

Briefing Paper 54

Self-help housing – towards a greater role

*David Mullins, Patricia A. Jones and Simon Teasdale, University of Birmingham
with Ben Pattison, Jennifer Strutt and Jim Vine, Building and Social Housing Foundation*

'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'.¹

Introduction

TSRC research on self-help housing has engaged with a wide range of participants¹ over a 12 month period to explore the potential of this small and largely unrecognised part of third sector housing to play a greater role.

At the scoping stage, and before the change of government, we had anticipated that self-help housing could play a more significant role because of its fit to the changing economic and social landscape. It had the potential to 'do more with less', to utilise empty properties in limbo as a result of stalled regeneration schemes, and to harness local community resources to resolve a range of connected problems including homelessness, unemployment, skills gaps and neighbourhood decay.

The 2010 election and the emerging policy landscape of 'Big Society', localism and deficit reduction confirmed the assumptions about 'fit', but deepened concerns about the barriers to realising the potential of self-help housing. This was due to conflicting pressures, such as large-scale procurement, commercial asset management practices and limited recognition that prevent self-help groups from accessing the support and resources they require.



B4Box trainees on site in Manchester

Case study research conducted in the summer of 2010 confirmed the importance of barriers restricting access to suitable properties at an affordable rent and the fragility of funding arrangements but provided encouraging evidence of the positive enabling impact that the right mix of people can make, be they residents, workforce or partners.

Now following consultation facilitated by the Building and Social Housing Foundation (BSHF) with a wide range of experts, drawing on the research and involving debates with self-help projects and their partners, 12 recommendations are presented to enable the sector to deliver its potential. These recommendations should assist self-help groups to take advantage of new opportunities such as to bid within the £100 million empty homes programme announced in the Comprehensive Spending Review, to work with local authorities on the New Homes Bonus to

¹ We acknowledge in particular the support provided to the research by Jon Fitzmaurice at self-help-housing.org, the eight case study organisations who took part in the research, BSHF and the 26 experts they assembled in Windsor to probe the evidence and recommend responses, and CRISIS who commissioned linked research on self-help housing and homelessness.

bring empty homes back into use and to work with local groups to take up the community right to reclaim land.

The research has established what can be achieved when local and national partnerships harness the potential of self-help housing. Further research is now required to investigate the most effective strategies to support self-help housing in the future, to assess the impact of changes in the policy environment and to assist self-help groups and their partners to demonstrate the multiple benefits of their work.

Case study evidence

Eight case studies were selected to capture a range of different approaches to self-help housing; some had been in existence for over 20 years while others were in their early stages. Valuable experiences were shared by Latch in Leeds, Riverlink and Tamil in London, Fresh Horizons in Huddersfield, Community Campus and Centrepoint in the North East, B4Box in Manchester and Shekinah Mission in Plymouth. These case studies highlighted the multiple contributions of the projects, the five essential ingredients and the barriers and enablers encountered in relation to each (see Table 1).

Table 1: The five essentials of self-help housing

| Essential Ingredient | Case Study Evidence: Barriers and Enablers |
|----------------------|---|
| Property | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessing suitable and affordable properties was the most important barrier faced by all of the case studies. Commercial asset management approaches by social landlords and difficulties in engaging with private property owners were the key obstacles. • These barriers were being tackled by developing close relationships with particular landlords, embracing 'meanwhile use' to make practical use of pauses in the property development process and assembling a package of options to work with private owners. |
| Funding | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-help groups need up-front funding to make properties habitable, rents that cover ongoing management costs and lease fees, grants or fees to cover training and support, and core funding, assets or reserves for organisational sustainability. • While the case study projects had used a wide range of funding options, including temporary social housing grant, rents, trading and loans; more work is needed to develop transferable investment models (e.g. to attract social investors). Two projects demonstrated the role that asset ownership can play in sustainability. |
| Workforce | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Securing the right mix of volunteers, trainees, employees and contractors to undertake building works is a key decision for self-help groups, reflecting their different missions (as co-operatives, social businesses or as employment and training providers). • Case studies were able to demonstrate success where trainees and volunteers gained training, confidence and trust. <i>"We've done lots of training, its good"</i> (Trainee interview) |
| Residents | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-help groups need people able and willing to live in the housing secured, often on a short-term basis and able to pay the rent. • Effective partnerships were important to enable referrals of residents. In some cases support services were provided to enable a wider group to benefit. Affordable rents were seen as a key advantage by residents, enabling them to get access to paid employment. |
| Partners | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Help from Within' needs to be supported by 'Help from Without'.² • Case studies succeeded because partners assisted in securing properties and funding and flows of volunteers and residents. This worked best where partners understood and valued the multiple roles played by self-help groups and trusted them to deliver. <i>"They've always been a good partner in bringing back empty properties into use and being our eyes and ears on the ground"</i> (Partner Interview). |

Source: TSRC case study report (54) (2010).

Summary and recommendations from the BSHF Consultation with experts

The Building and Social Housing Foundation (BSHF) co-ordinated a Consultation on self-help housing at St George's House, Windsor Castle. It sought to explore how self-help housing could be supported more effectively, to maximise the contributions it can bring to tackling empty properties. The Consultation built on research from the Third Sector Research Centre (TSRC), which identified many benefits associated with this approach. Self-help housing provides:

- an additional source of affordable and accessible housing to meet local housing needs;
- opportunities to gain construction skills and training;
- a sense of community, common purpose and mutual support for residents and the workforce;
- a means to tackle dereliction and blight which contributes to wider neighbourhood regeneration.

Analysis of self-help housing case studies by TSRC found an interconnected group of barriers to and enablers of their development.

The success factors for self-help housing were considered to be a committed group of people organising projects, available property, a viable funding model, local housing need, a willing workforce and support from partner organisations.

Working to assemble all of the key ingredients will require different types of responses by individuals, communities, charities, local authorities, central government and others.

These can be divided into three broad areas for action:

- engage with people and communities;
- build the strength of local partnerships;
- create a supportive national framework.

Each of these broad areas is addressed in turn in the BSHF report with specific recommendations for actions that can be taken to support the development of self-help housing. The recommendations are outlined below, grouped according to whom they are directed at and listed according to priority within each group.

Central government and the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA)

Government funding should be accessible to local community groups and other organisers of self-help housing. The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and the HCA should ensure that qualifying criteria and reporting requirements are proportionate to the amount of money being distributed, either directly or through intermediaries

Specifically, designated funding for self-help housing should be made available from the £100 million Empty Homes Programme due to the wider community benefits of this approach. Consideration should be given to outsourcing the distribution of this money to an intermediary vehicle in order to ensure that, as the capacity of relevant organisations increases over the duration of the programme, there will be funding available for new schemes.

Government should ensure that legislative and funding frameworks, such as the New Homes Bonus and the Community Right to Reclaim Land, actively promote self-help housing.

Government should review procurement procedures for contracts so that they do not disadvantage small organisations wanting to bid for construction work. For example, they should ensure that wider community benefits are included in considerations of value for money and that the procurement process is proportionate to the size of the contract.

The DCLG and HCA should play an enabling role to build up the capacity of self-help housing to contribute to tackling empty properties. They should play a brokering role to facilitate an environment in which local partnerships can develop.

National facilitators

A national facilitator, such as self-help-housing.org, should deliver support to develop and promote self-help housing. This should have a particular focus on developing and sharing sustainable financial models and developing local networks.

Charitable trusts

Charitable trusts should consider the possibility of establishing a development fund for self-help housing similar to one that has encouraged the growth of Community Land Trusts.

Local partners

Local authorities, arms length management organisations (ALMOs) and housing associations should be encouraged to build partnerships with organisations undertaking self-help housing where there is mutual benefit, for example tackling empty properties and employing local people. The DCLG and HCA should play a brokering role to facilitate such partnerships.

Local authorities, ALMOs and housing associations should be incentivised to transfer the ownership of properties to local organisations undertaking self-help housing in order to support their financial sustainability.

Research and monitoring organisations

Changes to housing and welfare policy, such as the New Homes Bonus and Universal Credit, should be monitored to assess their impact on the demand for, and effectiveness of, self-help housing.

Organisations involved in self-help housing should use low burden monitoring and evaluation to demonstrate the cross-cutting benefits of their

work to tackle empty properties and their value to the local communities in which they operate. Demonstrating multiple benefits could generate innovative funding routes, such as ethical investment and social impact bonds.

Further research should be undertaken to investigate the most effective strategies for supporting the development of self-help housing in different contexts in the UK and internationally.



Fresh Horizons local office, Huddersfield

Further information

The full text of the BSHF report is available at: www.bshf.org/published-information

Full case study evidence is presented in TSRC Case Study Report 54 at: www.tsrc.ac.uk/Publications/tabid/500/Default.aspx

Earlier TSRC briefing and working papers (11 and 53) on self-help housing and further information on the project can be found at:

www.tsrc.ac.uk/Research/ServiceDeliverySD/SelfHelpHousing/tabid/615/Default.aspx

A further report on self-help housing and homelessness: 'Connecting the Dots: the potential for self-help housing to address homelessness' is available from CRISIS at: www.crisis.org.uk/research.php?fullitem=299

¹ Self-Help Housing.Org (2010) What is Self Help Housing? www.self-help-housing.org

² Archer T. (2009) Help from within: An exploration of self-help. London: Community Development Foundation.

This paper is part of the Third Sector Research Centre – Briefing Paper Series see www.tsrc.ac.uk for more details and a copy of the full Case Study Report (54)

The support of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the Office for Civil Society (OCS) and the Barrow Cadbury UK Trust is gratefully acknowledged. The work was part of the programme of the joint ESRC, OCS Barrow Cadbury Third Sector Research Centre