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Community-Led Housing – helping meet the housing crisis

By Fran Ryan, Oxfordshire Community Land Trust

In 2015, a group of charities called Just Fair, which included Crisis, Oxfam, Amnesty International, Save the Children and Unicef, said the UK was in breach of its United Nations human rights commitment to provide people with adequate homes.

A few years on, the issues mentioned by Just Fair are even more pressing; high house prices and rental costs, unhealthy housing conditions, and rising levels of homelessness. In Oxfordshire, the average house price is eleven times average earnings. In rural areas, wages are lower and prices higher, forcing people to move away and affecting the sustainability of our villages. There are 3,000 families on the waiting list to receive social housing in Oxford alone, with thousands more across the county.

It's a bleak picture in many ways, with an acute lack of affordable homes at the root of the problem. If government isn't delivering, we need to look to other ways to meet housing needs. Community-led housing (CLH) is one.

CLH is when a community group is involved throughout a housing development and then owns or manages the homes afterwards. Benefits to the community are clearly defined and legally protected. Permanent affordability is often a driving principle.

As a member of Oxfordshire Community Land Trust, I've been involved in CLH for a number of years. There are a number of groups in existence already Oxfordshire (read more below). However, only around 1% of housing in the UK is community-led, compared to around 80% in Austria and 60% in Germany.

But when you tell people what CLH is, they're interested. Not just in a truly and permanently affordable home but the other benefits that come from working with others; improved neighbourliness and well-being, and reduced isolation. CLH housing schemes can also retain resources within the local economy and help people develop new employment skills. Most new CLH groups are responding to the climate emergency by aspiring to build zero-carbon homes.

If Germany can do it then so can we. The research says so too. I was part of group called Collaborative Housing that recently undertook research for Oxford City Council. We showed that community-led housing is feasible in the Oxfordshire housing market, even in areas of acute need.

Collaborative Housing, with government funding, has now established a support service for CLH groups in the Thames Valley, offering advice on setting up a group and choosing the best approach, all the way through to funding and planning advice. We're already in touch with 30 groups in Oxfordshire which intend to be a vital part of solving the crisis of housing affordability in the county.

Here's a flavour of what's been going on locally.

Dean Court, Cumnor: Oxfordshire Community Land Trust just got planning permission for its first project at Dean Court, West Oxford, which it aims to complete by early 2021. This will be for 8

permanently affordable eco flats for people with a local connection who are also on the housing register with Vale of White Horse District Council.

Stonesfield Community Trust: founded in 1983, the oldest land trust in the county has 15 affordable rental homes. They also host businesses and a pre-school.

Kindling and Dragonfly Housing Coops, Oxford: these are shared houses where the residents are coop members. Collectively, the coop owns the house and charges affordable rents to the residents. The motive is to provide a decent, mutually supportive and affordable place to live. They are a huge success.

Hook Norton and Thame: these emerging CLTs are both building affordable eco homes for local people.

Oxford Cohousing: is hoping to secure a site in the first half of 2020 to build a cluster of 20-40 mixed tenure Passivhaus homes, based around the idea of mutual support.

There will be an event celebrating community-led housing on 16 January at Oxford Town Hall, 6.30 pm. Collaborative Housing will also be officially launching its new service. Come along to find out more and get involved. We're keen to talk to people interested in creating community-led homes for themselves, those who want to contribute time and/or money to make it happen, and landowners and home owners who might want to work with us to make a CLH project happen. You can sign up for the event at: www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/celebration-of-community-led-housing-tickets-71796696853

For more information about community led housing visit collaborativehousing.org.uk or email fiona@cohub.org.uk for more information. Oxfordshire Community Land Trust can be contacted at: info@oclt.org.uk