Cohousing:
A conversation starter for how we want to live our later lives

A discussion paper by Moyra Riseborough for the Elders Council of Newcastle and The Quality of Life Partnership, part of Newcastle’s Age Friendly City programme.

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Tuning in to talk about self-determination

During winter 2011 and late summer 2012, several groups of older people, housing and social care providers, decision makers and architects met in Newcastle upon Tyne to talk about Cohousing. We wanted to test older people’s interest in cohousing and perhaps find a nucleus who wanted to start their own cohousing group. Could cohousing be a better choice for housing and support in later life?

The four meetings we planned grew to six, in response to unexpectedly high interest. Perhaps it was because our project coincided with more public outcries over failed care homes, or maybe it was the resurgence of interest in self-help and community-led solutions. Whatever it was, the conversations were peppered with a deep distress about old-style solutions for older people; the failures of community care and the dismal lack of progress in ensuring older people are well-treated in hospitals and care homes.

We found both professionals and lay people uneasy with the way society pigeonholes older people.

With our research participants, we found that some of the reasons lie within us. It’s too easy to sidestep difficult discussions about older age because we don’t want to think about our own plans, or lack of them. As professionals, it’s often difficult to start conversations with older people and their families about choosing the housing, support and care options to suit them, because the options are inappropriate or, more often, don’t even exist.

By trying different ways of communicating with people, we found we could start conversations in a new place. This helped people to voice feelings they normally wouldn’t impart. Through being more imaginative, e.g. encouraging people to take photos, make drawings and comment on flipcharts, we made it easier for people to visualise cohousing as a possible option for them in later life.
What is cohousing?

Cohousing is an intentional neighbourhood, where the people who live there make all the key decisions. People live in their own dwellings, but there is often a “common house” where people meet to share meals and socialise. It may have room for guests to stay and equipment such as white goods is often shared there. Co-determination and support are key cohousing principles, while living sustainably is also important, although not in every case.

What attracts people to cohousing is the promise of a better quality of life, a safe place to live and a “village-like” community.

It is certainly no easy option. Unlike other developments, people must form a cohousing group and learn to work together before they embark on finding land or appointing architects to design the buildings. Members have to be prepared to work hard to develop their group, talk through their ideas and make decisions together.

Consensus decision-making, not just majority rule, is the starting point. It takes time to get this right. Working together helps people form common bonds and encourages them to express their views. Successful cohousing groups need this level of engagement to continue once the development is occupied, as it takes at least three to five years, from the group’s first meeting, before members can move in to their homes.

Although still relatively young in the UK, with 14 developments so far, cohousing has been popular in Europe for twenty years, particularly in Denmark, where it was born in the 60s, fuelled initially by young professional families deciding to buy adjoining properties so they could share child-minding responsibilities. It later spread to Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, Ireland and, more recently, North America.

In Denmark, an estimated 8% of households are now co-housing developments, with shared facilities typically including gardens, maintenance and eating.

Interest in older people-only cohousing is something new. It offers many things older people are looking for, such as living independently in their own home with supportive neighbours, community spirit, affordable, warm and sustainable housing and control over decision-making.

Five lessons we learned

1. Older people want to support themselves as much as possible
2. There are better ways to consult and engage with older people – our conversations prove it
3. Younger and older generations can work together to develop communities, but younger and older people often have different interests and they need to be equally valued
4. Community and common bonds are as important as ever – they grow organically with a little help
5. Sustainability and affordable energy are key concerns – housing developers, planners and politicians should take note.

What about sustainability?

Most intergenerational cohousing developments prioritise sustainability. This may include growing food, water harvesting, composting toilets and different kinds of green energy.

Our research, along with discussions by the Older Women’s Cohousing Company in London, shows that older people are just as interested in sustainable living as younger groups, both to leave the world “in better order” for future generations and to reduce their energy bills.

But interpretations of sustainability vary. In the Newcastle research, older people’s views were split on initiatives such as growing food and community gardening rotas, which require greater time and physical commitments.

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

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It’s not all new-build and owner-occupier

Cohousing looks like any small housing development but has additional community facilities and may incorporate existing buildings.

It may be new build, it may re-use existing properties or combine new and old. Lancaster Cohousing in the UK, for example, has brought back into use an old building for use as communal workspace, while building new housing alongside.

Some groups in the Netherlands focus on bringing empty, old buildings back to life, including factories. In our research, there was great interest in doing the same. Several buildings were identified, including disused shops, Banks and industrial premises in the heart of Newcastle.

Many cohousing groups are started by people who raise capital themselves, by obtaining individual mortgages or using proceeds from a house sale. However, cohousing can be developed for any tenure.

Hanover Housing, for example, is developing social rented cohousing in England, notably with the Older Women’s Cohousing Company in North London.

The downside is that public funds are increasingly difficult to obtain. The Homes and Communities Agency has only a small budget for developing community-led housing, including cohousing.

“I want to live with people that I like and that I have something in common with.”

The research conversations in Newcastle chimed well with research that most people prefer to live in their own homes in later life, or move to independent, self-contained housing rather than sheltered housing or care homes. Many people liked the mutual support cohousing offered and said this would probably be a natural extension of relationships that develop between people over time anyway.

But they didn’t want to be constantly on call to provide support to neighbours. People also made a clear distinction between support and intimate personal care tasks:

“It depends on who it is. I wouldn’t want anyone in my family to help me dress, but a friend... yes, possibly”.

A hot topic of conversation was heating costs, closely followed by transport and how to get around.

Residents of rural areas had different views to their urban cousins. While town dwellers said their ideal neighbourhood should have a wide range of services, shops in walking distance and good public transport, people who lived in the country had lower expectations and were used to travelling further.

They also expected higher heating and living costs, particularly if they lived in locations without mains gas. However, everyone wanted to reduce energy costs and their impact on the planet, if possible.

The importance of community

Community was mentioned by everyone. In one conversation people talked about the negative side of growing older:

People said that while they were members of communities of shared interests, they weren’t necessarily members of a community where they lived. As friends and family members died, the sense of community changes. Communities of interest were more important to many than community of place.

However, Chinese Elders in Newcastle highlighted the importance of being in close proximity to each other, so as they get older and find it harder to get around, they can provide mutual support.

They could see cohousing as providing the “housing with support” they have been talking about for some time, allowing people to be together when they want, but also have privacy.
**Introducing co-support ideas**

- **Less is more.** Use a mixture of short bursts of information, at different times, in mixed media. Give people too much information in a block and they will be inhibited from expressing themselves.
- **Use plain-language factsheets.** We sent these out in advance, but also had copies available on the day. They included links and references to key sources of information, for optional further reading.
- **Multimedia presentations,** including video clips, come across well. There is a lot of easily accessible information out there. We found some great clips on YouTube about cohousing projects in the UK and North America.
- **Images** help people visualise. We displayed photographs and plans of cohousing developments in Europe and North America, again with links to further information.

People responded according to their expectations and experiences of life, ageing, housing and so on. In other words, people naturally bring their life experience with them. People need time to discuss their ideas.

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**Planners and non-planners**

It was clear from the conversation workshops that people are divided into planners and non-planners.

To some extent this is simply a personality difference, although having a steady, good income and a stable lifestyle makes it easier for some people to plan, while others find it difficult because of events such as illness, unemployment and upheavals in their lives.

Those people who like to plan are more inclined to participate fully in discussions on cohousing, but by using a variety of methods to involve people, from drawings to role-plays, everyone can engage.

Finally, we took care to report back to people. This is often a reason why people report a bad experience with a consultation exercise.

“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.”

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**Making space for ideas**

A few “ideal” cohousing developments, as imagined by groups in our workshops.
What older people want

What older people said they wanted chimes well with previous research:

- Private living space, but the opportunity to socialise regularly with others
- Light, airy rooms that are well-insulated, easy to keep warm and well-ventilated
- At least a two-bedroom property
- Easy to use, affordable heating and energy
- Secure neighbourhoods and safe properties
- Good design, especially accessible features, such as well-designed kitchens and bathrooms
- To continue to connect with social support networks and leisure and cultural activities

Changes in culture: Working with community-led housing groups

For commissioners, housing developers and others interested in working with community-led housing groups, there are some specific lessons:

- Community led housing groups take time to develop and must develop their own core
- Developers and social housing organisations need to be clear about what they’re offering. What is in it for them and the cohousing group? What are the different options?
- Housing organisations have to pass on their skills and knowledge to the cohousing group, rather than do things for them, and have a clear plan on roles and responsibilities
- Housing professionals should be patient with cohousers, who need to learn a new vocabulary of housing concepts. It takes time to speak the same language.
- Address realistic concerns about local lettings policies, allocations and balanced communities. The UK Cohousing Network has a bank of information about how cohousing works in practice.

Easy changes for social housing

There are practical and easy changes that social housing providers can make, such as including a space on their application forms where people can express interest in cohousing or co-operative housing. They can also be more proactive in providing information on the subject.

The benefits of cohousing to older people can easily be highlighted. Older people who don’t want to move away from their localities, for example, but whose homes are unsuitable as they age, could join forces to turn an old redundant building into apartments, creating their own supportive neighbourhood. In the right circumstances, providers and older people can do this together.
Community leaders may need to do less leading and more facilitating if they are serious about promoting and enabling self-help. There are important lessons to be learned from cohousing groups on sharing responsibility and inclusive decision making.

The challenge for us all, as we get older, is to keep an open mind.

Cohousing will not appeal to everyone. It is a choice and if more cohousing developments start to appear, that choice will widen.

The evidence from our workshops, along with other published research, proved to us that cohousing has a greater potential appeal than we first thought. More people liked the idea than disliked it and there were some who actively wanted to pursue it, including some who had never come across the idea.

This suggests that there are many potential cohousers out there amongst older people. It also shows a clear distinction people who welcome community living and those who have decided, regardless of age, that sharing with others in a supportive environment is not for them.

This idea of co-support without moving from one’s neighbourhood was a popular one and there is room to grow the idea some more. For example in the United States, Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs) are becoming popular among people who want to help each to live as long as possible in their local communities.

“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 have a say.”

Trusts have been formed by groups to help them purchase services together. Intergenerational and co-operative models of care and support are also being explored in the UK and in Europe.

Some older people say it’s too late for them to start developing a cohousing community because they are unlikely to be able to see it through from start to finish. Some just don’t want to give the time, but there are others who are not put off by the extended time commitment and who could see the benefits clearly.

The prospect of meeting regularly, even after properties are built, is not welcomed by people who like more private lives. The American model, where residents share maintenance and other site work (albeit with less physical activities for those less mobile) appeals to some people, yet puts others off completely.

But the principles of supporting and looking out for each other (within boundaries) and living near the people you choose, are popular. When asked to describe their ideal living environment, this
**Examples of UK cohousing projects**

**Lancaster Cohousing, Halton, Lancaster**
www.lancastercohousing.org.uk

An intergenerational, sustainable development, now almost completed, offering affordable homes for sale. Ecological values are to the forefront, with features including shared car ownership and communal workspace/office space as well as a common house.

**LILAC, Leeds**
www.lilac.coop

LILAC (Low Impact Living Affordable Community) is an intergenerational development which has just been built. It has a major emphasis on sustainability. The group benefits from being a Community Land Trust and the first Mutual Home Ownership Society in the UK. Land ownership is held in common by the land trust and homes are leased to residents through a bond. Mutual arrangements for mortgages keep costs low but the City Council has also supported its development.

There is considerable interest in LILAC across the UK. 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://wales.party.coop/2012/03/20/a-co-operative-agenda-for-welsh-local-government

**The Older Women’s Cohousing Company (OWCH). Barnet, North London**
www.owch.org.uk

The UK’s first older people-only cohousing group has recently won planning permission to develop a 25 flat, mixed-tenure project.

OWCH says it is a group of twenty or so women, almost all of whom currently live alone, from a variety of backgrounds and cultures, with ages ranging from the mid-fifties to eighty. They say that being part of a group of friendly neighbours who look out for each other is the best way to stay self-dependent and active as they get older.

**Further information and links**

**Websites**

**UK Cohousing Network**
An information hub about UK cohousing.
www.cohousing.org.uk/category/8/71/senior-cohousing

**Community Land Trusts national network**
http://communitylandtrusts.org.uk

**Homes and Communities Agency**
www.homesandcommunities.co.uk

**Vivarium Trust**
A pioneer older people’s cohousing group in Scotland.
www.vivariumtrust.co.uk/index.php/about-vivarium

**Beacon Hill Village**
A self-governing senior community in Boston, United States.
www.beaconhillvillage.org

**Village to Village Network**
Information hub for the “Village” movement (senior cohousing) in the United States.
www.vtvnetwork.org

**Video**

**Cohousing in Canada**
An overview of the cohousing movement in Canada.
www.youtube.com/watch?v=VfdkhdBUBUw

**Senior cohousing in Colorado, United States**
The Silver Sage senior cohousing project in Boulder, Colorado.
www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ekrhoefn3g

**Lancaster Cohousing, UK**
A video update from Lancaster Cohousing.
www.youtube.com/watch?v=GMMzm8rdvJo

**Reports**

**Senior cohousing communities – an alternative approach for the UK?**
An overview from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

**Housing an Ageing Population: The Extra Care Solution**
Report commissioned by the Housing LIN.
www.housinglin.org.uk/_library/Resources/Housing/Support_materials/
Other_reports_and_guidance/Housing_an_Ageing.pdf