



## Work on the wild side: For commissioners and housing and social care providers

This briefing, the second of two, has been written with commissioners and organisations providing housing and care and support services in mind. The main challenge is that it is virtually impossible to quantify demand for cohousing unless and until a cohousing or community-led housing group is brought to commissioners' attention. Commissioners cannot directly commission cohousing, since activities are bottom-up. They can, however, create cohousing-friendly conditions by acknowledging, in key local plans, that they will support self-directed or community-led housing groups. This briefing provides insights that can aid those working on the wild side!

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## Introduction

This briefing paper for the Housing Learning and Improvement Network (LIN) is for commissioners and organisations providing housing and care and support services. It is the second of two briefing papers from a fascinating research project that set out to gauge interest in cohousing in Newcastle-upon-Tyne and ended up with some radical 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.

The dissatisfaction that people who are growing older have with the same services and arrangements their parents had is not confined to the UK. Californian architect and articulate, well-known US cohousing advocate Chuck Durrett expresses some similar views in this video.<sup>1</sup>

Based on the thoughtful contributions of professionals and 'lay' people, both older and younger, who helped inform 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.

## What is cohousing?

Cohousing is often described as an intentional community, since it is more than housing alone and offers people access to a friendly, supportive community which the members develop and sustain.

Cohousing has many variations. Of the 14 developments in the UK so far, all are very different. They vary in size and tenure, although they each share key cohousing principles - individual homes for occupants, a communal space where people come together to share a meal and other social activities including formal meetings, a commitment towards respecting and supporting each other, living alongside people as a community and living sustainably.

In the US and mainland Europe, cohousing has been established for longer than in the UK and it is beginning to demonstrate its capacity to enable people to support each other in older age and through changing life experiences.

For these reasons, cohousing is an option that should be included with the housing, care and support options currently being considered and budgeted for by commissioners and housing and social care providers. It offers groups the opportunity to self-organise so they can live as they wish, support each other as they choose and take a greater social responsibility for sustainability, as well as reduce energy costs and avoid residential and long-stay hospital care.

Mixed-tenure cohousing groups exist in the UK and interest in developing more cohousing is growing. Mixed tenure developments mean that it is possible for people from different financial backgrounds to work together to develop and benefit from a cohousing community. There are currently social housing grants available to assist community groups to develop community-led housing, including cohousing.

The UK Cohousing Network estimates that of the forty or so cohousing groups currently in existence in the UK, ten are working towards setting up cohousing developments for older people only, while others are intergenerational. Most cohousing developments offer accessible,

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<sup>1</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=KFmaqwbKCYI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KFmaqwbKCYI)

barrier-free living environments and new developments are increasingly built to Lifetime Home Standards. The Oxford Cohousing group, for example, has identified the need to ensure that disabled people are fully included in cohousing and their proposed development has plans to ensure this will happen.

The first older women only cohousing community in London, for women over the age of 50, is in the process of being developed by Hanover Housing Association with the Older Women's Cohousing Company (OWCH). This group has been meeting for many years and says that cohousing offers an alternative, supportive community for older people that will enable them to live in good-quality, well-designed, accessible housing in the community. The buildings OWCH members will occupy are being developed by Hanover for rent at socially affordable levels. OWCH have negotiated with Hanover how they will run the development as a cohousing community. OWCH has produced a fascinating, short video<sup>2</sup> about their unique project.

### **Challenges for commissioners**

The main challenge is that it is virtually impossible to quantify demand for cohousing unless and until a cohousing or community-led housing group is brought to commissioners' attention. The Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) Regional officers will provide information on community-led housing groups that it has contact with and the UK Cohousing Network is a vital resource for finding out about new and developing groups. These information sources are important for needs analysis, since some groups will not have contact with any other statutory organisations, particularly in their first year.

Commissioners cannot directly commission cohousing, since activities are bottom-up. They can, however, create cohousing-friendly conditions by acknowledging, in key plans such as the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) or Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA), that they will support self-directed or community-led housing groups. They can also actively encourage housing and community partners to support self-directed and community-led housing initiatives. For example, by encouraging housing and community partners to consider 'buddying' arrangements, including providing meeting places for community-led housing groups and offering low-level office support so their members can publicise meetings.

Given that the Localism Act 2011 is now being implemented, it is likely that groups will emerge who want to make use, for example, of the Community Right to Build and the Community Right to Manage and some plans could potentially involve services to support local vulnerable residents. Community Land Trusts are already well placed to do this. For example, the Glendale Gateway Trust in Wooler, Northumberland, already owns and manages a number of community assets including housing and a hostel.

Commissioners have to work alongside these changes in arrangements to support community led initiatives and it makes sense to prepare for them now.

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 wellbeing is well-established, but as Imogen Blood (2010)<sup>3</sup> suggested, when people with high support and care needs live in the right setting,

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<sup>2</sup> [www.owch.org.uk/owchpages/indexB.html](http://www.owch.org.uk/owchpages/indexB.html)

<sup>3</sup> Blood I, *Older People with High Support Needs: How Can We Empower Them to Enjoy a Better Life?* Round up. Reviewing the evidence. York. Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2010  
[www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/supporting-older-people-summary.pdf](http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/supporting-older-people-summary.pdf)

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. The same is true of cohousing according to the evidence so far from elsewhere in Europe and the US. Yet in cohousing people manage most of their support on a mutual basis.

## **Challenges for housing, care and support providers**

The challenges include:

- Finding the means to support those groups that are seeking sites and assistance with developing land and buildings
- Supporting groups that are seeking know-how and advice
- Supporting existing tenants or residents who want to find virtual ways to support each other, for example, through relatively simple technology.

An additional challenge is acknowledging that some cohousing groups will be successful and others will not.

Cohousing is not an easy or a quick option and a great deal of commitment is required from group members, who have to be prepared to meet regularly, learn a lot of new skills and do considerable research, as well as learn how to work together as a group. Most groups take between five to seven years, or longer, to develop a cohousing community.

## **More developmental challenges**

Lack of early development funds is a problem, particularly when group members are in the process of coming together and generating first ideas. Many groups do not have any funds other than those they generate themselves to meet together, publicise meetings and research and develop ideas. Help with some costs and in kind help is almost always useful. Hot off the press while this paper was being written, the Department for Communities and Local Government announced on 5th August 2013 that new funds are available for anyone planning a building project in their community including cohousing. £14 million is available up until March 2015 to help cover building costs, land acquisition and other costs for a proposed development of more than five homes. This is welcome and commissioners should engage with their local community led organisations to ascertain whether they are in a position to bid to the HCA and the Greater London Authority (GLA) in London. More information on the Community Led Project Support funding programme is available from the Homes & Communities Agency website<sup>4</sup>, and GLA at: [crtb@london.gov.uk](mailto:crtb@london.gov.uk)

It is a fine balance between helping and pushing. Most cohousing groups take a considerable time from having their first meeting to getting close to having something that resembles the group's plan for the future and which all group members share. It is easy for groups to lose touch with members and get pushed into a direction they are not sure of by a more powerful housing organisation. Having housing and other organisations as partners who respect cohousing groups' desire to be self-directing is therefore very important.

An illustration of how to develop the right sort of skills came out of one of the cohousing research workshops held in Newcastle in 2012, at which some potential cohousing participants explored their ideas with Gentoo, a large Sunderland and Borders social landlord, who were

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<sup>4</sup> [www.homesandcommunities.co.uk/community-led-project-support](http://www.homesandcommunities.co.uk/community-led-project-support)

also participating in the workshop. Both sets of people found that they needed to listen to each other much more closely. Gentoo staff remarked that they learned to rein in their enthusiasm and allow cohousing people to develop at their own speed.

Funds to acquire land and provide capital for developing buildings are available through several routes. First, developing housing associations, registered and social landlords may partner with community-led housing initiatives such as cohousing and apply for Affordable Homes Programme funds. Secondly, community-led housing groups can also apply for designated funds available to community-led initiatives from the HCA. In addition, there are banks and building societies who are prepared to lend to cohousing groups such as Ecology Building Society and Unity Trust Bank.

### **Co-operation and community self-help**

A growing number of communities have expressed interest in self-help solutions and co-operative ways of working, for example, by running local shops and taking over local pubs as community interest companies. It is likely that community capacity will continue to grow and it is possible that groups of tenants and residents will approach housing and social care providers to take on more roles to support people in communities.

Some rural communities already have vehicles to do this. For example, Community Land Trusts (CLTs) in some areas are looking closely at the needs of local populations, given the scarcity of public services to support older and disabled people, to help people stay in their communities.

Parish Councils and CLTs have developed cooperative affordable energy schemes for local communities and are also looking at other social and economic needs.

Gentoo Housing and Your Homes Newcastle suggested that some groups will emerge who are interested in finding alternative ways to support themselves who don't want to build or refurbish properties per se. Here, the challenges are having appropriate means and channels in place to identify such groups and working out with partners, including user-led organisations, how best to support them. Several communities were mentioned in Newcastle and Sunderland who might benefit from sharing telephone and email addresses as a starting point.

### **Challenges for social care and support providers**

Clearly these are difficult times to consider redirecting funds for social care and support services, or for identifying new funds. However, most people who currently live in cohousing, or are in the process of developing communities, are likely to use fewer resources than they would if they lived in ordinary housing. Moreover, people who live in cohousing say they benefit from being less isolated and from being able to call on their neighbours to help with shopping, getting to places and other support.

UK cohousing is still relatively young, but older cohousing communities in the USA and continental Europe have done a variety of things which suggest that people are prepared to continue to determine their lives. For example, some cohousing groups provide accommodation at the community-owned/managed common house for live-in care and support staff, with these services bought jointly by residents of the cohousing community. Other people bring care and support in as anyone else would in the 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.

## Conclusions

Cohousing is never going to be the main choice for everyone but there are clear benefits for commissioners and housing, care and support providers from having a niche that works for people who want to determine their living arrangements and are prepared to work as a community. They are unlikely, as a result, to need to consume many public services.

Community benefits from their cohousing are something many cohousing communities want to share with other people. Cohousing is not regarded as exclusive by the people who live there and there is virtually no interest in developing gated communities. Cohousing communities in the USA often get planning permission to develop because they bring wider benefits to poor local communities.

Cohousing sits alongside and complements a range of other community-led initiatives and demonstrates a growth of interest in community-led solutions, including social enterprise. From being the exception, community-led activity is growing. For example, people participating in the research workshops in Newcastle expressed their interest and community-led activity continues to attract interest.

The challenges for commissioners and housing and care providers are to adjust their ways of working so they facilitate community-led housing and other initiatives to develop and flourish. This means allowing groups time and space to develop at their pace and ensuring that fairly low-level and low-cost help and support is available when they need it. It also means a change in thinking so that everyone acknowledges a wide spectrum of community-led and self-help activity with perhaps the fully fledged cohousing community at one end and small, self-organising 'virtual' support groups at the other.

Creating the right conditions to enable cohousing and other activities to develop is partly about helping groups develop in the first place. Commissioners and housing, care and support providers can do this by being willing to listen, transfer knowledge and knowhow and give valuable in kind help, such as a space to meet.

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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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The partnership was made up of commissioners Rose Gilroy, Lynn Corner and Helen Jarvis from Newcastle University, Barbara Douglas from the Quality of Life Partnership, Vera Bolter, Mary Nicholls, Maureen Tinsley from Newcastle Elders and Moyra Riseborough from RRCA. The partnership is still meeting together and further developments from the research are ongoing.

## 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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