

## Building Community: Learning from community self-build housing failures and successes



There is a truism shared by those who have successfully built community eco-housing; building houses is the easy bit, building community requires all the work. Some lessons that others have learnt from community housing projects are:

- 1. Start small:** Starting with a small core of people helps build a firm base of communal understanding and enables key principles to be agreed more quickly.
- 2. Decide purpose early:** A lack of a clear purpose wastes people's time and energy. Deciding early on that, for example, the project is for urban senior co-housing or rural low impact development, helps people decide if it is something worth investing in.
- 3. Decide decision-making processes early:** Without clear governance structures through which it is clear how decisions are made, recorded, and checked then problems will emerge when people seek to challenge already-made decisions. If decision-making is unclear groups can end up in loops of repeating debates endlessly.
- 4. Create space for informal sharing and conversations:** Taking the time to get to know each other is vital in building trust and in helping people decide if they want to live together. Sharing regular meals, beers, dancing, etc. enables one-to-one conversations and friendship building. Having fun is vital to a successful project and keeps people wanting to be involved. You could also develop a 'friends group' through which people can get to know each other without necessarily formally committing to the group.
- 5. Good practice in meetings:** Hold regular meetings in a neutral space and agree who will facilitate and who will take minutes. Most groups rotate the roles around different group members. Within meetings try out different communication techniques to ensure that everyone is heard. These practices should help prevent power struggles in a group and reduce misunderstandings or assumptions.
- 6. Find points of commonality and difference:** While part of the point of community self-building is to work in common with others, it is just as important to identify, discuss and resolve points of difference. Only by articulating differences can their importance be understood.
- 7. Use structured activities to help group progress:** Few people have time and energy to waste in endless meetings. Structured group activities (such as visioning exercises or sharing workshops), especially those that allow small-group work, enable people to see progress being made, their views included and momentum sustained. These activities can be within regular business meetings or held separately; as long as sufficient time is given to them.
- 8. Develop a robust and clear system of communication:** This might be a group email list or posting of minutes online, but it needs to be available to all.
- 9. Develop a standing agenda for meetings:** This saves time and helps in consistency. This could include; greetings, icebreakers, apologies, minutes, matters arising, current issues, reports from the task groups, any other business. Some groups also end with a short period of silence.
- 10. Share case studies:** By exploring other examples of community self-build projects and sharing information and knowledge, groups can reach a collective understanding of what housing they are interested in and the detailed issues involved. Be aware that all projects have their strengths and weaknesses, so look closely at more than one example.
- 11. Use external agencies, training and expertise:** Using third party help brings additional knowledge and fresh perspectives to your project. Through this process you also build good support networks. You will also need, eventually, to have access to professionals, such as lawyers, preferably those who understand what you are trying to achieve.
- 12. Find an external project manager:** Some of the most successful groups had an external project manager. Ideally you need someone who can help with people processes and someone else who understands the technicalities of building. Having someone external also means that the group does not become reliant on one individual, no one person is indispensable and this gives the group more resilience.

## Finding a site: Make sure you are ready



Many community-led housing groups spend years looking for the perfect location to build their homes. Sometimes, however, a site can present itself early in the process and groups do not always feel ready to move forward quickly on a project. If you have just found a site here are a few things we would advise you organise in your group.

- 1. Take time to check whether the site (and any partners you are working with, such as a housing association or Community Land Trust) is right:** There is a temptation when a site is found to become very pragmatic about other aspects and end up compromising on what might have been core values of the group. It might not become clear what the level of compromise will be until a few months into the process. Don't become too pragmatic.
- 2. Agree a decision-making structure:** Whatever approach is chosen – consensus, voting, or a mixture – ensure that everyone knows, understands and agrees how decisions will be made in the group. This is vital as once a site has been found a lot of decisions often have to be made very quickly.
- 3. Rearticulate the core values of the group:** This is important not just for the group but for those partners which tend to become involved at this stage. This helps as you start explaining the project to planners, potential neighbours, housing associations and funders.
- 4. Ownership:** Enthusiastic organisers who have more time to devote to the project may lead the group in a direction that not everyone has signed up to, as they try to keep to a timetable imposed by external factors. Agreeing decision making structures and rearticulating core values will help these organisers, as well as increase ownership of the process for others in the group who don't have the time to get so involved.
- 5. Start fundraising:** A site requires some funds to hire architects, surveyors, lawyers and to submit a planning application. Potential places to try for grants include The Tudor Trust, Esme Fairburn Foundation and the Homes and Communities Agency. If you are working with a housing association they can cover these costs, but remember you will most likely be paying them back for this once you move in. It is your money they are spending so try and ensure they communicate well about budgets.
- 6. Start community engagement:** If you are keen on a site then starting talking to those who live near by and cultivate contacts that you might need in the local council (and others in the area who share an interest in what you are doing).
- 7. Use external advice, training and expertise:** There are numerous places to get advice and help from at this stage, such as Community Land Trusts, Radical Routes, Co-Housing Network, CDS Co-ops, and Co-operative enterprise hub. Many of these groups offer free advice and/or someone will come and give a talk about particular aspects of community housing projects. If you are planning to work with a housing association then do see if you can find a friendly housing association that can act as a mentor.
- 8. Find an external project manager:** Some of the most successful groups had an external project manager. Ideally you need someone who can help with people processes and someone else who understands the technicalities of building.
- 9. Secure commitment from members:** Now is the time to ask people to commit to the project. This can be done through asking for a deposit, but you need to do what best suits your project and form of ownership or tenancy. This helps clarify who is really interested in moving onto a site and who is not.
- 10. Keep the social activities going:** Having fun and getting along with each other is vital at this stage, when meetings can become long and very business focused. Make sure there are regular spaces where you have fun together.
- 11. Develop task groups:** Once a site is found a great deal has to happen quickly, so split the workload into task groups and assign a co-ordinator to each.
- 12. Develop a standing agenda for meetings:** This saves time and helps in consistency. This could include; greetings, icebreakers, apologies, minutes, matters arising, current issues, reports from the task groups, any other business. Some groups also end with a short period of silence.