

Speech: Community-led housing

Introduction

Thank you, Sophie. [Sophie Long, BBC News correspondent and presenter (event host)]

The BBC folk seem to get the best gigs in town.

I am speaking at an event being compered by Mark Easton next.

[Easton [RESI conference](#) story]

I am absolutely delighted to be here at what is a landmark moment for community-led housing.

Today's event – the first ever conference to bring the sector together – is testament to just how far you have come.

With [half of the 225 plus Community Land Trusts](#) in England and Wales having been set up in the past 2 years, the momentum is clearly growing.

And I want you to know that I am behind you all the way.

Benefits

Because the strengths of community-led housing speak for themselves.

You know your local areas better than anyone.

And are better placed to make things happen.

To see the potential of small sites.

Difficult sites.

Sites that are off limits or of no interest to developers.

You are not waiting for someone else to step in and just take what you are offered.

You are designing and developing houses that you and your neighbours are proud to call home.

Homes that, from the word go, are an integral part of your communities.

Homes that are not just affordable now, but are affordable forever.

That are models of high quality design, energy efficiency and innovation.

And it's not just the people in those homes who benefit.

Because your work raises the bar for the entire housing market.

Pushing up expectations of design quality.

Powering the growth of modern methods of construction.

And, by supporting smaller-scale building companies making the house building industry more diverse and resilient.

But the benefits go further still.

By giving people a hand in the conversion or refurbishment of empty properties you are equipping them with new and highly transferrable construction skills.

You are sustaining local economies by giving young home-grown talent affordable places to live and a reason to stay.

You're not just building better homes.

You're building better communities.

Barriers

And I certainly don't underestimate what that takes.

You face significant barriers, such as access to pre-development grants, loans or mortgages and a lack of understanding or resources at a local policy level.

But the biggest barriers are almost certainly cultural.

It is a simple idea: if you need a home, why not build it?

Yet most people in our country never even consider it seriously.

And, if they do, they might think of either Grand Designs or some kind of flat-pack nightmare on an epic scale.

I know, from living and working in Europe that homes built by local communities are a normal part of the landscape in countries like Germany and Sweden.

People there may be somewhat surprised that we need to have a conference about it at all.

Yet here in Britain, the term "community-led housing" is likely to be met with blank looks.

Well, outside this room anyway!

And, even when explained, it's seen as a heroic endeavour that is only for the most extraordinary and adventurous of individuals.

Of course you are extraordinary people. And I don't normally like to single out individuals from a sea of excellence.

But on this occasion I must.

There's Maria Brenton, who for 18 years and counting has committed herself to the Older Women's Cohousing project in Barnet.

There's Geoff Pook, from the Beer CLT, who formed a group, secured funding, secured Registered Provider status and built 7 homes – and did it all in just 2 years.

Two years!

I've had flat-pack furniture in garage still not assembled after 5 years!

And let's not forget one of the first innovators, David Brown, who has just stood down as Chair of High Bickington Community Property Trust after almost 2 decades.

Maria, Geoff and David are truly inspirational, and I take my hat off to them, and indeed to all of you.

But I want community-led housing to be a realistic option not just for exceptional people but for all people.

Even politicians!

Realising the sector's potential

This is vital if we are to realise the true potential of this sector.

To empower more communities.

To, ultimately, see community-led housing playing a much bigger role in delivering the houses our country desperately needs.

Delivering these houses is an overriding priority for this government.

Recent figures showed that the number of homes in England increased by more than 217,000 last year – the highest level of net additions since the depths of the recession.

But you saw in February's [housing white paper](#), and again in last week's ambitious [Budget](#), that we want to go further still.

That we want to build more of the right homes, in the right places, at the right prices.

And I believe that community-led housing has a huge role to play in helping us to do just that.

Announcement

A year ago we backed the sector with the launch of the Community Housing Fund.

Since then, we've awarded £60 million in grants to help 148 local authorities support more community-led projects

The grants, which ranged in size, were paid to authorities that had the least affordable homes or the highest density of second homes.

Alongside the money, we gave advice on how to spend it in order to deliver the best results.

And we wanted the grants to help build capacity and support local projects, now and into the future.

Some fantastic work has been happening as a result .

Many councils – such as in Sussex, Hampshire and London – have pooled these resources to provide and information and support hub for community groups.

Others – such as Cornwall and West Dorset – have already used the money directly to help get the projects off the ground.

In short, this funding has been a success.

So today I can today announce that we will launch a new programme of funding to help build thousands more homes.

Worth £60 million in the first year alone, it will provide both capital and revenue funding, with flexibility to meet demand.

A significant element of the funding will also go towards developing an advisory network that supports community groups to bring forward projects.

We will shortly publish a prospectus setting out criteria for bids.

And, from January, we will invite applications from community groups, registered providers and any other appropriate organisations.

Bids will be assessed by the experts at Homes England, our new national housing agency.

And we hope to announce the first allocations as soon as Easter.

It is vitally important to me that we continue to work closely with the sector in delivering this programme, just as we have done in the design phase.

Many of you have had a hand in shaping this new programme of work. And I hope you will reap the rewards.

And I also hope you will come together to share your vast experience and expertise.

I want to ensure that our investment in the sector makes a real difference and your contribution will be invaluable in helping us achieve this.

That's why I will be setting up an advisory group to steer the Department of Communities and Local Government on the delivery of the programme.

Conclusion

Some will say this just small fry.

That community-led housing currently accounts for just a few hundred units a year – under half a per cent of total housing output in England.

That the scale of the challenge before us – building 300,000 homes a year – dwarfs the capacity of the community-led sector.

But when the community-led movement began it was producing just a handful of homes each year.

First that grew to a few dozen, then to a few hundred.

Now, with government on your side, there is no reason why those hundreds cannot become thousands.

No single measure will fix our broken housing market.

But with action on many fronts, with the dedication of many people, we can get there.

It will take time.

But I know that we can do it.

And community-led housing has a serious contribution to make.

There are few sectors that boast the combination of talent and passion that we have here today.

People who are totally committed to making their communities better places to live.

So let's do everything we can to get even more people involved in community-led housing.

Together with you I want to make the idea of communities building the homes they need not a radical departure, but an everyday reality.

And for the sector to play its part in getting Britain building.

Thank you.