Latch with James and Ryan

[00:00:00] 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 meeting people who are at the forefront of doing, supporting and enabling communities to make great housing. Building new homes or refurbishing old buildings. People who are truly making homes to live in and meeting local housing need.

I'm journalist and presenter Peg Alexander. My guests on this podcast are James Hartley and Ryan Jeffers. James and Ryan are from Latch Leeds Action to Create Homes, a charity which refurbishes, derelict and rundown houses, making homes for people who are homeless or in housing need. But what's more, most of the [00:01:00] renovation work is done by Latch stuff and volunteers.

So people are getting houses they can really call home and they're getting support to help them make a fresh start. But also unemployed people are getting skills and training. Which helps them make a fresh start too. Now I'm afraid to say that when we started to record the podcast, tech gremlins got in the way.

So we ended up at the last minute having to record in person, but it was a terrible day. There were storms lashing down. We ended up sitting at opposite ends of a room recording at rush hour with big windows open to make it COVID safe. So sadly, the traffic and the storm have made it onto the recording, especially when Ryan is talking.

But I'm really hoping that even with all this background noise, you will still be inspired by what both James and Ryan tell us about the way that their work and Latch changes lives. [00:02:00]

James and Ryan, welcome to the podcast. Hello. Hi, so we might have a bit of noise as we're having this podcast. We've got the windows all open.

We're at opposite ends of the room from each other. People will have to bear with us if they hear the noise of the traffic outside. James, let's just start by, kind of saying hello to you. You're the CEO of Latch, but, and you've worked for Latch for many, many years, but you actually started life as a bricklayer yourself, didn't you?

Yeah, that's right. I started in construction at the age of four because my dad had his own business.

That's pretty good.

Yeah, I'm not that old, but might look it.

But yeah, so I've always been involved in construction and worked as a bricklayer. And the job at Latch was my dream job because it enabled me to apply my skills and also to help people change their lives as much as Latch does. And Latch, you know started 20 odd years ago and that was great. And it's still great today.

You know what, we haven't got cameras on here, but if people could see the smile on your faces, you're talking about [00:03:00] how much you love your job.

I said it was my dream job when it started. It's not been a dream for 20 odd years. There's been some nightmares along the way, but overall it’s been great. But crucially today, I now sort of paper shuffle and read emails and youngsters, young lads like Ryan have come along to take over and make us better than we've ever been, so now we've done that.

Yeah, you're dealing with the money and all that side. Ryan, you're a property refurbishment worker. You're fairly new to latch yourself and you started as a trainee here, didn't you? Having been unemployed. Tell us a bit about your kind of journey.

So I was, obviously did personal training beforehand, but through lockdown, weren't able to do that when the gym shut down. And then this woman that I know from the community rung me up and was like, there's a course going two days a week. But I wasn't doing anything, so I just thought, oh yeah.

Had you done, because you're a personal trainer, and I can obviously tell looking at you that you were a personal trainer, I have to say. But, you know, if you were doing that, had you done anything like building work or anything like that before?

No, I was the, who can I phone to get [00:04:00] this job done? That's who I was. Who can I phone to get this job done? Yeah.

So this woman, she said to you, what, did you fancy going on the training course?

Cause she used to support me a lot when I was younger.

Yeah.

She was just like, there's a course. I was like, oh yeah, I'll do it. Went down and everybody was just nice. So it just made me comfortable.

Yeah. Yeah. And, and from then you literally, you've been learning all the really practical building skills. Yeah. What sort of skills have you been learning?

So I've done, when I first got here, it was digging. And then I think I picked up plastering first, and the best. And I've done a bit of joinery. Tiled, put in a kitchen last week and tiled the bathroom today.

Cool. Oh, wow. Excellent. And I know you're, you know, you, you, you made it through the grade, if you like. You've ended up getting the permanent contract.We'll come back to, to what that feels like.

James, talk to us a bit about the fact that this is so integral to Latch's [00:05:00] work. It's not just that you're, you know, creating homes as a charity and you're creating them in, in, in areas of Leeds that really needs those homes. But you've also making sure that people are getting skills along the way.

Yeah, through creating homes, we've maximised the impact that that can have on people's life, both for the owners personally moving into it, but also people like Ryan. And of the staff we have today working alongside Ryan, many of them have been on the same journey as Ryan. Come with few or no skills they've developed and with Latch.

And then they're now mentoring Ryan. And Ryan in the future will hopefully mentor others. And Latch will grow and do more and more. And he's, um, made a real big impact and impressed from day one. We're really pleased to have him.

How difficult is that in reality? Because Ryan, you've just said, you know, yourself, you picked up the phone, you called someone if you wanted something doing, but you've got to not just support the people that are training, you've also got to deliver quality homes as well, because you've got contracts, you've got commitments, you know, you're not talking shoddy work, so how difficult is that for [00:06:00] you as an organisation to manage?

Yeah, you're trying to get a balance between the experience of Ryan so it's slow enough for him to develop skills and experience but that the quality is good as well. So what makes that work is the staff that we have around Ryan who are professionals who have got the experience. I've been on Ryan's journey so they're kind of good at mentoring, tutoring, supporting and encouraging and you know, we set high standards and we deliver high standards and we support people to help them do that but we acknowledge that they're not going to be there from the start so we try and balance off those priorities and usually we get it right but.

So that's having the professional staff who've got the skills working alongside people. Was it harder than you expected Ryan? I mean has it been more of an eye opener or is it something that's just felt really natural?

I think if they hadn’t made me feel so comfortable it would have been harder but I remember coming when I first got here and I was, screwing a screw into a ceiling.Yeah. The screw kept falling off my drill.

Yeah, I'm the same with that. They fall off all [00:07:00] the time, don't they?

Everyone was like calm down, it's all right, it's all right. And then, now, I do 100 a minute. Yeah, and then you stay in there.

Yeah, I mean, I guess that's just what James is saying, that what, what feels like is probably really important for you is having the skilled, experienced staff who are also understanding and able to work with people.

Yeah, and, uh, everybody's taught me their way and told me to choose my way of doing things. Okay. So I've learned so much from everybody, everybody I've worked with. Yeah. So it's been good.

So you're doing, are you doing across the whole range of things then from, as you say, from tiling, building, joinery, plastering?

How's your plastering going? Because that just looks to me like, I have to say, when I've seen people plastering.

When I watch people doing [00:08:00] plastering, it looks to me like the most satisfying job in the world. And until you go over it and then it drags and then you got little, uh, marks on it. Yeah. I kept doing, having my trowel and then going to go put some more plaster on and then knocking the wall.

Yeah. And then I leave a big dent in the wall and have to go back over it. But then of course that's the thing, isn't it? I guess doing that, nobody's going to get annoyed, are they? Yeah. Yeah.

That's it, you have to have a go on like what Ryan's proven is you have to do it again and again and again to get good at it and that's anything and what's sad about for many people is, is because they can't do something straight away, they pull away from it and it's a lesson for all of us I think is, is that you get good by doing it and we'll be inept at things when we start, but we get better to keep at it.

And if we're terrified of making a mistake, you never learn. You can't learn, can you? And that's where a supportive atmosphere and inclusive atmosphere is really important for people like Ryan. So the other people, you know, we have people from various ethnic [00:09:00] backgrounds, diverse communities. We have women working on the projects on site as well.

So the idea is to create a nice welcoming positive atmosphere because that's how we'll get the best out of each other and everybody. Does anybody go on to live in the homes who are refurbing them?

Not, not much anymore. Normally the, the housing need is the priority for people who apply to us because they're desperate in housing.

We are given the option to engage if the timing's right on the properties, but it's something we did historically rather than currently. So it's a bit separate, is the housing thing, because there's desperate housing need and training are kind of separate. Although people who become tenants can join the training schemes and participate in activities subsequently.

And I guess once people are settled, they've got some settled housing, they've got the support that I know that you offer here on top of the housing, it must be a lot easier than to say, I'm feeling ready to go and join the schemes.

Yeah, our thinking on that is, is the house is a foundation for you to address other issues, of like you being homeless. Family, mental health, drug, alcohol, addiction [00:10:00] issues, but also employment and training so you can access it then, rather than while you're still inadequately housed. I mean, obviously that's not your story, Ryan, because, you know, you know, you've come from being a personal trainer as well.

Sometimes, I just join people when I want. When I'm training.

You've come through a different route. How important has it been to you that you've been able to go, do you know what? I can learn something new. I can start again. I can do a new career because it's a very different thing. Personal training.

Yeah, it's been very good. And even like, whereas personal training, my sons would be like, oh, I want to be big. But now they're like, oh, I want to fix things like you now. So my sons are seeing it now.

That must be amazing. How old are your sons?

12 and 10.

Yeah, you see, that must just be amazing to know that they're looking and saying, I want to, I want to be able to fix stuff like you.

Yeah.

What effects has it [00:11:00] had on your life? Being able to be part of a project where you're learning new skills and you also know that you're giving homes to people. That, that is really something else, isn't it?

Makes me smile. Yeah.

Does it really make you extra proud of what you're doing?

Even like, the auntie walking around and everyone saying, Oh, I've seen, I've seen, well done. Yeah. It's just a nice feeling. Or when we finished that project on 126, and everyone was happy down there.

Yeah, well you live quite locally.

Yeah, yeah, I just live around here.

Yeah so that whole thing of it being part of the community, it is your home as well is really important.

Doing it all on my own turf. Nice. Yeah. Very nice. Really, really nice.

James, let's come back to talk about some of the more boring aspects. I could carry on talking to, I'm sorry, [00:12:00] I could quite easily just ignore you and carry on chatting to Ryan to be quite honest.

It wouldn't be the first time.

And we've both got Leeds United t shirts on, but we obviously won't mention that.

Let me just ask you a bit about some of them, the kind of, boring's the wrong phrase, but you know, obviously I think people listening to this podcast are going to be on other projects, maybe community projects that don't do housing, or maybe other community led housing projects that are interested potentially in, in getting trainees.

Where do you get your money from? Where does, how does this all stack up? Because obviously it's going to cost you to have trainees. We have two strong advantages really at Latch, because we own quite a large number of properties, we're able to secure loans against them.

You've got loads of properties, I mean last year and during the pandemic we even started 18 didn't we?

Yeah, yeah, we've about 90, it changes every day, about 96 now. Of which 5 are waiting to be worked on and Ryan's working on one of them now. So the money for them is loans and grant really.

Right.

But we've just innovated around the community share issue. We've just raised [00:13:00] raised 50, 000 in 10 days for a community shares.

My goodness, because last time we spoke last week, you hadn't quite, you hadn't quite reached a target.

I thought you'd invested peg.

If only I had that. I do like to invest in a community shared housing, but I can tell you I'm right at the bottom end of what I put in.

So you've hit your target already?

Yeah, yeah, so we're going above it. So that will form with other bits of funding grant and possibly some loan for the next stage. But the money's crucial for it, but you know, the money is a means to an end, which is Ryan and the people that we're housing, creating the homes.

And us getting money and support will help do that. And that's what we're motivated by.

I mean, you're working in the areas such as Hare Hills, Chapel Town and Burley. Areas that the council will say are on the list of areas of deprivation in the city. [00:14:00] How, and you're obviously housing quite vulnerable people in the housing.

How's that been with the communities in those areas? Feeling about the work that Latch is doing?

Yeah, well, I think our arrival in the community is probably welcome, because there's been a long-term empty property there. We always notify all the neighbourhoods that were there, what we're here to do, tell them the story.

And then our tenants move in. Now our tenants can be problematic at some times, but what's crucial to make it work is every tenant has a support worker. Yeah. So if our tenants are having difficulties both in terms of with neighbours and the community, we're right in there because we, not only do we respect our tenants wanting to succeed, we owe a lot to the community.

Yeah. So we take that really seriously. Yeah. And do engage if there are issues. Our problem, tenants having problems fitting in the community, we'll try and ease that around. So, we do take that very seriously and do everything we can, but it is the real world, so stuff happens, but we deal with it. Yeah, I mean, I know it's, you know, on your website, you're very clear to tenants.

If you come and join and you get housing, you've got to play your [00:15:00] part as well. You've got to pay your rent, you've got to behave. Given that community element is really important, you live around here, were you aware of Latch's work then before you found out about the scheme?

Yeah, my sister was with Latch a couple of years back, I didn't know about all the schemes that they do, but I knew of them.

I knew, and I've obviously, I've always walked past here, so I've seen it.

Yeah, so what did your sister do then?

Um, I think she was a single mum. Okay, so yeah, she got help.

She was a tenant once. So for your family then, knowing there's an organisation that is housing people must feel really, that must just make it feel even extra special for you.

Yeah. Like if I go home with a story, my sister can say oh yeah, I know, I know him. He used to come to fix, fix in my house. Oh yeah. So yeah. Yeah. Brilliant.

Absolutely. Brilliant. So for yourself then Ryan, I mean, you've, you've now moved on from being a [00:16:00] trainee, you've now moved into being permanent member of staff.

What's kind of like on your radar yourself, what, what do you want? There's a particular areas that you want to develop more into, or?

Joinery a bit more, because I've seen that you can go into somewhere and like, even like this downstairs, the office is downstairs. If I went there by myself, I'd have to be with someone like, what do you think, do you think of that?

Whereas with these lot just can go and do it. So I could go into a room and throw plaster on the wall. By myself, no problem. Yeah. I could tile by myself, no problem. But I'd have to be with someone to do certain jobs with joinery.

Yeah, yeah. So still, kind of still very much working. I'm just getting it.

That's pretty quick if you can already tile and do that sort of stuff on your, on your own. That is, that is pretty quick. Yeah. Was it quite hardcore then, the training course?

Do you [00:17:00] know, not really. I think my best way of learning is someone showing me and then me just doing it. Yeah. So when I was working with them, like they just let me go do it.

If I needed them, just call me. Come on, James, pretend he's not here, right? Come on, what, what did you mess up big time then?

Do you know what? I didn't actually mess up. Oh. Because of all, like I said, if I I did loads of plastering. Yeah. So that's how I got it so fast.

So I was with Andrea plastering and she'd just be like, just do it. Just go, just do it. Just do it. I used to get there a bit early in the morning and I just start, I just start by myself.

Out of one to 10, how much do you love doing this job?

Nine.

Wow. That's, that's pretty good. What did you think it would be before you started it then? Did you think it would be this good?

Like I said, everyone's been very nice [00:18:00] from the start, so I didn't have to worry about nobody else, so it's always been alright.

Do you know what though, James, that's pretty good to have a member of staff say nine, nine out of ten. Yeah, we're selling for that. We've got a bit of work to do, haven't we, but I think we can get into a ten in the next six months.

Yeah, and you've set the target high now, you know.

All my other jobs, it was like, I've got to go to work.

So what would you say to anyone then who is listening, James, from say another, either a community led housing scheme or another community organisation that's listening to this, hopefully feeling as inspired. As I felt listening to you both, what would you say to them about the challenges, the things that are easy and, and also your advice to them?

Yeah, I think the word that came to mind is don't underestimate the challenge, but crucially the satisfaction of getting it done. I've been with Latch when we had 20 properties, so I've seen [00:19:00] 70 new properties. So I'm perhaps a little bit jaded than I used to be halfway through the journey. But, it's incredible the impact that you can do, but it is difficult to do.

And the key challenge for us all is, is finance, financial resources and how we can do that. So you need to be imaginative and the share issue has been a really good way of us doing it. But in Leeds there's a lot of support through the local authority around grant funding and other elements of work that we do.

And of course you've got Leeds Community Homes that brings, you know, is different to some other hubs and then it was set up by organisations including Latch.

Exactly. I was just going to turn to that. There is knowledge and expertise there available to people to link up to and get the advice that they could need to start with.

Anyone who's listening and wants to chat to Latch, we’re happy to share all our information and intel as we have it. As much as there is because we want to see people do it with us, alongside us, because there's more, more needs to be done than we can do on our own.

And I know this is probably a bit of asking the obvious on this one, [00:20:00] given that you just said within a week you managed to hit your target on your community share offer.

But, I mean, one, there's another podcast, another episode in this podcast series all about community share offers. What would you say to anyone? Because obviously, getting to the point of being able to launch it. There is a lot of work that goes into that.

Yeah, we, we were lucky that we got the booster program grant, of around ten grand, which enables us to buy in the expertise.

I was talking to someone recently about there's some sort of mentoring scheme where groups are looking at it, could speak to people like Latch, Leeds Community Homes, demystify it a little bit. So they're probably not as scared as I once was before I started it. And then see its viability. And I think if you're into property, it works with property because you have an asset and a possible revenue that works.

So yeah, look into it. There's a lot of information that could be a way forward. And it does, you know, we're, we're looking to welcoming our 80 new investors into Latch as members to both bring their, their money great, but also their energy and ideas for us to grow. So yeah, I think it's going to [00:21:00] be a good, a good thing.

I mean, it feels to me listening to you that the heart of the ethos here at Latch is responsibility to the communities where you're based, engagement with the communities, but also there's an element of, you're willing to take some risks, you're willing to get loan finance, you're willing to do community share offers in order to make new homes for people.

We have to take risks in that regard, but we know the, they're mitigated by the fact there's lots of properties available, right? There's lots of demand for the properties. We, we advertise the property at 10 in the morning and it's overwhelmed by midday. The demand is just incredible. So from a purely business point of view, it's always going to work if you can make the numbers work.

But yeah, you know, we want to do it. There's money inproperties, but it's really about people and people like Ryan and all the hundreds of tenants that we've helped over the years and the changes that we've seen made. And that's what, that's what we want to do. The people at Latch like to do it for them.

That's why when someone like Ryan joins us, we welcome him, [00:22:00] look after him and encourage him and he takes over from us.

So go on, you get the final word then, Ryan. Go on, sell it to us. If anybody else is listening, thinking, could they do it? Just tell us what difference this has made for you.

You're never going to know until you try. And if you fail, try again. And if you fail, try again. That's all you can do.

And I guess you'd say to any organisations that are listening, come on, do it, do it, give people a chance.

Yeah, like James said, everyone can work side by side, so it'll be good for everyone to get involved.

Tell you what, you've both been an amazing inspiration, especially since we've had some issues with our technology and kind of last minute, and I know you need to go and pick up your sons now Ryan.

Thank you both so much for this time this afternoon and I know people listening are going to be super inspired. I expect people ringing up asking for help and advice. Thank you both so much.

Yeah, thank you Peg. Nice to speak to you. [00:23:00]

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