

How to enable Community-Led Housing

Learning Brief 2: Building Positive Relationships with Hub Stakeholders

November 2021

A series of learning briefs to share insights from the enabler hubs funded through Power to Change's Homes in Community Hands programme

Power to Change's Homes in Community Hands programme provided grants to help build and refurbish affordable housing. Specifically, the programme has supported the development of community-led housing in England with £5.2 million in funding. The fund has predominantly targeted five areas in England, where enabler hubs are supporting the development of community-led housing, and where funding is directed to both hubs and community-led housing projects.

The evaluation team is assessing the impact of the Homes in Community Hands programme on various stakeholders and beneficiaries, while also capturing important learning to inform the practice of community-led housing enablers, community-led housing groups and other organisations, including funders like Power to Change. This learning brief presents findings from Year Two of the evaluation, assessing the methods used by hubs to engage with and influence key stakeholders such as local authorities and registered providers to build a positive climate for community-led housing in their area.

Key Points

- A key purpose of enabler hubs was to build a positive climate for community-led housing in their area by engaging with key stakeholders who have the power, resources and knowledge to support the hub's work with local groups.
- In most cases local authorities (and combined authorities) and registered providers were seen as the most significant stakeholders to focus on. Other local stakeholders and national peer networking have also been important.
- Building positive relationships with local authorities can bring many benefits to hubs and enhance the local climate for community led housing. Benefits may include land disposal policies informed by social value, or other policies and financial instruments which enable individual housing projects. Working across local authority departments and with Combined Authorities can increase the impact and scale of influence of hubs.
- Building positive relationships with registered providers (RPs) can enable access to grant funding through the Affordable Homes Programme and development expertise. Maintaining a variety of options and partnership forms including registering new RPs, working with community oriented RPs and undertaking projects with developer RPs can help to maximise leverage and community-led influence on delivery.
- Initially hubs enjoyed quite uneven success in influencing local authorities and registered providers across their area, reflecting the variable strength of existing relationships. Broadening the focus of hubs beyond their initial local authority areas was challenging and required a more strategic approach to relationship management and more targeted advocacy strategies.
- Balancing relationship building and policy influencing work with providing more direct support to individual projects has been an ongoing challenge for hubs. However, as Homes in Community Hands grant funding ends, the value of a positive local climate based on a solid set of stakeholder relationships will be even more apparent.

Which stakeholders are critical to building a positive climate for community led housing?

Engaging with key stakeholders who have the power, resources and knowledge to support the hub's work with local groups is a core purpose of community-led housing hubs. In most cases local authorities (and combined authorities) and registered providers (RPs) have been seen as the most significant stakeholders to focus on.

Other local stakeholders that hubs have sometimes engaged with include local third sector and social economy organisations and infrastructure bodies, public land taskforces and private housing developers.

Becoming a recognised part of local networks that are of importance to community-led housing, e.g. local housing partnerships, housing provider networks, tenants and residents groups, voluntary sector councils and regional think tanks (e.g. Centre for the New Midlands, Northern Housing Consortium) can provide a short cut to recognition and influence with a wide range of local stakeholders.

Peer networking across the national community-led housing movement; e.g. through Basecamp (an on line information sharing tool developed by Community Led Homes and used by the hubs) has also been very important in harnessing ideas and resources to build a positive local climate for community-led housing.

Building Positive Relationships with local authorities

Building positive relationships with local authorities can bring many benefits to hubs including policy statements, financial support from commuted sums, Right to Buy receipts, prudential borrowing or other sources, asset transfer and land disposal policies including social value provisions, planning policies, councillor support for and involvement in community-led housing projects, and consistency of support after changes in political control.

Such relationships often built on longstanding trust and understanding of CLH, joint working and recognition of mutual benefit. Nevertheless such relationships can be vulnerable to changes in key local authority officers and members and are often uneven across council departments. For example securing a positive housing policy statement on community-led housing may not necessarily lead to positive relationships with the planning department, or in making the financial case for social value disposal or prudential borrowing support. The West of England hub has been particularly successful in its work with Bristol City Council in developing a site disposal policy informed by social value.

CASE STUDY SOCIAL VALUE IN LAND DISPOSAL – BRISTOL CITY COUNCIL

In 2020, Bristol City Council launched a CLH land disposal policy, aimed at transferring land to CLH groups and utilising innovative decision-making methodologies to take account of social value. The hub played an active role in supporting its launch and implementation, working closely with both the authority and CLH groups. Five groups obtained land through this process. This disposal process was also perceived to shift the local authority's role in relation to CLH groups – rather than providing direct support to communities in engaging around the concept, their negotiations are centred on heads of terms for land disposal, housing management expectations if they receive grant funding to support development, and other technical matters.

Combined Authority Mayoral elections in 2021 provided the opportunity to influence manifestos, seek capital and revenue funding and land, and to engage with wider political networks at the regional level. Breaking Ground hub in Merseyside for example developed a quantified set of asks for capital and revenue funding and offers in terms of its support for wider regional objectives. In West Yorkshire the hub, Leeds Community Homes, has secured support from the newly elected mayor, who has made commitments to work on land supply and finance to ensure 500 community led homes are developed.

As attention has shifted to Combined Authorities and the regional level, further opportunities have been identified for influencing the bodies operating at that level. Sitting on regional public land task forces (e.g. in the West Midlands and Merseyside) has enabled hubs to connect directly with potential sources of land, and using innovative decision-making approaches that emphasise social value has shaped land disposal policies that have transferred land to community-led housing groups.

Building Positive Relationships with registered housing providers (RPs)

Building positive relationships with registered providers (RPs) can enable access to grant funding through the Affordable Homes Programme and development expertise and other forms of support for community-led projects (e.g. employment and training impacts) but this needs to be underpinned by trust and understanding. Four main forms of engagement with RPs were found in the research and these are now discussed in turn:

- i) **Registering new community led RP providers** is not the easiest or most direct way to access Homes England grant funding for CLH projects but was attracting increasing interest in the case study hubs. It has been identified as one option for future sustainability of hubs wishing to become developers and housing asset owners in their own right and was also being pursued by a number of groups and hub partners. One of the hubs (Leeds Community Homes) had set up a new non-charitable subsidiary company which was near to completing registration as an RP. In another case (Community Homes Tees Valley) a core hub partner (Redcar and Cleveland Voluntary Development Agency) had successfully secured RP status after a 29 month registration process and was using this experience to advise other hub partners and groups while developing a pipeline of 4 CLH projects to provide a total of 70 homes.
- ii) **Community orientated RPs** were often among the existing partners in hubs. This provided opportunities for value-based partnerships with CLH groups, reflecting their own community-based origins or roles, for example as secondary housing cooperatives. Such partnerships have the potential to avoid many of the problems of scale and power differentials, lack of local focus and professional distance that have often dogged relationship building with larger RP registered providers. Community oriented RPs have also supported the creation and early development of hubs and often been among the enabling service providers. However, there can sometimes be perceptions of 'competition' including with the hub's enabling service.
- iii) **Project based partnerships** with large RPs have often been used to provide project support to new CLH groups. This has enabled projects to gain access to Homes England grants, development and management expertise and services and other forms of technical support. Such partnerships can be structured in a variety of ways but it is important to ensure that they meet the needs CLH groups. Case studies highlighted the importance of limiting the time period before control of assets passes fully to groups and by ensuring that local residents and other individuals benefit from employment and training impacts.
- iv) **The 'Developer model'** can provide a route to scaling up community-led housing by focusing on homes that are already being built or likely to be built by RPs and other developers (for example in large new planned settlements, where the homes are transferred to a CLH body after completion). The crucial challenge is to ensure that these homes are genuinely community-led both at the development stage and at 'Live' stage'. A key role that some hubs were exploring was to provide a 'community build service' to enable developers to find a community partner and to facilitate successful partnership working, or to build a new community group from scratch to take on a stewardship role within their scheme.

How do hubs build a positive climate for CLH?

Initially hubs enjoyed uneven success in influencing local authorities and registered providers across their area, reflecting the variable strength of existing relationships. Broadening the focus of hubs beyond their initial local authority areas was challenging and required a more strategic approach to relationship management (e.g. issuing prospectuses, developing clear offers and asks to local authorities, joining a range of relevant local networks, and seeking active engagement with local trail-blazing projects by well-resourced partners). Some hubs have recently developed targeted advocacy strategies using 'power mapping' methods.

CASE STUDY OF RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT – West Midlands Urban Community Homes

wMUCH takes a strategic approach to relationship management, to influence and collaborate with key actors across seven local authority areas. Summarising their approach a wMUCH representative noted, '*... we have a relationship with all seven of them [local authorities] ... primarily housing strategy*'. The hub has run a '*toolkit session for West Midlands housing officers*', to '*enable community-led housing at a strategic level*' (wMUCH hub lead).

wMUCH has developed a two-pronged strategy for working with RPs:

- i) Developing a prospectus setting out the kinds of support it can offer to groups and to RPs, including a '*community building*' offer to assist developer RPs to work with CLH groups, and running online events to promote this.
- ii) Engaging with key RP forums and partnerships including Birmingham Social Housing Partnership and Matrix, an RP alliance which in 2020 reapplied for substantial Affordable Homes Programme pot from Homes England under the Strategic Partnerships Framework.

wMUCH aims to make the RP sector aware of the benefits of community-led housing, and to stimulate active interest for trailblazing CLH projects initiated by, or in partnership, with RPs. Active relationship building with the West Midlands Combined Authority has enabled the hub to connect directly with potential sources of land and infrastructure support for CLH through membership of the Public Land Task Force. This relationship building work was used by wMUCH to develop a pitch to candidates for the May 2021 mayoral elections, on a range of issues including land and infrastructure, revenue funding for groups and for the hub to support its active pipeline. In 2021 wMUCH is developing this approach further through a more targeting advocacy strategy facilitated by the Community Land Trust Network. This will entail 'power mapping' key stakeholders at local authority and regional level and developing more specific asks and offers.

Conclusion

Engaging with key stakeholders who have the power, resources and knowledge to support the hub's work with local groups is a core purpose of community-led housing hubs, alongside support for individual groups and projects. These two sets of activities are mutually reinforcing.

Positive relationships with local authorities are critical to the success of community-led housing in many ways. Attention has shifted from working with one local authority through a generic Community-led housing policy to building strategic relationships with many authorities and Combined Authorities across hub areas and building a network of relationships across Council directorates with councillors and officers.

Our detailed work on engagement with registered housing providers shows the importance of maintaining a variety of options and partnership forms in order to maximise leverage for genuine community-led delivery in projects involving RPs.

Moving from good existing relationships with individuals to more strategic relationship management and advocacy strategies has provided the basis for building a sustainable positive climate for community-led housing in the hub areas. This is likely to be a key legacy of the Homes in Community Hands programme.

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