorate too. I volunteer for them four days a week"

"We have just finished a house and when I first saw it, it was nothing and now we have renovated it, it looks very nice. It makes the area look nice instead of a bad place to live...it make people want to live here"

Source: Goodson L and Phillimore J (2008)

Funding

Many self-help housing organisations currently operate on very limited budget, drawing on volunteer labour and rental income to cover core costs as well as housing management service costs. This is partly due to lack of awareness of funding opportunities and partly to the lack of interest of mainstream housing funders. Self-help-housing.org aims to get more funding into the sector, to raise interest among charitable trusts and lever money in from statutory sources. It has identified a HCA (see below) funding stream known as Temporary Social Housing Grant that could be taken up more strongly for community based self-help housing.

Representative/umbrella bodies

Like other forms of bottom-up community based activity self-help housing is unlikely to thrive without institutional linkage to a network of funding, regulatory and support bodies. The key resource dependencies of the sector are on a supply of properties, adequate funding and a supply of volunteers.

Empty Homes Agency - key body identifying and stimulating use of empty dwellings. Social landlords (local authorities, housing associations and ALMOs⁵) appear to be the major sources of supply, but need to access the much larger numbers of empty private dwellings e.g. through Local authority empty property strategies.

Homes and Communities Agency - £6.7million funding for unimproved properties allocated for TSHG 2008-11. This funding stream could be taken up more strongly for community based self-help housing alongside the larger scale use for temporary accommodation for statutory homeless people.

Housing Associations Charitable Trust (HACT) - has provided financial support to more than half of the self-help groups referred to on the self-help-housing.org website.

Shelter - were heavily involved in supporting the first generation of community driven housing initiatives back in the 60's and 70's and are now well placed to work with self-help-housing.org, hact, and a new generation of self-help groups .

National Housing Federation - can encourage housing associations to engage with self-help housing partners and draw down funding through TSHG.

Development Trusts Association - provides potential links for self-help housing with the asset transfer agenda providing the potential for longer term sustainability.

Community and grass roots organisations e.g. Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs), schools, worklessness projects etc. are important linkages to maintain the supply

of volunteers, some of whom may also become the residents of properties they work to repair.

Key issues for further research

Further research could include a supportive evaluation of the Tudor Trust initiative to enable development and wider take-up of this model (by exploring the learning points, barriers and enablers encountered by this project). This could explore the value added of self-help through SROI or other methodologies linked to an understanding of learning from the case studies being compiled by self-help-housing.org. **Research on the scope for self-help and other alternatives to large scale regeneration in housing market renewal areas, would also be of interest in the wake of the credit crisis and the public expenditure downturn.** The potential for self-help housing organisations as examples of social enterprises would repay further research focusing on the different business models adopted within the self-help sector and the potential read across of models from other sectors such as furniture recycling. Another potentially fruitful area for investigation concerns the relationships between self-help groups and other TSOs in structuring a 'thriving third sector' – for example the impact of self-help housing in re-energising larger TSOs at a later stage of their organisational life-cycles (e.g. partnerships with Shelter, and larger housing associations) and the potential of self-help housing to join up solutions to worklessness, community cohesion and housing.

Footnotes

- ¹ The paper draws on discussions with Jon Fitzmaurice, Project Director of self-help-housing.org and the wealth of material that the www.self-help-housing.org project is beginning to assemble (supported by the Tudor Trust) on a sector that has largely operated 'below the radar' and without significant policy or institutional support.
- ² Better Together: Final Accommodate Evaluation Summary <http://www.hact.org.uk/downloads.asp?PagelD=89>
- ³ Evaluated by Mullins D, Goodson L, Beider H and Jones P.A, CURS (2004-8). Final evaluation summary available at www.download.bham.ac.uk/curs/pdf/accommodate_summ.pdf.
- ⁴ Goodson L and Phillimore P (2008) Accommodate: Report of accredited community research training: Birmingham: University of Birmingham.
- ⁵ Arms Length Management Organisations; non-profit organisations who now manage over 1.2 million homes on behalf of local authorities. Further information from National Federation of AMLOs <http://www.almos.org.uk/>

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