Introduction: Cohousing – Are We There Yet?

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Our Diggers & Dreamers guest editor maps the terrain of cohousing in the UK

This new publication from the Diggers & Dreamers collective is focused upon a look at how cohousing is faring in the UK and is a follow up to the previous release of *Thinking about Cohousing* in 2004. It is being issued at a time when there is a very keen upsurge of interest in all kinds of mutual and collaborative approaches to meeting housing and community needs, including interest at the highest political levels for how communities can take more control over their housing and neighbourhood ideals.

The fragilities and catastrophes of recent events in the property and finance markets have brought many concerns forward about how non-egalitarian and divisive the UK has become in its mainstream approaches to meeting social concerns. Largely through the long-standing persistence of the broad co-operative movement, a report promoting the alternatives from mutual housing opportunities was drawn up in 2009 for the Labour government by the Commission on Co-operative and Mutual Housing[1], which concluded how "many housing organisations now recognise the value of community, [and] are taking steps towards cooperation and mutuality....", alongside identifying steps that sympathetic organisations could take to support mutuality in practice. The UK Cohousing Network was a core member of the Commission, and the concept of cohousing features significantly in the final text. An egalitarian sharing of decision-making and the long-term benefits of new neighbourhood provisions remains at the core of cohousing proposals, and

they rightly can be assessed alongside other mutual formats for such strength and benefits. On the back of that report, a body of representatives from across the mutual sector has since emerged (representing housing co-ops, land trusts, tenant management bodies, local authority housing management organisations, cohousing groups and others) that is already achieving significant success in lobbying for new funds and development opportunities that could be targeted towards a variety of new mutual housing developments – whether this be co-ops, cohousing schemes, community land trusts', or others.

Such mutual values are clearly supported by the Coalition Government's present 'localism' agenda. This has been heralded as a complete shake up of local services and local bureaucracies and, ultimately, to be a means whereby changes to the built environment would be at the behest of local communities, rather than over their heads. Current proposals for new legislation have therefore included a number of innovative mechanisms to stimulate community engagement in the dynamics of neighbourhood planning and development. These include the much-reported 'community right to build' and the identification of local assets for community-focused purposes. There are also other high-level working groups examining how all aspects of self build / community build developments could be promoted in the future.

It is interesting to see how directly the Government has promoted its intention to receive ideas for its 'right to build' opportunity, including a web-page flyer (see right) on how local people might progress co-ops, or cohousing, or other kinds of community-led developments (!), and a new report on how to support communities commissioning all kinds of self-build projects[2].

What can be said about the current 'localism' debate is that it is certainly attempting to articulate a straightforward ambition: it poses questions about how to stimulate community engagement with the planning of local services, and how to gain community 'buy-in' for changes that could be proposed to the character of local places. The political rhetoric that has been flying back and forth to date has, however, been largely focused on contrasting views as to whether or not it this 'localism' will result in significant quantities of new house-building to help the nation's perceived

An Opportunity in the Making

The Government is planning to give citizens more rights to decide what is built in their communities, including housing, local shops and community facilities.

Proposals for the Community Right to Build are currently before Parliament as part of the neighbourhood planning framework in the Localism Bill. If the Bill becomes law any successful proposal will need to be:

- from a community group such as a community interest company or a community land trust, etc
- independently assessed to see whether the proposals meet specific key criteria; and
- supported by more than half of the community that vote in a referendum.

If you're interested in a community-led development you should talk to your neighbours to get an idea about what sort of development the whole community would want to see. You may also want to talk to your local council, housing association or other community groups. You may also find it useful to get advice from people who already have experience of taking forward community-led schemes.

To find out more about the Community Right to Build visit:
www.communities.gov.uk/righttobuild
for further information.

If your community group is interested in using the Community Right to Build and wants to be kept in touch, tell us about your plans at:

righttobuild@communities.gsi.gov.uk

For information on community led developments, visit:

Community Land Trust Network –
www.communitylandtrusts.org.uk

Locality –
www.locality.org.uk

UK Cohousing Network –
www.cohousing.org.uk

Action with Communities in Rural England –
www.acre.org.uk/our-work/community-led-planning

Confederation of Co-operative Housing –
www.cch.coop

shortage in supply, or whether it will just promote a rise in NIMBYism (and it does have some potential for either...). It has been less overtly engaged with what particular qualities will be central to such new developments, and less vocal about how to craft new neighbourhoods, as distinct from the numbers of new housing units or other new 'community facilities'.

It is significant, therefore, that an interest in creating new neighbourhoods remains persistent in the UK – certainly if judged by the widespread nature of cohousing groups on the ground and their plans for building new neighbourhoods. The UK Cohousing Network has a constant stream of contacts seeking information and advice, and regular requests are received from media sources interested in writing new magazine pieces, or in making small documentaries about the modern-day cohousing experience. There is a steady focus upon cohousing and other mutual housing philosophies from the academic sector, producing papers and dissertational pieces that relate cohousing's key characteristics to the British community scene, and making contributions to international meetings, like last year's comprehensive conference in Sweden. The option of cohousing provision as a choice for older people is being discussed and debated more and more by policy-makers, and specifically as an alternative to traditionally minded sheltered-housing or extra-care schemes[3]. Government departments have noted "a growing interest among older people in cohousing communities where they can control their own self-contained accommodation and live as a mutually supportive group with some common space". Cohousing has also now broken the barrier of being recognised in central mechanisms to provide public housing grants towards the costs of appropriate new development, and the first grant-assisted project has already been completed in Dorset.

Yet, putting such activities and engagements to one side, the actual creation of new cohousing neighbourhoods in the UK over the past few years remains very modest. The most identifiable successes have been Springhill in Stroud – completed during the time that *Thinking about Cohousing* was produced – and the development and occupation of the UK's first cross-tenure cohousing project at the Threshold Centre in Dorset. In the wings, there are the high-spec 'eco-projects' about to commence work on-site at Forgebank in Halton, Lancaster, and the LILAC project in Leeds, now also

with full planning permission and looking to be on-site this year. Other groups have remained persistent and focused for quite some considerable time – such as the OWCH group in London, or the development plans in Brighton – but it would not be honest to talk up the number of new UK cohousing neighbourhoods that people have been able to create.

There also continue to be other UK projects that commentators describe as representing cohousing developments – small neighbourhood housing projects that plan a shared use of facilities or land, or groupings of new houses that intend to maximise interactions between neighbours. The UK Network continues to hear of ideas to include 'three or four cohousing properties' within plans for a wider housing development, though by the nature of this scale they would not be able to create the cohousing dynamic in practice. At one level this is an encouraging sign of support for aspects of communal living within wider development plans, although at another it sounds like a confusion remains on what is identifiably unique to making cohousing neighbourhoods the viable communities they are. It is worth repeating that the core characteristics of cohousing neighbourhoods[4] are:

(a) Designing in order to create intentional neighbourhoods.

(b) A minimum provision of essential private and common facilities.

(c) A size & scale suitable to foster and sustain the necessary community dynamics.

(d) Cohousing residents having the final say about all aspects of their neighbourhood.

[See Appenix A for further details].

So, whilst this is not to be disparaging about all kinds of housing development that can help support sustainable communities, claims that very disparate approaches are, or will be, cohousing ones can still point to a lack of clarity for just what distinguishes the cohousing approach to that of other kinds of housing or mutual development. It needs to be clearly emphasised that the cohousing philosophy is very focused upon creating neighbourhoods – its promotion of collective responsibilities is not solely based upon a collaborative

approach to the building of houses, or the management of new homes. It is what the cohousing movement in the United States has memorably summarised as 'creating communities, one neighbourhood at a time...'. It is a philosophy that encompasses a focus on the quality of house-building and the physical setting for homes, within an embracive attention given to a whole set of interpersonal and shared community dynamics.

It might be hoped that the distinctive qualities which cohousing schemes routinely achieve – outcomes that are certainly not customarily found within mainstream UK housing provision – could be sufficient grounds for such schemes to be utilised more widely in UK building projects. If this is not yet happening because of a lack of practical information for fitting cohousing into the UK's context of contemporary concerns – such as how it can square with demands to help provide 'affordable' housing – then the chapters that follow should provide plenty to consider. Perspectives and information are provided on both historic and up-to-date considerations about the cohousing momentum in the UK, alongside observations about how the cohousing approach sits within the wider context of British housing, neighbourhood and mutual developments as a whole.

Finally a 'cohousing-centric' vision for the future is suggested, in order to set a challenge for making the process of creating this distinctive kind of neighbourhood just a little bit more straight-forward ... it would be good if building new communities didn't exhaust people and so stop them from enjoying the results!

Notes

1 'Bringing Democracy Home', Commission on Co-operative & Mutual Housing (2009)

2 'An Action Plan to promote the growth of self-build housing in the UK', DCLG and National Self-build Association (2011)

3 'Lifetime Homes, Lifetime Neighbourhoods: a National Strategy for Housing in an Ageing Society', DCLG / Dept of Health Publications (2008)

4 Abridged text taken from 'Thinking about Cohousing', M Field, Diggers & Dreamers Publications (2004)