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‘To achieve positive outcomes, developers must have a clear understanding of each community stakeholder’

Labour’s Angela Rayner used day one of UKREiiF for the first airing of the party’s housing policy. The announcement heralded the creation of new towns, with local infrastructure, where communities want to live very much at their heart.

Many other panels at the conference emphasised the importance of partnerships and community-led developments, delivering social value and a drive to meet the demands for much-needed housing.

However, as a small and diverse architecture firm, we did question whether what was being said on the various event stages really rang true with our direct experiences on the ground.

Hard to get a hold

We have found it challenging to get a foothold to win community development schemes, even in the very neighbourhoods in which we grew up. The complex procurement landscape still favours bigger practices. They have the resources, commercial backing and previous experience to tender for large public sector works, but not necessarily the creativity, local knowledge and relationships with local communities.

So at times it does feel like the odds are well and truly stacked against us, as well as the diverse communities that we should be representing.

High interest rates, rising material costs and a lack of liquidity are making it increasingly hard to make schemes stack up financially. Developers should be asking what partnerships and models they can co-create with the government and communities to get viable schemes built.

When we recently spoke to a regional developer, it became clear that many local schemes were no longer financially viable without government funding, and



Lincoln Street
scheme, Coventry

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a lightbulb switched on for us. To create financially viable developments, the real estate industry must properly engage and partner with the local community, which is rooted in that locality and cares about longer-term outcomes. And in doing so, developers can attract additional funding.

Government vehicles such as the Levelling Up Fund, the £150m Community Ownership Fund and the Affordable Homes Programme are avenues to secure finance which rely on taking the community on the journey with us, in partnership.

Therefore, projects that access these funding pots should move towards a viability model that is a win-win for all. Communities want outcomes that meet local needs with longer-term social value, and identifying exactly what these needs are stems from local knowledge.

For example, architecture firm Stead & Co’s Fitzherbert Community Hub project in Brighton saw the client work in partnership with several community groups and local services to create a high-quality building to house a range of community services.

A different model

The model used to reach positive local community outcomes is different, and I

do wonder whether this is something the industry has truly acknowledged.

In real estate, it is commonplace for new housing developments to be built and sold to fund community infrastructure. Community projects tend to be self-funded schemes at the initial stages, so it is about partnering with them to share your development expertise from the start in order to make more viable schemes happen.

Stakeholder engagement

To achieve positive outcomes, developers must have a clear understanding of each community stakeholder. This includes mapping out their desired outcomes and specific deal-breakers, right through to the structures that govern how they work.

At our mixed-use Lincoln Street project in Coventry for the Sikh Gurdwara, we recommended establishing a cross-party steering group to oversee the project. We worked with 12 members from the temple to shape the project and form a masterplanning strategy. They reported back to the larger congregation, ensuring transparency and inclusivity. The community approval process culminated in us presenting and facing a vote by a congregation of more than 100 members at the temple. The project has now been approved and will break ground next year.

By engaging more diverse project teams who better represent and are part of the communities that we are building for, developers will get more consensus and buy-in that will help them to secure more funding for viable schemes.

Individuals who have first-hand knowledge of the areas being regenerated bring invaluable insights into the needs, challenges and aspirations of the community. This perspective is crucial to create spaces that are not only functional but also culturally and socially relevant.