



# Altogether now

Affordable, sustainable and with built-in social advantages, many experts see community self-build projects as housing's brightest prospect for the future – so why are they so hard to pull off? Sustainability consultant **Steffie Broer's** first-hand experience led to her setting up Bright Green Futures to help would-be community builders get started. Here's what she's got to say...



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There's hardly anything not to like or admire about community self-builds.

They offer all the benefits of self-building on your own – designing and living in a house you really love, lower costs and an amazing sense of achievement – with the added benefits of mutual support and being able to pool land, talent, building materials and other resources. This doesn't just have implications for even more money-saving: it

also builds strong, like-minded communities that are bound together socially – a priceless commodity, if ever there was one.

Getting such a project off the ground is no easy matter, however, but having built our own home as part of a Bristol eco community we wanted to pass on what we'd learnt to other would-be builders, so we set up Bright Green Futures to do just this.

Our own project, the Ashley Vale development, is a unique eco community built on a former scaffolding yard a few miles from Bristol city centre. In 2000, when developers threatened to build a modern housing estate on the sensitive site, a



**B**right Green Futures initiates eco self-build communities by purchasing land, selling plots to self-builders and then supporting them in setting up their communities and building their homes. It has also set up a database of interested self-builders, so that when there's enough demand for a certain area, it can target a plot search there. Bright Green Futures currently has a beautiful plot of land near Stroud in Gloucestershire available for community self-builders.

To register your interest for a plot in Stroud or elsewhere, or if you have some land available for a community self-build, interested developers and local authorities, or if you would like to contribute your skills and work for the company, get in touch via [www.brightgreenfutures.co.uk](http://www.brightgreenfutures.co.uk). Other useful places for help include Ecomotive, a not-for-profit company that helps sustainable self-build communities ([www.ecomotive.org](http://www.ecomotive.org)) and the Community Self-Build Agency ([www.communityselfbuildagency.org.uk](http://www.communityselfbuildagency.org.uk))

community action group was formed to take control in order to develop an eco self-build community. The land was divided into individual plots, with a communal shared garden at the heart of the site as well as a community room and three workspaces. Each building plot was sold to individuals and the shared garden and community room are in communal ownership. By owning the site, residents were empowered to take full control of its development.

Those living at Ashley Vale live sustainable lifestyles because that's what motivated them to self-build in the first place, but it's also because sustainability is often more convenient. For example, we have a communal garden, which means we tend to spend more leisure time at home, so there's no need to travel long distances to take the kids to the park or visit friends.

Adults and children alike have a lot of their friends and social life in the direct vicinity, and we know on average about 50 of our neighbours by name – the UK average is three. Many of us now work from home, having been given the opportunity to integrate workspaces into our houses or rent workspace on site. All of this means that the time we spend travelling is significantly reduced – which means more time for fun, less time in traffic and fewer emissions.

### Safety in numbers

Our houses were also more affordable. With many of us being on low or medium income, and some with large families, it was important to create sufficient space using our limited budget. It's usual for self-build

homes to cost much less to build than they are worth once completed, and the uplift for most of us has far exceeded what is typical for self-builders.

Building together had huge advantages. We recommended tradespeople and building products to one other, and also worked on one another's houses. We bought things in bulk and used up one another's construction waste material and off-cuts. We purchased materials at good prices, and, in terms of labour, we forged trusting relationships instead of using expensive contracts managed by large firms.

Homes at the Ashley Vale site have increased in value faster than the national average, and faster than individual self-build homes: most of them are now valued at two to three times the initial plot and building costs. The main attraction, it seems, is that people want to live in a positive community – it's what motivated the residents to build in the first place and it's why the houses are in high demand when they come on the market.

I am immensely grateful for having had the opportunity to build and live here. Since we started we've received so many visitors who ask if we could help them do the same that I decided to set up Bright Green Futures with the view to create more eco self-build communities, so other people could enjoy the benefits of sustainable living.”



### Case study

Nick Masheder, one of Ashley's Vale's original self-builders, explains how he has been affected by the project:

“Building our house was one of the most challenging tasks we have done as a family, and now that it's finished, it has clearly been our single most satisfying and positive undertaking. We now have an eco-friendly home big enough for our family of five, in a much-loved area and with a network of friends and neighbours. It is hard to believe!

“In financial terms it has been an excellent investment – the plot cost £35,000 and the total build cost was £135,000. For this (and a whole lot of hard work) we got a large three-bedroom

house and two small one-bedroom flats (which provides for my parents' retirement fund). The alternative would have been to have stayed renting and later buy a fairly run-down two-bedroom house, without high insulation standards, paying probably twice as much for bills, and without being able to help my parents.”



**Above left: The community room and shared garden are at the heart of the scheme, and are much used by the residents. Left: The houses incorporate many of the features that draw people to self-build, such as double height windows**



## Community self-build: your questions answered

**Bright Green Futures' Steffie Broer is in a unique position to help community self-builders, because she's already done it herself. Here she shares the pleasures and the pitfalls of the project, and outlines what it will take for self-build eco-communities to be popping up all over the country.**

### How hard was it to find a plot?

Purchasing land is the single biggest obstacle to eco self-build community projects: the group has to compete against professional property developers, and plot sellers often prefer to deal with one professional, rather than a group of individuals. At Ashley Vale, a number of coincidences came together which made us more viable, including a planning requirement for mixed-use development, a very proactive existing community and contaminated land issues that made the land unattractive to property developers. These coincidences cannot be replicated, however, and that is where Bright Green Futures will bridge the gap to making eco self-build communities happen.

### How well did you support one another during the build?

We did the research on construction practice together and were able to recommend materials and trades to one another. Luckily we had people in the group with expertise in sustainability as well as people with expertise in construction.

We also discovered that personal contacts or recommendations were better than large companies. When it came to timber frames, for example, we found that using a small contractor or taking time off work to build the frames ourselves was

better than using a package company, because the standard of workmanship was generally better.

### And what sort of community emerged?

Our greatest success was creating a neighbourhood where we know our neighbours, we care and we contribute. This ranges from working together on the communal garden, organising get-togethers and helping each other with childcare, shopping, etc. There are no requirements for anyone to take part in any of this, and indeed the level of involvement of individuals varies widely. However it is likely that when one of us is hit with difficulty, such as a someone in hospital, difficult work commitments, job loss or a relationship breakdown, there is a community of people offering to help with practical issues as well as emotional support.

### Any other advantages?

It's great for kids. Having a communal garden and a pedestrian-friendly street with a 5 mph speed limit means that kids can play safely outside. From a really young age they become independent, learn to solve disputes on their own, are able to speak confidently to adults and kids and generally prefer running around outside to staying at home watching TV.

### Are eco self-build communities really a solution for mass housing?

At Bright Green Futures we want to make eco self-building accessible to most people in the UK – not just those on high income – and help people leave a social and environmental legacy, rather than just make money. This means that we can work with lower profit margins than conventional property developers, and we can sell at more affordable prices. However, for large-scale roll-out, more government backing

would be required. This may include allocating land to be sold specifically to eco self-build communities that demonstrate that they can meet certain sustainability credentials. Local authorities can also help by being supportive to the concept in the planning process.

### How can housing become more sustainable?

It's painful to see how many new housing developments are built where community spirit and a commitment to sustainability is little more than an afterthought. By assuming that sustainability is only about making homes energy efficient and integrating renewable energy, there is a missed opportunity to reduce carbon emissions through enabling low carbon lifestyles (transport, waste, food, using local and natural building materials).

If people were to live this sort of holistic lifestyle, we would only need to spend £3,000 on our homes to achieve the same sort of reduction in our carbon footprint as £20,000-worth of renewable energy and energy efficiency measures. ●



**The homes' individuality is refreshingly unusual for England**