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### **UK property**

Community land trusts offer a fresh take on housing development

Citizen-led projects are rethinking residential construction





Citizens House offers staggered balconies for socialising © French+Tye

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Between two housing estates and a primary school in Sydenham, south London, an 11-home development has emerged with a radical proposition. The prices of homes in Citizens House, which was developed by and for local people, are tied to the local average income, rather than the property market, in perpetuity.

The project, completed earlier this year, came about through the efforts of local campaigning group Lewisham Citizens (part of community organising body Citizens UK), and a community land trust called London CLT.

CLTs — non-profit organisations that own and develop land for the benefit of a community, run by local people as members — are rising in number across the UK as residents seek to have agency in the development of their neighbourhood and avoid displacement.

Between 2008 and 2023, the number of CLTs in England and Wales rose from 20 to 350, according to the national Community Land Trust Network. Although CLTs don't have to tie property prices to local income, many go down this route because of the persistent need for affordable homes.

“There are 8.5mn people in England with some form of unmet housing need,” says Kate Henderson, chief executive of the National Housing Federation, which represents England's housing associations. Councils and CLTs could “step up” alongside housing associations, she says, as part of the solution.



Home prices at Citizens House are tied to average local incomes © French+Tye

In the UK, increases in house prices have far outpaced the rise in annual income. Data from the Office for National Statistics shows that in 1997, workers in England spent about 3.5 times their annual earnings buying a home; in 2022, it was 8.3 times.

In the London borough of Lewisham, where Citizens House is located, average home prices are 12.9 times the median local income of £36,104, according to the Office for National Statistics.

“[There was] an impassioned plea from our community to do something about the desperate need for truly affordable housing in the area,” says Janet Emmanuel, a school teacher who — as part of Lewisham Citizens, and now a board member of London CLT — helped to make Citizens House a reality.

The land, an underused garage site, was given to London CLT by Lewisham Council after extensive campaigning, on the agreement the organisation would create affordable housing for local people. On its launch, a two-bedroom flat in the development was priced at £272,000 and a one-bedroom at £215,000; about 65 per cent of their market value and six times the average local income.

The mechanism by which the homes remain relatively affordable — even in years to come — is a legal “asset lock” that protects the properties from market fluctuations. When residents move out, they must resell their homes at prices linked to local earnings.

Brenda Dacres, deputy mayor of Lewisham and mayoral cabinet member for housing development and planning, says that through Citizens House, the council has learnt “some really useful lessons that would help enable faster delivery for potential projects of this type in the future”.



WeCanMake has built two homes in back gardens of council-built housing © Ibolya Feher/WeCanMake



One of WeCanMake's units under construction © Ibolya Feher/WeCanMake



Local residents helped select the scheme's architects — Archio — through an open public vote and contributed to the design through public workshops. “The architecture is all about creating areas for social interaction and neighbourliness,” says Mellis Haward, director of Archio. Staggered, protruding balconies enable conversations between flats, and a shared courtyard provides space for events.

Hundreds of people applied for the homes. Successful applicants had to fulfil criteria drawn up by London CLT in collaboration with the local community, which included having at least a five-year connection to the area (such as living or working there), being in housing need (such as existing accommodation being overcrowded or unaffordable), and being supportive of London CLT's aims (determined by questions such as: “How important is providing affordable housing to buy in London?”).

“I feel so lucky to own 100 per cent of my flat in London and still be located within the same borough as before,” says Christian Codjoe, who moved into Citizens House in June after considering moving to Kent in search of an affordable home. He praises “the sense of community-building that is shared among residents”.

In the Knowle West neighbourhood of Bristol, a CLT has been developing tools to unlock the planning system to construct new housing for locals in need.

Adopting a “micro-site” approach, WeCanMake has built two homes in back gardens of low-density, council-built housing, and is now working towards three new CLT developments on car parking sites in the city.

Two households of Knowle West council tenants volunteered to give parts of their garden to the CLT for the affordable homes. To comply with local restrictions on backland development, WeCanMake worked with Bristol City Council, which designated the land as Community-Led Urban Exception Sites, or Clues, and transferred it to the CLT on a long social value lease. Bristol's community-led housing land disposal policy, introduced in 2020 to free up council-owned land for affordable homes, also enabled the project.



Knowle West tenants agreed to cede part of their gardens for the WeCanMake development © WeCanMake

Planning consent “was conditional on the land and homes being in community ownership and affordable, in perpetuity,” says Melissa Mean, director of WeCanMake. The new homes are rented at a permanent “living rent” — no more than a third of the average household income in the area.

Accessing affordable financing for such projects can be a challenge. Community groups can be seen as “too risky and small” for loans, says Mean. Qualifying for a grant from Homes England’s affordable housing fund, meanwhile, is complicated and they only cover a certain percentage of costs. “You need the working capital to secure a site, develop a scheme and secure planning consent before you can get the grant,” says Tom Chance, chief executive of the Community Land Trust Network.

WeCanMake received an affordable housing grant from Bristol City Council, as well as social finance from a regional fund. Citizens House relied on a now-defunct Community Housing Fund from Homes England, alongside the Big Issue Invest London Housing Fund.

One solution, which about three-quarters of CLT developments in England and Wales have adopted, is to partner with socially minded developers or housing associations, giving easier access to financing, plus development support. “Asking every community to become a developer in a way that London CLT has is hard,” says Chance, adding that partnerships can make the process more achievable.

In Liverpool, opposite Anfield stadium, Homebaked CLT — made up of 182 community members — has partnered with a local housing association to renovate a terrace of homes, backed by a grant from the Community Housing Fund. The trust was formed in 2012 as a “protest” against the demolition and redevelopment happening under the government’s Housing Market Renewal Initiative, says Homebaked CLT co-ordinator Tom Murphy. “Many of our local families were displaced.” The CLT was envisioned as “a vehicle for local people to really have ownership and influence over our neighbourhood”.



Concept art for Homebaked CLT's redeveloped terrace in Liverpool



The Liverpool terrace as it looks today © Mark Loudon

After Homebaked CLT converted part of one of the buildings slated for demolition into a four-bedroom flat, Liverpool City Council granted it a licence to renovate the rest of the terrace of empty homes into affordable housing and space for local businesses. “We wanted to demonstrate there was still a lot of value in our existing local assets,” says Murphy. “We don’t need to flatten them and build new ones.”

The housing association is developing the scheme under a long development lease from the council. Once completed, Homebaked CLT will buy the scheme back, using community shares, sponsorship, grants and a loan. A new community-led housing policy from the council, developed with help from Homebaked, may pave the way for similar developments.

Chance believes between 5 and 10 per cent of housing in England and Wales could be community-led — including CLTs, co-housing, self-build and housing co-operatives — if these options were “taken more seriously”.

**We wanted to demonstrate there was still value in our existing local assets. We don’t need to flatten them**

**Tom Murphy, Homebaked CLT**

The Community Land Trust Network estimates there is capacity for up to 278,000 CLT homes across England and Wales; 1,711 have been built to date, with 5,413 more in the pipeline. As well as in big cities, CLT homes are being created in rural communities, from Cornwall to the Lake District.



“Community land trusts can lead to more housing but they also just lead to better housing, and to housing that people feel more confident is delivering benefits to their area,” says Chance. “We know there’s a huge desire to do this, but it’s hard to unlock it and make it happen at scale.”

He argues in favour of policy shifts, such as requiring new large developments to include a proportion of community-led homes, or incentives for developers to partner with communities on housing. The Community Land Trust Network has also campaigned for the reintroduction of the Community Housing Fund, as well as the integration of Clues in national planning policy.

Chance is inspired by community-led housing models elsewhere, particularly in the US — where the CLT concept emerged out of the civil rights movement in the 1960s — and cities such as Vienna and Zurich. “The greatest barrier we have in the UK is cultural, in which we think if there’s a problem like the housing crisis, it’s fixed by the state or the private sector,” he says.

CLTs may not be a catch-all solution to delivering affordable housing at scale but they are one tool in a box of community-led options that are slowly gaining traction in the UK.

Policies may need to evolve, partnerships fostered and more funding made available, but those involved in testing CLTs are optimistic about the ripple effect of their work.

“The big shift we’re trying to do here is to treat homes not as financial products to be traded but as ongoing infrastructure for community benefit,” says Mean. “The dream is that every community across the country could do this.”