

Introducing: Community Coaches



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Creating Collaborative Culture is Key to Successful Community Initiatives

Many groups fail to achieve their goals even when funding and technical support are available, according to research into success factors for community-led initiatives. Increasingly, the evidence points to a group's *culture* as being a crucial influencer that can either make or break a project.^{1 2}

"[Cohousing] groups are often aware of gaps in their skill-base around practical issues like what legal structure to choose.....They are often less aware of the gaps in their co-operative skills, or ways that their structure or culture may not be facilitating them to do effective co-operative organising. However, our observation is that these things absolutely make the difference between whether a group thrives or flounders."

— Becks, Seeds for Change

We all know what it is like to have a good and bad experience of being part of a group or team, whether at school, work, sport or as volunteers. However, many of us fail to realise that rather than passively hoping for a good experience, we can actually take action. We can consciously shape our collective experiences to be more constructive using methods and processes to help any group become more skilled in sustaining a positive, collaborative experience.

"In discussions with many groups in recent years it has become clear that we were deeply underestimating the importance of providing access to so-called 'soft skills' in team building, decision-making and conflict resolution in the success of community groups seeking to develop housing, business or local assets."

— Owen Jarvis, UK Cohousing Network

This is particularly important with community groups as there are often urgently needed services and facilities at stake. Community groups and teams falling out or becoming stuck can have significant consequences for the local area. Yet funders, government, and communities themselves rarely invest in such skills.

"The challenges in maintaining group solidarity and momentum over the 5-7 years it usually takes to reach the 'living' stage are such that as many as 70-90% of cohousing groups fail to achieve their goal."

— Dr Helen Jarvis

Business or technical advisors are often backed by funders, and yet, while they provide valuable guidance to many projects, they are often out of touch with the group dynamics and systems that determine how well a group can make use of their input. Conversely, conventional coaches and facilitators, who specialise in group dynamics and systems, may not have sufficient grasp of the community-led context to align their support appropriately. A crucial opportunity is being missed to develop a specialised support for this movement that enables greater long-term success.

¹ "Community Coaches: A Strategic Recommendation," Feasibility Report commissioned by UK Cohousing Network, funded by Power to Change, and carried out by Year Here (2021);

² "Exploring the Durability of Community Businesses in England," Dr Reinout Kleinmans, Steve Clare, Dr Ingmar van Meerkerk and Rianne Warsen (2020).

“When you come to the meetings the decisions should be made already. In reality that didn’t happen. We ended up mediating the people in the room whilst they were disagreeing. It was quite difficult. People cried.”

— Ken Rorrison, Architect

This role must be capable of working in the complex personal and interpersonal realm of a group’s culture, to enable greater empowerment and effectiveness of the whole. The role of Community Coach was developed to meet this need.

“Aligned entrepreneurial culture is a necessary condition for durability. In an aligned entrepreneurial culture, entrepreneurial values are incorporated and shared in the community business, making everyone ‘pull together in the same direction’. This culture is also reflected in people being willing to adapt and embrace change, to take responsibility, to take risks in developing new activities/sources of income, and to experiment, learn and innovate ... The analysis suggests that any community business that lacks this condition is unlikely to survive in the longer term.”

— Dr Reinout Kleinhans, Steve Clare, Dr. Ingmar van Meerkerk and Rianne Warsen

“Exploring the durability of community businesses in England”

Some Scenarios

(1) A commercial developer has a large site in which they are open to setting aside plots for community led housing. They are happy to provide technical advice including an architect and financial support. They do not want to get involved directly but have a budget to bring in external support for team building during the project. They fear the project might be at risk if the group fall out or get stuck in ongoing delays whilst trying to agree key decisions.

- ◆ **A community coach can enable the group to form and then design its identity, culture, vision, and working methods so the group can be an effective client – able to make collective decisions and complete the housing project, whilst sustaining a healthy collective culture once they move in.**

(2) Volunteers from a local community come together to save the local library from closure and are being encouraged to do so by the local council. Business advice and funding are available, however there are lots of ideas, and very different levels of skill and experience.

- ◆ **A community coach can enable these individuals to create a shared vision, develop a fair, open and inclusive culture, and a way of making decisions and overcoming difficulties that can be sustained over time. This enables the group to cultivate a welcoming, creative and enterprising environment for a thriving community business.**

(3) A local community create a solid business plan that provides the basis for a community asset transfer to buy a local building to the delight of funders and government departments. However, the community, who want to participate, are feeling overburdened by such a large project. They have never worked together before collectively in this way, have limited skills to contribute. The project has resources to hire a development worker to “ensure the project is delivered on time and within budget”. She notices worries and concerns in conversations about the future of the project and volunteers withdrawing from taking on roles and responsibilities.

- ◆ **A community coach can bring awareness to the understandable fear of running a large and unfamiliar project, while exploring ways people can effectively become engaged, name their vulnerabilities and build trust amongst members.**

(4) A long-term community business, which was the heart and soul of its local area, collapses when the property owners sell the building that housed it to developers.

- ◆ **A community coach can provide a facilitated environment in which the community can express their different perspectives on the events that transpired, grieve the loss, and begin to explore what energy might exist for a new project or projects to be initiated.**

(5) A community development worker is supporting an initiative brought forward by a local community for new affordable housing. What arises are radically different perspectives and hostile viewpoints, even though the ultimate intentions seem similar. A group is forming that will represent the various sectors in the community and they have asked for support to navigate their way through these differences. The community development worker fears that their position of neutrality within the project might be compromised should they attempt to mediate the conflict.

- ◆ **A community coach can be invited in to mediate conflict and help the community to navigate the emotional and interpersonal terrain.**

About the Community Coaches Project

In 2021, the outcomes of a literature review and feasibility report, commissioned by the UK Cohousing Network, sponsored by Power to Change, and carried out by Year Here, established the need for the Community Coach role within the cohousing sector and created an initial role description.

The overwhelming sentiment in the researchers' interviews with active cohousing groups was that a Community Coach would meet a key – but often unexpressed – need for social and relational support. These groups reported that this type of support would enable the practical success of their initiatives, the sustainability of their communities, and the capacity for their organising to be inclusive of otherwise marginalised social groups.

But what would go into training and enabling such a role? How is it similar to and different from existing community support roles? To explore these questions and more, the UK Cohousing Network and Power to Change gathered together a co-design group which included 13 representatives of various community-led sectors from across the UK, a steering group of four, plus two members of Culture Garden to facilitate the co-design process and provide input into the emerging role and programme design. This group held a series of co-design sessions between November 2021 and February 2022 to more thoroughly scope out the Community Coach role and outline a training programme for it.

About the Role & Training

The co-design team have made great strides in scoping out the Community Coach role, and have successfully outlined a training programme for it. The team agrees that, at its heart, the Community Coach role should enable '**mutually empowered**' group cultures; that is, cultures that spread the benefits and responsibilities of a group's work across all participants, and that actively enable inclusion.

Another of the group's recommendations is to broaden the scope of the role. Although the impetus for it came initially from the cohousing sector, the co-design group strongly felt that its core intentions are applicable across a range of community-led initiatives, including community-led businesses, community-controlled assets, and community-led housing. Their view is that expanding the role to support this larger network will spread the benefits of the initiative more widely, and will enable its long-term sustainability by providing a larger business case for it.

The training programme combines an essential **knowledge base** for the Community Coach role with an essential **skillset**, in order to equip the Community Coach to enable mutually-empowered group cultures across the full spectrum of community-led initiatives.

In Conclusion

The project's core partners are currently preparing for the next phase of the Community Coaches project, which will involve the creation of a detailed curriculum and delivery plan.

We look forward to sharing the outcomes of our co-design with you, and to explore the broader importance of the Community Coach role and training programme to the initiatives you are a part of.

Please reach out to Info@CultureGarden.org with any questions or feedback.