Self-Help Housing

Supporting locally driven housing solutions

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Foreword

In December 2010 I chaired a Consultation to discuss how self-help housing could be used more widely in the UK. This is an opportune time to be looking at self-help housing. It fits well with a number of current government priorities. Tackling the blight and waste of empty properties by facilitating the engagement of local people, including many who have experienced social and economic disadvantage, it also boosts supply for people in housing need. It can deliver construction training and bring together disparate groups to create better understanding and integration. All in all, Big Society in action!

This report draws together the findings of the Consultation and makes a number of recommendations. Taken together these recommendations could make a real difference to widening the use of self-help housing.

At the time of writing major changes in housing and welfare policy are being introduced such as the Localism Bill, the Public Services (Social Enterprise and Social Value) Bill and the Home and Communities Agency Affordable Homes Programme Framework. These provide an opportunity to implement many of the recommendations in this report.

Since the Consultation, significant progress has been made on some of the points in the report. I really hope that this is the moment when self-help housing can begin to fulfil its potential in delivering benefits to local communities.

Heather Petch, Director of HACT, March 2011

Executive summary

"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]

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 new 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;

- an opportunity for owners of empty properties to bring them back into use;

- a means to tackle dereliction and blight which contributes to wider neighbourhood regeneration.

Analysis of self-help housing case studies by the 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 are outlined in full in Figure 1 on page 14, but 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, 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. (Recommendation 2: page 18).

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. (Recommendation 3: page 18).

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. (Recommendation 7: page 25).

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. (Recommendation 4: page 19).

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. (Recommendation 9: page 26).

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. (Recommendation 11: page 28).

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. (Recommendation 12: page 29).

Local partners

Local authorities, 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. (Recommendation 6: page 23).

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. (Recommendation 8: page 25).

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. (Recommendation 10: page 26).

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. (Recommendation 5: page 21).

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. (Recommendation 1: page 15).

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] Some of the key features of self-help housing are that:

- Empty properties are often brought back into use on a temporary basis pending a decision about their longer term use. Permanent transfer of properties to community groups sometimes occurs.

- Renovation work may be required to make the properties habitable. Residents or members of the community may be involved in undertaking this work on either a paid or voluntary basis.

- It can take different forms. The primary focus of the community might be tackling neighbourhood blight caused by empty homes, delivering training or providing affordable housing.

- It differs from self-build housing, which involves constructing entirely new permanent homes.

- It is not a new approach. Many large housing associations began in this way several decades ago and there are many international examples of success.

It is difficult to assess the number of organisations that are using a self-help housing approach. Self-help housing may be developed by many different types of local groups such as development trusts, social enterprises, migrant groups, artists' collectives, housing co-operatives and homeless organisations. Self-Help Housing.Org is a national project which is currently working with around fifty organisations, although there are likely to be many more local groups using this approach. These organisations are spread unevenly across the country.

The Building and Social Housing Foundation (BSHF) co-ordinated a Consultation at St George's House, Windsor Castle, to examine self-help housing and its potential to bring empty properties back into use. BSHF brought together representatives from groups undertaking self-help housing, academia, trade bodies, think tanks and government departments (the full list of participants can be found at the end of this report). This report draws on the discussions at the Consultation to make recommendations about how self-help housing could be

supported more effectively to maximise the contributions it can bring to tackling empty properties.

The Consultation built on new research from the Third Sector Research Centre (TSRC). A scoping paper[3] explored the history of self-help and located this within the wider development of ideas about community self-help in the UK. It proposed research to explore the steps that would be required for the sector to play an increased role in the future and this led to a follow up project, which examined a sample of eight case studies. These case studies included five well-established groups undertaking self-help housing and three recently formed projects to improve understanding of current policy drivers and barriers. The case studies were selected to capture as full a range as possible of different approaches to self-help housing. Interviews were conducted with project champions, other staff and partner organisations. Focus groups were held with volunteers, trainees, apprentices and residents from the well established projects. The research generated a case study based report[4] for BSHF's Consultation and a report for CRISIS, considering the potential of self-help housing to address homelessness.[5]

Benefits of self-help housing

The TSRC research and the Consultation highlighted a wide range of benefits that can be delivered through self-help housing. It is an approach that provides:

- contributions to additional supply of housing to tackle homelessness and meet local housing need;

- affordable housing for people who struggle to access other housing options, such as social tenancies or ownership (e.g. single people and couples on low incomes);

- opportunities to gain construction skills and qualifications through on-site experience for local people;

- benefits of active participation, improved self-confidence and greater control over key aspects of their lives for socially excluded people;

- benefits to owners of empty properties, such as private owners, local authorities and housing associations, who receive protection from squatting and prevention of crime and anti-social behaviour, without incurring the costs associated with private security;

- support for local authority work to tackle empty properties and build community cohesion. It can contribute to wider neighbourhood regeneration by tackling dereliction and blight through "street level initiatives";[6]

- engagement in the wider government priorities around the Big Society, localism and allowing local communities greater control;

- an opportunity to tackle properties, which are causing a blight to neighbourhoods, but which might not otherwise be renovated (for example because they are awaiting demolition or major renovation).

When these are taken together, the potential of self-help housing to deliver social and economic benefits is apparent. Self-help housing can provide win-win outcomes for a variety of groups. Perhaps the most important of these is the impact it can have on individual lives (see Box 1). With such a wide variety of potential benefits, the key question is: how can we encourage greater use of the self-help housing approach?

Box 1: Self-help housing – A success story

"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".[7]

Success factors

Analysis of the self-help housing case studies found an interconnected group of enabling factors and barriers that supported or impeded their development.[8] When these barriers and enablers are taken together they highlight the success factors that support the development of self-help housing:

- **A committed group of people**. Self-help housing is dependent on having a group of people who are willing to give time and energy to improve their community and housing. Effective leadership and a strong sense of social purpose are needed to sustain the enthusiasm and overcome the difficulties faced when using this approach.

- **Available property**. There is a wide variety of property that can be used for self-help housing. This includes empty properties in private ownership, which are often accessed with support from local authorities. Other suitable properties can include those owned by housing associations or various public bodies such as the Department for Transport, Ministry of Defence, local authorities and Arm's Length Management Organisations (ALMOs).[9] Many former factory and commercial buildings also provide opportunities for conversion into housing. Most often these will be available on short leases of two to ten years, and should, wherever possible, be at a low rent.

- **A viable funding model**. The simplest funding model is based on recycling rental income to pay for repairs to the property. Using volunteer time often reduces the cost of refurbishment for organisations undertaking self-help housing. However, this may not cover the costs of every property, so additional funding may be required. Funding to pay for refurbishment costs has come from a variety of sources such as voluntary donations, charitable trusts and statutory funding via Temporary Social Housing Grant.[10] Rent free use of a property in exchange for refurbishment is another option. Whilst most self-help housing started with recycling rental income to pay for repairs, it is ownership of assets by organisations that has the potential to provide a secure funding source that creates long term financial sustainability.

- **Need for local housing**. Those wanting to secure housing in this way will most often come from groups who struggle to access either private renting or social housing such as single people on low incomes, couples without children, refugees or people leaving institutions. It is important that as self-

help housing develops it continues to cater for those whose needs are often not met by conventional social housing.

- **A willing workforce**. To improve or maintain the properties there needs to be some combination of volunteers, trainees, employees or contractors who are willing and able to undertake the work.

- **Support from partner organisations**. This type of local response cannot take place without the right type of "help from without".[11] Local authorities, housing associations, ALMOs, community groups, enabling organisations (such as Self-Help-Housing.Org and the HCA) and other partners play a vital role in helping organisations undertaking self-help housing to access the resources they need to grow and develop.
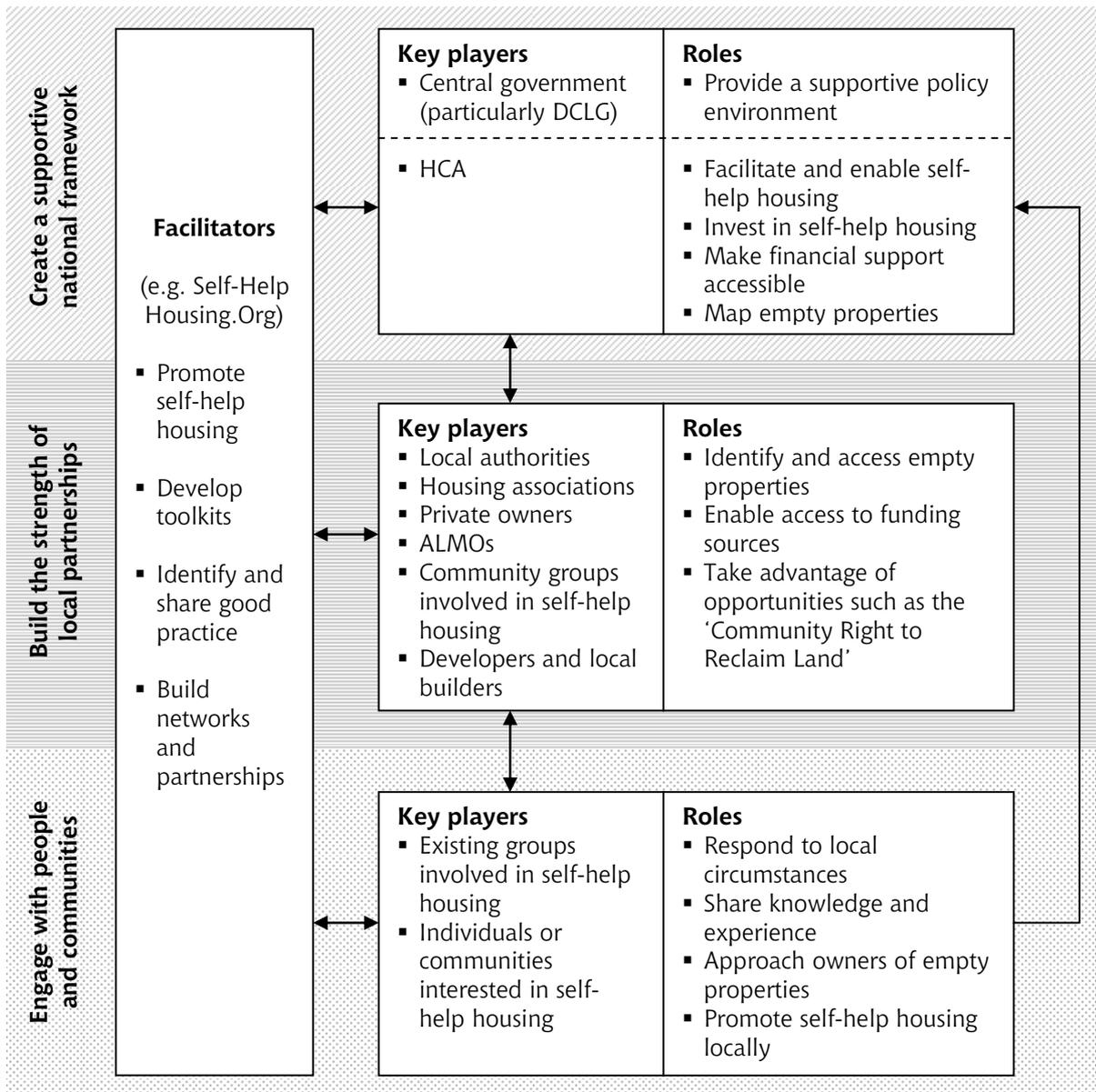
The key ingredients for self-help housing

Working to assemble all of the key ingredients for self-help housing 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 (see Figure 1):

- 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 with specific recommendations for actions that can be taken to help support the development of self-help housing.

Many of the recommendations from the Consultation are significant for wider policy, including the Big Society agenda, empty homes and community engagement. The recommendations provide examples of the type of support required by communities to respond to their local housing needs and deliver additional housing supply. While these recommendations are consistent with a localist approach to housing, they challenge some current practices. Large scale procurement and intensive asset management often leave little room for more localised responses to housing need by communities. Self-help housing also challenges service commissioners, such as local authorities and Primary Care Trusts, to recognise the multiple benefits that this approach can provide. These may not be recognised without close coordination between different commissioners in a local area; for example through community budgets in which local authorities and third sector partners explore the potential for more effective local services with residents.[12]

Figure 1: The key ingredients for self-help housing

	Facilitators	Key players	Roles
Create a supportive national framework	**Facilitators** (e.g. Self-Help Housing.Org) ▪ Promote self-help housing ▪ Develop toolkits ▪ Identify and share good practice ▪ Build networks and partnerships	**Key players** ▪ Central government (particularly DCLG) ▪ HCA	**Roles** ▪ Provide a supportive policy environment ▪ Facilitate and enable self-help housing ▪ Invest in self-help housing ▪ Make financial support accessible ▪ Map empty properties
Build the strength of local partnerships		**Key players** ▪ Local authorities ▪ Housing associations ▪ Private owners ▪ ALMOs ▪ Community groups involved in self-help housing ▪ Developers and local builders	**Roles** ▪ Identify and access empty properties ▪ Enable access to funding sources ▪ Take advantage of opportunities such as the 'Community Right to Reclaim Land'
Engage with people and communities		**Key players** ▪ Existing groups involved in self-help housing ▪ Individuals or communities interested in self-help housing	**Roles** ▪ Respond to local circumstances ▪ Share knowledge and experience ▪ Approach owners of empty properties ▪ Promote self-help housing locally

Engage with people and communities

Despite the success of the self-help housing approach it has only been adopted in some areas of the UK. A key question is how can more communities be supported in using this approach to address local problems?

A clearer understanding of the current use of self-help housing may provide a basis for widening its adoption. What has led to the current geographic spread of self-help housing? What can be learned from this to support the development of self-help housing in areas where it does not yet exist? What lessons can be learned from other contexts, such as Germany (see Box 2), where self-help housing is more common?

Box 2: Self-help housing in Germany

In Germany, self-help housing has been widely used to provide dwellings for young people. In Berlin, more than 300 large blocks with around 5000 flats (often former squats) were refurbished in a Self-Help Programme. Funding was provided for some of the repairs whilst volunteer labour (known as a 'muscle-mortgage') reduced the costs. Old factories and former military barracks were converted into attractive neighbourhoods, for example in Freiburg Vauban. Leipzig has a home-steading programme bringing empty inner city blocks back into use. Public funding can be granted, if a legal right to the property can be established over a minimum period (usually 15 years). Self-help housing is usually provided through partnerships with municipalities, providers of vocational training and social services, often also supported by charitable funds.

Recommendation 1: *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.*

The core of self-help housing is the people who are involved in bringing empty properties back into use. These organisations are people-based, not property-based. Their success is due to individuals and groups responding to the problems that they see around them. This means that **a diverse group of organisations are undertaking self-help housing because they are responding to different local priorities**. For example, youth homelessness and

housing need was the initial focus for Community Campus[13] in Teesside, and responding to empty properties left by a stalled road widening scheme became a major focus for Riverlink Housing Co-operative[14] in north London. (See also Box 3.) This responsiveness to the priority issues for local people gives self-help housing its energy and builds support within the wider community.

Box 3: Responding to local needs in Huddersfield

Fresh Horizons[15] is a community social enterprise based in Huddersfield. It became involved in self-help housing in response to local problems with abandoned buildings and dereliction. Local private sector empty properties have been targeted and seven options developed to encourage owners to bring empty properties back into use. This generates work for the construction employment and training team and also provides an additional housing opportunity for the local community. Tenants have expressed their appreciation in having responsive, local support from Fresh Horizons. While initial empty homes activity has been on a small scale, the aim is to undertake 'street level regeneration' based on local clusters of around 30 properties.

The specialised local focus of the self-help housing approach means that it is most likely to appeal to smaller organisations and community groups. For this approach to grow whilst retaining its strengths and original purpose, it is more likely to grow virally, from person to person and community to community: replication is more likely to be successful than expansion.[16] This type of growth will require creative support from a variety of different sources. However, some larger organisations, such as housing associations, may also benefit from this approach. In order to do so, they would need strong local connections and be able to work in collaboration with local communities. If some larger housing associations were able to adopt this approach it might provide a boost to the scaling up of self-help housing.

The experience of the case studies suggests that two of the success factors for self-help housing are a **committed group of people** and a **viable financial model**.

Committed people who want to respond to local problems exist in every community. There are ways that enthusiastic individuals and groups can be supported in developing a response to the local issues that they face. Existing groups such as neighbourhood forums, development trusts, homelessness groups and social enterprises are just some of those who might benefit from the

self-help housing approach if they had the right support. The early stages of development may be particularly difficult. Support from existing organisations undertaking self-help housing, or a national facilitator, such as Self-Help Housing.Org, are often vital in the early stages of a project. This type of support could include one-to-one meetings, peer exchanges[17] or the provision of basic information, such as model tenancy agreements.

The self-help housing projects studied already give generously of their time to other groups. The difficulty is often in identifying individuals or groups who might benefit from this type of support. One option might be to consider whether there are existing organisations in areas without self-help housing that would be able to increase their impact by adopting this approach.

Even with a committed group of people it can be difficult for small community groups to develop a financial model that can make self-help housing viable. Developing a self-help housing project may have higher initial costs and greater financial risks than other types of community project. This is due to the cost and risk of refurbishing empty properties. Community organisations may have particular difficulties in finding funds to cover the upfront costs needed to begin work. Support from charitable trusts or other funders during the early stages of development appears to be crucial in the development of self-help housing.

Different local circumstances mean that there will not be a 'one size fits all' financial solution for self-help housing. However, flexible frameworks and external advice could provide invaluable support. These might list possible sources of funding, models for governance and examples of how other organisations work. There are also ways that government can contribute by ensuring that national financial frameworks and regulations fit the needs of small, local organisations. National representatives and enablers could work with central government and funders to ensure that local organisations can access funding that they need.

Central government (particularly the DCLG), local government and the HCA should review grant funding so that small local organisations such as self-help housing groups can access it. Organisations undertaking self-help housing often find that the minimum amounts of money that can be bid for in funding programmes are too large for their work. Even when they can access funding, the reporting requirements can be a major barrier. They are often disproportionately long and complex and do not reflect the lower level of risk involved in smaller amounts of money.

There may be a role for an intermediary that can provide support for small organisations in accessing funding for self-help housing. For example the

Minister for Housing has announced a £100 million fund for tackling empty properties.[18] This appears to be ideally suited to self-help housing projects. However, current projects may struggle to access this funding due to their current size and capacity. An intermediary vehicle might allow self-help housing projects to access this funding as their capacity develops.

Recommendation 2:   *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.*

Recommendation 3:   *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.*

The public sector (particularly local authorities) may find that procuring services from organisations undertaking self-help housing brings additional social and economic benefits. This can include procurement of both properties and contracts (such as construction contracts). The advantages of this type of approach to procurement are clear. Investment from government is retained in the local economy and wider community benefits are created. These could include provision of training, development of the local economy or increased volunteering. It would also provide a valuable source of funding for organisations undertaking self-help housing (see Box 4). However, the timescales and complexity of procurement frameworks often make it difficult for community organisations to compete. The criteria often fail to fully account for the wider community benefits offered by approaches such as self-help housing or the cost of alternatives such as using private security.

Box 4: Procurement and training in the North West of England

B4Box[19] is a social business aiming to bring empty properties into use and deliver accredited construction skills training and paid employment to local people, around 80 per cent of whom have been on benefits. Trainees are paid at the minimum wage until they secure an NVQ level 2 qualification at which point they can work with less supervision. Over a two year period the business has brought around 250 properties into use and trained 40 people. Most of the trainees are people who are older than traditional apprentices (generally over 24 years old) and have previously received benefits. 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. Barriers have been experienced in accessing properties and 'being paid for social outputs', such as training former drug users and people with autism.

Recommendation 4: *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.*

Build the strength of local partnerships

Self-help housing, like all community action, cannot be undertaken in isolation. Responding to local needs will bring this kind of project into contact with other organisations with different priorities including local authorities, housing associations, ALMOs, health providers, the criminal justice system, youth services and other community groups. For some organisations using a self-help housing approach, partnerships have been very successful and vital to their development. For example Community Campus has developed a successful partnership with Coast & Country Housing which has helped them access Temporary Social Housing Grant in order to renovate ten privately-owned empty properties. Canopy has been working with a wide range of local volunteers from schools and community groups in Leeds (see Box 5). Whilst these partnerships have been successful, other organisations have encountered

major difficulties in developing partnerships to undertake self-help housing. How can more of these strong local partnerships be built?

Box 5: Building the local community in Leeds

Canopy[20] provides a self-help housing opportunity for people who are homeless, which means they have the opportunity to participate in the renovation and decorating of their new home alongside volunteers. These volunteers are a diverse group of people from the local community and local schools. This brings together many individuals from different communities in the local area, including people from different age groups and with differing abilities. Canopy facilitates an opportunity for people from different backgrounds to interact and learn from each other's experiences and skills. This project pulls different strands of the community together, helping to overcome ignorance and prejudice.

In some locations, local groups working on self-help housing have found it very **difficult to engage with potential partners** such as local authorities and housing associations. Some organisations also appear to have perceived self-help housing as a threat to established services, reducing their willingness to partner in this approach. There are a number of things that local groups can do to increase the likelihood of building strong local partnerships to support self-help housing. One lesson from existing partnerships is to think carefully before expending time and effort in trying to establish links. Some organisations are unlikely to be open to partnership working so it is best to focus on the most likely opportunities. It is also important to find and build good relationships with the right people in an organisation. For example, the regeneration or community/social investment team at a housing association might understand the benefits of self-help housing more readily than the development team.

Another lesson on developing partnerships is the need to be clear about **the impact that self-help housing is having on the local community**. Evidence from the case studies suggests that even successful groups are reluctant to promote their self-help housing work, which could act as a barrier to building networks. There is a need to build an effective communication strategy to explain the benefits of self-help housing. Other organisations will need to see that building a partnership to support self-help housing can contribute enough to their priorities to be worth the time and effort. Approaches to other local organisations should be tailored to address their particular priorities. For example, housing associations might be particularly interested in neighbourhood issues or tenant involvement. Approaches to measuring the impact of a project

such as peer research undertaken by communities benefiting from the projects (as in the case of Canopy).[21] Other methods such as Social Return on Investment[22] or Social Audit might consume too many resources to be appropriate for relatively small projects to adopt outright, but can nonetheless provide broad frameworks to demonstrate benefit which could be simplified for use by self-help projects.

Recommendation 5: *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.*

Organisations undertaking self-help housing may be able to increase their effectiveness by **working with other groups to respond to new opportunities**. Government proposals to introduce a **'Community Right to Reclaim Land'**[23] may be one such opportunity that would allow the acquisition of other community assets. There may be other local groups who have similar aims and could make useful partners. Housing co-operatives, Community Land Trusts or other mutually-owned organisations are examples of other groups it might be worth approaching. This type of partnership might allow the scaling up of self-help housing to deal with larger numbers of empty properties that might have been created by infrastructure development or regeneration schemes.

There are several areas where **local authorities could gain from building partnerships with organisations undertaking self-help housing**. This would provide local authorities with another method of tackling empty properties and housing problems. Local authorities have powers under the Housing Act 2004 to ensure that all residential properties, including empty properties, are safe and suitable for habitation. Self-help housing can offer local authorities a wider range of options in responding to empty properties. These include 'meanwhile use', which brings a property back into use whilst the owners decide what to do with it in the longer term, or using volunteer labour to bring a property back into use in return for a lower rent. Local authorities can support self-help housing by helping to identify suitable properties and acting as a broker with private owners. A menu of different options could be drawn up providing the owners of empty properties with a range of choices.

Organisations undertaking self-help housing have demonstrated the **benefit of a 'carrot and stick' approach to dealing with private owners of empty properties**. Where a local authority identifies suitable properties, organisations can work in collaboration with owners to bring the property back into use. If such approaches prove ineffective, the local authority may use statutory powers such as Empty Dwelling Management Orders (see Box 6). Working with private sector landlords could prove an effective method of realising self-help housing's need for properties. It could also provide a valuable service to property owners who often are unaware of their options.

Box 6: Working with private owners of empty properties

Fresh Horizons[24] is attempting to work with private owners of empty properties. It has developed seven options to encourage private owners to participate. These include incentive-based approaches such as 'meanwhile use', shared equity and purchase and Temporary Social Housing Grant funded improvements. These options exist alongside liaison with local authority empty property teams on Compulsory Purchase Orders and Empty Dwelling Management Orders.

Government proposals for a **New Homes Bonus**[25] may also support partnerships to use self-help housing to bring empty properties back into use. As the scheme design ensures that the New Homes Bonus will be paid for empty homes being brought back into use (as well as for newly built homes), it might provide a new financial incentive for local authority work in this area. Self-help housing may provide a cost-effective solution for local authorities and they could share some of the additional revenue generated with the organisations undertaking self-help housing.

Other possible areas of collaboration could include completion of any outstanding work to bring properties up to basic minimum standards. There is also a wider facilitation role that local authorities can play in supporting self-help housing. They should ensure that local planning frameworks and housing strategies provide space for community responses to housing. This might include 'meanwhile use' of properties at preferential rates to allow self-help, given the wider community benefits of this approach.

Housing associations and ALMOs could also benefit from partnerships with organisations undertaking self-help housing. Housing associations established as a result of large scale voluntary transfers and ALMOs might particularly benefit, since their strong ties to specific local communities could fit

well with self-help housing. Partnerships could offer housing associations and ALMOs a different option for dealing with properties that are too expensive to bring up to an acceptable standard through conventional means, or are subject to lengthy delays awaiting major regeneration schemes. The use of volunteer labour could make this economically viable and provide a source of property for self-help housing. Housing associations currently have access to Temporary Social Housing Grant to bring empty properties that they do not own back into use (see Box 7).[26] A new funding framework is being introduced and the government investment of £100 million in empty properties might provide a source of income for self-help housing.[27]

A more strategic partnership between housing association developers and local groups involved in self-help housing groups could deliver mutual benefits. This could involve planning a pipeline of properties that would be suitable for temporary use as self-help housing, while awaiting regeneration, but would eventually be handed back to the housing association. A regular supply of housing would enable more effective future planning of self-help housing. It would benefit housing associations by addressing local blight, vandalism and squatting, which can be associated with regeneration. This might help to avoid situations where housing associations are paying private security companies to protect the properties which could be used for self-help housing.

Other skills and knowledge that housing associations and ALMOs have could be of real benefit to self-help housing, particularly in relation to property management, tenant involvement and governance. If housing associations and ALMOs were willing to transfer these skills and knowledge, they could be helping to support the development of a useful partner and ally.

> **Recommendation 6:**   *Local authorities, 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.*

> **Box 7: Successful partnership between Community Campus and Coast & Country Housing**
>
> Community Campus has worked in partnership with Coast & Country Housing to access £250,000 of Temporary Social Housing Grant. This is being used to renovate ten privately owned empty properties. It will also provide accredited training and on-site construction experience to 15 young people. These 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 Coast & Country Housing. This project has been described as "win-win for all concerned" and has been praised by the Homes and Communities Agency.[28]

Create a supportive national framework

Self-help housing is a response to the needs of a local community and offers a wide range of benefits relating to housing, employment and the local economy. It is most likely to grow virally between communities, but many of the barriers to self-help housing are created at a national level. There are many ways that national government and organisations can support locally based self-help housing projects. They can help to create a supportive structure that is flexible enough for local responses to different issues to emerge.

Central government can contribute to developing this supportive national framework in several ways. It can ensure that, at the very least, **new legislation and policy proposals do not make it more difficult for community responses** such as self-help housing to emerge and develop. New legislation will often provide the opportunity for government to take a more proactive role in encouraging self-help housing. For example, the DCLG has developed the New Homes Bonus, which will apply to empty properties that are brought back into use.[29] The design of the New Homes Bonus should ensure that local communities are actively encouraged to support local authorities in bringing empty properties back into use. The DCLG's development of a £100 million fund to support bringing empty properties[30] back into use provides another opportunity for government to support self-help housing.

More generally, **government can look to raise the profile of self-help as a concrete example of several of its key policy directions**, including localism, social enterprise and the Big Society. This support could act as a catalyst for local communities and the development of local partnerships.

Recommendation 7:   *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.*

Central government decisions also have a major impact on local communities through the structure of the financial support system for housing costs. For example, it can be difficult for local authorities and housing associations to legally transfer properties to community organisations undertaking self-help housing. This transfer can occur for different lengths of time from temporary 'meanwhile use' to permanent transfer. Creating more opportunities for permanent asset transfer could allow organisations undertaking self-help housing to build asset bases against which they could borrow funds and regular income streams that would support their long term financial sustainability. The experience of groups such as Community Campus[31] highlights the role that the acquisition of property assets can play in building financial stability.

Recommendation 8:   *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.*

A flexible national framework can be based on the principle of ensuring that all **grant funding is delivered as close to communities as possible.** This principle can have an impact at a national level through the national housing and regeneration agency, the HCA.

Organisations undertaking self-help housing should be able to access HCA funding without needing to become Registered Providers.[32] Ideally, at least some funding streams should be directly accessible to local community organisations such as those undertaking self-help housing. With the development of Registered Providers who are allowed to make a profit, and support for private developers through the Kickstart delivery programme, the HCA has already extended the types of groups who are eligible to receive funding.[33] Extension of funding to a wider variety of voluntary groups would represent a logical development that would be beneficial to self-help housing.

There are other ways that the HCA can support self-help housing. A good example is the development of an online tool to map empty properties.[34] This will be publicly accessible and allow organisations interested in undertaking self-help housing to see the number and exact location of empty properties in their area. Adopting this type of approach allows the HCA to be an important enabler of self-help housing.

Recommendation 9: 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.

There is emerging anecdotal evidence that changes to government funding, such as the end of ring fencing for Supporting People funding, are having an impact on the financial viability of some organisations undertaking self-help housing that are in receipt of this.[35] The government is proposing major changes to housing and welfare policy that will alter the environment in which self-help housing operates. For example, the government intends to introduce a Universal Credit that will replace Housing Benefit and other welfare benefits. **The changes proposed by the government will create both major opportunities and threats to self-help housing**. As these changes and others are introduced they will need to be monitored to assess their impact on self-help housing. The government will need to ensure that policy changes in one area, such as welfare reform, do not undermine their objectives in another area, such as the development of the Big Society.

Recommendation 10: 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.

There is a clear need for facilitators and intermediaries who operate at a national level to support self-help housing. The local focus of self-help housing is a great strength, but also a weakness in strategic terms. It is difficult for small, local organisations to engage with national policy issues, exchange ideas and good practice or develop a strategic view that is wider than their context. National facilitators can provide legitimacy to local groups as they seek

to access funding and build partnerships. They can also look to address national barriers that affect many different local groups.

Some national organisations already support self-help housing including HACT,[36] Empty Homes,[37] Community Development Foundation[38] and Development Trusts Association[39] (which will become part of Locality in April 2011). Whilst these organisations are interested in this issue, Self-Help Housing.Org is a national organisation specifically focused on this approach. The capacity of these organisations is limited and several are undergoing major structural changes. This means that self-help housing may be supported best by one national facilitator that combines the skills of these national organisations with the knowledge and experience of local organisations that are undertaking self-help housing.

Greater capacity for a national facilitator could improve support to self-help housing in the following ways:

- **Development of financial models**. Grant funding is likely to continue to play an important part in supporting self-help housing, particularly as new projects develop. Government sources of grant funding and engagement with charitable trusts will be important in sustaining this important source of income. However, thought needs to be given to innovative financial models that might allow self-help housing to develop further. It can be difficult for local organisations to access the skills and the information required to develop them further. These include loans, ethical investments (e.g. to enable self-help groups to purchase properties then renovate and sell them to become sustainable), social investment bonds (to recognise the multiple benefits of self-help housing to a variety of public services), grant recycling and allowing residents to build up an equity stake in their property. The Housing Finance Corporation[40] acts as an intermediary body for housing associations wishing to access additional finance raised through bond issues. There may be a way an intermediary can act in a similar way to help access additional funds for self-help housing.

- **Offer practical advice**. There are important practical issues that arise in developing self-help housing. Existing organisations have found the practical advice and sample documents available through Self-Help Housing.Org to be very useful. These could be expanded to include information about funding opportunities and sources of external support (such as Business Link[41] or legal advisors). The HCA's decision to commission a website which will set out comprehensively options for dealing with empty property is a welcome development.[42]

- **Foster knowledge transfer and mutual support.** The importance of knowledge exchange between local groups has already been highlighted. A national facilitator can have a role to play in matching groups to help them find the advice and support that they need. Exchange visits and gatherings of self-help housing groups, possibly at a regional level, could be part of this approach.

- **Build networks**. Increasing awareness and support for self-help housing, particularly amongst other organisations such as housing associations, ALMOs, co-operatives, local authorities, private property owners and construction companies.

- **Promote self-help housing**. There is a role for a national facilitator in partnership with local self-help housing groups in explaining what self-help housing is and highlighting benefits to different audiences at a national level.

- **Engage with government**. A national facilitator can help government to understand the benefits of self-help housing, particularly the multiple benefits seen across different policy areas including housing, welfare and employment. It is also important to support government in ensuring that national policies work together to create a coherent framework for self-help housing to operate within.

Recommendation 11:   *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.*

Self-help housing has a number of similarities to Community Land Trusts, which seek to create "affordable housing and community resources through the co-operative ownership of land by the local community".[43] The development of Community Land Trusts has received a major boost from a development fund set up by charitable trusts. This fund has provided three types of financial support to local groups: initial scoping of a project idea, more detailed support to develop a business plan and an investment fund that provides loans. This type of fund could also be effective in supporting the development of self-help housing.

Recommendation 12: *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.*

Consultation participants

BSHF is grateful for the contributions made by participants at the Consultation. This report does not claim to represent a consensus opinion of all those present, although in preparing it we have drawn heavily on the discussions held. Responsibility for any remaining errors rests, of course, with the authors.

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