

# Why cohousing is good for people and communities – the evidence

Cohousing has been around for fifty years or more. However, it has only become a focus for action and research in Britain and Ireland in the last twenty years or so. Various arguments have been made for it. Here we highlight five key claims and the evidence there is to support them. They are that cohousing:

- reduces social isolation and loneliness.
- fosters agency, mutual aid, and well-being.
- adds to the supply of affordable housing.
- strengthens community life and a sense of place.
- can have significant health benefits.

This brief review of relevant research was undertaken because Hope Cohousing (HCH) needed to make the case for cohousing to potential funders and service providers etc. We have published it in case other projects also need to demonstrate impact.

Our focus is primarily on cohousing organised by, and for, older people. We conclude, with some confidence, that cohousing offers a route to what should be a better model of living in later life. In short, many people find that cohousing communities are good places in which to grow older. Connectedness and social participation contribute to a happier and healthier old age (Forbes 2002: 6).

Much of the research we draw upon to discuss these claims is freely available. Links are included in the bibliography in case readers want to follow up on the discussion.

## What is cohousing?

Inevitably, there are various definitions of cohousing. Here it is approached as a form of collaborative housing (Fromm 2012; Lang *et. al.* 2020). Such housing can be broadly seen as 'communities where residents collectively have significant control over their homes, the services used and how they live together' (West *et. al.* 2024: 2). Alongside cohousing, this category would include co-operatives and self-managed private retirement developments.

Collaborative housing and cohousing involve:

- *intentionality*. As Fromm's (2012: 364) discussion of collaborative housing put it, 'before moving in, residents have the intention to balance the privacy of their independent household with the creation of a community in which they will participate'.
- *a strong social dimension*. There is a concern with inclusivity and with social justice. Many cohousing projects place affordability, diversity, and equality at their core. They also emphasize sustainability. See Hudson *et. al.* (2019).
- *autonomous housing units and the provision of shared common facilities*. Collaborative housing involves a number of separate households rather than a single entity such as a commune. (Vestbro 2010: 21-22).

Cohousing can be seen as making a fourth component central:

- *active participation by households in the development, management, and life of the community*. Some projects described as collaborative housing include an emphasis on resident management, 'strong participation in the development process' (*op. cit.*), and collective activity. Most cohousing projects go beyond this and require a commitment to active engagement in these elements as a condition of joining them.

For an introduction to cohousing from a US perspective, watch Grace Kim's TED Talk – [How cohousing can make us happier \(and live longer\)](#).

## **1. Cohousing reduces social isolation and loneliness**

Our quality of life is influenced by the nature and extent of the social connections we enjoy. We know that loneliness and social isolation have a detrimental impact on people's health (see, for example, van den Burg *et al.* 2021; Glass and Vander Plaats, 2013; Glass, 2019). We also know that reviews of the research – such as that undertaken by Carrere *et al* (2020) show that communal living arrangements like cohousing reduce older people's feelings of loneliness compared with 'living in single arrangements'.

In cohousing projects, a reduction in social isolation and loneliness is achieved through joint activities, the use of shared space and physical designs that enable encounters with others (Scanlon 2021). An evaluation of the LILAC Cohousing project in Leeds, for example, found huge increases in talking with neighbours, borrowing things, exchanging favours, and feeling of belonging (LILAC 2021). Research into the impact of self-build projects showed a similar reduction in social loneliness (van den Burg *et al.* 2021).

While loneliness cannot be eliminated, it can be reduced. What many older adults need is 'simple neighbourliness' (Glass 2019) and informal mutual support (Hudson 2017) – and this is facilitated by cohousing. However, some may experience this in terms of a loss of privacy (Motevasel 2006).

## **2. Cohousing fosters agency, mutual aid and wellbeing**

*Cohousing provides a system of governance, an infrastructure, an economy of scale, and a culture of peer support, within which to solve some of the problems of 'excess' in a culture emphasising privacy and individualism. (Jarvis 2011: 573)*

Research around both elder and intergenerational cohousing projects shows that many of those looking to join them are seeking a sense of belonging and community and are pleased when they find it. They want to work with others to create a place where they look out for others – and have others look out for them (Hudson *et al.* 2021a). There is also some suggestion in the research, that communal housing is 'marked by an individualized form of collectivism' (Törnqvist 2019: 910). What is valued is that they offer a low-key and fairly autonomous form of belonging – and this applies to residents from their 20s to their 70s (*op.cit.*).

Alongside the sharing and mutual aid of neighbours, another central feature of cohousing is that their members are expected to work together to make decisions about how the project develops and functions. They are also required to engage in the daily round of managing of the scheme and getting practical things done like looking after the common spaces and garden. As Jarvis (2015: 11) has commented, engagement in such shared work and the 'participatory practices of self-governance rely upon feelings of belonging and a common sense of purpose'. Crucially this means they are creators and animators of the life of the cohousing community, rather than being customers.

Having a sense of agency and of helping others and being helped by them, can flow into their wellbeing. We know, for example, that:

*... living in a community characterised by higher levels of communication and mobilisation is positively associated with residents' self-rated health status, especially in elderly persons. In addition, it has been shown that high social support and participation in social networks alleviate stress in older people, preventing them from developing functional decline and mental health problems. A sense of community has also been positively related to a range of health outcomes and indicators of well-being, including life satisfaction and loneliness, happiness, and quality of life. (Carerre et. al. 2020: 24)*

At the moment we can say with some certainty, that cohousing has psychosocial health and various practical benefits. What we do not yet have is a picture of its broader health benefits.

### **3. Cohousing adds to the supply of affordable and sustainable housing**

Hope Cohousing is the first community-led cohousing project in the UK where all the homes are affordable and rented. However, many projects before it have sought to create affordable leasehold housing. Some have also included a significant affordable rental component – often in association with local housing associations. In addition, most have placed a strong emphasis on the use of sustainable materials and low ongoing energy usage. Three notable examples are:

**OWCH** (New Ground Housing, London) has 25 flats, eight of which are for social renters on assured tenancies. This project pioneered the provision of housing for older people and has been subject to significant attention by researchers. [<https://www.owch.org.uk/structure-of-owch>]. See Arrigoitia and West (2021); and Bazalgette *et. al.* (2012).

**Bridport Cohousing** – the UK’s biggest cohousing project with 53 sustainable, affordable eco-homes. Nearly half the homes (26) are available for social rent through their partner housing association: Bournemouth Churches Housing Association (BCHA). They specifically set out to foster a diverse community [<https://bridportcohousing.org.uk/>]. See Hudson *et. al.* (2019).

**LILAC** (Low Impact Living Affordable Community, Leeds). This project uses a mutual home ownership model. This seeks to bring ‘the bottom rung of the property ladder’ back within reach of those on modest incomes. Crucially it is designed to remain permanently affordable for future generations. The project had major support from Leeds City Council. See Fisher and Greenwood (2021); LILAC (2021); Chatterton (2016).

The problem faced by those seeking to create affordable cohousing is that using sustainable materials and looking to significantly reduce ongoing energy usage requires significant capital investment. Affordable and social housing is built down to a price. Funding policies and mechanisms are generally short-sighted. They do not factor in the lifetime and environmental costs.

#### **4. Cohousing strengthens local community life and a sense of place**

One of the interesting questions is whether the experiences and relationships involved in cohousing also further engagement with local networks and groups beyond the cohousing project. One of the great benefits of cohousing for older people is that they can maintain their independence to age-in-place (Wand and Hadri 2018). In some cohousing initiatives, members of the wider community come to the project. They offer facilities and amenities that local people generally can make use of such as meeting spaces, the garden, and shared activities. As a result, cohousing residents have an opportunity to engage with people beyond the project (Hudson *et. al.* 2019).

Beyond this, there is evidence that cohousing contributes to neighbourhood cohesion and civil society (see. One study of the experience of cohousing in Italy and England concluded that within the project, bonding social capital is generated. At the same time bridging social capital is formed with the wider community (Ruiu 2016). As a result, cohousing residents tend to be active in the wider neighbourhood. The same phenomenon has been seen in some US research. Berggren (2017) found that cohousing residents were more involved in 'civil society and electoral politics' than residents of 'conventional' homes. The suggestion was that members of cohousing communities 'develop capacities, confidence, and a sense of efficacy, and hone skills that facilitate participation in electoral politics' – and more generally in local activity (*op. cit.*). In some projects, it has worked the other way. People who are actively involved in local community activities have reflected on their own experiences and future lives and decided to set up a cohousing scheme. That is certainly the case with Hope Cohousing.

## **5. Cohousing (and collaborative housing) can have significant health benefits**

There is growing evidence that key elements of the cohousing experience help contribute to the continuing health of their residents (see, for example (West *et. al.* 2024). Loneliness and isolation are both positively linked to covariates, such as:

- depression,
- CVD,
- smoking, and
- diagnosed diabetes (Cacioppo and Cacioppo 2013).

John C Cacioppo and Stephanie Cacioppo comment that higher scores of loneliness and isolation are also

*... associated with poorer cognitive function. After 4 years, the mean scores of cognition were significantly lower than at baseline, although the mean differences were small. After adjusting for covariates, loneliness and isolation were associated*

*with poor memory among those low in education, and isolation was associated with poorer cognitive performance at follow-up. (2013)*

In contrast to approaches to old age that focus on independent living that transforms into care, cohousing and much collaborative living look to interdependence and mutual aid. One of the main findings of the *Collaborative Housing and Innovation in Care Report* was that:

*Residents of these schemes value and engage in community life. This is especially the case in... cohousing communities, where members often consciously choose the model because it offers mutual support and an alternative way of ageing. Even longtime residents of the cohousing schemes remained committed to regular social activity and shared events. Day-to-day interactions build social bonds that underpin mutual support when there is a need for it. (West et. al. 2024: 4)*

The process of 'ageing better together intentionally' (Glass and Vander Plaats 2013) that we find in senior cohousing and co-operatives, has been found to foster 'proactive, engaged individuals' who actively construct their experience of ageing (Glass 2019). The research supporting this conclusion is growing. As Julia Carerre et. al. (2020) comment:

*... housing is an important determinant of health and health inequalities, and cohousing is a potentially health-enhancing form of community living that raises many expectations for creating vivid social networks, communities and healthy environments. Various studies have provided a relatively consistent picture of the increased psychosocial health benefits of the community dimension and the emotional and social bond of this model of housing.*

Most collaborative housing generally stops short of offering the sort of care services offered by specialist provision e.g. around personal care. However, research into a range of collaborative projects during the Covid-19 pandemic, suggests that: 'in times of crisis, cohousing, in particular, has the potential to substitute for or complement other forms of formal and informal care' (Izuhara 2022: 17). There is some tension here (Tummers and MacGregor 2019) and it would be reprehensible if state and private care providers exploited the kindness of neighbours and placed a burden on them that those bodies should be carrying.

Senior cohousing acknowledges that older age:

*... begets more care, and therefore requires a set-up that can informally facilitate it. On the other hand, it is a model predicated on the belief that co-living improves well-being and therefore staves off, for some time at least, the need for too much (or formal) care. (Arrigoitia and West 2021).*

However, it will take time to confirm just how much cohousing staves off the need for formal care.

### **A new model of living in later life**

In the UK, as Arrigoitia and West (2021) have pointed out, older people's housing options have been limited. They can:

- remain living 'independently' in their home. This is what the overwhelming majority of people over 65 do (Adams and Hodges 2018)
- move to 'some form of institutionally-provided, pre-established retirement housing'. Examples here include retirement communities, extra care, or sheltered housing (Park and Porteous 2018).
- enter, often as a last resort, an institution offering residential and nursing care. (Higgs and Gilleard 2015).

In contrast, a growing number of continental European governments have encouraged and supported collaborative housing. For example, the Dutch government recognizes that:

*...social change has transformed the meaning of 'being old' for many – that it has gradually created a shift from accepting paternalism to expecting co-production, at least among the younger old. Opening up incentives to a self-managing model taps into a strong current in Dutch culture.*

*Sustaining self-dependence among the old is seen as crucially bolstered by social connectedness – for which 'clustered living' is an answer. (Brenton 2023)*

Sadly, there is little evidence that governments within the UK have properly understood this. Coherent and inclusive housing policies began to disappear in the early 1970s. This resulted in a major decline in public and municipal housing



(see, for example, Boughton 2018, Minton 2017) and a growing waiting list for 'social housing' (now around 1.2 million people). The associated development of the private renting sector led to a similar number of tenants living in deep poverty (Colenutt 2020, Ch. 1). Alongside this there have been:

- a growing paralysis in planning;
- the limiting of developments so that housebuilders can keep their profit margins high; and
- the 'financialization' of housing wherein properties are often approached as investments rather than homes.

Housing inequality and insecurity have grown (Spratt 2022), and we face a shortage of around 4 million homes in the UK. We need coherent policies, major investment, and wider adoption of alternative models like cohousing and collaborative housing.

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[Prepared by Dr Mark K Smith 2022, 2024]

Updated: February 12, 2024