Chris Brazier- Heron Educational Charity

Welcome to Communities Building Homes, a new podcast brought to you by Community Led Homes, North Yorkshire and East Riding.

In this podcast, we're going to meet people who are at the forefront of doing, supporting and enabling communities to make great housing. Building new homes, or refurbishing old ones, people who are truly making homes to live in and meeting local housing needs.

My name's Peg Alexander, I'm a journalist and presenter, and my guest today is Chris Brazier.

Chris is from the Heron Educational Trust, a charitable trust based in Humbleton in the East Riding of Yorkshire, just over 10 miles from Hull. The trust started in 1718 with a legacy intended to help support the education of boys and girls in the parish, which they've done through giving out grants, but also since the end of the 19th century.

They've owned the village school and surrounding land, but the school closed in 1959 and it's been disused since. So now they want to turn it into homes and support community and sports facility. We're recording this podcast in the middle of that process, so we're going to get a snapshot of the middle of a community led housing scheme.

Chris, welcome to the podcast. Thank you very much. Nice to be here. Oh, it's lovely to speak to you. So let's start off by you telling me about Heron Educational Foundation and why you got involved in housing. What motivated you? Yeah, so as you said, been going for just over 300 years, we're all about supporting children through education and into employment.

We used to own a small farm and that generated enough income, though not quite to support our aims. So a few years ago, we made what I think was quite a bold step to sell the farm, and then recognizing that the school was slowly degrading and needed refurbishing, we thought right let’s build to convert the school into housing.

We've also got a little bit of land alongside the school, which we'll build another couple of houses on, that we'll use for affordable housing, which is in short supply in our small village, enabling people to stay local, and sort of stay within the community. And that in turn will enable us to generate enough money to help children and young people through their education and really make a difference to them as they move towards employment.

So that's our sort of dream if you like, and it, you know, so far, so good and I'm touching wood as I speak. Because as you say, you're going to be looking for three two bed homes at the moment, affordable rents, and you're also hoping it's going to have an impact on the end of the village where, where the school is, aren't you?

Absolutely. Yeah, so it's as I said, its slowly degraded, the school closed 50, 60 years ago now and it's difficult to keep a school as a just a simple community building, you can't get enough money to keep it sort of up to date and compliant with all the regulations and rest of it so the school will become three two-bed houses.

We're going to build two, three-bed houses in the sort of garden of the school and the schoolmaster's house, which is again in need of refurbishment, which will be our six properties. So there'll be six affordable houses at the far end of the village, which as you head to the south, will get rejuvenated. We're going to build it in the same sort of style as the current buildings down that end of the village.

So that's another important part of it. And of course, it's important to us because it is our village. We're not building remotely. We're not you know, dealing with somebody else's town or village or project. It's our village. It's been our building for a long time.

Now is our opportunity to sort that out and get ourselves sort of into the 21st century and back to our roots, helping people get through the education process. I mean, when you first started making the plans for this, then did you find that the community were totally on board, as you say, it's your village and you were trying to improve the village as well as provide affordable housing so people can stay there.

Yes very much, so it's important to recognize, of course, that we are also part of the community and that's important to us and important to the community. So again, we're not sort of coming in as third-party developers to build things. We are part of the community. We represent the community and the whole community surrounds those buildings.

And again, without their support, we would have gone nowhere really because they would have opposed planning or they would have, you know, had put so many objections in the way, but the reality is the complete opposite. They're really keen to get the school back into proper use, develop that end of the village.

And, you know, a lot of people live in the village for a long time, grow up, have families, and then their families can't stay in the village because there's nowhere to live and they can't afford to. So again, it appeals to the local population that there will be six properties that will be affordable, particularly the three small ones in the old school, the three, two, the three two bed properties embarking on their first move away from home and mum and dad, but also only just down the road from mum and dad. So it really works on a number of levels.

Have you got anyone in the village who actually remembers going to the school? Definitely. I mean, I think it was about 1960’ish that it closed. So we're only talking 60 years ago. So if you are in your mid-70s, then you remember it.

And there are plenty here. What we found looking at the population of our village is that once they're here, they stay. So it's not all old people, but people who came here, you know, in their early twenties or whatever, have continued and continued and continued.

Why would you leave Humbleton? It's, it's almost the perfect place to live. And the East Riding, of course, is the best.

Oh, come on, describe it a bit more to us. Describe the village. Well, it's a lovely little village. It's probably about 200 or so people. It's about 80 properties spread along the main road. It's got an old church, but that's pretty much all we've got left in the village now, apart from the community centre when we build it. If you work in the village, you're probably working in agriculture or sort of you know, single person businesses working from home. A lot of people commute into Hull or the areas around Hull to work, but come back out of Hull.

I mean, nothing wrong with Hull, but if you're a country person then coming back home in the evening to Humbleton is so much nicer.

Is it really flat, your part of East Riding then? It is, yeah definitely, you can see forever.

Yeah, because lots of people don't realize that, do they?

They think everything in Yorkshire is rolling moors, and of course loads of it is, but actually this is all dead flat. Yeah definitely, I mean within the Humbleton Parish is the highest point on what's called the Holderness Peninsula, which spreads all the way down to Spurn Point, and I think that's 15 meters above sea level, so that's the highest point for about 30 miles in any direction, so yeah, it's lovely and flat, and agricultural crop land.

And as you say, really, really close Hull as well.

We were talking about the fact that you've got planning permission, so this is where your project's up to at the moment. This is probably not the best description, but you've got planning permission, you've got the designs, the designs look lovely, I have to say.

Thank you.

You sent me some through the email, so I could have a look beforehand and they look really nice, as you say, keep in with the keeping of the village. You've got the planning permission. You've got finance in place. You're now just in the process of trying to get your contractors, aren't you?

Yes, it's an important point getting from planning permission to the opening of the tender letters with the construction companies, it’s quite a big process. Actually, there's lots of pre work that needs to be done, which to be honest, I'm not a property developer by background.

So there was a lot we learned there about how much work actually needs to be done between the process of getting the planning permission, which in itself is quite long, and then the process of getting the things built. There's a whole lot of surveys and studies. When you're dealing with an old building like the school, it's been unoccupied for about 10 years because it was a community hall before that.

So there's lots of structural surveys, lots of checking for asbestos, you know, all those things have to be done before you get to the opening of the tender letters and then hopefully appointing a construction company and getting the building done. So we are exactly in that point with another 10 days to go until we open the letters, to see what the costs will come out to be.

We've had quantity surveyors looking at the project, so we're confident that it's affordable for us. But it'll be a big drawing in of air moment as we open those, four tender letters on the 7th, so fingers crossed.

Talk to us about that process, because I think that's one of the interesting things.

Well, there's so many interesting things we can talk about, but that process of you're an educational charitable trust foundation, and suddenly you're now housing developers, you know, and, and as you say, you just talked there about the fact that quantity surveyors, architects, you have planning, you have lots of technical work on the building, technical work on the grounds.

Talk to us about how that process has been for you as, trustees of the charity, in terms of getting to this point.

Yeah. I think the phrase is interesting is the process. Yeah. I mean, I describe it as you have to start with a dream. You have to be thinking, you know, where are we going to get to?

What's the aim here to make that big decision to invest the money to go down this, this road. But very quickly you have to professionalise, and that's the lesson I think we've taken away from this is, we have a relationship now with our architect who completely understands what we're trying to do.

He's been there since the beginning. Once we got to the end of the planning stage, we appointed project managers because it's such a complex process. You know, at the very beginning, we thought, oh this is okay. Well, you know, we've got businessmen, we've got workers, we've got farmers, we've got people who've worked in all sorts of different industries, that this will be fine.

You know, we'll just roll through this and, you know, keep it as cheap as we can. But actually very quickly realized, no, you need properly trained people. You need people who understand it. And that's what I call professionalising. You know, we've all learned. Certainly I've learned a lot about, you know, what architects do, what quantity surveyors do, and what you need and then what you might want to try and de-risk this process going forward.

And it, it is complex. It is not you know, as simple as it might sound when you sort of just list off what you're trying to do. And it does take time. That's the other bit that we're very lucky. We've got six trustees. We've got sort of three who are very active and dedicate quite a lot of time to the project and answering questions and giving guidance and talking about costs and all the rest of it.

And then hopefully we've got three who are a bit less active, who we then go back to, to say, this is what we've done. You know, you don't all have to be in this all the time, full time, because that's too much to expect from anybody. It really helps actually to have the sounding board to go back to, to say, we've been around this discussion. We think this is what we want to do. What do you think, rest of trustees? And we have meetings now on the project every month and then separately as a trust every month as well. So two weeks, every two weeks, we're having a meeting at the moment, to talk about finance planning, thinking, costs to come, you know, and sort of de-risking the project.

So it's certainly not full time. You know, I don't want to give that impression, but it's not something you can let drop for more than sort of two or three days before you have to get back into the emails, answering questions and keeping the process going. So again, it's part of that, what I would call professionalising it.

You can't afford just to sit back for a month and have a meeting and say, well, what's changed? Well, lots and lots will have changed or probably more likely nothing will have changed because they needed a decision, you know, three or four weeks ago. So it's quite a big undertaking. For that focus period of time we've been on for the last, three or four months, I suppose.

So you have to think about it in terms of do we have time to dedicate to this? Or if not, I guess you have to appoint a project manager, you know, completely and trust in him. But then you start to lose control of your own project, which we, we were definitely keen not to do. Yeah. It's getting that balance, isn't it?

Yeah. I mean, one of the things that I feel, looking at community led housing schemes, is there's a lot of people who have, I mean, they call it the group stage in, you know, for people listening, the first stage of community led housing scheme, which is where that the group of people have come together and say, we want to start the scheme.

I mean, in your case, you were already there, you were already a. A group that's been going for a long, long time. It's quite easy at that stage to go, you know, we're a really good group. We know what we're doing. And then all of a sudden you're into this whole different world of house building, which is something completely different.

And as you say, I think the project manager role becomes incredibly important because you're not talking project management. In terms of running an organization or a group, you're talking about specialists in the construction industry who, that's what they do, they know how to, to build.

Yeah, you definitely do need that help I think.

Talk about a bit about the help you had from the hub, I believe from Community Led Housing. Yes absolutely. I mean, between the council and the hub, you know, advice is gold really. You know, there's lots of useful things you can learn as you're going through the project. There's access to funding, potential funding, actual funding, how other people have done this.

So we've been in contact through the council and the hub to see what other people have done. There's not actually a whole lot in the East Riding that's happened before. I think there's only one other project, and that was sort of a few years ago. Now there's a few up in the north. But of course, every project's different.

It's not a case of just applying what they learned and putting it there. It's really a case of sort of looking at it and saying, what can we learn from some of this? And certainly, as you say that, you know, the advice we got from both the hub and the council, which to us almost seemed seamless, you know, they think there's an overlap between the people on both, to help us through to understand, well, if you, if you do this, you'll qualify for more.

If you go this route, you might be able to ask here because ultimately you can have a dream, you can professionalise, but if you haven't got any money, I'm afraid the real world looks at you a bit strangely. So where have you got your money from then? Let's get down to the nuts and bolts.

As I think I said, we, we had a farm and we've sold that.

So that's given us about 60 percent of our funding. And then the council's community housing fund, we're in the final stages. So they've helped us already at the stage two, which is about getting through the planning. So we've received, and we're very grateful for, about 40,000 pounds there.

Because obviously there's quite a lot of costs to get to that point. We've got quite a lot of technical work to do to get to the point of planning. It's quite surprising. I mean, it's, you know, we're sort of roughly three quarters of a million build, and it's been roughly a hundred thousand to get to the stage of the beginning of the build.

So, I mean, it's, you know, that's quite a big chunk. It certainly took me by surprise. By the time you add it all up, that's from the very beginning, from the sort of start of concept all the way through planning permission. And as I said, all the various surveys and the project manager cost and, you know, they all add up.

I've got a marvellous spreadsheet, which, uh, sort of slowly builds it up. But yeah, so the council have helped us with part of that money. We've had to fund some of it ourselves. And then looking forward, we're hoping for about sort of 35 percent of the cost to come from the council, which is the maximum they will allow. So somewhere around that figure.

And again, we've had a good close working relationship with the hub and the council to have that discussion. We don't want to get to the point and then suddenly go, oh, please can we have this much money? In a build all the way along to say, well, we think we might need this much.

What do you think? Is that acceptable? What sort of things do you want to see? We went around the, how to make housing affordable, how to make housing attractive, and relevant to the population that is rising. So they could tell us what sort of family sizes is it, you know, early. Three first houses, is it older?

Is that where quite a lot of the community inputs come? As you say, on what around being an affordable rented thing, but also on what you're actually building? Yes. I mean, there's an element of what you're referring. Yes. There's an element of, you know, the school really only works as three, two beds, but the other buildings, definitely it's, it's given us that balance.

Traditional property developers would probably try and build bigger houses because you get more profit out of four and five bed luxury dwelling. But that's not what's required for the affordable market. The affordable market needs entry level housing and then probably smaller families.

So the three beds became the answer rather than trying to build bigger or trying to build one big house. So yes, it's, it definitely been a sort of interaction of information. What is it you want? What of what space have we got? And sort of work our way through that process quite early on, obviously, to get through before we even put planning permission in to say what’s going to work as a partnership between us, the hub and the council, to come up with the right answer for all of us. So it was an interesting process.

Absolutely, I mean, it feels to me listening to you that this very much a win win situation for you because although housing isn't your primary purpose as a trust, you know, it is a win win situation. You're improving the village that you were set up, to be part of.

You're going to be supporting families and that in turn is going to be supporting, uh, girls and boys with, with their education. You're also going to be down the line creating more community. I mean, it's a big job and you're going to have some income that you can use then for grants. Yeah, exactly.

And traditionally over the past, you know, probably 50 years or so, our grants have been quite small. As I said, we've only, we've hardly had enough money to keep ourselves. Uh, keep the properties, you know, safe and, and, available. So it's been small amounts going through key stages, primary to secondary, secondary onto university, you know, a few hundreds here and there.

Wha the dream is, is, you know, once we start to get, sort of real money coming in is, is really make a difference to key individuals in the village and, you know, across to carry on doing what we've been doing, but also to look at, well, maybe we could take a child all the way through university rather than a couple of hundred pounds towards books.

Maybe it could be three or four thousand pounds towards a full year at university which they couldn't otherwise have achieved or something. And, you know, university is not the focus for everybody. Could be agricultural college, could be an HGV license, could be setting up a small business, you know, in the local area or working from home.

But going from a few hundred, which is nice to have, to two, three or £4,000, you can actually make a difference to a life, you know, as a child becomes an adult and goes through sort of 18, 19, 20 and is starting to think about, well, what do I want to do with my life? If you haven't got that, that just that little bit of extra and it's not going to change the world, but it might change the world for one child.

Couple of 3,000 suddenly you've got business going and you're off, you know, and also the advice that we can help provide or indeed to access, you know, when you're 18 19 you don't know who to who to ask. You don't know who to speak to. And as I said before, you know, we've got business people we've got farming people, we've got teaching education specialists as well on the trustees who can provide information for free and access to a person who might be able to help you.

So there's a lot of wins in here. Just need to get those tenders opened and get the buildings built.

We can actually see each other while we record this and your eyes sparkle when you, every time we talk about opening the tenders and seeing, uh, what's going to come through. Your eyes do sparkle, Chris.

We're coming up towards the end of the podcast. You know I've got a question here. Tell me about your major challenges. Tell me about the big achievements. I mean, we talked about some of the challenges already. That was, you know, professionalising was obviously a big thing, understanding how complicated this would be, but you've obviously got through that. Would you advise other community organisations who are maybe thinking about doing housing projects to get involved in community led housing?

Yes, definitely. It's a good route to go down. The other thing I would say is, as we touched on before, other people have gone down this route, you know, don't be afraid to reach out to them, to have a look at what they've done to have a chat, you know, Who have done this, been on this journey will happily share that information with you.

It's a few, a few tips, a few ideas. And even if it's just, you know, this journey can be achieved. You know, it does take a while. It took us probably close to 12 months to get planning permission, partly through COVID and all those other complications. But I think that's quite quick actually.

I think sometimes when you're in the middle of this, it looks like a long way, but actually, yeah, as you say, in the great scheme of things, it'll probably be about three years start to finish by the time we've got the buildings occupied. So yes definitely, it is a good route.

As you were saying earlier, you know, when you have to make the finances stack up in your plans, which makes it less risky than some people may think it is because you don't get to that point if you're not confident that you can make the finances stack up and then you will have income coming in later on.

Yes. So it is back to that professionalism point. You know, you have to have a budget. You have to be thinking through how much have we got? How much do we need? Where will that come from? But, you know, again, the hub and the council have been really helpful about reassuring us, you know, not making a final binding contractually limiting commitment, but saying, yes, this is the project we would like to invest in.

They're as excited about it as we are. You know, these are the sort of figures that we think, you know, we could be looking towards. So it helps us on that journey. If you like, it's not about getting to a stage and then applying. It's about being part of that partnership. We have people from the council and the hub attend our monthly project meetings to give us a bit of advice, not just on the money side, but also because they've been down this journey.

Some of them are professionals from the building industry as well. They understand the challenges we're facing. You can give us a bit of, again, you know, advice is often free and can save you an awful lot of money. Longer term. So that's, that's another message I've really picked up from talking to you.

It's about that working together. You know, this isn't a thing where you start, it's not, it's not like other funding where you plan your project and you put in an application and you sit back and wait to see whether someone will fund it. It is a kind of working relationship. And, you know, I found having moved into working a lot in the community led housing I've never known a sector that is more happy to share and support each other.

You know, it is, one project wants to help more projects. And as you say, people share so much experience and knowledge and support. Yeah, definitely. to each other, which is wonderful about this sector. I think it's so exciting what you're doing. I think it'sabsolutely brilliant.

And I think it's a great beacon for other community organisations or you know, as you sell as itself, you know, a charitable trust, other organisations that may not think housing is top of their agenda. But if, if they've got the way to do it, I think you're a great beacon for showing that actually it's possible.

You're going to create six homes for people who wouldn't otherwise have those homes in your village, which is a wonderful thing to know that you're doing, it must feel great. It does, and it goes back to the other points all very well professionalising, you've got to have that dream, you've got to have that exactly as you laid it out there, all the wins that will come from this, you know, from being able to from helping somebody stay in the village and get into their first home through to helping, you know, their children in 20 or 30 year’s time, get their qualifications or get to university or start a business or whatever it is.

So you've definitely got to have that shining dream in the future. It's not all about professionalism and money and permissions and applications and paperwork. I think getting that blend right is probably the secret. I'm not sure we've, quite got it yet. But it definitely helps to have to keep those balances going.

It can't be all about, you know, the money and the serious side. There's got to be a dream there to aim toward.

What a great place to finish, Chris Grazier. Thank you so much for joining us on the podcast.

Pleasure. No problem at all.

Good luck to everybody else.

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