

Domestic Democracy? Building a co-operative community around student homes

Brighton & Hove Community Land Trust - in partnership with SEASALT (South-East Students Autonomously Living Together) housing co-operative - has just purchased its first property, making it the fifth project in the UK, and the first in the South-East to establish a co-operative model of homes for students, collectively managed and at affordable rents.

Housing co-operatives are a way for groups of people to come together to own and manage their own housing. These homes are isolated from the housing market and offer lower rents and better-quality accommodation than the private sector. They allow the people living in them to pool their resources to create community-style homes where everyone collaborates for mutual benefit. The rent paid is only used to cover the upkeep of the house (lease, bills, repairs, etc.) and not to enrich landlords.

“High rents are causing significant inequalities in education. Those students whose families are able to support them are able to devote considerably more time to their studies than those who are having to work long hours to cover their rents” (Rebecca Searle, Lecturer, University of Brighton)

The property is owned by Brighton & Hove Community Land Trust and leased through a 7-year lease to SEASALT. Responsibility for ongoing and long-term maintenance and plans for the property is shared between the two organisations, with SEASALT having full autonomy in the day-to-day running, membership of the co-operative and the life of the community. Both organisations are committed to prioritising energy efficiency and environmental sustainability in the use of the home.

SEASALT are set to be good neighbours: as a group that feels strongly about the importance of community, they will allow their members to stay for the duration of their studies plus a year after graduation. This will give them the opportunity to build relationships with their neighbours and escape short-term tenancies that students and the community around them find disruptive. Each new member signs up to SEASALT’s community promise and not wanting to take up family housing was the main driver behind the group looking for larger properties.

The Bevy, the local community-owned, co-operative pub, told us why they supported the project:

“The Bevy as a community owned pub is a great example of how an area can really benefit from collective ownership. We are excited about working with Seasalt and helping the students become a real part of the wider Moulsecoomb community.”

Funding to buy the property was secured through a mortgage from Ecology Building Society, and a successful community share offer which raised £336,200 from over 140 investors. The plan is to buy a second property in 2-3 years, creating more homes that will be out of private ownership and affordable, secure and sustainable in the long term.

Jon Lee, who leads on Ecology Building Society’s support for community and co-operative housing explained:

“As a longstanding supporter of co-operative housing we were delighted to be asked to support Brighton and Hove Community Land Trust’s partnership with SEASALT to deliver affordable, energy efficient and quality rental accommodation for students.”

Ecology specialises in supporting projects which respect the environment and enable sustainable communities and has pioneered innovative 40-year mortgages for housing co-operatives, helping to maintain rents at affordable levels.

As a member-owned mutual ourselves, it's fantastic to be part of this ground-breaking project which we hope will pave the way for many more co-operative student housing schemes throughout the UK."

The problems with student accommodation are endemic of the wider issues with the housing market in this country. SEASALT explains:

"As young people, we have grown up in a country where the impacts of the financial crash, resulting austerity and a profit driven neoliberal system have disproportionately impacted disadvantaged communities, including us. The mass sell-off of public land and unequal land ownership have given rise to a financialised housing market with accommodation and rent prices spiralling faster than inflation.

For students, these issues are only enhanced as landlords and letting agents look to exploit our inexperience and precarious, insecure situations, frequently to make maximum profit for minimum effort. This means that student accommodation often exemplifies the worst aspects of housing in this country. Thus, it is very difficult to break the yearly cycle of renting with private landlords who usually have no incentive to improve student living conditions or tackle big issues such as the carbon emissions and accessibility of their housing stock.

By empowering our students to take control of their accommodation, we have taken the first steps towards building a fairer and more equal future across Brighton and Hove, putting the needs of our local community first. So, not only do we want to provide affordable, sustainable and democratic solutions to housing, we also want to demonstrate how co-ops and the co-operative economy can help solve the big issues of our time. This could include climate change and sustainability, wealth and land inequality, democratising our economy or, of course, our housing crisis. That's how we fit into the bigger picture, because after all, if we a small group of students can make big change in our community, why can't you?"

"We have really enjoyed working with these inspiring students, who have given so much passion and time to the project, even though some of them may not live in the house themselves. We look forward to a long and fruitful and enjoyable partnership with them and watching them thrive" (Janet Crome, director BHCLT)



Lease signing at Rotunda Café at Preston Park

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BACKGROUND INFO

1. Brighton & Hove Community Land Trust (BHCLT) is a community benefit society, registration number 7502. It is a non-profit community-led organisation working to put housing development back in the hands of people who need it. It is one of over 225 Community Land Trusts (CLTs) in England and Wales. Find out more at: <https://bhclt.org.uk/>
2. Community Land Trusts (CLTs) act as long-term stewards of housing, ensuring that it remains genuinely affordable, based on what local people actually earn, not just for now but for every future occupier. Over 17,000 people are members of CLTs across the country. More information can be found at: www.communitylandtrusts.org.uk
3. SEASALT's goal is to create affordable, high quality housing for students, run by students and offer an alternative to the current housing situation. It was founded in spring 2018 and is established as a fully mutual, not-for-profit housing co-operative.
4. Find out more about what is happening with community-led housing nationally at: <https://www.communityledhomes.org.uk/>
5. Find out more about Student Housing Co-operatives nationally <https://www.studenthomes.coop/>