



# How to find land

**Angela Vincent**

## **Struggling to find a site?**

You are not alone. Many groups tell us that acquiring land is one of the biggest factors holding them back.

Angela Vincent is a Director of UK Cohousing Network. She is also a co-founder and Chair of Kent Cohousing. Here she shares her personal experience of the difficulties groups face when trying to find land and gives some top tips based on her experience with

Two months after deciding to create Kent Cohousing, in 2016, we had what we thought was a very quick win. With eyes wide open for opportunities, we found a three-acre site, not being used, on a friend's property. The owner was really keen on the idea of cohousing. It seemed perfect. We wondered why it had taken others so long! The landowner was particularly supportive of our cohousing vision as he had a daughter with disabilities and could see how people living in a more neighbourly way, while staying independent, could be an ideal way for her to integrate into a community.

We were very excited when Channel 4 decided to feature our proposed development in an episode of Location, Location, Location. Phil Spencer was very interested in the opportunities that affordable, sustainable cohousing has to offer, and featured LILAC cohousing in Leeds as part of a programme.



*Fiona S Waters, Phil Spencer and Angela Vincent looking at land in Kent for cohousing.*

Unfortunately, what looked like a very exciting piece of land turned out to have numerous planning issues which were found after our architects did a feasibility study. Some details had changed since planning permission was granted previously. It had a tree preservation order, had moved into a conservation area, was next door to a historical site (which meant English Heritage might have had to be paid to watch the entire build), and a local parish councillor told us there was a chance we might find a Roman village once we started to dig! Worse still, we later discovered that there were in fact several owners of the land and not all of them shared our vision. Our early enthusiasm was soon tempered by reality. We are still looking for land.

Using my experience and that of other groups who have succeeded here are my top tips for groups that are at that stage. Some are longer term strategies and others are as instant as owning a site at the fall of the auctioneer's gavel!

## **Register your interest in a self-build plot**

Notify your Council that you are interested in a plot of land to build on as an individual, or in a group, via the Self Build Register for your area. Recent legislation requires Councils to keep a register of this interest and they should make an offer of some land after three years. Three years on, let's see if that starts to happen but, like going on a housing register, it is useful to point to Councils that you registered your interest with them already. The National Custom and Self-Build Association have a tool to find your local register [here](#).

## **Small Sites Register**

London has a Small Sites Small Builders programme, an initiative of the London Economic Action Partnership and the Mayor of London, where small sites come up for development by community groups. Sign-up for the Small Sites Register [here](#).



## Stalled Sites

You might notice that some building started in your area and then stopped for quite some time. Developers go bust or are defeated by problems that a group might be able to overcome. Make enquiries and see if it is something you might be able to use.

## Under your nose

Many people have found land near them by walking or cycling around their area, noticing under-used or vacant land, like garages or deserted buildings that they can make further enquiries about.

## Do a Google land search

If you are looking in a very specific area, get onto Google and scan in on areas. Use Google Streetview and look for sites. You can then find out who owns the site through the Land Registry.

## Professional help

Keep an eye on Right Move and other property search engines as relevant sites come up. Tell your local estate agent to look out for you. There are also land agents that will help you if you give them a brief of what you are looking for.

## Auctions

Many plots or suitable properties come up for auction and can be a great way to get land quickly. Don't get carried away with the bidding and buy something you haven't checked out! You need to sort out how you will finance it before you bid, but usually only need a 10% deposit on the day. You then have 28 days to pay the balance.

## Local Council Land Allocation

Most councils have a Local Plan. Check it out to see what land was brought forward from their Call for Sites from local landowners. Some sites won't be approved for development but might still be viable for a smaller group to look at. You'll also get an idea who locally has excess land. If the Council hasn't made enough allocation of land for the next five years, that can be a leverage for you.

## Neighbourhood Plans

If you have a Neighbourhood plan in your area, you might find someone has already specified that there should be self-build, custom build or community led housing in the area. If that is the case it will help you as you pursue land and planning permission. If a Neighbourhood plan is currently being created where you live, make sure you get that included in it. It will make life easier for you and other community building projects in the future.

*“It is easy to get disheartened, but it can also be a very exciting part of your journey as a group.”*





## **Empty Homes**

Sometimes we are so busy looking for new land to build on, we dismiss the opportunity that exists in empty homes and commercial buildings. Many Councils have someone who deals with bringing empty homes back into use, and there are some grants and 0% interest loans in some areas to help you do this. Commercial properties can be refurbished using Permitted Development Rights which means little or no planning permission required.

## **Garden Infill**

You might have a friend or family member with a lot of land on their property that is prepared to sell off some of their excess land to you in order for you to build on, or leaflet homes in an area you are interested in and ask owners to contact you if they are interested.

## **Joint ventures**

Consider joint ventures with others to speed up the process. We have chatted with housing associations, developers, architects and landowners who have expertise and an interest in community led housing. They can bring their own finance, expertise and land to the mix, your group's leverage being that as a community group you bring a ready-made 'community engagement' to the planning application, and potentially a complete set of future residents from the outset.

Many people have done this before you, but it's still a new way of providing housing in the UK. It is easy to get disheartened, but it can also be a very exciting part of your journey as a group. There is great power in working together as a community and more and more Councils, professionals and landowners are starting to recognise this. Good luck on your search.



# Contact Community Led Housing

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