2017

Something wonderful in my back yard: the social impetus for group self- building

Emma Elizabeth Heffernan
University of Wollongong, eheffern@uow.edu.au

Pieter De Wilde
Plymouth University

Something wonderful in my back yard: the social impetus for group self-building

Abstract

The housing crisis in the United Kingdom, as Barker (2004) identifies, has become shorthand for a chronic lack of suitable and affordable housing - in both the home ownership and rental sectors - and the undersupply and diminishment of social housing stock (Barker, 2004; Jefferys et al., 2014). What has also become clear is that the mainstream housebuilding sector - speculative housing development - has not risen to the task of ameliorating this crisis. Consequently, there is increasing marginalisation within the housing and land economy, with many people finding that their housing needs cannot be met by the sector. This chapter focuses on the experiences and perceptions of those who have been involved in group self- build projects, where households are involved in the design and/ or production of homes, either by arranging for their construction or building homes themselves within a group of three or more households (see also Duncan and Rowe, 1993). Against the background of the UK's housing crisis, this focus is particularly timely, as such group self-build projects are widely promoted as offering a route into housing that runs counter to these conditions.

10

Something wonderful in my back yard: the social impetus for group self-building

Emma Heffernan and Pieter de Wilde

The housing crisis in the United Kingdom, as Barker (2004) identifies, has become shorthand for a chronic lack of suitable and affordable housing – in both the home ownership and rental sectors – and the undersupply and diminishment of social housing stock (Barker, 2004; Jefferys et al., 2014). What has also become clear is that the mainstream housebuilding sector – speculative housing development – has not risen to the task of ameliorating this crisis. Consequently, there is increasing marginalisation within the housing and land economy, with many people finding that their housing needs cannot be met by the sector. This chapter focuses on the experiences and perceptions of those who have been involved in group self-build projects, where households are involved in the design and/or production of homes, either by arranging for their construction or building homes themselves within a group of three or more households (see also Duncan and Rowe, 1993). Against the background of the UK's housing crisis, this focus is particularly timely, as such group self-build projects are widely promoted as offering a route into housing that runs counter to these conditions.

An introductory note on group self-build

It is clear there are many ways of organising and managing a group self-build. Wallace et al. (2013a) provide a comprehensive list – while also noting that these different modes of delivery might overlap – that includes co-housing, eco-development, self-build for rent, sweat equity and community land trust.

- *Co-housing*, first developed in Denmark in 1972 (McCamant and Durrett, 1988). Co-housing groups commonly employ professionals to design and construct their homes and facilities. Within a co-housing scheme, each household typically has its own private home, and a common house for communal facilities is also provided.
- *Eco-developments* are planned sustainable communities. The construction of the homes is not necessarily carried out by the self-builders (instead, professionals may be appointed), but the self-builders will have an input into the design of the homes and community (Wallace et al., 2013a).
- Typically organised by a housing association, *self-build for rent* is a model whereby tenants receive training opportunities and/or reduced rent as payback for being involved in the construction of their home (Wheat, 2001). The unpaid labour provided by the tenants serves to reduce the overall build cost and therefore allows rents for the homes to be reduced.
- Within the *sweat equity model*, self-builders commit to a certain number of hours per week in the construction of their home. When the home is complete, they own a share in it (Wallace et al., 2013a).
- A *community land trust (CLT)* is a not-for-profit organisation owned and controlled by the community and run by volunteers (National CLT Network, 2012). Its purpose is to develop housing or other community assets that remain affordable in perpetuity.
- A *contractor/developer-enabled scheme* typically involves a local authority or developer offering serviced plots on their land, possibly as part of a larger development (Wallace et al., 2013a).
- *Contractor/developer-led schemes* characteristically offer the self-builder a choice of plots and designs for their home on a multi-unit site (Wallace et al., 2013a). Self-builders are also typically offered choice in terms of their level of involvement in constructing/finishing the home.

For the purpose of this chapter, all of these categories and models are considered as group self-build housing, and the projects with which interviewees were involved encompass a range of these. The reasons for the authors' focus on *group* self-build include the limited research on this mode of housing procurement and the mismatch between the potential of group self-build to offer housing at a similar scale of development to speculative housing – thus meeting unmet demand – and the very small proportion of new homes built through group self-build. Against this

background, this chapter explores group self-build in greater detail from the point of view of those who have experienced it.

Group self-build motivations

Wallace et al. (2013a) suggest that group self-build projects are typically formed around strong individuals with very strong motivations to achieve the project aim. They also assert that such groups attract people with common values and beliefs, typically regarding such topics as community, affordability and environmental sustainability. In the context of the German *Baugruppen*, groups are believed to form in one of two ways: either a pre-existing group of friends deciding to build together, or under professional leadership (Hamiduddin and Gallent, 2016). Wallace et al. (2013a) suggest that there is often a focus on providing access to housing for local people within their own community, and that developments are characteristically small in scale, using unique development models each time with little replication of successful models.

The UK government's current support for the self-build sector lies in its status as a potentially resilient supply of housing (Barlow et al., 2001; Brown et al., 2013; Parvin et al., 2011; Wallace et al., 2013a). While during recession the level of activity amongst speculative housebuilders is reduced, a move in line with their concerns to deliver profit (Callcutt, 2007), the self-build sector continues to build homes because these are built by an occupant to live in rather than for immediate sale (Parvin et al., 2011). This sector is also more agile, better able to make sites that are smaller and more difficult to develop viable (Brown et al., 2013).

From the point of view of the household, self-build housing improves choice (Barlow et al., 2001; Brown et al., 2013; Griffith, 2011; Parvin et al., 2011; Wallace et al., 2013a). By building a home that meets the needs of the occupants, the level of satisfaction with the home is significantly increased (Parvin et al., 2011; Wallace et al., 2013), while also producing a home of a higher quality (Barlow et al., 2001; Miles and Whitehouse, 2013; RIBA, 2009). Barlow et al. (2001) report that 'getting more for their money' either in terms of quality or quantity is a significant motivation for many self-builders. According to Brown et al. (2013), savings of 20–30 per cent on build cost can be achieved through self-build models of procurement, with group self-build projects having the potential to deliver even greater savings, through the benefits of economies of

scale. This accords with the German context where group self-builders typically make savings of 20 per cent when compared to individual self-build (Hamiduddin and Daseking, 2014).

Barlow et al. (2001) observe that self-builders often incorporate technical innovations within their homes. Enhanced energy efficiency is cited by many as a benefit of self-build homes (Brown et al., 2013; DCLG, 2011; NaSBA, 2011; Parvin et al., 2011). Because self-builders have a long-term interest in the home they are building, decisions that impact on both the capital cost and the running costs of a home can be considered on a whole-life basis. Therefore, investing in enhanced energy performance becomes a sensible option for a self-builder both in terms of their comfort and finances (Parvin et al., 2011). A qualitative study of Danish co-housing (Marckmann et al., 2012) found that self-builders were very focused on the inclusion of sustainable technologies and, to a lesser extent, also on the sustainable everyday practices of the residents. However, the environmental consequences of the size of their homes was notably absent in their discussions, despite the fact that the floor area of a home has been found to be a significant factor in its overall energy consumption (Gram-Hanssen, 2011). There is a propensity for individual self-build homes to be large detached dwellings, which, as a less dense form of development, has a negative impact in the broader sense of sustainability (Dol et al., 2012). Therefore, although individual self-builders may focus on the improved energy performance of their home, there also needs to be broader consideration of the scale and nature of the development. This is perhaps more feasible with group forms of self-build where a community is being built (Wallace et al., 2013a).

It is asserted that motivations to group self-build 'tend to be influenced by micro factors around personal and community values, rather than macro factors related to the broader economy and social trends' (Wallace et al., 2013a, 42); community is a primary motivation within group self-build projects (Benson, 2014). Previous research found that group self-build offered the benefit of building a community through the process of building homes (Benson, 2014; Broer and Titheridge, 2010; Brown et al., 2013; Wallace et al., 2013a). Hamiduddin and Gallent (2016) attribute this to individuals with shared purpose engaging in building a place for that community to continue to develop. Indeed, it is also suggested that this pathway of development leads to strong social relationships (Hamiduddin and Daseking, 2014). Group self-building has been found to offer the benefit of being a good place to bring up children (Broer and Titheridge, 2010) and to provide an affordable housing

solution for those 'who find themselves marginal to the housing market' (Benson, 2014, 21). Benefits that facilitate further the affordability of group self-build housing include sharing the costs of land, construction and professional fees; pooling of knowledge and skills, and potential sweat equity trading; reduced individual risk through aggregation; and savings on construction overheads by operating as a single client (Parvin et al., 2011). Despite these hopes for the affordability offered by group self-build, in the German context the *Baugruppen* model was found not to be appropriate for low-income households. Instead, it suited a niche market of middle-income households who, although they could not afford to undertake an individual self-build, could secure a mortgage for a group build (Hamiduddin and Gallent, 2016).

Whilst a body of knowledge exists on the wider self-build sector, this review of the literature highlights a gap in terms of the experiences and opinions of group self-builders in the UK. The literature has suggested that a desire to remain or become a part of a community is often central to the motivations of would-be group self-builders, but this is not underpinned by empirical research. This chapter investigates the experience-based opinions of group self-builders in relation to the motivations for and benefits of group self-build housing, with a focus on the social aspects of group self-build housing.

Understanding group self-build experiences

The empirical research comprised a series of 11 in-depth interviews with people who either were planning or had completed a group self-build scheme in England. Interviewees were selected purposively, with participants being recruited through online self-build forums; via self-build intermediaries; and through direct approaches to group self-build schemes, both planned and completed. Social media, including Twitter and Facebook, were also used to engage with the group self-build community.

The method of analysis adopted here is the housing pathways approach. Clapham argues that many perspectives on housing 'assume simple and universal household attitudes and motivations' (Clapham, 2005, 34). By considering the housing pathway of each household interviewed within this study, it is possible to understand the individual meanings of those households and how those meanings have translated into actions over time. Further, it is also possible to identify where individual pathways converge to form common pathways.

Group self-builder profiles

The 11 interviewees were involved in nine different group self-build schemes. Nearly half of these schemes had developed independently, through grassroots action (four), a further two schemes had become more autonomous after beginning as supported schemes. One interviewee was from a housing association-led scheme (as developer) in which the group self-build homes were being purchased off-plan at slightly reduced open market rates. One independent group had initially tried to find a development partner with whom to work, but had become frustrated with that process and the group had thus determined to proceed independently. Each interviewee either chose or was allocated a pseudonym. Figure 10.1 shows the profiles of the different interviewees in matrix format.

Given the small sample size and the purposive sampling techniques used, it is not possible to conclude that these characteristic data are representative of the group self-build sector. However, these data merit discussion in the light of existing profiles of (primarily individual) self-builders within the literature.

The interviewees in this study ranged from the 26–35 age group to the 56–65 age group, with the greatest concentration in the 26–35 group (four). This concentration in the younger age bracket is of note when the findings of Wallace et al.'s (2013b) survey of 580 self-builders (the significant majority of whom were individual self-builders) are considered; only 6 per cent of respondents in the previous study were within the 26–35 age category. Further, Benson asserts that:

> The 'typical selfbuilding household' consists of two people, often a married couple, aged between 40–69, with above average annual incomes, education of degree level and beyond … prior property ownership and housing assets are significant in becoming a self-builder. (2014, 2)

This stereotype profile considers not only age, but also household structure, income and education; it relates almost exclusively to individual self-builders, and concurs with several previous studies (e.g. Barlow et al., 2001; Brown, 2008; Wallace et al., 2013b).

Within the current study, four of the interviewees out of 11 either lived on their own, or were single parents. All four of these interviewees were female. In her social, geographical and political exploration of

		Interviewee pseudonym										
		Alison	Beth	Colin	Derek	Edward	Freddie	Grace	Helen	Sarah	Jess	Kathy
Age group	25 and under											
	26–35		●				●	●			●	
	36–45				●				●			
	46–55	●				●						●
	56–65			●						●		
	66–75											
	76 and over											
No. in household	1							●				●
	2	●	●	●			●		●	●		
	3+				●	●					●	
Household structure	Single							●				●
	Couple		●	●			●			●		
	Single parent family	●							●			
	Nuclear family				●	●					●	
Route to self-build	Independent	○	○	●	●	●			●		●	●
	Developer-led									●		
	Supported	●	●				●	●				
Model of group self-build	Co-housing			●	●					●	●	●
	Eco-development											
	Self-build for rent											
	Sweat equity	●	●			●	●	●	●			
	CLT	●	●			●	●	●	●			
Project stage	Planning to group self-build	●	●	●		●			●	●		
	Completed group self-build				●		●	●			●	●
Tenure	Affordable	●	●			●	●	●	●			
	Open market			●	●					●	●	●

○ Indicates a scheme which began as a supported scheme and has since developed to be a primarily independent group.

Figure 10.1 Interviewee profile matrix

eco-homes (which fall within the self-build spectrum), Pickerill (2016) analyses gender identity and gender relations within their development. She finds that women are typically excluded from construction through cultural practices, judgments are made about their capacities and capabilities, and their input is often undervalued. Indeed, across the cases she studied there was a stereotype that 'men build houses and women make homes' (Pickerill, 2016, 174). Yet within this study are examples

of women choosing to build themselves and their children a home, an uncommon pathway.

The interviewee characteristics within the current study are therefore suggestive that those households attracted to the group self-build pathway might differ significantly from those that follow the individual self-build pathway. In Germany, the *Baugruppen* model has proven popular with households comprising younger couples with dependents (Hamiduddin and Gallent, 2016). Brown et al. (2013) postulate that potential 'collective custom builders' (another moniker for a group self-builder) can be broadly categorised as either '[o]lder, more affluent households … commonly referred to as "Empty-Nesters" or "Baby Boomers" … [and] [y]ounger, less affluent households for whom access to housing is currently limited, and for whom motivation stems from economic need and the prospect of cost-savings' (Brown et al., 2013, 37). Thus, whilst the younger and less affluent demographic profile of the group self-builders within the current study supports this postulation, with the addition of female leadership and alternative household structures (single-parent households), this study identifies even greater diversity in the households following the group self-build pathway.

Despite the increased diversity of group self-build, several interviewees expressed disappointment that their community was not as diverse as it might have been, generally due to financial constraints. Therefore, although the group self-build pathway appears to attract a more diverse cohort than individual models, limits of inclusivity exist. This has potential implications for social sustainability.

Common characteristics of group self-build

Interviewees were encouraged to describe the nature of their own project, from which common characteristics of group self-build have been identified. A common assertion was that group self-builders were typically community-minded people: 'The people you meet that want to group self-build, they're great people, they're really nice groups, [names two groups] and I'm sure all the others too, they're just nice, they're community-minded people' (Alison). This aligns with the findings of Wallace et al. (2013a), who assert that self-build groups attract people with common values and beliefs, and that these values are often regarding topics such as community.

Group self-build schemes typically rely on different members of the group bringing a variety of skills to the project:

What is good about the group is obviously some of us, our skills might be more now, the initial setting up and doing all the admin. But other people's skills are going to come in when it's building … So I think that's good that the skills will be mixed and shared. (Beth)

Despite this, it is worth being mindful of Hamiduddin and Gallent's (2016) caution that groups may not bring together all necessary resources and thus may need to bring in missing skills.

Within sweat equity models of group self-build, it is common for there to be a requirement for all homes to be completed before any can be inhabited:

The good thing was that every house had to be completed before anyone moved in, so it kept at a certain level. So no one else was running away putting the curtains up while matey down there was still trying to fit the kitchen. (Freddie)

This supports the literature in which it is stated that this requirement is commonly used to overcome potential issues of group members not contributing equally in terms of time and effort (Wallace et al., 2013a).

Benefits of group self-build

In discussing their experiences of either planning or completing a group self-build scheme, interviewees identified several benefits. These are shown in Figure 10.2 and have been grouped into two categories: personal benefits and broader benefits. Some of the benefits have been identified as serving both as personal and broader benefits and are therefore shown bridging the two categories.

These personal benefits were identified by interviewees from sweat equity models of group self-build, in which the self-builders were more 'hands-on'. Interviewees identified the opportunity to develop new skills and knowledge as a personal benefit of group self-building:

Personal benefits		Broader benefits
Develop skills and knowledge	Financial accessibility	Builds community
Empowering	High build quality	Environmental sustainability
Pride – sense of ownership		Supports local economy

Figure 10.2   Identified benefits of group self-build housing

> To know that you're living in a place that you really created. I mean in that sense, as a life experience, it's fantastic; that's one of the reasons that I want to do it, it's very empowering, isn't it? And to know that you can sort out your housing problem and give yourself a home for life and learn amazing new skills… (Alison, age range 46–55)

The literature suggests self-builders have the potential to gain employment because of the new skills developed (NaSBA, 2013). However, the following quotations illustrate divergent views regarding the potential for future employment:

> I wouldn't feel that I could tip up to a building site and go 'Can I have a job?' [laughs] unless it was labouring – I'm pretty good at that! But I think … we're definitely much more able to just get on and do things now that need doing around the house or in the garden. But I don't think anyone has actually retrained as a result of this. (Grace, age range 26–35)

> The learning curve's been amazing; I have learnt so many things. Because I didn't know anything about planning, business management, you know, a lot of things I've learnt a lot about in the past couple of years, but it's been good for leading onto other types of employment afterwards as well. (Helen, age range 36–45)

We argue that this divergence in opinions is due to Helen considering the potential for applying transferable skills or for employment in the broader development sector, because she is part of an independent group and is involved in a broad range of tasks such as planning negotiations and funding applications. Conversely, Grace is possibly considering only the potential for employment on a building site, because she was part of a supported group self-build and was only involved in the project after the site had been acquired and planning permission granted. While she can see a benefit in her confidence and ability to tackle construction and maintenance tasks, she cannot envisage this leading to employment opportunities.

The benefits of empowerment and pride were identified only by female interviewees. One possible reason for this is that the construction industry is one of the most male-dominated industries in the UK (Fielden et al., 2000). Indeed, the Office for National Statistics found that whilst around 20 per cent of architects, town planners and building surveyors and around 9 per cent of engineering professionals in the UK are female, the ratio of female construction workers on site is significantly lower (less than 2

per cent of construction and building trades) (ONS, 2015). Given Pickerill's (2016) findings that cultural practices exclude women from construction, female group self-builders are therefore likely to commence a project with the perception that, as a woman and an amateur, they are ill-equipped for the task ahead. Thus, when they successfully complete their project, they feel empowered and proud of their achievement against adversity. Amateur male self-builders may also have felt similarly proud and empowered based on a previous lack of experience, but might not have acknowledged these emotions, or may not have felt comfortable discussing them in an interview with a female researcher. However, the ingrained stereotype that 'men build houses' very probably smooths their path into self-building. Whilst the finding that group self-build has the potential to be empowering aligns with the wider literature (Burgess et al., 2010), the relationship between gender and empowerment within group self-build is elucidated here.

Interviewees believed that a further benefit of group self-build homes is that they are likely to be of high build quality because self-builders take pride in their work (see also Miles and Whitehouse, 2013; RIBA, 2009):

> [A housing association] came when it was finished and a lot of them were saying that the standard of the build is actually much higher than they've seen from contractors. So that was super nice to know … but then I think that's connected with having a pride in what you're doing, because it's for you and for your community. But it was nice to get compliments on that because everybody was absolutely trying to do [their best]. (Grace, age range 26–35)

A number of interviewees stated that the process of group self-building builds a community, thus confirming findings from previous research (Benson, 2014; Broer and Titheridge, 2010; Parvin et al., 2011):

> A year seeing each other every week, you know, 20 hours a week or whatever and all trying to get to the same goal and all trying to deal with the same problems … I mean it does build that community. (Freddie, age range 26–35)

Within the literature, it has further been suggested that the benefit of community interaction extends beyond the group self-build development to the wider neighbourhood community (Broer and Titheridge, 2010; Brown et al., 2013). This was delightfully exemplified in a letter published in the *The Times* about one of the schemes covered by the research. A neighbour of that scheme wrote to express his delight that people were

taking this grassroots action within his rural community, referring to it as 'something wonderful in my back yard' (SWIMBY) as opposed to the more commonly held opinion of 'not in my back yard' (NIMBY).

Many interviewees believed that group self-build offers the benefit of being more environmentally sustainable than other forms of housing development:

> I think if you're the sort of person who's going to be interested in a self-build, you're also the sort of person who's interested in having the responsibility to look after the environment a bit more. (Grace, age range 26–35)

> Because of the particular wants of the people, you'll be building to a very low energy/high spec, in a way that a commercial developer wouldn't do. (Colin, age range 56–65)

However, although many interviewees aspired to environmental sustainability within their schemes, other priorities were often decided to be of greater importance, and they were willing to compromise on the environmental sustainability of their schemes, as exemplified by this quote from a member of a completed co-housing scheme: 'It was a belief that it was a way of introducing social sustainability into housing, and I wanted to have ecological building, but like I say, I was willing to compromise on that one at the time' (Derek, age range 36–45). Interviewees stated that a further benefit of group self-build is that it supports the local economy, confirming the suggestion that self-builders are more likely to operate locally, employing local tradespeople and consultants and utilising local builders' merchants (NaSBA, 2013).

The financial accessibility of group self-build was identified as a primary benefit by the interviewees:

> To be eligible, really, you're in the position you're renting, you haven't bought, you haven't got loads of money, because self-builds normally require huge amounts of money … it's a £5,000 deposit and that's it, that's your only costs … which is something that's reachable for lots of people. (Alison, age range 46–55)

This is in agreement with Benson (2014), who asserts that group self-build offers an affordable housing solution to those marginalised by the housing market. Whilst affordability is suggested as a benefit within the broader self-build literature (e.g. Falk and Carley, 2012; NaSBA, 2013),

the two concepts, affordability and financial accessibility, are believed to be distinct from each other. The affordability discussed in the wider literature often relates to reduced running costs resulting from enhanced environmental sustainability and reduced capital costs as a result of saving the cost of developers' overheads and profit through the self-builder building or managing the project, whereas the financial accessibility identified within this study refers to group self-build offering the only solution to home ownership for many working people.

Motivations for group self-build

The motivations for group self-building identified by the interviewees have been grouped into two categories: personal motivations and broader motivations (Figure 10.3). Hamiduddin and Gallent (2016) assert that the motivations of the household inform the subsequent housing pathway.

Affordability was a central motivation for the interviewees involved in affordable group self-build schemes using the sweat equity model:

> It's a financial thing. If you're working but you're not earning a lot of money, you're in the gap – you're definitely not impoverished, but at the same time, you aren't able to save … you think 'Am I going to be able to get on this property ladder, at all, ever?' (Grace, age range 26–35)

The above quote from Grace highlights a similarity with the German *Baugruppen* model popular amongst middle-income households. Grace also expressed unease that there were people who may need the housing as much as her, but who were in a worse financial position and thus could not access this housing pathway:

Personal motivations		Broader motivations
Avoid poor-quality housing		Environmental sustainability
House to meet needs		Morals
Housing security	Affordability	
Only route to home ownership	Community	
Personal investment		
Place to bring up children		
Quality of life		

Figure 10.3   Identified motivations for group self-build housing

There were definitely people who would have qualified who wouldn't have been able to get finance, so it's great if you're one of the people who can, but it does make you feel slightly conflicted actually because you think 'well actually, I'm in a better position than these people and these people still haven't got housing'.

The motivations of affordability and to stay within one's own community were commonly linked by interviewees:

We can't afford to live in the communities that we work in, which is not … on a sustainability thing, yes we could go and buy a house in Whitleigh, but it's not my community, it's not the school that my kids go to, it's not the school they've grown up in. (Edward, age range 46–55)

Other motivations under the theme of community related to wanting to be part of an intentional community. This quote from Colin, a member of a planned co-housing group, when asked about his motivations for self-building, highlights this point as well as the potential for broader environmental sustainability:

Well, a sense of community, but also the idea of having low-energy housing, the idea of, if you like, the environmental benefits of not everyone having, you know … of sharing some things basically, possibly a car pool, possibly a laundry facility…

Many interviewees identified community as a key motivation for group self-building. This broad motivation included: being close with your neighbours, returning to or staying within your own community, sharing, and the need for a diversity of households to sustain a community.

There's not any affordable housing round here and, like in all the villages in Devon, there's no affordable housing, and I don't see how they can sustain a community life when the only people that can afford it are retired or very high earners. (Beth, age range 26–35)

It was really emotional, totally emotional to think that I might be able to come home and live at home and have that sort of sense of community. (Grace, age range 26–35)

Whilst this broadly aligns with the literature in which community is identified as one of the three primary motivations (Wallace et al., 2013a;

Benson, 2014), the housing pathways of the interviewees give greater depth of understanding of this motivation.

A series of personal motivations were identified by the interviewees, these are: avoiding poor quality housing, having a house which meets their needs, housing security, only route to home ownership, personal investment, a place to bring up children, and quality of life. Helen is a single mother who is a director of an independent affordable group self-build project. Her primary motivation is to avoid poor quality housing and live in a suitable environment in which to bring up her child:

> Motivation is years of bad landlords and mouldy houses [laughs], and having a son … I just think living on a lower wage bracket, I think it's not fair, you shouldn't have to put up with that.

Alison is also a single mother, living in a one-bedroom house with her preschool-aged child. She is a director of a supported affordable group self-build project and her motivations are the desire for a house that meets her family's needs. She also reiterated the motivation of housing security and stability: 'I live in a house with no garden and one bedroom and really want to live in a nice place. And also just don't want to keep moving; I just can't do that.'

Interviewees from groups using the sweat equity model identified group self-build as the only route to home ownership. At the time of self-building, Freddie, who was 33, had moved home over 35 times in his life, hence both a desire and need for stability and housing security. As he described,

> It was the only way in, only way into the housing market. I'd pretty much given up on owning or getting a mortgage … Rental was tricky as well because there just weren't the properties any more, so having to move quite a lot. And over time, I mean I've moved 35 something times, throughout my life … it was constantly trying to find somewhere that was rentable on the wages that I was bringing in and that was still in the area that I was brought up in and want to stay in.

Wallace et al. (2013a) stress that motivations for group self-builders tend to concern micro factors, such as the personal motivations we identify through the quotations above. However, the complex nature of the housing market means that many of these seemingly personal motivations in fact stem from the conditions of the wider housing and land

economy, poor quality housing and housing insecurity. Recognising the structural conditions within which these personal troubles arise is therefore an important intervention into understandings of the value of group self-build both to the people undertaking it and as a solution to these widespread housing issues.

Indeed, this was clearly articulated by one of our interviewees. Her moral stance against the current operations of the housing market was her primary motivation for pursuing an affordable group self-build model:

> I don't really agree with the housing market as it is and I don't really agree that housing is for making profit. And I think that the way that it works at the moment is not sustainable. So that was my main driver really, is to try and find a way that is more sustainable, and is about making homes which are for future generations really … and more of a kind of social responsibility towards that. (Beth, age range 26–35)

The social sustainability Beth promotes encompasses motivations of affordability and community in ways that extend beyond individualised motivations. Her assertion is underpinned by a commitment to thinking about how the housing market might function differently; '[W]hile it is not always the case, community-led housing may also include a commitment to a different ideology about the relationship between housing and wealth' (Benson, 2014, 21).

Edward, a director of an independent affordable group self-build scheme, asserted that environmental sustainability is a primary motivation for their group. He also relates this to a motivation for an improved quality of life:

> We've always said that we want to build environmentally friendly, sustainable homes – that was the primary driver, so the group is self-selecting … it's people who are motivated on an environmental level, it's people who are motivated to better their quality of life. (Edward, age range 46–55)

This demonstrates a combination of broader and personal motivations underpinning the desire to create sustainable homes.

Two of the interviewees within this study (Alison and Helen) were single mothers, each with a child under the age of five; both interviewees were pursuing an affordable group self-build route using sweat equity. They were also both very proactive and central figures within their

groups (see Wallace et al., 2013a), directors of their respective community organisations. Given the gender divisions within most self-builds (Pickerill, 2016), it is unusual for these women to be participating within a self-build project without a male partner, and even more so to be driving these projects. Both interviewees stated that they could not envisage any other route to home ownership (shared or otherwise), in stark contrast to the motivations of many individual self-builders, where access to housing is rarely a motivation (Benson, 2014). Alison and Helen additionally stress that they could not consider pursuing an individual self-build project, group self-building being accessible to them in terms of finance, the skills and knowledge required, and the mutual support provided. This aligns with Parvin et al.'s (2011) suggestion that group self-build lowers the capital threshold for entry, which refers not only to financial capital but also personal capital in terms of skills and knowledge. This needs to be met in turn by social capital, which within a spontaneously organised group may or may not be sufficient to deliver the scheme (Hamiduddin and Gallent, 2016). It is for this reason that groups either need to enlist assistance from outside their community or adapt the methods they intend to use. Indeed, many of the schemes of which interviewees were members had chosen to use straw bale construction, including because of the ease (and speed) of construction it allows (Seyfang, 2010).

In summary, a range of motivations for group self-building were identified by the interviewees. Many of the motivations identified related to the fundamental need for housing which could not be met through the rental sector either in terms of quality or affordability. Similarly, a need for stability was a commonly cited motivation due to the short-term nature of tenancies within the private rental market. The central themes of affordability, community and environmental sustainability aligned strongly with the literature, but the narrative underlying these themes further extends the existing knowledge. Moreover, the additional personal motivations identified contribute new information to the body of knowledge.

Conclusions

This chapter has provided a unique exploration of the motivations for group self-building from the perspective of 11 individuals who have completed or plan to complete a group self-build project in England. A genuine appetite and aspiration for sustainability in the homes of the self-builders was highlighted. Furthermore, aspirations for a different

and more community-minded way of living were exposed. Many interviewees identified a desire to work with others, to learn from and with them, to build closer relationships within either existing or new communities. Interviewees were often morally opposed to the way in which the housing market has changed and the very real impact this is having on communities and their ability to sustain themselves. Many interviewees were driven by a need for housing security and stability, which resulted in their taking a proactive approach in forging a common housing pathway through grassroots action.

The group self-builders interviewed have cast a new light on the gender divisions in self-build. The female self-builders have not only played an equal role in housing delivery, but have taken a leadership role in driving forward their housing pathways. Therefore, whilst self-building a house clearly presents challenges, this chapter has revealed that doing so within a group has the potential to empower participants whilst delivering sustainable, diverse, sociable and cohesive communities for the long term, creating something wonderful in our back yards.

Acknowledgements