



Environment & Sustainable Communities Committee	Agenda Item Item: 6 Appendix A
12 June 2023	

Consultation Responses - Community Homes Support

Consultation text sent to community homes groups / constituent local housing authorities / Eastern Community Homes:

Dear Sir or Madam,

The purpose of this communication is to consult you about a proposal to discontinue providing a support service to community homes groups within Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.

Background

The Combined Authority's Housing Strategy of September 2018 recognised that delivery of community housing could contribute towards meeting the Combined Authority's housing objectives.

On 27 January 2021 the Combined Authority Board approved a community homes business case that included the provision of £5,000 community homes start-up grants to support emerging community-led housing groups.

On 10 January 2022 the Housing Committee approved the current Community Homes Strategy and Eastern Community Homes were appointed to provide a support service to community homes groups until 31 March 2023. The arrangement excluded providing support to community homes groups within East Cambridgeshire as these groups are supported directly by officers from East Cambridgeshire District Council.

On 7 October 2022 the Housing Committee approved a proposal that originated from East Cambridgeshire District Council and allocated funding of £100,000 to provide further technical support to community led housing initiatives across the whole of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.

Current position

Despite the funding being made available no funding has been drawn to date and on 13 March 2023 the Combined Authority Housing Committee considered a recommendation to discontinue providing support to community housing groups.

The recommendation received mixed reactions from committee members and it was resolved to defer the decision until June to provide an opportunity to seek views from community housing groups, constituent local housing authorities and Eastern Community Homes.

If you would like to express a view on the proposal then please send your comments by email to Nick Sweeney, Residential Development Manager at the Combined Authority before 12 May 2023.

Response from Cambridge City Council

Cambridge City Council was actually awarded government grant a few years ago for community-led housing, and we have spent some of that on identifying potential groups and on start-up grant for one organisation interested in building in Cambridge.

Interest has been limited, with the main sticking point appearing to be access to free or very cheap land.

We still have some government grant remaining so would not need to draw on the CPCA's fund for these purposes, and would not object if the funding was withdrawn. (Although if sufficient funding was available for groups for land purchase then that might be a different matter)!

Response received from East Cambridgeshire District Council

East Cambridgeshire District Council strongly urges the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA) to continue to provide a support service to community homes groups via Eastern Community Homes (ECH). In the Devolution Deal the CPCA committed to work with Community Land Trusts (CLTs) to deliver new schemes recognising the benefits these schemes bring to the community. This commitment was recently reaffirmed in the CPCA budget and business plan for 2023-2024.

Supporting communities to deliver community-led housing by offering long term qualified technical support is key. CLT Trustees are often volunteers and rely on support in what is often a complex and slow process.

Information from the Chairman of ECH provided to the Housing and Communities Committee states that there is a healthy interest from communities in pursuing community-led housing in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. The CPCA should support these communities and communities who are considering community-led housing and continue to fund the Community-Led Housing Support Service.

Growing Government interest and support for community-led development is evident in Government's recent NPPF consultation on changes to the English planning system, which included questions on community-led development, along with a draft definition of community-led development. It would be regrettable if the CPCA to withdraw its support for community-led development just as Government support for it is increasing.

Response received from Fenland District Council

Following discussion with the Portfolio Holder , we have no issues with the proposal.

Response received from Huntingdonshire District Council

I think perhaps the chicken and egg matter may be an issue. Whilst the reasons are understood, funds are not available until after groups have incurred expenditure.

However I can see that with such poor take-up CPCA may wish to review.

Is it possible to reserve a much smaller budget which can roll over/be renewed each year (perhaps £20,000)?

My instinct is that you may still get very few but it would allow up to 4. If you then get just one or two at least you would still have a budget.

Also, I would be interested to see ACRE/Eastern Community Homes comments since they may have some insight or relevant suggestions.

Response received from Peterborough City Council

It is a difficult one because housing delivery through community homes groups is a slow process so there is an argument to be made to say that access to funding to support them needs to be available for a sustained period to reflect that and enable results. You have indicated that there has been no take-up of the start-up grant since it was introduced in 2021 and likewise of the technical support grant funding since its introduction in October 2022 which bearing in mind the involvement of Eastern Community Homes, is disappointing. In light of the limited activity of community housing groups in Peterborough, my response is that I neither support nor object to the proposal.

Response received from South Cambridgeshire District Council

A key priority for South Cambridgeshire District Council is to provide housing that is affordable to all. We are very much a supporter of community-led development as part of a suite of options to bring forward affordable homes for local people. South Cambs DC had previously supported the initial set up of Eastern Community Homes by way of a one off grant,. Our understanding was that after the initial set up costs, Eastern Community Homes was to be self-financing as the pipeline of new schemes buy services from and through the Community Hub. We also continue to support the work of Cambridgeshire Acre through its housing enabling role by way of an annual grant and regular update meetings to help bring forward affordable housing schemes.

Whilst it is disappointing that the Combined Authority are seeking to withdraw funding for the services of Eastern Community Homes, we understand the competing financial priorities that the Combined Authority face and that any funding provided has to be assessed on outcomes and value for money. From the CPCA report and from our own experience, it would appear that groups are not coming forward to the extent that there are any tangible projects underway within our District. Therefore, whilst we as a District Council will continue to support community-led development through our work with Cambridgeshire Acre and supporting Eastern Community Homes where possible, I can also sympathise with the difficult funding decisions that the Combined Authority have to make and with regret support the CPCA's recommendation.

Response received from Eastern Community Homes

Response to consultation on proposal to discontinue providing a support service to community homes groups in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough

Eastern Community Homes, the community-led housing hub for the eastern region, entered a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Combined Authority in January 2021 to support a partnership approach to the delivery of community-led housing support in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. Community-led housing delivery includes Cohousing, Community Land Trusts (CLTs), Housing Co-operatives, Self-Build and Self-Help.

This agreement was extended until 30 June 2023 to allow for a consultation to take place with community-led housing groups and local authorities on a proposal to discontinue providing support and community-led housing grants funded directly by the Combined Authority.

Eastern Community Homes welcomes this consultation and makes the following points based on our experience as the organisation delivering the Combined Authority's community-led housing support:

1. The proposal for discontinuation of support comes at a time when there is a crisis in the provision of affordable housing across the county and nationally. The recent report Homelessness in the Countryside: A Hidden Crisis (Mar-2023) details the shocking increase in homelessness in rural areas and considers market failure in provision of affordable housing, recognising there needs to be more provision of truly accessible and affordable housing. House prices in the County have seen huge increases, The lower quartile property price in Cambridgeshire in February 2023 was £263,593;

this compares with £173,167 in August 2014 – a 52% increase in nine years. Rental prices are similarly high, for example the median cost of a three-bedroom private rental property in Cambridgeshire is now over £1,100 per month, with rents rising by 11% in the last year. Rents are typically higher in rural and market towns due to a shortage of suitable rental properties and lack of social housing stock availability. Compounding the problem of affordability, salaries have only seen average annual growth rates of 1.9%.

2. A growing number of people living in both urban and rural areas of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough have been shown to have little access to housing through the traditional housing market due to these high house prices and rising rents. Community-led housing offers an alternative approach that enables people to take charge of their own housing and gives them more of a say in the place they live. This is supported by the Combined Authority's own Housing Strategy (Sep-2018) which recognised that delivery of community housing could contribute towards meeting the Combined Authority's housing objectives.
3. The Cambridgeshire and Peterborough area is viewed nationally as being progressive in its support for community-led housing policies and through the overall good progress made by the provision of dedicated Combined Authority support. Withdrawal of grant and enabler support will inevitably mean community-led housing delivery will slow with the impact being that housing development could take even longer to achieve.
4. Lack of strategic support for community-led housing will mean opportunities will be missed, particularly for the development of community-led housing at scale in our new communities and through other opportunities to deliver housing differently. The Community Land Trust Network recently published its State of the Community Land Trust Sector report (Apr-2023) and its research showed the potential for 278,000 extra homes across the UK to be delivered through scaled proven models of CLT delivery. These models create new opportunities with housing associations, local authorities, developers, groups and partners collaborating with Eastern Community Homes to progress CLTs.
5. The support of a qualified community-led housing enabler focused on early intervention and enabling of volunteers to achieve an effective set-up of their group is fundamental. The enabler can then guide an independent group through all the stages of housing delivery and bring in other housing specialists to achieve a scheme. Support is extended to defined communities looking to build housing, including people who are younger, older, homeless, students, LGBTQ+, key workers and veterans. They may struggle to find suitable housing themselves and need enabler support to achieve their aspirations of living in a community-led housing scheme.
6. Anyone can start, volunteer and deliver a community led housing project. The people that step forward are usually community leaders who think change is needed and are supported to start to lead that change. It takes time as the enabler is working with a group learning the principles of community-led development; as well as finding suitable land and financing for a project.
7. A growing number of successful schemes across Cambridgeshire demonstrate that community-led development is achievable and, where it has been successful, communities are strengthened by their home ownership, local investment and community engagement aspects of the process itself. Often, groups go forward building upon their own successes with further developments of homes and community-owned assets. The homes are owned by the community, they are legally protected in perpetuity, and any future surpluses are reinvested back into the local area.
8. Due to timescales, the last housing committee meeting saw no grant applications presented and this was interpreted as lack of progress. Since the announcement of new £100k grant (Oct-2022) the Eastern Community Home's advisor for Cambridgeshire & Peterborough has been working with groups to allow for applications to be presented of a sufficient standard. The total funding request from groups who recently submitted applications is £97,323, making a good case that funding and support is needed to take **these projects forward**.

It is a critical time for the direction and delivery of housing in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough with the impact the lack of affordable housing availability is having on our communities clear. Discontinuing

funding will be seen by groups as a lack of support where community-led housing is seen as having a hugely positive impact on communities and people's lives. We urge the Combined Authority to keep providing funding and to work with all its partners to strength its policy to support for the development of community-led housing.

Eastern Community Homes, as the regional community-led housing hub, wishes to support all its partners to progress and strengthen new or existing delivery of community-led housing across the County and to continue working with the Combined Authority in the future.

9-May-2023

Response received from Gt. Staughton Community Land Trust (GSCLT)

GSCLT has been working with the Parish Council and the community to develop and ensure the village community of Great Staughton is preserved, enhanced, and is sustainable.

Some years ago it was identified that the community was losing many young people who could not afford the commercial rents or property prices in the village. The sale of nearly all social housing had meant that there was virtually no low cost housing in the village.

As a consequence the GSCLT together with the local Parish Charities and subsequently Places for People the local Housing Association developed a scheme to provide 12 properties, 3 shared ownership and 9 at social rents to be kept in perpetuity for the village. These have now been completed and tenants are now occupying the properties.

Whilst this is a major achievement for the village and will certainly help in sustaining the school, doctor's surgery and local businesses it is not sufficient. These properties were oversubscribed. The recent census shows that the Parish population has reduced by 5% and that 48% of the population are over 50 (census 2021). These figures are considerably adrift to those for Huntingdonshire as a whole where the population has increased by 6.5 % and the age profile is 41% over 50.

This shows the need to develop more schemes to ensure the sustainability and well being of the village community.

As a consequence through the developing Neighbourhood plan a call for sites was sent out to establish suitable areas for more affordable housing and to address a particular community issue – the retention of the local Doctor's surgery.

This has now happened and the community is now considering the report from the consultants in response to the sites suggested. The intention of the GSCLT is to work with a local landowner to develop a site for housing, a community building to include a surgery. This process is about to begin and the grant process was vital for the landowner to consider the possible options and to achieve the best result for the community.

By its very nature the process takes time to develop and reach a point at which it is possible to submit a grant application. Even though we identified the need over a year ago and have been progressing it, by the time a call for sites is formulated, posted, and evaluated a considerable amount of time has elapsed. We are expecting to include in the Neighbourhood plan a recommendation for a suitable site but unable to complete this prior to end of May 2023 in order to satisfy the need to consult all parties and give proper consideration to all proposals.

This demonstrates the problem with the grant. It takes time to get to the requisite point to make an application. That is why it would be so unfortunate if the funding is to be withdrawn when we and possibly other groups may be nearly ready to make an application. I wonder whether the process could be more publicised, and an expression of interest be lodged which can count in the process.

The GSCLT and the Parish Council would very much like to have access to grant funding to further the process.

Bob Jewell

Chair GSCLT and GS Parish Council.

6th April 2023

Response received from It Takes A City CLT

Dear Nick,

Thank you for the email regarding the proposal to discontinue the support to CLH groups in the CPCA region.

I am founder and chair of It Takes a City Community Land Trust, incorporated in July 2020 with the able assistance of the then CPCA's CLH support activity. Your then colleague Emily Mulvaney, who had transferred to you from ECH (I think), ably helped us determine the legal basis of our new CLT and apply for start-up funding. Happily, Emily, having left CPCA some while ago to work for Laragh Homes, is now one of our Trustees.

I am intrigued to hear there has been no draw down of the newly available funds. We had the first message about the new funding from Jenna in November. Unfortunately, I was away at the time although there should have been an out of office. I saw Jenna's email when I returned in January, and we've tried to progress it since. We submitted a rough draft of a funding application on 7th March, but setting up a meeting with Jenna to discuss this further seems to have been difficult, now hopefully arranged for tomorrow.

I'd suggest the problem is that the process relies solely on Jenna's email explanations and her availability to meet. There is no documentation to work on.

This bears some similarity with the process for working with CPCA in 2020 – there was little documentation to go on, and it all depended on Emily. I think there was also then confusion over the relationship between ECH and ECDC, and the CPCA, the transfer of staff to and fro, albeit the then Mayor was very much in favour of CLH initiatives, having promoted them in ECDC before taking up the role of Mayor. And now the involvement of CambsAcre.

It would certainly help to have some clear documentation available on-line and perhaps more resource to engage with the potential applicants.

I very much hope we can prove that it can work however!

With all good wishes

Chris

Chris Jenkin BEM MA CEng FIET

Response received from Waterbeach CLT

Dear Nick,

As a Community Land Trust in Waterbeach we would like to respond to the below regarding the discontinuation of the supporting funding.

The funding has not been well publicised as we were not aware of its availability.

However, the larger issues related to CLTs drawing on the funding is the availability of land within South Cambs and lack of support from the Council for making it available to CLTs at a cost that makes it possible to develop homes that are affordable to local people. In order to be able to bring projects forward we would need the support and pressure of the Council, without the focus on "viability" which is the usual get out from developers. We have tried to engage with U&C for the Waterbeach development, to bring forward a CLT parcel there, but they don't want to discuss on anything other than commercial terms.

Having said the above, we would be keen to see the continuation of the funding, particularly as we are looking to discuss another site local to the village of Waterbeach, and would be hopeful to be able to draw on the fund in the near future for things like community engagement, public exhibition, and putting in a planning application. Having funding available to do this would also help us to look committed to our possible development partner and make it a more attractive venture.

We hope that the above assists, and demonstrates that groups do want to develop community homes and would use the funding, if they were able to find land to be able to bring projects forward.

Thanks,

Ian Bracey

for Waterbeach CLT