

## **BCLT Annual Report 2016**

### **Affairs of the Society**

A year of hectic activity on our own projects and turbulent political changes in the wider world has opened a range of new opportunities for Bristol CLT.

The big milestone this year has been the completion and occupation of our first housing project at Fishponds Road. We lost Anna Maloney, our first development officer at the end of 2015 and went through a difficult period in the spring when the Fishponds project was at its most demanding and we had no development officer and a reduced board. Happily BCLT appointed Bridget Petty in April, who immediately brought new focus onto completing the contract work, managing the self-finishing phase and getting residents moved in.

Our second project at Shaldon Road in Lockleaze has also been rolling on for several years and languished somewhat over the spring as we all turned our hands to the pump in the last phases of the Fishponds development. Bridget's arrival and the appointment of project managers Local Agenda in April helped to restore momentum and the design is now rapidly falling into place and heading for a planning application early in the New Year.

In May this year Bristolians elected a new mayor and council on the back of strong manifesto promises about tackling the city's housing crisis. In July, with Fishponds road completing, BCLT was able to seize the moment and organise a conference at Bristol University on scaling up community led housing, in partnership with colleagues working in Lawrence Weston, Southmead and Knowle West. The new cabinet member for housing attended for the whole day and the event was a major success. We are now continuing to work with these partners to build on the momentum created and move community-led housing (CLH) into the mainstream of BCC housing policy.

So BCLT has emerged from the long haul of its first project with 12 completed houses and over 20 residents. There were a number of cost and funding crises during the construction phase and there were times when we feared that the scheme could not be completed with the funds available. As it turned out however, we have ended with significant surpluses and a remarkably well-resourced platform for taking the society's work forward.

This has been due in no small measure to the expert guidance from our colleague Steve Bendle. Steve was involved in the original 2010 report for Bristol City Council that proposed that Bristol should have a CLT. He stayed on to assist BCLT with setting up and has been a board member since the society was founded in 2011, giving generously of his expert knowledge and experience. Steve has now stood down from the board and I want to express my appreciation and that of board member colleagues for the huge investment of time and care on his part that has allowed BCLT to establish itself so successfully.

I would also like to pay tribute to Keith Hallett, who stood down from the board this year after 5 years of generously sharing his local knowledge and long experience as a Bristol architect and social entrepreneur.

BCLT has received extraordinary support from our partners at United Communities. Oona Goldsworthy, the director, has sat on our board and exercised a key role in the realisation of our first project. Sally Gilbert, Sarah McQuatt and other UC colleagues have supported the board and Bridget and helped us to flog through the burdens of compliance that resulted from registration with the Homes and Communities Agency and use of government funding. A very big thank you to you all.

Now that 325 is substantially complete and fully occupied, the scope for our activities has been transformed. Once some completed houses came out of the long development pipeline the whole landscape changed, it seems. Working with our colleagues in the Urban CLT project, BCC has been carrying out the second part of its mission – of supporting other CLT development groups both in and around Bristol and elsewhere in the country. We were also featured on Radio 4's You and Yours programme in the autumn, and gave evidence to a parliamentary hearing on CLH in Westminster. We have also been approached by Power to Change, Wellspring Healthy Living Centre with partnering proposals and Bristol City Council planners working on proposals for large housing sites in South Bristol. So these are exciting times for BCLT.

### **Our Values and Objectives**

In the light of the range of new opportunities that are unfolding, there's now an urgent need to renew our vision. Six years ago a small group of founders set out to build some affordable houses using a CLT model. For most of the intervening period we have been almost entirely focused on achieving that goal. With that now mostly behind us, and with a local and national housing policy framework transforming almost by the day, we need to look at the opportunities that are opening up and set a new course.

When we were interviewed by Radio 4, a number of the questions were about why we were using a community-based approach and why we were prepared to make such an investment of volunteer effort. Why weren't we focusing our energy on lobbying the council or government, we were asked. The answer is partly because the mainstream approaches to fixing the dysfunctional housing market are largely broken - with housing completions of all types below 100,000 in England in 2015, and partly that the costs of providing housing are around a third lower in what a new report calls 'the citizen sector' of housing, and partly because of Bristol's strong ethos for tackling social issues with grass roots solutions.

### **Role of the Society's Board**

Bristol CLT is a grass roots organisation that has evolved from the city's special character, but we still haven't found enough good ways to involve members in the processes of project identification and development. Most of the work is still done by board members and our development officer. We have, of course, established a Shaldon Road Prospective Residents Group, which is now working with the architects as client representatives, and we have also just set up a site finding group with board member Ed Romaine as chair. Over the coming year we will be inducting a new board members and looking for new ways to get all our members involved with the aims of BCLT. Now that we have created an operational platform, those of us in the 'old guard' hope to pass the baton on to a new generation of housing activists.

With a revitalised board, BCLT will therefore be re-visiting mission and objectives in the New Year. We intend to involve our members in this process, along with our partners, stakeholders and colleagues in the CLH scene in Bristol and the National CLT Network. The new board will have responsibility for this process. It will also be undertaking a review of our constitution and recommending any appropriate changes to members at the next general meeting.

Along with these new tasks, board members retain responsibility for setting a framework of governance to achieve our objectives, for monitoring our performance against these objectives, for appointing and managing staff, for budgeting and managing financial and other risks to the society and for ensuring that we commission appropriate professional advice and support for our decisions.

### **Policy for Admission of Members to the Society**

One of the big questions our new vision needs to resolve is who BCLT exists to serve. Our founding idea was to use the energy, enthusiasm and resourcefulness of young Bristolians trying to get onto the housing ladder to pioneer new business and funding models for getting high quality affordable houses built. However, the implicit deal has always been that although we would focus on this ‘intermediate’ demand for affordable housing; we would also structure our schemes to provide housing opportunities for people in greater need and with less ability to be proactive.

At Fishponds, along with houses for existing BCLT members, we allocated rental units to people with high priority on the City Council’s waiting list. I and my board colleagues all think that this has been immensely worthwhile. But the difficulties of applying this approach more widely have been brought sharply into focus recently as we develop an allocations policy for the forthcoming units at Shaldon Road.

We have also struggled at times to manage the formal responsibilities that follow from the decision to become a Registered Provider, once we accepted government funding for the project at 325 Fishponds Road. And of course, we know that very few of our members joined Bristol CLT because of an enthusiasm for traditional social housing and the compliance burdens that come with it. So we have to forge a way forward that develops competence in governance, in project management, in being a responsible employer, in managing the formal processes of raising and using investment responsibly, but which keeps our grass roots, can-do, member governed ethos and allows us all to take control of the process of housing ourselves.

The society’s policy therefore remains to keep membership open to all applicants who satisfy the basic criteria of having an established living or working connection to Bristol. We do not actively seek new members however, in view of the high number of existing members in proportion to the amounts of accommodation we have so far been able to develop.

### **Board membership**

BCLT lost a number of valued board members over the last year, and has been seeking new volunteers to join our board and build our capacity as an organisation. Our constitution requires three board members to be elected by BCLT members in the ‘residents’ class of membership, three by the ‘community members’ class of members and three by the stakeholder class. This sounds fine but has a number of practical difficulties, not least that it’s hard to expect members to elect representatives from among their ranks when they don’t know each other very well – or at all in some cases.

So, although we do want to make it possible for the democratic processes to work with BCLT and will continue to seek applications from members to join the board and conduct elections where appropriate, we have also been proactive in the mean time, in seeking out good candidates and in trying to persuade suitable people to stand for board membership. In particular, the board needs to develop skills and experience in financial management, project management and property and planning law over time. We are therefore always on the lookout for potential board members with these and other relevant skills such as community engagement, business planning, self-building and event management.

As a result of these efforts in advertising and spreading the word and interviewing potential candidates, the AGM elected four new board members and endorsed one existing co-opted becoming a full board member.