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

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Third Sector Research Centre

January 2011

About Crisis

Crisis is the national charity for single homeless people. We are dedicated to ending homelessness by delivering life-changing services and campaigning for change.

About TSRC

The Third Sector Research Centre (TSRC) is a collaborative venture by the Universities of Birmingham and Southampton, with contributions from Middlesex and Kent. It is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, Office of Civil Society and Barrow Cadbury Trust. TSRC exists to develop the evidence base on, for and with the third sector in the UK. Working closely with practitioners, policy-makers and other academics, TSRC is undertaking and reviewing research, and making this research widely available. The Centre works in collaboration with the third sector, ensuring its research reflects the realities of those working within it, and helping to build the sector's capacity to use and conduct research.

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Acknowledgements

1. Introduction: The Big Picture

- 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 (Shapps, 2010). According to New Philanthropy Capital there were around 260,000 people sleeping rough or in temporary accommodation in 2008 (New Philanthropy Capital, 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.

At a policy level the opportunity to develop connected solutions to these three problems by bringing into use empty properties, training and employing homeless people to renovate them, and providing housing for at least some of those in housing need would appear obvious. However cutbacks in government spending over the next parliament make it extremely unlikely that central government will fund a major programme to 'connect the dots'.

However these problems also offer opportunities to innovative 'self-help' organisations in and around the homelessness, housing and skills training sectors which could be better utilised. As one of our interviewees succinctly puts it:

> *"Well it sounds a bit arrogant, but because you've got nearly a million empty properties and because you've got a three quarters of a million skilled worker shortage and because you've got millions of people on the dole it seems to me obvious to join it up."* (B4Box)

Self-help housing schemes for some groups of homeless people, could be facilitated by social enterprises, housing associations and other third sector organisations in the housing and homelessness field. However existing schemes face some barriers which if tackled would allow them to reach their potential. This report highlights the opportunities and

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[1] http://www.homesandcommunities.co.uk/Empty-homes

barriers facing self–help housing organisations, and suggests ways in which self-help housing might play a greater role in responding to the single homelessness crisis.

2. What is Self-help Housing?

> *"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. However, a scoping study has suggested that the number of organisations already engaged in this area is small and has declined since a peak in the 1970s and 80s when it was known as 'short-life' housing. During this period government funding (known as Mini-HAG)[4] was available to housing associations supporting this activity (Mullins, 2010).

In a time of significant budget reductions, government is looking for cost effective solutions and also to harness citizen engagement. The Third Sector Research Centre (TSRC) has undertaken a research study 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.

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[2] http://self-help-housing.org/
[3] If 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] Nowadays Temporary Social Housing Grant provides a similar source of funding.

3. Methodology

The research involved seven in-depth case studies of organisations currently involved in self-help housing, and one case study of an organisation (Centrepoint) interested in using the model to provide housing and employment training for homeless service users. In total 25 interviews were conducted with CEOs and other key staff and partner organisations. Focus groups were held with volunteers, trainees, apprentices and residents within the projects.

The case studies were selected to capture the range of different approaches to self-help housing identified earlier and expanded upon in section five. Some had been in existence for 20 years, while others were in the early developmental stages. The case studies provide a mix of emphases on the different elements of self-help housing: bringing property back into use, providing training and paid employment, letting properties, and the involvement of beneficiary groups in the management of the projects. The different case studies range from informal community housing projects to social businesses renovating empty properties and making an express commitment to employ disadvantaged groups. The case studies demonstrate different combinations of approaches to meeting housing, employment, training and community engagement needs.

The case studies also identify the barriers faced by these organisations. In a time of significant budget reductions, government is looking for cost effective solutions and also to harness citizen engagement. It is in this context that the potential contribution of self-help housing is explored. Thus the aim of this report is to suggest ways that third sector organisations might overcome these barriers, either alone or working in partnership with other socially minded organisations.

4. Background

The previous government made a commitment to bringing empty properties back into use, introducing empty dwelling management orders in 2006, to allow local authorities to manage, renovate and let privately owned properties. Take up by local authorities was almost non-existent (Ireland, 2010), although local authorities did bring back 36,000 local authority owned properties into use in 2009 (Ireland, 2010). Housing associations, which together have responsibility for around half of all social housing in England, have been deterred from renovating empty properties in favour of building new ones as a consequence of subsidies for new builds and VAT on renovation costs. However stock transfer housing associations have been involved in major reinvestment programmes in

existing stock to meet the decent homes standard. In 2009 there were still 784,000 vacant dwellings in England, the majority of which were privately owned. To help counter disused properties in the private sector, the Temporary Social Housing Grant (TSHG) programme was designed to encourage greater usage of existing stock that might otherwise appear uneconomic to renovate.

The new 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' (Alcock, 2010). Initial signs are that this commitment to the Big Society is not simply a smokescreen for the dismantling of the public sector. For example, early fears that the Office of the Third Sector would be subsumed within the Department for Communities for and Local Government have proved unfounded. Instead it has been renamed the Office for Civil Society and is taking on a major role in developing the Big Society agenda. The lack of consensus around what this big society might mean offers opportunities for voluntary and community organisations to help set this agenda themselves.

As well as a commitment to an enhanced role for voluntary and community groups in public policy, the Coalition Government has a less well publicised commitment to tackling homelessness. Indeed the Minister of State for Housing and Local Government, Grant Shapps, founded the Conservative Homelessness Foundation in 2008.[5] Shapps has promised that a Conservative government will 'provide the power and resources to effect urgent change directly to residents and communities to exercise locally' (Shapps, 2010: 12) with the aim of creating a 'nation of homebuilders' (ibid: 19). In part this is to be achieved by encouraging self-build social enterprises to engage in self-build projects (ibid: 2010: 45).

Much of what the minister of state was speaking about referred to rural housing development. Indeed if the current housing shortage is to be alleviated then more building will have to take place in rural areas. However it is in many of Britain's cities and towns where the housing shortage is most acute. This is most visibly demonstrated in the form of street homelessness. Many of Britain's rough sleepers face acute social problems which leave them ill equipped to compete in a world where there is a mismatch between demand and supply for jobs and homes (Stephens and Fitzpatrick, 2007). Of course street homelessness is the only the tip of the iceberg. Often hidden in overcrowded accommodation or hostels are another layer of homeless people. For many of these people,

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[5] http://www.conservatives.com/People/Members_of_Parliament/Shapps_Grant.aspx

homelessness is a consequence only of a shortage of places to live (Pleace, 1999). Perhaps perversely, this homelessness occurs alongside huge numbers of empty properties, despite a range of measures designed to bring them back into use (BSHF, 2004). However an acute skills shortage in the construction industry has meant that even in a more favourable economic environment, the last government was unable to meet central planning targets. While building more homes, or renovating disused properties, would alleviate much of the homelessness crisis at the macro level, at a micro level the policy response has favoured targeting unemployment among homeless people as a long term response to social exclusion (Teasdale, 2010). Indeed, the lack of employment related skills among the homeless population has been well documented (Opinion Leader Research, 2006).

We are faced then with a housing shortage, hundreds of thousands of empty homes, homelessness, high unemployment and a lack of trained construction workers. Meanwhile the political environment is shifting in favour of local community groups who want to tackle these problems at a local level, although the resources to support this will inevitably be quite limited. Organisations in the voluntary sector and construction industry have long recognised that these problems are not unconnected, and can be tackled in partnership. For example CRASH is a charity funded by organisations and individuals working in the construction industry that offers homelessness sector organisations assistance in developing and improving their premises.[6] CRASH had been involved in partnership work with at least two of our case study organisations.

One approach that might offer potential to tackle the problems simultaneously is 'self-help housing'. This might involve small scale housing co-operatives or larger social enterprises. However, very few organisations are currently known to be involved in self-help housing (Mullins, 2010).

5. The case studies

1. **Latch** is a self-help housing organisation based in Leeds. Latch was set up by students in 1989 and has developed a more formal structure to provide housing and support to people at risk of homelessness or in housing need. The organisation secures properties mainly from local social landlords, and has a property expansion programme working with service users, trainees and volunteers to bring properties back into use. Future plans include the setting up of a community building firm to specialise in sustainable construction. Current barriers are cuts in Supporting People which threaten 50% of employed staff, and the reluctance of social landlords to provide replacement properties.

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[6] http://www.crash.org.uk/about/

2. **Riverlink Housing Co-operative** is a short life housing co-operative based in North London which was formed in the late 1970s. They originally operated across four London boroughs but have become increasingly focused on a small area where a major road widening scheme led to long term planning blight. The organisation is characterised by a strong ethos of 'helping each other'[7] and 'doing building works in a mutual way'. Riverlink brings empty properties into use and maintains them 'at no cost to the housing organisation'.[8] Reliance on voluntary labour helps them offer low rents. Volunteers are able to access training. Despite the insecurity of short-term leases residents have enjoyed a strong sense of security through mutual support. However, following the abandonment of the road scheme, a large housing association secured Homes and Communities Agency funding to regenerate the area. This has resulted in Riverlink having to hand-back half of their properties and cope with an increase in rents charged by the new housing association.

3. Tamil Community Housing Association is based in London and was set up in response to the mass refugee movement following the crisis in Sri Lanka in the early 1980s. The association identifies strongly with 'self-help' which is about 'communities doing things for themselves and not relying on Government', an idea that they feel has particular resonance for forced migrants. Over time the association refocused on settled families, registered as a housing association, developed permanent housing and developed its asset base. The organisation is still involved in short-life housing, as bringing empty homes into community use is a core value. It works with many of the largest housing associations in London, but has recently noticed reluctance on the part of these housing associations to offer new management agreements or to transfer properties for short-life use at below market rents. Tenants are not directly involved in the management of the properties.

4. **Fresh Horizons** is a community based social enterprise in Huddersfield set up with funding from a housing and land asset transfer to residents on a local authority housing estate. It is involved in facilities management, construction, and employment and training activities for local residents. The organisation began to explore self-help housing in response to a high incidence of derelict and abandoned properties in the area. Local privately owned empty properties have been targeted through measures to encourage their owners to bring them back into use. This generates work for the construction, employment

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[7] Quotations are taken directly from transcripts of interviews with case study participants.
[8] However, the housing association which owns the properties did charge lower rents.

and training team and also provides an additional housing opportunity for the local community.

5. Community Campus 87, a social enterprise working with young people in Teesside, was set up in 1987 to respond to youth homelessness. It provides supported tenancies and training opportunities in four local authority areas and a key skills project that gives young people accredited construction based skills. The organisation has been very successful in acquiring assets including tenanted properties and a former night club building which is used as a base for the organisation. Following a recent award of a £250,000 TSHG to a stock transfer housing association partner to renovate 10 empty privately owned properties, Community Campus will provide accredited training and on-site construction experience to young people. The young people will also have the opportunity to rent the improved properties on assured shorthold tenancies during the six year lease periods negotiated with the landlords and will receive tenancy support services from the stock transfer partner.

6. **Centrepoint** is a national housing association and charity for young homeless people providing housing, advocacy, support and training. They are exploring self-help housing as a temporary housing option to be combined with skills training and work experience, initially in the North East of England. Young people would be expected to work alongside professional construction workers to deliver renovation works to empty properties. Funding would be drawn from TSHG, charitable fundraising and Supporting People. For Centrepoint, participation in self-help housing is seen as a temporary stage on a housing and employment pathway out of homelessness to a settled life. Access to training and skills support would be through the association's regional learning hub while properties would be managed through the regional office rather than by the young people themselves.

7. **B4Box** is a social business[9] based in Salford bringing empty properties into use and delivering accredited construction skills training and paid employment to people who have been unemployed for six months or more. Trainees are paid the minimum wage until they secure a NVQ level 2 qualification. At this point they can work with less supervision and are paid in line with the industry average. Over a two year period the business has brought around 100 properties into use, and trained 12 people to NVQ level 2. Properties are secured through local authorities and housing associations which retain the ownership and management of the properties. After renovation properties may be sold, for example, to key workers.

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[9] B4Box are structured as a normal profit making business with social aims.

8. **Shekinah Mission** in Plymouth is a charity that was originally set up to help people sleeping rough. It has now developed into a regional training and housing provider for homeless people, ex-offenders and other groups at risk of exclusion. Interest in self-help housing has come from their subsidiary social enterprises providing training and employment opportunities in the construction, cleaning and maintenance fields. The model here would be to renovate empty properties primarily as an employment and training initiative. Properties would be managed by a housing association partner but might be let to the middle market rather than to homeless people.

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

NAME & PRIMARY DESCRIPTOR	MAIN FUNCTIONS[10]	ORIGINS	FUNDING[11]	PROPERTY SOURCES[12]	USERS[13]	KEY PARTNERS[14]
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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[10] Property refurbishment (P), Housing management (H), Support (S), Construction Training (C), Paid Employment (E), Access to housing (A).

[11] 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),

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

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

[14] 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).

6. Learning from the case studies

The process of collecting each of the case studies aimed to identify the potential benefits of self-help housing approaches to homeless people and organisations supporting homeless people. The case studies also sought to identify the barriers faced by organisations involved in self-help housing, and to ascertain how these barriers might be overcome. This section draws upon our analysis of the benefits of self-help housing approaches to homeless people. Analysis of the interview and focus group transcripts identified six potential benefits of particular relevance to homeless people and organisations seeking to support them:

- Access to housing;
- Access to training opportunities and to paid employment;
- Participation in socially valuable activities through volunteering;
- Engagement in decision making at an organisational level;
- Opportunity to overcome social isolation; and
- Access to formal and informal support while in accommodation.

First and foremost homelessness is about the lack of a home (Pleace, 1999). From this perspective homelessness is a problem caused by a mismatch between supply and demand for homes. There is a shortage of affordable homes in the United Kingdom, in particularly London. This led to the establishment of some of the first self-help housing projects in the 1970s. In fact, five of our eight case studies were created explicitly to provide housing for homeless people, while one was created to provide housing for refuges and asylum seekers.

> "*The whole reason for Riverlink was to provide affordable housing for general needs, single homeless people.*" (Riverlink 1)

> "*The background to why we started was that we were all ...working in the Housing Aid Centre under the old community programme. So we were doing housing advice and housing aid, giving advice to landlords, giving advice to young people who were all on 12-month contracts because they'd been unemployed. We were sending little 'Johnny' down to a landlord who was taking a look at him and saying, 'No chance.*

> *I'm not housing him' because he had his Mohican haircut or whatever and the drive*
> *to help those young people was like, 'Well why don't we try to get some housing that*
> *we could manage ourselves?'"* (Community Campus 87)

The need for organisations to bring back property into use for the purposes of housing homeless people is as acute today as it was in the 1970s. While aggregate levels of homelessness are associated with a shortage of affordable properties, it is generally recognised that some people are more at risk than others (Stephens and Fitzpatrick, 2007). The situation is exacerbated for those without dependants who usually have no statutory right to accommodation. A particular problem faced by many single homeless people is inability to compete in the labour market, due to a lack of skills, qualifications or work experience (Opinion Leader Research, 2006). All but one of our case study organisations (see Table 1 above) offered opportunities to gain skills and work experience through formal training programmes or informal volunteering.

> *"We have a very clearly stated aim about helping homeless people...*[We] *provide*
> *homes but acknowledge or recognise that the provision of a home is only a starting*
> *point on a journey to help people change their lives. That by providing support whilst*
> *in their homes and also access to skills, training, and opportunities to volunteer,*
> *people can change their circumstances."* (Latch).

Indeed some of the more recently established organisations' primary motivation was to provide training and employment to excluded groups. For example, B4Box does not provide housing to those involved in renovating properties. Instead, its primary aim is to employ and train local people while renovating empty properties on behalf of housing associations and local authorities. All trainees are paid at the minimum wage level until they reach NVQ Level 2 standards, at which point they are paid at the same rate as qualified construction workers in other companies, and are able to supervise new trainees:

> *"In the first year we brought 100 properties back into use and we qualified 12 people*
> *…. Those people had an average of five years distance from the labour market. One*
> *of them was dyslexic and autistic. There was all sorts of problems, drugs, alcohol,*
> *etc, ex-offenders. They achieved a multi-skilled qualification which means they've*
> *got a job for life. In 12 months ... I've been quite surprised at people… we've got one*
> *person who never worked in his life. He was a heroin addict and then he was five*
> *years clean, and he's 27... He is now one of our supervisors... and I'm determined if I*
> *can keep going I want him to get a degree in construction management at Salford*

University, so he'll go from nothing to that. His mental arithmetic is so quick and just like that he'll measure this room. He's a wonderful person … he's got married, he's off tax credits." (B4Box)

Community Campus, Shekinah Mission and Centrepoint also offer programmes allowing homeless people to secure accredited construction skills qualifications. For these organisations the aim is to help people gain work skills in a real life setting, often in partnership with a local college. It would appear they have had some success:

"Well, before I started I was struggling to get work in the field that I do because, well obviously the recession and that. And well this has just… Fresh Horizons has been a doorway to me to get into the industry, learn different trades and get my qualification, so… I'm quite happy with it." (Fresh Horizons, focus group member)

More traditional self-help housing organisations such as Riverlink may offer opportunities to learn through volunteering to help with repairs and maintenance of the properties. The skills acquired are less formalised, and may be less appropriate for large numbers of non-ready for work participants than the more structured training offered by organisations such as Fresh Horizons. However, Riverlink does have a training budget which has allowed them to send members on formal courses offered by local colleges.

"One of the things that often makes me smile is watching members who move on with a complete new skill set with confidence when I saw them come in being frightened or nervous and stuff and they go out there. I think of George for instance who now works for the Government and manages contracts. When he came in you say boo and he'd jump six foot, you know Through the training we gave him his confidence went up and up and up and he followed it through and when you see someone like that, then they move on and they've got such a – their self-confidence has been brought up, they're going for it now; whereas when they came in they were sort of down here…" (Riverlink)

This has helped Riverlink members accumulate a wide range of skills. It would appear that co-operative organisations providing self-help housing that are able to attract or develop a membership with a wide skills set are able to draw upon their members to renovate and maintain properties, and so keep the rental levels low:

> *"Q. How is it that you can produce housing to a higher standard?*
> *A. Cost, basically. The members do it themselves once they're trained. We pay them a meal allowance and travel expenses, but other than that, you know, they do it on a voluntary basis… The rents are only lower because we take on derelict properties."*
> *(*Riverlink)

It has long been recognised that high rent levels act as a work disincentive by creating an artificially high marginal tax rate as housing benefit is withdrawn (Kemp, 2000). This work disincentive is probably highest for homeless people living in hostels. For those living in a Riverlink property:

> *"I would say we give people the ability to do part-time work, full-time work. To give you an example...this* [other] *association, 80% of its tenants were on benefits and 20% were working. Well here, 80% are working and 20% are on benefits. It's completely the other way round. Now a lot of people may work part-time, and they have that capability of working part-time because they're in a co-op where rents are affordable, so they're not trapped, so even if they do go on benefits, they can claim housing benefit – it's not a problem. They're not sort of exorbitant rents. To give you an example, a room in this place is £60 a week… Next door, the person in the same unit pays twice as much, you know. It's a private landlord...I mean one of the guys you're going to meet this afternoon ... he was a part-time instructor at the local gym up the road here, but he could only do that because his rent was affordable. He couldn't have done part-time and then do studies, which is what he was doing."*
> (Riverlink)

Of course moving into employment is not a realistic short term goal for all homeless people. For some people, other aspects of their social exclusion may require tackling first. Tania Burchardt et al (2002) identified four dimensions of social exclusion:

- Consumption: the capacity to purchase goods and services;
- Production: participation in socially valuable activities;
- Political Engagement: involvement in local or national decision making; and
- Social Interaction: integration with family, friends and community.

This report has shown how self-help housing projects can offer participants an opportunity to access paid employment, either directly or through training, thus tackling the production

and consumption dimensions of social exclusion. For those further from the labour market, our case study organisations were able to offer the opportunity to engage in socially valuable activities, often on a voluntary basis. This is an important step towards living a life that is valued (Smith, 2008), which for some people can lead to future paid employment, and for others can be an end in itself.

Many homeless people have little control over their lives. According to one of our interviewees *"homelessness equals disempowerment"* (Latch). One benefit of self-help housing is that it can offer people the opportunity to take greater control of their life through being able to participate in decision making. Some (though not all) self-help housing groups working with homeless people offer their members the opportunity to feed into organisational decision making:

> *"They'll give us a question like, 'what do you think the company should do to further improve business or communication within the company?' and then we just all write down our ideas, share ideas and then we'll have a little argument, discussion about it."* (Fresh Horizons)

These first steps towards enabling people to understand that they have some say in what happens to them in the future can begin to tackle people's lack of political engagement.

One of the greatest problems for formerly homeless people resettled into accommodation is isolation from the support structures and friendships they previously relied upon (Smith, 2008). Self-help housing communities can offer people a chance to develop new friendships:

> *"Actually I enjoy it. I like living in a sort of community if you wish. And I've met a lot of people which I would never have met if I hadn't been in with the link because you tend to go in cliques of people you meet through work I think. I think it's incredible. It's that community of different people with different experiences and different...both work and life experience. That's enjoyable. Years ago, I separated from my partner and found (myself) very isolated afterwards… It's not easy in London unless you've become part of some group that's active if you wish. There are active groups round here now, partly because of what's happening round here, but in other parts of London you might not see your neighbour or not know your neighbour accept to say hello occasionally, if you're polite in the morning or such."* (Riverlink)

Of course housing homeless people may necessitate more than just providing a roof over their heads. Many also need further support. However, some self-help housing projects, particularly those with a more co-operative ethos, see themselves as only suitable for homeless people with low support needs. Shared housing is perceived as particularly unsuitable for people requiring specialist support: This is partly associated with the level of insecurity and the burden involved in working on the properties, and partly with a lack of access to Supporting People funding to respond to wider support needs, as demonstrated when organisations were asked if they had ever housed people with support needs and then had to arrange care packages or support packages:

> "Yes we have unfortunately and discovered they've got mental health issues ...they have been housed subsequently by the local authorities for example, say former …asylum seekers have had mental health issues because of the experiences they've gone through, but it hasn't been so apparent when they've approached the homelessness agency. It becomes more apparent ... as you get to know the person. But it's not … a large number of people, and probably while I've been here I've had say about two, maybe three have had support needs – greater support needs than we can manage." (Riverlink)

> "A couple of examples I can think of is where we get people who haven't declared they've got certain illnesses and stuff where we've had to deal with it. Generally we get them referred on. There are other people we've had to have sectioned and then move them on, like any organisation...We've had drug addicts who we've had to get into therapy and stuff...But we deal with that. We wouldn't kick people out, we'd ... sort them out and move them onto the appropriate service. That's the whole thing." (Riverlink)

Other case study organisations, notably Community Campus and Latch have evolved into more formal organisations and taken on Supporting People funding allowing them to offer accommodation and support to a wider range of homeless people. Supporting People funding did not come without strings attached, however. In both cases the need to provide more formalised support within controlled frameworks impacted upon their organisational ethos. For instance, despite one condition of receiving Supporting People funding being a requirement to set up a service user involvement group, it would seem that professionalisation came at the expense of service user involvement in decision making:

"This is one of the reasons why service user involvement is less prevalent as it was because we have had to tailor our services to the requirements of Supporting People... Before that came in we had a great deal more flexibility to work with people in the way that they wanted to work with us, but all of a sudden you find that service user participation has been completely hijacked by the government so that it becomes an agenda about choice and opportunity, but it's a false agenda because you're kind of forced to facilitate service user involvement in a way that actually people don't want it." (Organisation anonymised).

Self-help housing organisations, therefore, are able to tackle many of the problems faced by homeless people. In addition to offering a potential solution to people's lack of accommodation some self-help organisations are able to offer training and paid employment; informal and formal advice and support; participation in socially valuable activities; a chance to participate in decision making and opportunities to overcome social isolation. However, none of our case study organisations was able to provide all these benefits, and there were differences in their capacity to work with people with significant support needs and those distant from the labour market. B4Box has adopted a commercial model and was able to offer paid employment and accredited training opportunities for people while renovating properties for social landlords. Tamil Community Housing Association has moved away from housing for refugees towards providing generalist social housing for settled families predominately from the Tamil community. While, it has retained a strong focus on bringing empty properties into use, it has developed professional management structures rather than reliance on self-help in housing management. Riverlink has remained true to its co-operative roots and continues to renovate properties using homeless volunteers who go on to live in the properties. Fresh Horizons has pursued a training model for excluded residents, and has developed an empty property project to generate employment. Community Campus and Latch have both moved away from their self-help roots to offer Supporting People funded support to homeless people living in their properties, and offer volunteering and training opportunities.

The evidence reviewed in this report suggests that self-help housing has the potential to offer solutions to homelessness and social exclusion for some people. Why then has it not been taken up on a greater scale? The next section identifies some of the barriers faced by self-help housing organisations.

7. Barriers to self-help housing

There are four key factors that all self-help projects need. First, they need access to properties to renovate and let. Second, they need a sustainable funding regime. Third, they need people to renovate and maintain the properties. And finally, a demand from residents to live in the properties is essential.

All case studies emphasised that a major barrier to their success was the inability to access sufficient empty properties to meet the needs of their members.

> *"If the policy can line up enough to say to me, 'there's some empty properties', that would be all I'd need, … and I could guarantee, actually contractually guarantee, as I've proved it now, for three years now we've done a lot of properties, and we've trained a lot of people, and we've got really good value for money"* (B4Box)

Although most empty properties are in the private sector, self-help organisations have generally been more successful in negotiating leases with social landlords. However it would appear that there is a declining supply of social housing stock coming in to short life use. The case study organisations identified three factors behind this trend. First, in some areas as decent homes standards were achieved there were fewer properties available for renovation. Second, many social landlords were reluctant to accept lower returns than might be achieved through selling the property. 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.[15] 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. Very few self-help schemes have stable partnerships with large social housing providers that might generate a constant supply of properties. One project, Fresh Horizons, had some success in attracting private property owners by offering to help them renovate properties and provide a management and letting service.

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[15] 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.

All of our case study organisations found it difficult to bring in sufficient income to deliver self-help housing projects. Only two relied wholly on income derived through trading. In the case of B4Box income was generated through contracts with social housing providers to renovate properties. They had been able to work with landlords sympathetic to their social goals of employing local and disadvantaged people, and so were often able to bypass a competitive tendering process. This enabled them to generate a small profit. Tamil Community Housing Association predominately relies on rental income from letting their properties, and has been able to build up reserves through using previous grants to purchase properties. Their strong asset base also includes modern office accommodation and meeting space for community events. Other case studies derived income through a variety of sources, including grant funding and payments for providing training or employment to disadvantaged groups.[16]

One option for organisations seeking to develop self-help housing on a limited budget is the use of voluntary labour. This might involve service users/tenants or bringing in volunteers from the wider community. Riverlink made a virtue of avoiding grant funding, and relied wholly on rental income from letting their properties. While on the surface this appears to be a financially sustainable model, it is important to recognise the unpaid contribution made by residents and volunteers in renovating and maintaining the properties. The importance of volunteers was also highlighted by another of our case study organisations, Shekinah Mission. Shekinah has traditionally used volunteers from the local community to, for example, help mentor homeless people and prepare them for employment. A few years ago the contractor building their current premises went into receivership leaving Shekinah facing the prospect of becoming homeless themselves. Fortunately:

> "(when) *it all went wrong and went in the papers, we had lots of qualified plumbers and electricians come in and say, '...We'd like to just give you a couple of weekends of our work, and we'll come and do this stuff for you'."* (Shekinah)

The volunteer plumbers and electricians then worked alongside trainees on Shekinah's construction skills programme to complete the building.

Another barrier faced by some self-help housing projects is a lack of demand for shared or co-operatively owned and managed housing, particularly among homeless people themselves.

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[16] The issue of funding for self-help projects is covered in more detail in a separate report available from www.tsrc.ac.uk

"The idea of it (Latch) being a co-op was the ideal. But actually the reality is that if you're working with people who've got chaotic lives the last thing they need is intense pressures in terms of being able to manage their own housing. You will maybe get one or two people who might respond positively to that but otherwise people who've got other issues want somebody else to sort out that stuff. .. the people who were being housed didn't want it ... to be quite honest, they needed a roof, they needed somewhere to live." (Latch)

Sharing a house does not always work out for the tenant or the property owner:

"If you've got two or three sharing a house, if you don't get the right combination, you get conflict. And they won't pay, they won't put any electricity on, they won't put the gas on, or their friends come round here and done this. So it's easier to manage if they're just single tenancies." (Community Campus)

But for a small number of homeless people, shared housing may be a preferred option:

"when you speak to many of those guys, they'll say, 'Actually, I don't want to live in a flat on my own, I really don't. I'd like to share a house with two other people.' And I just think this could give real choice for people as well, which is obviously the real important bit at the end of it" (Shekinah)

"But we still have some shared properties. And for some kids the shared work, because it's like a little crutch. If you can get the right combination of tenants, it works really, really well" (Community Campus)

Nonetheless, it would appear a major barrier to traditional self-help housing approaches playing a greater role in the future is a lack of demand for shared housing. To some extent this may reflect the decline of a collective ethos in an era of individualism. More importantly, it may reflect a general rise in living standards and housing expectations since the 'heyday' of self-help housing in the 1970s.

In summary, the major barriers to self-help housing, particularly for traditional co-operative self-help organisations, include:

- the difficulties for organisations to cover costs;
- problems in allowing those who renovated the properties to live in them;
- the inability of organisations to access properties to renovate;

- a lack of demand for shared housing; and
- the decline of a cooperative ethos.

The final section of this report suggests ways in which these barriers might be overcome[17].

8. Overcoming the barriers

This report highlights how organisations involved in self-help housing have been able to provide small scale solutions to housing shortages through the renovation of empty properties. In the process they have been able to provide training and employment opportunities to excluded groups and housing to homelessness people. Additionally those projects with a co-operative ethos have offered people the opportunity to escape aspects of social exclusion, by giving them a chance to take control of their lives, and to live or volunteer in an environment that enables them to make new friendships. Of course no single project was able to achieve all of these outcomes. Taken together, the cases demonstrate how the process of engaging homeless people in renovating empty properties offers the potential to tackle a range of interconnected social problems.

At one end of the spectrum we found organisations like Riverlink, offering a more traditional self-help housing approach on a small scale. One approach to encouraging a greater contribution from self-help housing would be to facilitate the development of similar co-operative self-help housing projects. This approach will take time, and relies on the contribution of people with the collective values shared by those people running Riverlink. It is not clear whether in an era of individualisation these individuals exist or can be nurtured. In particular, it seems unlikely that homeless people would be able to set up co-operative self-help projects without assistance from those with more social and financial resources, for example co-operative development agencies. Moreover, it appears that most people do not want to live in shared housing today as demonstrated by two of our case study organisations moving away from their co-operative roots and towards a more professionalised approach combined with the provision of single rather than shared units. Planned changes to housing benefit rules restricting single people under the age of 34 to an allowance equivalent to the cost of a room in a shared house may reverse this trend, albeit through necessity rather than choice.

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[17] Further consideration of tackling the barriers identified in the TSRC research took place at a consultation Event organised by Building and Social Housing Foundation at Windsor in December 2010. These will be reflected in a report of the consultation and final TSRC report. This report focuses on specific issues associated with homelessness for the purposes of CRISIS who funded this report.

More recently established organisations among our case studies, or those new to the field of self-help housing, have tended to adopt a specialised approach to tackling one or two aspects of self-help housing. For example B4Box focuses primarily on the training and employment of excluded groups while renovating empty properties for partner organisations. Indeed the development of partnerships appears to offers the key to the future of self-help housing. The main barrier to the success of our case studies was their inability to access sufficient empty properties. Local authorities and housing associations can facilitate this by offering derelict properties to self-help housing organisations to renovate. Indeed, by engaging organisations employing local people housing associations may be able to meet other agendas:

> *"the Homes and Community Agency about a year ago, wrote a letter to all housing associations ...it said, their* (entitlement) *to housing grants would be at risk if they didn't use their capital spend in housing to train local residents...   So for example we've got one really, really good (HA) client in Preston … And they've given us nearly a million pounds worth of properties which is just fantastic. Just great, the whole thing's great. They would have to tender that work across Europe, unless they can say 'no, we're making a special exception because this organisation does all this added value'. On the added value part it's because (we will) train (their) residents."*
> *(B4Box)*

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 such as B4 Box and Fresh Horizons to renovate them. A similar approach in two of our case studies saw hostel providers contracting with private sector construction companies and including clauses that the companies should provide employment to their members.

Once empty properties have been renovated many are sold on or returned to the LA/HA for general needs housing. However, 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. For many homeless people this would have the additional benefit of allowing them to bypass hostel accommodation, which despite significant improvements in recent years, is still described by one of our case study

organisations managing hostel accommodation as a 'sausage factory' which deskills people.

Some of our case study organisations were able to access programmes providing funding for training homeless people, and moving them into employment. B4Box demonstrated that renovating property for local authorities could be done profitably even without these income sources. It is not beyond the bounds of imagination to suppose that organisations such as B4Box and Shekinah could develop more profitable partnerships that drew on both welfare to work payments and trading income.

Partnership approaches might enable a more co-ordinated approach to self-help housing on a larger scale. They could also facilitate access to a wide range of funding opportunities. Only two of our case study organisations were able to operate on trading income alone. The financially secure case study organisations were those who had been able to purchase property in the past, and now had the ability to borrow against these assets while securing a reliable income stream through rents. It may be that the era of easy grant funding for third sector organisations is over. However temporary social housing grants are available to organisations bringing privately owned properties back into use. Perhaps the current downturn in property prices offers an opportunity for organisations or consortia to purchase properties at a relatively low price, access temporary social housing grants to fund renovation costs, and secure a long term income stream through welfare to work payments.

We have seen then how self-help housing approaches can provide a route out of homelessness and unemployment while tackling the empty homes problem. We have also seen how organisations might 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"* (B4Box)

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