

Fiona Sielski Waters  
travelling with



# Community Living in England

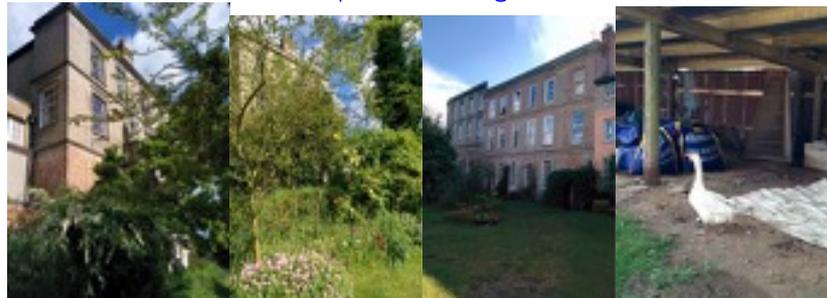
**On the road with Belgian Co-Housing  
Association Samenhuizen, exploring co-housing  
and intentional communities across England.**

**June 2016**

By weird synchronicity, I found myself joining up with a group of Belgians as they embarked on an epic coach journey, travelling across England to look at co-living. A space had only occurred on the coach at 5 am that morning, and I'd woken strangely early at 4 to see an email message ping in from Roland of the group. They included association staff, some living in co-housing, others wanting to start projects; architects; and also enlightened Dutch local council planners. Many of them had already toured Denmark and Germany, so England was next, while the EU controversy bubbled in the background.

## **THE OLD HALL COMMUNITY, EAST BERGHOLT, SUFFOLK**

<http://oldhall.org.uk>



The Old Hall is an enormous grade II listed building with 70 acres of rural land in Suffolk. Nowadays, there's about 40 adults and 10 under-18s living there with no particular ethos, but a general concern about the environment and a desire to live an egalitarian, co-operative and healthy lifestyle.

It all started when a group of friends had the idea of living together in a big house, and came across an old friary in the 1970's. It's huge! They finally got enough takers to join them and purchase it for about £75,000. An extraordinary evolution included much rebuilding and attempting to heat the place; food growing and animal rearing to be self-sufficient; cheese and cider-making; bee-keeping, fairs and festivals; runaway pigs and baby turkeys; pantomimes; and an ever-changing additional community of wwoofers.

"The magic of the place just seeped into me" is one quote in their book - *The Patchwork History of a Community Growing Up*. "It's like being married to forty different people" and "I can't think of anywhere else in the world I'd rather have grown up" are others. In June 1973 there was an ad in the Observer: "Co-operative/community evolving Suffolk. No alternative society. Old property. Agricultural land. Persons interested must be prepared to commit themselves ideologically and financially." Old Hall grew from there!



Farming is organic with vegetables, fruit and wheat, plus cows, sheep, chicken, geese, bees, pigs and cats. Nowadays, there's a serious heating system with a biomass boiler and ground source heating. It was reportedly very cold in the past! It must all provide an amazing natural playground for the children, with the benefits of a tree house and old boat (pictured above).



The Old Hall has enough space to provide a lot for its community. Here is the library and sitting area, space for cheese-making, a games room and the longest corridor I've ever seen for shoes and boots.



*A yurt through the trees, earnest discussions and broad bean shelling under canvas.*



What did I start to see as common themes as our travels expanded? A post room – as you can't help but bump into each other and have to engage, as someone said sagely. A drying area – and this is one of the old fashioned variety. But not all places had a tame baby goose who accompanied us around and, for a moment, considered whether to journey onwards with us or not.

Old Hall is run as a housing association with members being shareholders and having an equal say in the running of the place via consensus decision-making.

### **BRAZIER'S PARK, OXFORDSHIRE**

<http://www.braziers.org.uk>

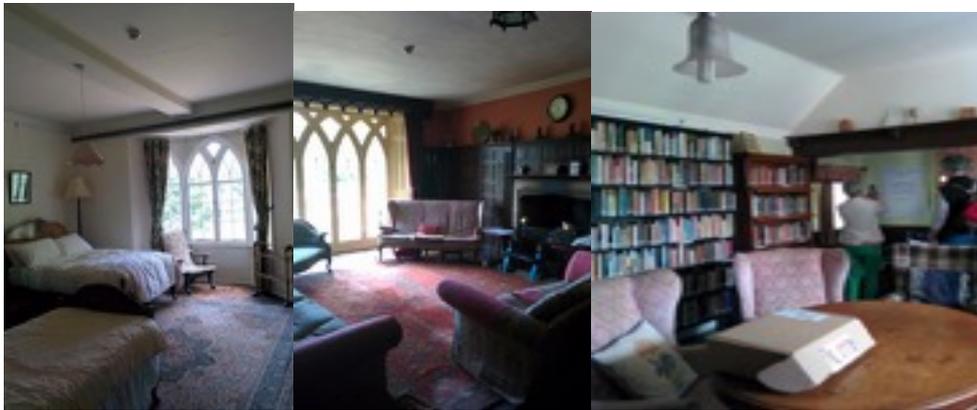
Brazier's Park is one of the oldest secular communities in the UK, and the childhood home of James Bond creator Ian Fleming. It's run as a community and residential college, and was founded as an educational trust in 1950. They say it's a continuing experiment in the advantages and problems of living in a group. They farm 55 acres of land, run courses and events, host weddings and are assisted by volunteers from across the world.

The grade II listed building is Strawberry Hill gothic, and there were around 11 residents when we visited who each volunteer 25 hours a week. That could be working in the office, on the land, or getting involved in maintenance.





There's a beautiful organic kitchen garden, livestock and 55 acres of land.



Guest bedrooms are on the first floor and there's a library – definitely on my shopping list for co-housing.



My wish list would also have a fire pit. Perhaps I'd avoid the 'social organism' chart where someone has scrawled 'another misleading chart?' Consensus can be hard to find sometimes!

## THE ORGANIC FARM SHOP & CAFÉ, CIRENCESTER

<http://www.theorganicfarmshop.co.uk>



Our lunch stopover deserves a special mention as it was stunning. They say: “The land is not ours, it belongs to the future and we should leave it in good heart.” They have a farm, shop, café, veg garden, textiles, eco venue, courses, a cottage, yurt and camping where you can go truly off grid. Delicious food and excellent espresso said our Dutch friend cautious of the weak English kind.

## SPRINGHILL CO-HOUSING, STROUD, GLOUCESTERSHIRE

<http://www.therightplace.net/coco/public/index.html>

<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2010/may/01/cohousing-community-stroud>



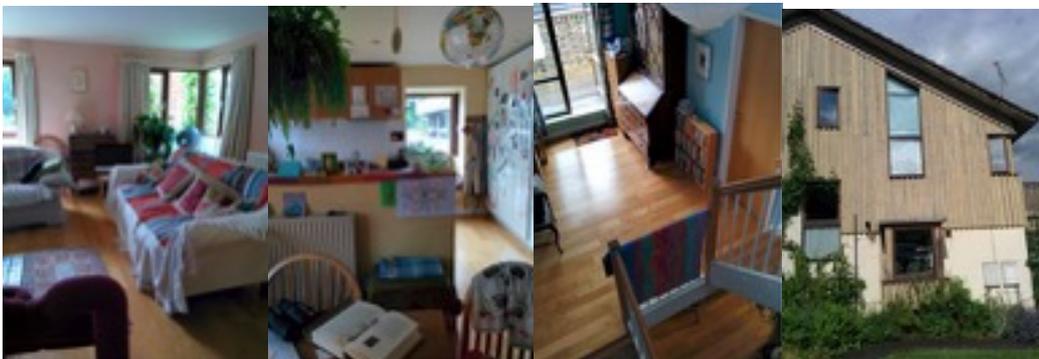
Then we moved on from the enormous old listed houses with acres of land to Springhill – the first new-build co-housing scheme to be completed in the UK. This was created by David Michael, who purchased the site in 2000 and formed a limited company. He invited new householders to become shareholders and transferred ownership of the site to the company. Plots were 30% per-sold to members when the land purchase was completed in 2001. The site received detailed planning permission

for 35 houses/flats in the same year, building work started in 2002 and the first residents moved there in 2003.

The original design was influenced by two books – *Cohousing* by McCamant and Durrett and *The Pattern of Language* by Christopher Alexander. The site and houses were designed by Architype <http://www.architype.co.uk>.



The 35 dwellings include studios, 1 and 2 bed apartments and 3, 4 and 5 bed houses. Some houses are pretty large. Most are owned, but some are rented and there are some lodgers in homes. When we visited there were 60 adults and 16 children. Car parking is located in one place to the north of the site and there's a pedestrian street. Homes are highly insulated, triple glazed and there's solar tiles. The site is on a steep slope so there's a sustainable drainage system with planted rills, cascades and a communal pond.



*One of the larger houses.*



*Common house work room, kitchen and games area.*

There's a three storey common house with games and work rooms, a seating area and kitchen. Everybody has to cook for communal meals once a month, and these are vegetarian - about 6 out of 10 are veggies. Less room for argument I expect.

There's no mission statement for the community and there is no vetting for the buying of homes becoming available. However, people are encouraged to come and visit to make sure it's a lifestyle for them. "You don't have to say why you want to join Springhill, you choose and people change, it's not set in stone but it's a willingness to know your neighbours" said one member. 0.5% of the sale price goes to the residents association. In the rich mix of it all, there's not enough parking, lots of cats which people either love or hate, two dogs, different parenting styles and a pantomime every year.

People are asked to contribute 20 hours a year to communal work and there's a monthly fee depending on the size of your home (65 pounds monthly for a 5 bed house and 20 for studios).

What are the best things about living here I asked:

The people here. There's always someone around. Different groups like a singing and women's ones. There's people of all ages from 6 – 80. There's time to get to know people and I love them all. We forgive people – there's conflict – it's painful and then we forget are some of the replies.



Springhill doesn't have the acreage of the big old houses but it has food growing, chickens, composting and a tree house.

### **CO-FLATS LANDSDOWN IN STROUD, GLOUCESTERHIRE**

<http://www.coflats.net>



The company is related to Springhill and remodeled this old chapel into 14 flats and studios with a common room, two garden areas, bike lock-up space and a wind turbine. It's super insulated and lots of light has been designed into it all. The smallest studios have a living/sleeping/kitchen area plus bathroom. The sofa turns into a bed at night. That can become a chore after a time, one man admitted. Another had no need of a sofa as he liked lying on the floor. Co-housing also allows for everyone's individualities.

### **CANON FROME COURT, HRERFORDSHIRE**

<http://www.canonfromecourt.org.uk>



Canon Frome is a farming cooperative and intentional community with a Georgian manor house, stable block and a 40 acre organic farm. It's run as a co-ownership housing association and there's about 50 adult and children in 19 dwellings of various sizes. They don't have a common philosophy, but there's a prevailing sympathy with green issues. The community was purchased from the local council, where the building was formerly a school.



Farming and food growing takes a considerable amount of time and help depends on people's circumstances. Members meet weekly and use consensus for decision making.



Now there's a wood chip fueled heating system and solar panels amongst the soil association approved food growing. Watch out for heat loss from the heating system pipes to the homes they said.



*A home in the stable block.*



*Communal dining room, grand entrance hall and larder.*

They use the N Street consensus method which they call a safety valve consensus decision making tool.

[http://bobroc.com/cohowebinar/pdf/E9b\\_N\\_Street\\_Solution-Oriented\\_Mtgs.pdf](http://bobroc.com/cohowebinar/pdf/E9b_N_Street_Solution-Oriented_Mtgs.pdf)

They aim to have a waiting list of people who want to move to the community and have visited a few times, and take on board that the farm and community entails quite a lot of work.

### **FORGEBANK CO-HOUSING, LANCASTER**

<http://www.lancastercohousing.org.uk>

<http://www.passivhaustrust.org.uk/projects/detail/?cld=35#.V4KyjVcyfd>



This is another award-winning new-build co-housing community developed outside Lancaster in the village of Halton on the river Lune, with workspaces in an adjacent mill. It started with a group of people getting together in 2006 and the site being purchased in 2011. Luckily for them a developer had gone bust. Construction started that year and was completed in 2013. It's a non-for-profit company limited by guarantee, with consensus decision-making.

There's about 65 adults and 15 children living in 41 leasehold passivhaus standard eco homes with biomass boiler, solar PV and hydroelectricity from the river. Homes range from 1 to 3 beds and they aim for shared-car ownership. They stress that people are buying into an intentional community and this is a big commitment, and not for everyone.



*Common house kitchen and dining area, plus room for playing as well.*

There's a common house with a communal kitchen and dining room, where there's vegetarian and vegan meals on offer communally several times a week. There's communal food stores, play areas, guest rooms, laundry and a bike shed.

Eco Arc designed the project with the residents. They planned with a 1,000 year flood plan in mind, but have had some flooding from the river in the lower areas.



*Walk way, laundry and food stores.*

## CAMPBILL PENNINE, WAKEFIELD

<http://www.pennine.org.uk>



This is an independent specialist college providing for young people with learning difficulties. Some live in and others travel from home, and there's a 58 acres site with farmland, animals and stables for land based learning, and a variety of arts and crafts in special hubs.

It is part of the Camphill Movement and is a non-profit making charity with help from both local and international volunteers.

The ethos of Camphill is the conviction that every person is more than their physical and psychological make-up; their essential spiritual being is unimpaired and whole. At the core it recognises the uniqueness of every individual.



*Workshops and basket making.*

There facilities are splendid with a craft hub with pottery, woodwork, basket making and weaving,



*Weaving and pottery.*



*Food growing, many animals to nurture and stables.*

The farm and gardens are worked organically and biodynamically, and they are about 50% self sufficient in terms of garden produce for about 75 people on site.



Staff and residents and volunteers live in five different houses – this an older one and the others more modern. This one had beautiful touches throughout and the environment is very important for the whole project.



Camphill Penine is not just a college for young people with learning disabilities, but a community which cares about its environment. Creativity and care for animals and the land is all key. It's an impressive mix.

### **LILAC COHOUSING, LEEDS**

<http://www.lilac.coop>

<http://www.lilac.coop/learning-from-lilac.html>

<https://www.transitionnetwork.org/blogs/rob-hopkins/2014-10/paul-chatterton-lilac-leeds-co-housing>

<http://www.yorkshireeveningpost.co.uk/news/why-lilac-co-housing-scheme-in-leeds-is-still-setting-trends-two-years-on-1-7196644>



As Lilac is the latest new-build co-housing project to launch in England, it's worth looking at how they did it in some detail.

Lilac means Low Impact Living Affordable Community and it calls itself the UK's first affordable, ecological co-housing project with 20 households and a common house in

Bramley, West Leeds. There's 12 flats and 8 houses centred around a pond and common house and outside deck. Around 36 adults and 13 children live here, with adult ages mostly ranging from 80 to early 30s, with no teens yet.

There's a shared launderette, workshop, play areas, allotments and green space, with the common house having a kitchen and dining area for shared meals, plus guest rooms and space for films and meetings.



*Lilac common house and downstairs area (kitchen at the back)*

It's run on a unique shared ownership model as a Mutual Home Ownership Society which is an equity based leaseholder scheme. The cost of the project is divided into equity shares which are allocated to members based on the size of their property and their income. The member buys their allocation of shares either on a monthly basis, in which case their payments are set at 35% of their net income, or in full on moving in. Members can take their equity with them on leaving, and the value of the equity shares is linked to average national earnings, ensuring the project remains affordable from one generation of residents to the next (source: Diggers and Dreamers). Lilac is committed to sharing its model with others and runs regular tours.

Founder Paul Chatterton was asked in an article:

But presumably in order for that to work, you need to make sure you have a mixture of incomes in there. If everybody's signing on or on very low incomes, it's not going to generate enough money, surely?

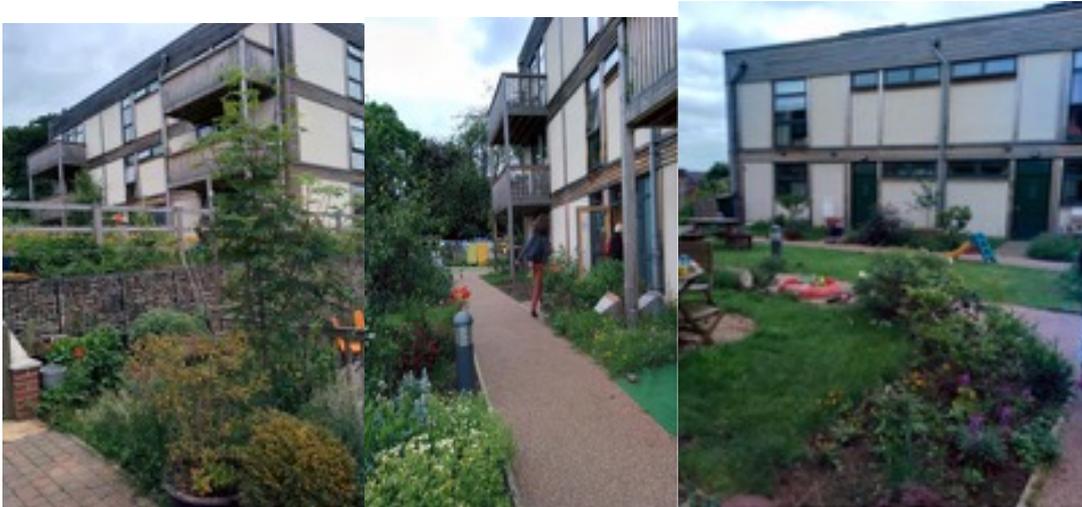
*"That's right, and we need to be clear that Lilac is what we call intermediate housing. This is that bit in the middle which is not very well served in the UK. This is defined as housing which is of greater value that would serve those lowest income centiles and it's more affordable housing than those who could afford to buy their own home. So it's the bit in the middle which currently is not being provided for in terms of the builders. OK, so we need more social housing, so we need to make an important argument that this should not take away from social housing.*

*"So what we need in a mutual home ownership society is people with minimum net incomes. What we do for each house type is place a minimum net income which*

generates enough money to pay for the debt associated with that house. They can be quite modest. For example, we've got a two bed on the site and the couple who live there have a combined income of about £15,000 a year.

*"Between them, that can be £7,500 each a year. So they're quite modest incomes. But between those incomes they can pay their 35%, that's enough to allow them to live in that 2 bed flat. So it's within reach of people on fairly modest incomes. But you're right, it doesn't service those on benefits because at the moment you can't accrue equity on housing benefit."*

Lilac created its own software model Dwell to cope with this shared ownership scheme as it's a complex set up to work out.



*Flats in blocks of 6 on the left & middle, two houses on right.*

There's:

- 6 x 1 bed flats @ 48 sq m.
- 6 x 2 bed flats @ 71 sq m.
- 6 x 3 bed houses @ 90 sq m (2 storey) and
- 2 x 4 bed houses @ 111 sq m (2 storey).

On the tour the build prices quoted to me were 77,000 and 66,000 pounds for flats, and 190,000 for a 4 bed house, including share of the land and the common house. There is no developers profit built in, which usually amounts to about 20 - 40%.

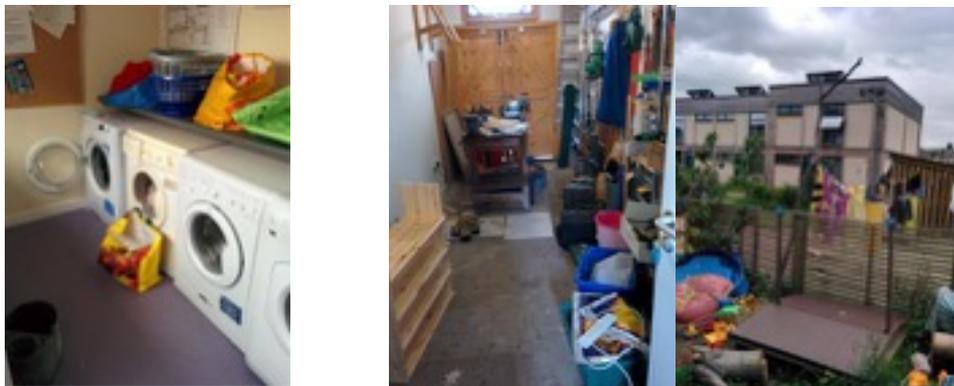
As with most projects, a group of 5 founder members looked at starting a community and, getting wise to the auction game, asked the local council to tell them of any sites they were about to auction ahead of time. They'd asked the council to gift them land and the resounding answer was no. But through talking to the council they found a site of an old primary school which had been empty for 7 years with some undevelopable land due to sewer pipes. This luckily made it unattractive for bigger developers. The council would usually expect to put 40-60 homes on such a space. The council agreed to hold the land for them until they had the funds in place.

Funding for the 2.7 million pounds project came from a 10% deposit via members, plus a 400,000 pounds government grant from the Homes and Community Agency (HCA) and a mortgage from the Dutch bank Triodos. As luck would have it a general election was looming and HCA had the funds to deliver before times changed. The land cost was 250,000 pounds. Initially the council suggested building 30 homes, but the group decided 20 was a better number.

The homes are built from straw bales and timber frames, with lime render via Model (<http://www.modcell.com>) and are super-insulated, high performance, low energy, passive homes, using locally sourced straw bales and hemp. This produces a zero carbon construction system. It was crucial that Modcell could store straw bales in dry conditions or they become compromised. They obtained a fixed price on the building work and the project did over run due to bad weather. When they came to the common house, they couldn't afford to build this using straw bale construction.

As Lilac had a grant from the HCA they had to conform to certain standards of sustainability. On top of the straw bale construction there is triple glazing, PV solar on the roofs and mechanical recovery ventilation systems.

Water in the houses is heated by solar as there's room for large tanks. Flats have small gas central heating boilers. One flat resident puts her gas/electricity bill for heating/water at 300 pounds a year and says she really only needs to put the heating on for about 1-1 ½ hours from 5 pm in the winter. More recently, builders such as ZEDFactory are promoting zero bills homes with even lower costs. Homes at Lilac are built to a level 4 building standard.



*Communal laundry, work room and outside washing lines.*

Homes are future proofed with easy to turn taps etc. and there's a lift in the common house.



*Central pond and deck, and cat climbing post (no cat flaps in super-insulated houses!)*

The central pond is part of a sustainable drainage system, there's water gathering from the roofs and sluices so there's never a rush of water to overload street drains.



*Allotments and polytunnel (in the area where building impossible due to large sewer pipe).*

There are 25 allotment plots and 5 of these have been given to local people. Unlike the larger farming communities we visited, everyone grows their own choice of food, rather than sharing the harvest.

There's a piece of open space land by the allotment which is open to the public during day time.



*One of the two car parks (for about 6 cars), the open space and tethered dog on ground floor flat patio.*

There are two car parking areas, with far less spaces than the council originally asked for. Some share cars, and of course public transport is better in cities such as Leeds.

One member said: "the possibility of living here outweighs the level of meetings!"



*Interior of a top floor flat and views. Each block of flats has a spare bedroom and bathroom for guests. A neat idea.*

### **What did I learn from the trip?**

Well the Samenhuizen bunch were very friendly and a real tribute to the sort of people wanting to explore community living. They serenaded me as I hopped off at the M20 junction before they caught the ferry back. They had many different experiences of their own. One lived in a big old house in Amsterdam with six different groups living in their own way. The town planners could see what a good way it could be to live, but knew some of their colleagues were very conservative. One community creator had brought her own architect to look at it all and another was starting a project for older people. There was trouble brewing with a few people in a newly built project, but I think and hope they had the personal charm and skills to overcome that.

While I admired the mastering and running of huge old houses with serious farming operations, I can see that you need a good size of committed people to keep it all running with a real love of the land. And large and inventive heating systems that work.

The new build highly insulated homes and modern common houses are so different. And yet also embrace beautiful green spaces, inventive natural drainage, play areas and food growing. Animals are a sensitive point everywhere it seems. That's a tricky one that needs discussing right from the start.

Sourcing the land is a heroic mission. As is getting local councils engaged and planners to share your vision. Plus funding the whole thing of course. So full credit to Springhill, Forebank and Lilac for showing the way.

And now we have more in the pipeline with Cambridge council supporting

<http://www.cambridge-kl.co.uk> and its 42 homes developing and selling now.

After an 11 year search, a group of mostly Londoners sourced an old mill site in Colchester, Essex and building is out to tender now, with just a few of the 23 homes still for sale.

<http://cannockmillcohousingcolchester.co.uk>

There's a project in Muswell Hill, London developing an old hospital site:

<https://cohousingwoodside.co.uk>

And Mandorla Cohousing is another innovation in Herefordshire as it will form part of a larger Bridge Croft development of 150 passivhaus homes designed locally by ArchiHaus and built in a Hereford factory. Mandorla will purchase 21 homes on a 2 acre plot, and will have a common house.

<https://mandorlacoho.wordpress.com>

Meanwhile, a community land trust succeeded in Bridport and they've achieved permission to build 34 affordable homes (from 1 bed apartments to 4 bed family homes) to a sustainability level of at least code 4.

<http://bridportcohousing.org.uk>

On my personal shopping list for cohousing:



*A fire pit for nocturnal star gazing.*



*Tree houses for kids (and adults)*



*Beautiful food growing areas.*

Plus workspaces and creative areas so people can live and create and bounce ideas off each other.

Building social engagement in with laundry and mail room. A colourful common house with library area, wood burner and sofas. Some good cooks (as I'm not).. the list goes on...

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