Retrofit Obviously! - **A Shared Vision for a Strong Retrofit System**

Tipping Point East, London, England

Thursday, September 24 • 9 AM - 5 PM

Overview

A one-day summit exploring how a shared retrofit system can unlock healthier homes, thriving places and delivery at scale.

Retrofit matters. Obviously.

Retrofit, Obviously! is the National Retrofit Hub's first national summit, bringing together policymakers, community organisations, local authorities, housing providers, industry, finance, health, academia, and SMEs.

Hosted at Tipping Point East in London's Royal Docks, this free one-day event is designed to move the conversation beyond individual projects and towards a retrofit system that works for everyone.

Anna Francis and Rebecca Davies were invited to share a presentation within the Health and Homes Panel, the script below was delivered to a series of 11 visual slides..

Script delivered:

Anna and Rebecca: We are Anna and Rebecca from The Portland Inn Project,

A Community and Arts led organisation based in a residential neighbourhood in stoke on trent.

We are making vital change towards collective justice and today we're going to share a brief overview of the work we are doing and how we have come to retrofit a derelict pub in the neighbourhood, with and for our area and how that process is leading towards a wider neighbourhood renewal

Anna: The neighbourhood where we live and work, the Portland Street Area of the city centre of Stoke on trent was one of the designated Pathfinder housing renewal programme areas, a collapsed regeneration scheme that ended in 2011. which saw the demolition of mainly Victorian terraced housing in the midlands and the north, with a view to rebuild different/better housing.

In our area where the compulsory purchasing process was slow the collapse of the scheme saw families living next door to boarded up houses. The city council, having purchased 35 properties across 5 streets, needed to be imaginative about what to do to try to fix the residual issues left in the neighbourhood, and announced the £1 home scheme.

Rebecca: Soon after Anna moved in as a one pound house owner, and as an artist - she began a creative project as a way to speak to neighbours about what worked and what needed work in the area– Within weeks of the project beginning (from a tent on the nearby green space, because the pub, shop and community centre were all boarded up)

I came to Portland St with touring social club space – the Oasis Social Club - installed temporarily on Portland Street, and with each of these projects the community let us know loud and clear that what we really needed was a permanent space of our own to programme community activity and come together. So Listening to that:

We began the Portland Inn Project in 2016 – to test if the community would like to take over the abandoned pub building – and as a way to start to be more in charge of the health of the neighbourhood and how our community is talked about, as around that time the only media stories about our neighbourhood were very negative – focusing on Brexit, drugs problems and the collapsed regeneration pathfinder. We started a process to aim to take over and renovate the abandoned pub.

Rebecca: To date we have been operating out of a shipping container space – this can be restricting in some ways but also enables flexibility, openness and welcome in other ways. From here we run a year round programme – weekly youth clubs, monthly meetings, gardening club, creative projects and commissions and more.

Anna: We set up a Community decision making panel in 2018.

Usually via a bi monthly meeting with food, we look at setting priorities, discuss urgencies and programme together – voting on anything which needs a decision. This is not like a traditional residents association – any community member can take part.

This sits alongside the bi-monthly services meeting which has been running since 2017, which brings together services that we work with in the area, for example, the police and various departments from the council including for example: empty homes, anti-social behaviour, and environmental teams: There are still a lot of residual issues in the neighbourhood, as a result of years of neglect, and social and environmental injustice. It takes partnership collaboration to aim to tackle that.

These meetings are always action focused, with different members of the meeting identifying actions that need to be taken as a result of issues raised by the community and then individuals owning the action, which is followed up on later. The meetings ensure that the services can do their jobs more effectively, targeting shrinking resources and allowing us to do our job in the neighbourhood too.

Rebecca: Back in 2020 we worked together with neighbours to create a 100 Year Plan, after working with artist gardener Andrea Ku. This plan is now 5 years in, and our work to transform and retrofit the pub building is a key part of it.

Working with photographer Felicity Crawshaw – we delivered a community photoshoot to vision the 4 pillars of our 100 year Plan. This image won a Bronze at the Paris Photo Prize and an honourable mention at the International Photo Awards as well as being one of the winners of portrait of Britain, this is part of the work we are doing to change the story of our place.

Anna: We are retrofitting the Portland Inn and ensuring it is redesigned to be a sustainable community arts building for now and for the future: making decisions about the building

that will make it beautiful but also cheaper and more sustainable to run, and truly representative of our place and our people. This is what the community spoke of needing, and so we have seen amazing buy in from neighbours – if you find out what people want, and support them to do it, they will want to be involved. But we just want to also talk about data here for a moment – if you look at metrics like the Indices of multiple deprivation – date for our area sees us ranked as 5th most deprived nationally, scoring poorly against all of the metrics including, and that is challenging - but what can happen when a community takes charge of data collection, rather than allowing the external metrics about their place to define who they are, but also we began to explore how becoming your own research team as a neighbourhood can leverage support and advocate for the change that may be needed. We were so pleased to work with Civic Square and Centric lab via their Ecological health in neighbourhoods programme, which led to further work with Centric lab to begin to explore how community health impact assessments can deepen our understanding of health in the area.

Rebecca: This led to us understanding more about priorities for people in the area, we created a longlist of what to begin to tackle. Our Community Health Impact Assessment work is providing the evidence we need to talk about why these priorities need to be tackled.

Rebecca: We have realised that the work we are doing is not the retrofit of one building, but of our entire neighbourhood, with the building as the first step– health, environment – social and environmental justice for our neighbours... Community Health Impact assessment has been one way to not only challenge the status quo, bringing light to these injustices and sharing ideas for improvements to our housing, street and green spaces.

Anna: As part of that work - This summer we have been getting to know the bio-indicators in the neighbourhood (mosses and lichens) that can tell us about the air quality – and now backing that up by using air quality monitors to gather our own data, as part of a campaign to then talk to our industrial neighbours about how they are polluting us, and beginning to consider what planting can be done locally to mitigate air pollution, while also starting work to consider how we can improve indoor air quality in our homes, via retrofit initiatives- for the days when the air is poor outside. This is ongoing work and we are just getting started on that.

Anna: Finally – our building is in the last chapter of its retrofit.... open to the public later this year, we are making the most of opportunities to learn new skills in the neighbourhood while we continue projects to complete the building.

Once this is done we are turning our attention to the bad landlords, and considering how we can set up a community land trust and retrofit the homes locally to make them healthy and ready for the future we face.