Community commissioned neighbourhoods

We’ve heard a lot about neighbourhood planning, but what about community-led housing development? asks Levent Kerimol

Self-build housing is not a new idea, but appears to be coming to the fore again recently. Collaborative self-build can achieve greater social benefits, as well as better quality, more affordable places to live. Residents can retain development gains, and can make savings by investing their time in the process.

Self-builders have an inherent interest in adopting sustainable technologies and better design to suit their particular lifestyles, taste or ethics. This ultimately increases the diversity and quality of future housing supply. Residents are less likely to move away and have an inclination to take care of their local environment. Cooperation during development also means neighbours get to know each other before they move in.

Self-build housing output in the UK is still much lower than other parts of Europe, accounting for around 12,000 new units produced each year. The Grand Designs programme gives a glamorous snapshot of the sector; typically featuring wealthy retired households developing one-off houses in the countryside. Occasionally there are young professional couples carrying out more urban projects on a site which is too small to interest a mainstream developer.

Surveys suggest 53 per cent of people in the UK would like to build their own home, and a recent MORI survey found at least 1 million Londoners are seriously considering it. However the most significant challenge is finding and securing a suitable site. The former housing minister, Grant Shapps, stated he would like to see the number of self-build homes double over the next decade and for the sector to move into the mainstream.

The idea chimes with the localism and big society agendas with people providing the homes they want for themselves. The NPPF places a duty on local authorities to assess the demand and make provision for “people wishing to build their own homes” (NPPF, para 159).

Land values in London will probably mean most people wishing to commission their own homes will have to work in groups to be able to afford sites and achieve urban densities. Multi-unit “group self-build” projects only account for a small proportion of self-build, although they are more common in Europe, and have the greatest potential for growth in the UK self-build sector. The government hopes to support this growth with a £30 million rolling capital loan fund to assist groups with the cost of site purchase and construction, of which £5m is controlled by the GLA’s Build Your Own Home fund in London.

At its most basic a community group may be constituted as a limited company to allow them to pool their capital and secure a site and development loan, with the individual house-holds purchasing their completed property with a conventional mortgage. There are many examples across the country. In London they include Cohousing Woodside, who are re-developing a former hospital site in Muswell Hill, and the Hackney Cohousing Project who are building 14 units on a council-owned redundant nursery site in Stoke Newington. Both groups have partnered with a housing association to aid with the high land costs in London and also take on the affordable housing requirements of their developments.

Affordability is integral to some development models based on co-ops, such as CLTs, and Mutual Home Ownership, which seek to achieve affordability in relation to incomes rather than surrounding market values. These usually maintain joint ownership of a completed development, with individual house-holds effectively renting from an entity they own a stake in, and democratically control.

A resale formula allows residents to benefit from the appreciation of property in line with general inflation, whilst avoiding the increases due to property speculation. This keeps units affordable in perpetuity. Some of the newer models have been running in other parts of the country for some time, and have also included the purchase of existing homes as well as new-build development. Most of these models are only just beginning to be explored in London.

The Vauban neighbourhood in Freiburg, Germany is frequently cited as an example of how groups can be supported by a local authority (or by specialist facilitators) to build four or five storey apartment blocks as part of a coordinated masterplan. This approach is now fairly common in Germany. It ensures a sense of community and achieves higher densities with well maintained public realm. The first British example of ‘local authority enabled cohousing’ is taking shape in Cambridge, where the council decided to take an alternative approach to their remaining development sites in Orchard Park. The council is putting the land forward and working in
partnership with members of existing co-housing groups and other Cambridge residents. The council may appoint a development partner to enable the construction of around 40 units according to the resident group’s decisions.

In most cases, local authorities around the country who are beginning to take a more active promoter role tend to act as plot developers, dividing a large site into serviced plots to enable mass individual self-build. This is a fairly straightforward model that has been underway in mainland Europe over the last few decades, and has increased in prominence in the UK since Grant Shapps led a delegation to Almere in the Netherlands last year.

Particular attention must be given to fostering a sense of community and avoiding isolated individual houses that fail to achieve the social benefits of community commissioned developments. This is quite unlike the extreme proposals by Policy Exchange to impose self-build development in potentially unsustainable locations as a penalty for local authorities who fail to meet housing targets.

Newham Council is taking forward a scheme on a redundant garage site in Custom House, where they hope to procure a development partner, who will build a terrace of custom designed units in accordance with the resident’s desires. A similar model is being explored by a number of developers, who may sell serviced plots with outline permission for individual self-build houses or offer to develop a customised unit on a fixed fee basis. Developers such as Igloo and Solid Space are pioneering models in London on the basis that it is less risky than speculative development and ought to provide some savings to customers. It should be possible for boroughs to negotiate a portion of a major development site to be delivered through this custom build method, although the benefits may be purely cosmetic, unless particular attention is devoted to ensuring residents have a strong say over the design and development process and ongoing management.

There are a plethora of models being explored at the moment, and each can be attuned to the aims and objectives of a particular project. As specialist facilitators, ‘Our London’ is currently working for a Housing Association to explore the most suitable models for their particular circumstances and ambitions, as well as acting as enabling project manager to take a project forward in line with objectives.

The London Legacy Development Corporation is also considering taking forward some form of large-scale self-build development on the Olympic Park site. They are currently carrying out feasibility and survey work to assess demand and determine the mix of models that would be preferred.

Despite certain claims, community-led development is unlikely to provide a panacea to the current housing crisis. However a more diverse approach to the delivery of housing should make for a healthier market in the long run. More importantly, giving more control to residents in the development process will result in higher quality places both physically and socially, and local authorities should be in a position to reap the rewards of a proactive enabling attitude.

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1 http://www.london.gov.uk/priorities/housing/homes-and-communities/build-your-own-home

ABOVE: Springhill Cohousing, Stroud.
BELOW: Ashley Vale, Bristol