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LESSONS IN COMMUNITY LED HOUSING: (2) FOR CLH HUBS AND ENABLING SUPPORT

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Summary study findings

In 2017 Power to Change launched its Homes in Community Hands (HCH) programme, to support community led housing (CLH). Focusing on five urban areas across England, HCH funding has helped plan and develop individual housing projects, develop enabler organisations, and capitalise other investment and funding mechanisms. Our evaluation tracked the programme between 2019 and 2022, and built a significant evidence base of primary and secondary data. We show the programme to have made grants in excess of £5.1m- 60 grants to 44 different organisations (including 37 CLH groups). In varying forms and to different extents, the programme has supported the planned development of between 4,000-5,000 homes including 1350 planned by the groups receiving direct grants. We suggest a wider range of impacts to people and place will be felt in the coming years.

The key contributions of the programme are:

1. Helping improve the national infrastructure for CLH and increase its influence
2. Supporting hubs in the promotion of CLH and the development of new enabling services
3. Enabling hubs to build local relationships and influence local conditions to support CLH

The implications for community led housing:

The study sets out a range of implications and actions required to create an improved funding and policy regime for CLH. It also suggests how the national infrastructure for CLH can be oriented to new agendas and institutions and how local enabler hubs must diversify their income. Finally, it details implications for CLH groups facing challenging funding environments.

Key messages for CLH hubs, practitioners and policymakers

The evaluation of the HCH programme has provided crucial insights on the enabling infrastructure for CLH in England. It has revealed the importance and potential impact of enabling hubs, as well as the barriers to their sustainability.

1. Hubs are founded on collaboratively-defined strategies and governance structures, which involve a range of stakeholders in creating positive local conditions for CLH. These include local and regional policymakers and politicians, as well as external technical specialists and organisations that support the planning and development of new CLH projects.
2. The enabling work undertaken by hubs is important to the growth of CLH in their local areas, particularly the technical advice and support provided to new and developing projects. This enabling work also helps CLH initiatives to identify new opportunities for land acquisition and development, and has harnessed community cohesion and participation among communities otherwise under-represented in the CLH sector. Our analysis suggests that where hubs have received funding above their comparators, the pipeline of community-led homes grows faster than we might otherwise expect.
3. The enabling and influencing work undertaken by hubs has led to the development of specific policies and local political commitments to support further growth of CLH. Collaborative approaches to governance and alignment with the strategic objectives of policymakers have been important in achieving these commitments, though there are financial challenges that may constrain further growth of CLH.

Lessons for hubs, practitioners and policymakers

The importance of collaboration

1. Enabling hubs adopt strategic approaches to lobbying and influence, which helps to create positive conditions for CLH. These approaches were underpinned by active advocacy planning, including identification, mapping and prioritising of key stakeholders that hubs needed to lobby and influence to build support, and to define their asks of and offers to these stakeholders. These advocacy plans helped hubs to strategically align their objectives and to initiate conversations and connections with local politicians and policymakers.
2. Hubs also sought to collaborate with external stakeholders by involving them in organisational governance and strategy. In the West of England, following a period of sustained political support and policy development, the CLH West hub have brought together the views and needs of various stakeholders to create a local strategy for CLH development. Other hubs recruited key stakeholders into their governance structures to create potential entry points in the target organisations or areas of specialism that the hub needs to influence. In the Tees Valley, this included the recruitment to the steering group of a faith based social enterprise with access to Church land and a local authority economic development department with access to employment training funds.
3. Hubs also sought to collaborate with CLH groups themselves, with direct inclusion of active groups in governance structures. This positions CLH groups as being central to the formation and development of hubs, adding value to hub operations and strategy by reflecting on the needs of projects and on their own experiences of CLH development.

4. The evaluation also identified active collaboration with Registered Providers (RPs). In addition to development partnerships, hubs also engaged with providers in broader strategising and awareness raising, such as in the Liverpool City Region where six of the largest providers pooled resources to fund a dedicated office to link between the hub, CLH projects, and RPs, helping to broker opportunities and support awareness raising. As with other lobbying and influencing work, this represented a strategic approach to build collaboration and create future opportunities for CLH initiatives. In WMuch several of the core members were from local RPs active in CLH.

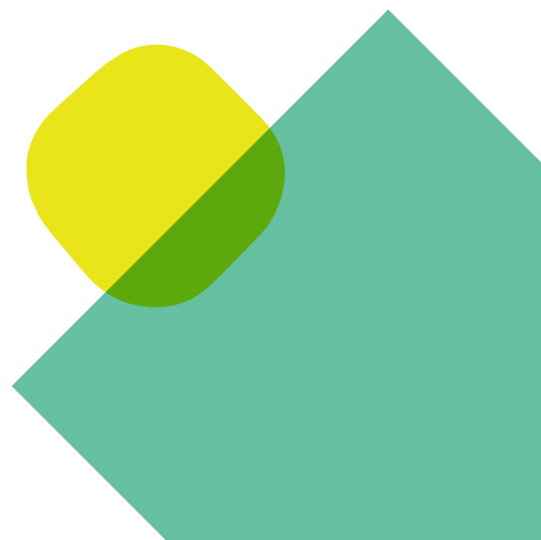
The value of enabling work

1. One of the primary purposes of hubs is to work with local projects to help CLH schemes progress. This happens through early-stage exploratory work that enables projects to identify and refine their ambitions, as well as more dedicated support to achieve outcomes or to meet specific technical needs. Examples of the latter include working with groups to meet the legal and regulatory requirements to become a Registered Provider, and therefore become eligible for capital grant funding from Homes England, and working with groups to appoint managing agents or professional partners to deliver projects.
2. Enabling work helps CLH projects to plug resource gaps. Many CLH groups are composed of community volunteers and do not have paid staff. Hubs acted as a resource, able to provide advice and expertise to help progress projects. Critical to this was a pool of expert advisers with different types of expertise and experience, ranging from project management to community development, to planning processes. This network of mutual support with access to a range of skillsets was important to CLH groups and legitimised hubs as a vital element of the CLH ecosystem.
3. The enabling models of hubs also involved working with diverse communities including under-represented groups. In several areas, hubs were actively working to enhance the ability of different communities to engage with community-led housing, recognising the inequality in power and resource and the disadvantage and discrimination that some communities experience in the housing system. Many hubs were undertaking significant outreach work to engage with communities otherwise absent from discussions about CLH, highlighting issues of equality, diversity and inclusion.

Policy impacts and financial sustainability

1. There have been variable impacts on policy development and political commitments in support of CLH across the five areas supported by the HCH programme. In Bristol, the City Council has created a dedicated land disposal policy to release land for CLH projects, using an assessment of social value to inform their decision-making. The hub is perceived as a key partner in the delivery of this, particularly in offering advice to groups interested in acquiring land and raising awareness of CLH within the city. In other areas, the influencing strategies of hubs had resulted in local and regional political commitments, with the hope that this would translate into the development of policies and procedures that could facilitate the growth of CLH.
2. Political commitments are also evident in Birmingham, where a CLH strategy has been developed by the local authority's housing department and the hub was invited to submit development proposals for six council-owned sites. This has been backed by manifesto commitments from the controlling Labour group. In Liverpool a new community asset transfer policy has been developed, which CLH groups may be able to benefit from, while there have been strong Mayoral commitments in Leeds and the wider area. The current mayor is committed to ensuring that the 500 CLH homes currently planned are eventually developed¹.
3. While there was recognition that policy and political commitments take time to embed and translate into tangible outcomes, a key learning point was the benefit of aligning CLH activity with the priorities and objectives of policymakers and politicians (particularly economic development and employment – a key priority in the Tees Valley). This did not mean that CLH objectives had to be altered or changed, but that they could be framed or presented in ways that highlighted their strategic contribution and benefits to other stakeholders, such as the broader social value of CLH.
4. Hubs and the projects that they support will only be able to deliver on their potential, and to fulfil the goals of policy developed to support them, if appropriate revenue and capital funding can be secured. While many hubs are developing alternative streams of revenue, including planning and development of their own housing, contractual work for local authorities, and provision of housing management and maintenance services at 'the live stage' for CLH projects, the conclusion of grant funding posed a risk to their immediate financial sustainability while they waited for alternative revenue streams to mature.

¹ <https://tracybrabinmetromayor.laboursites.org/housing/>



..... Implications and actions

The above highlights several implications for the CLH sector, and learning points for hubs, practitioners, funders and policymakers:

1. Enabling hubs face immediate risks to their financial sustainability because of the limited amount of grant funding available to support their work. There is a need for longer-term and consistent support if hubs are to mature into financially sustainable community businesses. Many hubs have made significant progress in diversifying funding streams, but these may not generate sufficient revenue to mitigate the loss of grant funding. Usually, at the conclusion of grants, hubs were compelled to seek replacement grant funding from local and regional authorities, reduced the scale of their direct employment and reduce overheads, or reschedule their final phase of larger grant funding to cover longer periods of time. In addition to capital funding for projects, the Government and other funders must recognise the importance of revenue funding to support the CLH ecosystem of infrastructure organisations. Therefore, creating a long term Community Housing Fund is central to the continuation of enabling support.
2. A wider ecosystem in support of CLH now exists, including forms of collaborative strategising and governance in different areas. This can create new opportunities for the planning and development of CLH homes, targeted lobbying and influencing and a process of collaboration may be useful for other hubs in stages of formation and development.
3. The experience of Bristol shows that it is possible for policies to be created that account for the social value of CLH schemes in land disposal policies, rather than prioritising purely financial returns. This is providing inspiration for the design of policy elsewhere in the country, including Liverpool and WMuch where similar arguments are being pursued by hubs with combined authorities and other key actors in land supply. Research and evaluation into the impact of this policy will provide further learning and evidence of its benefits.

Further information and evaluation reports

<https://www.shu.ac.uk/centre-regional-economic-social-research/projects/all-projects/homes-in-community-hands-evaluation>



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Power to Change is the independent trust that strengthens communities through community business. We started life in 2015 and use our experience and evidence to bring partners together to fund, grow and back community businesses in England to make places thrive. We are curious and rigorous; we do, test, and learn. And we are here to support community business, whatever the challenge.

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