

The CLT Network's racial justice journey

Tom Chance, CEO, September 2025

The Community Land Trust Network (CLTN) has been committed to social justice and equity since we were founded by Community Land Trusts (CLTs) in 2010. Our movement has roots in a number of social justice movements globally, notably the civil rights movement in the USA.

Unlike our sister network in the USA, our movement is disproportionately rural, and so more white. Those American roots first spread into rural areas of the UK, brought over by activists and academics interested in rural financial inclusion and community development. Various factors have meant rural CLTs have been more successful in building homes, buying workspace, rewilding farmland and so on. For example, rural CLTs trying to build social housing can use the Rural Exception Sites policy as a route to low-cost land, and rural housing associations are more culturally attuned to partnering with communities, and together these have powered dozens of successful projects, which inspire other communities down the road, leading to a lot of rural CLTs. Neither condition applies to urban CLTs. So, given that the rural English population is 98% white compared to 82% for England and Wales as a whole, our movement can appear disproportionately white.

Nonetheless, supporting both rural and urban CLTs and all CLT leaders of colour; celebrating our roots in the civil rights movement; and supporting marginalised communities tackling systemic racism, have always been a part of our work.

This document is all about our journey in these areas of work: how we have, and haven't, celebrated Black pioneers; how we have sought to tackle racial injustice in our project work; and how we've understood, and responded to, systemic racism in the land and property systems. I then explain some of our next steps on this journey, and invite you to join and help us.

Celebrating Black CLT pioneers

In working with the CLT Network, I have been further educated on the long history of the erasure of Black voices and achievements from history. I understand the risk of this happening in the CLT movement – whether deliberately or unconsciously – and the impact this erasure could have.



Community land trusts were born from the civil rights struggle for black land ownership. New Communities Inc, founded in Georgia, USA in 1969, is considered the first CLT - a response to generations of exclusion, land theft and poverty. The CLT was formed by leaders in the southern Civil Rights Movement, and was conceived when they came together with activists from the peace, homesteading and community development movements. They drew on roots in international examples like the UK garden cities and the Indian Gramdan Movement. You can read more about the history of the CLT movement [here](#).

Growing from these roots brings considerable responsibility. And at the Community Land Trust Network, we recognise that the history of our movement is inseparable from this fight for justice.

Since the network was created in 2010, we have taken steps to celebrate this history.

A brief dig into our archives finds references to the civil rights movement in our second newsletter to members in 2011; in the publicity launching our See It and Believe It programme to help CLT activists visit each other in 2012; in the introductory history section of the CLT Handbook, which we have sent to all members since 2012; on our website since 2016 (prior to that there were vague references to the USA); and in many talks we have given every year to the public, and to professionals in policy, housing associations, councils, etc.

We have sought to build links with our American counterparts around this history. For example, we supported members of London CLT to visit a CLT conference in Ohio and connect with Black CLT leaders through the See it and Believe it programme in 2014. We screened the UK premiere of the film about the history of New Communities Inc. at our AGM in 2016, and hosted a workshop about Black-led CLTs in America with a speaker from New Orleans in our 2021 AGM.

The history formed part of our training programme for our first CLT Ambassadors from 2021, and is part of the induction talk delivered by our CEO to all new staff and trustees.

We are proud of this history. We will continue to refer to it. It is not always front and centre of our messaging. On one occasion, I made the mistake of removing a reference to the civil rights roots in a short internal paper for a prospective funder, which was sensitive about funding 'political' activity. I should have pushed back and added context to the paper. I have apologised to a member of our movement with whom I shared this anecdote, both for making the wrong call at the time and then sharing the anecdote



without context and reassurance. Listening to them talk about the incident helped me understand the history of erasure that gave context to their reaction.

Reflecting on the discussion about erasure, we would welcome thoughts on how we can further celebrate these roots.

We also want to make the link between those roots and the shoots of new activity in the UK today.

What we have not done so well is to tell the stories of individuals in the UK CLT movement, including those of people of colour. We have made some efforts. When we commissioned photography in 2019 we ensured we captured diverse images of CLT activists, including people of colour, and ensured a diversity of imagery on our website and publications like our 2024 manifesto. We recruited and trained a diverse group of CLT Ambassadors in 2021 to bring more people with lived experience of different kinds of marginalisation and oppression into public discussion about CLTs, and we have supported them financially to represent the network at UK and international events. We have worked to ensure a diversity of speakers at events such as our AGMs and our 2024 national conference. But honestly, I'd say we've done less than we'd have liked to around this. Doubtless, for many in the UK, the CLT movement still seems like a very white space.

We know there is more we could do to recognise and celebrate the role of people of colour in the CLT movement in the UK and internationally.

Our project work

Equity Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) has been reflected to some degree in our business plans, internal policies and activities since we were founded. But we recognise that intent is not the same as impact, and that we have not always done as much work specifically on racial justice as we might have.

Our main approach to date has been to fundraise for resources and support for CLTs to tackle systemic racism (and other forms of oppression); and latterly to try to develop more standardised models of housing project that lower barriers for CLTs, including in racially diverse contexts.

Fundraising with and on behalf of CLTs is a key part of our role as the national membership body for the network of 300+ CLTs. It's in the nature of being an



infrastructure body for a movement – bringing material financial support to CLTs as well as acting as a campaigning body - and 75% of our income has gone back out to CLTs and partners since we became an independent charity in 2014.

In 2012, recognising that the English and Welsh CLT movement was disproportionately rural, we developed the Urban CLT Project. We secured funding from the Oak Foundation, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and Tudor Trust. The project provided grant funding, training and a peer learning programme to help CLTs flourish in towns and cities like London, Bristol and Leeds. Training covered topics including influencing local authorities, finance and business planning, and inclusive community organising.

Following an academic evaluation of that project, we fundraised to launch the Cohesive Communities Fund. This followed the model of grants to CLTs alongside training and peer learning. It was explicitly focused on supporting CLTs led by majority-minoritised communities, and CLTs that wanted to improve the diversity and representation of their leadership and membership. Unfortunately, much of the work was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Towards the end, we trained and commissioned CLT leaders of colour to conduct their own peer research on EDI in the CLT movement. We co-funded the 'Community Led Housing for All' research into Black-led Community Led Housing (CLH). We also trained a new diverse cohort of 'CLT Ambassadors', with a budget to cover their travel, time, care costs and lost earnings. You can read more about this work and the research reports [here](#).

We have also sought, as a movement, to develop more standardised forms of housing projects with partners in the community-led housing sector. The sector collectively has concluded that these can help to lower barriers for communities. Our first pilot of the '[Growth Lab](#)' to tackle this was fairly criticised by the 'Community Led Housing for All' research for not explicitly considering EDI. So our second iteration focused on two teams, one of which looked at CLTs in racially diverse communities in Liverpool, including one CLT that is explicitly Black-led.

Sometimes our role, and even that of CLTs, is behind the scenes and not well known about. For example, a CLT in Haringey called [StART](#) emerged in 2015 with the aim of developing an alternative community-led regeneration of a former hospital site, with economic and racial justice at the forefront of their thinking. They were supported through our Urban CLT Project and the Cohesive Communities Fund, in the latter, funding their community organising work led by a woman of colour. We also supported them by jointly lobbying the GLA and council; by connecting them with peers in our network; and with some of our member services. Eventually StART and their allies

secured a commitment to 50% affordable housing across the whole development with a focus on social rent – a key demand of StART’s to secure racial justice - and for 56 community-led homes. At this point StART decided to step back and support a new people of colour (POC) led housing co-operative, Gida, to bid for the homes. Gida has been supported by various organisations, including Community Led Housing London, an enabling organisation established following CLTN’s advocacy for a funded support service in London.

One of our reflections on the ‘Community Led Housing for All’ research was the need for us to better uplift and champion stories, like these, of leaders of colour and of fights for racial justice through community-led housing. Perhaps we could also be better at describing our supporting role.

We want to continue and expand our project work in this area, and to sharpen our focus on an anti-racism approach. We have made two unsuccessful funding bids for work on EDI since the two research projects concluded. We have now convened a working group of CLT leaders of colour to develop a stronger project proposal, which we hope to take to funders in the near future.

Our understanding of systemic racism

Our mission is to make community ownership of land and affordable housing commonplace. We see this as one way to redress the systemic injustices of our land system, giving communities power through an equitable and inclusive form of land ownership.

We recognise that racism in the UK is structural, institutional and systemic. It is pervasive and deeply embedded in policies, laws, practices and attitudes. It amplifies and adds to the structural injustice and powerlessness of communities in general in our land and property systems. Systemic injustices affect all communities, but are felt more acutely by communities and leaders of colour. Their experience is shaped by working in - as Stuart Hall put it - a ‘society structured in dominance’.

We have commissioned, co-funded and supported research which has added to the evidence of systemic and structural racism in the land and property systems. This includes our [peer research](#) on barriers and attitudes in the CLT movement, and the [Community Led Housing for All](#) research led by CLTN Ambassador Claude Hendrickson and Henri Baptiste. Our understanding of systemic racism is informed by these, and related research into [community-led housing in Bristol](#) by the Black South West Network, and other approaches to community assets like Ubele’s [A Place to Call Home](#), Power to Change’s [research](#) on social business support for minoritised ethnic

communities, the [Adebowale Commission on Social Investment](#) and others. We understand there are issues including low awareness of CLTs among communities of colour and a lack of stories uplifting leaders of colour; mistrust from those with power in the system, and sometimes outright discrimination; a lack of representation and even exclusion from decision making in the sector; unequal funding allocations; and structural inequality and racism in the wider land and property systems which we are seeking to overcome.

We have long viewed racism as systemic, though it has not often been at the forefront of our work and messaging. On occasion it has, for example in 2020 I wrote [a blog](#) for Triodos Bank connecting the impact of structural racism on COVID-19 deaths to our work on structural racism in land and housing, and I touched on our work at the time to address this through some of our project work.

We have always been a very small organisation of between 2 and 6 staff, often scrambling to deliver complex projects with all the pressures of short-term charitable funding, and trying to use this resource to fundamentally change the system.

So we have not always been able to support or fully engage with other initiatives. For example, we lent publicity to the Black Land & Spatial Justice Fund but could not contribute financially. CLTN staff and trustees occasionally manage to attend events like the Land Justice Fair and Shared Assets' Land Justice Gatherings, but not as much as we'd like. We're inspired by other members of our movement, particularly CLT Ambassadors, who connect more widely into anti-racism networks and movements and want to better develop these links.

One of the reasons we supported the two recent research projects was to better understand the extent to which systemic racism pervades the CLT and community-led housing movements, and what we could do about it. Do we understand systemic racism as a problem 'out there' which the CLT movement is fixing, or is it also a problem inside the movement itself?

Both pieces of research found that there were issues within the CLT movement. For example, a lack of active strategies in CLTs to attract members from diverse backgrounds; a reliance on social networks for recruitment that can result in the recruitment of more of the same type of people; the need for more targeted dissemination of material to communities of colour; and an underrepresentation of people of colour in leadership roles in the movement generally.

A highlighted example was the accredited training programme for advisors supporting groups, which illustrates the connections between our own steps and the bigger



systems we move within. This programme was developed by the Confederation of Cooperative Housing (CCH), in partnership with CLTN (as the lead partner and grant holder) and the UK Cohousing Network (UKCN), and later with Locality. The training programme began in 2017, and since 2024 has been run independently by CCH. CCH has collected equalities data on participants, and shared the following data on participation up to May 2025:

- Training sessions - total attendees 307; BME attendees 28 = 9%
- Accreditations - total accreditations 154; BME accreditations 14 = 9%
- Reaccreditations - total reaccreditations 39; BME reaccreditations 5 = 13%

This shows that people of colour are underrepresented, comprising a smaller percentage of the programme (9-13%) than the general population of England and Wales (18%). Efforts to reach out to and train a more diverse range of individuals had been moderately successful, with the programme more diverse than previous programmes with rosters of CLH advisers (anecdotally, since we did not collect EDI data back then). Partly, the data reflects similar, deeper inequalities in the built environment professions. The data shows good faith efforts, and intention, particularly from CCH, but a remaining gap between the impact of that and where we need to be if we want to build skills and representation among people of colour within an industry riddled with a history of institutional racism.

Another issue highlighted by the research was disparities in funding, and a lack of data collection. When our network secured the Community Housing Fund, largely off the back of supportive lobbying by MPs in the rural South West, the government decided to target the first wave of funding to areas with high levels of second home ownership, which are generally very white areas. We criticised this and secured equal access to the funding for all communities in England in the 2018-20 programme. We went further in the 2021-22 Community Housing Fund, delivered by a partnership of CLTN, CCH, UKCN and Locality. We obtained agreement from the government to fast-track applications from organisations led by people of colour, and tracked how many funded projects matched that description. Of 52 grants approved, 3 were from organisations led by people of colour (i.e. a majority of their leadership). We did not collect data on the degree to which the organisations receiving the other 49 grants (and unsuccessful applicants) had representation of people of colour in their leadership, and how this compared to the demographics of their local area. We were aware of, and worked on, but were unable to fully overcome systemic issues (such as greater historic funding and fewer systemic barriers to white rural areas) which underlay a distortion of CHF project funding to more white communities.



The Community Led Housing for All research rightly highlighted the need to be much better in collecting data, and then in targeting efforts to ensure training, funding and other interventions support people and communities of colour.

The next steps in our journey

We are now working with our members, and with the Social Justice Collective and Kin Structures, on the next steps in our journey towards being an anti-racist and anti-oppressive organisation.

Over the summer and autumn of 2025, we are developing our next business plan. We will develop a new Equity, Diversity and Inclusion strategy to sit alongside that, and to inform our priorities.

This will be informed by an EDI survey of our staff and trustees; an EDI survey of all our members (CLTs); training for all our staff and trustees on EDI, anti-racism and anti-oppression; and facilitated workshops with the Social Justice Collective for staff to reflect on these training sessions and develop an action plan.

We have also convened a working group of CLT leaders of colour to help develop new ideas for project work, facilitated by Kin Structures. We will then, as an infrastructure body for community-led development, work to bring the resources into our movement and into the hands of CLT leaders of colour. The best way for us to work towards racial justice in the land and property systems in England and Wales is to work collectively.

We are continually learning and trying to improve. We invite you to join us on this journey - to support, challenge and collaborate so together we can bring justice to the land and property systems in England & Wales.

