

## Hastings Commons, UK

'Hastings Commons' is made up of a group of four community-based, non-profit entities in Hastings, a deprived seaside town on the South coast of England. The project aims to regenerate the neighbourhood with participation from and for the benefit of the local community and provides an interesting alternative to widespread gentrification-displacement approaches. It has bought, improved, and opened 12 buildings which are now used for affordable housing, workspaces, activities and events for Hastings residents to use, share and enjoy for years to come.



**Submitting organisation:** Hasting Commons

**Type of organisation:** Commons

**Key elements of the project:**

- **Neighbourhood Regeneration**

8,500 square metres have been regenerated in a neglected, heritage-rich seaside town in the UK, for both housing and business and community support programmes.

- **Community Land Trust**

541 shareholding members have community ownership over affordable properties in-perpetuity.

- **Broad Alliance of Stakeholders**

The Commons is broken down into four entities and works with local organisations, charities, municipality, businesses, and the cultural sector. It is heavily involved in advocacy efforts through national commissions and networks.

### What inspires us ...

Hastings Commons has created a rare, collective ecosystem and framework which provides affordable, safe and secure housing to a deprived and at-risk community. The place-based, community-led institution has shifted power and agency away from potential profit-driven developers, to the people of Hastings, enabling them to lead their own development and create their own spaces.

## Introduction

White Rock, Hastings, is amongst England's most deprived places.<sup>1</sup> Its story is similar to many seaside towns in the United Kingdom, which experience deprivation, dereliction and eventually profit-driven development. Hastings Commons is a group of diverse, community-based enterprises all working towards a shared goal of people-led regeneration without gentrification and partners closely with municipalities, businesses and non-profits. It has taken 12 buildings into community custody, which are now used for affordable housing, workspaces, activities and events for the local community.

## Context

Some of the most deprived towns in the UK are beside the sea. Although the White Rock neighbourhood of Hastings has a rich heritage, it is now close to the top 1% of most deprived neighbourhoods in the country after decades of neglect. According to the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019, it ranks 333 out of 32,844 deprived neighbourhoods in England.<sup>2</sup>

With the loss of industries such as fishing and fish processing, a visitor economy has taken over. This generally employs people seasonally, pays low wages, provides little job security and offers low-skilled work. Educational attainment is often low in seaside towns. Those that can, move away. Those who are left are more likely to live in social housing, or in low quality, badly maintained, shared or multiple occupation accommodation. Second homes and short-term holiday lettings reduce housing supply and push up housing prices that become unaffordable for local people.<sup>3</sup> Deprived neighbourhoods are vulnerable to profit-driven developers who do not serve local community interests.

In Hastings, the local council has faced potential bankruptcy over the lack of affordable accommodation in both the private and social housing sectors, with many people placed in temporary accommodation.<sup>4</sup> There is a shortage of affordable housing in good condition, with 200 homes fewer homes being built in Hastings each year than was recommended by the government's Housing Need Assessment.<sup>5</sup> In March 2024, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities committed over £13,000,000 GBP (\$16,511,300 USD) to provide more affordable housing in Hastings.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hastings is a borough located in the county of East Sussex.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019-mapping-resources#indices-of-deprivation-2019-explorer-postcode-mapper>. Deprivation is measured according to income; employment; health deprivation and disability; education, skills and training; crime; barriers to housing and services; living environment.

<sup>3</sup> <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CDP-2022-0153/CDP-2022-0153.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-sussex-66178662>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.hastings.gov.uk/static/foi/FOIR-310581108\\_FOIR-310581108\\_2-HBC\\_A4\\_TOWN\\_FUND\\_-\\_ANNEX\\_1-6\\_FINAL\\_PRINT\\_V3.pdf](https://www.hastings.gov.uk/static/foi/FOIR-310581108_FOIR-310581108_2-HBC_A4_TOWN_FUND_-_ANNEX_1-6_FINAL_PRINT_V3.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/40-million-levelling-up-boost-for-east-sussex#:~:text=The%20total%20%2%A340%20million,can%20access%20higher%2Dpaid%20roles.>

## Project Description

Hastings Commons takes a holistic and community-led approach to ‘regeneration without gentrification’ in the White Rock neighbourhood of Hastings. It addresses issues around severe and worsening housing, deprivation and dereliction. Its mission is to grow and sustain the Hastings Commons as an asset to the local community, owned and run collectively and inclusively for current and future generations.

It brings derelict properties under community ownership in perpetuity and renovates them to a high standard, incorporating modern green technologies. These properties are partly used to provide affordable flats at living rents, as well as affordable workspaces.

They also include spaces for community members to come together, including urban gardens, a public living room, youth clubs, training, and pathways to employment (the Kickstart programme for young people aged 16-24 people).

Hastings Commons advocates for better recognition and financing of alternative community-based regeneration schemes. It does this through various committees and networks, such as the Hastings Housing Alliance, which it formed in collaboration with other non-governmental organisations across Hastings. It also works closely with peer organisations across England to improve the conditions for this kind of grassroots community asset development.

This project started in 2014 and is ongoing. It has renovated 12 buildings, across which there are 12 rent-capped apartments housing 15 people with planning permission for a further 12 in the flagship Observer Building. It has brought 8,500 square metres under community ownership and positively impacted 6,385 people. This figure includes 15 residents, 160 commercial tenants, 123 hot deskers, 556 Community Land Trusts members, 3,141 unique public living room users, and 2,390 young people in youth clubs and pathways to employment schemes. It excludes the number of additional participants who benefit from community engagement events and activities each year.

## Organisation implementing the project

Hastings Commons is an ecosystem of organisations working together, united through the concept of ‘commoning.’ Commoning is an ancient land management practice, where people had access to and responsibility for common land and resources to fulfil their basic needs. Within this project, ‘commoning’ involves people working together to positively change their environment, and in doing so taking opportunities to improve their own lives within an open and mutually supportive community.

Hastings Commons is formed of four entities:

**1) Hastings Commons Community Land Trust (CLT)** - Formerly Heart of Hastings CLT, Hastings Commons CLT is a Charitable Community Benefit Society established in March 2016. It is a membership-based body that provides the governance, leadership and engagement to this project. It was built to hold long-term responsibility for the community assets (the buildings) in perpetuity.

2) **Hastings Commons Neighbourhood Ventures** – Registered in 2014 as White Rock Neighbourhood Ventures, is an asset-locked social enterprise property developer with a charitable purpose that takes and manages risk. Already 1/3 owned by the CLT, it buys the buildings and then finances, renovates and manages them. Once the buildings are financially stable there is a pathway in the Shareholders Agreement for the founder investors to be bought out at sub-market value so 100% will be owned by the CLT.<sup>7</sup>

3) **Leisure and Learning** - A Company Limited by Guarantee<sup>8</sup> with charitable status established in 2019. It is referred to as the creative animator, as it develops and funds learning and training programmes across Hastings Commons.

4) **Living Rents** - A Company Limited by Shares<sup>9</sup> set up in 2016 to provide and manage high quality and affordable housing. It is owned by Hastings Commons Neighbourhood Ventures. In December 2023, Hastings Commons submitted for Living Rents to become a Registered Provider i.e. to make it a mini housing association.

Hastings Commons is governed by a single board made up of trustees and directors from the above four entities. The board, of which 93% are local residents, meets quarterly. Board members also attend regular Development Meetings and Programming Meetings.

## Aims and Objectives

To tackle decades of neglect and deprivation, Hastings Commons developed this project to:

- Rescue and protect the legacy assets<sup>10</sup> of Hastings through regeneration.
- Provide a sustainable portfolio of unique assets to thousands of people across the local community in perpetuity.
- Create an environment where people can take ownership, improve their quality of life and shape the neighbourhood they live in.
- Demonstrate, inspire, and share, to create the conditions for a viable alternative to traditional models of regeneration.

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<sup>7</sup> While the company or society is still trading it must use its assets for a specific community benefit and may not transfer them to any person or organisation that will use them differently.

<sup>8</sup> A company limited by guarantee is a distinct legal entity from its owners and is responsible for its own debts. Limited by guarantee, companies are most often formed by non-profit organisations such as sports clubs, workers' co-operatives and membership organisations, whose owners wish to have the benefit of limited financial liability.

<sup>9</sup> A company limited by shares is a corporate entity that is legally separate from any directors and shareholders. As it can stand alone as a legal entity, it can enter contracts as a company and hold assets in its name. The word limited here refers to the shareholders limited liability.

<sup>10</sup> The term "legacy asset" has been coined to refer to an asset that has been inherited from historical uses that are now outdated or obsolete.

Hastings Commons serves three groups:

- 'Commoners': These include tenants (residential and commercial), trustees and the staff team (including volunteers), who are directly involved in looking after the spaces and supporting each other.
- Community Land Trust (CLT) members: Members support Hastings Commons' work and supply new trustees. Often these include commoners as well, but not all members are commoners. Those Commoners that are CLT members tend to be involved in decision making by virtue of being staff, trustees, volunteers and tenants. Community Land Trust membership is open to all who support the objectives (i.e. including those beyond the area) but in reality, 88% of members live in the town and 95% live in the county, and 93% of the Hastings Commons board are residents.
- Wider community: This includes other local people who can engage in and benefit from the spaces, whether through attending events, taking part in pathways to employment, and attending workshops. This project strongly supports youth education and employment.

Residential and commercial tenants benefit from the permanently affordable homes, capped rent workspaces, training and pathways to work, youth clubs, and so on. Community Land Trust members have shared ownership over land and buildings as well as voting rights, giving them a direct say in how community assets are developed and used. The position of partner NGOs, charities, and businesses is also stronger because of this collective action, and many are CLT members themselves.

Hastings Commons is prioritising targeted outreach and engagement with racially minoritised communities, working class residents and renters, because it recognises it has struggled with this in the past.

Indirectly, this project helps the local Hastings Borough and East Sussex County Councils. Hastings Borough Council is heavily burdened with the local housing crisis, temporary accommodation costs and rising homelessness. This project relieves this economic burden, as does its planned scale.

Hastings Commons Community Land Trust currently has 556 members and hopes to gain 750 members by March 2025. It is developing an additional 12 new affordable homes due for completion by 2025/2026. It is also putting a proposal together for the site of a large multi-storey car park, which it hopes to convert to 160 affordable cooperatives homes.

## Key Features

**Retain and refurbish.** Renovating existing buildings conserves important historical assets for the local community and reduces the embodied greenhouse gas emitted by new construction.

**Community Land Trust (CLT).** This project uses the Community Land Trust model, which is open to all who support its goals and objectives. Members join by buying at least one community share at £1 GBP (\$1 USD). All members have equal voting rights, regardless of how many shares they hold. They

receive regular updates on progress and activities, have the right to stand as trustees and to elect the trustees, and must approve changes to any governing rules.

**Partnerships.** Hastings Commons collaborates with local and regional partners across the charity, public, corporate, creative and cultural sectors to achieve their objectives. It works with Hastings Borough Council and East Sussex County Council, where it sits on the Town Deal Board; a board managing the Hastings Town Investment Plan (including housing).

**Affordability.** Housing affordability is to set and protect rent levels at one-third of local median income. Rents then only rise with inflation in line with the Regulation of Social Housing's [Rent Standard](#), thereby protecting affordability in perpetuity. As a Registered Provider, Hastings Commons will continue to keep that policy. Until then both the Community Land Trust and Neighbourhood Ventures entity are mission-locked to provide affordable capped rents.

**Community ownership in perpetuity.** 100% of the shares in Neighbourhood Ventures (which owns the assets) are owned by the CLT. CLTs are defined by UK law to further the social, economic and environmental interests of a local community by acquiring and managing land for their benefit. Legally they cannot allow assets to be sold or developed unless members think it will help the community. The growing CLT membership itself ensures democratic control of the assets and that they continue to provide community benefit.

**Local allocation.** Hastings Commons works closely with Hastings Borough Council to ensure that homes are allocated to those in housing need, receiving nominations from the Council's Housing Register and using its selection criteria to select those with local connection, enthusiasm for the commoning ethos and willingness to contribute. Hastings Commons also receives applications directly and reserves some housing for those who would otherwise be at risk of becoming homeless. Decision making opportunities are heavily promoted to local people, as this project recognises that decisions on how spaces and buildings are used should be shaped by those impacted by them.

**Methods of engagement (Open Doorways).** Hastings Commons has different ways to encourage people to take part in decision making, including consultation events, the CLT Annual General Meeting, Board meetings, focused workshops directly involving community members on certain areas i.e. types of home needed. Other engagement methods include social spaces such as the public living room, youth club and a programme of events and activities.

**Advocacy.** Hastings Commons is committed to influencing national policy and funding conditions for community-led regeneration, through participation in commissions, reviews, national networks and membership bodies (e.g. the CLT Network). Hastings Commons is one of Joseph Rowntree Foundation's 'emerging future pathfinders' to help their Trustees better support community-based action for alternative futures. They have also set up the Hastings Housing Alliance, in collaboration with NGOs across the Borough.

## Innovation

Hastings Commons directly challenges the dominant model of regeneration, ownership and development by rooting its work in the concept of the commons (management of common-ground resources for the collective good) and commoning (people working together to positively change their environment and own lives).

It is an innovative, new entity that can shape the development of a city or town. We have seen several examples of community-led structures worldwide, but this is uniquely well institutionalised with an elaborate organisational structure. It offers a new community-based way to shape society and has done this through a power shift where Hastings Commons exists on par with private enterprises and government bodies. This is shown by its close partnership and collaboration with the local councils and its position on the Town Deal Board (see above).

It is also one of the few community-based models focused on regeneration. Another example would be [Granby4Streets CLT](#) in Liverpool which has also looked at regeneration cohesively, instead of just focusing on housing. Both models see the development of an area, its economy and what makes a city as interrelated with housing and therefore to be addressed together. Given Hastings' general deprivation – in housing, employment, skills, education and wellbeing – this is an impressive, integrative response to transforming a neighbourhood.

Hastings Commons is pioneering work in seaside towns - a new area for CLTs. There are other existing CLT models in seaside towns in the United Kingdom – [St Ives Community Land Trust](#) and the [Great Yarmouth Community Land Trust](#) – but none with the sustained level of community engagement and robust organisational structure of Hastings Commons. With seaside towns' unique issues and housing challenges (heritage decay, a visitor economy, poor council funding), Hastings Commons provides a model for other communities to gain more control over their housing situation and wellbeing.

## Funding

The founder investors in Hastings Commons Neighbourhood Ventures (HCNV) - [Jericho Road Solutions](#) and [Meanwhile Space CIC](#) – provided early stage and high-risk investment of about £350,000 GBP (\$446,706 USD). They gifted one-third of the shares to Hastings Commons Community Land Trust (CLT). The remaining shares will be bought by the CLT at below market value when the building portfolio has been 'de-risked' and reaches financial stability.<sup>11</sup>

Hastings Commons is funded through a combination of capital and revenue grants, capital loans and income generated from the use of the buildings (rental income, events etc), plus community shares<sup>12</sup> and loan stock<sup>13</sup> provided by local people and organisations. Funders include national and local

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<sup>11</sup> The formula for the CLT to buy below market value: take the market value (with capped rents), less any outstanding debt, less any grants given specifically for charitable purpose. Then check that the resulting figure is 'do-able' by the CLT without taking more than 50% loan to value across the whole portfolio.

<sup>12</sup> Community shares are withdrawable shares that cannot be sold, traded or transferred between members, unlike shares in a typical company.

<sup>13</sup> Loan stock is a form of debt which shares multiple features with risk investment. Its stock issued by your business as a collateral against a loan. Just like other loans, it earns interest and grants control of the shares to the lender until the loan is paid off.

government; trusts and foundations; government bodies such as [Historic England](#); private-public partnerships like the [Local Enterprise Partnership](#); and a range of social lenders, including the Ecology Building Society.

The Community Land Trust's operating costs are £400,000 GBP (\$508,556 USD) per year. They are currently met by the combination of grants listed above and earned income.

Since 2014 Hastings Commons has raised a total of £29,000,000 GBP (\$36,870,310 USD) in capital and revenue, funded by a total of 94 different grants and loans from 53 different funders. It is actively involved in national work to shape and expand the funding environment for community asset development. For example, it advocated to Historic England to expand its funding to community-based organisations and is currently working with Power to Change to convene a 'Financing the Future Task Force' to attract pension and mortgage investment (20+ year funding) into community asset development.

The goal is to reach a steady state, when all the buildings are earning more than they cost to run. At that point, all the assets and HCNV itself will be completely de-risked and will be 100% owned by the Community Land Trust in perpetuity.

## Impact

### Financial

- Housing is more affordable and accessible. Rent levels are at one-third of local median income or 80% of market rent (whichever is lower).
- Renovated and brought 12 buildings under community ownership.
- Housed 15 people in 12 affordable, good-quality rent-capped apartments, located across the community-owned buildings.
- Local businesses can flourish and not be priced out of the area as they can access affordable workspaces.
- Secured impressive levels of funding in an environment not conducive for financing community-based organisations. Since 2014, it has secured £29,000,000 GBP (\$36,870,310 USD).

### Social

- This project's mission and design is based on community collaboration and belonging. For example, in the Common Room – one of the spaces available for use – people take part in meetings, workshops, classes and community group gatherings. This space also serves as a 'public living room' – a space for people to come together in a non-transactional environment, to 'be alongside each other'.
- The local community has greater decision-making power over the neighbourhood they live in, through the Open Doorways channels, where they take part in open meetings, community consultations etc.



- 93% of the Board are residents within the community.
- One of the rent-capped flats has been adapted using a disabled facilities grant from Hastings Borough Council to support a tenant with restricted mobility.
- The Kickstart programme - an employment skills programme for young people aged 16 to 24 - is hosted out of the spaces
- Hastings Youth Commons runs a youth club 4 nights a week and supports 11–18-year-olds to contribute to the design process and renovation of derelict and difficult heritage buildings.
- In the Annual Tenants Review (conducted in 2023, 55% response rate) nearly half of tenants (42%) reported building meaningful professional relationships; 61% formed meaningful personal friendships; 79% reporting meeting new types of people; and 95% felt in 'good company.'
- Given the vulnerability of residential tenants, Hastings Commons is careful not to extract data for impact purposes and collects it on a voluntary basis. Of the 27% of residents who responded, individuals reported a strong sense of community and belonging; an improvement in mental health; mutual support; and professional and financial opportunities.
- Hastings Commons conducts advocacy work through national networks and by participating in relevant Commissions (ex. No Place Left Behind Commission on Levelling Up). Through its advocacy work, it helped shape Historic England's 'Working in Place' strategy, encouraging it to broaden funding beyond authorities to work with place-based community-led organisations.

### **Environmental**

This project renovates existing buildings, significantly protecting the embodied energy of the buildings and preventing carbon emissions from demolition, manufacturing and construction. For example, it will save more than 1800 tonnes of CO2 by converting a multi-storey car park into housing, compared to a standard redevelopment.

To protect the environment, Hastings Commons has a climate commitment of 'Be Lean, Be Clean and Be Green' that it applies to all its buildings.

Be Lean projects use less energy through:

- Improved thermal envelope (upgrading the built fabric by insulating external walls, fitting more glazing), thereby reducing heat loss and reducing energy required for heating.
- Enhancing natural ventilation wherever possible.
- Using Mechanical Ventilation Heat Recovery units.

- Using energy efficient lighting.

Be Clean, Be Green – Hastings Commons supplies energy efficiently and uses renewable sources by:

- Purchasing power and choices – it buys energy for all the buildings and has negotiated good terms to prioritise greener tariffs
- Using photovoltaic panels where possible.
- Using Air Source Heat Pumps.
- Using sustainable and locally sourced materials.
- Enhancing existing on-site biodiversity.
- Using low flow sanitary devices and water management systems to save water.

## Learning, evaluation, and recognition

Hastings Commons conducts regular independent evaluations of their projects through [Resources for Change](#). They have a full time Impact and Feedback Coordinator. They are careful to not be too extractive with their impact measurements and are embedded within the community to get more real-time updates.

Hastings Commons has learned that for effective regeneration to take place, organisations need to:

**Create equitable access to essential goods and services** – for people to thrive they need homes, health, education, utilities, meaningful employment and social opportunities.

**Create opportunities to connect** - thriving places need strong social infrastructure, i.e. spaces and places for social interaction, where people can connect with, spend time with and get to know each other.

**Create a cared-for place** – thriving places are places where people want to spend time and do not suffer from poor place quality e.g. dereliction, declining high street, lack of public realm, or a lack of green or blue space. Improving place quality fosters local pride, improves health and wellbeing, attracts investment and can help rebuild the economy.

How this is done is also very important, and Hastings Commons has learned: to build on what they already have; to build agency and power for people to act on the issues affecting them; to act quickly and adapt as they go; to think long-term unlike traditional short-term models of regeneration; to use commoning to enable people to step up and step in to collaborate together in the stewardship of resources; and to actively seek equity and inclusion by focusing on affordability, accessibility and creating social value.

## Recognition

### Prizes and Awards

- Jericho Road Solutions, on behalf of Hastings Commons, was a finalist for ‘Placemaking and Affordable Housing Design’ category in the William Sutton Prize 2019.

This project has been featured in national media:

- BBC Sunday Politics Southeast broadcast, (link no longer available).
- [‘People tell me they’re not ready to work’: how long-term sickness blighted a town – The Guardian](#)
- [The Housing Battle of Hastings - New Statesman](#)
- [Battle to Save Hastings’ Cursed Pier - The Telegraph](#)
- [Artists are taking over old supermarkets and derelict buildings. Can they escape artwashing? - Big Issue](#)
- [Empty Homes: How a group of Hastings resident are turning the tide on the housing crisis - Big Issue](#)
- No Place Left Behind Commission, BBC Radio 4 Today Programme, (link no longer available).

## Transfer and future plans

Hastings Commons is renovating its flagship building to create another 12 affordable homes that will be completed in 2025/2026. It is developing a proposal to convert a multi-storey carpark to create 160 affordable cooperative homes. It will also focus on consolidating existing buildings, to maximise their benefit to the community while conducting further engagement and outreach.

Those working on widespread adoption of community-led approaches to regeneration face many barriers. These include a short-term, competitive funding system meaning Hastings Commons has had to obtain over 100 separate grants and loans to complete its work. There is a longstanding resistance to devolving decision making and power to local communities and a lack of patient long-term capital borrowing at affordable rates.

Hastings Commons wishes to position itself as a beacon for other organisations interested in developing place-based community-led solutions for regeneration. They are installing an International Hosting Centre for the Commons (to be completed by April 2025) to host national and international visitors and deliver training and knowledge-sharing events. They have a strong appetite for knowledge transfer to not just influence the policy and funding environment but shift the direction of regeneration away from developers towards communities. It is well positioned to highlight the impact of



community-led work and advocate for better practices, particularly through its work with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, networks, and national commissions. It hopes that it can be less reactive in this work as capacity grows.

It is also scaling the approach locally. For example, Hastings Commons is in discussions with Historic England about a multi-year programme of support for others undertaking community-led heritage-focused regeneration work across Hastings.

### **World Habitat Reflections**

Hastings Commons has constructed an entire ecosystem and framework that is fundamental to providing affordable, safe and secure housing to a deprived and at-risk community. These kinds of actors – commons or collective structures – are rare. It has created an institutionalised, place-based, community-led enterprise that has shifted power and agency to the Hastings community to lead their own development, access safe and secure housing, and create spaces for themselves. As one of the first to do this in the United Kingdom, it provides an inspirational model for regeneration. The World Habitat Awards can provide a platform for it to launch its planned advocacy and knowledge exchange work.