



Can the NPPF boost community led housing?

Greater flexibility in planning decisions around allocations and affordable tenures would unlock the innovations that communities are trying to achieve for themselves, says Levent Kerimol

Some years ago, we would have had to look to Germany, Scandinavia, or the States to find examples of community led housing such as Baugruppen, Cohousing, or Community Land Trusts (CLTs). Today London has several examples with different approaches to community led housing, adding to a legacy of established co-operative housing projects.

Communities can help achieve higher densities and unlock sites that may otherwise be difficult to develop, increasing and bringing greater diversity to housing supply, as well as more stable, supportive, and happier neighbourhoods through the empowerment of current and future residents.

As the sector grows, we will undoubtedly see more innovative ideas and projects emerge from communities motivated to take control of their housing situation and contribute to housing delivery in London. We've already supported over 100 groups and projects in London with a real diversity in ideas, motivations and people, and are now focused on helping deliver the 20 or so most progressed projects across London. Residents have just moved into the latest scheme, a direct development by London CLT in Sydenham which links future resale prices to average incomes. Meanwhile the environmental self-build CLT, RUSS, in Ladywell, is close to completing 36 homes this summer.

Yet the movement is still struggling to make the contribution it could. Councils have an important role to play in enabling community led housing to become a more mainstream part of housing delivery. All too often support has been ad-hoc, through hard-won special cases. Considerable effort is required from both councils and communities to make Community Led Housing (CLH) happen. The only way to scale is to move from bespoke projects to repeated, standardised opportunities facilitated by planning policy.

So, it's been great to see the recent consultation on the NPPF include direct reference to community led housing. The proposed definition is a streamlined

version of that in the London Plan and other funding strategies. We expect these documents can be aligned with the following tweaked definition: "Community-led developments are those that are driven by not-for-profit organisations that are democratically controlled by and accountable to their specified community, where such organisations own, manage, or steward homes and other assets in a manner of their choosing. The benefits to the same specified community are clearly defined and legally protected in the long term."

The NPPF already expects planning authorities to assess the number of people wishing to build their own homes, with legislation requiring sufficient permissions are given for self and custom build. This has seemed impractical in London, where individual houses on plots often won't make the most efficient use of land. However, community led development can be a group or association of individuals for the purposes of self and custom build housing. Surveys have found that most self-builders would be interested in being part of a group scheme, with interest skewed towards younger and lower-middle income households, which reinforces the relevance of CLH to London.

Community led housing provides a way of meeting self-build demand and is often linked to policies on small sites. However, simply stating this link has minimal effectiveness in creating opportunities for CLH. Most sites remain inaccessible to CLH organisations as they are generally uncompetitive when bidding for land in the open market. Policies could identify certain sites specifically for community-led development or include additional affordable housing requirements on them. I was struck by this approach in Zurich, where a third of Site Allocations are exclusively for co-operative housing.

On larger sites, we've seen Local Plans outside London set requirements for a percentage of self and custom build housing. Policy could extend this to community-led development. There are already precedents of partnerships, such as London CLT

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acquiring the intermediate affordable homes in Redbridge Council developments, or the GLA placing an obligation on the developer of their 900 home St Ann's site in Tottenham to transfer at least 50 homes to a nominated CLH organisation. Including CLH within larger developments doesn't have to change the affordability mix but means residents and communities can take control of the long-term management and stewardship of their homes, without the development risks.

The NPPF consultation also asked about Rural Exception sites, which have been particularly important for the development of Community Land Trusts. Community Led Exception Sites could be useful as some CLH developments in London have struggled with a single planning policy, despite wide-spread community support for their proposals, or additional density on sites, that may be difficult to support otherwise.

Finally, greater flexibility in planning decisions around allocations and affordable tenures would unlock the innovations that communities are trying to achieve for themselves.

The NPPF should give local authorities the leeway to exercise judgement on whether all affordable rented homes need Registered Providers. The process of becoming a Registered Provider is very onerous, yet where a specified community, democratically controls the organisation with genuine accountability, poor landlord practices seem less likely. ■

The work of CLH London is vital in providing practical assistance to officers. CLH London was established by the GLA and is hosted by CDS Co-operatives (a small RP with a history of promoting co-operative housing). We work closely with CLH groups, boroughs, and other partners in supporting the practical delivery of community led housing in London. We hope to help councils move from ad-hoc reactive responses to facilitating more opportunities on privately owned sites, through planning policy.

