

# **Exploring the possibility of change**

## **Cohousing - the potential for an older people's development in Newcastle upon Tyne**

Findings from an action research project commissioned by  
Newcastle University, the Quality of Life Partnership and  
the Elders Council of Newcastle

A Beacon project funded by Newcastle University

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## Thank You

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Thanks are due to many people starting with a big thank you to the Steering Group team comprised of Vera Bolter, Lynn Corner, Barbara Douglas, Helen Jarvis, Mary Nicholls and Rose Gilroy. They facilitated discussions, provided materials and expert resources to inform briefing notes, took notes and records of discussions, shared their contacts, experience and know-how and did far more than most Steering Groups do. They made it possible for the project to hit the ground running and they are working out what they intend to do next with the project's findings.

Thanks also to my colleague Muriel Barron who organised the research workshops and with Anne Richardson from the Quality of Life Partnership and the support staff from the Changing Age Team at the Campus for Ageing and Vitality booked venues and refreshments, organised resources and wrote up notes. They also provided much needed information and camaraderie to our workshop participants during one of the most memorable storms Newcastle has ever experienced in June 2012.

Many thanks of course to everyone who participated and helped build a momentum in the project. Thanks to people who emerged during the action research as shakers and movers and were willing to facilitate some provocative discussions. Special thanks go to Maureen Tinsley a potential cohouser and Diane Jones a retired researcher and community activist. Philippa Hughes from Three Rivers and her background in community solutions, the really vibrant 'can do' team of Margaret White, Caroline Gitsham and Helen Hume from Gentoo, members of Newcastle Elders Council for their enthusiasm and active participation, Jo Gooding from the UK Cohousing Network who fortunately for us lives in Newcastle and gave us lots of support and information.

Together we discovered a lot about how cohousing and cohousing methods of organising and doing chime with the views expressed regularly by older people in Newcastle and beyond about the homes, neighbourhoods and lives they want and the way they prefer to be involved and included in decisions about our society and the physical world.

Moyra Riseborough (updated February 2013)

# 1. Introduction

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The action research project emerged from a partnership between academics Rose Gilroy, Lynn Corner and Helen Jarvis at Newcastle University, Barbara Douglas from the Quality of Life Partnership and Vera Bolter and Mary Nicholls from Newcastle Elders Council. They often work together and have long standing roles in policy and research on challenging themes such as innovative ways to meet the housing, care and support needs of a growing older population while also listening to, articulating and responding to older people's wishes and aspirations. For example, they are involved in work sponsored by the World Health Organisation to create Age Friendly Cities and supported the Newcastle City Council initiative led by Councillor Ann Schofield to become an Age Friendly City. They are currently supporting the City Council to adopt a cooperative approach in its relationships with local communities.

Cohousing and other kinds of community led approaches have been mentioned frequently in discussion about housing over the last decade. Recent involvement by Elders Council member Vera Bolter on research into European examples of housing and support (commissioned for the HAPPI panel (see Barak and Park 2009) explored various innovative options that went beyond the housing and support models most of us are familiar with or added something different. One was cohousing and the examples shown in the report seem to offer much more than housing with support or care. For older residents there was a lot more control because they were involved from the start in the design of the environment they lived in and their way of living built on their capacity for self-help. The living environment also meant not just the housing or a common room where people met from time to time but the wider neighbourhood. People living there were choosing to cooperate together to create a supportive community and they were thriving. Not surprisingly the cohousing idea made an impact on the HAPPI panel and Vera's experiences led to a happy synergy of interests being kindled locally amongst the people who commissioned the action research for this report in Newcastle.

## Change

Cohousing isn't new. Cohousing developments have been built over the last couple of decades particularly in Denmark where it started and later Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands and Ireland and more recently, North America. References to its *potential* were mentioned in many previous research reports and policy discussions. Maria Brenton in the UK has long championed cohousing and built up evidence (especially from the Netherlands) about cohousing's potential role; see for example a 2001 article called Cohousing Communities of Older People in Peace and Holland (Eds) and a very recent discussion paper for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (January 2013). Maria has also been one of the driving forces behind the Older

Women's Cohousing Group who after a long period of gestation are having a development built in London. (For more information on the group see [www.cohousing.org.uk](http://www.cohousing.org.uk)).

Yet there is something palpably different about the way cohousing is being talked about now and this is reflected to some extent in the HAPPI reportage. The reason seems to be partly because cohousing has come of age. For example, many early co housing projects in Denmark have developed and matured. In addition a number of cohousing developments specifically aimed at meeting the needs of older people have been steadily gaining in popularity. Charles Durrett (2009) a leading North American cohouser and qualified architect developer, explains the growing popularity of senior cohousing amongst the baby boomers by observing that this population group are used to organising themselves and challenging the status quo. Perhaps most importantly the growth and popularity of senior cohousing developments say something about how people are able to join together to create and run something different and possibly better than the housing, care and support arrangements 'other organisations' put in place *for* people. The UK Cohousing Network currently has approximately 40 groups who are in the process of developing. Ten are interested in developing seniors cohousing. Some are interested in older people development while others are keen on intergenerational cohousing projects. The first project should open in a couple of years in London.

Intergenerational and family cohousing projects are already up and running in the UK so the cohousing movement is growing here too.

Meanwhile Helen Jarvis has been pursuing her academic interests in researching and understanding cohousing communities and sustainable living. In 2011 Helen stimulated local interest in the notion of cohousing in several presentations she gave in Newcastle at the Literary and Philosophical Society, the Green fair and Brunswick Church Hall organised through the Cooperative Society, Living for the Future and North East Permaculture Network (see Resources and Links at the end to find copies of Helen's presentations). Helen noted that cohousing has the potential to address the challenges of an ageing population and enable the growing number of older people in single person households to live as independently as they want but in a supportive environment. Mutual self-help and support, self-organisation and choosing to live in communities where older people agree to be supportive to one another have proven benefits (see Choi, 2004, Durrett, 2009 and Glass, 2009).

Reflecting on the renewed interest in cohousing and given the need for a greater range of community based housing and support options for older people in Newcastle to facilitate self-support, the partners decided to apply for some Beacon funding from a Newcastle University 'pot' to explore the potential amongst older people for developing a cohousing group in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. The application led by Rose Gilroy and Lynn Corner was successful and an action research

programme involving a series of research workshops was subsequently funded.

The research started in late October 2011 and ended in June 2012.

## **1.1 The Research Steering Group**

The partners set up a Steering Group to steer the action research project and disseminate useful resources and information. The members as noted already were Rose Gilroy, Helen Jarvis and Lynn Corner from Newcastle University; Barbara Douglas from the Quality of Life Partnership; Vera Bolter and Mary Nicholls from Newcastle Elders Council.

## **1.2 Coproduced action research**

The action research was led by me, Moyra Riseborough from Riseborough Research and Consultancy Associates (RRCA) but it was a team effort working with the Steering Group and participants.

## **1.3 The research – what was done?**

### **The exploring co housing action research events**

Four cohousing action research workshops were organised to present basic information on cohousing and collect people's views on and about cohousing for older people.

- One with older people and carers
- One with Chinese Elders
- One with planners, architects, developers and housing providers
- One with social care, health, housing decision makers and local politicians

#### *Four workshops timeline – December 2011 to May 2012*

The workshops also encouraged people to consider what it would be like to live in cohousing as older people and to think about the barriers to creating such communities.

A fifth research workshop was held on 28 June 2012 which examined issues and matters that had been raised in previous workshops and other events and encouraged people to consider solutions and options. The participants included a range of people who took part in previous events plus some new people who had been unable to take part or didn't know about them at the time.

In addition two complementary events were held at the Great North Museum organised by Rose Gilroy (“Cohousing Designing Inclusive Communities” 29 March 2012) and Helen Jarvis (“Co-creating Participatory Engagement in Housing and Community Development: A Challenge for Social Renewal” 3 May 2012).

All the research events provided rich data on how people are disposed towards many aspects that underpin cohousing and the challenges presented by living sustainably and taking control over their neighbourhoods. The research workshops also provided data on how older people feel about cohousing and how developers and commissioners actually approach the topic in Newcastle and the region including insights into the barriers from their point of view to developing cohousing.

There were tricky and difficult discussions such as what do people do when someone is unable to manage any longer – are their neighbours obliged to do some of the intimate care tasks for them? Is that part of the deal? And, is this kind of development only for the well off – as one person said “for the people who live in Jesmond?” A literature search and discussions with other people developing older people cohousing in the UK suggests that these questions arise regularly – for Jesmond read the grander parts of any major city or substitute the place with people who are more articulate than most. The evidence though is that cohousing can and often does work in a variety of settings. In Norway for example the Government encourages cohousing developments in areas with high levels of social and economic deprivation where communities are breaking down because cohousing developments have positive and wide impacts across neighbourhoods and localities (source Barac and Park, 2009).

## 1.4 Outputs and resources

One of the outputs from the action research is this report. Other outputs aimed at particular audiences will also be produced.

Some resources were produced in the course of the action research and they are listed below:

Power point presentations

- Presentation 1 with short You-Tube video clips was prepared in order to give participants some basic information about cohousing and to encourage discussion. The presentation was used for the first two events but it was amended and shortened for the third and fourth events (presentation 2). A third PowerPoint presentation was prepared and delivered to the audience participating at an event organised by Rose Gilroy at the Great North Museum on 29 March 2012. The presentation gave some early analysis and pointers from the action research.



- Power point presentations were also provided by Gentoo and Three Rivers for the June workshop.
- A fact sheet about cohousing and the action research was prepared and widely circulated
- Notes that were written up and circulated to participants after each of the events giving key points and summarising flip charts and other group discussions. Five sets of notes were produced in all plus photographs of drawings and tape recordings of some of the discussion from “Cohousing Designing Inclusive Communities” organised by Rose Gilroy and held at the Great North Museum.
- Photographs of people participating at all the events.
- Photographs of the drawings people made that expressed their views of the cohousing they wanted to live in
- Exercises developed for the research workshops to encourage participation and exploration
- Links to many other resources, information and research papers.
- This report.

Other material from workshops and presentations run by Helen Jarvis and Rose Gilroy) will be posted onto the Quality of Life website [www.qualityoflife.org.uk](http://www.qualityoflife.org.uk).

## **1.5 The people who participated in the research workshops**

Participants were recruited from a range of different ‘constituencies’ such as diverse groups of older people including people providing personal care for partners and loved one’s; groups of people from a range of relevant professions including some who were older such as architects, estate agents, lawyers, housing professionals, social care and health professionals and decision makers. Appendix one lists the names of people who came to research workshops and discussions and who further explored cohousing through their personal, community, political and professional/work networks.

## **1.6 Summary of key findings**

Together we discovered

### **A different way of thinking about later life**

- Talking about cohousing and thinking about how people would really like to live led them to think more broadly to a different way of thinking about later life – it freed people up to think about people shaped solutions and ideas.
- There is a genuine discomfort with current approaches for meeting older

people's housing, care and support needs

- Our discussions showed that people want to express the way they want to live. People are far from passive. The research discussions chimed with personal values and experience and reflect older people's aspirations as well. Older people and younger people have a huge interest in contributing to discussions on how we want to live – they just have to be asked and involved in the right ways
- The action research workshops helped individuals consider their personal future housing and later life pathways – some people carried on their conversations from one research workshop to another and came to a better understanding of themselves as a result

### **Listening to older people**

- Older people were clear that some are interested in older people only cohousing
- A proportion of younger and older groups are also interested in mixed age intergenerational co housing.

### **Rediscovering community**

- People have their own 'take' on community. The research highlighted how different groups explore community to suit their times and situations
- A sense of community is important but it is missing from most mainstream approaches. It is one of the reasons cohousing and cooperative housing are attractive

### **Co-production – a different way of seeing and working**

- There is a strong preference for people working together - coproduction *with* but not solely by architects, developers and others is a preferred way forward
- In facilitating people to come together to explore ideas– we learned a lot about the processes that work best. Less overt interference from the experts, 'talking with rather than at people' and giving people the tools to discover and engage with ideas are highly productive. Connecting activities such as connecting people to each other and to resources/information and materials they may want are worth their weight in gold. These are what make coproduction real.
- Coproduction is at the heart of cohousing and it highlights challenges for housing providers and developers. New skills are needed for working with groups of people who want to be self-organising and self-determining. There are lessons here for housing providers and local authorities who want their consumers to take on decision making for their neighbourhoods and work cooperatively.

- The workshops provided some tips on what works when it comes to helping groups of people explore ideas.

### **Talent and enthusiasm**

- There are valuable talents in Newcastle and Sunderland and people have loads of energy for trying out new things. Older and younger people showed their enthusiasm for coming together to find out and explore topics that are really important
- Housing providers, architects and designers have much to contribute. Gentoo from Sunderland and Your Homes Newcastle, for example, put an innovative virtual spin on cohousing by considering how they could facilitate groups of people to start virtual cohousing communities so they can support each other. They also suggested that people could use social media to keep in touch.

### **Challenges**

- Alongside the challenges for commissioners cohousing offers many benefits including drawing on the capacities people have to help themselves so the challenges are worth overcoming.
- People raised many questions about becoming a cohousing group – we were fortunate to have the UK Cohousing Network co-ordinator at some of the research discussions and we had access to their resources including a new toolkit for groups. However, it is part of the development process for new groups to deal with challenges and people quickly grasped this.
- There is scope for social housing landlords to incorporate cohousing and cooperative models of housing in the options available to people who apply for housing – it could be a new option they can add for older people. The HCA hosted community led housing group in the north east are keen to support this idea.

### **Sustainable living**

- There is a growing movement of people of all ages and backgrounds interested in learning to live more sustainably in urban rather than rural settings and for reclaiming the city for living and working in sustainable ways and there are links with cohousing and cooperative working and living.

### **Surprises**

- The action research built up a surprising momentum and created a platform for people to share information. Through the research we discovered there is a lot going on in Newcastle around community led housing and sustainability. The links in appendix three give some indications.
- The UK Cohousing Network is poised to take on a greater supporting role –

the potential for growth for older people only and cross generational cohousing developments seems to be huge.

## **1.7 Achieved what we set out to do**

One of the original aims of the research was to help establish a group of people interested in developing cohousing. Yet as the workshops took place and interest in the project grew, it became clear that there were other just as important 'achievements'. Perhaps most importantly we opened up a conversation on how people want to relate to community and how they want to take part in shaping the places and communities they live in. The conversation was waiting for the chance to take place.

As a consequence of the action research some embryonic cohousing activities including one potential older people's cohousing group in Gosforth. Other seeds are developing though. For example, there is interest amongst local Co-operative Society members in wider Tyneside in exploring cohousing. Just as importantly in a short space of time we raised awareness about cohousing in Newcastle and around the region. Over 70 people from a wide variety of different backgrounds and networks, professions and organisations including public, voluntary and commercial decision makers participated in the action research. Many more people were kept informed about the work as it proceeded. We contributed to other discussions and networks and to a rich cross fertilisation of ideas on many topics including living more sustainably, living in supportive neighbourhoods, designing older people friendly habitats and older people led community and self- help developments.

Everyone who participated in the research or was in touch with the project and said they wanted to be kept up to date will receive copies of this report.

## 2. What is cohousing? Exploring views. Contrasting literature

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A cohousing group in Oxford that formed in 2010 is in the process of designing its cohousing. The group gives a fairly typical description of cohousing saying it is an intentional community where people benefit from many of the communal activities and the “neighbourliness” one might find in a traditional village. (See [www.oxfordcohousing.org.uk](http://www.oxfordcohousing.org.uk) for more information).

### 2.1 Essential elements?

The Oxford cohousing group also talks about some essential elements that are necessary to cohousing. They are:

1. Self-contained dwellings that each household occupies with additional shared facilities located elsewhere. Individual homes can range from 1 bedroom flats to 4 bedroom family houses, but all have their own kitchen, bathroom, living and sleeping space. Shared facilities may be in a “Common House” and can include dining/meeting space, a large kitchen for making meals for the whole community when people get together, a laundry if people want this and guest rooms. Some cohousing developments also have things like a market garden, allotments, work spaces and play areas.
2. Intentional community design since the cohousing is designed in such a way that neighbours come across each other regularly. A cohousing ‘cluster’ is usually 10-30 households, or 14-60 people. Larger projects are achieved by creating several clusters. This is why cohousing is often described as intentional communities.
3. Participatory since the whole process from thinking about having a cohousing development through to developing it and living in it is participatory and is meant to be like that. Potential residents are actively involved in thinking about the design from the earliest days and this follows through when people move in. This means that a sense of community is already formed and people know each other well before

they move in and have to start running the development between them.

4. Common ownership and non hierarchical decision making. The overall site that will be developed into properties and shared facilities is managed by the residents. Residents have a stake in the decision making process and aim to make decisions consensually. Residents all have the same commitment to sharing responsibility for the overall management of the site regardless of the tenure of the individual homes they live in. The way this is achieved varies from one cohousing group to another since it depends on what the members want to achieve and what they can afford.

In the Oxford cohousing group's case the intention is that a not for profit body, such as a Community Interest Company, will own the freehold of the whole site, and will sell leases to owner-occupiers and the Housing Association: the shareholders in this company are the residents and the social landlord. The site freehold will be held in common ownership, with owner-occupiers and the housing association (if there is one) as shareholders. The idea behind this is to make sure that the land will remain in trust for the wider community and restrict it from being parceled up and sold to the highest bidder. (The Oxford cohousing group development is still under construction but the units have all been pre-purchased.)

LILAC a cohousing development in Leeds which is in the process of being developed has taken the idea of protecting community assets a stage further. It is the first Mutual home ownership society cohousing group in the UK (it is also a Community Land Trust). LILAC members purchase shares in the Mutual Home Ownership Society and by doing this have kept costs low. Developed in partnership with the Co-operative Bank there is currently enormous interest in the model and the Welsh Government is currently considering adopting the model for its mutual homes development plans in Wales (see A Co-operative Agenda for Welsh Local Government September 2012 <http://party.coopserver.co.uk>.)

However, almost any of the legal structures we have available in the UK can be used to support or underpin cohousing. They include becoming a housing association or having registered social landlord status, companies limited by guarantee and as we have seen, fully mutual home ownership societies. In Ireland and Scotland where community based housing associations tend to be small and rooted in very local communities there is more capacity for cohousing groups to become housing associations in their own right. See, for example, the Irish cohousing group Nas Na

Riogn Housing Association Limited formed by older people from professional backgrounds (Barac and Park 2009).

It is still possible for community led housing groups to become registered housing associations in England and Wales but it is less common. Partnerships with housing associations are more common. Two London cohousing groups (the Older Women's Cohousing Group and the North London Sustainable Housing Partnership) formed partnerships with Hanover HA a specialist provider of older people's' housing to build cohousing developments. The Older Women's Cohousing group will be an older women only community while the North London Housing Sustainable Housing Partnership will dedicate 70% of its intended 200 properties at people over the age of 55 and the rest will be occupied by younger households.

Participants in the research workshops in Newcastle were quite interested in legal structures and in how ownership was vested and shared but they tended to see it as a complex subject that could be off putting. Some of the things that confused people were issues and decisions over ownership of the land and choosing a decision making structure.

*"You would have to get really good advice" commented one Chinese Elder.*

*"I think we would spend a lot of time working out the best legal identity for us because there is a lot to consider – it is extremely early days for us but it is an important subject that we would need to work through and think about the consequences" (An embryonic co housing group spokesperson)*

*"What happens if there is a dispute?" queried an older home owner.  
"Who sorts it out if there is no-one in charge?"*

*"I suppose you could form a company like you would for say a business and appoint people to run it – my brother is in something like this in the US. They seem more used to doing that kind of thing than we are – don't you think?"*

## 2.2 Other essential ingredients

### 2.3 Being light on the planet –sustainability

A fifth ingredient which is becoming more prevalent is a commitment to developing the site and living and working thereafter in sustainable ways. Methods used for build and design are often selected to use fewer of the earth's resources and much thought is given to how people can live lifestyles that use least energy while still making the properties and the development as a whole affordable and attractive. As a result many cohousing developments use the latest in green energy efficiency, make good use of 'grey' water and recycle waste where possible. Allotments, bulk buying food staples and co-operating together to purchase fuel and energy all help reduce energy and keep things affordable for members. There are often benefits for the wider community as well living near the cohousing.

Some cohousing groups choose to share cars and transport or decide to use electric cars and bikes. Again it depends on the community members but a common thread in discussions about cohousing development involves ensuring that cars do not dominate the layout and design of the cohousing or get in the way of how people should enjoy and use external sites. For example, a cohousing development in Nevada (USA) is designed so that car parking is some way away from where the residents live and is away from areas where people often meet up outside for chats and where children play. The idea is that the car does not dominate the scene – people do. (For more on the Nevada city cohousing group and its green approach see [www.nccoho.org/](http://www.nccoho.org/))

Our research workshop participants gave a mixed reception to green issues and sustainability. Some thought it was really important to 'tread lightly on the planet' – others hadn't really thought too much about the subject or were interested primarily for affordability reasons rather than sustainability per se. Some of the drawings produced by the different groups of participants at the Cohousing Designing Inclusive Communities showed a deeper interest in and aspirations towards designing a sustainable cohousing development – the drawing produced by the 'Swifts' group for a multi-generational cohousing community for example, included reed beds for recycling used water and human waste.







LARKS



SWIFTS



ROBINS

Opinion was divided on gardens, growing food, allotments and having to tend to green areas. Some older people did not want to have anything at all to do with gardening or growing food while some groups particularly those involving younger people were very keen on fairly intensive gardening and growing food to harvest. There was a small group of people in the middle who said they didn't mind contributing some time or energy but did not want to spend all their free time digging and so on. These discussions reflected awareness amongst older people about the impacts of ageing on their functional ability as well as life style preferences and it was surprising how these discussions could divide people.

## **2.4 New build, using empty property and retrofit**

Cohousing can be newly built or it can reuse existing properties or be a combination of new and old. The N Street cohousing group in California for example decided to retrofit their existing properties to make them more suitable as a cohousing settlement (example supplied by Jo Gooding, the UK cohousing network Co-ordinator). The Lancaster cohousing group in the UK is a mixture. Some groups in the Netherlands have deliberately sought to bring empty old buildings back into use including old factories (see the HAPPI report by Barac and Park 2009). In the research workshops with older people in Newcastle there was a huge interest in doing similar and a number of buildings were mentioned as ideal possibilities including shops, floors above shops, old Banks and industrial premises. Chinese Elders were particularly keen on living in the heart of the City. There was also interest in mixing new build and older properties.

## **2.5 Tenures and mix**

People living in cohousing may be renters or owners, leaseholders or a mixture of all kinds of tenure. To a large extent it depends on what the cohousing members are aiming for as well as on available options, For example, it can be difficult to get a mixed tenure development off the ground without backing and guarantees such as the backing of the Homes and Communities Agency.

Many cohousing groups are started by people who are prepared to raise the capital through obtaining individual mortgages or by recycling capital from the sale of a home into the cohousing group. Some cohousing owners are keen to develop options to support people to staircase down if they need at a later date to release equity from their properties and they want to encourage mixed tenure developments.

Public funds are increasingly difficult to obtain. At the moment the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) has a small budget for developing community led housing including cohousing so more mixed tenure and social rented cohousing may emerge. It isn't clear how long this option will last. Some of the cohousing groups embarking on development now include groups with a commitment to social rented

housing. For example the Older Women's Cohousing Group in Barnet, mentioned earlier, and is working with Hanover Housing to achieve this.

Helen Hume and Margaret White from Gentoo in Sunderland commented on their experiences of working with communities to design and build – “we probably go in there with all our guns blazing full of enthusiasm and dying to get things going when (after thinking and talking today in the workshop) we should maybe hang fire and wait until people have thought things through”

Locally there is a lot happening. During the action research in Newcastle the HCA started a series of meetings with organisations and people interested in developing community led housing across the region. A Network has developed from this and meetings continue to be held. The activities that came to light through the HCA led meetings suggest there is interest in mixed tenure community led provision including cooperative housing and self-build. A number of these threads are currently being followed through and bids for HCA funding are being encouraged including funds for new HCA programmes called Custom Build and Community Right to Build, details of which are still emerging. The Network is a very positive way to bring activists and local authorities as well as housing associations and interested parties together and a distribution list is now available. In addition the Ouseburn Trust is looking at a community build project with the Spindus EU Network.

The HCA is also encouraging interest in Community Land Trusts and the CLT Network has some enabling funds to assist new groups. The Glendale Trust in Wooler is the only existing Community Land Trust in this region so far. Members of its housing group are currently exploring ways to meet the housing, support and care needs of local older people. Cohousing is one of the options that may be explored.

## 2.6 Urban and rural

The workshop discussions between groups of older people and people approaching older age in Newcastle revealed strong preferences for urban or suburban settings. The rural idyll appealed to very few people who came to workshops but the HCA network indicates there is actually strong rural activity in the region by self-help community groups to build housing and strengthen communities and may well include opportunities to consider cohousing.

The discussion on the best locations for cohousing for older people chimed with the things older people regularly say about the neighbourhoods they would like to live in:

*Safe, age friendly and inclusive neighbourhoods*

*Close to frequent, easy to use and affordable transport*

*Near facilities and services such as shops, the gym and leisure activities*

*Close to open spaces and cultural activities where people can socialise in warm weather and meet friends*

The Chinese Elders said they would ideally like to have a cohousing development right in the heart of the city and they didn't mind if it was new build or retrofit but they wanted to be at the centre of everything that is going on.

## **2.7 Small and large communities**

Opinion was divided in the Newcastle discussions on what constitutes small or large cohousing communities and the literature on the subject suggests there is no right or wrong answer. Using the cluster idea that a small cluster is 10-20 households for example, this would still be large for some would be cohousers. Some people like a group in Gosforth for example are looking at the possibility of a cohousing development of less than 20 households. Other people such as David Dobereiner a keen cooperative housing and former commune resident favours larger cohousing clusters. This is largely because of the benefits of a larger community such as, being able to share more costs and tasks together and having a wider pool of people to meet and exchange ideas with.

One thing is clear from the literature on cohousing. Larger cohousing communities tend to have more shared facilities and services and smaller communities seem to have fewer presumably because it is harder for a relatively small number of people to fund shared facilities. However the extent to which people share and coproduce also depends on the aims of the group and on the commitment of members.

## **2.8 Older people only or all ages - cross generational**

Charles Durrett writing about cohousing for older people (2009) draws on his experience of cohousing groups mostly in North America and Denmark. He suggests that it isn't 'better' to have older people only cohousing groups and nor is it better for them to be intergenerational – it is a choice. The group members of any cohousing project under development have to talk the different ideas and approaches through and decide what is most appropriate for them.

Opinion is divided amongst would be cohousers on what is best. At a study day for cohousing groups on cohousing for older people run by the UK Cohousing Network and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in York (May 2012) a marked preference for older people only communities was expressed by older people. A minority of older people preferred mixed age communities. However, the UK cohousing network reports that while many people start off saying they want an older people only group they often change their minds and move towards having an intergenerational

development.

What are the reasons for such preferences? One of the members of a cohousing group in Scotland (Vivarium) who has lived in cohousing elsewhere in Europe said that discussions and activities in mixed age communities inevitably get swamped by family (i.e. child oriented interests) and older people's interests are excluded. There was a lively discussion on this theme with family oriented cohousing groups saying they did not want to exclude older people and wanted to welcome and involve them. However, the differences in views were striking and since the different ideas could not be reconciled they were left 'on the table' as it were.

Charles Durrett makes this helpful observation: in intergenerational cohousing the needs of the child tend to dominate whereas in seniors cohousing the seniors needs dominate.

In our discussions with people in Newcastle the same kind of divided views emerged and sometimes a full and frank exchange of views took place! For example there was a very lively discussion around one of the tables at the "Cohousing Designing Inclusive Communities" event in March at the Great North Museum. Interestingly though while older people seem to be able to talk through the pro's and con's relatively easily some younger people found it difficult to accept that it was a legitimate choice to want older people only cohousing. There were some testing discussions though on what it would be like in older people only cohousing if the family came to visit a lot and the grandchildren came to stay frequently. "What about in the summer holidays?" was one of the questions I heard. It was possible as several people pointed out for cohousing communities to be overrun by grandchildren and visitors and the discussion considered the benefits and disadvantages. "Would we need rules?" someone else asked. The conversation weaved around these points and concluded that a policy on visitors would have to be discussed by any older people only cohousing group.

## **2.9 Making decisions together – the idea of consensus**

Consensus building is part of the processes would be cohousers learn as their group develops and hopefully progresses toward developing a real community.

Consensus was a difficult concept for most people who participated in research discussions to grasp although a few people had some experience of it, for example, people involved with the Quakers or co-ops. Consensus is not generally defined by cohousers as everyone being in agreement. The Lancaster cohousing group for example refers to consensus as a process through which all members understand the common ground between them and reach decisions in order to promote and protect the common ground even if they disagree with some aspects of a proposal. People would not in the Lancaster group be asked to compromise their principles or the values of cohousing in order to reach a consensus.

Material posted on websites on and by cohousers in the UK and North America indicates that the process of making decisions by consensus is taken seriously and many groups undertake training in order to follow a consensus decision making process. A number of cohousing groups refer to using majority voting as a fall-back position when it is not possible to reach a consensus or if it is not appropriate to reach a consensus (for example on routine matters). However, the position groups take on using fall back decision making methods seems to be very variable. The Lancaster group has a fall-back position but states that members aim to make all important decisions by consensus suggesting that their preference is to use consensus decision making as their starting point. At the UK Cohousing Network study day in York several senior cohousing groups said they have slightly different approaches to consensus decision making. Everyone agreed it was their starting point but some groups tend to use a majority decision approach if consensus is not forthcoming.

In our research people expressed some finely grained differences in their views on consensus. For example, in an exercise devised to get people talking. The exercise used a role play of a mythical cohousing group trying to talk through some difficult issues. Jo Gooding from the UK Cohousing Network suggested that this exercise brought people face to face with the kind of questions cohousing groups actually tackled and often had to reach a consensus view on. By going through the exercise the participants had to experience what it feels like to try to reach a consensus and the exercise even though it was limited and artificial brought it home to people that consensus making is a practical activity. *Experiencing it was different to merely hearing about it.* Section 3 of the report looks in more detail at processes associated with developing a cohousing group so they become a thriving community.

## 2.10 Being intentional and choosing who you live with

The idea of choosing to live in a community rather than being 'put there' by someone else or getting in there by default through lack of other choices was considered as a good *and* bad by people at our research events. Choice was mentioned as a positive side of cohousing. For example, being able to exercise choice would mean being able to decide if you liked the people who were going to be your neighbours before you moved in. Also being able to choose how much or how little you joined in although most people accepted the need for a minimum level of social involvement.

There were also concerns that intentional communities could become exclusive.

*"I don't like the idea of being separate from the local community around where I live"*

*"I think it could become intense and difficult if people fall out with each other – the downside of village life"*

A number of people expressed reservations about cohousing becoming gated communities. However, there were options some people felt to share resources with people living round and about a cohousing development. This thread of discussion was noticeably most negative in a workshop held at the Central Library involving professionals, decision makers and commissioners and fewer older people and potential cohousers. Yet housing professionals could be highly imaginative and often were in other workshops. On the whole older people's views tended to be less negative.

## **2.11 Private living space with extra shared and common spaces/ facilities**

The notion of the common house and having shared activities such as a shared meal together regularly was greeted with some suspicion and had a mixed reception. Most people could see a shared meal in a common room big enough to accommodate everyone would bring people together and it was a good idea to have facilities and guest rooms in the common house for parties and for visitors. However, the idea of a common house did not create many sparks for people. Perhaps we are bounded by what we know and the subject might have benefited from more discussion and experimentation. For example people were much freer in their thinking and discussion at a workshop held at the Great North Museum where they were encouraged to draw their ideas of cohousing.

In most other discussions when it came to considering what cohousing would be or could be like most older people and professionals tended to take sheltered housing as their reference point when they talked about shared space and facilities whereas younger people were much freer and did not refer to sheltered housing at all. One of the things we learned from this was that imaginative methods are needed alongside discussion and there is no doubt some people need to see and perhaps visit alternative ways of living and sharing in order to have something tangible to think about. Even a short DVD didn't really help because they tended to give only one or two examples of a common house or shared facilities in one or two cohousing developments and people needed much more than this to come to a view on the benefits and disbenefits.

Yet the idea of sharing resources and using less was a popular one.

## **2.13 What are we prepared to share and what do we want to do privately**

An exercise Rose Gilroy devised for the Cohousing Designing Inclusive Communities workshop asked people to complete a proforma indicating which daily



activities they preferred to do along or with family and which they would be prepared to do with a community of like-minded people. The exercise aimed to get people thinking and talking. It also gave insights into how people feel about sharing. Interestingly most people would share gardening equipment but only 5 people are prepared to look after children.

The being private and being together exercise

Daily activities	Alone or with family	With a community of likeminded people
Food shopping	7 people said yes	7 people said yes 4 people said some
Making evening meal	4 people said some	7 said yes 5 said some
Eating the evening meal	6 said yes 5 said some	7 said yes 5 said some
Washing up	6 said yes 3 said some	9 said yes 3 said some
Gardening/growing food	3 said yes 3 said some	9 said yes 3 said some
Looking after children	9 said yes	5 said yes 1 said no
Social activities	4 said yes 2 said some	10 said yes 2 said possibly 3 said some
Consumer goods	Alone or with family	With a community of like-minded people
Car	4 said yes	13 said yes
Washing machine	5 said yes	1 possibly 10 yes
Computer	16 yes	2 yes
Gardening equipment	3 yes	13 yes

## 2.13 Taking a completely different view – virtual cohousing

Imaginative leaps were taken at workshop three held at MEA House involving architects, potential cohousers, housing professionals including developing housing associations with the capacity to support cohousing projects.

People quickly grasped the idea that cohousing could take various forms and legal identities but they suggested that cohousing could also be virtual and that the idea of having cohousing retrofits could take on a whole new meaning. Retrofit is usually taken to mean properties that are totally redesigned in this case for the use of cohousers. People from Gentoo in Sunderland however came up with the idea that where there are existing strong links within local communities there is the potential to

introduce cohousing principles and ideas so people can use the links they have between themselves as a basis to support each other better. Technology could also help people to communicate with each other and 'keep an eye' on each other when necessary such as when someone is ill.

Martyn Burn from Your Homes Newcastle was amongst people responding enthusiastically to the idea and he reflected on the fact that some communities are more capable of doing this than others. He could identify some from his experience. He also expressed concern about the fall-out from economic recessions on once resilient neighbourhoods and communities and he could see a role for social landlords helping people to connect with each other and identify common interests. Something simple such as a swap list or lists of people interested in meeting people who play chess, want to have help with the garden or go walking could be good starting points.

Caroline Gitsham from Gentoo shared Martyn's view and noted that some communities face a range of complex issues, are unsettled and lack the motivation to become self-organising. She felt that housing providers could provide some of the support but was realistic about it and sounded a cautionary note by mentioning the downside of community where resilient and tight knit communities are sometimes made unhappy and dangerous places by extended families who wield power and control.

It was all food for thought and far from being downcast we were struck by the determination of housing colleagues to find ways around problems. Their imaginative reworking of cohousing ideas of retrofit so that people could link up regardless of where they lived or become a co-support community while staying where they are were striking. By applying a virtual spin they offered new options for thinking about and applying cohousing ideas.

This discussion also chimed with recent public discussion on the housing crisis and the lack of affordable housing which has led to at least one local authority deciding to turn empty office buildings into housing. Could there be opportunities here for cohousing developments in unwanted business premises such as empty offices and pubs?

## **2.15 Conclusions to section 2**

This section has looked at different perspectives on what cohousing is and how it is experienced and understood. It mixes together evidence from other research, accounts and descriptions from co-housers and the views of people who participated in the Newcastle research workshops. In our workshop discussions people talked about the issues that really concern older people such as the desire to live in age friendly locations and communities. These discussions have a wider appeal not just for those interested in cohousing.

Our learning about how best to run workshops that engage people includes the fact that facilitators need to ensure people are supported to go at their own pace when taking in new ideas. Also to make space for people to knit new ideas with their own experiences and with the values they hold most dear – people like discovering for themselves rather than being ‘told’.

- It *is* complicated

Cohousing is not easy for people to grasp all at once in all its permutations. Anyone who likes descriptions to be tight and well bounded will probably find cohousing a slippery set of loose ideas.

- Growing knowledge works

The workshops kept people informed and involved over a period of time – people were invited to subsequent workshops and sent copies of write ups from all the workshop discussions. As a result people were able to ‘grow’ their knowledge and engage with a complicated subject over time.

*“I have really enjoyed coming to these meetings – it has been great to meet other people and I look forward to them”*

*“Great fun and really testing to think about. I feel that my ideas have developed and I actually know something about this”*

- Engaging people in a process of discovery

As a result the workshops provide useful information on how to engage people in a process of discovery that they enjoyed and wanted to be involved in.

- Defining?

It probably isn’t a good idea to try to define cohousing too closely because examples are continually emerging mostly from Europe and North America and increasingly the UK.

- Processes of developing – central to developing group resilience

The processes of becoming a co-housing group are critical to a group’s development helping people ‘jell’ together. Some groups spend more time on developing themselves rather than the site or buildings while other groups want more concrete outputs. Does it matter? The evidence suggests that it does because being able to work well as a group makes cohousing groups more resilient in the long run (see Durrett 2009 for more discussion).

Group processes also affect people’s decisions on the time and energy they want to invest. The Older Women’s Cohousing Group in London (UK) commented on the

benefits from getting to know and like each other over ten plus years. Since for many years the group did not have a site or building to focus on members did other things to keep them together including visits to buildings and other cohousing groups, singing and doing training courses together.

## 3. How older people only cohousing groups deal with challenges and issues

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If cohousing brings together the benefits of living in a village where people generally know each other then there are bound to be downsides as well. Falling out, exclusive behaviour, failing to welcome new people, having cliques and having different levels of expectations over behaviour and action are common in everyday life but according to Charles Durrett can escalate in cohousing settings. .

Cohousers learn to deal with these issues through coming together to work through them. Clearly how successful this is depends on the people concerned but friction and irritation does not loom large in the literature on cohousing or in the accounts cohousing groups give about themselves.

It probably helps that most cohousing groups have access to helpful resources and most people are willing to share their experiences of what seems to work well. .The UK Cohousing Network for example, has a well worked set of tools and resources that are constantly being added to and shared to assist cohousing members. From this it seems safe to say that cohousing is something that people are constantly engaged in doing and learning about – new tasks and new challenges will present themselves.

Sometimes people decide cohousing is not for them and they don't continue as a result with the developing cohousing group or they move out. Others move as their lives changes. For example, people growing older in some Danish and North American intergenerational co housing communities decided that they would prefer to live in older people only communities instead. Other people move to different locations to be nearer family, friends or for jobs and a different way of life.

Some cohousing options are more easily accessed by people with capital or who can obtain a loan or mortgage. The options for people living on lower incomes or who cannot obtain a loan or mortgage depend more on partnerships with social landlords and charities in order to access social housing subsidies and resources to buy and adapt buildings or acquire land.

### 3.1 Co care and co support – what do they mean in practice?

Charles Durrett (2009) suggests that very few if any cohousing groups for older people have anything approaching co-care as part of their rationale for living in cohousing and it isn't provided by the members as part of their commitment to the rest of residents. Just as in other settings though some cohousing members develop relationships and friendships and want to take on some of the caring and support for some residents. In the studies Durrett presents older people only cohousing groups

tend to have boundaries around the activities and responsibilities they want to take on which stop short of intimate personal care and limit the responsibilities members have to take on. Groups talk through the situation and come to a view they are happy with.

At the Study Day organised by the UK Cohousing Network and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation earlier this year we were asked in small group sessions to explore the capacity or interest of cohousing for seniors to support people with care needs and we were asked to think about the way cohousers might approach the subject. There was a huge range of views from those who wanted rules and specifications to those who wanted to see how things evolved. Some people were adamantly opposed to having anything to do with carrying out intimate care tasks for other people. Others thought it depended on the relationships that were developed over time.

Some cohouser groups were more disposed to be age friendly than others and while some reference was made to the notion of older people friendly settings it was clear that many people did not know what this involved in terms of design standards and methods.

A view was expressed at a plenary session later that settings should be only for seniors or only for families but that whatever is decided the spectrum would have to be very wide in terms of age and disability. Some people expressed the view that they had heard from colleagues in the USA, Denmark and Germany that mixed age cohousing schemes became harder to live in as people aged. Younger people tended to dominate discussions (it was said) particularly if they wanted to raise children and provide child care and play activities. Older people's views for other activities and preferences tended to be squeezed out.

### **3.2 Integrating new members and new residents in established groups**

Some of the accounts written by cohousing groups about their experiences focus on the early days when the groups started and the period leading up to having a site, getting the resources and deciding on designs and spaces. These accounts say that critical bonds are made during early struggles and it is clear that people identify themselves within a cohousing group not just by the roles they play but the stage during which they moved into the cohousing. Newer or later members have different relationships and a different understanding to some of the older stalwart members. Typically cohousing groups start off with a group which then turns into a small core of determined people and more people join once there is a site and homes are becoming ready. Some groups advertise for members offering homes for sale and the opportunity to join in a cohousing lifestyle. The sharing and the collective aspects are not optional but groups seem to vary quite a lot in terms of what is expected.

Some cohousers have concerns about the future and worry that they may find it difficult to attract new residents with a commitment to cohousing as the original members die or move on. Other communities face similar challenges of course and perhaps the answer is that places and people change but they don't usually fail because of change. It takes a lot more than that.

However, most cohousing groups seem to want to keep would be cohousers involved so that there is a waiting list or list of people who might be interested in filling vacancies if they arise.

### **3.3 Bringing care and support in – what communities do**

Older people only cohousing groups seem to be better prepared or at least more prepared to talk about the challenges of getting older and people's needs for practical support and care compared to intergenerational cohousing groups. The intergenerational groups at the UK Cohousing Network and JRF organised Study Day event referred to earlier were reluctant to engage with some issues. For example, how they would ensure that older members were involved and included along with younger people.

Some older cohousing groups provide accommodation at the Common House for live in care and support staff and their services are bought jointly by people who live in the cohousing. Other people bring care and support in as anyone else would in the local area and wider community but the cohousing way of organising gives people the option if they want to have more control over the care and support they purchase by doing this collectively and may help keep costs down too.

The research on cohousing and older people refers to routine support from friends and neighbours suggesting that those things that involve quite low levels of support such as shopping and getting around are easier for older people to do and manage.

Older people in the Newcastle research workshops said how good they thought it would be to have the support of friendly neighbours – if it worked. There was some scepticism that it would always work unless someone 'was in charge'. There was some disbelief that people would support each other without someone else 'supervising'. Yet others disagreed with this point of view. Interestingly amongst those who disagreed were people who are already members of various self-help and community groups and who spoke from experience about the way they resolved differences and supported each other without anyone 'being in charge'.

### **3.4 Moving on and moving out**

It can be difficult for housing care and support providers to broach things like moves into specialist provision particularly if older people need nursing care and the

environment they live in isn't suitable for this to be provided easily. Other tricky issues are everyday risks, such as, cleaning the windows, helping to tidy up after a social event in a public place. Should older people take such risks? The situation gets very complicated if older people's relatives are averse to risk taking and if organisations providing services have genuine worries about litigation.

Cohousing for older people has certain advantages such as age friendly living environments that help people self-care for longer and therefore avoid traditional kinds of care and support. The link between age friendly design and health and well-being is well established but as Imogen Blood (2010) suggested when people with high support and care needs live in the right setting with bathrooms and kitchens they can use and with the right equipment to feel safe and be connected to other people, their 'needs' actually reduce. People don't have to move in these situations. Commissioners should bear this in mind.

This isn't to say that people's circumstances don't change. Our research participants considered flexibility and asked themselves how change can be accommodated. Their views varied. Some said that change is a natural process that most people can deal with. Others at least initially thought that someone would have to be in charge to make the decisions while other people said "what about rules?" However, when people got used to the idea that cohousers made their own rules and decided together on who they would welcome as residents discussions sometimes took a different turn. To some extent these discussions hinted at the kinds of fears and uncertainties we will all face as get older.

### The fears and worries

Would other cohousers 'gang up on' residents whose behaviour is confused or if someone has started to wander? Would residents if left to their own devices become oligarchs and dictators or would they be beneficent and understanding and compassionate to everyone? Would residents become worn out because they were expected to support each other all the time? Would everyone age at the same time and would it become another "God's waiting room"?

"What about people selling their properties" asked one participant? "Surely they have the right to sell to anyone they want?" This question raised some difficult issues. At the moment no UK cohousing group has a way of ring fencing sales. There are no covenants that cite the need for local connections or insist that the cohousing management group has to be consulted. However, this might change as new groups start to develop cohousing in the UK.

The rules, a facilitator pointed out in one discussion, are made by the cohousing group so it is up to them to decide. People have to learn to make these decisions together rather than having them imposed by someone else. Getting to grips with this degree of self-determination was hard for some people to imagine.



John Smart from Newcastle Elders commented that he is used to making decisions and talking through options with other Elders Council members but he said

*“I don’t know if I want to do it all the time – sometimes I just can’t be bothered when I get home”.*

Housing professional Helen Hume was adamant that cohousing is not for her:

*“Oh no when I get home the last thing I would want to do is have to go to a meeting or talk to anyone – just talking can be a struggle after a hard day” .*

Barbara Douglas from the Quality of Life Partnership took a different view

*“I’m definitely interested and I can see the point of investing my time for my future”.*

There was much more general interest though when it came to the benefits from cohousing.

### **3.5 The strengths from cohousing – the benefits**

Older people participating in the research suggested that the strengths would be:

- Having more people around that they would have something in common with
- The opportunity to make new friends
- Feeling safe because people were looking out for each other
- Feeling safe because the environment was designed to be safer and there was less likelihood of trips and falls
- Having control over decisions and having a say in how social activities were organised
- Having friends as neighbours
- Being able to make their incomes go further – particularly through energy clubs, good insulation, saving on bulk purchases and white goods
- Being able to get around easier with shared transport
- Being able to meet other people in other cohousing groups in other countries
- Being able to share resources without having to store them such as gardening equipment
- Contributing to the community – feeling useful and part of something
- Doing our bit for the planet and the area
- Having well designed housing and places to meet in that suit us and help us
- Not being talked down to by other people
- Being part of something that benefits all of us and not being anonymous

- Always having someone to chat to and somewhere to go to if we want.

Amongst the benefits that professional housing staff and architects noted for older customers were:

- Being able to live near friends and like-minded people
- Having a supportive network close by
- Being less anxious and therefore happier about where they live as well as healthier
- Being able to choose the layout of their homes and neighbourhoods to suit their lifestyles
- Lower costs – warmer homes
- A safer environment.

In one workshop a City Council member of staff commented that the benefits from cohousing would probably be felt most by people in Jesmond because they are more used to organising themselves. In contrast in a later workshop two South Tyneside women gave a completely different point of view. They pointed out that it was as a result of their involvement when they were younger wives/partners and relatives of miners in the miners' strike that they started to get involved in organising self-help activities. They could see a real benefit in cohousing for their largely working class community and felt that other people in similar communities might also be attracted to the idea.

People from social care and health professions tended to be more cautious about ascribing any benefits to cohousing although they could see the parallels between older people choosing the kind of support and care they wanted and the health benefits that people would have as a result of having a greater choice over their living environments and communities.

Politicians and decision makers including commissioners were divided in their views on the long term appeal of cohousing. There was some reluctance to imagine that lower income groups of older people could take on the challenges of cohousing but there was a willingness to ensure people had the opportunity. Councillor Ann Schofield for example suggested that cohousing has to be older people led which means that local authority staff and politicians have to work out how best to support older people. This is a big cultural change for the Council.

### **3.6 Conclusions to Section 3: Parallels with other age friendly developments**

Section 3 refers to age friendly cohousing and communities drawing particularly on research evidence collected in North America, Denmark and the Netherlands. There

are strong parallels between the views expressed by older cohousers and older people's preferences in the UK for housing design and layouts and the environment more generally including views on specialist housing provision. For example, research commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in the 1990s to develop the Lifetime Home Standard and make housing developers more aware of the need to build new homes that could be easily adapted to meet changing needs across the life course led to a greater research and policy interest and in turn to Government policy on Lifetime Homes and Lifetime Neighbourhoods (see Lifetime Homes Lifetime Neighbourhoods – A National Strategy for Housing in an Ageing society February 2008, DCLG <sup>1</sup> and a report by Bevan and Croucher on Lifetime Neighbourhoods (2011)). There have also been many large scale and small surveys on older people's views and needs for housing, care and support. The HAPPI report for example summarises the main things older people say regularly about the sort of living environments they would prefer while a report by the National Housing Federation "Breaking the Mould" (2011) presents good examples of housing produced by and with local communities including older people. The main points are:

- Most people prefer if possible to continue to live in their own homes or to move to independent self-contained homes rather than specialist provision
- People move because of push or pull factors – push factors include a fall or having to give up the car making it harder to manage where one lives – pull factors include wanting to be nearer friends or family
- We are divided into people who are planners and those who are not
- Planners are most likely to think about how they want to live in later age and where. They are also most likely to consider how they will afford older age and cope with the transitions that growing older will mean for them
- Most of us want to have privacy *and* be able to mix with other people when we choose
- The locations we want to live in are diverse but most people as they get older want to be closer to shops and services and transport if possible and to be able to walk around localities easily. However, these factors do not necessarily get a mention by older people who want to live in rural areas and there are significant differences between rural and urban elders views and expectations
- Light and airy rooms that are well insulated, easy to keep warm and well ventilated are preferred by almost all older people
- Most people say they want at least a two bedroom property so they can have visitors to stay and or have an additional room to care for someone when they are ill or for a carer if this is needed
- Easy to use and affordable heating and energy are essential especially as many older people live on fixed incomes
- Older people want to live in secure neighbourhoods and in safe properties

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<sup>1</sup> The policy is not supported by the current coalition Government.

- Good design especially accessible features and well-designed kitchens and bathrooms with features such as walk in showers make a difference to older people's ability to live independently and self-care. This does not mean that all older people want these features!
- Most of us want to continue to live near the support networks that we are familiar with and to be able to get to the social and cultural activities we want to.
- Many older people strongly express a desire to live in ordinary housing rather than in older people only provision.

Despite this long list it is the diversity of older people's views about where and how they want to live that is most significant. The views of people who participated in the research workshops in Newcastle suggest that cohousing will appeal and does in fact appeal to some of them. It is most likely to appeal to people who want to plan their later lives and want to have some certainty about the neighbourhood and community they will live in. The need and the wish to plan was a thread in discussions led by would be cohousers. For example:

*"I want to live with people that I like and that I have something in common with. I am perfectly happy to start with a small group of people I know and see how it goes."*

*"I am clear about the design and layout I want. It has to be easy to look after, attractive and practical with room for the adaptations and equipment I might need as time goes on"*

*"I like the idea of cohousing because I can think maybe for the first time about how I would like to live and where".*

*"Living close to people I know and like seems like a fun thing and it's worth the meetings to have somewhere good to live where I want to be that I have a say in isn't it?"*

*"I don't want to think about it yet – I am not sure if I ever will but it does have its attractions. I like the idea of designing where I would live but not yet"*

## 4. Appetites, challenges and opportunities

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Before the research started meetings organised by the Living for the Future group were exploring cohousing options with the Ouseburn Trust in Newcastle. The Ouseburn Trust is continuing to consider this as one of a number of options for using a parcel of land and is working closely with the HCA.

### 4.1 The appetite for developing a group or two

During the research, interest in senior cohousing grew and at least two potential groups have a good chance of emerging as a result – one led by Maureen Tinsley and fellow Quakers while another could emerge from cohousing Northumberland and other activities led by people associated with the Living for the Future Initiative. The E group on cohousing coordinated by Diane Jones is part of a broader movement where many forces are coming together to stimulate a range of self-help activities. They include the new cohousing Northumberland group – a loose group of people of all ages interested in a range of co-ops and cohousing activities - activities by Transition Towns in the north east on sustainability and a rebirth of cooperative activity as well as a new WEA Green Branch. An interest in cohousing is also being explored by a group in Middlesbrough so there are opportunities for more cohousing ideas to cross fertilise across the region. There are many linkages and cross over points too with self- development, sustainable living plans and live work schemes across the region and community led housing plans in Allendale and Wooler for example.

Bubbling activity and links

Since there is a lot of activity there are links across different groups and networks. Appendix 3 lists the links that were identified during the research and shortly afterwards.

### 4.2 Seeds

It is possible (even likely) that the research workshops and the other events that took place planted a few seeds that may come to fruition in the future. People who came to workshops and events asked if there were going to be any more and there was a genuine interest in carrying on with the exploration. It is unusual to get such a degree of interest so it seems safe to say that one or two people will show future interest in starting or joining a cohousing group.

More importantly the research events raised the profile of older people only cohousing in the North East and Newcastle. It led the steering group into realising that there is a value in using the methods we devised for the action research to explore a different kind of thinking about which starts with people shaping their solutions to later living arrangements. It also provided a much needed burst of

information and opportunities for a wide range of people to find out more about cohousing, sustainability, age friendly neighbourhoods and much more.

### **4.3 Capacity**

The discussion with Chinese Elders hinted at the need for more community development resources to work with and facilitate emerging cohousing groups. The Chinese Elders were forthright about the need for support to help a potential group develop and obtain the resources and expertise it would need. However, the participants also quickly realised that the whole point of cohousing is that people learn to do things for themselves and it isn't necessarily a good thing to have an expert at the helm. Instead groups have to develop their own capacity.

The UK Cohousing Network provides useful information and resources including tools to help new groups get going and established. People have to make time to do this for themselves.

The same kinds of capacity issues are mentioned in North America although cohousing groups there seem to expect to pay for services including courses on positive ageing and courses to help cohousing members get organised. In Denmark and the Netherlands there are more subsidised resources to assist people and cohousing is better integrated into the range of options and lifestyles older people are expected to consider.

In the UK cohousing is beginning to be mentioned in key research and policy publications most of which have been mentioned already such as the HAPPI report (2009) but also see a report by the Audit Commission in 2004, a report by Imogen Blood for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2011) which rounds up the evidence on how best to support older people with high support needs and refers to the opportunities presented by cohousing for these individuals. See also "Time to Move. A Literature Review of Older People's Housing for the Scottish Executive" (2006) and several outputs by Maria Brenton. In a roundtable discussion on cohousing held as part of the previous Government's preparations for the National Strategy for Housing an Ageing Society hosted by Baroness Andrews in October 2007 at the Department for Communities and Local Government, Maria Brenton gave a presentation on cohousing. She pointed out that for local authorities cohousing does not necessarily involve having to find new resources rather it means using them in a different way. There is the potential for cohousing to "create an old fashioned neighbourhood in a new way".

### **4.4 Challenges**

At least four sets of challenges were alluded to in the research workshops. They

affected:

Commissioners and housing professionals including developers

Politicians

Community leaders and activists

Older people

#### **4.4.1 Commissioners and housing professionals including developers**

One of our workshop participants, a social care commissioner (with housing responsibilities also) said it was virtually impossible for her under current commissioning arrangements to actively enable cohousing to come to fruition. Her role does not include commissioning services to support and encourage a few bottom up groups including cohousing groups. Her role is focused on commissioning services for large numbers of people in need.

For housing professionals and developers the challenges include learning to take a back seat, to facilitate rather than lead and learning how to pass on their knowledge and give groups the benefit of their expertise while avoiding the temptation to take over. Housing professionals commonly, as our Gentoo colleagues acknowledged, take decisions for tenants and leaseholders/occupants whereas the skills involved in enabling cohousing groups to develop mean that professional workers have to stand back. However housing professionals also mentioned useful experience and day to day practice they could draw on. For example, Pip Hughes from Three Rivers (part of Four Housing Group) mentioned the impact on her practice and of her colleagues from a project with a group of people with disabilities who wanted to design the best possible place to live and have management arrangements that were user centred. . The experience taught Three Rivers a lot about improving the way they listen to customers and they were working on how best to embed these lessons in their everyday work.

There was a free and frank exchange of views between Gentoo colleagues and Jo Gooding from the UK Cohousing Network on the kinds of arrangements cohousers need when working with housing associations and other developers. The key points were:

- It is probably best for housing associations and developers to accept that cohousing groups take time to develop and it is a mistake to get involved too closely with them too soon
- Housing associations need to be clear about what they are offering co housers. It needs to be clearly spelt out – what is in it for the housing association and the cohousing group? What are the options?

- In terms of skills, development expertise and know how – how do the housing association anticipate passing these skills and knowledge on to the cohousing group? What is the plan? A plan is necessary because the cohousing group will want to do some or all of the tasks that housing associations would normally do and housing associations have to acknowledge this and adjust accordingly
- Cohousers have to learn a new language including the concepts housing professionals use every day so do the housing professionals who have to learn about the group and where they aim to be. There has to be give and take and time to take on new knowledge
- It is possible to get around concerns about local lettings policies, allocations and balanced communities by considering the wider benefits and by looking at actual examples which will answer most concerns. The UK Cohousing Network has a bank of information and examples which will provide factual evidence about various cohousing developments and this can help address worries and concerns.

#### Example 1

The Lancaster cohousing development is an intergenerational, sustainable development which offers low cost affordable homes for sale.

#### Example 2

The LILAC development in Leeds benefits from being a Community Land Trust and from being a Mutual Home Ownership Society. The CLT means that ownership of the land is held in common by the CLT and land is taken out of the equation when it comes to future land values. Members lease their homes from the MHOS and do this through a bond. Mutual arrangements for mortgages keep costs low but the City Council has also supported its development.

#### Example 3

Threshold cohousing group in Bristol provides mixed tenure housing and is a good example for cohousers interested in learning how to develop a mixed tenure approach. It also has local lettings arrangements that work.

It is perhaps worth mentioning that there is evidence to help commissioners and developers consider the benefits of cohousing for older people particularly from the US and Northern Europe although more evidence from the UK will emerge slowly. However, related research is on-going in the UK to examine how older people can and do support each other while living in a variety of settings (see a review of the evidence by Imogen Blood 2011 referred to earlier, part of research commissioned by Joseph Rowntree Foundation under their Better Life Later Life Programme).



#### 4.4.2 A practical and easy change

There are some practical and easy changes that social housing providers could think about. One of them involves having an option on their application forms to allow people to express interest in cohousing or cooperative housing. Also to provide people with information on cohousing and cooperative ways of living. There are good reasons for people to consider alternatives such as cohousing and coops especially in the current climate. For example, older people who don't want to move away from their localities but whose homes are not going to be suitable for them as they age may consider joining forces with other older people to revamp an old redundant building or buildings to make suitable apartments and provide a supportive atmosphere for each other. Providers and older people could work together to do this where the circumstances are right.

#### 4.4.3 Politicians

Amongst the challenges facing politicians Councillor Ann Schofield referred to the need for politicians to acknowledge that there are not enough housing and support choices for older people and to take action. Also to take on board the need to involve and include people living in communities in order to work more cooperatively with people in times of austerity.

Cohousing offers an additional choice and potentially through self-support and being able to organise, buy in and share care and other services reduces the amount of state assistance required by individuals as they get older and require more support. By designing and or retrofitting properties in such a way to facilitate self-care and having some services in common including at least one shared meal a week, cohousing also offers people more opportunities to continue to live independently without care and support having to be purchased.

Diversity of provision is a good thing but politicians are often at a distance from the actual decisions to support a diversity of provision. Commissioning practice is also currently against cohousing. The challenge for politicians then is to talk about and embed the changes that would support cohousing in the Local Plan and in the culture they work within. However, politicians need to consider what this means for themselves and there wasn't scope in our research to do this. For example, perhaps politicians could consider how they can encourage an enabling approach and strategic practices within their local authority and in their relationships with housing providers and developers to support cohousing developments. By doing this politicians will help create opportunities for those older people who choose to, to help themselves and support each other for longer without having to rely on local authority and other services.

#### **4.4.4 Community leaders and activists**

For community leaders and activists the challenges are to recognise that self-development may be the only option for hard pressed communities and cohousing is an option that people need to consider. Moreover even when the old options are still available and the opportunities are very restricted these days, experiences tells us that relying on others to come up with solutions to problems communities face have not always worked. Today people want lasting solutions that are right for them and they have valuable expertise and knowledge to share. Community leaders may have to learn to do less leading and more facilitating in order to encourage self-help and self-development and there are many lessons from cohousing groups on how to share responsibility across groups as well as lessons on how to ensure everyone is involved in decision making.

It was heartening to have so many people from different community groups and organisations coming to workshops and making enquiries about the project. It is clear from the interest expressed in the HCA Network on community led housing and the other activities that are going on in the region that community led and bottom up activity is alive and kicking. Perhaps this is because there are so few other options with a cash strapped economy but the roots of the community groups that we came into contact with go back much further than the current economic downturn. It is clear that there is a thirst for knowledge. People want to come together and share ideas and talk. Our experience from all of these events is there are never enough opportunities and there is never enough time but everyone goes away from every event whether it is on cohousing, living sustainably, growing one's own food or learning how to live more frugally with enthusiasm and some of those people are now beginning to form groups.

#### **4.4.5 Older People**

The challenge for older people indeed for us all as we get older is to keep an open mind. Cohousing will not appeal to everyone. It is a choice and its existence if people get some developments off the ground locally, means that there is more not less choice than there is at the moment.

The evidence from our workshops together with the evidence published so far on the benefits of cohousing and how it works suggests that it has a greater potential appeal than we thought at the start of our research. More people liked the idea than disliked it and there were some people who actively wanted to follow it up including people who had never come across the idea before they came to a research workshop or read our fact sheet. This suggests that if people get to know about cohousing it will appeal to some of them. It also suggests that there are people who

are 'shopping' for ideas as part of their planning for the future. Some of them are 'retired' and older while some are approaching retirement. There is a clear dividing line between people who don't plan and those who do and another line between people who have decided (regardless of age) that sharing with others in a supportive environment is not for them.

Some older people acknowledge that it is too late for them to start developing a cohousing community because they are unlikely to be able to give the time to see a cohousing development through from start to finish. Some people just don't want to give the time but there are others who are not put off by the time it may take – between four and seven or eight years on average - and they could see the benefits clearly.

Meetings are certainly off putting for many and the prospect of having to meet regularly after the properties are built and do shared activities are not favoured by people who like more private lives. The American cohousing principle of people sharing some of the maintenance and other regular site work (including less physical activities for people who find it difficult to do physical sweeping and weeding for example) appeal to some people are put others off completely. Yet the principles of supporting each other and looking out for each other (within boundaries) and living near people you choose to live near are very popular. They are also really close to the kind of ideal people describe when they asked to.

We heard in several workshops from people who thought they needed a leader, someone to do things for them. We also heard from people (usually professionals) who said people including older people could not organise themselves. We heard some of the worn and frayed myths about older people that older people 'don't want to do this'. Through talking to each other most people changed their perspective and tended to be more receptive to the possibility that older people can aspire to do things for themselves and be self-organising if they want to.

The challenges for older people include therefore continuing to challenge myths about older people including their actual capacity for self-organisation; continuing to say that older people are diverse and continuing to say that older people need a better choice of housing, care and support options including cohousing.

#### **4.5 Conclusions: “Revisioning” older age and community?**

We started out the action research intending to gather people's views on cohousing and to encourage and support a cohousing group to develop. Also to perhaps contribute something to the City Council's strategic plans for older people, housing, support and neighbourhoods since the City Council made a commitment that if we proved cohousing's viability they would take action. As the project developed and through hearing the richness of people's views our thinking changed and the project

began to take on a different shape.

As planned we did identify some people who were interested in developing cohousing groups. We also found some individual professionals and community activists who are really prepared to test out cohousing ways of working with people. We learned from them too and we can see how useful it was for everyone to bring them together.

As the research project unfolded it moved into reflections of older people's lives and started a deeper exploration of the unease people feel with ways of thinking about older age and community and the housing, support and care options we have available for older people. Older people referred to the fear of losing community, of being adrift, of no use, of being cut off and being isolated but they also did not want to be overwhelmed and they did not want to be constantly on call to provide support.

For example, a discussion with Chinese Elders highlighted the importance of community and being close enough as the members get older to give each other support. The discussion drew on the way the group relates to each other now and to the importance this group and their friends and relatives attach to having an extended community of people from similar cultures and backgrounds. The community meets together regularly and stays in contact by phone (and increasingly email). The Chinese elders can see that cohousing could be the answer to the kind of housing with support that they have been talking about and being able to choose to do this as a group would enable people to be together when they want but also have privacy. An intentional community – the description often given for cohousing - hit the nail on the head for the Chinese group. The longer the discussion went on the closer the group came to understanding that the cohousing idea was not only possible for them but attainable provided they wanted to put in the work to start a group and overcome obstacles along the way, as other groups had done. Do they want it enough though? Only time will tell. In the meantime cohousing remains a possible option for them. They enjoyed thinking about the possibility and the process was a useful one because it helped individuals work through some of their future options.

The drawings made by the groups who participated in the “Cohousing Designing Inclusive Communities” workshop led by Rose Gilroy demonstrated their take on cohousing and community and showed us how important community is to people. Community always comes up in research on and with groups of people on housing matters but it tends to get downplayed. For example, community is mentioned in key research reports on and about older people and housing but it's rarely given pole position. In our discussions community kept being mentioned as very important.

Given a free hand our mixed age range audience from different walks of life including people who had come to several cohousing events and some who had been to none, chose to combine a range of ingredients found in cohousing in different ways. The

common denominator was community – everyone worked to find something that would suit everyone and when this didn't work they agreed to disagree. So for one group this meant they could not go forward and agree on a single drawing but they reached an understanding about their disagreement through discussion. The discussion was instructive since it indicated how people who have major differences in outlook talk about their differences. The group reached a joint conclusion that their differences were too great for them to work together to develop a cohousing initiative since the aspirations and priorities of members of the group were so different in terms of the scale of the development, the importance of eco-sustainability and whether or not the cohousing would be intergenerational. The other groups all came up with something different although each reflected the group's views and interests and their needs and expectations about giving and receiving support and being part of a community.

Amazingly people cooperated without being 'told' to do this. They visited each other sometimes to see what each group was doing and they wandered off to look at the resources that were made available to them such as pictures of cohousing designs. The exercise underlined the need to be imaginative when we ask people to work with us to give us their views and interpretations of ideas. The drawings are tangible outputs and even people who can't draw well produced pretty good pictures that conveyed the cohousing community they saw as their ideal. To see the pictures go to the Quality of Life website [www.qualityoflife.org.uk](http://www.qualityoflife.org.uk).

### **Room for big ideas and for 'revisoning'**

Through exploring different interpretations of cohousing with people we came to understand that for all the talk of reality checks, lack of money and austerity there is still room for big ideas and it is still worth aiming for utopia. In fact that is what most people liked doing and they dealt with the negatives as well.

Our research happened to coincide with other changes that are going on, with a resurgence of interest in self-help and with community led solutions. It also touched on people's deep distress about old style solutions for older people, the failures of community care and the dismal lack of progress on ensuring that older people are treated well in hospitals and care homes. People want to be involved in the search for solutions to these problems. The post war consensus and the belief that the state knows best have gone forever.

To some extent the research discussions reflect our long love affair with a golden past when life was simpler and safer and they say something about people's hopes and wishes as well as their realities for safe and happy communities. It's important not to be fooled by this because our research participants were well aware about the capacity we all have as human beings to have a dream about the future while tackling the realities of the present. They also recognised that older age has changed and so have communities. The research simply tells it as it is. Despite the

poverty, lack of opportunity and fragmented communities that characterise some social housing estates most people expect to be asked to take part and they can with the right tools use their imaginations.

The salutary lesson is that older age and community need to be rethought and 'revised' to fit these changing times. Some easy and no cost options would also help including encouraging social housing landlords to amend their application forms and have some cohousing and cooperative housing options on them and supply some basic information for people who express an interest in these options.

#### **4.6 Next steps**

This report is the first output from the research. The Steering Group intend to produce a number of different outputs based on the research findings. They will include a short popular summary and a number of papers and articles. These outputs will continue to be posted on the Quality of Life website.

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Homes and Communities Agency website – [www.homesandcommunities.co.uk](http://www.homesandcommunities.co.uk)

Quality of Life website [www.qualityoflife.org.uk](http://www.qualityoflife.org.uk)

Oxford cohousing group. [www.Oxfordcohousing.org.uk](http://www.Oxfordcohousing.org.uk)

# Appendices

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## Appendix 1: Research Participants

Jean Armstrong	Newcastle Elders Council
Rachel Baillie	Newcastle City Council
Neil Barker	Mackellar Architects
Pauline Bishop	
Lowri Bond	Northern Architects
Carol Botton	Northern Architects
Julie Bullen	Newcastle City Council
Michael Burke (Cllr)	Newcastle City Council
Martyn Burn	Your Homes Newcastle
Mary Butler	
Anna Campbell	
Susan Chan	Newcastle Elders Council and South Mountain Association
Kamto Chan	South Mountain Association
Kim Chan	South Mountain Association
Queenie Choi	South Mountain Association
Mary Cleary	Newcastle Elders Council
Sow Fong Cole	South Mountain Association
Pamela Denham	Chair Age UK Newcastle
David Dobereiner	Architect and interested in becoming a cohouser
Fiona Dodsworth	Newcastle City Council
Beryl Downes	Newcastle Elders Council
Pete Duncan	Social Generation Consultant
Denise Gillie	Newcastle City Council



Vicky Gilbert	Cooperative Society
Caroline Gitsham	Gentoo
Jo Gooding	The UK Co Housing Network
Frances Hinton	
Henry Holden	Newcastle Elders
Charlie Hughes	Newcastle City Council
Philippa Hughes	Three Rivers Housing
Helen Hume	Gentoo
Lynn Johnston	Age UK Newcastle
Diane Jones	Community researcher and activist- interested in becoming a cohouser
Peter Kay	Ouseburn Trust
Mary Kelly	Architect
Dawn Keightley	4 Housing Group
Ann Light	Northumbria University
Joyce Leeson	Cooperative Society
Charlotte Lundstrom	
Angela McCullough	Derwentside Homes
Felicity Mendelson (Cllr)	Workers Educational Association and Councillor Newcastle City Council
Elizabeth Meronik	
Wendy Mizen	Newcastle Elders Council
Lesley Mountain	
Mary Nicholls	Chair Newcastle Elders Council
Brian O'Doherty	Newcastle City Council
Andrew Oysten	
Andrea Pearce	Your Homes Newcastle
Kate Percival	Northern Architects

Sharon Preed	Your Homes Newcastle
Robert Rebar	Newcastle Elders
Mike Sams	
Clare Satow	
Ann Schofield (Cllr)	Councillor Newcastle City Council
John Smart	Newcastle Elders Council
Abi Taylor	Home Housing Group
Andrew Teacher	
Kirk Thompson	
Maureen Tinsley	Newcastle Elders Council, Society of Friends and interested in becoming a cohouser
Bianca Tobin	
Ada Tsow	South Mountain Association
John Urwin	Your Homes Newcastle
Andrea Westwood	
Margaret White	Gentoo
Steve Whitley	

## **Facilitators and organisers**

Vera Bolter	Newcastle Elders Council and HAPPI Panel
Lynn Corner	Newcastle University
Barbara Douglas	Quality of Life Partnership
Mary Nicholls	Newcastle Elders Council
Rose Gilroy	Newcastle University
Helen Jarvis	Newcastle University
Moyra Riseborough	Riseborough Research and Consultancy
Muriel Barron	Riseborough Research and Consultancy

## Appendix 2: Methodology and lessons

The action research aimed to be as inclusive and participatory as possible while also encouraging people to explore ideas and concepts.

### Providing information to prompt a discussion

Given that the concept of cohousing was new to many participants a key challenge was ensuring that people were given enough information about cohousing in order that they could express a view without leading them or bombarding them with too much information. We also had to ensure that people received basically the same information so that everyone started from more or less the same starting point as far as the information was concerned (although it was clear that a minority of people had pre-existing information about cohousing before we contacted them).

Getting the idea of cohousing across to people is complex because there are many different kinds of cohousing and it can be funded and organised in diverse ways. Some people find it difficult to think conceptually and relate best to concrete examples while other people can easily see the bigger picture and quickly grasp the idea that there are many variations on a theme. These very broad differences are of course gross generalisations and I use them here to simply draw some distinctions between people and the way they relate to hearing and seeing new information. In the research discussions therefore participants responded according to how they receive and process new information. Participants' responses also flowed through their expectations and experiences of life, ageing, housing and so on. In other words, they brought all of their life experience and professional and personal views with them.

Participants also brought their dispositions with them including the disposition to plan their lives or not plan. It was clear from the conversations that took place in the workshops and their fringes that people are divided into planners and non-planners. To some extent this is a personality difference although having a steady good income and the capacity/tenacity to plan also make it possible for some people to plan while others cannot do so because of life events such as illness, unemployment and upheavals in their lives. The research discussions suggested that those people who like to plan are more inclined to participate fully in discussions on cohousing.

We used plain language fact sheets which were sent to people before the workshops and available at the workshops for people to take away and or refer to. We also used a short Power point presentation that contained a couple of Tube video clips. A selection of photographs of various cohousing developments mostly in Northern Europe and North America were displayed in the room and there were references

and links to other sources for more information. At the first workshop we gave people far too much information which probably got in the way and could have prevented them from expressing their views. However, we were fortunately working with participants who were pretty experienced at coming together to do workshops and discussions and they gamely got on with the small group discussions and happily ran a bit over time even though it was a winter's evening.

Feedback from participants alerted us to the fact that they would have liked more time to talk things over. Many people had questions which were not answered in the presentation and came up in the discussions groups following the presentation.

### The mini workshop

Next we ran a mini workshop with older people drawn from the Chinese Community. In this workshop we tried out a slightly different approach which involved a much shorter presentation and reduced amount of information. We also moved to using experiential learning approaches that focus on engaging participants so that they are in control and decide what they want to learn. Providing less information meant that participants had to ask questions and they were encouraged to do this. The researchers took on the role of facilitators using prompts of key facts to help the discussion along. The key facts were:

- Cohousing is not one thing – there are many different kinds but most cohousing has the same common principles about being self organising
- You don't need a leader – the whole point is that a cohousing group gets formed by the people who are going to live in the cohousing and they lead the process themselves
- It isn't just about housing it is about a different way of living and looking out for each other
- Living sustainably is important to many cohousing groups and it keeps living costs down
- You don't need a leader but you might want to find out things and work with experts when it suits you
- You will have to have meetings and you will have to give up time
- You all have to agree on some things
- There are advantages in having control over things because you control the outcome and the costs but how much control you have is up to the group

### **Using experiential learning**

We kept this format for the next workshop. However, we also added a couple of exercises intended to encourage people to simulate experience of what it would be like to plan and or live in cohousing. We did this in order to enable people to

engage more deeply with the principles of cohousing and what it entails in practice.

It is probably worth saying what we mean by experiential learning.

The notion of experiential learning is linked to the idea that each individual has their own style of learning (for example, some people prefer doing and experiencing while others prefer the theoretical approach) and to the idea that learning is a process. People tend to learn best if they have the opportunity to come across an idea or a new experience and reflect on it so they understand it or can place it in the context of what they know already. The new knowledge may even challenge what they thought they 'knew' before. Learning is therefore a process in itself. If we take this notion and apply it to a research setting – in this case a research workshop discussion – we can anticipate that if our aim is to encourage participants to express views about cohousing which is a new concept we have to give them the means to enter into some sort of engagement with the concept in practice. We also had to give people the means to take control – which meant that we as researchers had to really take a back seat and be facilitators.

#### Exercises and pushing the discussion

To do this we designed some scenarios and exercises for people to follow see the exercises and scenarios produced for workshop 3 at the end of the appendix.

See also the scripts and prompts for speakers who came to the final workshop where we aimed to look for ways forward and tried to tease out the things that seemed to be important such as, virtual co housing and how could it work and why were some people so passionate about older people only cohousing? Also what could be developed and taken forward relatively easily?

#### **Being inclusive**

Being inclusive is not always easy and we had to work hard to keep people in touch with the project. We didn't have enough resources to do this as well as we could have done. However, we did keep our promises and have kept people informed about the research.

#### **Lessons**

- Did we get the balance of information right?

It is hard to judge but we learned the following:

Less is more – giving people a mixture of short bursts of information at different times using mixed media seems to work better than giving them all of the information

at once in one format. We used plain language fact sheets which were sent to people before the workshops and available at the workshops for people to take away and or refer to. We also used a short Power point presentation that contained a couple of UTube video clips. A selection of photographs of various cohousing developments mostly in Northern Europe and North America were displayed in the room and there were references and links to other sources for more information. At first we gave people far too much information which prevented them from expressing their views – by the second workshop we reduced the amount of information and we moved to using experiential learning approaches.

- Experiential learning – useful or a red herring?

Experiential learning or action centred learning approaches work. They provided a discipline for organising meaningful scenarios and helped participants to engage with a complex idea and what the ideas mean to individuals when they are put into practice. We think there is much to be explored about these approaches.

- Were we inclusive?

We think so – the feedback from participants indicates that we were and the fact that people kept coming back to research events suggested that there was a positive appeal for participants. There were no inducements offered – beyond some refreshments.

- Encouraging participation

The experiential learning approach helped us to really think about the best and most effective and interesting ways to engage people in research. Did we get it right? We don't know because we didn't evaluate our approach but we do know that the exercises we devised helped prompt detailed discussion on aspects of living in and planning cohousing between participants that could not have been easily encouraged otherwise.

*(Note – to read more on experiential learning and learning theory see for example, Illeris K (2007) How We Learn: Learning and Non Learning in School and Beyond. London. Routledge.*

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## **Workshop 3 Scenarios and Exercises**

### **Group A - A first meeting of would be cohousers**

First suggest someone will chair it

Second suggest someone or persuade someone to write a few notes or take turns!!

OK so it's your first meeting and you are all thinking of maybe starting a cohousing group. What questions do you ask and why? What kind of barriers and problems might you face?

Write down your views please! Your facilitator will help and will tell us all about it later.

NB: Cohousers tend to be great self-organisers but they don't necessarily like being organised by 'authority'!

### **Group B**

#### **You are going to play a game of consequences**

You are tasked with encouraging people to think about cohousing as one of the options they can choose to plan for now so that when they are older they can have good neighbours, independence and a good quality of life

You all start with the same first line which is

*I think cohousing is a good idea for when we get older because*

Read out your answers to each other when you have all had a go

Your facilitator will present the highlights later.

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### **Briefing notes for Speakers prepared for the Exploring Co-Housing amongst Older People in Newcastle. A provocative event – 28 June Campus for Ageing and Vitality Newcastle University**

Thanks for agreeing to run a session and to take part in this event. This is going to be run as a world café event. BEFORE THE EVENT your task is to prepare some thoughts which can be written up onto flipchart paper or in another format if you want so you can give a short presentation to everyone before they start the visits.

You may want to talk to colleagues to do this – contact details for colleagues will be sent to you.

## **The room layout plan**

The room will be laid out with four areas – there will be spaces for – 3 tables and 3 conversations with a note taker and animator. The fourth space will contain resources/ drawings/photos/ all the material we have collected including if possible blown up photos of the cohousing imagined developments. Please bring along anything you want to display!!

There will be a discussion area for the plenary session at the start and finish

A buffet and drinks area - next to the orange display corner

Reception at the door

## **World café**

We will start with some short presentations about the event. Moyra and Barbara will introduce the event. Next speakers will be asked to give short presentations.

About the discussions at each table. Two people from your group are asked to stay at the table to give a point of view and listen to what the guests think. (Others can participate by moving to other tables.) One of you will write down what people say on the paper tablecloth covering the table. The tablecloth is divided into four quadrants – one for each group. The fourth quadrant should be used to note anything that you think is not covered somewhere else!

**Yellow:** The yellow table will be hosted by people from Gentoo, a very large housing provider (amongst other things) in Sunderland. They are being asked to think about how they can take the co-housing idea and people supporting each other further. They are going to ask themselves how they can encourage their tenants and people they work with to set up virtual co-housing/co-support groups.

**Pink:** The pink table will be hosted by Philippa Hughes (from Three Rivers HA and Jo Gooding from the co-housing network). They are being asked to think about the things that housing developers and planners and policy makers can do together to better support groups that want to develop co-housing.

**Red:** The red table will be hosted by Maureen Tinsley and Diane Jones both of whom are interested in developing co-housing. They will bring some ideas to the table about the communities they would like to develop. They will also explain why they are interested in cohousing.

Everyone will get the chance to visit at least two tables for about thirty five minutes for each group. Participants are given coloured tickets as they come in indicating the tables they are going to visit.



## Appendix 3: Useful links

Cohousing examples in Europe and North America

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCAvqyHkCaY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCAvqyHkCaY)

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=EkRrhofrn3g&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EkRrhofrn3g&feature=related)

The Lancaster cohousing group in the UK

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=piA8JGuDVcM&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=piA8JGuDVcM&feature=related)

The Leeds (LILAC) cohousing group in the UK

[www.lilac.coop](http://www.lilac.coop)

Older Women Cohousing London

[www.owch.org.uk/](http://www.owch.org.uk/)

Community Land Trusts have a national network via

<http://communitylandtrusts.org.uk/>

### North East

A local co housing network group can be joined by going to

[northumberlandhousingcoop@googlegroups.com](mailto:northumberlandhousingcoop@googlegroups.com)

The Homes and Communities Agency regularly hosts meetings for north east networkers interested in community led housing including cohousing – contact [Vashika.Ramcharan@hca.gsi.go.uk](mailto:Vashika.Ramcharan@hca.gsi.go.uk) for more information

The community led Green Festival in Newcastle is a focus for many sustainability projects and community led initiatives and also includes events around cohousing and cooperative housing – see [www.newcastlegreenfestival.org.uk](http://www.newcastlegreenfestival.org.uk)

The Workers Educational Association in the North East established a Green Branch in 2012 and has held several conferences and festivals. Contact [ntodd@wea.org.uk](mailto:ntodd@wea.org.uk) for more information