



**RURAL  
HOUSING  
SCOTLAND**

# Community Learning Exchange Community-led Housing – Collective Action

Thursday 27th February 2020

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# Site Visit

## Spittalfield Collective Self Build, Perthshire

### Cllr Grant Laing, Perth & Kinross Council

The village of Spittalfield is 7 miles east of Dunkeld, in Perthshire. In the 1990s a group of local people facing huge rent increases created Spittalfield Collective RHOG Group – the first affordable, collective self-build project in Scotland. Blessed with glorious winter sunshine, the CLE group of 20 people met up to hear more about the project from Cllr Grant Laing, who, along with 11 other families, built their own homes here in 1993.

Up until that point the Rural Home Ownership Grant (RHOG) had predominantly been used as a means to build individual houses, but a discussion with an architect friend about the potential for housing on a former bus depot site on the edge of the village led Grant to question how a group could pool these to greater collective benefit. After suggesting the idea to others in housing need around the village – and initially receiving a lot of scepticism – a group was soon formed and a local architect, Kenny Duncan, commissioned to work with the group to develop a site layout and small range of house designs. The number of houses was determined by the then capacity of the mains sewage system.

Spittalfield, a former weavers' village built in an English country style in the mid-19th century, includes a central village green that is well-used throughout the year for a range of community events. The local authority planners initially suggested that a village green be included within the new housing development but, keen to ensure the new housing felt like part of the existing village rather than a competing suburb, this was deliberately eschewed by the group.



The new houses are, instead, connected to the village centre by a well-used short path weaving between other houses, making them feel very much like a natural part of the village.

Defying local authority guidance once more, the houses were all designed with three bedrooms instead of the recommended one or two, providing a size that allowed families to grow over time. This proved successful, with the school role increasing from around 20 to nearly 40 less than five years after the houses were completed. Its success goes further: enabling families to stay in their homes has had a direct, positive impact on community cohesion. This was tangible during our visit, with Grant nodding, waving and saying hello to almost everyone who passed by, despite having since moved house. Perth & Kinross Council area has one of the highest rates of aging population and social isolation, which projects like this – through long-term planning – can clearly help to address.

Built by Muir Homes, all twelve houses are owner-occupied, with eight still inhabited by the original families from 1993. Laid out around a simple, adopted road layout they are all detached, single-storey and largely unaltered – except one which has had a number of extensions and a loft conversion. Two pairs of semi-detached, two-storey houses for rent were built by a local housing association in the mid-1990s near the entrance to the site.

Grant noted that the RHOG covered around half of the project cost, with the remainder being made up of private mortgages.

Despite its success no other collective RHOG self-build projects were ever developed before the scheme was closed in 2012.

More details about the project can be found here: <https://ruralhousingscotland.org/collective-self-build>

# Discussion

After returning from Spittalfield the group convened in one of the meeting rooms at the Birnam Institute to learn about two exciting and innovative housing projects.

## Hope Co-housing, St. Margaret's Hope, Orkney

### Jenny Rambridge, Chair, Hope Co-Housing (HCH)

Hope Co-Housing (HCH) Community Interest Company is a group of senior women living around St. Margaret's Hope, a ferry port village at the northern end of South Ronaldsay, in the Orkney Islands. They wish to rehouse themselves in smaller accommodation, with a mutually supportive approach to living. Co-housing as a model of interdependent living is becoming gaining popularity across the UK, with notable examples in London (OWCH), Lancaster and Leeds ('LILAC'). It is based on sharing common tasks and equipment, such as cooking and cars. As well as reducing the cost of living this approach also reduces duplication and waste, and has many positive social impacts.

At the Hope Co-Housing project they plan to demonstrate a collaborative approach to age by combining the principles of innovative housing design, wellbeing and healthcare principles, and technology to support active aging. They are working with Professor Gokay Deveci of Robert Gordon University (RGU), Aberdeen, who is coordinating research inputs from design, computing, health and care professionals with the aim of creating a new typology of senior citizen housing in which people aspire to live, supporting each other and eliminating social isolation and fuel poverty. These twin aspects offer particular challenges on Orkney, where it

is predicted that more than 30% of people will be over the age of 60 by 2030, and where most heating is by electric – the most expensive form of fuel. It was inspiring to hear that the group plan to insulate the buildings so well, and to use non-toxic materials, that will help reduce the total annual heating costs to less than the Scottish Government’s Winter Fuel Allowance.

Jenny described the very positive relationship their group have with the planning and housing departments of Orkney Islands Council, whose connection with Robert Gordon University led to HCH being introduced to Professor Devenci. After exploring two potential sites on the edge of the village already zoned for housing, HCH settled on a west-sloping site with excellent views towards the bay and are in the process of negotiating its acquisition. Although uphill from the village centre, its proximity to the village was a key factor in its choice. Jenny also pointed out the presence of a supported living facility immediately opposite their site, noting wryly that they were developing their project specifically “to avoid ending up in there”!

The design for the project, developed by RGU with assistance from a Rural Housing

Fund feasibility study grant, takes the form of a terrace of five individual 2-bedroom houses with a sixth ‘common’ house positioned in the middle of the terrace. One of the bedrooms in each house can be easily enlarged in the future event of requiring additional space, e.g. for medical care equipment. Connecting the houses is a ‘social corridor’ – a glazed but unheated space providing essential shelter and designed to promote social interaction and encourage physical activity no matter what the weather. The whole building is positioned on the site to minimise the amount of excavation required and the design includes private and shared gardens, as well as a small parking area for a single shared car and visitors.

Jenny noted that they have major support from Orkney Health and Care and that community support for the project has been overwhelming.

RGU’s feasibility study included preparation of budget costs and pre-application planning advice from Orkney Islands Council. Despite their clear and well-documented potential benefits, funding the common house and social corridor have emerged as key challenges to the project.



Image: Robert Gordon University

Design, costs and specification are currently being optimised but HCH are clear that these two features remain non-negotiable aspects on which the success of the project hinges.

Having reached the limit of their own knowledge and expertise, the five members of HCH have each contributed a sum of money to pay for a development officer to help take the project forward. As part of this HCH hope to be selected for inclusion in Innovate UK's 'Healthy Aging' research competition, which may provide financial support for the social corridor and common house. They are also about to submit a full planning application for the project, so watch this space!

Jenny finished by noting that, although exciting, the process they have followed has felt very slow and there seems to be very little guidance for groups such as HCH wishing to explore co-housing.

<https://theorkneynews.scot/2019/09/03/hope-senior-cohousing-a-first-for-orkney/>

## Collective Custom Build, Portobello

### John Kinsley, Bath Street Collective Custom Build

Set up by four local families in 2013, Bath Street Collective Custom Build is an innovative project that regenerates a derelict site and creates four spacious, light-filled and highly energy-efficient homes. It was led by John, who runs John Kinsley Architects, and built from cross-laminated timber from Spain.

The site for the project, a tight plot set between a four-storey set of Victorian tenements and a two-storey Georgian townhouse, and originally granted planning permission for an uninspiring set of apartments, remained vacant following the 2008 recession. Seizing the opportunity and capitalising on a willing seller, the group purchased the plot. Making the most of the land available, the building has four floors – one for each family – and includes small private gardens to the front and rear.

A major feature of the project is the expansive use of 'mass timber' panels which not only create pleasant internal environments but also store (or 'sequester') over 114 tonnes of carbon dioxide. The use of this large-format, prefabricated panels system saw the whole structure completed in two weeks – less than a quarter of the time that would have been required for a conventional – and significantly more polluting and energy intensive – steel frame with concrete floors. After contractors insulated the building and made it wind- and water-tight some occupants took the opportunity to carry out the fit-out themselves, investing their own 'sweat equity' and helping reduce their costs. Using a cross-laminated timber structure allowed high levels of variation to the layout of each floor, enabling occupants to personalise them to meet their own needs and permitting future alterations.

John described the process of setting up their group, including discussion with lawyers about the constitution of the group. This resulted in the formation of a company limited by shares, which was used as the organisation to commission the contractors for the project. Finance for the project was made up of a combination of private funding and mortgages provided by Ecology Building Society, who offer reduced interest rates for energy efficient projects. Once work was completed each family effectively 'bought' their home from the limited company they had set up.

Drawing on the work of Alistair Parvin (<https://medium.com/@AlastairParvin/housing-without-debt-5ae430b5606a>) John described the social and economic benefits of collective custom build, illustrating that much of the cost of buying a new home goes towards developers' profits, marketing and land, and relatively little goes



towards the stuff that matters – like construction quality, design quality and size.

John recommended a 2019 report from the Cooperative Councils Innovation Network entitled 'Community-led housing: a key role for Local Authorities' (<https://www.councils.coop/community-led-housing/>) and finished by questioning the UK's predominance of housing ownership over rental. Referring to countries including the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, France and much of Scandinavia, he noted that rental here forms a much higher proportion of housing tenure, largely due to housing quality and the extensive rights of tenants.

John also noted that more than 10% of all housing built in Berlin is commissioned by building groups ('Baugruppen') and that land for development must be offered to Baugruppen before being on the open market.

<http://johnkinsleyarchitects.co.uk/portfolio/page/26bs/>

<https://ruralhousingscotland.org/collective-self-build-2>

## End note

This year's Community Learning Exchange included members from Colonsay, Canna, Finnerne, Alyth, Orkney, Applecross and many other parts of Scotland. Together, the site visit and the two presentations back at Birnam Institute offered opportunities to hear about innovative housing delivery models and better understand how built projects have weathered.

It was valuable to compare Spittalfield's 1990s model of detached individual houses to the compact and highly energy efficient terrace and apartment block of Hope and Bath Street respectively, so that we can make sure our own projects combine a strong sense of place with appropriate responses to the climate emergency.

