

# COHOUSING

Alan Heeks explores why cohousing can radically reduce your carbon footprint – and make you happy.



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Imagine a lifestyle that is really sustainable for people and the planet. What would it look like? Low environmental impact of course, but what about human needs? Many of us want some sense of neighbourhood, and our independence. We want comfort, fun, affordability – and a clear conscience.

Cohousing is a form of housing provision which can enable all this. It's little known in the UK, but well proven in Scandinavia where it started, and now in North America. Whereas communes and bender settlements may be low impact but only suit the dedicated few, co-housing is a form of sustainable living with much wider appeal. In Denmark, where it started, 5% of all households are in cohousing communities.

#### WHAT IS COHOUSING?

The key features which define a cohousing project are:

- ▶ The combination of self-contained dwellings with shared facilities: every home has its own living and sleeping space, kitchen and

bathroom, and alongside this is a common house, with a large room and kitchen for shared meals, parties, meetings, and maybe guest rooms, workshop, playroom, laundry.

- ▶ Cohousing projects are developed and managed by the residents, with the site freehold held in common ownership.
- ▶ The layout and scale of projects creates a sense of neighbourhood and informal community: a cohousing cluster is usually 10-30 dwellings, and cars are kept to the edge of the site.

Many people want to keep their independence, have their own front door, but combine this with mutual support and a sense of neighbourhood. Cohousing is a brilliantly simple way to have your cake and eat it. It is very different from housing co-operatives or intentional communities, which require a more communal approach than most of us want.

#### LIFESTYLE ENERGY USE

It's clear that there will be major problems in the supply and cost of oil and gas within the next few years. We urgently need major cuts in carbon emissions (e.g. 60%) yet the UK and others struggle to achieve even minor cuts. Housing and related issues like travel and food represent a large slice of our fossil fuel use.

The technologies for low impact heating, insulation and so on are now readily available. The big challenge is that so much of our carbon footprint comes from lifestyle energy uses. As Jonathan Dawson's piece on BedZed in *PM49* illustrated so well, technology can only take us so far in cutting energy use. This is why innovations like cohousing, which can reduce lifestyle energy use dramatically, are so important.

Common sense tells us that we can live more affordably and sustainably by sharing resources between households: car-pooling, food growing, recycling are just three examples. Yet housing policy and house builders have been so focused on owner single occupied homes that they have overlooked this.

## COHOUSING & SUSTAINABILITY

Using and managing shared facilities really does create a sense of community among cohousing households. So does site layout which promotes informal contact, e.g. pedestrian streets or everyone collecting their mail from the common house. These features have a direct effect on sustainability: it is much easier to share shopping trips, outings to concerts, and to enjoy more of your social life onsite. At the Threshold Centre, the pilot cohousing project where I live in Dorset, we have audited our car movements at 14% of the national average.

Some of the technologies are also better shared: for example, biomass heating systems, which work ideally for a whole group of households plus daytime uses like work spaces and social areas. Shared food production on site is another common feature of cohousing: it's more fun to grow your veg together, it's much easier to keep chickens when you take turns tending them, and social life blends with reducing food miles.

## COHOUSING & AFFORDABILITY

The shared facilities mean that individual units can be smaller and hence more affordable. Sharing transport, childcare, food purchasing and production also help reduce living costs. Most cohousing groups have some units available for affordable rent.

The attitude of housing associations and local authority housing departments to cohousing seems to be quite varied. Some at least see the benefits of this approach, and believe that it is a valuable form of new housing provision for some households. The Housing Corporation endorse this, and have given grant support to researching cohousing, and at least one cohousing group.

## SOCIABILITY & NEIGHBOURHOOD

Cohousing groups become neighbourhoods with a high level of social support very easily. The fact that prospective residents have to cooperate with each other to create the project means that groups are already formed as communities before they move in. A commitment to some level of shared values is found in any cohousing group, and is enshrined in the lease

commitments, which all households, including affordable rental, will be asked to commit to. And the level of social and working contact means that people naturally help each other out and the sense of neighbourhood evolves.

Whilst these are qualities many of us want, certain groups especially value them. Cohousing started as a way of creating a safe neighbourhood for children, and the first cohousing project in the UK, the Community Project in Sussex, shows how well this works. Much of the recent growth in cohousing around the world has been in senior cohousing: focusing mainly on individuals or households aged 50+. The cohousing workshops at the Threshold Centre have confirmed how many people in this age group want a way of living which combines independence with a sense of neighbourhood, and also with living much more sustainably.

It is ideal if cohousing projects can include work spaces and shared enterprises, especially for parents with young kids or older people, who want their work, social and home life as close together as possible.

## COHOUSING AS ORGANIC, EVOLVING

I'm using these terms to describe how cohousing has the permaculture approach and values. A cohousing community evolves from its resources and setting. Because the residents lead it, each development is shaped for the people who live there. And this means it is much more likely to work with the special features of a site than ordinary developers, who don't live in what they create.

What a cohousing group creates is not just a physical place; it's also an informal community. Because the residents own and manage the freehold and the shared facilities, they can fairly easily reshape things to meet changing needs, such as young families growing into parents plus teenagers.

## IT'S NOT JUST NEW BUILD

Whilst it's true that most cohousing projects are new build, the approach can be readily applied to existing buildings or even existing neighbourhoods. The Community Project in Sussex is a conversion of a redundant rural mental hospital. One project in Denmark is a creative re-use of an old factory, where the main factory building



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has become a covered pedestrian street with a terrace of houses on each side, all within the existing shell. In Oakland California, redundant warehousing was converted to create retail space below and cohousing above, bringing new life into a rundown area.

There are also examples of cohousing evolving from existing neighbourhoods, with little need for building conversion. In one American project, friends started buying adjacent houses in a cheap neighbourhood, then removed the fences between the gardens, and then clubbed together to buy a house which became the shared common house. Some of the elements of cohousing, especially shared meals, shared transport and support, could be applied to neighbourhoods in any location.

### THE COHOUSING MOVEMENT


Cohousing evolved in 1960s in Denmark: its growth has been helped by government policy support, recognising its social and environmental benefits. Cohousing developments can also be found elsewhere in Scandinavia, and increasingly in the Netherlands and North America.

In the UK there is rapidly growing interest in cohousing, with new groups forming, and many individuals keen to join a project. Cohousing is also attracting high interest from policy makers and the media. For example, a University College London report in 2006 highlighted cohousing as a way to offset the heavy resource use of the rapidly growing number of single-person households, and this report was well featured by the BBC and national press.

There are two established cohousing projects. Springhill in Stroud is a new-build scheme of 32 units on an urban site, completed in 2004. The Community Project is a conversion of a former rural hospital site in Sussex, completed in 2000. In Dorset, the Threshold Centre is creating a cohousing scheme and education centre based on a mixed use re-development of existing buildings.

The UK picture is however not all rosy. Many groups have found it difficult to get a project established, and some have given up after several years of hard work. The main problems are:

- ▶ Whilst planning strategies at all levels call for more sustainability, most planning officers and their policies don't recognise the special benefits of cohousing, and may feel that its focus on sharing resources and lifestyle cannot be defined by planning conditions.
- ▶ Buying a site in competition with developers is extremely hard: sites are scarce, hugely expensive, and sell very quickly. It is not easy for a cohousing group to raise finances and make a commitment in the time available.
- ▶ Knowhow and professional services to help cohousing groups get started are very limited in the UK.

The UK Cohousing Network is the key group in the UK. It is seeking to address these questions, though with extremely limited resources. One key area is in discussion with the Department For Communities and Local Government to help to achieve this is about hosting a symposium on how to take cohousing forward in the UK, and on planning policy and other changes 

### FURTHER READING

There are now several good books on cohousing. These include:

#### *Cohousing*

by Kathryn McCamant & Charles Durrett; £26.00

The best general book. Full of very useful case histories from Denmark and USA.

#### *Thinking About Cohousing*

by Martin Field; £7.50

A UK book on cohousing. Useful on some of the peculiarities of the UK situation, e.g. legal frameworks, etc.

#### *Sustainable Community – Learning From The Cohousing Model*

by Graham Meltzer; £12.50

This book covers cohousing in other countries, e.g. Australia, New Zealand, Japan and how the idea can be retro-fitted in existing housing stock.

All available from [green-shopping.co.uk](http://green-shopping.co.uk)

### RESOURCES

The UK Cohousing Network website helps individuals and groups to locate each other. The listing is currently incomplete – if you can help update it, please inform Dan Olnor of the Cohousing Network.

[www.cohousing.org.uk](http://www.cohousing.org.uk)

The Threshold Centre in Dorset has regular weekend workshops where you can explore the practicalities and experience cohousing for yourself.

[www.thresholdcentre.org.uk](http://www.thresholdcentre.org.uk)

The Springhill Cohousing Project in Stroud has paid, guided visits:

[www.springhillcohousing.com](http://www.springhillcohousing.com)

*Alan Heeks has created two sustainable education centres: the Magdalen Project in Dorset, and Hazel Hill Wood near Salisbury. He is also the author of The Natural Advantage which applies organic growth principles to people and organisations.*



## COHOUSING AND ECOVILLAGES



### COHOUSING WEEKEND WORKSHOPS

Come and learn the principles and realities with a fledgling cohousing community in Dorset.

July 13-15, September 7-9, November 16-18.

See [www.thresholdcentre.org.uk](http://www.thresholdcentre.org.uk) or 01747 821929

### THE DORSET ECOVILLAGE

Aims to create a major demonstration and education centre for sustainable living, including cohousing. Sites being evaluated. Seeking additional residents and professionals to achieve the vision.

See [www.ruralrenewal.co.uk](http://www.ruralrenewal.co.uk)