Community uses of Land Ownership Data

What happens when communities can find out who owns the land around them?

18 month evaluation report

The Digital Commons Co-operative

Introduction

Who owns land is one of the most important, and opaque, questions in the UK today. For communities trying to respond to the challenges of our times - from the housing crisis to climate breakdown - the simple act of finding out who owns the land around them can be a major barrier.

Transparent land ownership data is a critical enabler of community action. Whether people are seeking access to green space, organising to create a community garden, mobilising to count and monitor bird and insect species, or looking for sites for community-owned energy, knowing who owns what allows people to organise, evaluate and ultimately act. If we want communities to step up and solve problems locally they need to be empowered to do so. Access to land ownership information is a vital step in that empowerment.

This is the motivation behind LandExplorer - our interactive public mapping tool that exists to make land information public and accessible. It's an open-source tool that brings

together land-related datasets to help communities and social movements organise around land and power. Developed originally by Shared Assets, LandExplorer is built in partnership with funders and clients working towards social and ecological justice.

In December 2023, we launched a feature - an interactive layer to view the land held by UK and foreign companies. For the first time, this information was made freely available to the public allowing us to ask: **what happens when communities have access to land ownership data?**

Over the next 18 months, we gathered responses from users to understand how this data was being used. This report summarises those findings - highlighting the real-world value of accessible land ownership data and the critical role it plays in community organising, ecological regeneration, community energy, housing justice, and food production.

Our Approach

Exposing land ownership data

This work primarily made use of open datasets:

- UK companies that own property in England and Wales (link)
- Overseas companies that own property in England and Wales (link)
- INSPIRE Index Polygons spatial data (link)

These public datasets, although containing almost all of the data, cannot be easily linked. It is not possible to match a company name to the specific land parcels without referencing the National Polygon Service (link) - a dataset that costs £20,000 a year + VAT. In 2023 the LandExplorer team gained limited access to this dataset on an evaluation licence. We used this combined data to launch a new interactive feature on LandExplorer, allowing users to explore land owned by UK and overseas companies for the purposes of evaluating the utility to civil society.

Promoting to civil society

People and community groups discover LandExplorer by word of mouth or through project partnerships. LandExplorer is not a commercial product, and the land ownership functionality in particular has not been widely promoted to respect our evaluation license. Most promotion has been done through project partnerships including:

- Mapping community growing spaces in Wales with Social Farms & Gardens
- Our Data for Community Assets project in partnership with Shared Assets
- Our Data for Housing Justice projects funded by the Oak Foundation, also in partnership with Shared Assets

Between December 2023 and May 2025, 528 people individuals made use of the new land ownership layer. Of these 65% stated they were using for community interest purposes, 12% for commercial and the remaiing 23% did not specify.

More granularly, people using this data on LandExplorer worked with organisations in the following sectors:

- Research & Education (7%)
- Local authorities & government agencies (7%)
- Energy & community energy (7%)
- Parks, allotments, farms & land managers (7%)
- Environmental trust, charities & groups (2%)
- Housing organisations, unions & resident associations (2%)
- Press (1%)
- Other CICs and community orgs (37%)
- Other commercial (23%)
- Did not specify (6%)

When using the Land Ownership layer, users are invited (via a non-compulsory pop-up) to fill in a short form asking:

- What is LandExplorer helping you to do today?
- What impact can this have for you and your community?
- Who will benefit from this?
- What would make LandExplorer even better?

Over the evaluation period 52 people submitted direct feedback through our platform. We analysed these responses to understand how the data is being used, and how it supports community goals. The findings in the following section are drawn directly from this user input.

Thematic Findings

Based on user submissions, we categorised the uses into five main thematic uses:

- Community Organising – 50%
- Ecological Regeneration – 15%
- Community Energy – 13.5%
- Food Production – 13.5%
- Housing Justice – 8%

Community Organising

The most common use of LandExplorer's land ownership data has been to support community organising - accounting for 50% of responses. People reported that access to this information helps them protect local green spaces, resolve disputes, organise neighbourhood projects, and campaign for community rights and access.

What emerges from the feedback is that this kind of data removes the critical barrier of not knowing who to talk to about specific pieces of land. It enables residents, charities, and grassroots groups to confidently take action, whether they're researching potential land grabs, managing shared spaces, or envisioning new community assets.

People also described a range of more everyday, pragmatic uses: from directing complaints about public land to the right authority, to drawing up maps for resident associations and locating the owners of empty shops or neglected spaces.

What connects all these efforts is a desire to take action locally - and it is clear that land ownership information is key to unlocking that ability. Visibility on this data enables people to feel a sense of agency in a world that often disempowers citizens from taking action in their own lives and communities.

"...helps us, as a charity, protect and enhance [the park] land and protect it from future encroachment."

"...our community project aims to save vast swathes of greenspaces. We are using it to map land owners."

"...unlocking empty spaces for non-profits and community asset developers"

"...we have used it to find out who owns a small section of roadside verge which becomes overgrown and impacts local road safety."

"... to be able to negotiate use of the empty shop for a short term community project"

"...to be able to influence local change. It helps more people feel confident in making proposals."

"...to understand who our neighbours are, so we know who to approach for community and business proposals...."

"...housing estate/ residents' association to understand the management of the estate for the 500 households..."

"...identifying space for a community hub to support, strengthen, empower the community..."

"...a local alley has been blocked by a landlord thereby depriving the community of a route that has been used for generations. We are using it to find the owner."

"...developing a neighbourhood plan to attract inward investment and also for creating a better balanced neighbourhood..."

"... to check local council ownership so we can direct complaints to the right body. Local communities may get action on ongoing concerns on public land."

"...to understand who owns the land and where the boundaries are so that we can campaign for public access rights for walking."

"checking who owns land to try and provide better access to a park and playing field"

"...to explore opportunities for communities to negotiate land access for projects/activities"

Ecological Regeneration

15% of users told us they were using LandExplorer to support ecological regeneration. This includes efforts to protect habitats, control invasive species, plan for rewilding, and strengthen biodiversity at the local level.

In these cases, the need to know who owns land enables local people to engage in ecological stewardship. Examples of this include collaborating on habitat surveys, or challenging ecologically harmful and/or illegal practices. Access to land ownership data is a foundational tool enabling communities to act to protect and enhance local ecosystems.

"... to re-wild abandoned land or land which is currently only grass/turf for improved air quality / bio diversity"

"to map parish biodiversity and plot, flora and fauna..."

"to set up protection measures for beach nesting birds on public beaches."

"...to answer questions about who owns an area of local woodland perceived to be under threat of development, for the living ecosystem above ground and below ground..."

"... to help prevent flytipping with local owners"

"...to find information on local land ownership in the context of [local council's] proposed regional park."

"...to identify the owners of land with non-native invasive species (INNS) growing, which can negatively impact the ecological and amenity value of land and can pose a significant health and safety risk to the public using affected areas, adjacent footpaths and public open spaces downstream."

".. to request access permission to survey priority habitats with the aim of them becoming Local Wildlife Sites. This improves habitat mapping and increases the value of our ecological network mapping. Having the sites designated will also mean they will be surveyed approx. every 10 years with landowners given management advice. For Biodiversity. Landowners may be able to apply for subsidies to maintain habitats."

Community Energy

We found that 13.5% of users said they were using LandExplorer to support community energy projects - enabling local ownership of renewable energy infrastructure. People told us that access to land ownership data enables them to assess the viability of potential sites and get in touch with owners to start conversations.

In this way easily accessible land ownership information is allowing communities to take practical, place-based action on the climate crisis. Many of these projects also generate local income, reduce energy costs, and empower residents to participate in the transition to a low-carbon future. This information is a tool for local empowerment, helping community energy groups build the relationships, knowledge, and proposals needed to make their projects happen.

“Check land ownership for a property that may be suitable for community funded solar panels. A building that provides social justice services may be able to have free panels fitted by [our coop].

"...to understand who owns buildings, in order to see if landlords would be open to installing green energy such as solar pv."

"... to identify possible sites for community renewable energy, which will bring benefits to the community via inclusive transition, return on investment, mentoring and empowerment."

".... to identify the number of separate parcels of land involved in a cable route for a solar array, which helps us to progress plans for a collectively owned PV array."

Food Production

13.5% of respondents have used public land ownership data to support community food growing - toward creating allotments, market gardens and meanwhile gardens. Groups are accessing this information to locate landowners, identify potential sites, and build narratives around community growing initiatives.

The initiatives people describe are as much about place-making and resilience as they are about growing food. From advocating for local "Right to Grow" policies to creating inclusive spaces for marginalised communities, the projects report to foster local food security, health, social connection, and ecological resilience. While public land ownership data does not create the projects, this knowledge empowers people to vision and mobilise in their communities.

“Looking at a piece of land in my town that we are hoping to turn it into a meanwhile garden for those people who walk past and those of us doing the gardening”

"see the extent of land at [manor], which will be to be part-changed to rewilded forest/field and arable regen-agriculture - a place to plant, learn and input on best practice."

"Developing a business case and brief for a community hub garden. We aim to provide a safe and accessible outdoor space to provide activities for adults and children including those with ASD and ADHD in an isolated rural community on the Isle of Sheppey, amongst the most disadvantaged communities in England."

"Determine who owns land in Tower Hamlets that residents are keen to grow food on to advocate for the Right to Grow in Tower Hamlets! We are hoping to achieve the Right to Grow locally. Also, it's really hard to find out who owns what public land so we will use this to make things a lot quicker and easier."

"... finding potential allotment sites to enable more people coming together to grow food"

"Helping identify constraints around establishing a community oriented market garden"

Housing Justice

8% of users said they are using land ownership information to support community-led housing and campaigns for affordable homes. By helping people identify who owns sites, buildings, or land, simple access to land ownership information supports groups such as cohousing initiatives, community land trusts, and housing campaigners to develop proposals for community-led, affordable housing that meets local needs. Easily accessing this information reduces barriers at the critical early stages when groups are building momentum.

"... to search for potential development site for community land trust , probably local authority or church land. We want to create sustainable neighbourhoods with affordable homes and other facilities for people unable to access affordable , comfortable homes."

"... to check a site ownership as we're seeking land for community led affordable housing for local people in need of affordable housing"

"...to find the current owners of several parcels of land that could be a suitable site for our cohousing project, that aims to create affordable, safe and secure rental accommodation at London living rent levels and below."

"... to identify homes and land owned by housing associations in rural areas to helps me to understand housing need, engage relevant housing providers and support new affordable homes rural communities"

Cross Theme Analysis

Across all themes it is clear that access to land ownership data empowers action. These stories show people that *want* to act locally to improve their locality and community. The ability to quickly find land ownership information for commercially owned properties empowers individuals and groups to take action on a range of issues, from rubbish clearing to biodiversity monitoring, from discussing community solar installations to exploring affordable housing sites and negotiating meanwhile growing spaces.

While it is possible to find land ownership information without LandExplorer, it is cumbersome and can be costly, even when the data is public. A simple-to-use tool that makes public information easily accessible removes significant barriers that make community action difficult. The early stages of community organising require investment in visioning, dreaming and relationships - and unnecessary barriers strain groups in their most fragile stages.

Instead, removing this barrier demonstrably empowers people to initiate contact, assess feasibility, develop a collective vision and build momentum. Through our work with communities and social movements we see time and again that people want to solve problems and build thriving communities, and empowering communities to do so can unlock that potential. Finding the owner of a piece of land - when that data exists and is largely already public - should not be a barrier.

Multifunctional Benefits

These thematic areas that have been identified in this report are not siloed in practice. Many respondents described projects span that multiple goals:

- A rewilding initiative which includes community food growing and education.
- A solar energy co-op working with affordable housing providers.
- A community garden supporting both biodiversity and mental health in deprived neighbourhoods.

Reducing barriers to place-based community action naturally leads to intersecting social, ecological and economic outcomes.

Limitations

A number of limitations to data usability were raised:

- Accuracy: With our evaluation licence we have not been able to keep the land ownership dataset completely up to date.
- Interoperability: There is a desire to integrate Land Registry data with other datasets, such as Scottish land ownership, deprivation indices, and planning use class - all of which would deepen understanding and inform more strategic action.
- Transparency of large landholdings: There is a call to make data on significant landowners more available, especially where holdings are large enough to be considered of public interest. While this raises definitional and ethical questions, it speaks to a broader attitude that land transparency is a public good.

Unmet Potential

The feedback captured reflects the networks and projects of the Digital Commons Coop team during the feedback period. Our work with community food organisations and housing justice networks is evident in the types of responses we have received. This suggests that many of the most innovative civic uses of land ownership

data are still emerging. There is likely a far wider set of civic applications than those captured in this report - from art and education to mutual aid, mental health, and climate adaptation. Continued outreach and support will be key to surfacing these and ensuring that land data infrastructure finds the full diversity of public benefit.

Recommendations

Based on the diverse and emerging civil society uses of Land Registry data - from community-led housing and ecological regeneration to climate resilience and food growing - we make the following recommendations to ensure land data continues to unlock public benefit:

1. Make Ownership of Large Landholdings Public

We recommend that the Land Registry and relevant government departments consider a policy change to make the ownership of landholdings above a defined threshold (e.g. acreage or land value) publicly available.

2. Improve Data Interoperability via Identifier Attributes

In datasets that make reference to specific parcels of land, we recommend that sufficient identifiers are provided, such that they can be mapped via GIS to increase the utility of open data sets.

In the case of datasets that refer to freehold boundaries, simply adding the INSPIRE ID would be sufficient, however visibility on leaseholds held by companies is also public information and of the public interest. Thus a public version of the polygon service might include the IDs and coordinates for freeholds and leasehold properties, so these can be referenced by the relevant datasets.

Datasets that reference specific properties include:

- (UK and Overseas) Companies that own property in England and Wales
- Registered Leases
- Listed Buildings
- Planning Use Class data

3. Fund and Support Civil Society Innovation

Recognise and fund civil society organisations as key users of land ownership data. Consider the civil society use case in designing APIs and data visibility features, as well as funding and challenge briefs.

4. Commit to Data Stability and API Stewardship

For digital tools built on Land Registry data to remain reliable, developers need:

- Advance notification of breaking changes
- Access to the datasets via APIs
- Version control on APIs
- Clear documentation on how long legacy API versions will be supported

5. Support Interoperability Across Nations

Where feasible, we recommend supporting interoperability with Scottish and Northern Irish land data.

The Digital Commons Co-operative

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