

Our mutual friends

'Cohousing' may be an unusual way of living, but it's catching on as a way of life, with multiple benefits for the environment, older people and society at large, writes **Sophie Radice**

Imagine living in a rural location with the support and social benefits of an extremely close-knit community whilst retaining your own living space and independence. This may sound like the perfect rural village, but add to this a conscious commitment to living as a community, some shared facilities and a rota of duties such as cleaning, weeding and childcare, and you are approaching a description of 'cohousing'.

The cohousing way of life started in Denmark in the 1970s and today has been adopted by as many as one per cent of the Danish population. In other European countries and in the USA there are many established cohousing communities and more in various stages of development. In the UK, this type of community is becoming an increasingly popular solution to the alienating effects of modern life. There are an estimated 25-30 cohousing communities in the UK, with another 60 or so groups emulating the cohousing model.

Cohousing describes a group of households, each with a self-contained home, which share certain activities, such as bulk-buying of food and goods, shared chores and decision-making. The cohousing way of life can also have many benefits for the environment as many communities are created around shared ecological ideals such as green building techniques, organic gardening, recycling and biomass heating.

Cohousing is often based on owner-occupation, but some schemes are housing association-owned, with members paying rent. Two cohousing communities in the UK have been self-financing, designing and building their homes from scratch. What distinguishes cohousing from other housing models is communal living. New members are approved by the existing group and commit to a way of life that may seem strange to many

people, but which has manifest benefits, particularly for the young and the elderly.

It's a family affair

Cohousing offers many benefits for families – children can enjoy the freedom of secure (and often vast) play-space, while mums and dads can share parenting tasks and avoid the often isolating effects of caring for pre-school children. Older and single people can also find companionship and mutual support in such communities.

As Sarah Berger, who lives on a cohousing scheme in East Sussex along with 22 multigenerational households, explains: 'You can be as sociable as you like, you will always find someone to talk to or share activities with, but you can also withdraw into your own completely separate environment.' She continues: 'When I was diagnosed with breast cancer five years ago, I immediately had a group of six women in my sitting room opening the brandy. There were offers from people to stay the night, there was a rota to take me to chemotherapy and a rota for bringing me soup.'

Sarah is co-ordinator of the UK Cohousing Network (www.cohousing.org.uk) and first got involved with the setting up of a new community 15 years ago with a group of close friends. As they got more serious about living together, they visited existing communities, wrote a manifesto of what they wanted to achieve and started looking for sites. As part of their fact finding, they visited the Old Hall Community at East Bergholt in the Stour Valley – a sixteenth-century manor house with 70 acres of land that is now home to 40 adults and 15 children. Set up in the 1970s, residents eat together at mealtimes and commit to 12 to 15 hours a week to benefit the

community. Old Hall has livestock and allotments to grow fruit and vegetables, and is built on the shared aims of being environmentally friendly, self-sufficient, organic and committed to recycling.

Postlip Hall is a similarly long-established cohousing group in the Cotswolds. It is another breathtakingly beautiful historical building, mostly Jacobean, which has been divided into eight separate 'living units', each with its own front door. Postlip Hall residents don't eat together formally, their main focus being the sharing of the 15 acres, pond, stream and kitchen garden that everyone contributes to maintaining.

The Community Project eventually found a 1930s hospital in 23 acres of land, into which the first residents moved over ten years ago. While not being as picturesque a setting as some of the well-established cohousing groups, the old hospital was ideal for converting into light and cosy separate units, with space for a very big common house. This common area is used for group meals, parties, meetings, a laundry room, sitting area and children's playroom, and is one of the main characteristics of cohousing, along with participation by residents in the original design of the community, a commitment to consensus decision-making and management by residents themselves.

Sarah Berger stresses that cohousing is not a utopia. 'There are many meetings, a lot of joint projects and responsibilities, and everybody has to do their share. If people feel that consensus decision-making would be difficult or would be too much of an investment of time or energy, cohousing is probably not for them.'

The next generation

The cohousing principle is expanding beyond the idea of converting an existing building into separate units with a common space. Springhill, in

Stroud, Gloucestershire, is the first new-build cohousing site in England. Five years old, there are 75 residents, with all householders acting as directors and shareholders in the cohousing company. The houses closely follow Danish cohousing design principles, with photovoltaic solar electric generators on the roofs, super-insulated walls and a sustainable drainage scheme, as well as the grouping of the houses around a large common house.

Max Comfort, 64, has been involved in the project from the first stages of finding land, getting planning permission and finding builders willing to take such a big project on.

'My wife and I have always been interested in mutuality. When we lived in London we lived next door to people we had never spoken to, however we knew that the commune experience of either total chaos or strict belief-led living was not for us either. Cohousing made sense to us on many levels. It is practical: you share resources, bringing living costs down; social: the eating together four times a week and being part of a cooking rota is full of laughs; and, finally, because we are independent, we don't have to give up on our own life and home.'

Max Comfort admits that the meetings and sub-meetings are probably the most difficult aspect of large, mixed groups, but he sees cohousing as the model for future living. 'At the moment, cohousing is only open to those that can buy into a community (although we have some property for rent at Springhill), but with the help of Community Land Trusts – a mechanism for the ownership of land by the local community in which land is taken out of the market and separated from its productive use so that the impact of land appreciation is removed – the cost of the land would be taken out of the deal and would make new cohousing builds much more possible



Top: The residents of The Community Project hold a communal workday every month
Above: Teatime in The Community Project's spacious common house

for local people to initiate and develop. It would be extremely interesting to have mixed-tenure and mixed-income cohousing developments and I know that many councils and governments are looking into this as a way forward for affordable local housing.'

Supporting older people

Elements of the cohousing model are also seen as a way to tackle Britain's ageing society. Between 1962 and 2001 there was an increase in the population aged 65 and over of 51%. As



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family and social networks change and divorce rates rise, more people will end up living alone in later life. Baroness Julia Neuberger recently wrote in *The Independent* that 'we are deeply unimaginative about older people's living arrangements. We have sheltered housing and a bit of assisted living but in the US and much of Europe, they have cohousing – a sort of commune for grown-ups providing mutual support and allowing older people to choose whom they want to live with.'

Housing needs for the over-fifties can no longer be equated with a need for care and support, leading to traditional models of sheltered housing being replaced by communities such

– a café, restaurant, library, arts and crafts rooms, and a fitness suite – and a 42-bed residential care home, 'The Oaks'.

Many residents make a 'preparatory' move to Hartrigg Oaks because they wish to control how their future care needs would be met whilst they were still fully independent and didn't need any special care. For some, this was in part so that others could not 'take over' the management of their lives, should they become less independent, and in part for their own peace of mind. Some had been keen to lessen future pressure on children and other relatives, should their health start to fail.

Tony Dale, 80, has lived at Hartrigg Oaks with his wife since it opened and



Above: The Community Project residents
Left: The houses in Springhill, Stroud, Gloucestershire, closely follow Danish cohousing design principles
Below: Members of The Community Project mending fences on a workday

as Hartrigg Oaks. Set in the garden village of New Earswick, near York, this is the UK's first Continuing Care Retirement Community and was developed by the Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust in 1998. Non-profit making, it is intended to support an active and independent retirement by offering high-quality private accommodation as well as communal facilities, alongside extensive care and support services if they are needed. Services are provided using a financial model unique in the UK, pooling residents' fees to create a shared resource to fund care and support. The objective is to achieve a balance between those residents who need care and support and those who do not make many demands on its care services. Hartrigg Oaks must therefore try to ensure that it has the right 'balance' of residents, and appeals to the 'young-old', who anticipate living independently for some years to come.

The scheme consists of 152 bungalows, built to Lifetime Homes standards, clustered around a central complex housing communal amenities

although neither of the couple has needed care, both are happy to know that it is there should they need it. 'When people ask what it is like living at Hartrigg Oaks, I tell them to come and have a look,' he says. 'The bungalows are really spacious and have fantastic living areas. There are always activities and groups set up by the residents, and you can eat at 'The Oaks' if you want, where the atmosphere is great.'

Tony says that some people have criticised the community for being 'an old people's ghetto', but he says that description couldn't be further from the truth. 'There are always grandchildren and children visiting and cycling around the grounds or swimming in the pool. As this is a place that all the residents very much choose to live in, there is no sense that anyone feels that they have been 'put' here against their will. In fact, places at Hartrigg Oaks are so highly sort after that any place that becomes available is always snapped up. We feel so lucky to live in such a wonderful community.'

