# Briefing Paper 53

## Connecting the dots: the potential for self-help housing to address homelessness

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- According to the Homes and Communities Agency there were an estimated 784,000 vacant dwellings in England in September 2009[1], most of which are in the private sector.
- 1,800,000 households are on the waiting list for social housing. According to New Philanthropy Capital there were around 260,000 people rough sleeping or in temporary accommodation in 2008.
- Many homeless people face multiple disadvantages through a lack of skills, and long periods away from the labour market. The rapid rise in unemployment since 2008 has meant homeless people face increased competition for a decreased number of jobs.

Self-help housing may offer the potential to provide joined-up solutions to the problems of homelessness, empty properties and long term unemployment.

'Self-help housing involves groups of local people bringing back into use empty properties that are in limbo, awaiting decisions about their future use, or their redevelopment. It differs from self-build housing which involves constructing permanent homes from scratch'.[2]

It involves the procurement of empty homes from their owners usually on a time-limited licence or lease, but sometimes permanently. Users may be involved in undertaking or commissioning the work to make properties habitable, and there may be options for asset



transfer where this can be agreed with the owner (some self-help groups have become more sustainable by acquiring housing of their own to provide a dependable supply and source of rental income). Models of self-help housing include member benefit (co-operative) and community benefit (for others) models.[3] Self-help housing organisations range from informal community housing projects, to social enterprises that also involve construction skills and other training for homeless people, young people, refugees and other disadvantaged groups as part of a more holistic approach to providing housing and employment.

The coalition Government has expressed a desire to continue to tackle homelessness, the housing shortage, long-term unemployment and skills deficits. However, a much emphasised change in policy direction suggests a move away from central planning and direct state involvement and towards a more localised agenda that is expected to see the role of voluntary and community groups, social enterprises and co-operatives play a major role in delivering services as part of the 'Big Society'.

This briefing paper draws upon a research study undertaken to explore the potential of self-help housing to play a bigger role in the current political environment, and to understand the barriers preventing its wider take up. As part of this research a particular emphasis was placed on how self-help housing approaches might be adapted to help tackle homelessness and associated training and employment needs. Eight case study organisations involved, or planning to be involved, in self help housing were selected to represent a wide range of different approaches to self help housing. The research involved interviews and focus groups with project champions, staff, residents, trainees and volunteers, and partner organisations. The research identified a number of potential contributions of self-help housing projects to tackling homelessness.

- By bringing disused properties back into the available housing stock, our case studies contributed to meeting overall demand for housing. More importantly, some case studies were able to provide housing directly to those people who had helped renovate the properties.
- Some of our case studies were also able to offer training and employment opportunities to those renovating the properties. These ranged from informal volunteering opportunities as part of a community at

Riverlink to paid employment and the opportunity to gain a Level 2 accredited qualification at B4Box.
- Self-help housing organisations with a more co-operative ethos were able to offer those living in and working on the properties the opportunity to participate in organisational decision-making, and begin to take control of their lives.
- Some homeless people living in self-help housing projects found that they were able to build new social relationships and overcome social isolation.

While most self-help housing may be unsuitable for those with high support needs, our case study organisations were able to offer formal and informal support to those living in the projects.

However a number of barriers have prevented self-help housing from reaching its potential.

- First and foremost, our case study organisations found it difficult to secure empty properties to renovate.
- Other organisations found it difficult to bring in sufficient income to deliver self-help housing projects. This could be partially overcome by relying on volunteers to renovate properties.
- Another barrier is a lack of demand for shared or co-operatively owned properties, particularly among homeless people.
- Finally increased demand for social housing led to a greater reluctance among social landlords to let properties outside of choice-based lettings and nominations systems.[4] Perhaps perversely, this appears to have prevented one of our case study organisations from letting the properties to the homeless people who renovated them; while another was unable to let properties exclusively to the ethnic groups it was created to support.

**TABLE 1 Self-Help Housing Case Study Projects – Summary of essential elements**

| NAME & PRIMARY DESCRIPTOR | MAIN FUNCTIONS[1] | ORIGINS | FUNDING[2] | PROPERTY SOURCES[3] | USERS[4] | KEY PARTNERS[5] |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **LATCH** Self-help housing organisation | P, H, S, C, A | 1989 student co-op | R, S, C | L, O, H | R,T | LA, HAs |
| **RIVERLINK HOUSING CO-OPERATIVE** Short-life co-operative | P, H, C, A | 1970s housing co-op | M, R, V | A, P, O (TFL) | R, V | LA, TFL, HA |
| **TAMIL COMMUNITY HOUSING ASSOCIATION** BME housing association | P, H, A | 1980s refugee action group | T, M, R | H, L, O (TFL) | R | Refugee Action Group HAs, LAs |
| **FRESH HORIZONS** Community based social enterprise | P, C, E, H, S, A | 2000s SE funded from housing asset transfer | R, O, CCW, OG, L | A, P, O | T,E,R | LA, ALMO, Asset Transfer estate. |
| **COMMUNITY CAMPUS '87** Social enterprise working with young people | P, H, S, C, A | 1980s youth homelessness | T, R, O, OG | P, L | R,T | HA, LA, B |
| **CENTREPOINT** National housing association | P, H, S, C, A | 1960s youth homeless charity | T, R, S, C | P | R,T | HCA, LAs, B, CRASH, developers |
| **B4BOX** For-profit social business | P, C, E | 2000s individual entrepreneur | O, CCW | L, H | E,T | LA, HAs |
| **SHEKINAH MISSION** Charity for rough sleepers | P, C, E | 1990s rough sleepers day centre charity | C, O, E, L, OG | P, H | T, V | LSC, HA, B |

Source: Case Studies, Summer 2010.

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[1] Property refurbishment (P), Housing management (H), Support (S), Construction Training (C), Paid Employment (E), Access to housing (A).

[2] Charitable Funding (C), (CCW) Contracts for construction work. European Union (E), Learning And Skills Councils (LSC), Loans (L), Mini-HAG (M), Other Grants (OG) Rents (R), Other trading income (O), Supporting People (S) TSHG (T), Volunteer Labour (V),

[3] Private Owners (P), Local authorities (L), Housing Associations (H), Arms Length Management Organisations - ALMOS (A), Other (O) TFL (Transport for London).

[4] Residents (R), Trainees (T), Employees (E), Volunteers (V).

[5] ALMO (Arms Length Management Organisation), B – links with businesses (e.g. pro-bono work), CRASH (Construction and Property Industry Charity for Homeless), HAs (housing associations), LA (local authorities), LSC (Learning and Skills Council), TFL (Transport for London).

Our research highlighted a number of ways in which these barriers might be overcome by organisations working with homeless people.

- One approach would be to facilitate the development of co-operative self help housing projects. This would require financial assistance, perhaps from co-operative development agencies.
- The main barrier to the success of our case studies was their inability to access sufficient empty properties. Local authorities and housing associations could address this by offering derelict properties to self-help housing organisations to renovate.
- However, most empty properties are privately owned. Perhaps larger charities and third sector organisations could use their assets to buy privately owned properties and link with social enterprises to renovate them.
- Self-help housing could suffer from becoming too integrated into the social housing system. If access was based on the same housing need criteria as mainstream social housing, those single homeless people who have benefited from it might be excluded. Homelessness referral agencies might provide a mechanism through which people who might benefit most can be steered towards self-help without the disadvantages of a rationing approach.
- Self-help housing organisations should explore the possibility of also accessing welfare to work payments to supplementing trading income, perhaps by joining consortia helping people into employment.

It would seem that self-help housing approaches can provide a route out of homelessness and unemployment while tackling the empty homes problem. Organisations could form partnerships to do this on a profitable basis. To some extent this would seem to depend upon the continuing availability of welfare to work and temporary social housing grant programmes. Obviously self-help housing is not a no-cost option. However, as one of our interviewees succinctly puts it:

"I would think, logically, the costs of a local authority housing homeless people in bed and breakfast or in appropriate accommodation, and an empty property is not no cost, you're not getting any rates for it, you're not getting any rent for it, and it deteriorates. That deterioration can cost a lot"

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[1] http://www.homesandcommunities.co.uk/Empty-homes
[2] http://self-help-housing.org/
[3] In the former properties are improved and used co-operatively by the members themselves, in the latter these benefits may be provided for members of the community.
[4] Nomination systems are where the local authority nominates tenants from their housing waiting list. In a 'choice based system' the housing association openly advertises properties. In both cases the housing association is unable to select tenants as properties are allocated on the basis of need.

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This briefing paper draws upon research to help understand how self-help housing approaches might address homelessness. We would particularly like to thank self-help-housing.org ; the eight self-help housing projects; and their residents, volunteers and partners who participated in the wider research project. The full report was funded by Crisis, and can be found at http://www.crisis.org.uk/research.php?fullitem=299.