

## The Cohousing Approach to 'Lifetime Neighbourhoods'

This factsheet considers how local authorities can work with public and private sector partners to develop a cohousing approach towards the outcomes sought from the government's national strategy on housing for an ageing society.

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# THE COHOUSING APPROACH TO 'LIFETIME NEIGHBOURHOODS'

## CONTENTS

	Page
1. Introduction	1
2. The policy context	1
3. Is there a need?	2
4. The local authority agenda	3
5. The essence of cohousing	4
6. Cohousing models	5
7. The cohousing community: an 'old-fashioned neighbourhood'	6
8. Senior cohousing and culture change	7
9. Senior Cohousing Communities	9
10. A Dutch cohousing community of older people	9
11. The Older Women's Cohousing Company ('OWCH'), London	11
12. Emerging lessons: housing associations in partnership with local authorities	12
13. Emerging lessons: local authorities as facilitators of cohousing	14

## 1. Introduction

This factsheet considers how local authorities can work with public and private sector partners to develop a cohousing approach towards the outcomes sought from the government's national strategy on housing for an ageing society.

## 2. The policy context

The clear message from the Audit Commission Report, *Don't stop me now* (2008)<sup>1</sup> is that local authorities could do with some fresh thinking around the ageing of their populations.

It concluded that only a third of councils are well prepared for an ageing population, adding that 'most councils should do more to create an environment in which people thrive as they age'.

Housing providers could also update their approach to helping older people thrive. *Lifetime Homes, Lifetime Neighbourhoods, The National Strategy for Housing in an Ageing Society* (2008)<sup>2</sup> called for 'greater innovation from developers and new perspectives on inclusive design, higher standards, lifetime neighbourhoods'.

This factsheet's focus is on ageing in its widest sense in recognition of impending demographic changes which make it imperative 'for councils 'to make an independent life an option to as many people as possible, for as long as possible'<sup>1</sup>.

It recommends tapping into the energies and preferences of the 'young old' to encourage them to think ahead, mobilise resources and make for themselves (and for even older people) a lifestyle change for a more supportive and neighbourly old age. This is the social capital that cohousing can deliver. Helping older people develop their own self-managed communities is not necessarily hugely resource-intensive given the large share of housing equity currently enjoyed by those over 50, yet it can save significant sums in the future as well as helping the prevention agenda.

The '**cohousing community**', is a subject of mounting interest to older people in Britain. It offers a realistic alternative to a tradition of paternalism and benign neglect in relation to the old and isolated. It involves the older person as citizen not service recipient. It catches the mood of the baby-boomer generation now approaching old age, most of whom have equity not enjoyed by their parents or their children but many of whom have experienced divorce and separation as their parents did not.

This factsheet examines ways that local authorities and their public and private sector partners can engage with this cohort and help foster such alternative living arrangements. It points up the useful lessons to be gleaned from two selected examples:

- a Dutch cohousing community and
- a UK cohousing planning group.

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<sup>1</sup> Don't stop me now. Preparing for an ageing population, Audit Commission, 2008

<sup>2</sup> Lifetime Homes, Lifetime Neighbourhoods: A national strategy for housing an ageing society, DCLG, DoH, DWP Feb 2008.

Above all, it offers an innovative way for local authorities to respond to changing demographics and deliver key parts of their own local performance agenda.

### 3. Is there a need?

Twenty five years ago, the journalist Katharine Whitehorn commented<sup>3</sup> on expectations that soon 'a whopping one-third of us will be living on our own'.

'Either more people are learning to like living alone', she surmised, 'or there must be a hell of a lot of lonely people about.'

'What we need is something between the intense involvement of the couple ...and the isolation of living all alone. We need something equivalent to the squat or shared flat of the chaotic young, only geared also to those possessed of maturity, experience and a complete set of matching occasional tables. We want a larger framework, in which older people can go on getting older without either having to manage on their own, go into a home or cling around the necks of their reluctant children.'

In the fastest growing age-group of 75 years and over, half now live alone. Three quarters of them are women. Living alone and being very old, not to mention poor - which older women are, disproportionately - are risk factors. Very old people living alone are also a source of heavy demand on health and social care services.

A supportive community is more needed at this stage of life than any other.

When you are very old, you need support right where you are. The Dutch have a saying: 'Better a near neighbour than a far friend.' Too many very old people have neither.

A Help the Aged Spotlight report<sup>4</sup> published in October 2008, found that:

- 12% of older people (over 1.1 million) feel trapped in their own home
- 3% of older people *never* go out
- 17% of older people have less than weekly contact with family, friends and neighbours
- 11% have less than monthly contact
- over 1.2 million older people (13%) in the UK always or often feel lonely
- the number of older people who report that worry about the future is affecting their physical health rose from 1.2m in 2007 to 2.2m in 2008

Furthermore, older people are becoming more discerning about their housing choices and local authorities and their partners recognise that current housing supply for older people does not match their housing needs and aspirations. Indeed, some existing sheltered housing is declining in popularity in many areas of the country.

At the same time, retirement villages can be large and expensive. Almshouses are few and far between and paternalistic. Recent extra-care developments are attractive but can be a costly option and one that is rightly rationed for those who need it most.

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<sup>3</sup> Observer 27 June 1982

<sup>4</sup> Help the Aged, Spotlight on Ageing, 2008

Residential care is targeted on the oldest and frailest of the old and local authorities are, in line with national performance requirements, reducing their stock and shifting their attention to helping more people stay in their own homes<sup>5</sup>. This shift has undoubted advantages for older people but, without other interventions, might just exacerbate the problem of loneliness and isolation and inflate demand for health and social care services down the line.

Policy-makers, local authority decision-makers, board members of housing associations and trustees of old age organisations need to ask themselves: 'What do you want for your own old age? Can you put your hand on heart and honestly state that you will be happy to spend the last years of your life in some of the settings for older people you are responsible for?'

#### 4. The local authority agenda

The importance of a housing dimension to health and wellbeing is acknowledged more widely nowadays. Housing is of course not an instantly deliverable commodity. Local authorities, who are used to a long term perspective where planning and urban renewal are concerned, are perhaps not so accustomed to seeing housing provision in the context of future demand for health and social care. This link is an important one for cohousing – which is a long term investment. While the process of bringing a cohousing community to fruition can be a lengthy one, the involvement and activity of the older people who participate in the process can deliver immediate gains in well-being and communal support (as the final part of this factsheet also demonstrates).

Measuring and reducing loneliness in the home is not a performance indicator in itself. However, reduction of the impact of isolation is integral to the wider indicators promoting independence and the health and wellbeing of older people that need to be taken into account by commissioners and providers. Public Service Agreements 17 and 18, for example, exhort local authorities to:

- **'tackle poverty and promote greater independence and wellbeing in later life'** (PSA 17)
- **'promote better health and wellbeing for all'** (PSA 18)

PSA 17 refers to participation and social isolation issues. It requires local authorities to pay special attention to such factors as satisfaction with home and neighbourhood among the over-65s and the extent to which older people receive the support they need to live independently at home. PSA 18 reflects the ambitions set out in *Our health, our care, our say*<sup>6</sup> to create a health and adult social care service that genuinely focuses on preventing ill health and promoting health and wellbeing.

Local authorities have a key role in contributing to the success of these PSA requirements through Local Area Agreements and Local Strategic Partnerships.<sup>7</sup> Enabling more people to achieve greater independence and wellbeing through their own efforts would contribute significantly to their record in this area. Other local partners, such as Primary Care Trusts and voluntary and community groups, also have a significant contribution to make.

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<sup>5</sup> Community Care Statistics 2008: Supported Residents (Adults) England, NHS Information Centre,

<sup>6</sup> *Our health, our care, our say: a new direction for community services*. White Paper, DH, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> *The New Performance Framework for Local Authorities and Local Authority Partnerships*, Oct 2007, DCLG

From April 2009, the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) will extend beyond the performance of local institutions to outcomes in local areas and will focus more on citizens' experiences and perspectives. Here too, fostering the innovative model of cohousing communities for some older people can become a means of hitting key strategic targets.

April 2009 will also see the introduction of a 'duty to promote democracy' and to 'involve local people in key decisions'. The emphasis in *'Communities in control: real people, real power'*<sup>8</sup> is to pass power into the hands of local communities. The White Paper envisages community development workers helping citizens to shape their own areas, doing community building and promoting community engagement in planning.

Enhancing the autonomy, control and choice of older people through the cohousing community model delivers to this agenda and can pave the way for other age-groups like young single people to explore the model. Additionally, it is via practical, down to earth projects like this which really mean something to those participating, that 'people learn the skills of democracy and where democracy can flourish'.<sup>9</sup>

Delivering to the green agenda is also a preoccupation of forward thinking local authorities. It is not evident in the current emphasis on building sustainable communities that adequate recognition has been given to the social dynamics of individuals and groups in achieving and sustaining the behavioural changes required to reduce global warming.

Groups can deliver better to this agenda than individuals acting alone. Most British cohousing communities and groups planning cohousing are strongly motivated by a desire to conserve energy, share resources and contribute to the reduction of global warming. Individual members of these groups are signed up to - and reinforce - each other's commitment to the reduction of car use, to shared resources, to district heating systems, water conservation, etc<sup>10</sup>. Members of the Older Women's Cohousing Group, featured later in this factsheet, are passionate about reducing wasteful personal consumption and incorporating as many energy saving features as they can afford into their housing scheme.

## **5. The essence of cohousing**

Cohousing's key distinction lies in acknowledging communality as the reason for sharing a site or a building<sup>11</sup>. The conscious intention of all who sign up to it is to be active participants in the cohousing group and to benefit from neighbourliness. An additional feature is the maintenance of a healthy age balance from active young-old to very old.

Active participation and shared responsibility offer a strong contrast to the habit of dependency and apathy which too often becomes the default mode of older people in many UK residential settings. The cohousing community's residents are shareholders

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<sup>8</sup> Communities in control, real people, real power, DCLG, Cm 7427, July 2008

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Living Greener, Cheaper, Friendlier: Eco-neighbourhoods and Cohousing, A. Heeks & M. Brenton, UK Cohousing Network, 2006

<sup>11</sup> M. Brenton, (2001) 'CoHousing Communities of Older People' in S.Peace & C.Holland, (eds) Inclusive Housing in an Ageing Society, Bristol, Policy Press.

with a strong stake in the whole. They are not perennially waiting for someone else to take action but control and manage their environment themselves<sup>12</sup>.

In summary, cohousing communities are based on the following features:

- intentionality – they are set up and run by their members for mutual benefit
- members live consciously as a community
- they are democratically managed and controlled by their members
- common space encourages shared activities like community meals and
- where possible, physical design encourages ease of social interaction

A further major difference lies in *the process* of community development and capacity building that generally precedes a physical building. As people form a group to work together and develop their cohousing community and as they make an input into planning and design, this participative process becomes the means by which they get to know each other, develop a sense of ownership and grow a sense of group cohesion and commitment to their neighbours. Compare this approach with that taken by most developers and housing associations, who build first and then fill their schemes with people who are strangers to each other.

As people form a group to work together and develop their cohousing community, their input becomes the means by which they get to know each other, develop a sense of ownership and grow a sense of group cohesion and commitment to their neighbours.

## 6. Cohousing models

There are two models of cohousing:

- the inter-generational community where older people and families live side by side;
- the peer-group community where a range of people over 50 prefer to live in child-free environments.

The cohousing community in the UK can be a small hamlet-type development or mini-neighbourhood where the common house functions as a central node for all the surrounding households, where cars are kept at the periphery and where people share resources like cars, lawn mower, bulk supplies etc.

Such a community can be found in Stroud, where some 34 households - families and singles – collaborate as the Springhill cohousing community. Similarly, near Lewes, in Sussex, the Community Project has retrofitted redundant NHS buildings to accommodate 16 households of families and some singles and a common house where group activities can flourish and individual members can rent workspace.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> M. Brenton (2002) 'Choosing and managing your own community in later life' in K.Sumner (ed) Our homes, our lives: choice in later life living arrangements. London, Centre for Policy on Ageing/Housing Corporation.

<sup>13</sup> [www.cohousing.org.uk](http://www.cohousing.org.uk)

A cohousing community specifically for older people would more often take the form, at least in an urban setting, of a block of flats with shared facilities like a common room with kitchen, a workshop, a laundry room, a bike and buggy store. Such a project does not yet exist in Britain, although there are many examples abroad. These may be purpose built or they may be imaginative conversions of redundant churches, hospital buildings, schools or farms.

## 7. The cohousing community: an 'old-fashioned neighbourhood'

As anyone who counsels on housing options in later life knows, a limited range of choices is available for older people here in the UK. Where do we find the 'larger framework' Whitehorn was reaching for, where older people can find a way of living that is neither institutional care nor isolation? How does our society help to recognise and compensate for the fact that people progressively lose partners and friends as the eighties creep up on them? What positive or attractive alternatives are there to living starkly and perhaps riskily alone in old age?

It must be acknowledged that companionable, supportive neighbourhoods where the old and very old thrive (or where anyone thrives) are not a universal feature of modern living, especially in large cities. What is proposed in this paper is preventive action to remedy this deficit for growing numbers of older people. Local authorities and housing providers – who are repositories of financial, planning and development expertise – can, just by doing differently what they already do, direct these resources towards the new community development approach advocated in *Communities in control*<sup>14</sup> and make a positive impact on the quality of life of older people in small neighbourhoods.

In similar societies like the US, Holland and Denmark, people in the category of 'young-old' collaborate with public and private developers in forming what have been termed 'old-fashioned neighbourhoods created with a little ingenuity'<sup>15</sup>. According to the UK Network of Cohousing Communities, these communities offer 'a way of living which brings individuals and families together in groups to share common aims and activities while also enjoying their own self-contained accommodation and personal space. They are a means of compensating for the alienating effects of modern life where neighbours don't recognise each other and where day-to-day collaboration is minimal'.<sup>16</sup>

This type of development is specifically designed, in a way that few other community settings are, to encourage a blend of privacy and active neighbourliness. In these 'mini-neighbourhoods', people consciously set out to interact with their neighbours, share activities like eating together occasionally, watch out for each other, feed the cat, water the plants and notice if someone does not appear one morning. For older people, who spend 70% of their time at home in the domestic setting, this is invaluable.

There are neighbours around that they know, whom they meet easily and casually because the building is designed for this; there are 'eyes on the street' where petty crime (and therefore fear) is minimised; there is a common room or house where they can meet, share meals, play cards, have parties. It is also important that age-

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<sup>14</sup> Communities in control, real people, real power, DCLG, Cm 7427, July 2008

<sup>15</sup> [www.cohousing.org/](http://www.cohousing.org/)

<sup>16</sup> [www.cohousing.org.uk](http://www.cohousing.org.uk;);

peer communities like these are not cut off from their local neighbourhoods. They need to be near local amenities such as shops, post-offices and parks, bus and other transport routes and they need to be involved with local civic life.

What is the difference between the cohousing community and the average sheltered housing complex? For a start, with some striking exceptions, the latter is often no different from any block of flats and its common room and other shared amenities are notoriously under used. In many sheltered housing schemes, there is no catalyst, beyond mere co-location, to bring people together and encourage them to mix.

Conscientious housing managers struggle to 'retro-build' a sense of community, but their duties are increasingly defined as peripatetic housing management. Meeting national requirements on active tenant participation and delivering 'a culture of involvement'<sup>17</sup> is a struggle among already existing clusters of older people who have long been passive recipients in a top-down welfare system.

## 8. Senior cohousing and culture change

Perceiving older people as active citizens who have views and preferences, who have much to contribute and who want to take action to stay in charge of their own lives, requires a change of mindset for many public agencies accustomed only to a focus on the frail and vulnerable. The Audit Commission's *Don't Stop Me Now*<sup>18</sup> called for good local partnership working, delivering 'a change of culture' that moves beyond the 15% of over 65s who receive social care, where innovative local authorities endeavour to 'understand, engage and mobilise' their older community.

*Lifetime Homes, Lifetime Neighbourhoods*<sup>19</sup> drew attention to the fact that older people will make up 48% of the increase in new households by 2026, seeing them as key to the housing market, particularly 'in a less buoyant market'. The message here is 'It is not just that the housing market needs to reflect their needs, it needs to match their aspirations'.

The strategy considers characteristic dilemmas facing older people – staying put from choice, down-sizing to capitalise on their assets or staying put because there are no attractive alternatives within their community and therefore remaining in housing that is no longer fit for their needs. For those who are faced with the isolation of living alone, the document cites the cohousing movement as a strategic option, 'with single women in particular looking for ways to live with mutual care and support.'

'Denmark and the Netherlands developed the model but we also want to see greater innovation from developers in England in this area and a more creative and positive response to the possibilities. The Housing Corporation has invited bids for cohousing organisations for funding over the next three years. It is hoped that these forms of housing will help meet the needs of a growing, single, older population looking for congenial company and support as they grow older'<sup>20</sup>

CLG

<sup>17</sup> People First: Delivering Change through Involvement, May, 2007, Housing Corporation

<sup>18</sup> Don't stop me now. Preparing for an ageing population, Audit Commission, 2008

<sup>19</sup> Lifetime Homes, Lifetime Neighbourhoods: A national strategy for housing an ageing society, DCLG, DoH, DWP, Feb 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

The Housing Corporation (now the Homes & Communities Agency) set out in its 2008-11 prospectus<sup>21</sup> a policy welcoming bids for eligible costs within cohousing projects. The Corporation supports projects that increase tenure mix in communities 'which could include shared ownership for the elderly, HomeBuy and cohousing in addition to rent'<sup>22</sup>. It has encouraged a closer strategic partnership between housing associations and local authorities, particularly via a '**new culture of involvement**' and '**the use of community planning approaches in the design of new development, or the regeneration of existing neighbourhoods**'<sup>23</sup>. It has also said that it wants to find new ways of engaging older people in housing management, design and planning.

Local authorities can act as positive facilitators and even initiators in helping local older people to create supportive communities for themselves. This is recognised in the Housing Learning and Improvement Network toolkit, *More Choice, Greater Voice: a toolkit for producing a strategy for accommodation with care for older people*<sup>24</sup>

As noted earlier, the whole thrust of the current national performance framework and the modernisation agenda for people over 65 points towards encouraging independent living, enhancing the individual's satisfaction with their home and neighbourhood and enabling them to exercise choice and control. Linking these requirements to the aspirations of the young-old, as recommended by the Audit Commission, makes sense.

They are still active and engaged, are not enthusiastic about the available options for old age they see ahead of them and are as aware as anyone that they will have to look after themselves in a fast ageing society with a shrinking labour force.

Audit Commission inspectors were shocked when, in their mystery shopper exercise, older people seeking general information from local authorities were constantly routed to social services departments. Moving away from a narrow focus on social care to encourage genuine community action and empowerment demands from local authorities largeness of vision, a shift away from paternalism and a broad approach to ageing. The Commission calls for 'an innovative approach to finding solutions', saying that Councils need 'to understand, engage and mobilise their older community'.<sup>25</sup> The Commission notes that the age range between 50 and 65 years forms a 'transitional period for many people, with numerous life-changing events' and it recommends that local authorities focus on this transitional period of life as well as on the older years.

For those born in the baby boom years, retirement approaches, their children have grown, they may already have viewed their elderly parents' care and accommodation arrangements with some distaste and decided 'that is not for me'. They are likely to be fitter than their parents were at the same age and ageing for them is a different cultural experience.

This profile is to be found in a number of groups in the UK who are actively pursuing the cohousing community as a setting for their future years. Experience in the USA and in continental Europe suggests that it is the 50-65 year age group that is pivotal

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<sup>21</sup> National Affordable Housing Programme 2008-11 Prospectus, Housing Corporation 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Investing for Lifetimes: Strategy for housing an ageing society, April, 2008, Housing Corporation,

<sup>23</sup> People First: Delivering Change through Involvement, May, 2007, Housing Corporation

<sup>24</sup> <http://networks.csip.org.uk/IndependentLivingChoices/Housing/Topics/browse/HousingOlderPeople/OlderPeopleStrategy/LocalHousingStrategy/?parent=3671&child=2545>

<sup>25</sup> Don't stop me now. Preparing for an ageing population, Audit Commission, 2008

and the most energetic for taking forward initiatives such as forming cohousing communities and engaging yet older people. That time is on their side is also important given the long time lag from initial idea to fruition characteristic of most housing developments, let alone a cohousing community. Once set up though, the benefits of these communities are enduring.

'I have had 31 neighbours for 15 years and they are not all exactly my friends. But life is good together. Older people are less isolated in a living group and can stay independent for longer'<sup>26</sup>

## 9. Senior Cohousing Communities

The following pages focus on the age-peer group model of cohousing for older people. Details of the small number of established inter-generational cohousing communities in the UK where older people are active members may be found on the website of the UK Cohousing Network<sup>27</sup>.

For examples where older people have set up their own cohousing communities, we have to look beyond the borders of the UK. It should be noted however, that a number of 'forming groups' of predominantly older people are active in this country – in London, in Yorkshire, in Scotland. To illustrate the process of developing a cohousing community of older people and its benefits, we describe here:

1. a cohousing community that has existed for nearly twenty years in Amersfoort, in the Netherlands and
2. a would-be cohousing community in London that has been struggling to realise its ideal for the past ten years.

## 10. A Dutch cohousing community of older people

In the Dutch experience, the older people's cohousing community (as a self-managing group of people aged 55+) has been fostered with a view to extending years of independent and active living – but it has also crucially been based on a conception of the older person as a participating citizen.

Partnerships of local authorities and housing associations, working locally but backed by national policy, have assisted groups of older people to develop some 160 cohousing communities in the Netherlands, with an additional 60 groups in various stages of preparation. These 'living groups', as the Dutch call them, are settings where older people control and manage their own lives together. They demonstrate a far-sighted official strategy of keeping older people active and healthy for as long as possible.

They are also viewed as helpful in a wider context - balancing a local age-structure in new neighbourhoods and towns, for example, contributing stability to the regeneration of old, run-down neighbourhoods or revitalising apartment blocks 'retrofitted' to become cohousing communities rather than clusters of isolated households.

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<sup>26</sup> Greet Broerze, age 82, quoted in Trouw, July 2008, The Netherlands

<sup>27</sup> [www.cohousing.org.uk](http://www.cohousing.org.uk)

A longstanding and familiar strategy is reflected in a Dutch national newspaper headline in 2008: 'More and more older people choose to live in a living group'<sup>28</sup>. A recent development, in early 2008, saw the national association of older people's living groups in the Netherlands come to an agreement with the large housing association Woonzorg Nederland to establish two new 'living groups' per year among the baby boomer generation.

**The city of Amersfoort**, (pop.135,000) in central Netherlands, lists on its website 10 local older people's cohousing communities. It advises 'If you and others want to start a living group, contact the housing department of Amersfoort Council'. The council employs a community worker to facilitate the development of these local 'living groups' across the age-range. This person will work to identify a site locally (sometimes in the context of a new housing development) and broker contacts between a group of older people and a housing association.

On the outskirts of Amersfoort, a cohousing community of 43 men and women (whose ages in 2008 range from 55 to 83 years), has lived as a mixed tenure scheme from its creation in 1990<sup>29</sup>. 36 households, two thirds social renters and one third owner-occupiers, live in 70m<sup>2</sup> to 80m<sup>2</sup> flats (with moveable internal walls) in two buildings facing each other and joined by a bridge and a lift tower

Car parking is on the periphery and the buildings are surrounded by a large and generous flower and vegetable garden which is why this particular group came together in the first place. They have a large common room with kitchen and guest room; they function as a group and meet regularly to shape their collective life as a cohousing community.

At times they share community meals and there is much social interaction within the group. The community has the legal form of a residents association and its members are responsible for recruiting new residents and allocating tenancies. Small sub-committees work on various task areas like membership, the garden, social activities, etc. For such things as building maintenance, the owners liaise with the housing association landlord for the rental properties, but there is otherwise no distinction based on tenure.

The initiative which gave rise to this successful older people's cohousing community arose in the 1980s when the city council and a large local housing association responded to what was then a new trend in the Netherlands. These partners called a meeting of older people and invited interest in developing a number of prospective 'living groups' or cohousing communities.

The particular group described came into being around the strong interest in gardening which emerged for some of those participating. For the housing association to locate and develop the site where they now live took around five years, but since 1990 when they moved in, the residents have created a beautiful garden and are still active in cultivating it, even running a small farmers' market.

The five year development phase was not just focused on the physical site and building – it was a crucial time for bonding and sorting out agreed ideas on how they wished to live as a group and how they would deal with conflict if and when it arose. The pattern for this group followed that of other groups in the Netherlands – once a

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<sup>28</sup> Trouw, July 2008

<sup>29</sup> M.Brenton, *We're in charge: cohousing communities of older people in the Netherlands*, 1998, Policy Press.

group forms, its members meet regularly to participate in the design process for their intended building, to work through common ideas and disagreements and to get to know each other through activities like picnics, theatre visits, bicycling and boat trips etc.

The role of the local authority in relation to this group in Amersfoort was a supportive, facilitative one via a community worker who fostered relationships between the group and the housing association. The council also gave the group a small grant to fund a meeting place and communications. The housing association identified, purchased and developed a site in collaboration with the older people's group, put together the financial package necessary and it acts as landlord for social renters.

The architect came from a practice geared towards client participation in design. Once a broad template had been agreed with the prospective residents, some of them visited a nearby university construction studies department and built their agreed model from polystyrene blocks in order to get a sense of how it would work as a living environment. Although their membership has changed over the ensuing years and a number of the early pioneers have died, they are still a successful 'living group'.

## **11. The Older Women's Cohousing Company ('OWCH'), London**

As an example of some of the many groups in Britain struggling to establish a cohousing community, the OWCH group is an enduring illustration of sticking power and purpose.

In the ten years since it was set up, the group has renewed its membership time and again, survived the death of one of its founders, the withdrawal of some of its oldest members as they grew frail, the falling away of women whose housing needs became urgent and the loss of those who simply could not contemplate giving the project more time.

In that period, many housing associations have been approached, key people in London local authorities consulted, dozens of sites visited – one even got to detailed planning stage.

At the time of writing, the group is hopeful that a firm site has been identified in the London borough of Brent by the Hyde housing association working in collaboration with Housing for Women, development partner to the OWCH group. If this block of thirty flats and common facilities is completed, it will be the first purpose-built cohousing community of older people constructed in the UK and as such a shining beacon of achievement for other older people's groups.

In brief, the key feature of the OWCH group is that it is a company limited by guarantee in a formal partnership with Housing for Women, a small housing association based in Brixton, London. The group consists of women from their mid 50s to late 70s who mostly live alone, scattered across 12 London boroughs. They are a relatively low income and multi-racial mix of owner-occupiers and social renters and are keen to maintain this inclusivity in a mixed tenure development.

The women have been active lobbyists and with Housing for Women's help have been successful in gaining pilot status from the London Region of the former Housing Corporation and the offer of a social housing grant to be used anywhere in the capital. They have the support of the Tudor Trust, anxious to invest both in a self-

governing community of older people and in design for ageing. They also have an external consultant (author of this factsheet) who has supported the group's activities throughout.

The OWCH group is by any definition already a strong community. All they lack is a shared home. Over the years, meeting each month for a day and spending the odd residential weekend together, the group has built sound internal support networks – even though its composition has changed many times over the years, with few of the founder members still around.

This resilience is evidence of strong motivation and a testimony to the likely success of the future resident group in accepting and absorbing successive new members.

Running its own finances, facilitating its own meetings, running a website, a newsletter and producing publicity material, the OWCH group is practiced in the art of self-government. Policies, such as equalities, conflict resolution, mutual support, etc have all been developed by the women themselves on the basis of training workshops, which are repeated at intervals for new recruits. Capacity building has been given high priority and social events are also a key feature of the group's community building activities.

What they want is to keep active together, share responsibility for the life of their cohousing community and offer each other support as friendly neighbours. They are also keen to share resources where possible, to maintain a low carbon footprint and to be a resource for their locality. Without a shared building, however, all this will go for nothing, as the women get older and frailer and will still live alone.

**It really is extraordinary that co-housing should be so difficult here. We need to re-invent housing associations, set them free from the straitjacket that forces them to hand over nomination rights to new homes to the local authority, and let them spin off experimental organisations that imaginative people can invest in, and allow them to find new solutions for staying put when people are older. It is a crying shame that housing for older people in the United States and Europe is far superior to ours, and infinitely more imaginative....It is time that older people were given a real choice about where they are to live.**  
**Julia Neuberger<sup>30</sup>**

## **12. Emerging lessons: housing associations in partnership with local authorities**

To finance a mix of shared ownership and social rental, a number of funding streams must be drawn on: in the case of OWCH, this will include the women's own equity, social housing grant and a capital development loan. It is inconceivable that a low-income group such as this could finance and develop their cohousing scheme unaided.

Like many other aspiring cohousing groups around the country, they are good at building and sustaining a sense of community, they are good at managing their life as a group – but they lack the financial, planning and development skills to put a building up and they cannot afford to borrow capital or subsidise low-income renters.

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<sup>30</sup> Not Dead Yet, J. Neuberger, 2008, Harper Collins, London.

While the experience of the six or so successful (family-based) cohousing communities in Britain has been in the private sector, aspiring cohousers such as the OWCH group, the Threshold Centre in Dorset and the Lifetime group in Yorkshire have viewed **the non-profit housing association as the natural vehicle to assist with the development of a cohousing community.**

A survey of aspiring groups carried out in 2006-7 by the UK Cohousing Network found that, while - more often than not - these groups were keen to include affordable rental accommodation in their schemes, it has not proved possible. Engaging with housing associations has been difficult. 'The lack of engagement partly stems from a lack of knowledge and experience on both sides. There are no existing models and housing associations who respond positively know they will have to develop the models'<sup>31</sup>.

Major factors in the long wait of the OWCH group, alongside difficulties such as finding land, have been lack of familiarity among housing associations and local authorities in London with the concept and benefits of cohousing and their lack of awareness of the advances made in other countries. There may be no existing models yet in the UK but there is no reason why housing associations in Britain cannot learn from the imagination and flexibility shown by many of their European counterparts.

In the three groups cited above, still tenuous relationships are being forged with a small number of innovative housing associations brave enough to venture into new territory (Housing for Women, Hyde, in London, Synergy in Dorset and The Plus Dane Group in Merseyside & Yorkshire). The idea of forming a small 'learning network' between cohousers and interested housing associations is gaining ground. The OWCH project itself is supported by the Housing Corporation (HCA) as a pilot scheme to test out and demonstrate the possibilities for other older people.

Housing associations and developers are not accustomed to negotiating close participative relationships with their end-users and this will be new territory for many.

It is, however, a 21<sup>st</sup> century mode of interaction which might usefully be applied in all their housing developments – after all, why build more and more houses and flats and give no consideration to the quality of community and neighbourhood life to be lived in them? Housing associations could ask themselves how they could work alongside particular groups, bringing them together, involving them and giving them a say in designing and planning their own homes and neighbourhoods. Older people generally and groups like gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered older people have particular needs for such forms of involvement.

The learning curve is a steep one and compromise may be necessary from each party. Housing associations can be bureaucratic and remote. The cohousing group will have to co-operate with established ways of contracting and project management and may have to negotiate their ideal input into, say, choice of architect and subsequent design.

Hopefully, however, once involved, housing associations will quickly see the investment to be reaped from such involvement. Housing associations could also act as developers for cohousing schemes based solely on owner-occupation, given the dominance of home ownership among older people.

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<sup>31</sup> UK Cohousing Network

In summary, housing associations could:

- view direct participation by their end users in design of new homes and neighbourhoods as an important investment in social capital
- form genuine partnerships with their end-users and would-be cohousing groups
- form strategic partnerships with local authorities
- make available their skills and experience as developers to their end-users and would-be cohousing groups
- encourage and facilitate their active participation and sense of ownership in design and planning and
- encourage and promote capacity building and group cohesion

### **13. Emerging lessons: local authorities as facilitators of cohousing**

The UK Cohousing Network survey found some positive responses from local authorities around the country to proposals for family-based cohousing communities - even to the point of writing cohousing into the local plan, identifying potential sites or using planning exceptions in creative ways.

Planning delays and rigidities have, however, imposed strains on the durability and survival of groups. The cost of land is, inevitably, a barrier and a number of aspiring cohousing groups are looking with some interest at the Community Land Trust model - a model for which the CLG's Strategy for Housing an Ageing Society<sup>32</sup> has expressed some support.

Planning exceptions could also be a route for dealing with high land prices. The need for a planning policy to enable cohousing to move forward as an exception is spelt out in a paper<sup>33</sup> submitted to CLG in December 2006. A study tour in 2008 by councillors exploring Dutch approaches to building sustainable communities also led to suggestions that local authority involvement in planning new developments could mean that 'land values are determined by what is planned, rather than the other way round'.<sup>34</sup>

A further recommendation from this study trip to Dutch cities like Amersfoort was **that municipalities should 'Invest in community development to equip people to live together co-operatively'**. It is surprising that this should even need saying after decades of municipal involvement in supply of new housing and urban regeneration.

Current plans for a major increase in house-building nationally, partly reflecting prevailing trends in single household formation, need urgently to move beyond buildings to address the question of how a sense of neighbourhood and place and community may be developed. This is the strong message of national policy, particularly, as noted earlier, in 'Lifetime Homes, Lifetime Neighbourhoods'.

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<sup>32</sup> Lifetime Homes, Lifetime Neighbourhoods: A national strategy for housing an ageing society, DCLG, DoH, DWP, Feb 2008

<sup>33</sup> 'Living Greener, Cheaper, Friendlier: Eco-neighbourhoods and Cohousing', A. Heeks & M. Brenton, UK Cohousing Network, 2006, <http://www.cohousing.org.uk/node/141>

<sup>34</sup> New communities – looking and learning from Dutch experience, N. Falk, Town & Country Planning December 2008

The appointment of even one community development worker in a local authority area could make a positive contribution to the fostering and successful creation of groups of older people dedicated to forming their own cohousing community, given that most of the development side would be carried out by a housing association and the group itself can be equipped to become self-sustaining.

If cohousing is to succeed, local authorities will also need to be willing to modify standard nominations procedures for tenancies and agree a middle way with a cohousing group's selection criteria. This needs to ensure that applicants eligible for social housing in such a scheme are also genuinely signed up to the ethos of cohousing – or it won't work.

A scheme where tenants are allocated on the basis of housing need alone is not a cohousing community and long experience has shown that it does not necessarily thrive as any kind of community. Flexibility in housing allocations is needed so that people's shared interests, aspirations and ties may help cement social cohesion. How, it might be asked, would an older people's mixed tenure cohousing community based on a shared interest in, say, gardening, be accommodated in this country?

In the final analysis, a flexible and imaginative approach to housing allocations needs to be made more possible through an expansion of supply. The Dutch have a far more generous and non-stigmatising approach to social housing because they have invested in more of it. Social housing is the norm for a larger section of their population than in Britain – and rental tenure gives an added flexibility to cohousing.

The first part of this factsheet stressed the investment value for local authorities of:

- recognising the imperatives of changing demographics
- working for all their older residents, particularly the 'young-old', rather than just the vulnerable few
- promoting the independent older citizen
- facilitating the aspirations and tapping the energies of the baby boomer generation
- increasing satisfaction with home and neighbourhood among the over-65s
- promoting 'a culture of involvement'
- employing community development workers to help citizens shape their own areas and
- promoting community engagement in planning

The paper has outlined the beneficial contributions that senior cohousing communities can make to parts of the strategic performance agenda of local authorities.

It has set out the value of cohousing communities to older people in:

- staying in charge of their own lives
- being surrounded by familiar and supportive neighbours and
- staying active and engaged

In responding to the ideas contained in this factsheet, local authorities could:

- acknowledge cohousing communities of older people as an important investment in social capital and as significant contributors to the performance agenda
- form strategic partnerships with housing associations around this perception
- in active partnership with housing associations promote and encourage the development of cohousing communities, particularly those of older people
- employ community development skills to encourage capacity building and group cohesion among would-be cohousing groups, particularly among older people
- actively pursue with housing associations ways in which responsible social housing investment may be imaginatively and flexibly reconciled with promoting selection by cohousing groups of new members based on shared interests and ideals.

This factsheet is an invitation to forward thinking local authorities to respond to the invitation by the Homes and Communities Agency and the Department for Communities and Local Government to explore creative and innovative possibilities for meeting 'the needs of a growing, single, older population looking for congenial company and support as they grow older'<sup>35</sup>. First practical moves in this direction might be, jointly with a housing association, to expand their understanding of the cohousing community<sup>36</sup>, call local older people together to promote and explain the concept and then help and support the creation of a pilot local project run by older people themselves. Much would be learned from such an initiative.

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<sup>35</sup> Lifetime Homes, Lifetime Neighbourhoods: A national strategy for housing an ageing society, DCLG, DoH, DWP Feb 2008

<sup>36</sup> Durrett, C. (2005) *Senior Cohousing: a Community Approach to Independent Living*, Ten Speed Press, Berkeley, Ca.; M. Brenton, (2001) 'CoHousing Communities of Older People' in S.Peace & C.Holland, (eds) *Inclusive Housing in an Ageing Society*, Bristol, Policy Press

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