





Putting the People at the Heart of New Towns

A practitioner's guide to implementing community led housing in new towns and other large developments.











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1. Introduction

The UK government has an ambitious target of building 1.5 million homes, with new towns a flagship policy to achieve this. We need to ask not only how they can meet this target, but also how they can create thriving, sustainable communities.

Community-led development and stewardship are proven approaches to developing thriving, sustainable communities. These are places where engaged communities play a key role in co-designing and stewarding homes, assets and spaces, for long-term benefit. By having a more balanced mix in development, a wider range of needs can be met and more sustainable lifestyles supported. Through this collective endeavour, social infrastructure and relationships that create healthy, cohesive communities are formed and grown for the long-term.

This guide is aimed at practitioners across the housing sector, who wish to understand the potential for community-led housing in new towns, and how this can be implemented.

In an accompanying report we respond directly to the New Towns Taskforce and central government, setting out the policy case and the mechanisms that policymakers can use in national, regional and local government to ensure this is implemented.

One example in particular serves to illustrate the challenge and opportunity of this project: Northstowe, a planned 10,000-home new town near Cambridge.

A community-led place stewardship strategy was developed in 2006, but then not implemented. The Homes and Communities Agency had been advised to incorporate cohousing, custom build and CLTs into the first delivery stages of Northstowe, initially through the scoping stage brief and recommendations of the Marmalade Lane project in 2009/10, and then as part of South Cambridgeshire Right to Build Vanguard in 2014. But these ideas were not taken forward. The ensuing years of development are widely seen to have failed to deliver the promised social and community infrastructure. This has led to a turn-around intervention by Homes England's, which sees the inclusion of cohousing, one form of communityled housing, as part of the next phase of delivery. This is not only a corrective step, but a partial return to the long-standing vision of community-led development, not only at Northstowe but also within the history of new towns and the garden city movement.

Northstowe illustrates that community-led place stewardship, and community-led approaches to the development of assets including housing, must be central to building thriving, sustainable new towns, not as an afterthought or to address specific problems, but from the outset.

None of what we describe is new. Practitioners can draw on a rich seam of best practice going back over 100 years, and many are implementing community-led approaches in new towns and other large developments in 2025. We hope this guide will inspire practitioners to adopt community-led principles and approaches.



2. What is community led housing?

Community-led housing includes community land trusts, cohousing communities and housing cooperatives, and overlaps with self/custom built homes and other aspects of 'housing market diversification'. The recently revised National Planning Policy Framework provided a definition of community-led models, reproduced here with bullets to ease reading:

- A development taken forward by, or with, a not-for-profit organisation, that is primarily for the purpose of meeting the needs of its members or the wider local community, rather than being a primarily commercial enterprise.
- The organisation should be created, managed and democratically controlled by its members, and membership of the organisation should be open to all beneficiaries and prospective beneficiaries of that organisation.
- It may take any one of various legal forms including a co-operative society, community benefit society and company limited by guarantee.

- The organisation should own, manage or steward the development in a manner consistent with its purpose, potentially through a mutually supported arrangement with a Registered Provider of Social Housing.
- The benefits of the development to the community should be clearly defined and consideration given to how those benefits can be protected over time, including in the event of the organisation being wound up.

Community-led housing includes community land trusts, cohousing communities and housing co-operatives...



The UK has a rich history of integrating community-led housing into large-scale developments. The original garden cities were rooted in principles of copartnership, designed to foster collective ownership and shared benefits. Milton Keynes followed in these footsteps, incorporating housing co-operatives and self-build plots into its development. The 1970s and 80s saw a rapid rise in cooperative housing backed by government grants.

More recently, initiatives like Homes England and TOWN's plans to bring cohousing to Northstowe, and Kennett Community Land Trust's role as an affordable housing provider and steward of public amenities in a new garden village, demonstrate the enduring potential of community-led approaches.

There are connections between community-led housing and communityled approaches to place stewardship and other types of assets such as open spaces, shops and community centres. The connection could be in the form of a place stewardship body that plays a role in identifying and enabling opportunities for community-led housing. It could also directly build and own them, as has happened for example with Community Land Trusts that are both place stewards and developers and owners of affordable housing. This approach was integral to the original garden cities and continues to be implemented in large mainstream developments.

A recent study on community-led stewardship examined how these models can be mainstreamed, particularly in light of critical findings from the Competition and Markets Authority on the shortcomings of private management companies. Using five case studies and insights from industry interviews, the study illustrated what effective community-led stewardship looks like and how it can be initiated by local authorities, landowners, developers, or the communities themselves. The scenario framework from this study underpins the "HOW" section of this discussion.

Community-led and similar models are commonplace internationally, integrating ordinary people into the fabric of housing management and development. For example:

- In mainland Europe, self and custombuild homes account for 40% of new builds on average, with much of this through community models, illustrating that housing can be developed in ways that reflect individual and community needs.
- In Zurich, housing co-operatives play a central role in developing large sites for affordable and mixed-tenure housing, involving residents directly in decision-making and management.
- In the United States and France, condominium associations are familiar, with residents collectively managing shared spaces and resources, and with commonhold reforms coming this will become the default arrangement for flats in the future in the UK.

3. The potential for community led housing in new towns

How could communities engage with CLH in new towns?

Community-led housing (CLH) in new towns can involve a diverse array of people, bringing together individuals and groups with varied motivations and needs. Whether new towns are extensions of existing communities or entirely new settlements, the beneficiaries of CLH include:

- Local residents seeking better housing options: Those already living in the area who wish to move into the new development and attracted to one or more forms of CLH.
- People drawn to the community-led housing opportunity: Individuals from outside the area who are attracted by the chance to design housing to meet their needs and live in a mutually supportive, community-oriented, highquality environment.
- Participants in local community-led organisations: Those who may not wish to live in the new housing but are already involved with, or are attracted to, local groups that can design, own, or manage these assets for the benefit of the wider community.

- Groups formed or revitalised by the opportunity: These could be newly established groups specifically for a CLH project, existing community organisations locally rooted in the area, or groups looking for new land opportunities to expand their work.
- A broad spectrum of housing tenures and demographics: Including existing homeowners, first-time buyers, private tenants, and social tenants, across all income brackets.

These represent an opportunity to tap into new and more diverse sources of demand, reducing commercial risk the site breaking and initial phases of development. More people will want to move into new towns if there is a strong and varied offer, and if new towns develop a brand associated with neighbourly, convivial communities.

Examples from existing projects demonstrate this range of beneficiaries. At Northstowe, for instance, a new group of residents has been brought together by the enabling developer to live in a cohousing community in a new town where developers are reluctant to build for lack of demand. In Kennett Garden Village, the CLT is led by existing local residents passionate about developing and stewarding assets for the benefit of the entire parish.

How could community led housing be built in new towns?

There are a number of ways that community-led housing can be developed:

1. Dedicated plots for community organisations to develop

- Masterplans could designate plots for community organisations, typically accommodating clusters of 10-50 homes, and landowners/master developers could work with existing local organisations or run competitive bidding processes to identify community partners.
- Multiple clusters within a single new town could foster diverse, thriving neighbourhoods. For instance, a cohousing community might occupy one plot, while a local community land trust (CLT) develops affordable family homes in another, and both might also offer community facilities and there may be multiple clusters of both.
- Early involvement in masterplanning ensures these plots are strategically located to integrate into the wider town fabric and not cause phasing issues for neighbouring developers.
- Custom and self-build plots community groups can facilitate and enable the delivery of custom and self build commitments either as a community of individual dwellings or say a cohousing scheme.

2. Specialist developers delivering community-led housing

 Masterplans could also designate plots to be sold to developers specialising in CLH, which could then recruit or build up a community group around the opportunity.

3. Allocations sold to community organisations

- Larger developers could sell allocations of homes to community organisations, for example an allocation of affordable homes to a Community Land Trust, or a block of flats to a housing co-operative.
- Ideally it would give the community organisation some influence over the design, ranging from a full co-design process to minor adjustments, offering opportunities for groups to create housing tailored to their needs.



Each of these approaches can deliver on a diverse range of housing types and tenures, from market-rate to affordable, and from conventional homes to self-or custom-build. Developments could include detached houses, terraces, or flats, ensuring flexibility to meet various needs. Plots could be clustered or distributed throughout the town, similar to the way affordable housing is provided in large developments.

The timing and involvement of the communities can also vary. In some cases the community group may not be formed until post-completion, and the specialist developer or enabler will then focus on supporting them to manage and steward the homes and maintain the desired outcomes (like affordability). Earlier involvement enables more meaningful engagement in the design and delivery process, leading to better social, environmental, and economic outcomes. This can be particularly beneficial for households with needs not met by mainstream options, including those on the social housing waiting lists. enablers and specialist developers can make the process much better for all parties involved. These professionals bridge gaps in expertise, facilitating partnerships between community organisations and developers. The UK's growing network of enabling organisations, though uneven in coverage and experience, provides a crucial resource for supporting CLH in new towns.

Community-led housing can also be integrated with the approach to place stewardship. For example, in some cases a Community Land Trust has taken on the ownership and stewardship of the public domain and community assets, as well as allocations of affordable housing built by the developer(s).



The scenarios we will be exploring describe how and when this can be achieved:



Early stages:

Actions include identifying potential locations, embedding CLH in strategic/local plans, and creating supportive policy frameworks.



Allocation and policy:

Demand and opportunities for CLH begin to be reflected in the policy context when sites are allocated in regional/local plans, and policies ensure these are followed through.



Masterplanning and design:

Community organisations may be involved, and delivery and procurement options begin to be explored and reflected in e.g. s106 agreements.



Development and delivery:

CLH allocations/plots are developed and act as catalysts for early community activity.



Post-Completion:

Establishing governance models for ongoing stewardship and community management.





Kennett Garden Village

Cambridge

A development of 500 homes, more than doubling the existing village. A local Community Land Trust (CLT) will steward all the public open space, commercial space, amenities including allotments, and 60 affordable homes. The CLT was also involved in the masterplan, and sits on the project board with the developer (Bellway Homes) overseeing and negotiating on details of the build out. It not only gave local residents a meaningful way to influence and shape the new development, reducing local opposition, but will leave a legacy of a strong community development organisation that integrates the new and existing communities.

Chichester Community Development Trust

Chichester

Established in 2009 to fulfil a s106 requirement in the development of a former hospital by Linden Homes and Affinity Sutton, the trust first took ownership of a community hall in 2014. It has gone on to work with different developers, the council and its local community to take on or develop 14 assets, each meeting a bespoke purpose set by the community to meet a variety of needs. These include community centres, workspace, a nursery, a community garden, sports facilities, a park, a wellbeing centre, a cafe and community projects like bike repair and rewilding. With a £3 million turnover and 10 staff it is a financially resilient model of ongoing community engagement.

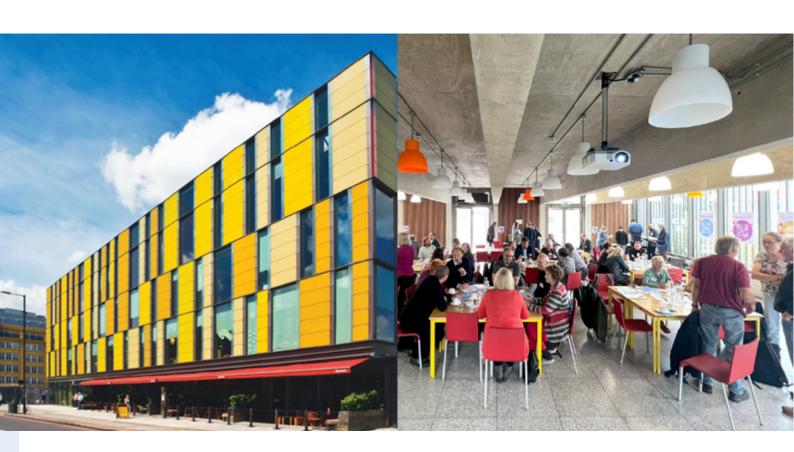


TOWN cohousing at Northstowe

Cambridge

TOWN is delivering two cohousing communities at Northstowe, bringing a resident-led model of housing to one of the UK's largest new town developments of 10,000 homes, 10 miles from Cambridge. The project provides a dedicated site within the wider Northstowe masterplan for two cohousing communities, alongside other marketsale housing, enabling future residents to design and develop their homes and neighbourhoods with TOWN and a professional team through a codesign process. The wider masterplan has outline planning permission, which includes a commitment to delivering custom and self-build homes.

The opportunity was secured through Homes England's support for innovative and community-led housing models and Northstowe's ambition to include more diverse housing types. A key lesson for other new town sites is the need for proactive land allocation and planning policies that encourage resident-led, community-focused housing. Future opportunities for cohousing may emerge through this model, where sites with a custom-build, requirement could be met through development as cohousing. Cohousing offers a proven model for long-term social sustainability and incorporating it early in new town planning can create strong, connected communities.



Coin Street Community Builders

London

Coin Street Community Builders (CSCB) is an example of community-led urban development in central London. Established in 1984, CSCB transformed a derelict stretch of the South Bank into a vibrant mixed-use neighbourhood, prioritising affordable housing, public spaces, and social enterprise. The organisation operates as a social enterprise and a development trust, ensuring that all assets remain community-owned and benefit local residents.

At the heart of CSCB's success is its model of cooperative housing, which provides secure and affordable homes for over 1,000 residents. The development also includes a thriving network of community facilities, small businesses, and cultural spaces. Through long-term stewardship, CSCB has fostered an engaged and resilient community, reinvesting income from commercial leases into local initiatives. Its model demonstrates how community-led approaches can create sustainable, inclusive urban spaces that balance housing, commerce, and social infrastructure while safeguarding longterm public benefit.

4. Recommendations to develop CLH in new towns

In our vision for CLH New Towns we expect all segments of the housing sector to play a part, public, private, non-profit and community-led housing - which of course is the focus of our recommendations here. We are proposing a healthy balance between a variety of development types and developers as the best route to delivering thriving new towns.

In order to achieve this, policy makers, investors and planners need to break from the experience of the recent past and create the conditions to diversify housing supply from the earliest possible point. This can be achieved through a combination of best practice in planning, conditioned land sales of public land and procurement.

Vision for thriving new town:

Delivered through a healthy diversity of suppliers

PUBLIC SECTOR

PRIVATE SECTOR VOLUME **HOUSE BUILDER SMEs**

HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS. CHARITIES, NON-PROFITS

COMMUNITY LED HOUSING, CUSTOM/ **SELF BUILD**

Here is a summary of the 10 recommendations made from our pre-event research and conference findings with participants.

By following the points outlined we believe policy makers and the housing industry will be well placed to not only deliver ambitious targets but achieve the long-term social, environmental and long-term benefits we all want to see from the next generation of new towns.

1. Embedding CLH as a core principle in new towns

Community-led housing (CLH) must be a foundational pillar in the planning, design, and delivery of new towns. CLH specialists and representatives—"vision stewards"—should be integrated into planning from the outset to ensure longterm affordability, sustainability, and social cohesion.

Key Actions:

- CLH values should become a "golden thread" throughout New Town developments and underpin decisionmaking at every stage, including democratic governance, affordability, and long-term stewardship.
- A "Community as Client" approach should be adopted, ensuring that residents, community-led organisations, and local stakeholders actively contribute to site selection, planning, and governance.

2. Strengthening CLH in governance & planning

CLH should be embedded into the strategic framework of new towns to ensure sustained community involvement and public benefit.

Key Actions:

- Local plans should require CLH integration, embedding stewardship, social responsibility, and democratic governance.
- Development corporations or public bodies should include CLH expertise on their boards and link with national CLH bodies.
- National and regional CLH advisory panels should contribute to masterplanning and pre-allocation processes.

Financing & land policies to enable CLH

A robust funding and land strategy must be developed to enable CLH to fulfil its potential alongside the broader housing sector.

Key Actions:

- Establish a long-term CLH investment strategy, including dedicated funding and low-interest loans.
- Implement land value capture mechanisms such as Community Land Trusts (CLTs) to retain rising land values within communities.
- Ensure a proportion of development sites are allocated for CLH, ensuring tenure diversity and social benefit.

CLH-driven design & development

New towns should adopt communityled design models, enabling residents to shape their environments.

Key Actions:

- Encourage neighbourhood custombuild models, allowing CLH groups to influence the design of homes and public spaces.
- Develop a national CLH design and development code to ensure sustainable and community-responsive projects.

CLH development partnerships

New towns should actively incentivise partnerships between CLH groups, developers, and housing associations.

Key Actions:

- Embed CLH in Section 106 agreements to ensure private sector contributions support community-led developments.
- Prioritise CLH organisations, specialist developers, and intermediaries in land allocations and structured funding support.

6. Stewardship & long-term community control

New towns should be designed for longterm resilience with governance models that protect community assets.

Key Actions:

- Incorporate community-led place stewardship structures, such as CLTs, to manage public and community assets.
- Develop post-occupancy buy-out models to enable residents to secure long-term community control over housing.

7. Aligning CLH with national & local policy

Community-led development should be strategically integrated into national housing policy and planning regulations.

Key Actions:

- Incorporate CLH into the national housing strategy.
- **Update the National Planning Policy** Framework (NPPF) to require local authorities to integrate CLH models into housing strategies.

8. Phased CLH integration across new town life cycles

CLH must be a strategic component across the full development cycle, ensuring continuous evaluation and adaptation.

Key Actions:

- Start with 10-15% CLH in new sites. increasing to over 40% in line with European custom/self-build averages as support infrastructure expands and matures.
- Adapt CLH strategies to regional requirements and settlement types.

Institutional backing

Government agencies should provide structural support for CLH within new towns.

Key Actions:

- Establish a national register of allocated CLH sites.
- Expand grant and financing support to enable CLH developments to compete effectively in the housing market.

10. Embedding communityled expertise in new town development

CLH should be fully integrated into the knowledge-sharing ecosystem of housing policy, planning, and development.

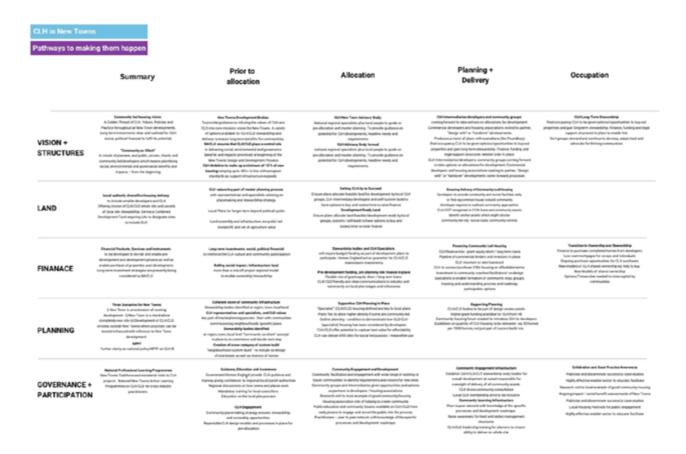
Key Actions:

- Develop professional development programmes for policymakers, planners, and developers focused on CLH best practices.
- Ensure engagement with existing CLH projects through the New Towns Taskforce.

Conference Outputs: *Recommended* **Community Led Housing in New Towns Journey Map**

This has been posted at the end of this document with the recommendations. Here's a view only link to CANVA summary of the Ideal Journey Map.

https://www.canva.com/design/DAGfofgztgc/K90as7gEEzHvaQFPiws7eA/view?utm_content=DAGfofgztgc&utm_campaign=designshare&utm_medium=link2&utm_source=uniquelinks&utlld=h16165ed46f



5. With thanks to

The many individuals from across the public, private and community sectors who have fed into this work. We list their organisations here not as endorsements for all the detail of the report, but to indicate the breadth of input into this work.

AECOM

Agile Property and Homes

Anthony Collins LLP

Bennett Institute for Public Policy

BiBO

Buro Happold

Chichester Community Development Trust

Community Led Housing London Community Stewardship Solutions

Confederation of Cooperative Housing

Considerate Urbanism

Create Streets Dark Matter Labs Delft University

East Midlands Community Led Housing

Esmee Fairbairn Foundation

Footwork

Future Towns Innovation Hub

Gleeds

Greater Manchester Community Led Housing

Homes England Housing 21 **Housing Forum**

Impact Investing Institute

JTP

LDN Collective Legal and General

Leeds Community Homes

Liverpool City Council

Local Trust Locality **MHCLG**

Middlemarch CLH

Nationwide Foundation

Place54 architects Power to Change

Plunkett

Pollard. Thomas. Edwards Architects

Resonance

RTPI

Self Help Housing

Social Life Summix **Stories**

TOWN/Marmalade Lane

TCPA The Edge

The Glass-House Community Led Design

The URBED Trust **Urban and Civic** Vistry Group Welbeck Land We Can Make CIT Wrigleys Solicitors **United Utilities**

Most of the above also attended a day-long workshop at Coin Street Community Builders on the 6th February 2025. Hosted by an organisation that exemplifies the power of community stewardship and development - of housing cooperatives, a community centre, public parks, the Oxo Tower Wharf and Gabriel Wharf, and soon swimming and indoor leisure facilities.









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