



Is co-living a good choice to support healthy, happy ageing at home?

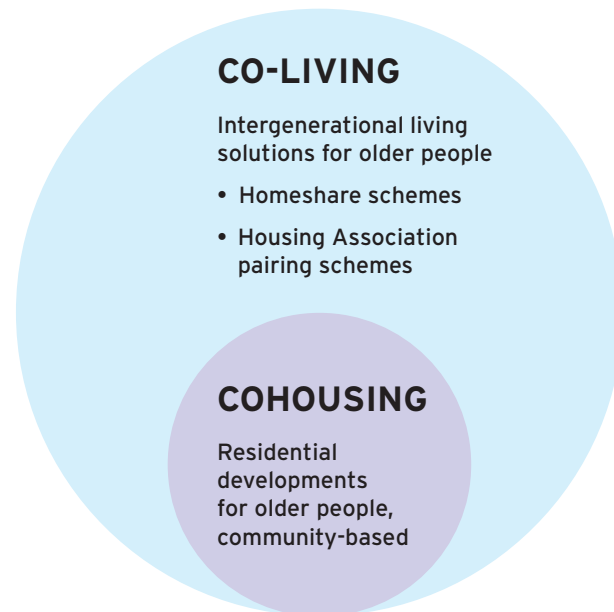
Summary and Conclusions

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Introduction

It has been consistently shown that good housing can help to sustain positive physical and mental health into older age. The aim of this research, carried out by the Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research, was to explore the extent to which co-living housing models might provide a good housing solution for people as they get older.

FIGURE 1 CO-LIVING AND COHOUSING



What is co-living?

Co-living can be defined as ‘a form of housing that combines private living spaces with shared communal facilities. Unlike flat shares and other types of shared living arrangements, co-living explicitly seeks to promote social contact and build community’.¹ Co-living is therefore seen as any alternative to more traditional housing which facilitates social contact and a shared lifestyle through the living environment.

Who is it for?

Co-living can be chosen at every stage of life. Students might choose to live in a co-living arrangement, either sharing with a group of people or on a one-to-one basis, in order to avoid the negative aspects of flat-shares or expensive single accommodation. Families can opt for co-living in order to raise children in a community environment, sometimes with family members from several generations, which brings about benefits for all generations. Finally, older people can decide to live in a co-living style home, either because they do not want to live alone or because they would like to avoid more traditional retirement or specialist housing.

Why is co-living suitable for older people?

Co-living has been considered as particularly suited for older people for many reasons. On the one hand, it represents an alternative solution to traditional housing options for older people. On the other, it has been considered a housing option which has the potential to address some of the issues faced in older age, particularly those of loneliness and isolation.

What are the different types of co-living that exist in the UK?

There are different types of co-living in the UK. Some are in individual homes, and some are group-based styles of living. These are illustrated in Figure 1 above.

The most common type of co-living is cohousing communities. These can be defined as ‘intentional communities’ which are ‘created and run by their residents’.² Cohousing is a communal form of co-living, where people decide to live together in a group setting. Each household has a personal, private home but residents come together to share activities, eat together and manage their community.

Other types of co-living include intergenerational one-to-one models. The main form of these in the UK are called ‘homeshares’, where an older person with a spare room at home is paired with a younger sharer in need of low-cost accommodation, in return for companionship and support with daily life tasks. Such intergenerational housing models have also been created by Housing Associations, where young people (often students) and older residents live alongside each other in a communal setting. This model offers sub-market rents for younger people, in return for providing companionship and light touch support with daily life tasks.

Is co-living growing in the UK?

There is now a growing interest in co-living and cohousing solutions for older people in the UK, and the UK is slowly catching up with the success of alternative housing models in the Netherlands, Germany, Scandinavia and the USA. There are currently 19 cohousing communities in the UK, and only a small number of senior-only cohousing communities. The first UK cohousing community was developed in 2004, but it took 18 years for the Older Women’s Cohousing Group (OWCH), the first senior-only cohousing

community, to be completed. However, cohousing is now growing in the UK, and the rate of growth is expected to increase over coming years as there are many cohousing groups looking for a site and planning to develop a community. Homeshare models are also growing across the UK: the first homeshare scheme opened in 1993, and there are now 27 homeshare providers.

What are the benefits of co-living?

There are many benefits associated with co-living. Some are common to all types of co-living, and benefits are often mutual and interrelated, addressing issues of loneliness and isolation among both older and younger people, as well as the lack of affordable or adapted housing options in the traditional housing market. Co-living supports older people to be more active, to engage in shared activities, and to share their daily life with other people. It offers a balance between private, personal space and common spaces where people can meet and interact. It enables older people to actively choose how they want to live in later life.

Some benefits are specific to particular co-living models. Cohousing communities keep older people active and improve their physical and mental health through belonging to a group where members make decisions together and share communal meals and activities. Many people living in a cohousing community enjoy cooking together, gardening, making music or playing games as a group.

“I very much enjoy gardening, and I really look forward to doing that collectively.”

Future resident of a cohousing community

Benefits can vary depending on whether people live in an intergenerational setting, sharing experiences with different generations, or live with other older people with similar lifestyles and routines.

“I expect to have a bigger social life, to see friends, pop out the door more often, share meals and have more companionship.”

Future resident of a cohousing community

“Your neighbours look after you, they know if you’re not well, if you’re isolated. It keeps you active, rather than living in a normal street where everyone goes to work during the week, and you’re lucky if you see them in the morning before they go.”

Resident of a cohousing community

One-to-one models of co-living such as homeshares bring specific benefits: they reduce health-care related costs for older people while providing low-cost accommodation for young people, and provide light support for daily life tasks for the older person. The intergenerational aspect of such schemes brings about other benefits: it can enable the older householder to stay up-to-date with new technology, while younger sharers may appreciate learning from the older person’s life, career or experiences.

“I just love the feeling of having somebody around the house.”

Householder

Homeshares also allow older people to remain in their home where they often have memories and emotional attachment, delaying the need for specialist accommodation or care. They provide relief for families worried about an older relative living alone and it has been recognised that having a live-in homesharer considerably reduces the risk of domestic accidents or dependency on emergency services. Finally, homeshares generate health-care related benefits and potential cost savings for local services and the wider community.

“We have a similar sense of humour, so we enjoy watching comedies together... I think he doesn’t need a lot from me, it’s just providing him with a little bit of light support and restoring his confidence.”

Homesharer

¹ Shafique, 2018
² UK Cohousing Network



Are there any risks associated with co-living?

Co-living models are regulated within a specific legal framework, which minimises risk for the individuals who decide to get involved. For homeshares, the agreement between the householder and the younger sharer is regulated by a specific set of policies, and a homeshare programme manager is in charge of overseeing the process and making sure both parties are satisfied. Even though it can sometimes be difficult for people who have been used to living alone for a long time to adapt to someone else's routine and presence in their house, the homeshare experience in the UK has proved to be very successful in a large majority of cases, and most challenges or mismatches were immediately addressed and resolved. Potential homesharers might need to talk to their local authority about possible impact on their Council Tax.

Groups or individuals committing to a cohousing community might face different inherent risks, including potential difficulties in finding a suitable site, securing funds for their project or the practicalities of building a community. However, the success of existing cohousing communities is likely to generate more support from local authorities, housing developers or mortgage companies to facilitate cohousing developments. More guidance and good practice guides are now available, and these are likely to make the cohousing development process less lengthy. However, involvement in a cohousing community requires the ability to work in a group, engage with the views of others, and be willing to allocate time and energy to the project.

"It was very difficult as a group to stay united and not to fall apart at every obstacle we faced, during endless negotiations and discussions, on finance issues, on the trouble of getting a site or deciding who was going to have this piece of land."

Resident

How can I register or hear about co-living in my area?

Most of the information regarding cohousing communities in the UK can be found on the UK Cohousing Network (UKCN) website <https://cohousing.org.uk/> which gathers updates on existing cohousing groups looking for members, guidance and good practices documents, general advice and feedback from existing cohousing communities. Information on how to set up a cohousing group, find a site and finance the project, design a community and settle in can all be found on the website.

For one-to-one intergenerational schemes such as homeshares, general information can be found on the UK Homeshare website. The central platform coordinates a national network of homeshare schemes in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. People with a spare room looking for a younger sharer can contact a local homeshare provider for help in finding the right match. Information on local homeshare providers and a list of local organisations can be found on <https://homeshareuk.org/homeshare-areas-coverage-map/>

More information about our housing research at the University of Cambridge can be found at <https://www.cchpr.landecon.cam.ac.uk/>

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