



Responding to COVID-19 in the Liverpool City Region

COVID-19: Tackling the "Housing Disease" Through Community-Led Housing

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Map of Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) boundary (in red) and constituent local authorities



Data sources: Westminster parliamentary constituencies (December 2018 - ONS), local authority districts (December 2018 - ONS), and combined authorities (December 2018 - ONS)

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Key takeaways

1. The quality and quantity of housing plays an important role in community health and wellbeing, potentially enhancing resilience to infections and minimising the health and economic impacts of pandemics. The effects of poor housing costs the National Health Service (NHS) at least £1.4bn a year.
2. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed an even starker correlation between housing and health. Death rates are highest amongst the communities with the highest levels of poor housing – with Liverpool one of the worst affected UK cities outside London.
3. At least 145,000 affordable homes are needed in the UK each year for 10 years to solve the housing crisis. But commercial developers focus on high-worth high-profit homes, while inadequate central government financial support and planning system loopholes further hamper the provision of quality, affordable homes.
4. Community-led housing is a viable and sustainable response to the challenges of providing affordable housing. This approach provides quality, secure and affordable homes in the areas where they are needed; better community health, wellbeing and resilience; and ensures profits are reinvested in community activities and enterprise.
5. Liverpool City Region (LCR) has a strong tradition of community-led housing, including the proposed #DestinationBootle development. The LCR Community-Led Housing Hub is supporting communities to design and deliver new homes. However, among the supportive measures needed at the national and local/regional scales, the Community Housing Fund should be continued and extended to enable communities to progress pipeline projects, provide confidence and encourage new ventures.

1. Introduction

The quality and quantity of housing plays an important role in community health and wellbeing, including resilience to infection. Access to affordable, good quality housing is consistently connected with improved health and wellbeing, better sleep, greater cognitive capacity, better self-management of chronic conditions and long-term smoking cessation, as well as reductions in childhood developmental disorders, depression, stress, domestic violence, obesity and infectious diseases. The effects of poor housing are estimated to cost the NHS at least [£1.4bn a year](#) in first year treatments alone, with the additional lifetime costs of associated impacts on educational attainment, economic activity and wellbeing undoubtedly substantial for individuals, societies and economies.

This briefing summarises the key impacts of housing on health, wellbeing and resilience and sets out the reasons why the UK housing crisis has persisted for decades. In the second part, it explores what is already being done in the Liverpool City Region (LCR) and elsewhere to tackle housing needs, and the crucial role that communities can play in developing high quality, secure and affordable housing.

2. COVID-19: “A Housing Disease”

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed an even starker correlation between housing and health. As Amy Clair, an Economic and Social Research Council Fellow, pointed out in a [blog post](#) in April 2020, “Stay home” is a policy measure that amplifies and entrenches social and economic inequalities.

COVID-19 death rates are highest amongst the communities with the [highest levels of overcrowding](#), homelessness and multiple occupancy homes (HMOs). This prompted the lead member for housing services in Newham, the local authority with the highest death rate in the country, and some of the highest rates of overcrowding, to describe COVID-19 as “a housing disease” (Barker 2020).

While London is home to many of the worst affected communities, Liverpool experienced one of the highest death rates in the country in the early part of the pandemic, and it is likely that the City Region’s high levels of overcrowding, homelessness and HMOs played some part in that.

People living in overcrowded and poor quality housing tend to be those on low incomes, including disproportionate numbers of people aged over 75, people with disabilities and other chronic health problems, and people from Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds. These groups are amongst the most vulnerable to COVID-19, yet overcrowding prevents many from effectively self-isolating from others with whom they share kitchens, bathrooms, bedrooms and other living spaces.

Shared housing is also common amongst young people, particularly since UK government changes in 2012 mean people under the age of 36 are now only able to get support for a rented room. Although these groups are not thought to be at high risk of serious consequences, asymptomatic circulation of COVID-19 amongst the young heightens the risk of community transmission to more vulnerable people.

For the homeless, who often lack access to basic hygiene amenities to facilitate even simple handwashing, social distancing or self-isolation can be incredibly difficult, even in shelters or

temporary accommodation such as those funded through the government’s “Everyone In” programme. The risks presented by COVID-19 can exacerbate pre-existing conditions including the [altered immune systems](#) from which many homeless people suffer as a result of the psychological distress of homelessness itself.

Private rental tenants can also experience weakened resilience to infection caused by anxiety and long-term stress due to housing insecurity, and the quality of private rentals is often poor, with many posing a serious and immediate risk to health (e.g. see Clair 2020).

More broadly, weeks and months in lockdown have prompted many to question the nature and quality of the place we call home. COVID-19 has brought into sharp focus the (in)adequacies of our housing stock, with limitations in outdoor space, natural light, high-speed internet or personal space just some of the issues that we are now coming to terms with.

3. Why is there a lack of affordable quality homes?

Successive governments have failed to tackle the housing crisis. Housing charity Shelter claims that more than [three million new homes](#) are needed over 20 years to support those in greatest housing difficulty, “trapped renters” who cannot afford to buy, and older private renters struggling with affordability – with social housing the greatest priority. Recent research commissioned by the National Housing Federation (NHF) identified a need for [340,000 new homes](#) annually over the next ten years, including at least 145,000 (or more than 40%) on an “affordable” basis, meaning homes that cost around 20% less than local market rates to rent or buy.

To achieve the new homes needed, the NHF asked the UK Government to commit £12.8 billion *annually* for ten years. In spring 2020, the government committed to invest £12.2 billion over *five* years, pledging to build 180,000 affordable homes over the next *eight* years.

Even with this pledge, inadequate though it is, getting the homes built can be a challenge. Affordable homes lack appeal to volume house builders that prefer to focus on larger, more expensive homes that generate greater profits, and there are plenty of alternative government funding streams to support this kind of work. To counter this commercial imperative, it falls to local council planning authorities to stipulate that developers must include affordable housing within new projects. Local councils usually require that between 25 per cent and 40 per cent of new homes are affordable, depending on location and local need.

However, many developers already circumvent the local planning system and avoid the affordable housing requirement through, for example, a legislative loophole known as [permitted development rights](#), which allow offices to be converted into housing without planning permission resulting in so-called “[rabbit-hutch homes](#)”, some without windows. The Local Government Association (LGA) estimates that more than 13,500 affordable homes have been “lost” across England in this way over the past four years. Rather than close the loophole, [government is planning to extend](#) it to give developers greater freedoms.

So, within this national context, what can be done to “Build Back Better” in the LCR? How can we enhance provision of quality, affordable homes that build healthy and resilient communities that can thrive, including through future pandemics?

4. What’s already happening to improve housing in LCR?

Prior to COVID-19, significant advances in housing improvements were underway in the Liverpool City Region. In 2015 Liverpool City Council launched a [private landlord licensing scheme](#) aiming to improve the quality of private rented accommodation, though this ended in April 2020 after the government [refused plans](#) to continue the scheme.

In 2019, the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) published a [Housing Statement](#) which aims, by 2024, to deliver more homes, improving housing choice and quality; support the region’s ageing population; regenerate neighbourhoods; improve the quality of renting; and tackle homelessness.

It has already launched Housing First, a new service that prioritises getting homeless people with complex needs quickly into stable, permanent homes, followed by intensive personalised support to address other challenges. The programme is modelled on an approach established in Los Angeles in the 1980s, which is now employed extensively across the US, Australia, Canada and Europe.

Further, LCRCA plans to deliver 20,000 homes over the next five years, exceeding the Government’s local housing target. Already, [700 brownfield sites](#) have been identified which could accommodate 42,000 new homes. Building on brownfield sites (those which have previously been developed but are now derelict) preserves green spaces, but the land often requires remedial work to make safe for redevelopment, and LCRCA has asked Government for £200m to complete this work.

But if volume house builders are reluctant, who will build the affordable homes that are needed?

5. Community-led housing: communities taking the lead

Community-led housing, where the design and delivery of housing is led by local communities, is an approach increasingly recognised as a viable and sustainable response to the challenges of providing affordable housing. More widely, community-led groups that own or manage assets such as property, known as [community hubs](#), tend to be highly attuned and responsive to local need, adept at building networks, engaging local people in design and delivery of local projects, and building trust and goodwill.

Crucially, management of property and other assets provides community-led groups with significant revenue streams that reduce dependency on grants and donations (e.g. see Traynor and Simpson 2020). As well as providing sustainability and reducing the need for charitable or public funding, community-led housing management groups can reinvest surplus funds into community activities and

enterprises, which in turn leads to improvements in community bonding, health and wellbeing, enhancing quality of life and reducing resilience to infection.

There is no one set model for community-led housing. Projects can be established as housing co-ops, community land trusts (CLTs), tenant management organisations (TMOs), co-housing, community self-build schemes or self-help housing groups that retrofit empty homes, and approaches vary across different countries, as shown in Figure 1.

In the UK, the Confederation of Co-operative Housing lists more than 160 community-led housing schemes, more than 25 of which are located in LCR. The city's pioneering role in community-led housing is set out eloquently by Matt Thompson in [Reconstructing public housing: Liverpool's hidden history of collective alternatives](#). Pertinent examples include Alt Housing, Gingerbread Housing, Lark Lane Housing and [HomeBaked](#). The latter, situated on the

Figure 1: Examples of community-led housing across Europe

Germany	The community housing movement, the <i>baugruppen</i> , is responsible for construction of around 5,000 homes annually in Berlin alone, representing 15 per cent of new housing provision. Some developments offer shared facilities such as laundry rooms, fitness rooms, guest rooms, rooftop terraces, creative and rentable community spaces (e.g. see Ring 2016)
Switzerland	The cooperative movement has experienced a recent renaissance nationally, where community-led housing schemes are recognised as important players in urban renewal and planning. The Swiss have developed a range of innovative finance models including public subsidies and low interest loans for non-profit developers and individual members (e.g. see Varnai 2017)
Spain	Barcelona recently announced it will deploy new Catalonian regional powers to force the sale of empty properties to increase the city's supply of affordable housing, therefore helping low-income tenants

Figure 2. Architect visualisation of #DestinationBootle, Townhouses view



boundary between Everton and Anfield, comprises a community-led housing and enterprise scheme, including co-operative bakery, whose vision is to regenerate the high street “brick by brick and loaf by loaf”.

Perhaps the most well-known in recent years has been [Granby4Streets Community Land Trust \(CLT\)](#), designed by Turner Prize winners Assemble. CLTs are local organisations set up by people to develop and manage homes and other assets that are important to the community, like shops, workspaces and greenspaces. The “10 House Project” was their first initiative, involving renovation of derelict terraced housing on Cairns Street in Toxteth. By 2019 eleven 2-bed terraced houses had been completed, of which five were sold and six are rented on an affordable basis.

However, the largest community-led development in the UK is also based within LCR. [#DestinationBootle](#) is a new mixed use development near the Leeds-

Liverpool canal – see Figures 2-3. Currently awaiting planning approval, the scheme includes a geothermal energy scheme, 187 homes and 3,000 sq ft of commercial space, including a community enterprise hub, The Lock and Quay community pub, a canoe hub, outdoor performance space and enterprise pods.

Led by Safe Regeneration, the project has been conceived and designed by a community comprising hundreds of local volunteers, community members, creative and social organisations. Most properties will be let at affordable rent, with some available on an affordable shared ownership basis. An independent economic impact assessment estimates that the scheme will create 82 new local jobs and at least £5.9m annually through GVA, indirect local stimulus and additional contributions to public finances, making the project a good example of a “[shovel-ready](#)” scheme, creating local jobs and supporting a green recovery.

Figure 3. Architect visualisation of #DestinationBootle, Arts Hub view



Source (Figures 2-3): Ellis Williams Architects (2020) Design Workbook, #DestinationBootle

6. What's needed now to support community-led housing?

It's clear that to improve resilience to COVID-19 and future pandemics, improved access to good quality, affordable housing can play a key role in limiting the spread of infection, and improve quality of life, physical health and wellbeing for many. It can also help prevent the most damaging effects of future lockdowns impacting disproportionately on the most vulnerable in society.

To achieve this, greater and longer-term investment, a broader range of housing developers, prioritising non-profit community-led housing development, and greater powers for local communities are needed. The following policy recommendations are made with respect to the national and local/regional scales in the UK.

National policymaking

Social, community-led and affordable housing is the priority. Better quality and

more secure housing means better health and resilience. Affordable rents mean reductions in public expenditure on housing benefit, alleviating pressures on the private rented sector, and giving tenants more choice and power.

Funds for affordable housing development should be significantly increased and extended, with the NHF request of £12.8 billion annually for ten years as a starting point.

The [Community Housing Fund](#) should be continued and extended to enable communities to progress pipeline projects, provide confidence and encourage new ventures. Funding for other small and medium sized house builders should also be prioritised.

Commercial developers should be required to include affordable housing allocations at a guide rate of around 40% to meet demand, or in line with local need where there are local variations.

Proposed planning reforms should be rethought. The permitted development loophole should be closed, not loosened.

Planning applications should continue to be considered on a case-by-case basis. There are already [statutory maximum periods](#) for the consideration of applications. Delays to getting “spades in the ground” are more often on the developer side, once permission has been granted, than with the planning process.

More innovative financing options should be explored, including developing the range of low interest loans tailored to non-profit developers and community-led housing members and the use of collective assets as collateral.

Local and regional priorities

Local and Combined Authorities need to be adequately funded and empowered to encourage the kinds of housing needed in their local area and review applications promptly, within statutory limits, processing small applications equitably with major projects.

The voices of local communities must be heard on a case-by-case basis, not simply when multi-year zoning plans are drawn up. Local consultation should be more than a corporate tick-box. Communities should be supported to input meaningfully to the design, construction and management of developments, and to lead their own.

Capacity building for community-led housing should be enhanced, enabling scalability and community-led market disruption. National bodies such as the [Confederation of Co-operative Housing](#), [National Community Land Trust Network](#), [UK Co-housing](#) and [Locality](#), which together run the [Community-Led Homes](#) service, need more resources to support those on the ground.

Regionally, [Power to Change](#) has committed £4.2m to support the development of community-led housing hubs in LCR as well as Leeds City

Region, Tees Valley City Region, West of England and West Midlands.

7. Concluding thoughts for LCR

The LCR Community-Led Housing Hub, led by [Safe Regeneration](#), was launched in June 2020. The hub aims to promote different models of community-led housing and support groups across the City Region to develop and deliver their own schemes. The vision is that housing should be high quality, affordable, environmentally sustainable, and in community ownership.

The hub will need to build on the excellent track record in multi-sector collaboration, sharing knowledge and skills, creating practitioner networks, and practising generous leadership, to make a meaningful contribution to the housing market. Partners from public, private and community sectors must work together to make the process transparent, build capacity, and support local groups to develop and build out a pipeline of community-led housing across the City Region.

Recovery from the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic will not be easy. Lives, loved ones and livelihoods have already been lost. Preparations are underway for a second wave during winter months, and we are more alert to the potential threat of future, perhaps more deadly pandemics. There can be little doubt that improving the LCR's supply of affordable, good quality homes will be beneficial.

Addressing the LCR's housing challenges will not only provide homes where they are needed to support the region's workforce, create jobs and reduce travel and energy consumption, but most crucially, improve the health and wellbeing of our communities and build resilience to lessen the impact of future threats.

The City Region has a strong tradition of community activism, a rich and vibrant social economy, and a Combined Authority with the vision and collaborative approach to achieve long-lasting impact. We can do this.

8. References

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