



Evaluation of the Empty Homes Community Grants Programme (EHCGP) - Midlands region



Baseline Case Studies Report

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However, responsibility for the argument and analysis in this report is entirely ours.

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Executive Summary

Introduction

This is the first of three regional baseline summaries planned to inform evaluation of the impact of the Empty Homes Community Grants Programme (EHCGP).

While EHCGP is part of the Empty Homes Programme, it is targeted at organisations that are not registered providers of housing and which have much in common with community-led housing groups such as community land trusts, co-housing groups, co-operatives and community self-build groups; who now work together through the Mutual Housing Group.

The decision to allocate an initial £30million, and an overall total of just under £50million to 110 community-led groups over two EHCGP funding rounds was a bold departure from large scale procurement of affordable housing schemes and is worthy of detailed evaluation.

This report was made possible by a grant from Building and Social Housing Foundation (BSHF), support for transcriptions from Third Sector Research Centre (TSRC) and voluntary inputs from an academic visitor from Japan and interns from Housing Associations Charitable Trust (HACT). Further resources are being sought for two other baseline studies (in North East and Yorkshire and London Regions) and a longer term evaluation of EHCGP including an audit of wider social impact.

The overall aim of the programme of research is to provide a rounded evaluation of the impact of the Empty Homes Community Grants Programme to build on existing knowledge about the self-help housing sector and its expansion since the 1970s and thereby to add to wider knowledge on community-led housing initiatives in England.

A database of organisations was developed and updated, regional meetings were observed, six case studies were undertaken, each involving up to 5 semi-structured and qualitative interviews with key individuals, including project champions, workforce and residents and partners. Observation of regional meetings with EHCGP recipients organised by SHHO and HACT, and further expert interviews and discussions informed the drafting of the report as did an early findings seminar presentation at the University of Birmingham in Autumn 2013.

Background and Key Definitions

Self-help housing as is understood today has grown from a number of roots (Mullins, 2010) but the most important of these was the short-life movement that emerged in London and other urban areas in the 1970s to bring into use properties that local authorities had acquired from the private sector to improve, but were prevented from doing so by the austerity conditions that followed the IMF intervention in 1975. Short-life groups were partly the product of negotiation by those authorities with groups of squatters who had occupied the unimproved empty properties.

While several of these groups have survived to the present day, there was a gradual decline in new self-help housing activity up to the late 1990s. Partially revived by the new Labour government's interest in social enterprise and self-help, particularly in relation to construction training and employment, the self-help sector had still not reached a similar scale to that of the 1970s and 80s when Self-Help Housing.Org began to promote community led solutions to the growing problem of empty homes from the late 1990s.

Through a lively and informative website, regional events and peer support for local projects Self-Help Housing.Org has successfully stimulated a growth in the sector since 1999 when only 50 projects were known nationally to the position in 2014 when over 100 have received funding under the Empty Homes Community Grants Programmes that are the focus of this evaluation and 120 are mapped on the SHH website. The story of mobilisation of the self-help sector to scale up in this way without compromising its community based identity is a fascinating one and has been contrasted with the similar growth in Community Land Trusts over the past 10 years (Moore and Mullins, 2013).

The key to this success was in linking the aims of the sector with those of the incoming Coalition Government to promote 'localism' and to tackle empty homes. Following initial research in 2009-10 by Third Sector Research Centre (Mullins, 2010; Mullins et al, 2011), a policy consultation was held by Building and Social Housing Foundation at Windsor Castle in 2010 that established the achievements and relevance of self-help housing to the policy agenda. Detailed work following that consultation (Building and Social Housing Foundation, 2011 a and b) enabled the creation of a special Community Grants Programme (EHCGP) within the £100 million Empty Homes Programme open to organisations who were not registered housing providers. Later work by Self-Help Housing.Org and HACT funded by Tudor Trust and by Tribal as part of their administration of EHCGP stimulated and supported non-registered groups to apply for this funding.

Thus the scene is set for this evaluation; a 'new' group of providers largely based within communities were able to access housing grant direct for the first time to acquire and renovate empty properties and bring them into use. To complete this background summary a few loose ends need to be tied up to enable the reader to make sense of the terminology used throughout the report. Namely: self-help housing, community-led housing and the five essentials for self-help housing to succeed.

A brief history of self-help housing has been sketched above and the role played by Self-Help Housing.Org in mobilising and promoting solutions to empty homes by non-registered providers is apparent. A distinctive features of this form of activity is a focus on bringing existing properties into use rather than building new ones; this can be achieved either by 'meanwhile use' of properties owned by private owners on a temporary lease of licence or through acquisition of empty properties as part of the asset base of self-help groups. The other distinctive feature stressed by Self-Help Housing.Org is the relatively small and community-based identity of most organisations involved in this kind of work. Taking these elements together, Self-Help Housing is defined by Self-Help Housing.Org: **'involves local organisations procuring housing by means of bringing back into use empty properties to live in, organising whatever repairs are necessary to make them habitable'** <http://self-help-housing.org/> .

Reference has made already to the community-led housing sector and the promotion of community-led housing solutions by the Mutual Housing Group. This alliance comprises five main sub-sectors:

- **Community Land Trusts (160 CLTs in England and Wales)**
- **Cohousing (14 built schemes and 40 in development)**
- **Co-operative housing (longest established form accounting for 1% of housing stock)**
- **Self-help housing (120 mapped on SHH website)**
- **Community self-build (100-150 of the 11,000 self-built homes a year are produced collectively by informal private groups, co-operatives or partnerships with housing associations)**

(Source: Community-led housing what are the options? 2014).

Like Self-help housing each of the other four sub-sectors has a distinctive history and role. As a recent promotional leaflet states that 'there are not quite as many community-led housing options as you can shake a stick at but there are certainly quite a few' (ibid 2014). For similar reasons to self-help housing, community-led housing as a whole has enjoyed increased prominence under the localism agenda and some forms of community-led housing were also recognised by funding allocations in the 2011-15 National Affordable Housing Programme administered by the Homes and Communities Agency.

A recent review of community-led housing for Housing and Communities Research Group (Lang 2014) reports that:

*'There are only few definitions for community-led housing which highlight the variety of organisational models and their locally based mode of governance. The Homes and Communities Agency (HCA, 2011:3) recognises that **'the community-led development sector is a broad one encompassing a range of models and approaches with varying aims and aspirations. This includes CLTs, mutuals and co-operatives, co-housing, self-build and others'**. According to Gooding (2013:8), who has provided an excellent overview of the sector community-led housing describes **"homes that are developed and/or managed by local people or residents, in not for private profit organisational structures. The detail of the organisational structure can be varied, but governance should be overseen by people who either live or work in the locality of benefit or are direct beneficiaries."***

An important analysis of the reasons for emergence of community-led solutions in general and self-help housing in particular relates to the growth and shifting priorities in the housing association sector. This sector formerly occupied a space associated with local communities, street properties and small scale responses to local community needs. However with increasing scale and focus on new build this sector has largely vacated the space leaving a vacuum which is now being filled by less formal community based initiatives. According to this view programmes like EHCGP can be seen as providing scope for such groups to gain a foothold through local housing work, potential to build an asset base by acquiring empty properties and thereby to become sustainable community-led enterprises.

Thus, despite its origins as part of a larger Empty Homes Programme conceived primarily as a way of tackling empty property; EHCGP can now be regarded as one of several community-led funding programmes loosely associated with the Localism Act (including the community right to build and community-led housing programme). This is as a result of a successful response by Self-Help-Housing.org and its allies to the opportunity to make the case for a designated programme for non-registered providers to achieve a deeper local impact (Mullins, 2013). Currently the absence of specified funding in the 2015-18 Affordable Housing Programme provides common cause for members of the Mutual Housing Group to seek to further influence the policy agenda.

The methodology for this report builds on earlier research on the self-help housing sector prior to EHCGP. One of the key findings of earlier research was that **five essential ingredients** are necessary for self-help housing to succeed. These are:

- **securing properties,**
- **funding,**
- **workforce,**
- **residents and**
- **partners**

Of these partners were found to be the most critical success factors (Mullins, 2010). This 'five essentials' framework has been useful in organising the case study material in this report and in the conclusion (Chapter 5) findings are summarised in relation to these five essentials.

EHCGP Programme Analysis

Of the nearly £30 million distributed through the initial EHCGP funding round in 2012, the Midlands received a total of £4,474,016, 15% of the national grant total. The Midlands had a high rate of success in grant applications, with nineteen out of twenty-four applications receiving funding. These bids involved plans for the highest number of bedrooms to be brought in to use (955) in the most empty properties (355) of any region.

The majority of grant recipients (16) were locally based and planning to operate in a single local authority (LA) area, with six of these organisations concentrated in Birmingham City.

Round 2 allocations were made to five organisations in the Midlands, all of whom had also taken part in Round 1. They received a further £833,480, 4.2% of the national allocation, enabling a further 79 bedrooms to be brought into use in 49 empty properties.

Self-Help Housing organisations can be classified in a number of ways. Fifteen Midlands organisations are registered charities, seven are companies limited by guarantee, three are social enterprises, two are community interest companies and one is an industrial and provident society.

Thirteen reported that they provide education or training services. Eight provide supported accommodation (covering homelessness, young people, and those with mental health problems). Four focus on community development, and five on homelessness. Nearly half

(8) were faith based organisations; six with a Christian ethos, and two from Sikh community service organisations.

In terms of target groups, young people, children and NEETs (people not in employment, education or training) were the most significant target groups for projects. Five focused on homeless people, four on black and minority ethnic groups. One organisation was targeted at helping ex-offenders. The majority of the Midlands organisations (16/19) reported that they are incorporating a training element. The nature of these training activities and connections to the empty homes work varied.

Only one project was part of a consortium bid (Emmaus Coventry). Six of the nineteen organisations bid with nominated partners: Groundwork, Hill Holt Gainsborough, Live Wise Housing Ltd, Shropshire Housing Alliance, The Springfield Project and Windrush Alliance.

Of the 50 organisations on the Self-HelpHousing.org website in 2009, only one was based in the Midlands region. Now, over 20% of the EHCGP recipients are in the region, indicating that the EHCGP has had a significant impact on the growth of community-led empty homes programmes and work in the region. Most of the Midlands-based organisations in receipt of EHCGP funding are already well-established in wider spheres of activity. Self-help housing projects generally form new streams of work within existing community based and social purpose organisations.

The growth of the Midlands self-help housing sector achieved under EHCGP highlights the importance of both regional networking organised by SHHO and HACT and local authority support in stimulating groups to apply for EHCGP funding.

Case Study Findings

The six case studies were drawn from across the Region, from Shropshire to Lincolnshire with urban cases in Birmingham (2), Coventry and Nottingham. None of them were registered providers at the time of being funded¹, nor had they worked on empty homes before, although more than half had worked in supported housing.

A variety of motivations were reported for taking part. These included help in fulfilling their strategic objectives, finding accommodation for service users such as move-on from supported housing and building organisational sustainability by widening income sources. Many of the case study organisations described looking for funding to broaden or improve their existing service offer, and the opportune timing of the EHCGP funding becoming available. While for most organisations renovating empty homes was a new departure, it was usually seen as closely linked to existing organisational aims. EHCGP was summed up by one participant as *'an income stream, but with a social purpose'*.

Projects were encouraged to bid for the funding by various people including board members of their organisation, local authorities, housing association partners or contacts, and even by their accountants! Barriers to bidding included the tight timescale, uncertainties in the

¹ Although one later joined a registered housing association group.

bidding process for example in relation to unidentified properties, and general lack of knowledge and experience of this type of programme. Guidance and support was available from SHHO and from some local authorities. Other enablers included the experience of and advice from board members and partners and guidance from SHHO. Potential help through 'buddying' with larger housing associations was quite limited in practice.

Local knowledge was an important advantage for community-led projects in securing suitable properties; enquiries through local contacts and word-of mouth were often crucial to finding the right properties. Local authorities were often helpful in locating empties, but there were often difficult negotiations with owners.

Organisations usually looked for properties close to their offices or to existing supported housing. Local authorities sometimes suggested areas. Size criteria varied but were affected by housing benefit restrictions. Lease costs and the capacity for negotiation with landlords were important factors in securing property. In some cases landlord expectations made *'it impossible to manage properties at an affordable rent once the renovation had been completed'*.

Two main business models have been adopted to securing properties. The **lease and refurbish model** involves using EHCGP for capital expenditure towards the refurbishment cost while housing benefit and rent are used to cover leasing costs. While projects were able to make this model work, budgets were tight especially where support was required for vulnerable clients. The **acquire and renovate model** used EHCGP funding to contribute towards the purchase cost of properties with private borrowing or reserves used to contribute towards refurbishment and purchase costs. This model proved increasingly popular as projects considered Round 2 bidding with the growth of an asset base being seen as a significant advantage for long term organisational sustainability. One interviewee advised *'If at all possible find a way to own the properties'*.

Other important financial considerations were the failure of EHCGP to adequately cover project management costs and professional fees, and the benefits of having diverse income streams rather than just relying on EHCGP grant funding or Housing Benefit. Other streams drawn on included Market Towns Initiative, local authority grant, and training funding. Key advice offered by one interviewee was to have *'free economic streams, do not be grant-dependent'*.

The Midlands case studies revealed a variety of ways in which works to empty properties were organised and carried out. Most of the boxes in our sevenfold typology of approaches to delivery were filled by at least one case. Nearly all brought in some independent contractors and these ranged from large building companies to local tradesmen. Several case studies ensured that construction employment and training or other forms of apprenticeship were provided as a part of their EHCGP schemes. One example of 'self-help' was the Emmaus 'companions model' where residents played a major role in carrying out the works to the property that they would share. Hill Holt Gainsborough's first resident was the apprentice they took on for the project and who *'says he lives in the best house in the street'*.

EHCGP funding is not dependent on allocating the homes produced to those in greatest housing need as recognised by statutory guidelines. This flexibility and complementarity of self-help housing to social housing was seen as a major advantage. Case study projects worked in collaboration with local authorities seeking tenants who would best fit the ethos and wider objectives of the projects, sometimes using advertising and word of mouth recruitment and offering accommodation to apprentices. Such routes were sometimes more effective than nominations. One project champion had *“expected to get people referred to us through the benefit and homelessness teams and that hasn’t happened”*.

The central role played by partnerships in project success was captured by another project champion: *“We realised as an organisation we can’t do this on our own, so it’s finding the right partnership in order that we can fulfil that global objective*. Partners for EHCGP case studies were often the key to securing access to properties, finance, people and skills.

Local authorities were generally the most useful partners, especially in locating properties. Third sector partners had complementary skills and ability to harness essential resources for example volunteers, philanthropic donations or technical know-how. Partnerships with private property owners were more problematic, and partnerships with housing associations less developed than might have been anticipated. Technical support came from a variety of sources, but particularly from SHHO website and regional events and peer networking. Without the support provided by SHHO and some local authorities take up of the EHCGP would have been substantially lower and delivery less effective.

Early Programme Impacts

Case study organisations identified a wide range of **social impacts and community benefits** arising from their participation in EHCGP.

Some claimed benefits were closely related to the increase in housing supply secured by bringing empty homes into use. Supported housing residents benefited from the use of refurbished empty homes as move on. Meanwhile additional housing supply was valued in particular *“as a way of targeting needs groups who were unlikely to be assisted through homelessness or social housing routes”*.

However, one of the key issues raised by this claimed advantage is how affordable is the accommodation provided? Interaction between the Affordable Housing regime of rents at up to 80% market levels with housing benefits policies such as local housing allowance caps and shared room rents for under 35s will clearly be a challenge for projects to maintain access, particularly for those in low wage employment.

Other benefits related to the employment, training and volunteering opportunities provided by the refurbishment work on the empty properties.

- One project highlighted the volunteering role played by future residents; *‘people who have no experience of doing this kind of work’*.
- Another highlighted the impact of work opportunities and apprenticeships on individual self esteem: *‘a young man who was homeless, the family broke down, found himself on the street, we provided housing for him. He’s a model tenant. He*

subsequently went to college to do painting and decorating, and he then subsequently became a mentor and now one of our teacher assistants at the school, and he's looking to, next year, he will be graduating next year from college, and moving on to independent living'.

- A third highlighted the framework of personal discipline that could lead to future employability: *'what matters is they are experiencing work..they understand what five days a week means, they turn up in the morning..they get taught how to deal with the public..how to be polite..how to dress for work..all these simple skills are what we concentrate on'.*

Beyond housing and construction training benefits were claimed at a personal level for both workforce and residents. Opportunities for active participation for future residents were highlighted in directly contributing to the works of at least having a say on how their home was decorated. Meanwhile there were benefits of pride and satisfaction for the workforce: *"I feel the satisfaction of being able to look at the house and be like, "Yeah, I've done this".*

Benefits to neighbourhoods in which refurbished properties were located included town centre and high street uplift by bringing long term derelict buildings into use *"It should have a knock-on effect into the wider economy hopefully, the wider sort of sense of pride in the town".* Wider environmental benefits were claimed through recycling existing terraced housing rather than demolishing and building new: *"there's something special about renovating a house because in this current climate, it's about recycling and preserving and natural resources."* In one case refurbishing terraced housing under EHC GP was part of a wider vision for sustainable urban development.

Property owners stand to benefit in three ways from EHC GP. First, from investment in their properties which are often derelict or in a state of disrepair. Second, through securing a rental income and avoiding costs associated with preventing squatting and vandalism. Third, an opportunity to take part in a project with a positive social impact. However case studies often experienced difficulties in convincing property owners to take anything beyond a rent maximising approach to using their dormant assets.

While the baseline study could only identify project claims to wider benefits, a key aim of the full evaluation will be to provide a framework in which these claims can be validated through a social audit.

Organisational growth and sustainability was the second early impact considered in the baseline study. EHC GP has clearly had a major impact in the Midlands, increasing the number of organisations known to be involved in self-help housing from one to twenty-two. Early evidence of sustainability was the success of five Midlands projects (including four of our six case studies) in Round 2 EHC GP bids.

Another indicator of sustainability was a more general intention to retain empty homes work as an area of cost effective activity often that also aligned well their wider values and mission. As one interviewee put it *"So it was all about becoming sustainable also, but not losing the value of what we do".* For some organisations EHC GP was seen as part of adaptation to a changing environment to survive and grow. In this regard organisations that

had adopted the 'acquire and renovate' business model were generally more confident about long-term sustainability as social enterprises.

However, the possibility that there will be no further EHCGP funding after 2015 raised serious challenges for organisations committed to continue with this work." *We don't see this as money to renovate and that's the end of the story, we see it as a seed that's been planted, and that will grow into a forest.....even if the grant comes to an end, we are committed to our Empty Homes programme. "*

If there is no further public funding after 2015 such opportunities will need to come from other sources such as asset transfers, 'meanwhile use'² of social housing properties in limbo awaiting regeneration or sale, and contracts to draw on local community strengths to manage hard to let properties for registered providers. Further research on the development of these alternative sources of supply of empty properties for the self-help sector is urgently required.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The **Five Essentials** of self-help housing (finance, properties, workforce, residents and partners) have been validated by this baseline study of EHCGP.

EHCGP **funding** has made a modest but key contribution to the need for some working capital to invest in acquiring properties and renovations to bring them into use. This funding appears to have been sufficient in the Midlands to enable a significant amount of acquisition and renovation activity to occur from a standing start in 2012 and to provide good value for money for the taxpayer in relation to bedrooms brought into use. Future schemes might pay greater attention to provision for project management costs and consultancy fees.

The EHCGP restriction to **properties** that have not had previous housing grant funding set a major challenge for projects to establish good relationships with private owners of empty properties and to negotiate leasing costs that fitted the funding regime. Negotiations over leasing costs were often difficult, with common perceptions of unrealistic expectations of returns on what had been dormant assets. New ways of procuring empty properties, including social housing will be required if the EHCGP is not succeeded by a similar funding programme after 2015.

In terms of **workforce**, most case studies provided apprenticeship, volunteering and training opportunities and work for small local contractors. Thus it is likely that more of the money was retained in the local economy than under large scale procurement programmes.

Residents were selected in collaboration with local authorities but seeking tenants who would best fit the ethos and wider objectives of the projects. The benefits of this approach

² 'Meanwhile use' is a term in common currency in temporary use of empty retail properties for community use, exhibitions etc. Earlier research on self-help housing (Mullins 2010) suggested that it could be applied to housing to capture the advantages of temporary use for example of properties empty awaiting regeneration, sale or demolition.

were evident, for example *“Our apprentice says he lives in the best house in the street and he’s therefore got a great pride”*.

Partners again emerged as the key success ingredient from which all others can flow. It is clear that without the combination of support provided by SHHO and some local authorities take up of the EHCGP would have been substantially lower and delivery less effective.

In **Policy** terms EHCGP is a special programme and can be seen as a unique response to a shifting policy context in which government was reducing housing expenditure but seeking to give substance to a policy commitment to localism. EHCGP provided necessary but not sufficient conditions for community based groups to engage in recycling of dormant assets. A key policy lesson from the programme is the need for a policy framework and funding practices that “fit” with smaller organisations, alongside streamlined procurement from very large registered providers.

In terms of **organisational identities**, most of the projects to some degree identified themselves as part of a community-led sector, linking in some cases to social enterprise and in others to more traditional charity identities, but in all cases to community beneficiaries. A few made a more explicit identification with ‘self-help’ either as an alternative to state led approaches or in the purer sense of empowering and involving users in the design and delivery of solutions.

Community-led and self-help Identities were in general reinforced and strengthened rather than threatened by taking part in EHCGP. Diverse organisational identities and missions are inevitable and welcome features of a programme that deliberately sought to provide opportunities for organisations other than ‘the usual suspects’ to contribute to a national property rehabilitation programme. It is clear that the programme has created a space in which a variety of approaches, providing a real alternative to large scale procurement, bringing distinctive benefits direct to local communities as the by-product of relatively modest property based investment. The opportunity to secure grant funding for an activity that could also generate a rental income and in some cases an asset purchase was seen as an excellent opportunity for organisations to become more independent.

In terms of **future research**, this baseline study needs to be followed up with a fuller evaluation covering two more regions in depth, tracking the programme to 2015 and providing a social audit of the wider impact of the projects through a low burden self-assessment framework. This will evaluate the bold policy decision to allocate a significant slice of the Empty Homes Programme to non-registered housing providers. Detailed evaluation of claims about social value and community benefit will provide a basis for informing future investment, transferring learning and building better practice for future community led projects.

It could also provide a basis for a wider study comparing the delivery and outcomes of the EHCGP with the larger Empty Homes Programme delivered by registered providers with local authorities. This might help in understanding the relative merits of large scale and locally based delivery as well as comparing HCA and Tribal grant allocation and programme management experiences.

Recommendations

Six interim recommendations are proposed to build on the learning of this baseline study for wider discussion and debate:

1. **Set more realistic timescales and provide greater flexibility to enable new non-registered housing providers to take part in programmes such as EHCGP.**
2. **Join up support and capacity building at local and regional levels to maximise impacts.**
 - a. **There is also scope for more coordinated support and to explore ‘buddying’ type partnership models** to harness housing association’s expertise
3. **Undertake a social audit of the wider impact of the projects through a low burden self-assessment framework to inform future investment, transfer learning and improve future practice.**
4. **Promote organisational sustainability for community-led groups through continued opportunities to engage in housing and where possible to grow their asset base.**
5. **Overcome barriers to accessing properties by improving understanding of property owners and enabling community led groups to take on empty or poorly managed social housing and ‘meanwhile use’ of long term empties in development pipelines.**
6. **Stimulate continued bold and innovative thinking by community-led groups and thereby unleash resources of creativity to take on the biggest challenges in street level regeneration.**

1. Introduction and Background

The Empty Homes Community Grant Project (EHCGP) was initiated in 2012, the first round provided capital investment of nearly £30 million to community-led groups to help them bring empty or derelict properties back into use. A second round of funding announced in 2013 brought total funding for the period 2012-15 to nearly £50million.

Despite its origins as part of a larger Empty Homes Programme conceived primarily as a way of tackling empty property; EHCGP can now be regarded as one of several community-led funding programmes loosely associated with the Localism Act (including the community right to build and community led housing programme). This is as a result of a successful response by Self-Help-Housing.org and its allies to the opportunity to make the case for a designated programme for non-registered providers to achieve a deeper local impact (Mullins 2013).

However, it is important to recognise that self-help housing has a much longer history, connecting in part to co-operative and mutual housing traditions (Rowlands 2009, Bliss 2009, Handy and Gulliver 2010, Gulliver, Handy and Morris, 2013, Minora et al 2013, Lang 2014), to self-build by ex-servicemen that led to the foundation of BSHF (BSHF 2004), and longer standing ideas of self-help (Smiles 1859) community self-help and mutual aid (Burns and Taylor 1998, Harris 1999, Home Office, 2009, Archer 2009, Vanderhoven and Archer 2010, Mullins 2010, Moore and McKee 2012).

Self-help housing is the term most commonly used to describe those community-led groups involved in bringing empty housing into use. Self-help housing uses empty buildings to provide homes and work opportunities for local people. According to the umbrella body, Self-Help-Housing.Org it **'involves local organisations procuring housing by means of bringing back into use empty properties to live in, organising whatever repairs are necessary to make them habitable'** <http://self-help-housing.org/>. These properties may be acquired on a short term lease basis, or may become part of the long term asset base of provider organisations. Self-help housing can provide a unique opportunity to unleash the wider community benefits e.g. individual and community empowerment, employment and training, community safety, tackling neighbourhood blight and providing attractive options for empty home owners (Mullins, 2010, Mullins, Jones and Teasdale 2011).

The Third Sector Research Centre (part supported by Cabinet Office and ESRC 2008-13) tracked the progress of self-help housing over several years, and produced a number of research based accounts of the sector and its potential, in collaboration with Self-Help Housing.Org and including collaborations with BSHF and CRISIS. <http://www.tsrc.ac.uk/Research/ServiceDeliverySD/SelfHelpHousing/tabid/615/Default.aspx>

This research together with a Policy Consultation and follow-up work by Building and Social Housing Foundation (BSHF 2011 a and b) is recognised to have played a significant role in the establishment of an Empty Homes Community Grants (EHCG) Programme. Round 1 of this programme provided £30million direct funding to 110 community led groups towards capital costs of bring empty properties into use.

<http://www.tsrc.ac.uk/Impact/Selfhelphousing/tabid/885/Default.aspx> A second round increased the overall funding total to £50 million and involved 110 groups in all.

A capacity building programme was undertaken by Self-Help-Housing.Org and HACT from September 2011 to March 2012, supported by Tudor Trust, to enable community-led organisations to bid to access EHCGP. This involved working with DCLG and Tribal to influence programme design, with network bodies such as Locality, Community Matters, Urban Forum & Housing Justice to promote the programme and with individual community-led groups to stimulate and support bids. Seven regional briefing events held in early 2012 were attended by 280 people. Twelve electronic briefings were mailed to a database of 190 organisations and individuals advising on completion of bids. To assist bidders a suite of customised documents was developed with help from an experienced development professional and on-line and one to one support was provided. Without this programme it is unlikely that as many as 147 community-led (nonregistered provider) bids would have been submitted to Tribal who were responsible for assessing the bids (Source: Unpublished Report Capacity Building Programme With Bidders Around The DCLG Community Grants Programme, Self-help-Housing.org, 2012).

The current project, undertaken by the Housing and Communities Research Group at the University of Birmingham and partly supported by Building and Social Housing Foundation is the first element of a further stage of research to cover the period from the announcement of the Empty Homes Community Grants (EHCG) Programme through the expressions of interest, bids and allocations, to the current work being undertaken by Self-Help Housing.Org on the 2012-14 capacity building programme with the 95 successful bidders. It provides a baseline account of the first two years of the programme in the Midlands.

An overall programme of research has been proposed to produce a national evaluation of the EHCP, 2012-15. However, no funding has yet been secured for this project despite widespread agreement on its strategic importance. Case studies will be undertaken with self-help housing projects in up to three regions, and national work will be undertaken with experts in social impact measurement and with local self-help housing groups. This will include development, piloting and implementation of a low burden self-assessment framework to produce data for the majority of the 110 projects involved in the two rounds of EHCGP. This evidence will then be used to produce a rounded evaluation of EHCGP focusing in particular on its wider social impact and the benefits of involving non-registered community-led groups in the programme.

This specific research project provides the baseline regional component of the wider research programme for the Midlands region (comprising East and West Midlands). Subject to funding it is intended to return to the three baseline case study regions in 2014-15 to assess the impact of the programme.

1.1 Project Objectives

The overall aim of the programme of research is to provide a rounded evaluation of the impact of the EHCGP and build on existing knowledge about the self-help housing sector and its expansion and thereby to add to wider knowledge on community-led housing initiatives in England.

To contribute to this aim, this baseline study is intended to identify the existing scale and nature of self-help housing projects in the Midlands. It explores the barriers and enablers to expansion of the sector. It explores the wider community benefits, as well as the direct outputs of the programme in terms of empty homes brought into use. It begins to assess the impact of EHCGP on the national map of the sector and on the sustainability of individual projects.

Further baseline research is planned in two other regions, North East and Yorkshire and London, to explore the impact of EHCGP in places with different housing market conditions and different levels of prior development of self-help housing organisations. It is then intended to track the development of the programme and sector in these three regions to build a full national evaluation of the overall programme.

In the latter stages of the programme it is intended to develop and deploy a Self-Assessment Tool to demonstrate Community Benefit and the wider Social Value of the programme and outcomes achieved by individual self-help housing projects. It is intended that the approach to evaluation will be ongoing and participative to enable projects to collect evidence that is both meaningful and convincing to demonstrate impact and realistic for small scale organisations to collect.

1.2 Methodology

The methodology builds on earlier research on the self-help housing sector prior to EHCGP. A database of organisations was developed and updated, regional meetings were observed, and six case studies were undertaken, each involving up to 5 semi-structured and qualitative interviews with key individuals.

Desk research was undertaken building on earlier work undertaken at the Third Sector Research Centre in collaboration with Self-help Housing.org on the history and evolution of the self-help housing sector (Mullins, 2010, Mullins Jones and Teasdale 2011).

A database was developed to map the growth of the sector and delivery of the programme in the Midlands (and in other regions). Sources for database construction included the original EHCGP bid forms provided to HACT/TSRC by participating organisations, an expressions of interest survey conducted by Self-HelpHousing.Org and analysed by TSRC, a database compiled by HACT staff, a survey completed by participating organisations and provided to HACT/TSRC, and a database of the recipients of EHCGP funding from rounds one (2012) and two (2013).

This data was supplemented by discussions at regional meetings organised by Self-help Housing.Org and HACT and attended by TSRC (in the Midlands these were held in November 2012 and June 2013), and by regular ongoing meetings with Jon Fitzmaurice, the co-ordinator of Self-help Housing.org.

Case Study research

As part of the national evaluation of the EHCGP, five case studies were proposed for each of the three regions (Midlands, North East and Yorkshire and London and South East). This report reflects on the findings of the Midland case studies while in the other two regions, fieldwork for the case studies is on-going. In practice, a total of six case studies were undertaken in the region as well as a pilot with a seventh Midlands based self-help housing organisation that did not take part in the EHCGP programme.

Each of the case studies involved, where possible, up to 5 semi-structured and qualitative interviews with key individuals. A project champion was identified for each organisation for an in-depth interview, while specific aspects of the EHCGP project were explored through subsequent interviews with managers, contractors, residents, volunteers or apprentices.

Not all types of interviewees were viable for each of the case studies, for example depending on the stage of refurbishment at the time of the research interviews, many properties did not yet have residents moved, while other projects did not make use of apprentices or volunteers.

The sampling strategy for the case study research was to select a range of different types of organisations from different locations (urban and rural) across the Midlands regions, to capture a range of experiences of the EHCGP in action. There were some initial difficulties and delays in contacting and confirming organisations to participate in the research as case studies, despite the support of Self-help Housing.org and a strong case being put forward on the value of this evaluation study. Some organisations remained uncertain about participating in the research while others were at first keen but then became more reluctant. However ultimately, we established good connections with six organisations who were willing and excellent partners in the research reported here. Profiles of the six case studies can be found in Table 3.1.

The 6 case studies selected in the Midlands are representative of the broad array of community-led organisations that are successfully taking part in the EHCGP. The case study profiles show how these organisations differ in size from small, niche social enterprises to local branches of international charities. Table 3.1 outlines the background of each organisation, their EHCGP bid, the scope of their EHCGP projects, and the type of project according to its workforce. Organisations provide social housing, supported and semi-supported housing, homeless accommodation and many include a skills training or educational service. A number support young people in particular while others serve the needs of BME groups in their city or region.

In the Midlands, the case study interviews were conducted by three researchers, including a visiting professor from Japan, using the same national set of topic guides for different types of interviewees, developed for this evaluation project. These interviews were usually an hour and a half in duration, and recorded for reference. The University's ethical review protocol was adopted including ethical approval for the project, and consent forms for all interviews. The interview topic guides were piloted in a case study of a self-help housing scheme in the East Midlands that was not funded under EHCGP.

The approach to the EHCGP evaluation has been on-going and participative, and in this spirit, a seminar was held on the 8 October 2013 at the University of Birmingham to discuss the findings from the Midlands case studies. Discussion and feedback from this seminar contributed to the discussion section of this report and to the refinement of themes presented throughout.

1.3 Structure of the Report

The remainder of this report is organised as follows.

Chapter 2 provides an analysis of the EHCGP in the Midlands, showing the funding and its geographical spread, the types of organisations involved, the partnerships they have engaged in their projects and the wider benefits of the programme.

Chapter 3 introduces six case studies from across the Midlands and draws on interviews and visits to track their baseline experience of EHCGP. Experience of bidding for EHCGP funding is reviewed, followed by experience in accessing and managing works to empty properties. People aspects of the programme are then discussed including the role played by workforce, volunteers and residents. Finally, the role played by partners or 'help from without' is discussed.

Chapter 4 undertakes an early assessment of the impacts of EHCGP. First it looks at how the organisations identified their wider social impacts and community benefits of their work. Second it considers the impact of taking part in EHCGP on organisational growth and sustainability; and the role of Round 2 of EHCGP and future growth opportunities. Finally it reviews the main challenges perceived by the participants and the advice they would give to others embarking on a similar journey.

Chapter 5 provides interim conclusions and recommendations based on this first baseline study. It returns to earlier work that suggested there are five essential elements for self-help housing to succeed and reviews evidence on whether the five essentials framework holds true and how the EHCGP has impacted on these five essentials. It locates EHCGP in the fast shifting policy context for housing in England under the Coalition Government, identifying the key drivers that stimulated EHCGP and further support required to consolidate a sustainable community-led housing sector. It considers ways in which self-help and community-led identities have been reinforced or compromised by taking part in EHCGP. Finally an agenda for further research is outlined and some interim recommendations are presented.

2. EHCGP Programme analysis ³

2.1 Funding

Of the nearly £30 million distributed through the initial EHCGP funding round in 2012, the Midlands received a total grant of £4,474,016, 15% of the national grant total and the third highest award amount (after London and the Northwest). The Midlands is also a significant contributor to the programme, with its grant recipients representing the highest number of empty properties (355) and the highest number of bedrooms to be brought in to use (955) of any region (see Figure 1).

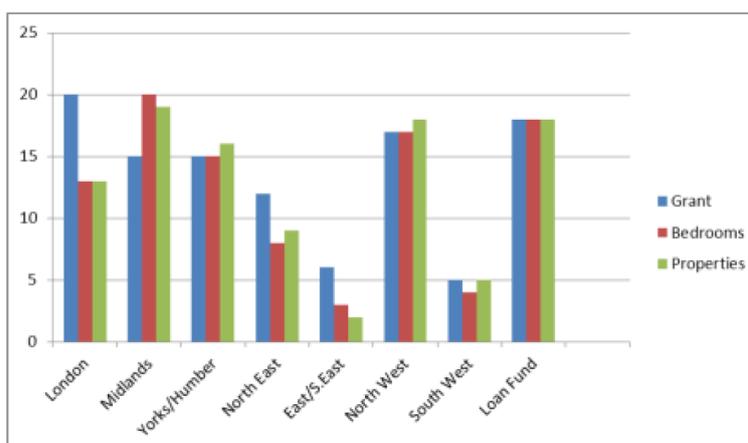


Figure 1. Representation of national grant allocation.

The Midlands had a high rate of success with grant applications, with nineteen out of twenty-four applications receiving funding (twenty were initially awarded funding, but one declined the grant and is therefore not included in this analysis). Of the EHCGP recipient organisations from the Midlands that completed a survey for HACT, several barriers in the programme were identified, including identifying properties, securing match funding, negotiating leases/purchases, compliance with EHCGP grant conditions and managing workflow, all of which will be examined in more depth in the case studies.

Round 2 allocations were made to five organisations in the Midlands, all of whom had also taken part in Round 1. They received a further £833,480, 4.2% of the national allocation, enabling a further 79 bedrooms to be brought into use in 49 empty properties.

2.2 Geography

The EHCGP can be depicted in terms of the national dispersion of organisations (Figure 2), as well as the concentration of Midlands-based grant recipients (Figure 3). In terms of areas of delivery, the majority of grant recipients (16) are planning to operate in a single local authority (LA) area, with six of these organisations concentrated in Birmingham City. A subsequent interview (December 2013⁴) revealed the role that had been played by Birmingham City Council working with Birmingham Council for Voluntary Service (BVSC) in introducing new projects to the programme. Some less geographically bounded and federated organisations were also found to have taken part in the programme in the Midlands, including three local YMCAs and two Groundwork projects. Live Wise is operating across three LA areas, whilst Emmaus UK made a consortium bid to EHCGP operating across

³ We are grateful to Mary-Kathryn Rallings for her analysis of the database on Self-Help Housing Projects in the EHCGP programme and for producing a first draft of this chapter based on this analysis.

⁴ Thanks to Mike Walsh and Kevin Wright, Birmingham City Council for their interview with David Mullins, December 2013.

four LA areas, although within the Midlands, Emmaus Coventry will operate in the single LA area of Coventry (see Table 1).



Figure 2. Geographical representation of national grant allocation, with Midlands circled.

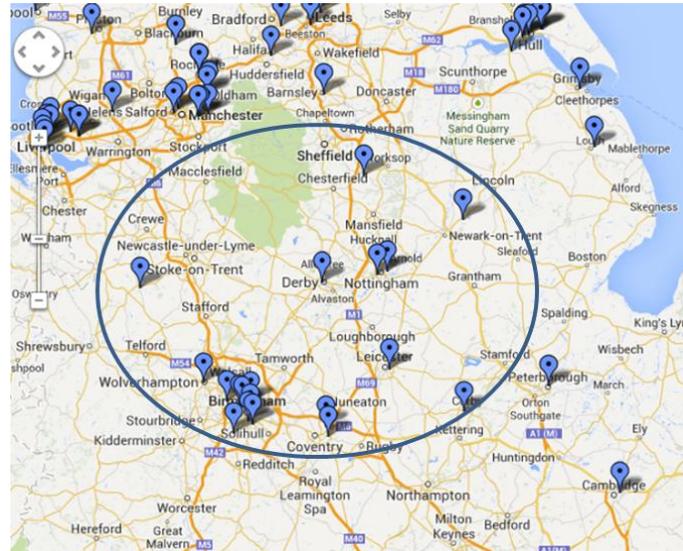


Figure 3. Map with each of the 19 Midlands-based organisations in receipt of EHCGP funding represented by a pinpoint.

Table 1: Local Authority areas of operation

	LA area 1	LA area 2	LA area 3	LA area 4
Action Homeless	Leicester			
Birmingham YMCA	Birmingham			
Dorcas Housing Group	Sandwell			
Emmaus UK	Bolton	Coventry	South Norfolk	St Albans
Groundwork Cresswell, Ashfield and Mansfield	Bolsover	North Derbyshire	East	
Hill Holt Gainsborough	West Lindsey			
Live Wise Housing Ltd	East Northamptonshire	Corby	Wellingborough	
Moat House Community Trust	Coventry			
New Servol	Birmingham			
Newark and Sherwood Homes Ltd	Newark and Sherwood			

Nishkam Association	Civic	Birmingham
Shropshire Alliance	Housing	Shropshire
Sikh Community Youth Service UK	&	Sandwell
St Basils		Birmingham
Start Again Project CIC		Birmingham
The Springfield Project		Birmingham
Windrush Alliance UK CIC		Nottingham
YMCA Black Country Group		Sandwell
YMCA Derbyshire		Derby

2.3 Types of organisations

Self-Help Housing organisations can be classified in a number of ways. Prior to the case studies we had planned to classify participants in relation to their legal status, mission and purpose and target groups. In the course of designing the case studies a fourth way of classifying schemes according to approaches to the delivery of the programme, which was developed based on the expertise of Self-Help-Housing.Org.

2.3.1 Legal Status

In terms of the legal status, fifteen Midlands organisations are registered charities, seven are companies limited by guarantee, three are social enterprises, two are community interest companies and one is an industrial and provident society. (More than one of these categories generally applies, with six of those that are companies limited by guarantee also registered charities. See Table 2). Furthermore, although the EHC GP programme was targeted at and designed for smaller organisations who were not housing providers registered with the Homes and Communities Agency, a wider range of types of organisations than expected were able to secure this funding in the Midlands⁵.

⁵ One is an ALMO, but not a registered provider (RP), while three are small registered housing providers with less than 150 homes in ownership. Although two of the YMCAs are registered providers they own less than 150 homes, while the third YMCA is not a registered provider. The programme was intended to embrace organisations that happened to be RPs, but which would not have had any funding for a long time and would have virtually no prospect of Homes and Communities Agency funding in the foreseeable future. The programme design was intended to be "small organisation friendly", unlike the HCA's system, which was geared to large RPs and large programme bids. One organisation was an independent charity at the start of the project but became part of a registered housing provider group during the course of the study.

Table 2: Status

	Registered charity	Company Limited by Guarantee	Social enterprise*	Industrial & Provident Society (IPS)	Community Company (CIC)	Arms Management Organisation (ALMO)	Registered Provider (RP)
Action Homeless	X	X					
Birmingham YMCA	X						
Dorcas Housing Group				X			
Emmaus Coventry	X	X					
Groundwork Cresswell, Ashfield and Mansfield	X	X					
Hill Holt Gainsborough	X		X				
Live Wise Housing Ltd	X	X	X				
Moat House Community Trust	X		X				
New Servol	X						
Newark and Sherwood Homes Ltd		X				X	X
Nishkam Civic Association	X						
Shropshire Housing Alliance	X						
Sikh Community & Youth Service UK	X						
St Basils	X	X					X
Start Again Project CIC					X		
The Springfield Project	X	X					
Windrush Alliance UK CIC					X		X
YMCA Black Country Group	X	X					X
YMCA Derbyshire	X						X
	15	7	3	1	2	1	5

*Note: These data were self-reported by organisations. Thus, whilst 'legal status' is used, the inclusion of 'social enterprise' is somewhat anomalous, with three organisations reporting this status in addition to classifying themselves as charitable and/or company limited by guarantee.

The spread of the purposes (Table 3) of the organisations is interesting. Thirteen reported that they provide education or training. Eight provide supported accommodation (covering homelessness, young people, HMOs, and those with mental health problems). Four focus on community development, and five on homelessness. In terms of ethos nearly half (8) were faith based organisations; six with a Christian ethos, and two (Nishkam Civic Association and Sikh Community and Youth Service UK) from Sikh community service organisations.

2.3.2 Purposes

Table 3: Purpose

	Supported accommodation	Homelessness	Education and training	Health	Community	Environmental / sustainability	Faith Based	Other services
Action Homeless	X	X						
Birmingham YMCA	X				X		X	
Dorcas Housing Group			X	X			X	
Emmaus Coventry	X	X	X				X	
Groundwork Cresswell, Ashfield and Mansfield			X		X	X		X
Hill Holt Gainsborough			X			X		
Live Wise Housing Ltd	X	X	X					
Moat House Community Trust					X			
New Servol	X		X	X				
Newark and Sherwood Homes Ltd								
Nishkam Civic Association			X	X			X	
Shropshire Housing Alliance		X						X
Sikh Community & Youth Service UK			X				X	X
St Basils	X	X	X					
Start Again Project CIC			X					
The Springfield Project					X		X	
Windrush Alliance UK CIC			X					
YMCA Black Country Group	X		X				X	
YMCA Derbyshire	X		X				X	
	8	5	13	3	4	2	8	3

2.3.3 Target groups

Young people, children and NEETs (people not in employment, education or training) were the most significant target groups for projects, with eight organisations having an explicit focus on younger people. Five focused on homelessness, four on black and minority ethnic groups. One organisation was targeted at helping ex-offenders. Perhaps surprisingly only four reported that they focused on specific geographic locations; however, from Table 1 above, it is evident that the majority of projects are in practice based in just one local authority area. (See Table 4.)

Table 4: Target population

	Young people/ children/ NEETs	BME groups	Homeless	Ex-offenders	Geographically specific areas
Action Homeless			X		
Birmingham YMCA	X				
Dorcas Housing Group		X			
Emmaus Coventry			X		
Groundwork Cresswell, Ashfield and Mansfield					X
Hill Holt Gainsborough	X			X	
Live Wise Housing Ltd			X		
Moat House Community Trust					X
New Servol					X
Newark and Sherwood Homes Ltd					X
Nishkam Civic Association		X			
Shropshire Housing Alliance			X		
Sikh Community & Youth Service UK	X	X			
St Basils	X		X		
Start Again Project CIC	X				
The Springfield Project	X				
Windrush Alliance UK CIC		X			
YMCA Black Country Group	X				
YMCA Derbyshire	X				
	8	4	5	1	4

2.3.4 Approach to Delivery

Given the focus of the research on the ways in which self-help housing can empower people as residents, workforce and as volunteers, a fourth way of classifying schemes emerged in discussion of case study topic guides between the research team and Self-Help-Housing.Org. This was designed to pick up variations in the extent to which empowerment occurs through direct participation in construction activities. For many projects there is a strong emphasis on training opportunities. The majority of the Midlands organisations (16/19) reported in our survey that they are incorporating a training element. However, the nature of these training activities and connections to the empty homes work itself varied. The following classification was used to explore this variation in our case studies.

Table 5: Delivery Approaches

TYPE 1:	Use of prospective residents to undertake the work or some of it
TYPE 2:	Use of trainees/apprentices to undertake the work - either in their own employ or from another organisation
TYPE 3:	Use of volunteers
TYPE 4:	Use of small or local builders - that sometimes may be built up, and /or sustained, by the work stream from the EHCGP funding
TYPE 5:	Use of a housing association/social landlord to do the work
TYPE 6 :	Hybrid mix of several of the above
TYPE 7:	None of the Above – e.g. conventional procurement from general construction companies

2.4 Partnerships

Only one of the Midlands organisations bid for EHCGOP funding as part of a consortium bid (Emmaus Coventry which is part of the national Emmaus federation which put together a single bid covering three regions: North-west, Midlands and South-east). However, six of the nineteen organisations bid with nominated partners: Groundwork, Hill Holt Gainsborough, Live Wise Housing Ltd, Shropshire Housing Alliance, The Springfield Project and Windrush Alliance. Some of these partnerships also included elements of training:

- the Springfield Project partnered with the Jericho Foundation in order to help people into training and employment, as well as providing the construction works;
- Shropshire Housing Alliance partnered with Shropshire Learning, Employment and Training Services to provide training for NEETs and later became part of Wrekin Housing Trust which it drew on for property development activity;
- and Windrush Alliance CIC partnered with Learn2Learn, a training construction scheme.

Further, although Action Homeless did not make their original bid as a partnership, they are working with partners to deliver the project. Of these seven organisations that bid or are working in partnership with other organisations for delivery, six included a local or district council or local authority as a partner, indicating strong links between Self-Help Housing organisations and local government, and therefore to have more focused effects on the local community. For instance:

- where local authorities are collaborating with self-help organisations to strategically refurbish empty properties in areas where dereliction is high, or as part of town centre regeneration (as with Shropshire Housing Alliance), thereby initiating a knock-on effect for further refurbishment;
- where local authorities are assisting in locating and securing empty properties (Hill Holt Gainsborough, Windrush Alliance CIC, Groundwork; Live Wise Housing Limited; Emmaus Coventry);
- where local authorities are helping to allocate tenants to properties refurbished under the EHCGP (Groundwork; Emmaus Coventry);

- where the local authority encouraged and assisted community based organisations to bid and helped with their bid documents (Birmingham City Council with several bidders in the City);
- and/or where EHCGP grant recipients are working alongside other local partners with vested interests in bringing empty homes back into use (Shropshire Housing Alliance, partnering with Market Drayton Community Partnership).

2.5 Wider benefits

Analysis of self-help organisations known to Self-HelpHousing.org prior to the EHCGP confirms the relative importance of the programme in kick starting the sector in this region. Of the 50 organisations on the Self-HelpHousing.org website in 2009, only one was based in the Midlands region. Now, over 20% of the EHCGP recipients are in the region, indicating that the EHCGP has had a significant impact on the growth of community-led empty homes programmes and work in the region. Seven organisations went on to successfully secure funding under round two of the EHCGP (Birmingham YMCA, Emmaus, Live Wise, Shropshire, Start Again, Springfield and YMCA Derbyshire).

Prior to the EHCGP, five organisations reported that they had no previous experience of housing (Hill Holt Gainsborough, Moat House Community Trust, Nishkam Civic Association, Start Again Project CIC, and The Springfield Project), although interviews conducted in the case studies provided a fuller picture of these organisations. In one case, there had been experience of providing supported housing prior to the programme. Moreover, only two reported previous experience working specifically with empty homes (Dorcas Housing Group, and Windrush Alliance UK CIC). Thus, the EHCGP can be viewed as affording at least five organisations in the Midlands with the opportunity to establish themselves in housing and, more significantly, gave seventeen organisations the chance to initiate empty homes projects where they had not previously done so.

An interview with Birmingham City Council in December 2013 indicated that EHCGP had been seen as an opportunity to enable community based organisations in the city to build their capacity through housing projects. Some joint promotional activity was organised with Birmingham Voluntary Service Council (BVSC) and support for bidding was set up by the City Council. An officer from BCC had *“talked to some very small housing associations, people who would like to have set up a housing association and community organisations who once they saw the opportunity thought housing is something we could do for our group”*. *‘A lot of those conversations took place..the BVSC link gave us a softer feel than if we had approached them direct’*. However, in practice the EHCGP deadlines were seen as quite tight and ruled out groups who were not already well advanced in their thinking. While BCC did assist a few groups with preparing final bid documentation, several dropped out before this stage: *‘I can only put this down to the deadline we were under’*.

At around the same time (February 2012) Self-Help Housing.Org and HACT organised a regional bids advice meeting held in Birmingham and continued to support successful bidders at two regional events in November 2012 and June 2013. Interestingly only two of the six eventually successful bidders in Birmingham attended the February 2012 event. However the event was attended by Birmingham City Council who were later in contact with some other eventually successful bidders. A similar process operated for the Hill Holt

Gainsborough bid; with a representative from West Lindsey Council attending the February meeting and subsequently supporting the Hill Holt Gainsborough bid. This highlights the importance of both regional networking and local authority support in stimulating groups to apply for funding such as EHCGP.

Most of the Midlands-based organisations in receipt of EHCGP funding are already well-established in wider spheres of activity. Thus, whilst many did not have experience of working with empty homes prior to the programme, they are not in themselves start-up projects. Self-help housing projects are therefore likely to be new streams of work within, existing community based and social purpose organisations, including non-developing housing organisations such as Birmingham YMCA. This highlights the role that EHCGP has played in contributing to the growth of the sector in stimulating existing organisations to become involved, and in providing access to housing funding that had previously been restricted to a small number of large registered providers. This was one of the main rationales for a ring-fenced EHCGP; and in the Midlands this strategy was clearly successful in widening the range of participating organisations. However, as a Birmingham City Council interviewee reflected *'Its an excellent idea at stretching what is not a huge pot of money a long way but needs to be even more flexible to help the smaller groups...whose decision making may not match the speed of the bid process'*.

The openness of the programme to non-housing specialists also introduces the possibility that the programme may be peripheral to the main activities of some participating organisations and even that the programme may frustrate some of their existing aims. This question of the extent to which participation in EHCGP aligned with and contributed to the wider mission and purpose of participating organisations is something that we return to in the case studies in Chapters 3-5.

3. Case Study Findings⁶

This chapter draws on the six case study visits and interviews undertaken with organisations participating in EHCGP across the Midlands regions. Section 3.1 provides profiles of the main features of these six organisations to provide a reference point for the remainder of our narrative in chapters 3 and 4. Later sections draw on these six case studies to cover a number of themes of relevance to assessing the impact of EHCGP. Chapter 3 continues by exploring why and how these organisations bid for funding under EHCGP (3.2), their approach to delivery (3.3), the business models adopted under EHCGP, and in particular whether to lease or purchase properties (3.4), how they recruited and managed the people involved in working on the properties, and residents to live in the properties (3.5), and the kinds of partnerships developed to facilitate their EHCGP programme (3.6). Taken together sections 3.2-3.6 explore the five key elements of self-help housing: funding, properties, workforce, residents and partners seen as essential in earlier research on the topic (Mullins 2010, Mullins, Jones and Teasdale 2011).

⁶ We are grateful to Ass Prof Yoshinobu Kikuchi for undertaking the Hill Holt Gainsborough and Windrush Alliance case studies. All other cases were researched by Dr Halima Sacranie and Prof David Mullins.

3.1 Case Study Profiles

This section introduces our six case studies to provide a basic picture of aims and activities of the participant organisations, their EHCGP bids, the scope and type of project funded by EHCGP and a quote capturing what the project means to the organisation.

Case Study 1	Birmingham YMCA
1. Background : Aims and Main Activities	YMCA is an independent charity with 121 branches worldwide in a federated structure. Its Birmingham branch was established in 1849. The organisation has a Christian faith background and the focus of their activities is supported housing/ accommodation for young people. They have 3 main supported housing sites in Birmingham but also provide other services at their hubs such as nurseries, day care and holiday clubs.
2. EHCGP and Bid Background	The EHCGP came to the attention of YMCA only about 4 weeks before the due date for applications. The outgoing chairman of the organisation, who has a Quantity Surveying background, and the incoming chairman, who is from a Housing Management background, both brought it to the attention of the CEO as a good opportunity to secure move on accommodation from supported housing.
3. EHCGP Bid Allocation	Round 1 £500 000 Round 2 £390,000
4. Scope of Project	50 properties in total. 2 flats (a 3 bed flat and a 2 bed flat) above shops in High Street, Erdington, refurbished into 5 bed shared accommodation which is now fully occupied by residents moving on from Birmingham YMCA supported accommodation. 24 flats in Henrietta Street: 16-1 bed flats and 8-2 bed flats in Hockley, Birmingham, completed on 27th September 2013. These flats are being let to working people, families and working residents moving on from YMCA supported housing. Securing access to move on accommodation was a major motivation for this non-registered provider to engage with EHCGP. All properties are 5yr+ leases with private landlords.
5. Project Type	Type 7 – Professional Property Development – Buy in skills and labour .
6. Key Partners	External Project Manager/ Quantity Surveyor, Birmingham City Council,
7. What the project means to us:	<i>“..it’s when you sign someone up and say you can have accommodation and you’re changing their life there. And obviously being able to give something back. We weren’t in a position before to have move on accommodation.....And the quality is positive. The standards are really good, really high.”</i> (Project Champion).

Case Study 2	Start Again CIC
1. Background: Aims and Main Activities	Start Again is a small Community Interest Company, set up by an ex professional footballer wanting to help young people. It is a social enterprise working in the areas of sports and sports health, life skills and supported living. Started in Birmingham in 2008 as a weekly football and mentoring project, they now do sports coaching, skills development, mentoring, rehabilitation and supported accommodation for young people between the ages of 13 and 30. Start Again works across the West Midlands, including projects in Wolverhampton, the Black Country, Smethwick, Dudley and Coventry.
2. EHCGP and Organisation's Bid	As a social enterprise, Start Again are constantly looking for trading opportunities that fit their agenda or where they can adapt to suit a particular opportunity. At the same time as they were looking to expand their organisation and accommodation services, the Empty Homes grant came out, and so they took the opportunity to apply for funding.
3. Bid Allocation	Round 1 £75 000 Round 2 £59,000
4. Scope of Project	Start Again are renovating three 3-bedroom houses, two 2-bedroom flats and two 1-bedroom flats as move on accommodation for young people.
5. Project Type	Type 6 (Combined Type 2 and 4) – Small Contractors and Apprentices
6. Key Partners	Birmingham City Council, Local College
7. What the EHCGP project means to us:	<i>"The great thing about Empty Homes was I suppose from the council's perspective they just wanted to get properties back into use, so there wasn't a restriction on what you did with them as long as they got used. So when we went and put our idea forward they seemed really keen because it was not only refurbishing properties and putting them back into use but also meeting other agendas on the councils such as youth homeless which is huge and rising, and also creating a stronger and better community. So all in all it was a bit of a win-win situation."</i> Project Champion.

Case Study 3	Emmaus, Coventry
1. Background: Aims and Main Activities	<p>As part of an international charity movement, Emmaus Coventry & Warwickshire opened in 1993, to help address homelessness in the area. They provide supported live-work community based accommodation for their ‘companions’. The Coventry group helps on average 50 people a year, and currently house 18 Companions at a vicarage in Binley.</p>
2. EHCGP and Organisation’s Bid	<p>A national bid was put forward on behalf of 3 branches of Emmaus in England. The director in Coventry was notified by the head office of Emmaus UK that there was going to be some money available for the refurbishment of empty properties in Coventry which would enable them to increase their service provision. Over the next couple of months more information came out about finding an empty home, about refurbishing it and putting it back into use. This tied in with Emmaus ambition to increase their number of service users or ‘Companions’.</p>
3. Bid Allocation	<p>Round 1 £312,900.00 nationally– including £45,000 for Coventry Round 2 £175,000 – Emmaus (Salford)</p>
4. Scope of Project	<p>One four-storey property with the ten bedrooms in a communal arrangement. The property was originally laid out as four separate flats; one per floor. The building now has ten bedrooms, and a large communal dining room, a two bedroom staff flat and an office.</p>
5. Project Type	<p>Type1- Residents (Companions) and Volunteers working on project alongside local contractors.</p>
6. Key Partners	<p>Emmaus Head Office, Coventry City Council, Private Landlord</p>
7. What the project means to us:	<p><i>“I think the thing that we’re probably proudest of is that we’ve been a group of people who have no experience of doing this kind of work. Working with a group of individuals that can be very challenging and we’ve managed to achieve our outcome in quite a short space of time you know, going from a standing position, I think we’ve moved forward very quickly to achieve something spectacular really.”</i> Project Champion.</p>

Case Study 4	Windrush Alliance
1. Background: Aims and Main Activities:	Based in Nottingham, Windrush was established in 2003 to provide affordable housing for young people and for ex-offenders. It started as a voluntary organisation and then registered as a housing association in 2011. Windrush provides supported and semi-supported housing, and helps young tenants acquire the skills to manage their own tenancy. In addition the organisation offers education and training opportunities and has been involved in property refurbishment for the wider housing market.
2. EHCGP and Organisation's Bid	The CEO at Windrush recognised that 6,000 people were on the waiting list for social housing at the same time as 2,000 properties were empty in Nottingham. He contacted the local authority to discuss bringing these properties back into use thereby reducing housing waste and at the same time providing additional resources to the city. In the absence of institutional support for an empty homes type project, the CEO of Windrush wrote to the Housing Minister about his idea, and when the EHCGP bid opened in 2011 he quickly submitted a bid to enable Windrush to deliver its existing commitment to bringing empty homes into use.
3. Bid Allocation	£285,000
4. Scope of Project	Windrush are planning to renovate a total of 30, mainly 3-bedroom properties. At the time of the case study interview, they had already secured 10 properties on a 5 years lease, 2 of which are 4-bedroom properties while 8 were 3 bedroom properties.
5. Project Type	Type 2 – 6 trainees recruited, providing construction skills- WALHA occasionally use local construction company but only if they fit to their ethos.
6. Key Partners	FUEL and local colleges (Construction training partners), Self-help Housing.org
7. What the project means to us:	<i>"I think for me the achievement is about bringing the house up to date, reducing the impact on the environment but also using that stock to provide a housing solution for people who are homeless."</i> (Project Champion, Windrush).

Case Study 5	Hill Holt Gainsborough
<p>1. Background :</p> <p>Aims and Main Activities</p>	<p>Nigel Rowthrop purchased Hill Holt Gainsborough in Lincolnshire in 1995 with the plan to make the woodland sustainable economically. In 2002 the business transferred to the community under a limited company which became a charity in 2007. Currently, Hill Holt Charity has subsidiaries with projects in education, training and employment including Hill Holt Gainsborough Gainsborough which bid for EHCGP funding for empty terraced housing in South West ward.</p>
<p>2. EHCGP and Organisation's Bid</p>	<p>West Lindsey Council asked Hill Holt Gainsborough (HHW) to assist with the regeneration of empty terraced housing four years ago. HHW suggested that it was possible to convert old terraced properties into modern day living spaces and proposed an ambitious whole street design solution. The council initially pledged £1.5m for the project. HHW bought a house at auction, and started work on an eco-designed, modern building. The council could not afford to extend the scheme to the whole street but recommended HHW to bid for EHCGP after attending a SHH regional event in 2012.</p>
<p>3. Bid Allocation</p>	<p>£225, 000</p>
<p>4. Scope of Project</p>	<p>EHCGP funding contributed to purchase of 6 properties to convert into shared homes with 19 bedrooms. 3 properties had been bought by Summer 2013; 1 at auction and 2 other empty properties. In the longer term there were plans to upgrade the rest of the street with environmental works to make it an affordable and nice place to live; at significantly lower cost than new housing development.</p>
<p>5. Project Type</p>	<p>Type 2 - 1 in-house builder, 1 apprentice and 2 foundation learners were working on site and more planned. HHW also uses a local electrician and local plasterer. The apprentice as the first tenant.</p>
<p>6. Key Partners</p>	<p>West Lindsey Council, Local Colleges, Young Designers/ Architects</p>
<p>7. What the project means to us:</p>	<p><i>"Its making a difference...when we first started there were no properties being worked on in that street. We've shown a number of local people around the (completed) house and when they see it they go wow!!! Our apprentice says he lives in the best house in the street and he's therefore got a great pride in it. Word gets around and we can start changing the thinking. That street does not have to stay as a difficult place to live that's going downhill. We'll actually turn it round and make it a nice place to live and that will be the biggest achievement."</i> (Project Champion)</p>

Case Study 6	Shropshire Housing Alliance (SHA)
<p>1. Background: Aims and Main Activities</p>	<p>SHA was formed through merger of several local homelessness and housing advice groups to cover Shropshire Council area. In 2012, it became subsidiary of Wrekin Housing Trust (WHT), a large stock transfer HA based in the neighbouring unitary authority. SHA has retained its local offices and service delivery in the main market towns of Shropshire. Apart from providing advice and support and securing accommodation for homeless people, SHA also operates a furniture recycling business.</p>
<p>2. EHCGP and Organisation's Bid</p>	<p>SHA was already procuring accommodation from private landlords to enable accommodation options for its client group who are mostly non-priority homeless. SHA has close links with Shropshire Council and their strategy and empty property team, who encouraged SHA to bid for EHCGP and advised on priority locations and properties to base the bid on.</p>
<p>3. Bid Allocation</p>	<p>Round 1- £114, 000. Round 2- £225,000</p>
<p>4. Scope of Project</p>	<p>A large high street property in Market Drayton, a former bank and nightclub that had been empty for 10 years was selected because it fitted the Shropshire Council priorities and would be a high impact location for SHA. The grant is being matched with several other funding sources (Shropshire Council new homes funding and Market Towns Initiative and contributions from the WHT parent) to purchase the property and convert it to 6 high quality self-contained flats.</p>
<p>5. Project Type</p>	<p>Type 5- Refurbishment works managed by Wrekin Housing Trust, using local private contractors</p>
<p>6. Key Partners</p>	<p>Shropshire Council, Wrekin Housing Trust,</p>
<p>7. What the project means to us:</p>	<p><i>"it's in a very prominent part of Market Drayton so that means the community can be aware of it. It should have a knock-on effect into the wider economy hopefully, the wider sort of sense of pride in the town. So all of that rather than a building off in the middle of nowhere that was empty because I don't know, the estate couldn't be sorted out or... it just seemed right. So the profile it gave us – the fact that the Local Authority were very enthusiastic so that means when the next round of bidding comes, they already think that we're prepared to do the jobs and interesting things that they want as well, so I mean I think that's an important relationship in the whole of the Empty Homes Programme with the Local Authority "Project Champion.</i></p>

3.2 Bidding for EHCGP: Why and How?

Motivations behind bidding and taking part in the EHCGP programme

A variety of motivations were reported for taking part. These included strategic vision, finding accommodation for service users and building organisational sustainability. While for most organisations renovating empty homes was a new departure, it was usually seen as closely linked to existing organisational aims.

Strategic vision or fit

A recurring reason given for taking part in the EHCGP was that the programme was aligned to the strategic vision of the organisations or would help them fulfil their strategic objectives. These could include more accommodation for homeless people, more supported housing or new social housing provision for existing service users.

“I think when you are a social enterprise you are constantly looking for things that fit your agenda or where you can fit into somebody else’s agenda. And, at the time, it just happened quite naturally that we were looking at a way to expand the project and the Empty Homes grant came out, and it just was like, okay, we can’t really pass up this opportunity so we took it.” (Project Champion, Start Again)

Move-on Housing

The case study organisations who already provided supported housing described facing the constant problem of where to move their service users on to, after their maximum stay of 2 years in supported accommodation. Having available general needs, affordable rental ‘move-on’ housing was seen to be crucial to prevent service users falling back into a cycle of homelessness. The EHCGP therefore afforded these organisations the opportunity to develop their own portfolio of ‘move-on’ properties, e.g. YMCA will now be able to access 50 units of their own, to move their supported tenants into.

Exploring New Opportunities for Long-Term Sustainability

Interviewees described the need to explore new opportunities and be creative in finding funding to support their activities. Some expressed the ambition to diversify to create new income streams and be more in control of their own destinies. For YMCA, the refurbishment and leasing of properties was seen as a new venture to explore, and perhaps a way of mitigating risk because of the reliance on Housing Benefit, which accounts for nearly two thirds of their annual turnover.

Rather than diversifying for the sake of it, the rationale behind embarking on a project like the EHCGP, was to establish the longevity or long term sustainability of their organisations.

“My role is to help Start Again to become sustainable so I started to look at it as an income stream, but with a social purpose, and thought that, well, if we could get some more properties and do them up we could continue this and help the young people as much as possible whilst also helping the organisation so that it can help more young people. And then it just happened at the time, right time, that Empty Homes grant came out.” (Start Again Project).

Timeframes and Experience

The project champions were the key individuals behind the decision to bid or support their organisation's involvement with the EHCGP. They were encouraged to bid for the funding by various people including board members of their organisation, local authorities, housing association partner or contacts, and even by their accountants!

Start Again had some limited experience of refurbishing a property for their existing office and supported housing, but all the case study organisations indicated that they had little involvement with housing or self-help housing prior to EHCGP. The organisations all intended to fulfil their 3 year contract for their successful Round 1 bid, while four of the case studies sought to continue their involvement with EHCGP by successfully bidding for Round 2 of the EHCGP. These organisations were YMCA, Emmaus, Shropshire Housing Alliance and Start Again.

The interviews illuminated some barriers and enablers to bidding for EHCGP.

Barriers

Barriers included the tight timescale to complete bid documentation and uncertainties in the bidding process for example in relation to unidentified properties. Organisations were being asked to bid over a 3 year period, for properties they'd not yet identified and to specify how much it would cost to repair them and for how long they'd be available on lease.

While advice on bidding was available from Self-help-Housing.org, who provided a lot of guidance around bidding, how to fill in the form, how to put the budget together etc., not all bidders in the Midlands had used this. There was a feeling that the application process was somewhat complicated and that Tribal, the agency to whom bids were submitted, was unable to provide direct answers to questions in advance of the bid deadline. Those organisations who had applied for EHCGP Round 2 funding did feel that their experience with Tribal was improved the second time around, but this may have also reflected their own growing familiarity and confidence in the process.

Because of the tight budgets involved, the case study organisations managed the application 'in-house' putting pressure on existing limited staff resources. The short time frame most had to complete the application, having only found out about the EHCGP near the deadline, was also cited a challenge. This was confirmed by an interviewee from Birmingham City Council who had provided advice to a number of potential bidders.

“ Anything to do with finance, community groups can be slow on decision making; meaningful would require more flexibility and time recognising the limited resources many groups have to call on’. (Birmingham City Council Interviewee)

In addition interviewees described their uncertainty about whether they would be able to secure suitable properties, and just generally their lack of knowledge or experience with this type of self-help programme.

Enablers

A number of factors were identified as contributing to the successful bids of these case study organisations. These included:

- Encouragement and letters of support from Local Authorities.
- Good advice from Board Members, accountants HAs, planners and other housing professionals.
- Competitive Bids – Value for Money for EHCGP (YMCA felt that they had priced their refurbishment budget ‘aggressively’ at £10000/ property.)
- Strong Partnerships (Windrush saw their Public-Private Partnership as a critical success factor).
- Guidance (reference was made to the extensive guidance provided by Self-help-housing.org- see section 1 above) advice and support (‘buddying’) from housing associations to smaller community projects, especially on financial matters (This was a key suggestion for enabling community groups but was only really key in one of the cases.)

3.3 Managing Projects: Properties

Sourcing empty properties and criteria for property selection

Local knowledge was an important advantage for community-led projects in securing suitable properties; enquiries through local contacts and word-of mouth were often crucial to finding the right properties. Local authorities were often helpful in locating empties, but there were often difficult negotiations with owners.

Organisations looked for properties close to their hubs or existing supported housing e.g. in the case of Start Again. SHA focused on market town high street locations to raise the profile of the organisation as well as fitting the Council’s priorities.

With property size being a strong criteria, organisations also considered different sized properties for different reasons. YMCA, for example, looked to refurbish 1 bedroom flats in large blocks to gain economies of scale for refurbishment and cost efficiencies in the management of the rental properties.

Emmaus also sought to refurbish one large property- converting a block of 3 individual flats into a single shared space and a large communal supported living facility to suit their community model. In contrast Birmingham City Council had originally encouraged projects to secure self-contained accommodation to enable independent living; but subsequently there was greater enthusiasm for shared accommodation to respond to housing benefit constraints for residents.

Barriers to finding suitable empty properties:

As could be expected, interviewees had to view and sift through many unsuitable properties or 'no-hopers' before finding the right ones. The property search was described as both time consuming and disheartening. Lease costs and the capacity for negotiation with landlords was also an important factor in securing property.

In some cases negotiating with private landlords proved to be a barrier and in a few instances terms couldn't be agreed for the properties concerned, and potentially suitable properties become unviable. One project that decided not to proceed as a full cost calculation had found considerable barriers to identifying properties that could be economically leased and managed using the leasing model. It had found landlords difficult to negotiate with and in some cases seeking to use the scheme for properties that did not meet the criteria of having been empty for twelve months.

Problems with securing properties on lease from private owners were raised in several of the regional meetings organised by SHHO and HACT. The internal note of the first round of regional meetings after programme allocations noted that :

'Most often because owners' demands regarding rents were too high, making it impossible to manage properties at an affordable rent once the renovation had been completed . Less often, because of competition from Registered Providers or local authorities trying to secure properties for other schemes (eg HCA programme or temporary accommodation).' (Unpublished note –Summary of Issues Arising from Regional Meetings – SHHO January 2013).

Enablers to finding suitable empty properties

Councils or local authorities proved to be very helpful in providing both lists of empty properties and also suggestions from Empty Property Officers on suitable properties for the case study organisations.

Apart from council help, local knowledge, enquiries through local contacts and word-of-mouth were also seen as crucial to finding the right properties. A few of the case study organisations also advertised locally for expressions of interest from private landlords and this was seen to have been a useful exercise in finding suitable properties.

In summary it appears that local knowledge/intelligence are significant advantages of community-led projects in securing properties. This competitive advantage can be reinforced by maintaining good links with local authority empty property officers.

3.4 Business Models and Rent Structures

The two main business models adopted by the case study organisations were to lease or purchase using different combinations of funding sources. Some stressed the importance of having multiple income streams.

Lease and Refurbish

YMCA, Start Again and Emmaus adopted this approach, whereby a suitable property was leased and the EHCG fund was used for capital expenditure towards the refurbishment cost. For YMCA and Start Again the affordable housing rental income would be used to service the lease and overheads.

YMCA were generally expecting £100 a week for a one bedroom apartment and £120 per week for a two bedroom property. At YMCA, residents interviewed who had already moved into a shared property were required to pay £62.50 per week each, and also pay their own water, electricity and their TV licence bills.

At Emmaus, the new property would be available to ‘Companions’ using the existing model of residents contributing to their stay through working for and at Emmaus, while trading income from the charity business would help service the lease costs.

One organisation that decided not to be a full case study in this research expressed reservations about the viability of the lease and refurbish model when providing accommodation with a high level of support for vulnerable clients. The rent levels demanded by property owners left insufficient funds for support costs once repair, management and maintenance were covered.

Acquire and Renovate

Hill Holt Gainsborough, Shropshire Housing Alliance and Windrush Alliance all used their Round 1 EHCGP fund to contribute towards the purchase cost of properties.

For SHA the local council also contributed capital funding for the purchase while their parent Wrekin Housing Trust were helping with substantial refurbishment costs associated with the large building that had been empty for over 10 years. The project manager at SHA described their model as a professional traditional charity model with the motivation to increase supply of housing accessible to their homeless client group and to increase the asset base of SHA.

At Hill Holt Gainsborough, the EHCGP fund was put towards the purchase of properties while the renovation work was being undertaken by a team of volunteers and apprentices working on site, which is a strong part of the ethos of their organisation. The main advice Hill Holt Gainsborough offered to other projects was to

“If at all possible find a way to own the properties ...owning the properties to create something that is really long term”.

On-Costs

A further difficulty reported by Self-Help Housing.Org from regional meetings and other feedback was that EHCGP grants only really covered capital costs and that there was very little (up to c10% of costs) for revenue costs/expenditure for example to cover professional fees.

“I’ve never really spoken to a project where this hasn’t been to a greater or lesser extent a problem.” (SHHO Coordinator).

Partnerships and Multiple Income Streams

A recurring theme at interviews was to try to have diverse income streams rather than just relying on EHCGP grant funding or Housing Benefit. SHA drew on local authority grant and Market Towns Initiative to finance costs of refurbishing a challenging but landmark building in the centre of a small market town.

Additional income streams could be generated from providing services or social enterprise ventures e.g. training programmes run by Start Again, or the second-hand furniture business at SHA.

“I would say having free economic streams, do not be grant-dependent, do not be grant-dependent. You have to develop several income streams in order to survive. Key is, as I mentioned, is providing services. That’s absolutely key, without a doubt.”
(Project Manager, Windrush)

For Windrush the Public-Private Partnership with their council, local businesses and private landlords was also seen as critical to their business model. (Partnerships will be discussed in more detail in section 3.6 of this report)

Progress and Monitoring

The progress of the Empty Homes projects was closely monitored by the project champion of each case study with the support of the management team and/or administrative staff. The case study organisations were required to produce regular updates on progress against targets for Tribal in order to ensure grant compliance and release of staged payments. Few problems were reported in complying with this requirement. However, none of the organisations had developed new monitoring tools nor were they yet using any specific methods to capture data on the wider social impacts of the project.

At the time of the interviews most of the case studies reported good progress and were either on target or slightly ahead of targets. One project champion was positive about having met almost all of their April 2014 targets by the end of 2013. Another project champion felt that their project was probably just a month or two behind where they should be, because the properties had taken longer to work on.

3.5 Managing Projects: People

This section covers the various aspects of managing people involved in EHCGP projects. Particular attention is paid to workforce management including managing contractor and refurbishment teams, management teams, apprentices and volunteers. The final section considers selection of tenants.

Contractors / Refurbishment team

Table 5 uses the typology presented earlier in Table 4 to show how each project found a workforce to carry out refurbishment works to the empty properties. Classification is based on the predominant models used, while the text description highlights the greater underlying complexity.

TYPE 1:	Use of prospective residents to undertake the work or some of it	Emmaus – Residents (Companions) and Volunteers working on project alongside local contractors.
TYPE 2:	Use of trainees/apprentices to undertake the work - either in their own employ or from another organisation	Hill Holt Gainsborough - 1 in-house builder, 1 apprentice and 2 foundation learners were working on site and more planned. HHW also uses a local electrician and local plasterer Windrush – 6 trainees were recruited, and provided with construction skills- WALHA occasionally use local construction company but only if they fit to their ethos.
TYPE 3:	Use of volunteers	Overlaps in practice with types 1 and 2.
TYPE 4:	Use of small or local builders - that sometimes may be built up, and /or sustained, by the work stream from the EHCGP funding	Several cases use small local builders but usually as part of one of the other models rather than as the primary approach to delivery
TYPE 5:	Use of a housing association/social landlord to do the work	Shropshire Housing Alliance - refurbishment works managed by Wrekin Housing Trust, using local private contractors who were managing the.
TYPE 6 :	Hybrid mix of several of the above	Start Again - Taken on 2 apprentices, and working with small local contractors
TYPE 7:	None of the Above – e.g. conventional procurement from general construction companies	YMCA: Professional Development Approach: Appointed External Project Manager and linked pay to performance. YMCA tendered for contracts on each site.

Table 6: Workforce

Nearly all the Midlands projects brought in some independent contractors and these ranged from large building companies to local tradesman. However, there were varying mixes of internal trainee based and more external procurement models. The descriptions in the table above indicate the extent to which our broad brush classifications based on the predominant form of procurement disguise more hybrid procurement models.

The Management Team

Different approaches were adopted for managing the Empty Homes projects as Table 7 describes.

<p>Recruiting specialist skills</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At Start Again, a Media and Marketing consultant became their part-time Business Development Manager, working with Start Again’s director to manage the empty homes project. • At YMCA an external project manager (a Quantity Surveyor and Property Developer) was employed to oversee the project. The project was also managed internally by their Housing Service Director and Housing Officers. YMCA did also have a development sub-committee of their main Board to monitor progress.
<p>Projects managed in-house using existing staff resources.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At HHW, the Managing Director and financial staff are involved in managing the project. • At Windrush a project manager looks after the Empty Homes project, and existing teams are in place for managing tenants and maintaining properties. The Finance Manager, Operations Manager and Development Director also have a strategic management role. • At SHA the Managing Director led on the bid process and property selection, with the technical aspects of the refurbishment delegated to the Wrekin Housing Trust surveyors and development department.

Table 7: Project Management

Apprentices and Volunteers

One of the key added values of self-help housing is the potential it provides for participation on the construction process and the opportunity this in turn provides for learning construction skills. As noted in Table 5 above for several projects this is a major consideration in the approach to delivery. Hill Holt Gainsborough, Windrush, Start Again and Emmaus were the main exponents of this approach.

At the time of the interviews, HHW had 1 in-house builder, 1 apprentice, 2 foundation learners and 2 volunteers working on site. Another builder and apprentice were to be joining the project soon after the interviews. For all of these groups the personal discipline of working was seen to be the best preparation for future employability:

'what matters is they are experiencing work..they understand what five days a week means, they turn up in the morning..they get taught how to deal with the public..how to be polite..how to dress for work..all these simple skills are what we concentrate on'. (Project Champion, Hill Holt Gainsborough)

Start Again had also taken on 2 apprentices to work with their small local contractors. One apprentice interviewed had been working on site for approximately 2 months, having been recruited by the project champion through an apprenticeship agency:

" I started off by looking for apprenticeships because finding work nowadays is kind of hard and I do feel I learn better while actually doing stuff than sitting in a classroom. So I did sign up for an apprenticeship agency in construction and it was kind of one of the ones that stuck out to me, and they introduced me to a maintenance course which is this Start-Again Project. So I had an interview with [project champion, Start Again], he showed me around. I liked what I've seen so just went from there really. About two months ago, two months I've been on the project now." Apprentice, Start Again

Emmaus directly involved Residents (Companions) and Volunteers working on project alongside local contractors. Volunteers working on site included existing staff as well as a board member.

For Windrush, taking on apprentices was part of their ethos as an organisation, and at the time of the interviews had already taken on 6 trainees, recruited from the local job centre. These trainees were provided with construction skills training in conjunction with a local training provider called First Universal Enterprises Limited or FUEL. (FUEL teaches a variety of construction and vocational subjects such as joinery, plastering and bricklaying to pupils from around 15 schools in Nottingham.)

Apprentices on the aforementioned case study projects have been involved in clearing out houses and gardens, stripping old walls, bathrooms and ceilings, and developing a range of constructions and decorating skills including plastering, carpentry and tiling.

The other two projects did not employ apprentices or volunteers in the works process. SHA involves volunteers in its housing advice and support work, but not yet for the EHCGP

project. An apprentice was taken on for office work because of the bid but not as part of Empty Homes refurbishment work.

At YMCA training service users or providing them with apprenticeships was not part of their EHCGP bid, and not planned at all for the first round of properties. YMCA felt that they had little scope for involving volunteers, apprentices or service users for refurbishments thus far because of the contracts with developers. YMCA do have a maintenance department, and are looking at the possibility of taking on apprentices within that. However they are also consulting with some private maintenance companies about the possibility of them taking on apprentices within the Empty Homes programme.

Tenant Selection

A final key aspect of people management in EHCGP is the selection of tenants to live in the refurbished properties. EHCGP funding is not dependent on allocating the homes produced to those in greatest housing need as recognised by statutory guidelines. This flexibility and complementarity of self-help housing to social housing was noted in earlier reports to be an important advantage enabling a wider range of groups to benefit.

The value of a complementary role of empty homes to mainstream social housing was recognised by both project and local authority interviewees:

“The great thing about Empty Homes was I suppose from the council’s perspective they just wanted to get properties back into use, so there wasn’t a restriction on what you did with them as long as they got used”. (Project Champion, Start Again)

“They were frustrated where our allocation system was not delivering and looking for any opportunity of boosting that to use for their client groups. But of course they all come through our hub in Birmingham anyway. So it’s a really good example of a partnership approach at a strategic level”. (Empty Homes Officer, Birmingham City Council)

For several schemes a key motivation for taking part was to provide move-on accommodation for existing supported housing service users. Other schemes found local authority registers and homeless nominations a good source of residents for the scheme.

Some used a variety of referral sources to fit their own project objectives e.g. to house those with severe needs (Emmaus) or to house apprentices working on the scheme (Hill Holt Gainsborough). In the latter case:

“what we’ve actually struggled with despite that good relationship (with the local authority) is the referrals of young people. All the people moving in to the first house we have found ourselves. We had expected to get people referred to us through the benefit and homelessness teams and that hasn’t happened”. (Project Champion, Hill Holt Gainsborough).

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Move-on accommodation for service users from supported housing: 	<p>YMCA has let flats to residents moving on from their supported schemes, residents moving on from other providers' supported housing schemes, and to direct applicants who have not been in supported housing</p> <p>Two young residents living in one of the YMCAs newly refurbished Empty Homes properties were interviewed. Having both spent 6 months at one of YMCAs supported housing schemes, they were notified by their key workers about the EH shared accommodation that YMCA that would be available. They had the opportunity to visit the flats while they were being refurbished, and at the time of their interviews, they had been living in the property for about 3 weeks.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct Applications <p>Advertise through local newspapers or websites</p>	<p>Some of the case study organisations advertised locally to let the Empty Homes properties whether online or through local press and job centre postings.</p> <p>YMCA were advertising for some of their properties through local press and Gumtree online.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apprentices: 	<p>At Hill Holt Gainsborough, the first tenants were an apprentice and his friend. (Tenants live by short term tenancies and the terms are different depend on their needs.)</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Referrals from councils: 	<p>At Windrush, the main residents were young men in their early 20's and were referred from the local authority. Their tenancies can last for up to 5 years</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing register 	<p>At SHA residents will access the scheme through the Shropshire Home Point register. They will pay similar rents to SHA clients in other properties including those in the private rented sector.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Word-of mouth 	<p>A number of case study organisations mentioned that tenants were found through</p>

	<p>word-of-mouth methods, which led to either self-referral or more traditional third party referrals.</p> <p><i>'We're using the same criteria we always use which is that an individual apply either directly or through a third party, and that could be a probation, police. It could be somebody's friend, any of the numerous hospital organisations. They refer directly to us and the only difference now will be that when we receive an application not only will we discuss whether we're able to help them but also which one of our two properties would best suit them at that time. (Project Champion, Emmaus)</i></p>
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Table 8 – Finding Tenants

The overall message from the case studies was of the advantage of flexibility; working in collaboration with local authorities but seeking tenants who would best fit the ethos and wider objectives of the projects. Trying to match these opportunities too rigidly to housing need based allocations systems would lead to potential conflicts and misunderstandings.

3.6 Working with Partners

Earlier research found that of the five key success factors required by self-help housing schemes, good partners were the most significant (Mullins 2010). Partners for EHCGP case studies were key in helping source properties, funds, people and skills. Several types of partners were important in these case studies:

Local Authorities/ Councils

The level of involvement from local councils varied but most of the organisations were positive about the support received from local councils in the form of notifying the groups about the grant, providing letters of support for bid applications and especially in helping to identify suitable empty properties, with the help of empty property officers and homelessness strategy officers at the councils.

Hill Holt Gainsborough described having a strong partnership with West Lindsey Council who provided match funding originally, gave advice on tenancy agreements and had hoped for referrals of tenants. A number of meetings took place where the managing director of HHW met with empty property officer for the whole county of Lincolnshire.

For SHA, Shropshire Council also provided matching funding from their New Homes Fund and Market Towns Initiative. The Council's Strategy Manager and Empty Homes Officer at Shropshire Council also advised on Shropshire Council's strategic priorities and helped SHA

to find suitable properties. Alignment with the Council's plans to improve high street locations in several market towns provided for a 'win-win partnership' for SHA.

Birmingham City Council had played an active role at the bidding stage in encouraging local community organisations to apply and in supporting them in the bidding process, including assistance in compiling bid documentation in some cases. It had also assisted some scheme in locating suitable properties, including by steering them towards particular locations where there was known to be a strong demand, for example from new migrants. The City Council had also attempted to incentivise empty property owners to bring properties back into use, for example by removing council tax rebates for empty properties. However, it acknowledged that it is often difficult to know why landlords keep properties empty even when assistance is on hand to make them habitable and secure a rental income.

The role played by local authority Empty Property Officers was highlighted by one project:

"Most Local Authorities have an Empty Property Officer. The Empty Property Officer knows exactly which properties are empty, and then we ask them to disseminate information about our organisation to the landlords and hopefully they will get in contact with us, and then we'll take it from there. Now obviously Local Authorities, they are keen to get properties back into use because number one, I know it's changed now, but their council tax will improve, they will have less antisocial behaviours, environmental health issues, and complaints and so forth, so there are big incentives for them to get the property back into use". (Project Champion, Windrush Alliance).

Private Landlords

EHCGP projects benefitted from negotiating extra terms such as rent-free periods and landlords to pay council tax, and also encouraging landlords to contribute extras such as donated furniture in the case of Emmaus. SHA has good working relationships with some of the larger PRS landlords housing low income groups and could if necessary call on them for advice. One project not included in the case studies; Jericho in Birmingham (which partnered with Springfield for EHCGP); has sought to engage with property owners seeking a social use of their empty properties

In Birmingham, while the Council had set guideline rents for its own empty homes programme, it was proving difficult to match these with landlord expectations. The apparent irrationality of landlords failing to secure any return on their assets but then expecting a rent at near market levels when a scheme like EHCGP emerges was also confirmed by projects.

Problems in forming effective partnerships with private landlords was a recurring theme in regional meetings convened by SHHO and HACT.

'Difficulties with securing leased property from private owners was an issue that arose in several regional meetings. The main reasons given for this, being:
a) Problems in getting owners to come forward (eg Canopy in Leeds reported that an approach, via the LA, had been made to over 70 owners and that only 6 came back as

interested, but none had signed up). b) Unrealistic demands regarding rents from owners, making it very difficult to then manage properties at an affordable rent. Competition in some cases from other RPs and LAs trying to get properties for other schemes (e.g. the HCA EH Programme or temporary accommodation).'

(Source: Unpublished note –Summary of Issues Arising from Regional Meetings – SHHO January 2013).

Housing Associations

An interview with Birmingham City Council highlighted the potential role for larger housing associations in providing advice and support to small community based projects through ‘buddying’ etc. However an attempt to facilitate such partnerships had not identified great interest from housing associations themselves. In the Midlands case studies registered housing associations were directly involved in two EHCGP projects, but there was little reference to housing association partners by the non- registered bidders.

One exception was Shropshire Housing Alliance where Wrekin Housing Trust (WHT) was the key partner following a merger in which SHA joined WHT Group. WHT became a crucial source of technical skills and gap funding that enabled the project to proceed. In particular key contributors to SHAs EH project were Wrekin’s Property Surveyor and their Development Manager.

Local Colleges and Training Bodies

Links to accredited training opportunities were an important way of ensuring long term benefits to the workforce from taking part in EHCGP. Three of the case study projects had well developed construction training pathways in partnership with colleges and training providers.

At Windrush, the key partner was FUEL, a voluntary sector partner for training, renovation, development and property management which in turn worked with colleges to provide accredited training opportunities:

“It’s Health and Safety, plastering, plumbing, painting and decorating, and the training providers are done by FUEL but FUEL work in conjunction with a college, so they will get a qualification once they’ve done their training...

What the colleges [in Nottingham] are doing, they’re setting up businesses, construction businesses, that connect to the college and that’s what they’re doing, so you’ve got a college who’s doing construction training, but then there’s a construction company and their learners go on to work in this construction company and that construction company then do business in the community...and they can then have, for example, small businesses, and those individuals working for those businesses, providing a service, generating an income, then that business then becomes sustainable within its own right, and then you can meet some of the college’s targets in terms of learners, training, social enterprise, and so forth, so it’s kind of that approach.” (Project Champion, Windrush Alliance)

At Start Again, the on-site apprentice who was interviewed described the process of signing up with a construction apprenticeship agency, who helped him register at a local college in Birmingham where he attends classes twice a week. The college then put the apprentice in contact with the Project Champion at Start Again who had asked the college if they had any suitable candidates to work on their Empty Homes Project.

At Hill Holt Wood in addition to their own apprenticeships, opportunities were provided for college students on construction training to gain work experience. There were a range of partnerships with colleges, including a college in Nottinghamshire, some of which were used on the Hill Holt Gainsborough EHCGP scheme:

“we have a college in Nottinghamshire who bring their apprentices here..they arrive about 10.00 in the morning and plaster for the day..they do it for nothing, we supply all the materials. Because they much prefer doing plaster work on a real building than being in their college plastering a wall then knocking it all down again....the majority are the foundation learners doing it as work experience” (Project Champion, Hill Holt Wood).

Housing Professionals and Agencies

Case study organisations sometimes bought in housing professional housing or construction services such as architects and surveyors and also sought advice from agencies such as Self-Help-Housing.org and HACT.

The role played by Self-Help Housing.Org was to facilitate and support bids and to provide ongoing support for successful bidders through regional events and national advice and facilitating peer learning. Once it was known who had received allocations SHHO made contact and started sending Briefings etc. They ran further regional meetings in the Midlands on 6th November 2012 and 26th June 2013, to which most organisations came, and these meetings formed a useful wider source of information for this research. This role was appreciated by the case studies as the following project champion indicates.

“I think their website’s been useful, their meeting that they organise every year is very helpful, the direct dialogue that you’re able to have with that organisation is helpful, but particularly their website. There’s a lot of stuff you can pull down. It’s up to date. It shares experience, based on other organisations’ experience, it’s been very, very helpful”. Project Champion, Windrush Alliance

4. Early Programme Impacts

Section 3 has provided evidence from the case studies of why and how participants took part in EHCGP, the business models they adopted, how they managed the property and people aspects of their EHCGP projects and the kinds of partnerships they developed to enable all this to happen. This section begins the task of assessing the wider impact of all this activity. In particular we are interested to discover whether and how allocating the

EHCGP funding of £50million to 110 mainly small, community based organisations rather than to a smaller number of registered housing providers has had a wider impact.

To do this we have first looked at how the organisations themselves have identified their wider social impacts and community benefits of their work (4.1). Second we have considered the impact of taking part in EHCGP for the organisations themselves in terms of growth and sustainability (4.2). In particular we look at opportunities for growth under Round 2 of EHCGP and consider where the next growth opportunities may come from (4.3). Finally we review the main challenges perceived by the participants and the advice they would give to others embarking on a similar journey (4.4).

4.1 Social Impacts and Community Benefits

Earlier research had highlighted the multiple potential benefits that community based empty homes projects can bring (Mullins 2010, Mullins et al 2011). Figure 4- drawn from the earlier research, summarises the benefits that were important in making the case for a separate funding stream for community-led groups within EHCGP.

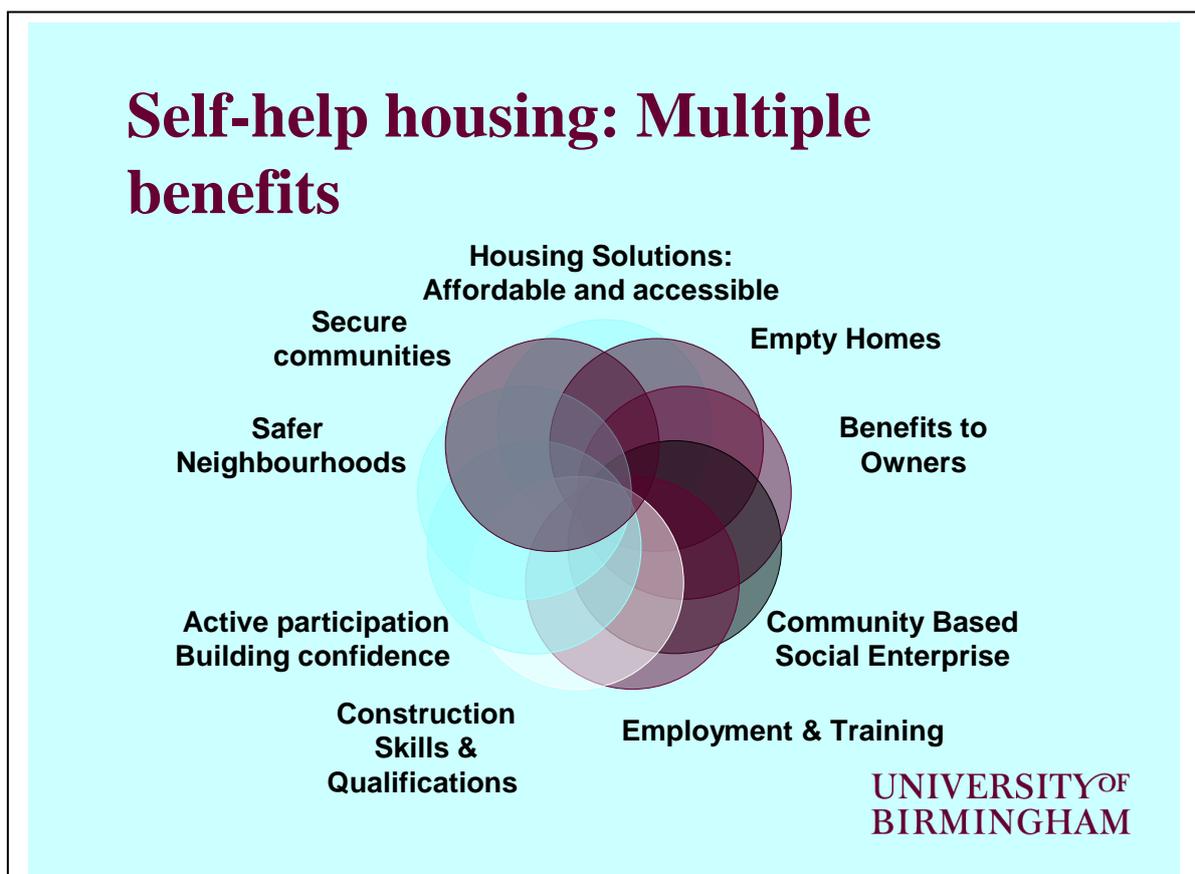


Figure 4 – Benefits of Self-help Housing

The case studies provide further evidence of the wider benefits perceived by groups who have been active under EHCGP. It will be important to return to these groups towards the

completion of EHCGP in 2014-15 to evidence the extent to which these benefits have been delivered in practice and to determine the wider social impact of EHCGP.

For the Midlands case study organisations, the EHCGP was continuing to be a positive experience overall. Key social impacts and community benefits are outlined here:

- Move-on Accommodation for Supported Housing Service Users
- Additional Affordable Housing Supply
- Employment and Volunteers/ Apprentices Skills Training
- Enabling Independence and Active Participation
- Investing in Communities and Improving Neighbourhoods
- Better Environmental Solutions
- Benefits to Property Owners

Move-On Accommodation For Supported Housing Service Users

Securing 955 additional bedrooms in the Midlands through EHCGP was a strong advantage for several organisations managing supported housing and looking for move on opportunities for residents. For Birmingham YMCA, EHCGP provided them essential move on for hostel residents:

“So this gives the people who have been in a hostel accommodation for, I don’t know, twelve months or so, an opportunity to move out now, and into their own finances, and a tenancy.... Helps people kind of get themselves on their feet.” (Project Manager, YMCA)

This was also the case for Start Again and for SHA, providing an opportunity for volunteers to assist clients to move on into independent accommodation with support and advice on tenancy maintenance matters.

Additional Affordable Housing Supply

The provision of additional affordable housing for vulnerable communities was widely regarded as a key benefit of the EH projects.

The positive experience is about being able to provide housing for people, someone who’s homeless, in a hostel, give them a key to a nice house, newly renovated, it’s fantastic. (Project Champion, Windrush Alliance).

This additional provision of housing would help ease the pressure on local housing authorities, and help towards addressing the problem of youth homelessness in particular.

Birmingham City Council saw the programme as a way of targeting needs groups who were unlikely to be assisted through homelessness or social housing routes; and actively steered self-help housing groups to areas of unmet need.

“Several of the groups are very specialist, working with ex-offenders, working with the Probation Service for nominations (New Servol, Start Again). Others working with young people (St Basils, YMCA) may go through the housing register, but we know YMCA have had problems with the register and we had to make special arrangements..... We wanted independent living for young singles with their own key.....but we’ve never been so prescriptive that we’ve tried to manage it...I gave advice on which areas of city to procure properties in based on my own knowledge; we’ve regularly mailed out to property owners on behalf of the groups and targeted them to areas with incomer communities and greatest pressure on social housing....the inner ring and the north of the city”. (BCC Empty Homes Officer)

However, one of the key issues raised by this claimed advantage is how affordable is the accommodation provided? Interaction between the Affordable Housing regime of rents at up to 80% market levels with housing benefits policies will clearly be a challenge. Already the shared room rent assumption for under 35s had produced changes to plans for self-contained accommodation (as in the BCC case above); threats to continued availability of housing benefit for under 25s were being discussed as barriers to move-on accommodation for young people.

Employment and Volunteers/ Apprentices Skills Training

The active participation of apprenticeships was seen as building confidence and giving the organisations and individuals a sense of achievement. Volunteering opportunities were provided on several projects, including the distinctive ‘companions’ model used by Emmaus.

“I think the thing that we’re probably proudest of is that we’ve been a group of people who have no experience of doing this kind of work, working with a group of individuals that can be very challenging and we’ve managed to achieve our outcome in quite a short space of time.... you know, going from a standing position, I think we’ve moved forward very quickly to achieve something spectacular really. ” (Project Champion, Emmaus, Coventry)

“a young man who was homeless, the family broke down, found himself on the street, we provided housing for him. He’s a model tenant. He subsequently went to college to do painting and decorating, and he then subsequently became a mentor and now one of our teacher assistants at the school, and he’s looking to, next year, he will be graduating next year from college, and moving on to independent living. So those kinds of success stories is an inspiration for us, when someone basically turned their life around, and an individual who was written off but because the right support and structure they were able to turn their life around, and become a major asset to the community and to our organisation.” (Project Manager, Windrush, Nottingham)

Opportunities for long-term sustainable employment through construction skills training was also highlighted as a key benefit by several projects. In Gainsborough this was specifically linked to local authority plans for substantial new housing as part of the Housing Growth Area in that part of Lincolnshire:

“There is a plan to build 7,500 houses in Gainsborough. There will be lots of business opportunities and also development gain money for managing community organisations and projects and restoring the inner area of town...so we’re hoping that money will come in to restore the poor housing down by the river and we can develop that into a much bigger scheme...”(Project Champion, Hill Holt Wood).

Other projects such as Shropshire Housing Alliance provided access to apprenticeships alongside their EHCGP programme.

Enabling Independence and Active Participation

The ultimate success of project for some of the case studies will be enabling residents and young people living in the affordable EH properties to be able to afford to sustain employment and thereby gain independence. This view was reinforced by interviews with residents at YMCA’s EH properties, who commented on the improvement in their quality of life.

“Compared to what I was living in before this (YMCA hostel) what I’m in now is much better so I’m progressing.” (Resident 1, YMCA)

“There’s more independence because you ain’t got to come down here for one to one meetings every week. It helps you grow up.” When asked for a word to sum up what living in EH property meant, the same resident replied ‘Progression’ (Resident 2, YMCA)

Residents also have the opportunity to either take part or have a say on how their home is decorated.

“The people that are moving in really because they get the chance to move into a house that’s basically been done up especially for them. And then obviously my point of view, I feel like... I feel the satisfaction of being able to look at the house and be like, “Yeah, I’ve done this,”But I think, especially the way it’s done up, I think whether (it’s for) a family or separate rooms or whatever it will be, yeah, they’ll be pleased, I think they’ll be very pleased.” Apprentice, Start Again

This benefit is accentuated in live: work projects such as Hill Holt Gainsborough where an apprentice now lives in the first house to be completed in the scheme. The Project Champion envisages a real benefit from combining work experience with living opportunities in making a difference to young peoples’ lives:

“It enables us to join up training with living. We find that a lot of young people who come to us during the day...we start to make a difference to their lives, we start to train them but then they go back to a dysfunctional home...some of them don’t have a home...having our own houses we can look after them 7 days a week, 24 hours a day and start to really make a difference to their lives”. (Project Champion,Hill HoltGainsborough.)

Investing in Communities and Improving Neighbourhoods

In one case – SHA - it was felt that the refurbishment of a long term empty high street property will have a positive impact on a market town centre, improving how safe people feel in the area and increasing their confidence due to the investment being made in a high impact location. This would in turn lead to communities feeling more secure and generate local economic benefits.

“It should have a knock-on effect into the wider economy hopefully, the wider sort of sense of pride in the town”. (Project Champion, SHA.)

In another case – Hill Holt Gainsborough – people were said to be noticing the impact of refurbishment work in the street where the scheme is located with impacts on local property values:

“at a meeting recently one of the local planners was saying that the one property we have finished is already having an effect on local house prices.....The one property we have done up to such high standards is having an effect on people’s expectations of property value.” (Project Champion, Hill Holt Gainsborough).

Better environmental solutions

The ‘recycling’ of existing housing stock was of critical importance to Windrush Alliance and to Hill Holt Gainsborough:

“That to me is key, because there’s something special about renovating a house because in this current climate, it’s about recycling and preserving and natural resources. Recycling a house is doing exactly that. You’re preserving natural resources. Why? You don’t have to chop down more trees. You don’t have to make more bricks. You don’t have to make more cement. You don’t need more copper pipes. A lot of the things already exist, so you are preserving natural resources. All you’re doing is upgrading the house, and upgrading the house, that house then has less impact on the environment, so I think for me the achievement is about bringing the house up to date, reducing the impact on the environment but also using that stock to provide a housing solution for people who are homeless.” (Project Champion, Windrush)

The street regeneration by Hill Holt Gainsborough in Gainsborough was founded on a larger vision of sustainable urban development through reuse of terraced housing. As well as providing a solution to empty homes in the South Ward of Gainsborough there was an aspiration to change attitudes to terraced housing and to provide better and cheaper solutions than new build housing for first time house purchasers in employment through recycling of the existing housing stock.

“we’ve got them (terraced houses) to a higher standard in eco-terms. If we could change the street as we originally intended it..to green the street to make it safe for people, to make it attractive in the outside of the propertiesif we buy these properties at the current value, bring them up to the standard that you’ve seen, the budget including changing the external infrastructure it’s about £85,000 per property

.. new houses in the area will sell for £125-145,000..so for £40-60,000 less per house.. but you'd need to change the whole street to convince them to move in. But nobody's prepared to take the big step to do that." (Project Champion, Hill Holt Gainsborough).

Benefits to Property Owners

Property owners stand to benefit in three ways from EHCGP. First, from investment in improvements to their empty properties which are often derelict or in a state of disrepair. Second, through securing a rental income and avoiding costs associated with preventing squatting and vandalism. Third, the opportunity to take part in a project with a positive social impact.

Case study projects needed to establish relationships with property owners and convince them of these benefits in order to secure access to their properties. As the following project partner interviewee indicates these benefits are substantial and real:

"The project's success is probably wider than the financial connection and I think really it's down to what the team will do... have seen what we're able to turn round and do, the results are amazing, it looks pretty good, and when you're working on all these projects you can't see day to day but then afterwards when some of the landlords have been back in to have a look at the properties, and they're like 'You're amazing'. I remember one who just couldn't get over the fact that these properties, nobody had been in as far as building, and they just wrote them off, and they were never to be picked up for occupation, and what we left behind, they were just amazed." (Surveyor/ Partner)

However, as noted earlier (3.6) the evidence that owners were 'not entirely convinced' suggests that there are further barriers to be overcome.

On the leasing model there was a danger that the programme had created an expectation amongst owners that they could enjoy a return near to market rents for properties that had been empty for at least six months. Negotiations over rents were often a sticking point on schemes proceeding even where local authorities (such as Birmingham) had set clear benchmarks for rents under its own Empty Homes Programme.

4.2 Impacts for Sector: Organisational Sustainability

The strategic growth and development of their organisation was a reason cited by all project champions for their involvement with the EHCGP. They described providing different options of housing models in the Midlands region through empty homes, affordable housing and low cost housing for low income people, while developing new ideas regarding housing solutions.

YMCA in general would like to expand in the area of social enterprise, and are keen to increase their housing stock and see this housing development as an area for strategic

growth. For Windrush, the EHCGP is a spring board for the organisation and, as highlighted earlier, having several income streams was seen to be important for the organisation. The EHCGP is a part of being adaptable to a changing environment which is crucial to survive and grow.

Shropshire Housing Alliance regards the empty homes schemes as an important growth opportunity both as a new source of supply and as a way of building asset base. (It was not clear at the time though how their merger with WHT has affected the latter as it is understood that the grant and assets are passed over to WHT.)

For Start Again, the EHCGP was about enhancing their long-term sustainability as a social enterprise:

“Obviously the social reason behind it is for us to help young people, but as much as we want to help young people we can’t do that if the organisation is not in a stable place. So it was all about becoming sustainable also, but not losing the value of what we do. So we looked at something that would tick both those boxes and keep a very level balance, and that’s where we came to apply for the Empty Homes.” (Project Champion, Start Again).

By contributing to the sustainability of community organisations such as these case studies, the EHCGP can be seen as providing institutional support for the self-help housing sector and promoting the longevity of the sector. Evidence of this strategic growth for some of the organisations, was in their successful Round 2 bids for the EHCGP, as described in the next section below.

Projects were committed to continuing their involvement in empty homes work beyond the life of the EHCGP, often because it aligns with their wider values and mission:

“Our Empty Homes programme finishes next year, so it’s a springboard. We don’t see this as money to renovate and that’s the end of the story, we see it as a seed that’s been planted, and that will grow into a forest.....even if the grant comes to an end, we are committed to our Empty Homes programme. Empty Homes is not a local problem, it’s not a national problem, it’s an international problem. We have ideas that are international ideas, in terms of providing housing solutions, not just in this country but overseas as well, because we believe that obviously we’re very familiar with human rights, but we believe that part of the human rights is to have access to housing, a warm shelter.”(Project Champion, Windrush Alliance).

4.3 EHCGP Round 2

Round 2 allocations were made to five organisations in the Midlands, all of whom had also taken part in Round 1. They received a further £833,480, 4.2% of the national allocation, enabling a further 79 bedrooms to be brought into use in 49 empty properties.

4 of the 6 case study organisations were successful in securing further funding in Round 2 of the EHCGP bids (Birmingham YMCA, Emmaus⁷, Shropshire, Start Again). This is an early indication of the sustainability of empty homes as a new product for these organisations.

Shropshire Housing Alliance was successful in securing £225,000 in to convert two large empty properties into 13 bedrooms in the second round Empty Homes funding for a scheme in Oswestry. Again this was a result of a strong partnership with the local authority which matched the EHCGP funding:

“the Local Authority, they said to me, “Are you going to bid in the second round?” And I said, “Yeah, I think I will” and they said, “Well Oswestry is our priority so do you want to look for somewhere in Oswestry?” The other thing is that obviously they match funds. So for the Oswestry Project we’re getting £20,000 a unit from them too.” Project Champion, SHA.

SHA also had a large office block conversion project in the frame in Shrewsbury but there were some technical issues with flood risk, purchase and securing Empty Homes funding.

At the time of the interviews, Start Again were considering purchasing rather than leasing their properties, which tied in to their long term aspiration to become a small housing association with an asset base. In the event they secured £59,000 to produce 10 bedrooms from 5 empty properties in Birmingham.

Birmingham YMCA continued with the leasing model to bring a further 38 bedrooms into use with funding of £390,000.

Other Round 2 successes in the Midlands from non-case study projects were £54,000 for YMCA Derbyshire to bring 9 bedrooms into use in three empty properties and £105,000 for the Springfield Project to bring 9 bedrooms into use in three empty properties in Birmingham. The latter was a considerable achievement for a local social care project that had not been involved in housing before its Round 1 allocation of £54,000. Its partnership with a local social enterprise, Jericho, specialising in property renovation had proved to be a winning team.

Success in Round 2 EHCGP is encouraging for the longer term sustainability of these projects, but there is no guarantee that similar funding will be available after 2015. Therefore, longer term sustainability depends on there being new opportunities for these organisations to continue developing self-help housing.

If there is no further public funding after 2015 such opportunities will need to come from other sources such as asset transfers, ‘meanwhile use’ of social housing properties in limbo awaiting regeneration or sale, and contracts to draw on local community strengths to manage hard to let properties for registered providers. Further research on the development of these alternative sources of supply of empty properties for the self-help sector is urgently required.

⁷ Although the Round 2 allocation to Emmaus was for work in Salford.

4.4 Key Challenges and Advice to other projects

To provide a general overview, we asked project champions about the challenges they had faced in managing their EHCGP funded project from grant application through to project completion and the advice they would offer to other community led groups embarking on similar journeys.

Business Models, Rent Structures and Funding Gaps

There were some particular financial challenges around the business model and the rent charged to the user. Participants had to balance the financial viability of their projects with the rent levels that intended beneficiaries were able to afford. ECHG funding allowed for rents up to 80% of the market, but resident ability to pay these was governed by their individual circumstances, age, employment status and eligibility for housing benefit. Local Housing Allowance limits effectively provided a cap to rents that could be paid. Meanwhile property owners were often seeking rents from projects that were closer to market rents, leaving a potential funding gap, particularly for projects with higher management costs associated with the support needs of residents.

“We found difficulties around negotiation, because – negotiating with landlords on properties I think at the beginning, because I think we did it to – rental income was from affordable rents and for what the landlords wanted to cream off for themselves, that was a bit difficult for us. It would have helped if we had local allowance set rents rather than affordable rents. But we put that in our bid so we had had to stand by it.”
(Housing Director, YMCA Birmingham)

“Obviously we had to take into account the local housing allowance rules change, so anybody under 35 couldn’t come onto the schemes. Due to the fact that our schemes here are young person’s, we could only take from all the people who have got fulltime jobs. The problem we’re facing is a lot of the young people are getting given zero hour contracts in employment, so although, you know, we are making progress in getting these people back into employment, we cannot trust their affordability based on a zero hours contract.” (Housing Director, YMCA Birmingham)

Managing Refurbishment Programmes

Other challenges related to managing complex works programmes, meeting targets on time with tight budgets and managing building schedules.

Pressures on budgets included escalating costs and/or unexpected costs e.g. house clearance, landscaping. An underlying problem here is the lack of provision in the EHCGP scheme for revenue funding to cover management costs and external fees (beyond the 10% on cost allowance).

Staffing the Project and Partnerships

There were particular challenges for those projects to whom property refurbishment was a complicated new activity. This could put pressure on existing staff resources with outsourcing of project management, and the building of complementary partnerships as the following quote illustrates:

“The future challenges are finding the right partnership. We realised as an organisation we can’t do this on our own, so it’s finding the right partnership in order that we can fulfil that global objective. That’s one of the challenges is finding the right organisation, the right synergy.” (Project Champion, Windrush)

Advice to Other Organisations

Case study organisations offered a range of advice to other organisations considering going down the self-help housing path. The scope to collaborate to do new things and develop free income streams and increase organisational assets was prominent, highlighting the scope that EHCGP has provided for innovation and creativity. Balancing this is the necessity for planning, research and caution and of course effort and hard work. These are all qualities that EHCGP has unleashed and which should continue to be harnessed after the programme ends:

“ So if there are things that somebody wants to do like self-help housing, great, what are you doing that we’re not doing that you can help us with and we can help you with, and then together we can help a lot more people. So my advice would be to go for it but do some research, make sure it’s the right thing for you. Do make sure that you check your revenue model. Does it work? Can you afford to stretch your resources as far as your vision without knowing where that’s going to come from and having things like critical success factors, like the project management making sure that things are completed on time.” (Project Champion, Start Again)

“I would say having free economic streams, do not be grant-dependent, do not be grant- dependent. You have to develop several income streams in order to survive. Key is, as I mentioned, is providing services. That’s absolutely key, without a doubt.” (Project Champion, Windrush)

“ If at all possible find a way to own the properties ...owning the properties to create something that is really long term...to get enough resources to really change the properties... to get them to a standard that is fit for the future...I can’t understand why outside London terraced houses on leases are seen as a problem”. (Project Champion, Hill Holt Wood)

“I think they need to be prepared to turn round and find that things take a lot, you know, more effort and more harder to get there with these properties because of the history and the nature of the work, but I think once you get past that, the results could flow, once... And it’s not like a new build project where you have your funding sorted out in a week or so. Here you have to find the projects and get them to work

and so, it does take a lot of, a lot of commitment and time.”(Surveyor/ Partner, YMCA)

“Don’t be overambitious, but don’t be overcautious, you know, it is doable and you don’t have to be some kind of homebuilding expert to use the fund.” (Project Champion, Emmaus)

“Well I think it was the size of the project really we were cautious about and our projects have tended to be quite high cost because it’s – you know, they’re conversion of properties rather than tweaking an existing domestic property. So, you know, in the process you sort of try and second guess, “Well what should I ask for? What’s reasonable for this?” And in a way, you should forget all of that....[it’s] a learning experience. (Project Champion, SHA)

5. Discussion: Interim Conclusions and Recommendations

This report has provided an early glimpse of the results of a bold policy decision to allocate a significant slice of the Empty Homes Programme to non-registered housing providers. Programme analysis is mainly confined to initial allocations in one Region, while case studies focus on the experience of six varied examples of locally based social purpose organisations who have taken the opportunity to bring empty homes into use under EHCGP.

In many ways this is too narrow and early a snapshot to draw conclusions or to make recommendations and a more considered view will require further research. However, we hope that this baseline study provides some insights and a framework to build on for more substantial evaluation of the programme in 2015. We feel that the tentative recommendations are borne out by the evidence to date and hope that these provide useful interim guidance for those interested in seeing a thriving community-led housing sector with an element concerned with the key task of recycling existing assets.

This interim conclusion begins by returning to earlier work that suggested there are five essential elements for self-help housing to succeed. It reviews the evidence from this baseline study to see whether the five essentials framework holds true and how the EHCGP has impacted on these five essentials (5.1). It continues by locating EHCGP in the fast shifting policy context for housing in England under the Coalition Government, identifying the key drivers that stimulated EHCGP and further support required to consolidate a sustainable community-led housing sector in which empty homes is a key element (5.2). Next it focuses on the organisations participating in EHCGP and the ways in which self-help and community-led identities have been reinforced or compromised by taking part in EHCGP (5.3). The agenda for further research is then outlined (5.4) before outlining some interim recommendations (5.5).

5.1. The Five Essentials of Self-Help Housing

Earlier research (Mullins 2010, Mullins et al 2011) has identified five essential ingredients for successful self-help housing projects:



Figure 5 – Five Essential Ingredients of Self-help Housing (Mullin, 2010)

Finance

EHCGP has made a modest but key contribution to the need for some working capital to invest in the initial renovations required to bring empty properties into use. Over the two rounds of EHCGP a total of £5,307,496.00 grant was allocated to projects in the Midlands, enabling a total of 1034 bedrooms to be brought into use in 404 properties. This is a grant cost of £13,137 per property and £5133 per bedroom. Participants were sometimes able to draw on other sources of funding for acquisition and renovation including local authority and Market Towns Initiative funding. They were sometimes able to purchase rather than lease properties by combining such funding with borrowing.

SHHO used regional meetings to introduce participants to a range of ethical investors (including Triodos Bank, Big Issue and others) and a way of raising matching funding to enable property purchase.

In the Midlands EHCGP funding appears to have been sufficient to enable a significant amount of acquisition and renovation activity to occur from a standing start in 2012 and to provide good value for money for the taxpayer in relation to bedrooms brought into use. However, there have been some limitations associated with the funding. In particular the

10% on cost provision has proved insufficient to cover project management costs and consultancy fees. Other financial issues relating to leasing costs and housing benefit availability are covered in discussion of the properties and residents essential ingredients below.

Properties

The EHCGP restriction to properties that have not had previous housing grant funding limited projects to sourcing properties from private owners and landlords. Earlier research has indicated that self-help housing projects had enjoyed greater success in negotiating temporary use of properties from social landlords than from the private sector (Mullins et al 2011). This set a major challenge for projects to establish good relationships with private owners of empty properties and to negotiate leasing costs that fitted the funding regime.

Evidence from the Midlands is that this was a challenge that could be successfully navigated in the market conditions found in the region, but not without difficulties. Projects were assisted in accessing suitable properties by mail outs from local authority Empty Property officers and in some cases by changes in council tax rebates to incentivise owners to bring properties back into use. However, negotiations over leasing costs with private owners were often difficult, with common perceptions that the existence of the programme led to unrealistic expectations of returns on what had been dormant assets.

Grant levels in the Midlands were sufficient to enable some projects to purchase rather than lease the assets; particularly where matching funding streams could be accessed and private borrowing or reserves drawn on to make up the investment gap. Purchases were also subject to negotiation hurdles and in some cases of long term empties there were difficulties in establishing title and securing mortgage finance. There was a growing recognition that purchase rather than leasing provided a more effective route to sustainability and bidders for the EHCGP second round were more likely to have considered the purchase option. Property acquisition was particularly attractive for those organisations who saw themselves as social enterprises, perhaps with aspirations to become registered social landlords themselves in the longer term. In one case the self-help project merged with a registered housing association group and the purchased assets became part of the general property portfolio of the Group.

New ways of procuring empty properties will be required if the EHCGP is not succeeded by a similar funding programme after 2015.

Workforce

The Midlands case studies revealed a variety of ways in which works to empty properties were organised and carried out. Most of the boxes in our sevenfold typology of delivery approaches were filled by at least one case.

At the purest 'self-help' end of the spectrum, Emmaus had the strongest overlap between residents and workforce based on their well established 'companions' model of live-work communities. However, the majority of the Midlands organisations (16/19) reported in our survey that they are incorporating a training element. Several case studies ensured that

construction employment and training or other forms of apprenticeship were provided as a part of their EHCGP schemes, and in one other case Hill Holt Gainsborough, an apprentice was also the first resident of the scheme.

At the other end of the spectrum one case study, YMCA Birmingham, adopted what we termed a 'Professional Development Approach': with an externally appointed project manager and linked pay to performance. YMCA tendered for contracts on each site. One reason for outsourcing was the scale of their ECHG project (88 bedrooms over the two rounds – largest in region), the short timescale required to complete the funded projects and the new range of skills including project management which YMCA preferred to buy in.

Where projects adopted more conventional outsourced procurement methods to recruiting and managing the workforce there was often attention to including local contractors in the supply chain. Thus it is likely that more of the spend was retained in the local economy than would be the case on a large scale housing procurement programme.

Residents

Because of the early stage of the EHCGP at the time of our case studies this is the weakest area of evidence in relation to outcomes. However, each case study generated interesting findings in relation to plans to attract residents to live in the refurbished properties. EHCGP funding is not dependent on allocating the homes produced to those in greatest housing need as recognised by statutory guidelines. This flexibility and complementarity of self-help housing to social housing was noted in earlier reports to be an important advantage enabling a wider range of groups to benefit.

As with workforce recruitment the case studies were found to adopt a wide range of methods of tenant selection, usually including some form of partnership with the local authority, but not extending to formal nomination restrictions. It is important to note that even in cases where residents are themselves involved in the works to properties this does not involve them doing works after they move in (as might be the case in some homesteading programmes).

One key potential barrier to securing residents for completed projects is that they may not be able to afford the rents. Changes to local housing allowances levels (to the bottom 30% of local rents), to the age limit for shared accommodation rent assumptions to 35 and potential further restrictions on housing benefits for under 25s were all worrying factors for future occupancy prospects. Nevertheless it appeared that most projects had modelled their rents on the upper end allowed under the 'up to 80% of market rent' norm for the Affordable Housing Programme that had been imported apparently without question into the EHCGP despite earlier evidence that low rents were a major attraction of self-help housing.

The overall message from the case studies was of the advantage of flexibility; working in collaboration with local authorities but seeking tenants who would best fit the ethos and wider objectives of the projects. Trying to match these opportunities too rigidly to housing need based allocations systems would lead to potential conflicts and misunderstandings.

Partners

There was strong confirmation from the case studies of a key message from earlier research (Mullins et al 2011) that the most important ingredient to the success of self-help housing projects is effective partnerships with other agencies. Such partnerships can be the key levers to securing the other four success ingredients. As one project champion succinctly put it:

“We realised as an organisation we can’t do this on our own, so it’s finding the right partnership in order that we can fulfil that global objective.” (Windrush, Project Champion)

Local authorities were particularly effective partners in assisting projects to source suitable empty properties, could be helpful in securing matching funding and were of some use in finding residents, volunteers and workforce.

Third sector partners with complementary skills and ability to harness essential resources for example volunteers, philanthropic donations or technical know-how were often a good way to put together the mix of inputs required for a successful project.

Partnerships with private property owners were the most problematic success ingredient and problems in forming effective partnerships with private landlords was a recurring theme in the research. While there can be clear benefits to property owners, these need to be sold effectively by projects and the alternative of purchasing properties can often be attractive if the funding is available.

There were mixed experiences in partnering with housing associations to access technical and financial skills and muscle; the most prominent case of this being a project that joined a housing association group structure. There would seem to be scope for work on buddying type partnerships with housing associations as proposed by one local authority interviewee. These could even extent into ‘meanwhile use’ of development pipeline properties and temporary management of some occupied housing association stock by closer to the ground community-led providers.

External technical and financial support and capacity building was sourced by several of the projects. In some cases this came from within national federations (e.g. Emmaus) in some cases from housing associations (SHA from Wrekin Trust) and in others from private consultants (YMCA Birmingham) or from local authorities (Birmingham and West Lindsey). However, the most widely cited support source was that provided by SHHO and HACT drawing on grant funding from Tudor Trust and as part of the Tribal grant administration contact with DCLG. It is clear that without the combination of support provided by SHHO and some local authorities take up of the EHCGP would have been substantially lower and delivery less effective.

5.2 The Shifting Policy Context

In Policy terms EHCGP is a special programme and can be seen as a unique response to a shifting policy context in which government was reducing housing expenditure but seeking to give substance to a policy commitment to localism. The decision to allocate a significant slice of the Empty Homes Programme to non-registered housing providers was a bold one that needs to be understood and its benefits carefully assessed.

Backing community-led efforts

"In some areas, the expertise for returning empty homes into use lies with community groups or voluntary organisations and that is why £25.8 million grant is being given to innovative schemes around the country that will allow groups to make a real difference where in the past they have often struggled to be involved or raise financing."

Source: 'Andrew Stunell: £145 million boost to help communities tackle empty homes'.
DCLG Press Release 29 May 2012

Despite its origins as part of a larger Empty Homes Programme conceived primarily as a way of tackling empty property; EHCGP can now be regarded as one of several community-led funding programmes loosely associated with the Localism Act (including the community right to build and community led housing programme). This is as a result of a successful response by Self-Help-Housing.org and its allies to the opportunity to make the case for a designated programme for non-registered providers to achieve a deeper local impact (Mullins 2013). Links with other community-led housing organisations have been strengthened through common membership of the Mutual Housing Group and common promotional events such as the recent regional events 'Getting it Built' (Birmingham November 6th 2013).

EHCGP provided necessary but not sufficient conditions for community based groups to engage in recycling of dormant assets. While take up in the Midlands is impressive, our analysis indicates that most of the successful projects were already well established community organisations who added empty homes to their portfolio of work, although most had not previously worked in empty homes. Some interviews indicated that take up could have been even wider had there been a longer timescale for applications and more attention to the circumstances of smaller and newer community led groups. A key policy lesson from the programme is the need for a policy framework and funding practices that "fit" with smaller organisations, alongside streamlined procurement from very large registered providers.

It was clear from the case study research that all the organisations included would welcome the extension of programmes like EHCGP with direct access for non-registered community led organisations. The evidence presented in this report highlights the real value that small scale projects have delivered locally. However, further developments to the policy context will be needed if self-help housing is to become a more widespread, viable and sustainable solution.

Allocation of grant through Tribal proved a generally successful pragmatic response to the lack of remit of the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) to fund non-registered housing providers. There was also some opportunity for more responsive approaches to payment of

grant and switches between sites and years than under HCA. Early anecdotal evidence of better programme take up and spend under EHCGP than under the mainstream Empty Homes Programme merits a fuller review at a later stage of the programmes. However, there were also some disadvantages in the use of a non-specialist grant administration body in connecting projects to wider policies and expertise. By and large this gap was filled by the support role provided by SHHO. There were also some limitations to funding which was confined to capital allocations with inadequate provision for project management costs and professional fees. These experiences need to be reflected on in future policy development and implementation.

DCLG and HCA policies on community led housing need to ensure there are funding processes that “fit” with smaller organisations, alongside their streamlined processes for very large registered providers. A recent initiative by Greater London Authority to allocate funding to small housing associations for small local sites may provide a model for this approach.

Small housing associations in London will be able to access grant in the 2015/18 funding round. The Greater London Authority is due to publish its bidding prospectus, which outlines a bid deadline of 31 March, tomorrow. The prospectus will make it clear there will be grant funding for organisations with fewer than 1,000 homes. Mike Wilkins, treasurer of the G320 group of housing associations, said: ‘I can’t remember the last time there was grant for small landlords.’ The GLA will also allow smaller organisations to continuously bid throughout the programme, rather than have to submit by a deadline, to make it easier for smaller landlords to find sites.

Source: Inside Housing December 5th 2013

A final policy point to bear in mind for the evaluation of EHCGP is that it was seen by Ministers at the time as a way of enacting localism and a sustainable community led sector was seen as an important intended programme legacy. Therefore evaluation needs to consider both the wider social impact and community benefits and the organisational sustainability impacts alongside the programme’s contribution to bringing empty homes into use in a value for money way.

An earlier BSHF report articulated the argument of a ‘legacy’ that the Minister and HCA could use to signal a ‘revitalised community-led housing sector and a set of funding and other mechanisms better suited to supporting it’

Source: (BSHF 2011b. p.21)

5.3. Localism, Self-Help and Community-Led identities

This report has explored the role of empty homes case studies as examples of ‘self-help’ and ‘community-led housing’ and is concerned with the distinctiveness of this kind of approach as compared to larger scale registered housing providers. However, it was apparent from the interviews that these organisations had a variety of self-definitions and different orientations to the concepts of self-help and community led housing. There was greater identification with the community led than the self help label although nevertheless there

was a strong tendency for organisations to define themselves and their participation in EHCGP in relation to their beneficiaries and in some cases to particular localities.

Two of the Midlands case studies appeared to buy-in fully to the concept of self-help as a key rationale for their EHCGP activities.

In the case of Windrush Alliance this was articulated as not depending on the state but helping yourself at an organisational level:

“Self-help basically means instead of depending on government and Local Authority, help yourself. You have the toolkit to be independent and to get the job done yourself rather than being independent and dependent upon government and so forth, and JFK said at his inaugural speech, “Don’t ask what the country can do for you, but ask what you can do for your country.” That’s self-help, what you can do for your country. That captures quite nicely the notion of self-help, what can you bring to the table? What can you do?” (Project Champion, Windrush Alliance)

The Emmaus scheme in Coventry put self-help into action by involving the companions directly in works to the shared property they would live in with resulting benefits of ownership and self-esteem:

“I think the thing that we’re probably proudest of is that we’ve been a group of people who have no experience of doing this kind of work. Working with a group of individuals that can be very challenging and we’ve managed to achieve our outcome in quite a short space of time you know, going from a standing position, I think we’ve moved forward very quickly to achieve something spectacular really. ” (Project Champion, Emmaus)

Most of the projects to some degree identified themselves as part of a community-led sector, linking in some cases to social enterprise and in others to more traditional charity identities, but in all cases to community beneficiaries.

“We’re a community organisation and its about our engagement with the community.. and we’re very keen particularly in working with young people, which is why our first resident of the house is an apprentice working on the properties .. and I think we can get more young people through that system “ (Project Champion, Hill Holt Gainsborough).

“Well it depends what you think “community led” is doesn’t it. So, our organisation is a Shropshire based charity that focuses on this community, as in the boundaries of Shropshire. So we’ve identified a community. The people who are the Board members, they generally live in this community and they’ve been involved here. So, that in a way is in our governance and our community structure... And I think – you can’t realistically say that we represent the community in another distinct way, through our clients – we know stuff about them and they tell us stuff about us and we ask them questions.” (SHA Project Champion)

This strong sense of being of a community or serving the community where the organisation has its roots was reiterated by one of the project champions at Start Again:

“Not self-help. Community led housing, yes. In terms of what that involves, it varies from organisation to organisation. I think when we looked at the term community led, [other project champion] and I are both Birmingham residents....grown up in Birmingham....and I think you can't lead a community until you've been part of it, and we've been part of it. luckily, for myself and [project champion] we've had great support networks behind us and we've managed to push through and do fantastic things, and now giving back is just a matter of having a really strong love and bond for a place that you have come from, but also recognising the plight and struggles of the community. ” (Start Again)

For YMCA, the local knowledge and presence was a unique selling point for them as an organisation but also the defining aspect of the EHCGP:

“So, when we talked about the Community Grants Programme, the emphasis seemed to be on small community based organisations with local links and local intelligence and local networks and who would be able to do, you know, what we've doneWe've got a building that is 800 to 1200 metres from where we're sitting now and you walk past it all the time and think, 'That building has been empty for ages, you know, what's happening with it. We could really do something with that building', and then you see a grant programme come up and you think, 'Yeah, we must do that', but it's not the grand master planning thing of, 'We're going to deliver 2000 units across the East of England between 2012 and 2015', it's, 'I'm going to do 50 units on that road now....A local opportunity, and local being far more focused and local small scale groups retaining, you know, the management of that pretty locally really. Small scale, smaller scale organisations with maybe a bit more of a personal touch, actually, having that fit in very much with local plans.” (Project Champion, YMCA)

These diverse organisational identities and missions are inevitable and welcome features of a programme that deliberately sought to provide opportunities for organisations other than 'the usual suspects' to contribute to a national property rehabilitation programme. It is clear from the above that the programme has created a space in which a variety of approaches to social organising have played a part. It is our contention that these organisations provide a real alternative to large scale procurement, bringing distinctive benefits direct to local communities as the by-product of relatively modest property based investment.

We were also conscious that taking part in central government programmes can be a mixed blessing for small social purpose organisations. Concepts such as mission drift, regulatory burden and 'selling out' are redolent of the challenges of holding on to ethos and values when delivering services under government contracts. While the case studies expressed some frustrations with the mechanics of bidding and accounting for public funds, there was remarkably little feeling in the interviews that EHCGP had diverted participants from their core mission. Indeed in a time of austerity, the opportunity to secure grant funding for an activity that could also generate a rental income and in some

cases an asset purchase was seen as an excellent opportunity to become more independent in the longer term.

5.4. Further Research

This report reflects on the findings from the Midlands region, and will contribute to a fuller national evaluation of the EHCGP. Comparing baseline case study findings across the 3 regions should provide an even clearer picture of the success of the programme as well as the challenges faced by participating organisations.

Follow up studies as the three year EHCGP investment draws to a close will provide a fuller assessment in all three regions; allowing emerging aspects such as programme switches and the mix of lease and purchase based schemes to become clearer. A fuller picture of people impacts on workforce and residents will also be possible at that stage. It will be interesting to track the progress of those organisations who are taking part in the 2nd round of the EHCGP, and in particular the change in project scope, the type of workforce employed as well as changes to business model (e.g. the purchase vs leasing of properties).

The work in this baseline study has been useful in gaining more understanding of the wider social impacts and community benefits perceived by projects themselves and how they align to wider organisational aspirations. Similar baseline studies in two other regions will be built on by more intensive work with two pilot organisations in each region to develop a simple method of capturing and quantifying these benefits, drawing on the latest thinking on social impact measurement in the third sector. From these pilots a simple on line self-assessment proforma will be developed to be completed by as many of the 110 programme participants as possible to cover the 2012-15 EHCGP outcomes. Projects will be encouraged to provide more qualitative personal case study material and stories to capture the wider benefits of EHCGP. This information will be analysed and presented at both regional and national levels in a variety of formats to provide a social audit of EHCGP and stimulate future investors in this work. This will complement the monitoring data on programme spend, unit costs and empty homes outcomes to be produced by Tribal as part of the accountability for the programme.

The Midlands baseline study provides a dramatic account of the impact on the self-help housing sector in the region. From a standing start Midlands based projects secured a significant share of EHCGP funding and now constitute an important sub-sector of community-led housing providers in the region. Five of the initial participants in the first round of EHCGP went on to receive allocations in round 2. This report also discusses longer term sustainability issues and considers where new sources of growth may come from. Asset transfers, meanwhile use development pipeline programmes and management agreements with social landlords seem to be amongst the possibilities. The 2012-14 summation report will provide the opportunity for a longer term assessment of growth and sustainability of the programme and the place that local community-led providers are now occupying in work on empty homes and micro-level housing renewal and regeneration. As another recent report points out (Lang and Mullins 2014) this is a space that was abandoned by an earlier generation of housing providers as they increases their scale of operations.

Although outside the scope of this evaluation, it would be interesting to compare the delivery and outcomes of the EHCGP with the larger Empty Homes Programme delivered by registered providers with local authorities. This might help in understanding the relative merits of large scale and locality delivery as well as comparing HCA and Tribal grant allocation and programme management experiences. All of the above proposals for EHCGP national evaluation could contribute to such a meta-evaluation.

5.5. Recommendations

Six interim recommendations, supported by the programme analysis, case study findings and early impacts assessment, are offered for discussion and debate. These recommendations fit the current policy agenda and are consistent with the current Localism and Austerity agendas, building on evidence that smaller community led organisations can provide more effective solutions to some housing and neighbourhood issues than larger scale procurement and delivery. They will be of continued relevance after the 2015 election and will be of particular interest to those interested in seeing a thriving community-led housing sector partly focused on the key task of recycling existing assets.

1. **Set more realistic timescales and provide greater flexibility to enable new non-registered housing providers to take part in programmes such as EHCGP.** While community led groups have been attracted into EHCGP in the Midlands, most were already well established in other fields. There is welcome recognition of the need for greater flexibility for example in the recent approach being taken by the Greater London Authority to allocations to small housing associations on an ongoing basis rather than in an annual or biannual bid round.
2. **Join up support and capacity building at local and regional levels to maximise impact and harness support from larger registered providers.** This report has evidenced the contribution that regionally networked support and capacity building programmes from SHHO and HACT have had on programme take-up and delivery, and the role played by some local authorities in complementing this locally.
(2a) There is also scope for more coordinated support and to explore 'buddying' type partnership models to harness registered housing association's expertise and experience for the benefit of community led sector.
3. **Undertake a social audit of the wider impact of the projects through a low burden self-assessment framework to inform future investment, transfer learning and improve practice.** The research proposed in section 5.4 above is important to validate the social impacts and community benefits claimed, to learn from EHCGP experiences and to inform future investment to continue and expand this work.
4. **Promote Organisational sustainability for community-led groups** through continued opportunities to engage in housing and where possible to grow their asset base through asset transfers and purchases. Action research is urgently required to provide opportunities for sustainable growth after the EHCGP ends.

5. **Overcome barriers to accessing properties:** by improving understanding of property owners of the advantages of meanwhile use of their unused assets and willingness to accept realistic rents. Opening avenues for community led groups to take on empty or poorly managed social housing and meanwhile use for long term empties in development pipelines.
6. **Stimulate continued bold and innovative thinking by community-led groups.** One of the main resources unleashed by EHCGP, and evidenced by their advice to others on page 55, has been the creativity of community-led groups. This can involve taking on the biggest challenges (e.g. 10 year plus empties and whole streets) and providing direct opportunities for excluded groups to contribute to property refurbishment and find a place to live.

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