



# town & country planning

The Journal of the Town and Country Planning Association  
September–October 2023      Volume 92 ● Number 5

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# the value of community-led housing

**Hannah Emery-Wright** and **Robert Read** explain how London CLT and Guy's and St Thomas' Foundation are exploring the health benefits of housing delivered by community land trusts



London CLT

**Residents and community leaders at the official opening of Citizens House**

On 23 April 2023, residents of Citizens House in Lewisham—London Community Land Trust's latest project and first direct community-led development<sup>1</sup>—hosted a celebration to officially open their new homes. After 10 years campaigning through Lewisham Citizens (the local chapter of the community organising charity Citizens UK), 11 genuinely and permanently affordable homes have replaced an estate's neglected garage site. Community leaders who made key decisions on

land, design, build and allocations joined the celebrations.

People with long-standing connections to Lewisham, who faced being squeezed out, unable to afford somewhere to call home, are now first-time homeowners at Citizens House. These local teachers, healthcare professionals, artists and civil servants, as well as employees in the private sector, all embedded in their communities, now control their homes through a residents' management company.

*'Moving into the CLT has been completely transformative... We've never had such stability to rely on, to depend on, to have as a basis for our plans and dreams.'*

**Citizens House resident**

Affordability is key if housing is to contribute to good health and wellbeing. Community land trusts (CLTs) are non-profit, member-led organisations that own and develop land for community benefit, providing stewardship to ensure that homes remain affordable in perpetuity. London CLT's homes are sold and re-sold at prices related to earnings, not skewed market forces—their buyers are investing in a *home*, not an asset.

Beyond affordability, people-centred approaches can have long-term benefits for health through the quality of the build and strengthening the wider community. Neighbours of Citizens House selected the architects, and the successful firm, Archio, ran co-design workshops. Connectivity and community were prioritised—an existing pedestrian route now opens into shared public space.

Design innovations are challenging, and achieving build costs to allow sales at what turned out to be 65% of market value requires keen budgeting. Nevertheless, London CLT's members have agreed ambitious principles for future schemes—addressing climate impact and promoting sustainability, autonomy and inclusion, health and wellbeing, economic wellbeing and prosperity, community and connectivity, safety and security, and beautiful homes for living.

London CLT is working with Guy's and St Thomas' Foundation, which provided an urban health grant to support research. An advisory panel of academics and practitioners, including the TCPA, is looking at how design principles for healthy homes align with members' priorities. Research streams are exploring how to achieve sustainability, quality, and social impact, while maximising health and ensuring long-term affordability for residents.

### Assessing impact

The Citizens House project began by retrospectively assessing London CLT's first 23 homes, acquired in 2017 through a Section 106 agreement at the former St Clements Hospital site in Mile End. Although the developer-led conversion and new-build project at a former workhouse and psychiatric hospital allowed London CLT limited input, research highlights tangible differences made by the homes.

Residents' stories illustrate the depth of the housing crisis, not only impacting London's least well-off but increasingly those with average incomes. Shared-ownership schemes trapped growing families in overcrowded flats as rising property values increased costs and made moving unaffordable. One family faced eviction from keyworker accommodation when their housing association landlord decided to sell,

while another keyworker's rent rose to unaffordable levels when their block was sold to a housing association. Disrepair, damp and mould afflicted private and social rentals, while one couple wondered if they could ever start a family when their only affordable option was property guardianship on an estate awaiting regeneration.

Interviewees felt the pressures of many trying to get by in London—the only option seemed to involve leaving. But living, working and raising families in the city was a key part of their sense of identity. Some were born near St Clements, while others had lived there for many years, contributing to community life and culture, and insecurity and anxiety threatened their health and wellbeing.

Selection criteria for the homes prioritised housing need, local connection, financial circumstances, and community contribution. Successful applicants were brought together, getting to know one another as they awaited completion of their homes. Social events and a campaign for community space helped build capacity for the responsibilities of resident management. Research shows that connectivity contributes to health and wellbeing, as does control, both over one's own circumstances and over the physical and social environment.

After moving in, residents reported reduced anxiety and a feeling of security, a burden lifted. Pressures had become ever-present, only really becoming fully apparent once they had gone—life felt lighter. They spoke of better standards of living and work/life balance, improved employment opportunities, a chance to study, or just being able to focus on what is most important. They remain in the neighbourhood where they had established roots, built valuable networks, and enjoyed the culture of city life. Green space is valued—many spoke of the importance of Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park, a nature reserve at the back of St Clements. Others have appropriated green space between buildings for community gatherings, sharing food and drink, and for children to play and even have camp-outs.

Some previously in parental homes, desperately saving for mortgages, gained independence, and life-changing decisions have been made. Flexible policy-making allowed allocation of two-bedroom properties to couples wanting children—ten babies have been born among CLT residents in the six years since moving in! For most, St Clements has brought privacy to balance connectivity—enough bedrooms, and space for people to be themselves and for children to study.

*'This to me is a space which is home... a place where I can retreat and have my own space and recharge and rest. And it is my space... somewhere where I feel safe, and I feel happy.'*

**St Clements resident**



London CLT

**'After moving in, residents reported reduced anxiety and a feeling of security, a burden lifted. Pressures had become ever-present, only really becoming fully apparent once they had gone'**

There are challenges—nine years on, developers remain on site and residents are yet to take control, adding to frustrations about refuse disposal, door-entry systems, and lifts not working properly. Anticipated community space remains uncertain. In future schemes, London CLT will look for partners who share its ethos and support resident management. Despite this, shared experiences among CLT residents provide a base for social interaction and an atmosphere of conviviality, neighbourliness, and collaboration.

These benefits could be met through other housing types, but the compelling case is that most other options do not currently combine them. Often people become displaced in search of affordability or have a sense of belonging but lack quality of build or security of tenure. So perhaps working to provide this combination is where CLTs add greatest value in improving health and wellbeing.

### **Looking forward**

Research connecting CLTs to health is limited, and St Clements alone will not make the case for systemic change. Pre-occupancy information from Citizens House residents is being followed up by post-occupancy questionnaires and interviews, while the impact of community involvement in getting homes built is also being researched.

Healthy design principles will provide a framework for new projects, allowing intentions to be set early and maximising opportunities. London CLT is planning new homes in Greenwich and Redbridge, with other potential sites in Ealing, Lambeth, and Southwark. The political and economic environment, though, is uncertain. The Community Housing Fund, which has subsidised many projects, is due to expire in April 2024, and CLTs have an ambiguous

place in councils' housing strategies. London CLT's urban health aims to promote learning via lobbying and campaigning—for inclusion of CLTs in policy across London, particularly in the run-up to the 2024 mayoral and council elections.

### **Hopes and challenges**

As building costs increase and climate change considerations become a necessity, balancing quality and affordability is challenging. Significant grant funding is needed just to make ends meet—with sustainable standards such as Passivhaus dropped to keep homes affordable. As development complexity increases costs, keeping prices pegged to local incomes gets progressively harder. CLTs are often given the most difficult infill sites, rejected by more established builders, and are expected to make them work with significantly fewer resources. When things go wrong, or take time, it feeds narratives about CLTs being too difficult, when the odds were already imbalanced. Local authorities being curious and solution oriented could tip the balance.

We hope that this research builds better understanding of where CLTs add unique value, and supports innovations to maintain approaches combining community, sustainability, quality, and affordability. We also hope that it helps to persuade government at all levels that such approaches are worth investing in.

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### **Note**

1 See the London CLT website, at [www.londonclt.org/](http://www.londonclt.org/)