

A good practice guide: Developing and supporting community houses



Shelter

Developing and supporting community houses

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Cover photograph by Nick David

December 2008

ISBN 978 1 903595 88 6

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Acknowledgments

Shelter would like to thank all the organisations and individuals who have contributed their time and materials to help put this guide together, in particular Pammie, Trish, Di and Mark from Courtney Park Community Centre.

Foreword

Eddie MacDonald



Shelter is committed to promoting the development of neighbourhoods where people want, and choose, to live. In fact, achieving this ideal is at the forefront of Shelter's agenda. Our clients have told us that the quality of life in their neighbourhood has a direct impact on how happy they feel in their homes. At the same time, the Government's Quirk Review has highlighted the need for more community ownership of assets, promoting the idea of people having a greater say in what happens in their locality.

Community houses provide an excellent opportunity for landlords and local people to work together. Due to their small-scale, neighbourhood focus, they can reach individuals and families who may feel excluded from the more expensive, formally run facilities available in their area. Many of the people we spoke to regarded their local community house as a lifeline, providing a focus for the neighbourhood, and a place where people can meet and barriers can be broken down. This guide examines the benefits of community houses and identifies how such facilities can be created.

This guide is an example of Shelter's work in supporting local authorities and organisations with policy ideas, examples of good practice, and campaigns to support local initiatives. It aims to be clear, practical and easy to use. We hope that you will find it a valuable resource.



Adam Sampson
Chief Executive

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Introduction

Context

In 2007, the Government launched the Quirk Review¹, which encouraged more investment into, and greater powers to be conferred onto, community groups. It recommended that local authorities and other public bodies should seriously examine the way in which they interact with the local community. In light of the Review, the Government explicitly stated its belief in the power of ordinary people working together:

‘Community ownership... brings people together with good public or voluntary spaces where people can gather. And when you bring people together, things start to happen!’²

The Quirk Review concentrates on non-housing assets such as village halls and community enterprises. However, in reality, successful community houses are the ideal venues for neighbourhood empowerment and can become significant assets for landlords.

A community house should be seen as a vital part of any new housing development. Shelter’s study of new communities found that ‘more emphasis needs to be given to community development. Successful community development requires places where residents and community groups can meet’.³ Community buildings should be viewed as an intrinsic part of local services, rather than as a luxury dependent on the availability of an empty property.

The Government aims to improve community cohesion by building stronger communities. Community houses can make a valuable contribution towards promoting community cohesion in a neighbourhood by providing a shared space where different groups from the community can meet informally, and learn more about each other. They offer a relaxed environment, creating an atmosphere that invites interaction between different backgrounds and lifestyles. However, the larger

community centres tend to have distinct time slots for each client group, and therefore may not create opportunities for community interaction.

Aims

This guide aims to encourage local authorities and registered social landlords (RSL) to develop and support community houses, flats, and open spaces. There is a strong and sustained link between most community facilities and local social landlords; these range from small projects that open only a few days a week, to larger initiatives such as community centres.

Definitions

Shelter has been quite specific with the working definition of a community house: it is a house or flat belonging to a local authority, or RSL, which is developed within an easily defined neighbourhood. Often this is a council or ex-council estate, or a group of streets, that are more informally, though strongly, linked together. Their development is based on needs identified by the community, which may include: high incidences of antisocial behaviour; lack of other local provision, such as youth groups and crèches; the need for people to have somewhere to go where they feel comfortable; and a place over which the community has a high degree of control.

For the purposes of this report, the word ‘landlord’ refers to either a local authority or RSL.

Some community houses are run by properly constituted management committees; others by more informal groups of interested people. They are not always managed by community members – in some cases the landlord’s staff run them with substantial input from the community. Community members generally form the majority of any committee or group. Larger community houses may have a small number of paid employees, but most are staffed by volunteers. In some cases, the landlord will provide staff to run sessions.

1 Communities and Local Government (CLG), *Making assets work: the Quirk Review of community management and ownership of public assets*, 2007.

2 Transcript of a speech given by Ed Miliband MP at the launch of Making assets work: the Quirk review, 15 May 2007.

3 Bernstock, P, *Neighbourhood watch – building new communities: learning lessons from the Thames Gateway*, Shelter, 2008.

The landlord will usually pay for any utility bills and general maintenance. Occasionally, they may make a considerable investment in the building if any conversions are required, for example knocking two houses into one. Where a project is so successful that it outgrows the original building, the landlord may enter into a partnership with an organisation that is able to provide a more suitable building.

People who use community houses are referred to as 'users' within this report. They are generally drawn from the immediate environment of the community house. An important factor in attracting users is the proximity of the community house to where people live. In some cases, people will travel further for a particular activity, for example beauty therapy classes or an after-school club.

Community houses offer a variety of activities, which tend to be tailored to the specific needs of the local community, and are usually highly subsidised or free. This is an important factor, because most community houses are situated in low-income areas. They provide an ideal location for services such as debt advice or counselling, which people may lack the knowledge or confidence to seek out elsewhere.

Methodology

We worked in depth with several community houses in order to produce a rounded view of the issues, problems, and benefits of being involved in such a project. We spoke to landlords, community volunteers, and users, about how important and necessary their community house was to them. This elicited a variety of views, allowing us to build a clear picture of both the advantages and problems associated with community houses. We also ran a number of focus groups with volunteer staff and users, alongside one-to-one interviews with RSL staff, members of voluntary management committees, and volunteers staffing community houses. In total, we spoke to 50 people, including landlords, community volunteers and community house users.

Some of the community houses we worked with were based in one geographical area. This allowed us to assess the extent of any communication, support and planned multi-agency partnership working in that particular neighbourhood.

Why develop a community house or flat?

There are a number of reasons why a landlord might decide to develop a community building, or why a local community might lobby for one.

A home for the tenants'/residents' group

A community house can be the logical extension of a vibrant tenants' or residents' group. Such groups tend to begin by using their landlord's offices to meet. As the group develops and its remit expands, the community's aspirations grow, and a larger and more flexible space is required.

A focus for the community

Landlords usually find an abundance of unharnessed energy in local communities, and can respond to the suggestions, ideas for improvements, and energy of local residents by providing a community house.

Community houses can accommodate a varied range of services and groups, creating a prime opportunity for people to interact. Frequently, services such as counselling, debt advice, and community learning, may require a base from which to operate within the local area. A community house would become a natural local focus.

Community empowerment

The Quirk Review advocated the need for greater community involvement in the management of local assets. It envisages a future where 'a new civic spirit sweeps through urban, suburban and rural communities alike'.⁴ However, the Review acknowledged that 'community groups... are seriously under-capitalised and therefore are constrained in their ability to realise their ambitions to heighten community and social benefit'.⁵ A landlord who invests in a community house, whether financially or otherwise, will be taking a big step towards community ownership of the local area.

Community cohesion

A community house can create cohesion within a particular neighbourhood, because it is the ideal venue for different groups to meet each other in an informal setting. The house ensures that a range of groups can meet – parents and toddlers, elders' meeting groups, craft enthusiasts, and adult community learning – and provides a wide enough scope to attract people from a variety of backgrounds. Organised classes can then provide interaction and cohesion between all those using the community house. For example, cookery classes can be used both as a way of comparing and sharing different ethnic dishes, and getting older people to encourage younger members of the community to learn to cook.

Specific problems

Community houses can be created to allow a landlord to address a specific problem within the community. A prime example of this would be issues relating to antisocial behaviour. One particular council estate had problems with young people meeting up in large numbers and behaving noisily, annoying other residents. A meeting between the young people, the landlord, and the local tenants' association concluded that a safe indoor space was needed, where the young people could 'sit off', play games, and listen to music. A flat on the estate was converted for this purpose, which is well used and popular. Now other groups, such as parents and toddlers, hold meetings at the flat.

An informal space for landlords to interact with residents

Landlords who wish to develop a strong partnership with their tenants may consider providing a community house to facilitate this. By doing so, a landlord can break down barriers between themselves and tenants, shifting the power balance between the two. This can lead to local residents taking a greater interest and sense of ownership in how the landlord operates in their community.

⁴ *Making assets work: the Quirk Review of community management and ownership of public assets*, op cit.

⁵ *Ibid.*

This approach also allows landlords to develop links with the wider community because private and council tenants, as well as owner-occupiers, can be included in activities or consultations. Larger landlords have a responsibility towards the community as a whole, and having a facility that is available for everyone to use will allow them to work with people from the wider community, beyond their own tenants.

‘The Centre acts as a focal point for the estate. Any initiative is run from there... [it] encourages family to stay/come to the estate and develop friendships and skills. [It] plays a vital role in sustaining and empowering the community, and reducing voids, vandalism and antisocial behaviour’.

Area housing manager

Premises for outreach services

The areas where community houses would be most beneficial tend to be poorly resourced in other ways. A key motivation for local people to create a community house can be the need to have services, such as advice providers or childcare provision, located in the neighbourhood.

Community benefit

Shelter’s survey of community house users illustrated the benefits they gained from using the facilities. These benefits were mainly social, as users reported that community houses helped them to feel part of the community, and enhanced their levels of self-esteem. Further benefits included the following.

Forming relationships with other people

‘It’s a shelter for us all. We’re all so busy and stressed during the week, doing the school run, its good to know we can come here and meet up.’

Community house user

Receiving support

‘If [the community house] didn’t exist, there would be a lot of mums around here on Valium.’

Community house user

Reducing isolation

‘It’s a safe place for people to come and share their worries.’

Community house user

Learning new skills

‘Before I went on [the basic skills course] I used to have to pretend I’d left my glasses at home when I went out. But now I can read the new spaper, and even help my kids with their homework, which is brilliant.’

Community house user

Starting up

Getting the community on board

Ideally, some community members will be involved in the development of a community house from the beginning. Most of the volunteers Shelter interviewed had been involved with their community house since it opened; in many cases they were the motivating force behind its conception. One volunteer commented that ‘the whole thing started in my kitchen. We used to meet up and talk around the table, the kids used to play in the garden. Then I went to [the landlord] and said, “Look, we need something bigger, there’s so much we could be doing, and I haven’t got the space.” They could see we were serious, and it all started from there really’.

In order to ensure that as many people as possible are informed about the creation of a local community house, and to provide opportunities for interaction, landlords need to be involved in outreach work. This could include the following.

- Visiting households within the proposed catchment area, informing them of any progress with the community house, and discussing their concerns and ideas.
- Devising a locality-wide scheme to promote involvement, such as a competition to find a name for the building.
- A ‘planning for real’ event, where community members get a chance to look at the proposed facility, and have input into developing it.
- Working with schools in order to get young people involved, for example producing artwork to be placed on or in the building.

Bricks and mortar

Community houses and flats require a substantial investment on the part of the landlord, not only in terms of time and expertise, but also financially. Handing over a house or flat for community use means that it will not be available for rent by the landlord, resulting in a loss of revenue.

Generally, designated community houses will not be appropriate without some adaptations, such as providing disabled access, ensuring that the property meets health and safety laws, and making

sure there are enough toilet facilities for the planned number of users. These adaptations will also require expenditure. A more fundamental conversion, such as maximising space by knocking two houses into one, will obviously be more expensive. It is easier to make the decision to hand over a house if it is on a low-demand estate. However, even in areas of high demand, landlords should recognise the value the property will add to the community, and its likely role in reducing antisocial behaviour.

‘At that time, the estate was a low-demand estate... so it was quite an easy decision to give one house over for community activities. Now, the demand is much greater, so I’m not sure it would happen today. It’s a shame, especially when the house has had so much to do with the improvement of the area’.

Housing officer

The quotation above demonstrates the wider positive impact community houses can have: they can make an area more popular, filling voids which have previously proved hard to let.

Landlords will also usually be responsible for the utility bills and general maintenance of the community house. However, community members are often happy to take responsibility for interior painting. This is a good way to involve members of the local community, and to encourage them to think of the building as ‘theirs’.

‘We decorated the building ourselves. The paint was donated from local businesses, and the kids got to choose which colour went where. We also did the front door and the fence, and they’ve never had graffiti on [them], I think because the kids put in the work themselves’.

Community volunteer

Recruiting volunteers

It is unlikely that any landlord would open a community house without the support and backing of local people. It is important to have strategies in place to recruit volunteers, in order to cope with increased turnover or the expansion of activities. Community members may take the lead in recruitment, but landlords should be able to advise and support them. Ideas may include:

- Talking to current volunteers: they will know how and why they became involved, and would therefore know how best to involve others.
- Preparing an information pack about the community house for landlords to give to new tenants at sign-up stage, including information on how they can get involved and volunteer.
- Ensuring that volunteers receive some kind of recognition and reward for their services: this could include nominating volunteers for community awards, or making the time to meet up with them and thank them for their services. One group of volunteers appreciated being taken out to Christmas lunch by their landlord: 'It just showed us that they had noticed what we did, and were pleased we were doing it'.
- Making sure that volunteers can access the appropriate training to undertake their roles with confidence, and to progress their own development.

'We have learnt a lot of stuff ourselves through doing the centre – accounts, child protection, even learning how to write better'.

Community house user

- Encouraging current volunteers to explain to users how they can become involved in running the house, and help to create a welcoming atmosphere for any potential new recruits. A common way for people to become involved in running their local community house is to begin as a user, and then progress to running activities or becoming involved in the management committee. Shelter's interviews with community volunteers indicated that people get involved out of a sense of neighbourhood or civic responsibility.

'You don't do it to get pats on the back'.

Community volunteer

'It is just like having a paid job'.

Community volunteer

'If we didn't do it, I don't know who would'.

Community volunteer

'We try to manage [the Centre] as best we can, but we have jobs and families ourselves... it's not always easy'.

Community volunteer

Staffing

The majority of the community houses we surveyed were managed and staffed by volunteers from the local community. In one area, RSL staff managed the house, but the user groups were organised by community volunteers. In a few cases, voluntary management committees obtained funding to pay the salary for a member of staff, typically a manager or a centre organiser. This funding came from a variety of sources including: the Lottery; Children in Need; and RSLs.

Constitution

A constitution is a document setting out the name of a committee, its aims, how it will manage its business, and what will happen if the community house closes. It is useful for two reasons: firstly, it commits key points to paper and is available as a reference when guidance is needed, or in case of any disputes; secondly, it helps external bodies, especially those who will provide funding, to ascertain what the committee does, and how it operates. Most community houses will find it difficult to secure external funding if they do not have a constitution. Creating a constitution helps to focus thoughts regarding the purpose of the community house, and promotes consensus decision-making, which helps to make a management committee stronger. So, although a constitution is not a legal requirement for a community management committee, it is a good idea to encourage one to be drawn up.

Attracting users

If the community house has been set up in response to feedback from local residents, it will already have a considerable number of potential users. For instance, if people have asked for an after-school club for their children, or young people have expressed a need for somewhere to meet, they are likely to use the facility when it becomes available. This is especially true if members of that particular group have contributed to deciding how sessions will be run.

‘We all sat down at the beginning and decided what the ground rules were going to be, like no one to come in drunk or anything, and that we would take turns to speak and listen to each other. It was good, because then everyone felt we had talked about why we had the rules, and it was things we all understood’.

Young person, community house user

The community house needs to be a focal point of the neighbourhood, and to be used as widely as possible. This ensures that future users are aware of its existence, and the facilities that it offers. This can be achieved by ensuring that:

- the house is highly visible as a community facility – a bright paint scheme will differentiate the property from others in the area. A large sign and noticeboard will assist visibility
- an up-to-date timetable should be displayed outside the house, clearly stating opening hours and the times each group will meet
- a regular newsletter should be distributed within the facility’s catchment area
- a welcome pack that includes information about the house should be given to new tenants and residents on the estate, or in the local area
- the house has regular ‘new user’ sessions, which will encourage less confident community members to join in.

Activities

Planning a programme

Successful community houses tend to run varied programmes of activities that are specifically tailored to local needs. Often activities reflect the interests and skills of the volunteers running them. One of the most common reasons for community houses starting up is to provide activities for local young people. However, there are areas where other age groups are prioritised.

‘SureStart does all the stuff for the really young ones, and for us, we are only a little place, we can’t do much for the older ones. It’s really the elderly that come along, especially when we are doing tea and toast. They come to chat and just to pass the time of day, really’.

Community volunteer

The experiences of this volunteer indicate that sometimes the constraints of a small building means that certain activities cannot take place. Some community houses are lucky enough to have outdoor space, which allows them to extend the range of sessions they are able to offer. One community flat was particularly small, but did have outdoor space, which was used to provide a summer play scheme for children aged five to 11. Unfortunately, this play scheme only ran on fine days; on rainy days it had to be cancelled.

As a community house develops and becomes a more integral part of the community, other agencies may ask, or be encouraged, to run sessions there. Landlords will incorporate sessions providing housing advice, and times when people can meet with community wardens. The community houses surveyed by Shelter ran the following groups.

Community-run

- Parents and toddlers
- After-school club
- Holiday play scheme
- Disco
- Family days out
- Elders’ group
- Pensioners’ outings
- Bicycle repair club
- Environmental action group
- Tenants’ group
- Breakfast group
- Bingo
- Credit union

Landlord-run

- Housing advice
- Community warden sessions

Outside agencies

- Debt counselling
- Counselling
- Art group
- Basic skills
- Employment and training advice
- Generic social worker
- Baby clinic

Encouraging community cohesion

The term 'community cohesion' generally refers to how people from different faiths or ethnic backgrounds relate to each other. However, it is also important that different generations interact with each other, and that people with disabilities can get involved in mainstream activities. Engaging with different groups provides a valuable social opportunity, allowing relationships to develop with other members of a peer group: parents of under-fives can meet with other parents; people with disabilities can attend a special swimming session; Muslim women can attend a keep-fit group tailored to their needs.

Community houses promote community cohesion by:

- encouraging the development of a management committee that is representative of all strands of the local community
- providing informal spaces where users can interact with each other
- making sure that community groups are accessible and open to people of differing abilities
- consulting with a wide range of people on the types of activities that the house can offer, taking into consideration existing community groups, the size of the house, and the requirements of the community
- making every effort to include all languages relevant to an area on all materials distributed
- developing links with minority groups, and/or the agencies representing them, to ensure that they are involved in the development of the house and its activities
- offering activities that are attractive to specific groups, and different mixes of people
- running cultural fun days in order to encourage mutual understanding and respect between different groups.

Good practice example: Claremont Community Centre

Claremont Community Centre is supported by Accent Housing Group. It began in one of the Group's houses, but has since grown and moved to larger premises. It is run by a voluntary management committee.

At first, users of the centre were exclusively from a Muslim background, but recently the management committee has taken steps to reach out to other groups. When the centre moved to its present location, it changed its name from an Arabic one to the more neutral Claremont Community Centre, in order to be more welcoming to the community as a whole. They also formed a partnership with the local community college, which now runs some classes at Claremont's premises. These classes are comprised of people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. The centre also encourages people with a disability to use its facilities, and provides a base for a group with learning difficulties, and one for deaf Asian men.

'We want to reach out to as many people as possible... we want everyone in the community to feel the Centre is there for them, not that it is for this particular group, or that particular group'.

Voluntary management committee member

Environmental issues

There is now much more awareness regarding making buildings sustainable, environmentally friendly, and low-impact in terms of the resources they consume. Community buildings are an ideal way to promote such ideas and get neighbourhoods to think about how they might be applied practically. The Community Development Foundation is currently running a campaign called 'Every Action Counts', which encourages and supports community organisations to take small steps towards environmental sustainability. They have divided their suggestions into five areas, which are:

- save energy
- travel wisely
- shop ethically
- save our resources
- care for your area.

A number of community houses have been active in developing their own 'green' projects, including creating community parks and wildlife gardens, helping local people to grow their own produce, and encouraging young people to care for their environment through leading by example.

Good practice example: Bidston Rise Community House

In 2004, volunteers at the community house organised a one-off litter pick around the local estate for 14 young people. The aim was to develop their understanding of community responsibility, and illustrate why they should not drop litter. Within three years, this had developed into the Bidston and North Birkenhead Environmental Action Group (Beanbag). Through funding, sponsorship, and donated items, the group carries out a number of local initiatives to clear illegally tipped waste, and highlight ways in which households can dispose of waste responsibly.

Beanbag also runs an annual three-day environmental event from the community house. This includes a litter pick, community clean-up, and an open-air environmental awareness day, with live music, competitions, and activities for people of all ages. The group has recently been the lead partner in a scheme to develop a community garden in memory of a local three-year-old who died tragically in an accident.

Development and sustainability

Clear leadership

Clear leadership is integral to the development and sustainability of a community house. This leadership may come from the landlord, a voluntary management committee, or a combination of the two. The involvement of local people is essential.

‘The existence of a person or a small group of volunteers who are prepared to take on the role of leaders seems crucial to the success of a community building’.⁶

In practice, it is more useful to have even a small management committee than to depend on a single individual. Burn-out is a very real issue for community volunteers because once they have established a profile, they are likely to be asked to participate in every committee and focus group going. A small group is able to support itself and share problems and difficulties. It should also mean that a variety of community viewpoints, skills, and experiences are represented.

Where the landlord plays a significant leadership role, it needs to ensure that it is in close contact with volunteers and users, delivering what the community wants, rather than following its own agenda.

‘Sometimes I do feel that [the housing association] have led, rather than the other way around – I do feel it’s better if the community leads, and we follow’.

Housing association worker

Ideally, leadership will provide:

- up-to-date financial management
- regular planning meetings
- opportunities for the wider community to participate
- identification of skills gaps
- relevant training
- volunteer support
- clear policies.

Financial sustainability

Planning is the key to the financial sustainability of a community house. One local authority involved in running a very successful community house stated that ‘landlords need to make sure they know the true cost of [the project] before they get involved’.

Community houses are unlikely to become truly self-funded, because they depend on offering low-cost activities in order to attract local individuals and families. Users paying for sessions will contribute towards running costs, but these fees are unlikely to cover them all. Landlords must ensure that they are prepared to provide funding at a realistic level, while also encouraging volunteers to develop their fundraising abilities. Volunteers can be very successful in obtaining small-to-medium sums from various sources (including charities and community chests), but these will generally be used to provide or subsidise services, rather than for capital costs. They may also be able to charge other agencies (especially statutory ones) for meeting rooms, and rooms for outreach services. Working in partnership with other agencies can also contribute to financial stability.

Partnership working

Community houses should work with partners whenever possible. Landlords will have considerable expertise in facilities management, but may feel they need support in areas such as relevant childcare legislation and training, community development, and community participation. In the Courtney Park good practice example (see page 18), the social landlord formed a partnership with Barnardo’s (a children’s charity), who were able to provide a paid worker with access to training opportunities for volunteers. The paid worker also gave day-to-day support to the users. When Barnardo’s ceased their involvement in the project, the volunteers were sufficiently skilled to run the centre independently.

When the small park behind the centre was being developed, the landlord again entered into a number of partnerships, most significantly with Groundwork (an environmental charity) and English Heritage. Each

⁶ Marriott, P, *Forgotten resources? The role of community buildings in strengthening local communities*, Community Matters, 1997.

partnership allowed the landlord to achieve far more than it could have accomplished working alone, providing a source of support and help.

For local authorities with community development departments, it would make sense to work in tandem with the relevant housing department when developing community facilities. For example, Cambridge City Council runs a number of small community houses, which are managed by a community development worker. It is his task to promote and support the involvement of local people.

It is worth approaching the local health service to look at the possibilities of joint working, or allowing various health initiatives to take place in the community house. Residents from areas that are socially excluded suffer from more illnesses than those who are socially accepted. The local health service can work with community houses to provide areas where specific health concerns, such as low breastfeeding rates or entrenched smoking habits, need to be addressed. Increasingly, health departments use community development methods as a new approach to working with such communities. Before the health services tackle the most important health issues on their agenda, they will need to listen to the views of local residents, to ascertain what their concerns are. A community house will provide an excellent base for this kind of holistic approach to health care, and will also give health workers an opportunity to meet people on an informal basis.

Most areas have a local play department or play council, who could help with staffing, equipment, and training for school holiday play schemes and after-school clubs. If there is a local playbus, it should be encouraged to park outside the house. This will maximise play opportunities for local children and young people, and will also provide a useful advert for the house's presence in the community.

Local schools and faith groups can also be the source of successful partnerships. In the good practice example of Nash House in Birmingham (see page 22) the local church provided a home for groups that had outgrown the original small community flat.

Promote community involvement

The sustained life of a community house depends upon a steady stream of volunteers to run it, and users to attend activities. Therefore, there must be an ongoing effort to promote community inclusion and participation. There should be a clear pathway for people to communicate their ideas, suggestions and concerns. This can be on an informal basis, or through the medium of a management committee and regular meetings. Most of the community house users that we spoke to appeared confident that they could make their voices heard, although it was not always clear how they would achieve this:

'I would just talk to one of the girls, [the management committee] and they would help me to get any ideas off the ground'.

'I would bring things up at that meeting where they show their accounts and stuff... to be honest, I probably wouldn't wait, actually, I'd just tell them at the time'.

'How I became a member [of the management committee] was... I just used to come with my kids and then started running the tuck shop... and that was it, really'.

'I think, as a worker, there's a benefit in being in the house and getting to know people, so they talk to you quite naturally about what they want out of it, and then you can help them. It never seems to get to a more formal level – things are sorted out as and when they happen'.

It is beneficial to spend time looking at the procedures for those who wish to become involved in the management of the project, ensuring that they are clear and transparent. These processes should be maintained and adhered to – for instance, a suggestion box is a good idea, but a person will need to be appointed to empty the box at a specific time, and a procedure agreed for dealing with any suggestions.

Keep things moving forward

In order to keep the momentum of a community facility, planning is essential. It does not have to be all-encompassing or complicated, but an annual plan will help the landlord, users, and volunteers to feel more informed about where the project is going, and why. The landlord and the management group, or a combination of the two, will need to look at activities such as:

- ongoing groups, for example: an elders group; parent and toddlers; general meetings; and an after-school club
- other organisations using the house, for example credit unions, counselling services, and health sessions
- landlord activities such as warden sessions, or housing advice
- seasonal projects, for example Diwali firework party, Eid celebrations, Christmas grotto, summer play scheme
- time-limited projects such as basic skills courses, or classes in healthy eating.

Once all the activities at the house have been audited, it will be easy to see where there are development opportunities or vacant timeslots, which can be made available to other organisations.

Good practice example: Courtney Park Community Centre and Park

The Courtney Park Community Centre and Park are situated in the middle of the Woodward Road Estate in Rock Ferry, an area of Wirral that is one of the most deprived wards in the country. Homes on the estate are owned and managed by Wirral Partnership Homes, which has taken over the housing stock formerly owned by Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council. There are 220 houses on the estate, from which come most of the Centre's regular users. A smaller number of users come from the surrounding streets, and previous estate residents have been known to travel from as far as two or three miles away to continue using the Centre's facilities.

The history of the community house on Woodward Road Estate dates back to the 1960s. However, there was little continuity – premises would open up for a couple of years and then close down, with the house being returned to the Council's housing stock. In 1997, a new community house was created thanks to the determination of a group of parents to provide summer holiday activities for the children on the estate. The housing officer at the time offered the use of an empty three-bedroom house on the estate, which had previously been used intermittently for community activities. There was some unused gym equipment left in the house, which the volunteers sold in order to buy toys, sports equipment, and tuck shop supplies.

The house was small and could only accept 35 children at a time, which was far less than the number that wanted to use it. The volunteers had a meeting with the housing officer and other relevant parties to discuss the need for a larger and more centrally located building because the original house was located on the fringes of the estate. The landlord agreed to convert two houses in the middle of the estate. The houses had a piece of wasteland behind them, which had originally provided a site for garages. The garages had been knocked down, and there was potential to develop the site for community use. However, the conversion was quite expensive, and there were some concerns about the longevity of the project:

'We did worry that we might do the conversion, and then the volunteers might give up after six months. There was no way we could force them to carry on. So yes, that was an issue'

Housing officer

It was at this point that Barnardo's became involved. They wanted to take part in a community development project, and by improving the local environment they hoped to improve the quality of the lives of local children and families. They appointed a community development officer to work in partnership with volunteers on the estate. The landlord felt more confident that the project would succeed once the community development officer was involved, and gave permission for the conversion. In 1998, the new building opened.

Before the appointment of the community development officer, the volunteers struggled with various aspects of running the house. The main obstacles they faced were:

- a lack of financial training or knowledge of accounting
- no understanding of the purposes of a constitution or an annual general meeting
- not knowing the legal requirements regarding running activities for children and the wider community
- not realising that, as volunteers, they were entitled to reasonable out-of-pocket expenses
- dealing with issues regarding the maintenance of the house, such as ensuring repairs were completed
- additional demands being made of their time, for example: parents leaving their children at the house long after pick-up time, or being encouraged to act as a tenants' group alongside their duties running the house.

As the volunteers became more skilled and experienced, they required less support from the Barnardo's worker, who moved on to other projects after a couple of years. The house has now been running for 10 years, and eight years ago successfully obtained funding to develop a small community park on the attached wasteland. This work was undertaken in partnership with the landlord and Groundwork.

Most of the original volunteers are still involved in running the house and park, and although they have had setbacks over the years, they have a real pride in what has been achieved:

'We have hit so many brick walls over the years, but somehow we have just kept going. When we look back now, we can't believe everything that has gone on. We do feel [the landlord] appreciates us better

now, and there's more support from people on the estate. Though we do get the odd few who think we get paid, and that's annoying'.

Community volunteer

Currently the house is running an after-school club; a holiday play scheme; a weekly disco; a healthy food project; an initiative taking children for holidays in Wales; and a litter-picking project. Previously, the house has also hosted community learning; a basic skills group; a pensioners' outing group; keep fit; beauty sessions; and a health visitors' clinic.

Over the years volunteers have formed a number of key partnerships, including:

- the local Primary Health Care Trust
- local schools
- neighbourhood colleges
- neighbourhood church groups
- a workers' Educational Association
- a charity providing holidays to low-income families
- a local regeneration initiative.

'We feel less vulnerable now, because there are lots of other people involved. We can learn from them, but we can also make sure that they know what people living on the estate think'.

Community volunteer

'We have learnt a lot. The first time we did our accounts it took us three days, because we didn't know what we were doing. Now we keep things up to date, and it's a lot easier'.

Community volunteer

Dealing with problems

It may sound simplistic, but the most effective way of dealing with problems is to try to anticipate and avoid them. This section discusses some of the most common problems associated with a community facility, and provides suggestions for dealing with them.

The landlord involved with a community house must identify any possible problems or constraints. It would be good practice to perform a risk assessment to identify particular risks and hazards associated with each activity. This is best undertaken in conjunction with community volunteers, as part of an open and honest discussion.

Financial mismanagement

Dishonesty is a rare problem during the life of a community house. However, if financial procedures are not clear and transparent, difficulties can, and do, arise. Landlords can be invaluable to community houses by helping them to plan their finances on a manageable and organised footing. This should include:

- helping to access good quality financial training to assist with keeping financial records
- being prepared to share their own organisations' financial knowledge and expertise
- offering accounting services
- advocating a constitution and annual presentation of accounts once groups start handling even small amounts of money
- helping with fundraising, including locating likely grant sources, and helping to write funding bids.

A 'closed' management group

Where community facilities are run by a small group of committed individuals who have been working together over a period of time, it may be hard for new members to become involved. Such groups are likely to be unaware that they are erecting a barrier, but may need help in becoming more open to other community members. This can be achieved by:

- helping people to identify when such barriers are being created
- holding an annual general meeting, where people can stand for various roles on the management committee, and be voted into position
- organising training and awareness sessions to provide participation skills for volunteers
- including details of how users can become part of the management team in newsletters or any other literature produced by the community house.

Difficult individuals

There are strong personalities in any community, and this is mostly a positive thing. However, sometimes individuals with very fixed or inflexible ideas can become involved in a community initiative and make it hard for other people to contribute, or have their voices heard. Other community members may find it difficult to confront someone like this, and there is a danger that willing volunteers will be put off. Well-organised and well-chaired meetings will help to ensure that people get an equal chance to express their views. It may be useful for the landlord's representative to spend some time listening and building a relationship with any individual who is making things difficult for other volunteers. In order to prevent this from happening in the first place, landlords should consider providing training for all volunteers and committee members on chairing and participating in meetings, and on negotiating skills.

Policies and legal obligations

Policies

Community volunteers can be put off by formal language that housing staff are used to hearing every day. It is important that people realise policies are simply a way of expressing how the activities in the community house are going to be run. Initially, the most important policies to develop are:

- health and safety policy (this is a legal requirement if five or more persons are working or volunteering at any premises)
- child/young person protection policy (essential if children and young people use the house)
- confidentiality policy (to ensure people feel safe in sharing information)
- financial policy (to set down clearly how money will be handled)
- volunteer policy (to clarify the role of volunteers and set down what they can expect to receive from the organisation).

In practice, many community houses struggle with creating written policies. If the same people acting as the management committee are also running groups or activities, they may not realise the need for a volunteer policy. Instead, they may rely on their shared understanding and vision for the house to govern how they conduct things on a day-to-day basis. This can become problematic when new volunteers are being recruited, and can lead to tensions within the community if it is felt that there is a lack of consultation.

If young people and children are using the house, then a child and young person protection policy is imperative. Any volunteers working with children will need to have a Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check. It is particularly important that volunteers know what they would do if they suspected, or it was disclosed, that a child was being abused or injured. This may be as simple as informing the local housing officer, who would then take steps to deal with the situation. A vulnerable adult policy, to cover groups such as people with learning difficulties or the elderly, may also be needed.

Insurance

Community houses depend on landlords and local residents working together. This should simplify insurance issues, because the landlord retains control over the building and covers any property insurance. However, groups using the house will need to take out insurance to cover their activities and any equipment they possess. If a voluntary management committee runs the centre, they may take over this responsibility, particularly if the committee agrees to hold any equipment in common. It should be noted that if potentially hazardous equipment is used, such as bouncy castles, extra insurance is necessary. Where possible, groups should choose an insurance company that has experience of working with small community organisations.

Constituted or not?

A constitution clearly sets out a group's purpose, scope, and powers, and clarifies what should happen to any assets should the community house cease to exist. Therefore, a landlord may want to encourage volunteers managing a house to write a constitution. However, there are examples where either the landlord manages the house itself (in which case it will be their responsibility to look at relevant policies), or it is run by a more loosely formed group, which operates without a constitution. This can be a successful way of working, as long as the community is closely involved and has a sense of ownership.

Financial management

A constituted group will be obliged to have an annual general meeting at which its finances are presented. It is good practice to ensure that volunteers, constituted or otherwise, have a basic understanding about saving receipts and keeping a weekly or monthly balance sheet.

Good practice example: No 1 Nash House

No 1 Nash House is a community flat run by Optima Community Association. A community member originally started providing family support activities from the flat, which was her home. She then moved to another part of the block so the flat could be used as a community base. Optima provide funding for the flat, and various groups are run by community members. However, the flat is not operated with a constitution. Optima staff visit the facility on a regular basis, and any issues concerning new groups starting up are referred to them. Flat users have a very strong sense of community ownership.

‘We all muck in, so we feel it’s our place’.

Community volunteer

‘I’ve done the cleaning, I’ve run coffee mornings, I’ve gone to fetch people who were too shy to come – you name it, I’ve done it’.

Community volunteer

The flat has now become so successful that it is in the process of changing premises. It has entered into partnership with a local church community centre, and is gradually moving groups over to this much larger building. As an Optima staff member noted:

‘In a funny way, we have become the victims of our own success, but we are doing things gradually, and making sure people feel settled in the new place’.

Community volunteer

Equality and diversity

It is important that community houses reach out to the entire local community. There are practical ways to do this, such as ensuring that buildings have wheelchair access, and that toilet facilities are suitable for those with disabilities. It is also important that volunteers, and those who support them, are aware of how to make the house welcoming to a wide group of users. This can be brought about in a number of different ways, such as:

- ensuring that the house is physically adapted for users with differing needs
- making the house the centre for local celebration of various community and religious festivals
- ensuring the management committee reflects the diversity of the neighbourhood
- training in diversity issues for volunteers.

Volunteer training

Training volunteers ensures that they are able to volunteer more effectively in the community house, and feel more confident and better informed. It is also a way of recompensing them for their time and effort, and helping them to build up a portfolio of skills. Many local organisations will offer appropriate courses.

Recommendations

Community houses are a vital tool for promoting and achieving community cohesion. They offer a lifeline to community members, providing subsidised activities and social events. Throughout the research Shelter conducted for this guide, it became evident that in order to facilitate good practice at a local level, there is a need for a countrywide register of community houses and flats. This could be developed and maintained by Communities and Local Government, enabling a clear, nationwide mapping of activity, providing a basis for joint working, and also showing where community buildings are not being developed.

The following are recommendations for landlords wishing to work with the community and set up a community house.

Involving the community

- Where a community house does not exist in a particular area, landlords should seriously consider developing one.
- When developing a community house, those involved in its establishment must engage as wide a range of community members as possible.
- Those running the community house should develop a clear strategy for interacting with the community, for example:
 - creating an information pack which, along with regular newsletters, should be sent to community residents to both welcome and inform them
 - holding regular new resident sessions to attract new users
 - involving the community, specifically young people, in designing and decorating the house, including any outdoor areas
 - encouraging the community to contribute towards the rules of the house, and the activities run from it.

Volunteers

- The landlord needs to ensure that they provide ongoing advice and support to the community house in recruiting volunteers.
- Volunteers should receive help with writing policies.
- Systems, and the finance, should be in place to pay all volunteer expenses promptly.
- Volunteers should be rewarded for the work that they do in the community house, for example entering them in community awards or providing a Christmas lunch.
- Training should be provided where relevant, especially for any key skills that may need to be developed.
- Volunteers should not be overburdened by getting involved with too many projects.
- Management committees should be helped to understand the importance of constitutions, and practical help should be offered in writing one.
- Organisational expertise should be shared with volunteers, to ensure that they are able to develop skills.
- Any procedures for becoming a volunteer must be clear and transparent.

Community cohesion

- All groups should be made accessible to people of differing abilities.
- Within the community house there should be informal spaces where users can interact with each other.
- Volunteers, and members of the management, should be recruited from a range of different backgrounds to ensure a degree of equality and diversity.
- Events should be held to provide an opportunity for groups to share skills and expertise, such as cookery or art sessions.

Sustainability

- Clear leadership and ongoing support must be provided for the people running the house.
- The community house must continue to deliver what the community wants, rather than what it is assumed that they need.
- Ensure that long-term volunteers do not burn out, and are provided with time off and support should they require it.
- Experienced volunteers should be valued.
- When recruiting for volunteers, it should be recognised that there is a danger of only recruiting within a closed category of people, therefore making it a closed shop.
- Partnerships should be developed with other agencies and community groups, to ensure that any multi-agency working is relevant to the needs of the community.
- Community houses should ensure that they have a plan that outlines the strategy for each year.
- Ensure that the house is flexible and can adapt to the changing needs of a community.
- Think about environmental issues when developing buildings and planning activities.

Finance

- Financial forecasts for the running of the house should be realistic and accurate.
- In order to be open and transparent, there should be an annual presentation of accounts.
- Be prepared to provide financial support in the long term.
- Income-generating activities such as training courses and keep-fit sessions should be considered, while ensuring that their inclusion does not price out the local community.
- Volunteers making funding bids should be supported as far as practicable.
- Partnerships should be developed with partners who may be able to contribute funding, or other resources which are relevant to the users of the community house.

Dealing with problems

- Where possible, a risk assessment should be undertaken, which will allow volunteers to anticipate possible problems, and take steps to avoid them occurring.
- Volunteers should take training in areas such as equality and diversity, and health and safety, along with any other necessary skills training.
- Volunteers should operate in an open and honest manner, and be ready to discuss any areas of concern at all times.
- It may be prudent to ensure a community house has a constitution, which would provide a structure for the development of the house.

Legal obligations and policies

- Volunteers and users should adhere strictly to any legal obligations.
- All volunteers who would be working with children or vulnerable adults must undergo a CRB check.
- All volunteers should be aware of the content of the policies and procedures of the house, and where appropriate, assistance should be given to them in writing.

Useful contacts

Community Development Foundation

Headquarters
Unit 5, Angel Gate
320–326 City Road
London EC1V 2PT
Tel: 020 7833 1772
www.cdf.org.uk

Community Matters (The National Federation for Community Organisations)

Community Matters
12–20 Baron Street
London N1 9LL
Tel: 020 7837 7887
www.communitymatters.org.uk

NAVCA (The National Association for Voluntary and Community Action)

This organisation is the national voice of the local third sector in England. It has a membership base, but is also able to help and support other organisations. Until 14 June 2006, NAVCA was called NACVS (the National Association of Councils for Voluntary Service).

The Tower
2 Furnival Square
Sheffield S1 4QL
Tel: 0114 278 6636
www.navca.org.uk

Joseph Rowntree Foundation

The Homestead
40 Water End
York,
North Yorkshire
YO30 6WP,
Tel: 01904 629 241
www.jrf.org.uk

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