



## Work on the wild side: For developers & architects

There is growing interest in exploring non-mainstream housing options for older people, including various methods of self-help and mutual support that are often similar to cohousing principles. This briefing is the first of two from the Housing Learning and Improvement Network and is explicitly written for designers and architects developing housing and care schemes for older people. It offers an insight into a fascinating research project that set out to assess interest in cohousing in Newcastle-upon-Tyne and ended up with a radical set of ideas about how to live our later lives. This is captured in useful lessons and messages on transferable good practice that can improve the outcomes for older people.

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## Introduction

This briefing paper from the Housing Learning and Improvement Network (LIN) is aimed at developers and architects. It is the first of two briefing papers from a fascinating research project that set out to assess interest in cohousing in Newcastle-upon-Tyne and ended up with a radical set of ideas about how to live our later lives.

It came over loud and clear in our workshops and discussions that people are very unhappy with traditional social care, support and housing solutions. There is growing interest in exploring other options, including various methods of self-help and mutual support that are often similar to cohousing principles.

Based on the thoughtful contributions of professionals and 'lay' people, both older and younger, who have informed this paper, we can offer alternative 'ways in' to re-thinking how we go about our professional work and, as a result, improve the outcomes for older customers and ourselves.

The briefing paper concentrates on domestic housing, rather than care or nursing homes, but concepts and ideas are transferrable.

## What does the client want?

It has taken a long time for developers to realise that older people are a lucrative client group for domestic housing of various types. Many developers, however, still don't.

There is mounting evidence that well-designed, accessible housing in the right locations helps people to self-care and live independently for much longer, avoiding the trauma of moving to institutional care and reducing the risk of accidents in the home. Interest has therefore grown across Europe in the idea of promoting age-friendly cities and towns.

But how many developers are providing what older people want? How many innovative and imaginative developments are developed with, or by, the consumers who will live there? Most examples in the UK have had very little input from would-be consumers, apart from cohousing and co-operative developments, which is why these and a few other commercial and social housing examples are so inspiring.

Architects, on the other hand, often work closely with individual clients to develop a home around the life people envisage they want. Constraints include money, restrictions imposed by the site, problems over access and utilities and poor communication between client/architect and developer.

## Improving relationships and communication

The commitment to constantly improving relationships and communication with clients is at the heart of architects and developers' professional lives. There is extensive literature on developing good relationships and communication between all parties, such as Inclusion by Design (2008)<sup>1</sup> by the Design Council, which emphasises the importance of including communities in the design of publicly-owned community buildings. See also the useful advice for individuals from the Home Owners Alliance, How do I work with an architect? (2013).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [www.designcouncil.org.uk/Documents/Documents/Publications/CABE/inclusion-by-design.pdf](http://www.designcouncil.org.uk/Documents/Documents/Publications/CABE/inclusion-by-design.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <http://hoa.org.uk/advice/guides-for-homeowners/i-am-improving/how-do-i-work-with-an-architect/>

However, the context is challenging. Today's older clients comprise a hugely diverse population, ranging from the affluent people in their fifties and older who can commission architect-designed new homes or refurbishments to match their vision of how they want to live their later years, to people who are less well-off but who are nonetheless interested in the design process. Increasingly, new clients are groups of people, including community interest groups.

This will require architects and developers to learn new skills. A survey of architect's clients by The Architects' Journal in 2012 noted that architects needed to improve their communication skills and think more "like the client." Almost three quarters of respondents said that the services they received from architects had either got worse or had not improved in recent years. Not listening to the client was a main concern (see Richard Waite, 8 March 2012, The Architects' Journal<sup>3</sup>).

## **Making way for imagination**

The cohousing discussions in Newcastle demonstrated that people are extremely interested in having a say over where they live and the neighbourhoods they live in.

In one workshop, a group exercise led to beautiful annotated drawings of the ideal cohousing neighbourhoods people wanted to live in, backed up with solid reasons. Even people with basic drawing skills produced illustrations identifying the key requirements and principles that were important to them. This creative and imaginative way of thinking through ideas was also fun. People remarked on how much they enjoyed and learned from the experience.

The buzz of activity and the high participation rates achieved in our Newcastle research workshops was noticed by many people, who compared this to their relatively poor experience of taking part in other community and social housing consultation events. There are lots of reasons why people report poor experiences, but the two biggest reasons mentioned to us were the lack of real opportunity to make a difference and only being consulted after the key decisions had already been made.

In addition, some older people commented that they were never asked about their views about wider things like employment opportunities, although they are still in paid work and have no plans to retire. There were people interested as a result in a wide range of alternatives such as live and work spaces or living spaces that were close to shared creative or studio spaces. This is a far cry from the idea that all older people want places to live to 'retire' to. Disengagement from the paid and unpaid workforce is not necessarily wanted or feasible and to some extent these comments touched on a changing relationship between work and life as we get older and changing aspirations too.

## **An example where consumer input paid off**

In 2013, developer McCarthy and Stone sponsored a RIBA design competition which resulted in a concept being submitted by the winners for new homes to match the lifestyles of people who are ageing but who don't want to change their interests and aspirations.

The "Re-imagine Ageing" competition was won by Tom Russell Architects from Bristol. The winning design embraced the views older people expressed in the HAPPI<sup>4</sup> report and which

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<sup>3</sup> [www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/what-clients-want-aj-survey-results/8627455.article](http://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/what-clients-want-aj-survey-results/8627455.article)

<sup>4</sup> Barac M and Park J, *Housing our Ageing Population: Panel for Innovation (HAPPI)*, HCA 2009  
[www.homesandcommunities.co.uk/sites/default/files/happi\\_final\\_report\\_-\\_031209.pdf](http://www.homesandcommunities.co.uk/sites/default/files/happi_final_report_-_031209.pdf)

are well-expressed in other research too, for more ‘inside out and outside in’ living spaces that are light, spacious, with balconies and external space, that are sustainable and offer options to socialise with other people living the development and nearby.

## Imagination and communication

In our research workshops on cohousing, some people acknowledged they found it difficult to visualise the unknown. They struggled to talk about ideas that had no concrete reality. Is this a gap in imagination between clients and architects which makes it hard for people to communicate?

*“Clients can lack the imagination – the big idea – to see themselves in their homes. How can I explain – you can have anything you want, although cost will come into it. It’s almost as if having so much choice frightens people off, so they spend too much time on details and cannot look at the big idea.”*

John Lloyd, a retired Northumbrian architect who has built both of the homes he and his wife occupied for most of their lives.

## Becoming a facilitator

Key issues for all professionals are how much detail to provide when discussing a potential idea with a client and how much expert input should be given when listening to client ideas?

Many clients choose an architect or developer because they like what they have previously produced. Some clients ask for examples and want expert advice early on. However, client and professional meetings can be frustrating, as well as expensive, if clients continue to be unclear about what they want.

Like the members of the HAPPI panel, many co-housers favour light and airy spaces that are easy to heat and affordable. However, they also look particularly for architects and partner developers whose ideas for construction and designs have a low impact on the planet and/or use carbon-neutral materials. Most of the cohousing developments built in the UK so far have involved finding a blend of sustainability solutions that meet the aspirations and budgets of the groups concerned.

It’s clear that the development of most cohousing groups is an unfolding story of experimentation and partnership with architects/builders. No-one would claim to have got the relationships or the designs, build methods and materials absolutely right. However, it is also clear that when a group of people is the client, different kinds of relationships need to be developed with experts. One way to describe this is to say that the architect or developer becomes less of the expert waiting for instructions and instead takes on the role of facilitating the client to become better informed.

The well-established cohousing group in Roskilde, Denmark has reflected on the processes that were important to them early on and their discussion, in this short video<sup>5</sup>, is insightful.

Roskilde was also highlighted in a HAPPI study visit to Sweden and Denmark<sup>6</sup> in 2009.

<sup>5</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=kKfVYnARjs0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kKfVYnARjs0)

<sup>6</sup> [www.homesandcommunities.co.uk/sites/default/files/happi\\_trip\\_6\\_report\\_final.pdf](http://www.homesandcommunities.co.uk/sites/default/files/happi_trip_6_report_final.pdf)

## **Working better with potential cohousing groups**

The rationale for suggesting this comes from the methods that worked most successfully in the cohousing research workshops. Cohousing is a complicated subject for discussion, with many component parts. The research team did not want to 'lead' or influence people's views. We were concerned that participants would get bored if they found our descriptions too wordy, but there was a real temptation to overburden people with information.

After some experimentation, we decided to use a mix of facilitation and learning methods with short bursts of factual information, all geared to enable participants to use their imagination and discover ideas for themselves. As a result we helped the participants to 'become the experts' by providing the right amount of information. People could discover and use material as they wished, including short PowerPoint presentations, YouTube videos, photographs and brief, digestible descriptions of real-world cohousing schemes.

The results were dramatic. People had deeper and more imaginative discussions about the homes and neighbourhoods they wanted and found they could initiate these discussions by looking at examples.

Similar methods could be used to enable clients to understand and discover what is important to them. It is the starting point for many "cohosers", but it could also be genuinely empowering to use these methods with people who want to influence the design of their community or neighbourhood.

## **Co-producing and the importance of process**

The workshop discussions on cohousing illustrated how important it is for a group to get the process right. By 'process' I mean thinking through ideas and exploring options. Many cohousing groups have referred to the importance of process and how this connects to the development of shared ideas within the group. The Older Women's Cohousing Company (OWCH) in North London, for example, has talked about the process of visualising and working out what people want.<sup>7</sup>

Most cohousing groups also visit other cohousing developments and look for ideas to take back with them. The 'thinking' stage, far from being an essential but potentially drawn-out forerunner to the more important task of compiling the eventual brief, is a key part of the brief and remains a part of it.

Seeing the process in this way changes the client/architect and developer relationship. Going back to the idea of being a facilitator, architects/developers are being asked to give their views and to draw on their expertise, when asked, but also to listen and co-produce with clients.

In the USA, cohousing is a well-developed and growing option for people of all ages including seniors. The Cohousing Company, created by US architects McCamant & Durrett, offers a total service to people interested in cohousing, from helping to facilitate meetings to briefing the architect and brokering key decisions.

The Wolf Willow seniors' cohousing group in Canada has produced a short film<sup>8</sup> that explains the particular process they went through very well.

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<sup>7</sup> [www.owch.org.uk/owchpages/indexB.html](http://www.owch.org.uk/owchpages/indexB.html)

<sup>8</sup> <https://vimeo.com/42528348>

A service like that provided by the Cohousing Company is not yet available from an architect's practice or developer in the UK. It is arguable that UK clients don't want such an encompassing comprehensive service but the participants in our UK cohousing research discussions indicated nonetheless that they would prefer to work with architects and developers to co-produce plans and concepts rather than being led by them (the traditional arrangement).

## The neighbourhood – community – Localism Act

Our research echoes research by others on the importance people attach to being part of a community. It is often the thing that most attracts people to cohousing and co-operative developments although most people usually qualify this by saying they are part of many communities other than where they live.

Architects and developers are often asked to work on briefs to refurbish and redevelop localities. There are huge benefits to be gained from working with local communities. There are also new challenges, given that more is at stake for communities who are at risk of losing services and assets in these austere times. The Localism Act 2011 gives new rights to community groups to acquire local assets such as shops and pubs, to build homes and other facilities and own and manage them.

To do all of these things, community groups are turning to architects and developers who are prepared to work with them as self-organising entities. Many are learning how to become co-ops or social enterprises at the same time as they are learning how to work with an architect and developer and trying to take on board the requirements of turning, let's say, a library into the heart of the community.

## Sustainable living and an ageing society

*"I believe that sustainability (saving the planet) and designing for an ageing society are the two biggest topics we as designers have to tackle in our lifetime."*

Professor Matthias Hollwich, University of Pennsylvania.



Sustainability attracted mixed interest amongst people who participated in the cohousing research workshops. Rises in heating and energy costs were partly behind this, but for some people there was also a genuine interest in being "lighter on the planet."

Some drawings produced by participants showed a deeper interest in designing a sustainable cohousing development – the drawing by the 'Swifts' group, for example, included reed beds for recycling used water and human waste.

Architects and developers who participated in the research workshops said that they also had personal and professional interests in designing sustainable features, but they commented on the additional costs for clients, where costs are often tightly

constrained. As a result, some volume builders and social landlords are put off from fully embracing sustainability and green energy.

Only one of the social housing landlords who participated in the research, Four Group, had seriously made inroads into designing new buildings with sustainable features including heat and energy savings and benefits for residents.<sup>9</sup>

Cohousing groups who have developed in the UK have found that they have to recruit specialist architects and builders who are prepared to conform to the group's wishes for sustainable methods of building, drainage, waste and recycling and heat and energy requirements. Each of the 14 cohousing developments so far developed in the UK are different, but there are shared principles which could be used by others.

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 of food staples and co-operating to purchase fuel and energy all help to reduce energy and keep things affordable for members. There are often benefits for the wider community, as some cohousing groups choose to share cars and transport or decide to use electric cars and bikes.

### **The social landlord as developer - lessons and messages**

Several London cohousing groups are working with Hanover Housing Association to develop their communities. A recent Demos paper for Hanover, *Sociable housing in later life* (May 2013), highlighted new research that many older people are dissatisfied with existing retirement housing and increasingly turn to sociable housing arrangements, such as cohousing, to combat the risk of social isolation and loneliness.

The social landlords who participated in the Newcastle research were quick to grasp that there could be partnering opportunities with emerging cohousing groups. However, they also found some new variations on cohousing, suggesting that cohousing could take various forms and legal identities and could also be virtual.

Retrofit is usually defined in this context as properties that are totally redesigned for people who want to create a cohousing community. That is one option for social landlords, particularly where a group of people are keen to start a community who are already neighbours. Taking a different approach to retrofitting, professionals from Gentoo in Sunderland noted that where there are strong links within local communities there is the potential to introduce cohousing principles, 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.

There are good reasons for people to consider alternatives such as cohousing, especially in the current climate. For example, older people who don't want to move but whose homes are not going to be suitable for them as they age may consider joining forces with other older people to revamp a redundant building 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.

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<sup>9</sup> Sinclair Meadows developed by Four Housing Group see [www.narecde.co.uk/sinclair-meadows-wins-three-sustainability-awards/](http://www.narecde.co.uk/sinclair-meadows-wins-three-sustainability-awards/)



## Transferable good practice

Three Rivers Housing (part of Four Housing Group) developed 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.

Encouraging cohousing - points for the future:

- Housing associations and developers should accept that cohousing groups take time to develop and it is a mistake to get involved too soon
- Housing associations need to be clear about what they are offering. What is in it for the housing association and the cohousing group? What are the options?
- It is possible to get around concerns about local lettings policies, allocations and balanced communities. The UK Cohousing Network has a bank of information and examples which will provide factual evidence to address concerns
- The Housing LIN's design hub<sup>10</sup> provides a range of tools and resources on designing and developing housing for an ageing population, including extra care housing, cohousing and HAPPI
- Developers and architects need to better appraise themselves of the emerging housing market for an ageing population and, in particular, a range of building design concepts that can enhance living and lifestyle arrangements of older people.

There are also some practical and easy changes that social housing providers could think about such as having an option on their application forms to allow people to express interest in cohousing or cooperative housing.

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<sup>10</sup> [www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/browse/Design\\_building/](http://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/browse/Design_building/)

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## Note

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and are not necessarily those of the Housing Learning and Improvement Network.

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## About the Housing LIN

Previously responsible for managing the Department of Health's Extra Care Housing Fund, the Housing Learning and Improvement Network (LIN) is the leading 'learning lab' for a growing network of housing, health and social care professionals in England involved in planning, commissioning, designing, funding, building and managing housing, care and support services for older people and vulnerable adults with long term conditions.

For further information about the Housing LIN's comprehensive list of online resources and shared learning and service improvement networking opportunities, including site visits and network meetings in your region, visit: [www.housinglin.org.uk](http://www.housinglin.org.uk)

The Housing LIN welcomes contributions on a range of issues pertinent to housing with care for older and vulnerable adults. If there is a subject that you feel should be addressed, please contact us.

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