

# Housing Associations and Cohousing; How to create inclusive, affordable, collaborative neighbourhoods for older people.

A REVIEW OF HOUSING 21'S  
COHOUSING STRATEGY IN BIRMINGHAM











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“Cohousing offers residents a unique opportunity to participate in the design, development and ongoing management of their neighbourhoods. It fosters a profoundly sociable way of living.”



# Introduction: purpose of this review

This review is aimed at leaders and decision makers in housing associations who are exploring collaborative models of housing to achieve better outcomes and heightened levels of engagement with residents. This guide is a culmination of the insights and reflections generously shared by the members of Housing 21's leadership, management, community engagement teams, future residents, and expert focus group. We will be drawing upon the experiences of Housing 21 and other pioneering housing associations that have embarked on the remarkable journey of designing and building new inclusive and affordable neighbourhoods, hand in hand with their residents. However, along the way, we will also explore and acknowledge other collaborative housing options that have emerged and may prove more suitable for the communities at the heart of this multi-neighbourhood project.

It is 20 years after the first new-build cohousing scheme opened its doors in the UK at Springhill, Stroud. Cohousing has been adopted largely by citizens as part of the self and custom build movement. Yet, curiously, registered housing providers have largely overlooked this concept and its application for the social rental sector until very recently. Two years ago, Housing 21 embarked upon a ground-breaking social rental cohousing strategy in Birmingham, driven by several compelling reasons that we shall delve into during subsequent chapters. It is a bold initiative, one that promises to generate invaluable insights for other communities and organisations to build upon.

At the time of writing, Housing 21 is actively exploring various governance options for the cohousing scheme, considering the invaluable input of future residents. It is plausible that by responding to feedback from both communities and professionals a fully resident-led cohousing model may not be the desired initial or ultimate destination in each project. However, by sharing their progress with openness and integrity, local communities, Housing 21's staff, partners and advisors are creating deeper insights for resident collaboration in housing solutions.

# Executive summary

**Owen Jarvis, CEO**  
UK Cohousing Network

Welcome to our report on Housing Associations and Cohousing: How to Create Inclusive, Affordable, Collaborative Neighbourhoods for Older People.

In this report we draw upon the first 18 months of Housing 21's pioneering Cohousing Strategy in Birmingham to provide guidance for housing professionals and community leaders on new approaches to social housing design for seniors.

The report consists of chapters contributed by members of Housing 21's Focus Group for their cohousing strategy. This group includes experts in cohousing, coproduction, and ageing, such as academics and practitioners. Their role was to provide insight and constructive criticism to the Housing 21 team, including their architects and community engagement team.

In Chapter 6, Lucy Hale of Housing 21 provides the rationale and background for their groundbreaking cohousing strategy. In Chapter 7, Triangle Architect's Harry Randhawa reflects on the challenges and insights of co-designing a new scheme with local communities, particularly during COVID. In Chapter 8, Dawn Carr from Legacy West Midlands details the methods and practices of their community engagement work. In Chapter 9, Dr. Yael Arbel of Sheffield Hallam University critically assesses Housing 21's experience through the lens of co-production. Jim Hudson and Professor Karen West explore various collaborative housing models that

support seniors in Chapter 10. In Chapter 11, Abdul A. Ravat from Abbeyfield Society emphasizes the urgent need to address housing for seniors, especially within ethnic minority communities facing significant inequalities. He highlights the role of housing providers in opening opportunities for local communities.

As noted in the early chapters, cohousing's history is rooted in the practical utopians of the self and custom build movement. Housing 21's strategy applies this model within the regulated world of housing associations. Applying an existing method to a new environment is common among innovators, but changes and adaptations inevitably arise. Housing 21 is experimenting with applying cohousing to the regulated environment of social rental housing, and we explore this throughout the report.

We also consider how cohousing represents one of several new approaches to social housing delivery, addressing the crises of insufficient and inappropriate housing for our growing and ageing population. Cohousing helps address concerns about health impacts stemming from isolation and loneliness—all within the framework of sustainability. In cohousing, community is not just a concept but an action, facilitated by both physical design and everyday interactions. Senior cohousing schemes can foster a powerful informal support network, enabling people to live independently for longer, potentially alleviating the burden on the social care budget.



Interest in co-production within the housing association sector has grown significantly in recent years. Cohousing is a highly participative form of housing, with residents leading design, development, and ongoing management. Cohousing can provide the structure for giving power to residents' voices, whilst respecting requirements for good management in large housing organizations. As Housing 21's CEO Bruce Moore aptly describes, cohousing is akin to a "Grand Prix, formula one car" of co production. While it may not be viable for all housing, it can set a standard that inspires and influences all of their work.

For housing associations, charities, and community groups seeking to embark on their own cohousing strategy, we recommend two approaches that require clarity as to your starting point:

1. If you decide that you specifically want to create a cohousing neighbourhood, either find a pre-existing cohousing group to work with or recruit individuals who have the interest, intention, and commitment to create one within your geographic area or criteria for selection.
2. If you are committed to a specific community or target audience, engage with your community in order to select the most appropriate model of collaborative housing to meet its needs which may or may not be cohousing.

Our final chapter includes tools and models to guide the decision-making process for staff in organisations and future residents within communities.

We firmly believe each chapter in this report is well worth taking time to read. We hope it will encourage you and your organisation to embark on what we believe is a better way to design housing and neighbourhoods, acknowledging the range of collaborative housing options available. Remember, if you do set forward on this journey, you won't be alone; Housing 21 and its focus group will continue implementing their strategy and sharing their learnings, while the UK Cohousing Network and community-led housing partners offer support. We believe that cohousing as a movement is only just beginning in the UK and we hope you will be inspired by this report to join our exciting, innovative movement.



# What is cohousing?

Cohousing is an innovative approach to neighbourhood design. It places a strong emphasis on social interaction, active resident ownership and involvement. The movement emerged in Denmark during the 1970s as a practical response to a sense of growing isolation experienced in modern cities. The concept typically revolves around 20-50 private homes complemented by shared amenities like gardens, car-sharing, and a central common house that serves as a hub for communal meals, gatherings, and events. In Denmark it is estimated that 1-4% of its population resides in cooperative or cohousing arrangements. In the UK that would be equivalent to between 600,000 to 2.4 million people, which offers food for thought.

The underlying principle of cohousing is to strike a balance between enjoying the privacy of one's own dwelling while fostering connections with neighbours and the wider community, thus promoting resource-sharing, and reducing our collective carbon footprint. Cohousing neighbourhoods emphasise common social design elements to promote neighbourliness.

Cohousing schemes pay particular attention to social design and have formal decision-making processes that ensure responsibilities are met and promote a culture of inclusion. Informal rituals such as eating together several times a week, honouring anniversaries, sharing in gardening and other activities all play their role in building a community culture. Given the levels of participation required, residents share a common intention to live in this way. Even where allocations are being made within social housing, it is imperative that residents have alternatives so that living in cohousing is a choice and not the only option available. Equally, if circumstances change, residents need to be able to have the option to move without significant hurdles.

Some cohousing communities share a common theme or purpose such as housing for seniors, LGBTQ+, sustainable living or better housing for local people. Sharing a common purpose offers a focal point around which to gather in times of difficulty. However, this should not be confused with expecting to have a singular outlook or belief system. Embracing diversity within a community is essential and healthy.

## Cohousing is an innovative approach to **neighbourhood design.**





From experience we advise groups of potential residents to avoid holding expectations of living in perfect harmony. We know that people and groups are complex and change over time. So we advise people to accept and embrace diversity and change in groups as part of cohousing's rich experience. We can help point to a range of tried and tested communication and decision-making skills that through regular practice can really help, not only in cohousing but life more generally.



# Context:

## Cohousing in the UK

In the United Kingdom, the cohousing movement has experienced steady growth. Over the past two decades, 11 new cohousing projects have been developed alongside 15 renovations of existing properties, with another 25 schemes anticipated in the pipeline.

In the absence of long-term public funding, the cohousing movement has been pioneered by determined groups of individuals who have banded together as intentional communities, raising funds through cooperatives or limited liability companies.

**HOUSING ASSOCIATION  
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### New Ground

North London

Opened 2016

New Ground is the UK's first senior cohousing scheme for women over 50. Hanover Housing Association supported the Older Women's Cohousing Group to secure land and oversaw the development work.

The community consists of 25 self-contained 1-3 bed flats (of which 8 are for social rent and managed by Housing for Women) with shared communal facilities and gardens, managed on cohousing principles.







“It’s never been done before, and we will be completely running it ourselves. We are making history, and we are extremely proud. We are not going to be a little ghetto of older people, we want to be good neighbours.”

Co-founder Shirley Meredeen, one of three women in their 80s living in the scheme.



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## Bridport Cohousing

Bridport

Opening during 2023

The largest cohousing scheme in the UK and first CLT opens in 2023. It will provide 53 eco-homes developed by Bridport Cohousing group, with a mixture of affordability including 26 social rent homes with the remainder a mix of discounted value (80% ownership) and shared ownership in partnership with Bournemouth Churches Housing Association and Dorset Council.



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## Springhill Cohousing

Stroud

Opened 2003

Springhill was the first UK new-build cohousing community. Initiated by a future resident and developer, the community has 35 market sale houses and flats and a common house located near the centre of Stroud. Plots were pre-sold to members who designed the community and layout of their own homes.



DEVELOPED  
INDEPENDENTLY

## LILAC

Leeds

Opened 2013

LILAC (Low Impact Living Affordable Community) is the UK's first mutual home ownership society. With a group-led development process the homes were made from natural materials (straw and wood) and based around co-operative governance and cohousing design. This award-winning project comprises 25 homes and flats and a common house and is in a suburban area, 3 miles from the centre of Leeds.





DEVELOPED  
INDEPENDENTLY

## Forgebank Community

Lancaster

Opened 2013

Forgebank consists of 35 - 41 households and is located 3 miles from Lancaster on the edge of Halton. The group led the development process, and the homes meet Passivhaus and Code for Sustainable Homes (level 6) standards, benefit from renewable technologies (solar, biomass and hydroelectricity) and a lower impact lifestyle is supported by a car club, a cooperative food store, shared meals and other shared resources.



DEVELOPED  
INDEPENDENTLY

## Copper Lane

London

Opened 2014

A group of self-builders in North London bought a small infill site in North London and built 6 homes, set back from the site boundary, clustered around a central courtyard, ringed by communal gardens, developing what they later recognised was a small cohousing community.



DEVELOPED  
INDEPENDENTLY

## East Whins Ecovillage

Findhorn

2015

An innovative ecovillage of 25 homes – a mix of flats and houses – with co-housing facilities including common room, kitchen and workshops. The overall design is based on two clusters with social space where residents benefit from shared activities including cooking, health, arts and crafts.

Passive solar design is at the heart of the development. Constructed using Scottish timber and insulation with recycled newspapers, the ecovillage meets Scottish silver standards for energy efficiency.



DEVELOPER  
ENABLED

## Marmalade Lane

Cambridge

Opened 2018

Council-owned land within an urban fringe development on the edge of Cambridge was designated for cohousing and market sale and a group developed around the opportunity. TOWN was appointed as an enabling developer and 42 homes were built with extensive community facilities and a sociable shared garden and car-free lane.





DEVELOPED  
INDEPENDENTLY

# Cannock Mill

Colchester

Opened 2019

Cannock Mill is a cohousing scheme consisting of 26 passive house homes, designed and funded by its residents.



DEVELOPED  
INDEPENDENTLY

# Chaco

Leeds

Opened 2023

A diverse community housing scheme reflecting the existing culture of Chapeltown. 33 high performance homes with a shared garden and common house (with workshop, laundry, guest rooms and shared kitchen and dining space). Group-led project delivering 100% affordable homes – 20 homes are shared ownership and 13 for rent.



DEVELOPED  
INDEPENDENTLY

# Five Rivers

Sheffield

Opening 2023/4

A group-led project in Sheffield, with a leasehold site from Sheffield City Council. 22 units, ranging from 1 and 2 bed apartments to 2 and 3 bed houses, notably a substantial common house with space to meet and socialise as well as a laundry and guest bedrooms. Local coop involved to provide shared homes to rent.



**Context:** custom-build and self-build housing

In the UK, cohousing has been closely aligned with the self-build and custom-build movements. MP Richard Bacon led a review<sup>1</sup> of how to scale up the self and custom build sector in the UK and pointed to the desire for many people to have a say in the design of their own homes. Regrettably, the review highlighted how the UK lags behind the rest of Europe in terms of providing group custom-build opportunities. However, as awareness of cohousing and custom-build housing rises, policy makers and planners will no doubt be required to respond to the demand for increased numbers and diversity of much needed housing.

The **voice**  
**of residents**  
has never  
been more  
important.



## Context: community-led housing

In recent years the government has recognised the value of community-led approaches to house building for its ability to galvanise local support and the fact that it is driven by the commitment and energy of the very individuals and communities that it will benefit. Local support means that the community-led initiatives can deliver locally affordable new homes in places and on sites where commercial speculative house builders cannot.

By engaging the creativity of local people, the community-led model typically delivers high design quality, high standards of construction and energy efficiency, and uses progressive, innovative building techniques. It supports the smaller house building companies and helps sustain the local economy by providing homes that are affordable at local incomes. For all these reasons, the government is keen to see the community-led house building sector grow.

These intentions were realised in 2016 through government backing given to a new coalition between the UK Cohousing Network, the National Community Land Trust Network and the Confederation of Co-operative Housing. Operating through to March 2020, the Community Housing Fund made £163m available to support over 800 groups, creating a pipeline of an estimated 12,000 homes.



## Context: coproduction and tenants' rights

A handful of pioneering housing associations have supported local cohousing groups to date. This coincides with greater commitments to and calls for coproducing housing association services with residents across the sector.

The voice of residents has never been more important. Social housing tenants will be empowered to hold their landlords to account as part of a new government funded training scheme<sup>2</sup> launched this year. Backed by £500,000 government funding, the Four Million Homes programme<sup>3</sup> will also encourage tenants to take an active role in how their homes are managed, with advice on how to set up a residents panel so tenants are treated with respect.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-into-scaling-up-self-build-and-custom-housebuilding-report>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/every-social-housing-resident-to-be-offered-place-on-watchdog-style-know-your-rights-training-scheme>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.fourmillionhomes.org>





**What are  
the potential  
benefits of  
cohousing?**



## Cohousing: tackling isolation and loneliness

The London School of Economics report “Those little connections”: Community-led housing and loneliness, was commissioned by the UK Government to Report for the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, November 2021<sup>1</sup>.

The experience of enduring the Covid lockdowns has served as a stark reminder of the profound influence our living spaces have on our social lives. It has become abundantly clear that the conventional options of single-family homes and flats do not encompass the full spectrum of housing possibilities. At the heart of cohousing lies a commitment to resident empowerment, collaborative decision-making, and inclusivity. These values have become crucial in countering the pervasive issue of loneliness.

While the allure of living in community-led housing (CLH) settings, with their shared spaces and collective activities, intuitively suggests a remedy for loneliness, empirical evidence to support this notion has been somewhat lacking—until now.

Crucially, the LSE report found that a profound sense of belonging acts as a formidable antidote to emotional loneliness. When the Covid pandemic swept across our communities, CLH residents swiftly rallied together, forming robust networks of mutual support. They drew upon their collective experiences of collaboration, whether in the maintenance of communal spaces or the upkeep of their homes. It is heartening to note that many CLH communities have extended these support systems beyond the immediate crisis. Many have established formal or informal mechanisms to assist members through life’s challenges, be it the arrival of a new child, health setbacks, or the painful loss of a loved one.

What is particularly intriguing is that while intentional cohousing schemes are purposefully structured to foster mutual support, our research has revealed that intentionality is not a prerequisite for alleviating loneliness. The LSE researchers encountered social connections, a sense of belonging, enduring friendships, and strong support networks among residents of housing schemes that were not originally conceived as intentional communities. This finding underscores the notion that nurturing social bonds and cultivating a supportive environment can be achieved in a range of housing contexts, transcending the constraints of deliberate design.

<sup>1</sup> <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseLondon/those-little-connections-community-led-housing-and-loneliness/>

## Cohousing: potential of affordability

LILAC is a co-housing community of 20 eco-build households in West Leeds. The homes and land are managed by residents through a Mutual Home Ownership Society<sup>1</sup>, a pioneering financial model that ensures permanent affordability.

A Mutual Home Ownership Scheme is a new way of owning a stake in the housing market. It is designed to bring the bottom rung of the property ladder back within reach of households on modest incomes in areas where they are priced out of the housing market. It is designed to remain permanently affordable for future generations.

Members of the society are the residents who live in the homes it provides. The society and not the individuals obtain the mortgage and so borrowing is cheaper. Each member has a lease which gives them the right to democratically control the housing community they live in. Members pay an equity share to the co-operative and retain equity in the scheme. After deductions for maintenance, insurance and other communal costs, these payments pay the mortgage. The monthly payment made by each leaseholder is set at around 35% of their net income. As members leave, existing members can buy more equity shares, and as people's income levels change their equity share commitments can also change. If a leaseholder leaves within three years, they are not entitled to increases in the value of their equity shares. The company keeps a set percentage of any increase in equity to ensure the sustainability of the project.





## Cohousing: creating sustainable living

Cohousing presents a pathway to achieving lower carbon footprints in housing, as highlighted by the research and insights of Dr. Penny Clarke<sup>2</sup>. Through intentional design and collaborative living, cohousing communities can significantly reduce their environmental impact.

Dr. Clarke's work reveals that cohousing enables the creation of environmentally sustainable neighbourhoods with a carbon footprint of only 65% of mainstream housing. By pooling resources and sharing facilities, residents can optimise energy usage and minimise waste. Cohousing promotes the adoption of renewable energy sources, energy-efficient technologies, and sustainable building materials, leading to reduced carbon emissions.

Furthermore, cohousing fosters a culture of conscious consumption and resource sharing. By sharing tools, appliances and vehicles, residents can minimise individual consumption and waste. This collaborative approach encourages sustainable behaviours and promotes a more environmentally friendly lifestyle.

Dr. Clarke's research underscores the potential of cohousing to act as a catalyst for behaviour change and environmental consciousness. By fostering a sense of community and shared responsibility, cohousing inspires residents to make environmentally friendly choices and actively participate in sustainable practices.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.lilac.coop/affordable/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://lilac.coop/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Lilac-Impact-July-2021.pdf>





# Our strategy for social rental cohousing **Housing 21**

**Housing 21** CEO **Bruce Moore**, when at Hanover was also involved in supporting the development of New Ground Cohousing in Barnet.

“Cohousing is the formula one car of coproduction. Whilst not affordable as a strategy across all our schemes, cohousing can significantly enhance models of **community and resident engagement** that can be adapted and applied across our portfolio”.



## Background

Housing 21 has launched an unprecedented cohousing strategy for social rental and shared ownership in the UK. Housing 21 is a leading, not for profit provider of Extra Care and Retirement Living for older people of modest means. It operates in over 240 local authority areas, managing over 22,800 properties and providing over 38,000 hours of social care each week. Their vision is to provide high-quality Extra Care and Retirement Living schemes, offering an alternative option for older individuals with modest means.

Housing 21 is not the first or only housing association to engage with cohousing in the UK. However, Housing 21 is the first housing association to declare a cohousing strategy and the intention to develop in 10 locations across Birmingham.



“Cohousing absolutely delivers against our social purpose and values on **developing sustainable, thriving places and communities.**”

**Lorraine Mealings**, CEO

**Bournemouth Churches Housing Association** – the enabling developers behind Bridport Cohousing CLT.

“Housing associations should work with all residents to ensure that they have **a voice and influence at every level** of decision making across the organisation, through both voluntary and paid roles”

(NHF and CIH 2023)<sup>1</sup>

**NATIONAL  
HOUSING  
FEDERATION**



**Chartered  
Institute of  
Housing**



Housing 21 plans to identify ten sites within the West Midlands conurbation to develop cohousing projects specifically designed for older individuals with modest means.

In keeping with the organisation’s mission, these projects will be in areas characterised by multiple deprivation and /or where at least 30% of the population comes from ethnically diverse backgrounds. Housing 21 aims to be particularly sensitive in avoiding assumptions about the needs and aspirations of potential residents or being perceived to “parachute” in with solutions. As such, the principles of cohousing in which residents are at the heart of driving a development forward are seen as particularly appropriate.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.housing.org.uk/globalassets/files/quality-of-existing-homes/better-social-housing-review---action-plan-published-2023.pdf>

## Housing 21 announced its **key ambitions** for their cohousing strategy:

### Empowering project groups:

Project groups will be established for all cohousing developments, allowing local older individuals to actively shape the design of the properties and community aspects. The aim is to encourage a sense of ownership, belonging, and community engagement. The first two project groups were established in 2021 with Legacy West Midlands tasked with community engagement and awareness raising (more in subsequent chapters).

### Collaborative partnerships:

Housing 21 will establish partnership agreements with local agencies and charities to support engagement and consultation events. This collaborative approach ensures that the cohousing projects align with the aspirations and needs of the local community.

### Aggressive timelines:

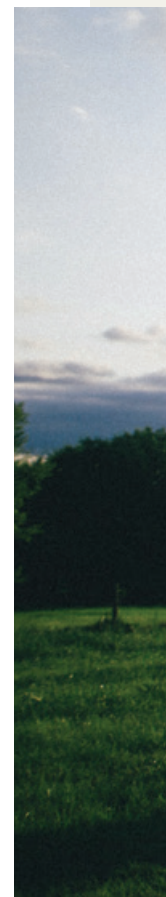
Despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, Housing 21 is committed to constructing and occupying the first two cohousing projects by the end of 2025. This ambitious timeline reflects the urgent need for quality homes and further emphasises their dedication to delivering on their promises.

### Accessibility and inclusivity:

Housing 21 aims to ensure that cohousing projects are accessible and inclusive, particularly for older individuals with modest means and from diverse communities. By learning from each project and sharing best practices, they will continually refine their approach to meet the needs of different populations.

Housing 21 sees the proposed cohousing projects as having distinctive features from both its existing schemes and from existing cohousing schemes. Housing 21 projects will involve far more resident engagement in the design and running of cohousing than in other schemes whilst at the same time moderating expectations for resident participation and common collective vision. By doing so they aim to ensure the scheme is recognisable as a cohesive cohousing neighbourhood whilst moderating potential barriers to participation for individuals from diverse, low-income communities who may apply from the social housing register and may be unfamiliar with cohousing.

The aim is to encourage a **sense of ownership**, belonging, and community engagement.







## Housing 21 has outlined the underlying **principles** of its strategy:

### **Establishing project groups:**

Residents will have an opportunity to join a project group at the outset, so they have a critical role in the design of the properties and communal spaces and – just as importantly – are able to shape the ethos and values of the community aspects of cohousing. The aim is that when residents eventually move in, a sense of ownership, belonging and community will have already been established. The phrase “intentional community” or “like minded” are frequently used to describe cohousing groups. Housing 21 plans to focus more on the “mutually supportive” nature of cohousing, the benefits of having good neighbours and living in a community setting whilst recognising that residents may come from diverse backgrounds.

### **Collaboration with local stakeholders:**

Housing 21 recognises the importance of working closely with local people, agencies, and politicians. Trust and relationships are built through active listening, understanding, and acting upon the experiences and aspirations of the community. Local councillors’ support when drawing up planning submissions and lettings agreements is crucial.



**Tailored lettings agreements:**

Unlike traditional lettings agreements, cohousing requires a different approach. Usually, nomination agreements in place with the Local Authority prioritise applicants with assessed levels of housing and/or care needs and rarely allocate before a development is completed. In cohousing, early identification and nomination of potential residents will allow them to participate in the design process before the completion of the scheme. Letting plans will prioritise individuals from the local area, promoting a sense of community and mutual support. Cohousing focuses on the benefits of living in a mutually supportive community therefore potential residents may be expected to give a few hours of their time each week to support the project or to their neighbours in the scheme or living in the local community.

**Flexibility in age requirements:**

While Housing 21 typically prioritises housing for over-55s, it also recognises the need for greater flexibility in cohousing schemes targeting deprived communities where social/health inequalities have a greater impact on the lives of individuals. Health and wellbeing data will be considered, and the appropriate age for eligibility will be determined in collaboration with each project group. Applicants must be at least 55 years old.

**Tenure flexibility:**

Most cohousing properties developed by Housing 21 will be available for social rent, aligning with the aim of providing for people of modest means in disadvantaged communities. However, flexibility may be required to accommodate those who previously purchased their council property or reside in owner-occupied houses with limited value. Where requested by a local authority then at least 25% of homes will be allocated to shared ownership.

**Varied operating models:**

Recognizing the diversity of cohousing schemes, Housing 21 allows residents to decide on the operating model for managing their respective communities. Options include forming a Tenant Management Organization (TMO) for independent management, appointing a managing agent, or adopting a resident-led service model. Other options include allowing the residents to appoint their own management agent or lead on decisions on management services such as maintenance, lettings, communal activities or having a Local Housing Manager. The list is not exhaustive. Whilst committing to resident empowerment, Housing 21 also notes that the usual risk assessments and regulatory standards will need to be met. Equally, resident energy levels for managing their schemes may change over time.





**Capacity Building:**

To empower cohousing group members in decision-making, Housing 21 provides support and facilitates training sessions on building design and operating models. Consultation events and visits to existing cohousing projects and Retirement Living schemes further enhance residents' knowledge and confidence.

**Research and Learning:**

Housing 21 is committed to capturing lessons learned and developing best practices. They have established a Focus Group comprising representatives from esteemed institutions, councils, networks, and the communities they plan to work with. The group's primary focus will be addressing practical challenges and evaluating the success of cohousing projects.

**Design Considerations:**

Housing 21 prioritises sustainable design principles, incorporating renewable energy and modern construction methods in all cohousing properties. Residents will actively participate in decisions related to sustainability, fostering a greener, healthier living environment with open spaces, car-free areas, and shared gardens.

Having established a strategy for cohousing in 10 locations across Birmingham we want to review in greater depth how this has been implemented in the first two years and any reflections. We will first look at the experiences of contracted partners – Triangle Architects and Legacy West Midlands.



# Designing new neighbourhoods with residents

## Triangle Architects

**Harry Randhawa**, Director  
Triangle Architects

Triangle Architects is an award-winning architectural practice based in Manchester. Their practice focus is primarily around the housing and healthcare sectors but also includes urban regeneration, community, and workplace projects. They were appointed by Housing 21, to oversee the design process for their cohousing portfolio in Birmingham. Harry Randhawa, Director at Triangle, pulls together reflections and insights from their experience to date that can help guide other designers.

### Background:

Triangle's starting point was UKCN's Practical Guide to Cohousing, which notes that the key principles of design in cohousing relate to how:

- The physical form layout of neighbourhoods makes deliberate use of architectural and design features that can maximise opportunities for social contact and strengthen local connections within the neighbourhood.
- Self-contained accommodation is supplemented by significant common facilities and spaces, of which a 'Common House' is a crucial setting for shared activities.
- Each neighbourhood is of a scale that will underpin sustainable relationships across the neighbourhood: between 20 and 50 adults is seen as an optimum scale (plus children, if the project is family-based).





Housing 21 wishes to give local older people from Birmingham the opportunity to be **involved in shaping the design of the properties and communal spaces**. It is important that the resident is involved and engaged with the community building aspects of the scheme and makes decisions on how the service will operate once completed. This is something we are doing “with” local older people rather than for them.



## Project brief:

Housing 21's brief noted the aspirations for the number of units to be achieved, common spaces, and adaptability of apartments for changing needs. Consideration was also given to privacy, security, loneliness and well-being.

The following standards informed the design: Lifetime Homes, Code for Sustainable Homes and HAPPI. While some of these standards are not yet current, they were nevertheless taken into consideration within the design development.

During the early stages these design standards were used to begin the process of shaping apartment layouts. Whilst there is variety, each apartment shares the same design for bathroom, living room, kitchen. We believe that before engaging with potential residents, the architect should clarify which criteria will remain fixed to comply with design standards, Building Regulations or Space Standards. At the same time, it is best to avoid prescriptive briefs as it will lead to initial sketches being over developed and this often leads to frustration amongst potential residents when changes are needed.



## Feasibility:

It is widely agreed that finding the right site is always a challenge and so Housing 21 have been able to work with Birmingham City Council to bring brownfield sites forward for development.

We recognise that every site is different and numerous constraints can mean that a site is undevelopable. First and foremost, the land ownership must be formalised. Our priority is to fix the extent of the site. With brownfield sites within urban environments, it is quite common for encroachment to occur from neighbouring properties. This can have a significant impact on the usable area of the site via loss of land to adverse possession. We find that the surrounding environment will affect the design and include planning requirements such as overlooking distances, parking provision, highways, overbearing, privacy, security, covenants, easements and, if available, site utilities information.

The more information that is available the more informed the initial feasibility study can be. These “constraints” will inform the massing and approximate the possible locations of key design elements for a cohousing scheme such as the common house, guest suite or incidental meeting spaces. Gathering this information helped us to consider how to meet Housing 21’s preference for a cohousing scheme of 25 units with a majority of 1-bed apartments. At this stage we factored in the key principles of cohousing into the feasibility study to make sure the building footprint is adequately “loose” to allow for development with the potential future residents.





## Layout:

We developed a typical apartment layout which met immutable design standards such as nationally described space standards, wheelchair accessibility and Lifetime Homes. We have allowed for variation within apartment layouts with open plan options and options for finishes. This is perhaps the only level of adaptability that a housing provider can build in. The cost implications of allowing for wide variations in internal design of individual apartments would stop the development in its tracks.

An aspect that often draws discussion is the proposal for double-banked apartments with internal corridors against dual aspect homes. While dual aspect layouts would be ideal, in most cases a viable scheme can only be achieved through a double-banked approach in order to meet the required density of development. However, a measured approach with a mix of single and dual aspect apartments should be considered to allow densities to be maintained and variety in the housing offer. Not all corridors are equal and opportunities to use views and incidental spaces to create spaces for meeting and interaction should be considered and incorporated.





“My advice is **don’t be afraid to throw it all away**. The feasibility study is a guide to inform the design process and not the final product”.

Triangle’s Harry Randhawa

**Triangle’s Harry Randhawa on consensus-led decision-making in cohousing:**

“Having many different internal designs for apartments across the cohousing complex is not financially viable for housing associations. However, residents can reach a consensus view on common priorities and preferences. For example, if 'Jack and Jill' bathrooms [sandwiched between two bedrooms and accessible from both] were considered not acceptable, the group would have to agree. In addition, we enabled simple adaptations to be made. For example, if in future a 'Jack and Jill' bathroom was required, as you might find in a Lifetime Homes apartment, then that would be possible.

“By identifying **zones of space** in the feasibility study, rather than clear designations for the common house, guest suite, gardens, laundry, offices and meeting rooms, **we allow the residents to express their thoughts on what is essential.**”



## Engagement

We feel that engagement with the Local Authority should be undertaken through a pre-application submission before substantial engagement with residents. The feasibility design is sufficient to take to planners for feedback from their consultants. Second-guessing what the planners will consider appropriate for the scheme should be avoided as failing to gain planning permission can be costly and disheartening.

We seek to remember that the concept of cohousing is also likely to be a new strategy for a planning department and so definitions, descriptions and examples should accompany a submission. For us, this means providing details of the flexibility of the proposals and management approaches that will ultimately be used within the development. It is important that we clearly communicate the elements over which residents have a level of control, and this can be further supported with drawings. For example, if the feasibility study proposes open deck access and residents have choices in door patterns and colours, this will need to be discussed with the planners and a strategy developed for how that information can be submitted in the planning application without the need to go back with multiple variations of condition applications.

It is worth keeping in mind that the planning department does consult with other departments; Highways, Transport, Environment Agency, Fire Services, Ramblers Associations, Landscape, City Design, Ecologists, Arboriculturists – the list can go on. We found that comments will be received from these departments, and it is likely that either changes will be required or in the most extreme case the development hits an insurmountable hurdle and the scheme on that site must be put aside.

These discussions with the planners will formalise any principles that must be adhered to in the development as it evolves with resident consultation. They also clarify the requirements for what will be needed to accompany a planning application, i.e. Ecologist Report, Transport Statement, Noise Assessment, etc. It will also provide comfort to the client that development of the site is viable from a planning perspective without incurring considerable additional costs.

We believe that resident consultation is fundamental to the development of cohousing, but it is important not to fall into the trap of designing for one group of very vocal residents, as the design should encompass the needs of all current and future residents.

We believe it is important to consult and engage with a group of potential residents embedded in the local community and consider how to incorporate the activities they already carry out into the scheme, such as cooking events or movie nights. This not only maintains social links for our residents but also links to the wider community and for future residents.

Housing providers or local partners need to fully embed themselves in the community at the early stages to understand those activities. By identifying zones of space in the feasibility study, rather than clear designations for the common house, guest suite, gardens, laundry, offices and meetings rooms, we allow the residents to express their about what they feel is essential. At the same time, some spaces will be specifically located at the feasibility stage to provide secure lines or deal with overlooking or any of the numerous other site constraints that might be present.

“How do you live?” and “How do you want to live?” are the two questions to open a dialogue which informs the design process. It allows the residents to think about where they are and what they hope for, and it allows the design team to consider those hopes against the other residents’ comments and formalise that as they develop the scheme. We found that the results of discussions will vary between groups and sites. For example, in one site the common house was identified as being central within the scheme. In another it was located by the main entrance with apartments spreading out from there. Choices about where to locate particular shared amenities necessarily relate to the broader design context and site constraints. Likewise, we found that the desire for the provision of guest rooms may vary. However, this does not mean that this facility might not become necessary in the future, and so we proposed a space which is multi-functional, a small second lounge which could become a guest suite.

As such, each scheme has varied in terms of shared space, whilst also taking into account the potential needs of future residents.

How much influence should the resident group have over the aesthetic of the design? Again, we felt that a pragmatic approach needs to be taken. The building needs to work within the site context, meet the client’s maintenance needs, be robust and sustainable. However, it should also have its own character and confidence. Architects are well placed to consider these aspects in their proposals and present them to the resident groups and clients to show how it meets their needs and to respond to their feedback.

In the case of our scheme our future residents had no experience of cohousing or even being involved in the design process. Accordingly, we developed a diagram to illustrate the shared journey of ourselves as the architects, current and future residents, and Housing 21 as the client – ultimately leading to residents moving in and managing their home.

As planning deadlines approach, incorporating changes requested by residents or the client can be difficult. However, if these are fundamental to the lived experience of the development, then taking a step back is essential.

As shown in the accompanying images, residents’ engagement continues through the construction process and this needs to be clearly clarified to bidding contractors in the tender documents.







## Designing

### Get started:

- Attend 2 to 3 consultation events
- Respond to flyers / questionnaires
- Meet as a group, neighbours, friends outside of events
- Help us design the building with you
- Tell us how you want to live

### Housing 21 will:

- Organise events
- Keep you up-to-date
- Help you organise your group

## Building

### The next steps:

- Attend progress meetings once a month with Housing21 and the builders
- Listen to, and ask questions about the building
- Help to choose colours, wallpaper, front door etc.
- Decide how you want your flat decorated
- Organise a rota, which jobs do you want to do?

### Housing 21 will:

- Help you agree on membership
- Help you to decide on community policies
- Help with training for group decision making
- Help with how to hold meetings

## Moving in

### The exciting part!

- Move into your flat
- Make friends with your neighbours
- Have a barbeque, start gardening, invite the neighbours round
- Hold your first community meeting in the common house!
- Share a meal with the community
- Make new friends for life
- Grow your co-housing community

### Housing 21 will:

- Help with the first few meetings and rotas
- Help you understand how to look after your building

We find that typically, a contractor will allow for very little consultation during the construction period in a Design and Build procurement route. In the case of cohousing, we noted that the resident group needs to be represented and liaised with regularly and the contractor must allow for these additional meetings including meetings to agree any option items such as doors or colours. Of course, these all have cost and time implications.

During the construction period, it became clear, that the client will continue to liaise with the resident group but also begin the process of education and development for the group to eventually manage their building themselves. We see this as a lengthy journey which will likely continue well into the lifetime of the building. In the case of our schemes some of the resident groups are unable to converse in English and those that can are uncomfortable with more complex discussions. As such it is likely the first generation of cohousing residents may require greater support as they become accustomed to this new way of living. Scenario-planning should allow for the possibility that residents do not ultimately wish to take on administrative and managerial responsibilities. However, their worth should not be undervalued and their role as community members remains important.

“We believe these cohousing schemes are “**Generation Buildings**”. The first generation within these schemes may not be as involved, but as the years pass and new residents move in, the skills and abilities of those that have been occupants for years will get passed on more fluidly.

Further, as second and third generation immigrants with stronger grasp of English and comfort with dealing with services move in, they will be more able to transfer responsibilities from the client to the resident group and so the **scheme starts to evolve and grow**”.



# Engaging communities in cohousing **Legacy West Midlands**

**Dawn Carr**, Director of Operations  
Legacy West Midlands

“We need to demonstrate a willingness to listen, understand and act based on the experience and aspirations of local people. The ‘one size fits all’ approach will not work, and it will be important to identify the issues faced by areas and communities. Local older people are less likely to trust Housing 21 unless we have developed links and built relationships with community groups and agencies rooted in the local area.”

**Lucy Hales**,  
Head of Cohousing Housing 21’s



## So how do you choose a **community partner?**

Housing 21 commissioned **Legacy West Midlands** to carry out this role, based on their direct local experience and track record.

**Dawn Carr**, Director of Operations, provides some history to the organisation and more information on their brief and methods for the project.

## Background: Birmingham's “Super-Diversity”

Birmingham is a city that is incredibly diverse. The city has long been known as a melting pot of cultures, with people from all over the world calling it home. In recent years, however, this diversity has reached new heights, leading to what is now referred to as "super diversity". Super diversity refers to a state of diversity that is characterised by a high degree of complexity, with many different ethnic, linguistic, and cultural groups coexisting in the same space. This is precisely what is happening in Birmingham today, where people from all corners of the globe have come to live and work in the city.

The roots of Birmingham's diversity can be traced back to the city's industrial revolution, which saw a large influx of workers from all over the world come to work in the factories. This trend continued Birmingham became a hub for post war immigration from Commonwealth countries such as India, Pakistan, and the Caribbean, as well as new communities seeking asylum. Today, Birmingham is home to more than 187 different nationalities, making it one of the most diverse cities in the UK. The city's population is estimated to be around 1.1 million, with over 300 different languages spoken. This incredible diversity can be seen in the many different communities that exist within the city, each with their own unique customs, traditions, and language. Birmingham's super diversity reflects the city's rich history and the many different communities that have made the city their home.

However, Birmingham has not been immune to the challenges that are often associated with multiculturalism. The city has faced issues such as social segregation, discrimination, and inequality, which have been exacerbated by economic hardship and austerity measures. Despite these challenges, the city has also shown remarkable resilience and works toward promoting social cohesion. As such, Birmingham is a shining example of how diversity can be a source of strength and cultural richness, rather than a source of division.







## Legacy West Midlands

Legacy WM was established in 2010 and has Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) status.

Inspired by the heritage of post-war migrant communities in Birmingham, our work celebrates their relationship with the industrial, architectural, and cultural fabric of the city. Early projects included tracing migrant journeys to Birmingham and developing a local heritage trail. Following the success of early projects, Legacy West Midlands adopted four key priorities: Arts, Heritage, Wellbeing and Young People. Our vision is for all communities to thrive by valuing and building on their own heritage together with the heritage that we all share.

### Our four strategic aims are:

1. To bring people together across diversity and inclusivity to celebrate and learn from cultural heritage through sharing our specific and common histories, beliefs, arts, and traditions.
2. Promote and support the physical and mental wellbeing of communities, families, and individuals.
3. Engage with local communities and relevant organisations to improve wellbeing by supporting community hubs, social housing and/or care which meets local needs.
4. Promote engagement with deprived communities by leading initiatives which aim to tackle inclusion, deprivation, generate opportunities for young people and enrich those communities.

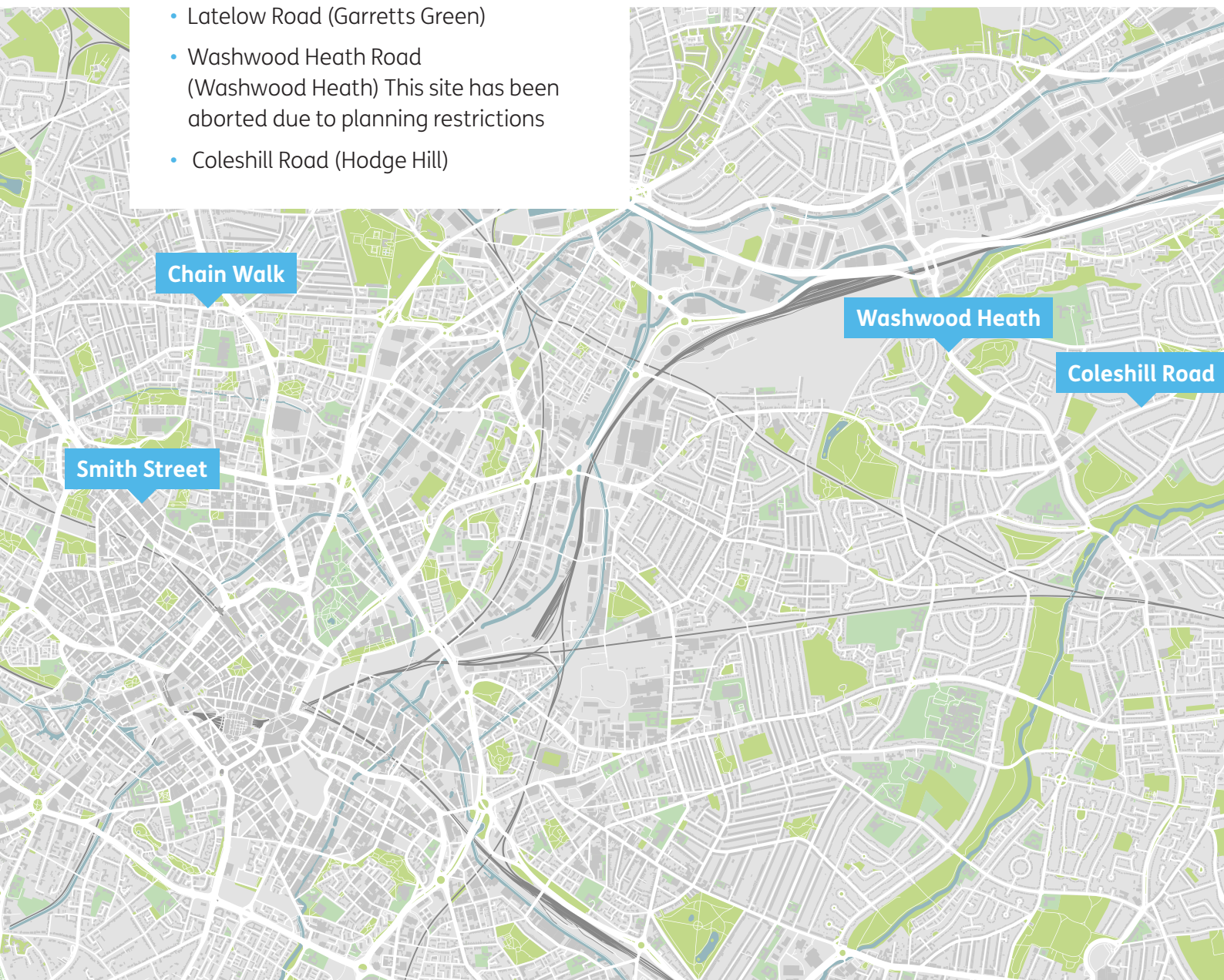
We achieve this by acting as a community anchor, that is, a resource to support individuals and community organisations who share this aim. Our model is based on 'Asset Based Community Development', building assets in the community – individuals, associations, institutions, places, spaces, and local connections. Through these aims our team and organisation have a variety of skills in engaging with urban communities.



## Housing 21's Commission:

Legacy WM was commissioned by Housing 21 to support a cohousing scheme providing quality accommodation for older, vulnerable people. We have facilitated community initial consultations with the elderly in our community on housing priorities and independent living preferences with a view to finding potential developments. Consultations took place in 5 areas of Birmingham.

- Chain Walk (Lozells)
- Smith Street (Hockley)
- Latelow Road (Garretts Green)
- Washwood Heath Road (Washwood Heath) This site has been aborted due to planning restrictions
- Coleshill Road (Hodge Hill)







The consultation presented the opportunity of modern affordable housing to all residents over 55 within the identified catchment area. The main aim was to seek interested parties that would like to be part of a cohousing community or collaborative housing and 'establishing a project group at the development of the project' – as identified in stage 1 of the H21 Cohousing Strategy.

However, there is an overarching eligibility criterion for housing which is:

- Residents must be over 55.
- Residents must have the "Right to Rent"<sup>1</sup>
- Residents must demonstrate need/or in receipt of housing benefits.

We saw that the concept of cohousing is quite new to residents and delivery partners in Birmingham and so Housing 21 has developed a strategy that has identified flexible approaches to tenure such as shared ownership. In addition, H21 recognises that a 'one size fits all' approach may not be suitable for all communities and have identified four potential options for the operating models for interested parties to manage the site:



### **Housing 21's options for cohousing residents:**

#### **a. Housing 21 Lite service**

Housing 21 own and manage the site, with residents having an active role in the decision-making process cohousing site and collaborating on the day-to-day activities, however a local housing manager is appointed to ensure the services are delivered to standard.

#### **b. Resident-led services**

Residents have the same role as in (1) but also take on the responsibility of Local Housing Manager / and outsource the service locally themselves. This could include managing the cleaning, gardening, property lettings and engagement activities.

#### **c. Appointing an agent**

The cohousing project group appoints a local trusted agency or cooperatives that are rooted in the community and reflect the demographic or culture of the local area to oversee all housing management and services.

#### **d. Tenant management organisation**

The residents create an independent legal body which is run by a tenant-led board to run all housing management and services – under agreement with Housing 21 who retain the ownership of land and buildings.



**Latelaw Road**

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/prove-right-to-rent>

## What were the **objectives** for the Legacy West Midland Team?

**The original objectives were as follows (for one cohousing scheme)**

1. Identify local community groups.
2. Support H21 in arranging community engagement events.
3. Liaise with prospective cohousing project group members.
4. Support with translation and interpreting when English is a second language.
5. Develop ways we could measure success and progress.
6. Initially deliver 2 days per week of support increasing to 3 days.
7. Completing a Data Protection Impact assessment – this will support all the project partners as we may be exchanging sensitive information.

**This arrangement was expanded in 2023 to three days per week as the project work needed increases as developments progress.**



## Specification **requirements**

To identify local community groups and local people with **a shared interest** in cohousing.

To support Housing 21 in arranging related **community engagement events**.

To liaise with prospective cohousing project group members and **support development of similar forums** to support the cohousing initiative, such as steering groups with residents as required.

To support with **interpreting when English is a second language** and advise on the most efficient medium to translate information, when required.

To share **cultural, environmental expertise** where it may benefit Housing 21 cohousing planning design & progress such as reflections of local resident's design preferences and ideas.

For LWM staff to **attend training and development opportunities** appropriate and relevant to the cohousing project.



## Outcome examples

Identify and attend community networking events to promote cohousing. Identify and document contact details for community groups and local projects.

Use social media to promote cohousing.

Attend community events and meetings to promote cohousing. Use opportunities to present at community events. Meet with community groups and local people to promote cohousing.

Promote events, using social media, flyers, posters, presentations, local contacts, etc.

Identify local people and support them to attend events, including arranging transport and sending reminders.

Identify and book suitable venues.

Set up the room for events. Enable translation when needed. Document attendees contact details.

Set up project groups and enable regular meetings.

Work with Housing 21 to design and deliver training and skills building programmes.

Support and enable commitment to the cohousing projects.

Enable potential residents to be “tenant and tenancy ready”.

Attend community events to support with translation.

Advise on design and translation of flyers and leaflets to support engagement.

To be a critical friend to Housing 21 to enable culturally sensitive services and building design to meet the needs of residents from a range of backgrounds.

Attend Housing 21 training courses, external training, conferences etc as agreed with H21.

## What **methods/processes** were used/chosen:

### **Website**

Update our website and start talking to our users & the local communities about Cohousing within our mainstream delivery.

### **Politicians**

Liaise with local councillors who are in regular contact with residents and can champion the co-housing schemes.

### **Asset Based Community Development**

#### **Individuals**

Speak to our current users, residents, and people in need.

#### **Associations**

Conduct meetings with local associations, faith groups, cooperatives, HMOs & like-minded groups and adopt them as local ambassadors for the co-housing scheme. This will involve them taking a lead in delivery a small consultation event with their members and fostering local ownership of the scheme.

#### **Institutions**

Liaise with local GP surgeries, health professionals and local organisations that support over 55's such as Age Concern, Mind, Diabetes UK, etc.

#### **Places and Spaces**

Hold consultation events in local community buildings and visit spaces where the community naturally meet – parks, school gates, open days, fetes, cultural events (Eid, Mela, Black History Month, Pride, etc).

### **Connections**

We make genuine connections with vulnerable people or those that may be eligible for the scheme by running on-off workshops or programmes of support, that touch the cross-cutting needs of over-55's.

### **Develop a social media campaign**

Collecting digital assets, photos, stories/ clips etc.

### **Listening to the community**

#### **Summary of communities being engaged with**

Our approach is to engage with the relevant communities within the catchment area of the specified scheme. We examine the ethnic breakdown of the area and the community needs. We also consider the intersectionality of local communities – faith, LGBTQIA, etc. To date the communities that we have engaged with are:

- All faith groups
- White working-class communities
- Black, African and South Asian communities
- New communities: East African, Eastern European, Yemeni, Kurdish, Iranian
- Refugee groups
- Homeless, soup kitchens and supported housing
- Men over 55
- Women-only groups
- Gardening groups
- Over-55s support groups



## Observations so far:

Dawn Carr has led the Legacy West Midlands team in Lozells and poses some questions based upon her experience: “Many of the seniors we’ve been working with are living in precarious housing conditions. In some cases, families are improvising a space for their senior relatives designating the space normally used as a dining room of a small terrace house as their space. The housing is in poor condition, we’re talking about properties before cavity wall insulation. There is no energy efficiency, security of tenure, they are difficult to heat, there is a lack of real choice”.

In response, Housing 21’s Lucy Hales says “many people haven’t got the income to move to a bigger house – can’t adapt to the home they have got. Having a new housing scheme at Chain Walk will enable people to retain their local support networks but have quality housing”.

Dawn Carr said “we’ve been looking at who might be interested in running a cohousing scheme, and how to build the capacity of a group. Once we’ve got a committee in place, we can then help more residents to sign up so they have a full scheme. Once the scheme is built, we will have no problem filling the scheme – the challenge is the time scales of housing development. It can take many years and keeping a coherent group of potential residents who have urgent and pressing housing needs is a challenge”.

“We have been largely engaging with first generation migrants from the East African Community – (East African e.g Sudan Ethiopia, Eritrean, Kenya, Burundi), South Asian Community, and the ‘Windrush generation’ – Black Caribbean Community. Dawn Carr said “In our experience, potential residents from the east african communities, are familiar with collaborative living arrangements. Culturally family compounds are seen and understood as a common practice today going back over many generations”.

“In all the conversations we’ve had, potential residents appreciate the concept of shared spaces and having authority over tenancy and being able to manage their spaces collaboratively”.

“One of the questions we have been exploring is whether there is a threshold of skills and experience needed before you move in such as running a committee or team whether at work or in social or voluntary groups. Some communities have generations who divided career and home working strictly by gender. Despite the split, many potential residents without workplace experience, may have strong organisational skills developed through responsibilities for large social gatherings, weddings, christenings.”

## Next steps:

“Cohousing can be quite daunting – even for the most articulate and intelligent person – just starting from a set of plans and expecting to move naturally along that spectrum. One solution that came up during our consultation phase – offer a “lite service” – in which Housing 21 initially takes responsibility for most of the housing management until, through reviews with residents, it is felt there is the desire and the ability to take on more responsibility. In this way you can move up a staircase as it were – from resident consultation to hiring a managing agent for services to becoming a Tenant Management Organisation. The cohousing journey is about progression.”

**Dawn Carr**

Legacy West Midland's





# Review: co-production experience to date

**Yael Arbel**

Sheffield Hallam University



This section draws on findings from a research project funded by the Nuffield Foundation – **Housing 21: a more inclusive model of cohousing?**

By Sheffield Hallam University's Yael Arbel and Tom Archer. The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation.



## Co-production

The term “co-production” is gaining traction in many areas of public policy and is beginning to make its way into the housing sector. Co-production is a way of developing and delivering services in collaboration with service users. It offers a collaborative process in areas where paternalistic relationships are often the norm, and therefore an opportunity to tailor services to users’ needs, based on their expertise by experience. Importantly, it “conceives of service users as active asset-holders rather than passive consumers” (Löffler, 2017). Rather than accepting what professionals have designed for them, often without the lived experience of the need, people have an opportunity to shape the services they need.

At the heart of co-production are the principles of reciprocity and devolution of power. Service users are expected to take more responsibility in return for greater control over resources and priorities. What does this mean for community-led housing?

Housing development is a complex and expensive process, requiring expertise and access to finance and land. All these aspects are very challenging for most people and indeed form a barrier for the development of community-led housing; but they are the normal line of work for housing organisations. A collaboration between potential residents and housing providers has potential to offer expertise and resources on the one hand, and design input, community building and self-management on the other.

There are very few examples of housing co-production in the UK (see reports in notes below). One of these is an emerging project in which a registered provider works with residents to develop a cohousing scheme. This pioneering model involved potential residents from the start in the design process, working with the architect and supported by a local NGO to improve community outreach, recruitment, group formation and capacity building. This section presents some lessons from this project as it still unfolds.

The strategy's implementation relies on the collaboration between H21 team, Triangle Architects, and local NGO Legacy WM, who worked directly with prospective residents to design and plan life in the scheme. This collaborative approach required investment of time, money, and coordination and made engagement with prospective residents effective and consistent.







## Challenging times: when everything is new for everyone.

It has been clear that good quality community housing is a priority in the areas Housing 21 is working in. For many families it is a process of offering the opportunity for seniors to be more independent from their children who may be supporting them. Many of the community members engaged with so far felt that, at present, the idea of being part of the management of a neighbourhood as associated with cohousing is not desirable – due to health, work commitments, digital exclusion, language barrier, and lack of confidence in face of the challenge.

Coproduction as a process has been significantly hit by the covid epidemic and lock-down measures which has made it far more difficult to regularly meet with residents and build momentum. At the same time, building costs have inflated, requiring readjustments of business plans, as well as delays in the planning process within teams at the city council. As a result, the development process has been longer than expected, creating uncertainty for potential residents being asked to commit to a process for new housing that is taking several years. The community is largely unfamiliar with the planning and development processes and so it can be hard to judge whether delays are par for the course or signs that the project may not reach fruition.

Cohousing is a new concept for the community, Housing 21, and Legacy WM's staff, meaning that everyone involved is working in new territory, outside of comfort areas. Therefore, there have been some differences with more typical self and custom build cohousing processes.

Housing 21 has emphasised expectations of neighbourliness over being part of collective management of like-minded people. The priority for potential residents has been accessing good housing rather than cohousing. Fortunately, Triangle Architects understand cohousing very well and Legacy West Midlands have significant experience in community engagement.



## Lessons so far:

### Resources

Co-producing a cohousing scheme is more expensive than developing other retirement homes. It involves a more iterative design approach which takes longer, investment in community building and capacity building and a smaller number of units to encourage a strong sense of community, as well as more bespoke communal areas.

### Investing in community engagement:

It is not uncommon for large organisations who engage in coproduction to expect results without significant investment in supporting structures. In this case, Housing 21 (H21) devised a strategy that involves partnerships with local organisations and created a dedicated role for the cohousing project; the architect works not only with H21 as a client but revises their drawings based on ongoing consultations with residents – which results in more time and work.

There is an understanding for all involved that co-production takes time. This attitude enabled room for consultation and community building. Importantly, Legacy WM who were contracted to work directly with residents also invested resources in the process, for example by offering a range of training opportunities where they identified a need to upskill.

### Capital investment:

Cohousing is resource intensive: the bureaucratic process for a large or small scheme is the same but the surplus of a small 25-unit scheme is small.

### Local connection and collaboration with NGO

One of the strengths of the project is the decision to work with a local non-governmental organisation that is rooted in the community and is connected to local people. This helped to build rapport with H21, who were not operating in the area and not familiar to potential residents. Especially when working with BAME communities, there was a sense from all involved that a BAME organisation is better placed to engage with communities and introduce a new concept.

Having established connections and understanding of the area were also important factors for community engagement. A significant number of prospective residents joined because of good personal relationships with Legacy West Midlands' staff. Another important point is Legacy staff's fluency in different languages, which helped where prospective tenants were not fluent in English.

### Co-production with architects and design lessons:

Another strength of the project is the engagement with Triangle, a community-minded architectural practice with a good knowledge of cohousing. The firm's director brings lived experience of BAME communities and understanding of language and literacy barriers, which are important assets for successful co-production, like the choice of a BAME-led NGO to engage with residents.



The architects attend public consultation events and follow up meetings, and work closely with Legacy West Midlands and Housing 21. The team's strong interpersonal skills were important to consultations and resulted in good engagement from prospective residents. In terms of design, while it is more bespoke than other retirement schemes, one key piece of learning is that there are very few design aspects that are culturally specific (e.g. a preference for kitchens separate from dining area vs the trend for open plan kitchen-diner): most aspects of the design are universal.

### When to engage?

Co-producing the design with residents meant that H21 engaged in consultations with communities prior to securing planning permission. However, this meant that some communities faced disappointment when planning permission was not granted after some initial engagement. The risk for residents and the housing association's reputation is balanced with the opportunity to take a risk together rather than the more paternalistic model in which the Registered Provider shoulders the risk and does not offer opportunities for residents' input into the design process.

### Changing management models

Communities are dynamic and may choose to use different management models at different stages as the project develops. At this stage, residents prefer a more managed model and are less keen on self-management; they are more likely to adopt one of the more organised models, either relying on Housing 21 or self-appointed management.

One question to consider is what might motivate them to take on additional responsibilities once their needs are met. Research shows that despite the effort involved in managing their own communities, this interaction produces stronger community ties and more opportunities for collaboration and interaction and a stronger sense of purpose and collective action. These in turn contribute to higher levels of belonging and connection. Another question is how residents can develop the skills and structures required for more direct involvement in managing their community?

### The role of the housing association over time

Related to the previous point, housing associations should be prepared to step in and offer support when needed over time, and be ready to step back if tenants develop an appetite for more control. Importantly, research found that in later life, collective self-management becomes more challenging, and may require more support from the housing association or another external source.

**Number of recent reports have been released in 2022/2023**

[www.futureoflondon.org.uk](http://www.futureoflondon.org.uk)  
(search co-production)

[www.communityledhousing.london/  
coproduction/](http://www.communityledhousing.london/coproduction/)

# Alternative models of collaborative housing for seniors

**Professor Karen West  
and Jim Hudson**  
University of Bristol



Insights from **Karen West** and **Jim Hudson**, University of Bristol based on their research into Collaborative Housing and Innovation in Care.

## Summary of Project:

Housing 21's cohousing strategy is based on the view that collaborative living offers the potential of a healthier way to live in older age than simply living alone or moving into homes of other family members. Existing options for late life are challenging with few ideal solutions. You might choose physical adaptations to your home as a way of staying independent while not losing the friendships and connections of your neighbourhood. Or depending on your needs, you might consider moving into sheltered housing, assisted living, or a scheme with the potential of greater care provision. While the right choice for some, none of these options is ideal for everyone. Alternative models do exist that are both physically and socially designed for healthy ageing, although so far there are only a few of these innovative schemes in the UK.

The University of Bristol's three-year CHIC (Collaborative Housing and Innovation in Care) project has taken a deep dive into the lives of some established communities, to ask in what ways such 'collaborative housing' including cohousing—might (better) meet the social care and support needs of older people.





The work is due to finish in 2024 so the views here represent some early insights and findings.

Six schemes were studied. Three are self-managed (a housing co-operative for older people, and two retirement schemes managed by the leaseholder-residents) and include some level of services from paid staff. The other three schemes are all cohousing: they comprise individual homes but also share spaces including a common house and kitchen. They are designed for social interaction, and their residents are committed to actively taking part in a sociable, mutually supportive community.

The cohousing movement does not see the model as a replacement for health or social care services; in the case of (so-called) senior cohousing especially, a community agrees the limits of what members should expect from each other in terms of support. “Looking out for, not looking after” as one of the groups involved in our research put it.

## For cohousing we focused on posing two key questions:

What is the role and extent of **mutual support** within groups?

How does this **complement or interact** with external care and support available?

(e.g. family members, paid support)

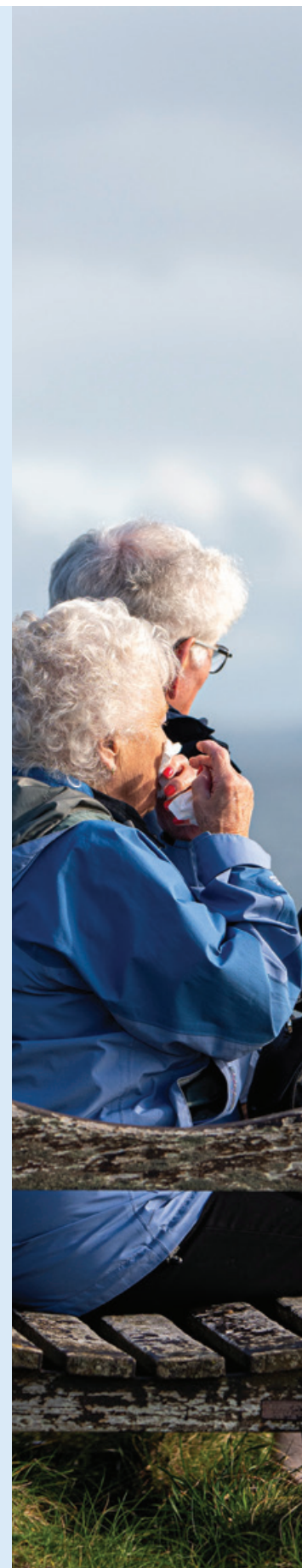
## Findings (so far)

All three cohousing groups retained a strong sense of community and social organisation, even, in the case of the longest established group, after nearly twenty years. This included regular shared meals, gardening, and resource pooling (such as a laundry room). Sharing management tasks around things such as building maintenance was considered a chore by many, but deemed to be worth it, and often regarded as an important element of community building.

- Day-to-day mutual support included giving lifts, fetching shopping and prescriptions, meal preparation during short periods of illness and so on. This kind of support was especially noticeable when a member had returned from a hospital stay. But there were also other kinds of sharing. Knowledge around good health practices for instance, and in the senior cohousing group, encouragement for all members to set up their individual power-of-attorney agreements. Formally or informally, each group also set up a 'buddy system', both to help new members but also, triggered by the COVID pandemic, to make sure everyone was looked out for.

- It was important to all three groups that there were limits to such mutual support – members were clear they were not any sort of care facility. But in practice individual members did often make the choice to go further, even in one case helping with palliative care when social care and NHS services were initially over-stretched during the first pandemic lockdown. We also saw that people might come together to give support in more subtle ways: negotiating with the complexity of social care, health, and other services to better support a member, often working with family members. Those family members also benefited, not least from having somewhere to stay (often the community's guest accommodation) and a supportive community around them, if travelling from some distance away.

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## ‘Benefits of cohousing in later life’

We **identified** the following benefits in findings from our research:

- A sociable community that supports wellbeing and alleviates loneliness and social isolation,
- That encourages better health practices, encourages a ‘preventative’ approach to good health,
- Where members look out for each other on a day-to-day basis,
- And are mutually supportive, with members picking up prescriptions, shopping, or more intensive support around short-term illness,
- And that may enable earlier discharge from hospital stays (or at least reducing the need for post-hospital care support from health services),
- While there are limits to such support, there are many examples of ‘advocacy’ or intermediary roles with health services and others.
- Family members are not excluded, and often also benefit from the support of the cohousing group.

## Where do these benefits **come from**?

- A commitment to sociability through regular social activity.
- But also respect for others and their privacy: cohousing is not a commune, not family, and not always ‘best friends’, but a loose fit community.
- A clear shared agreement on how the community will be managed, and what is expected of its members.
- Design for social interaction, including site layouts where you bump into neighbours, good communal facilities, shared garden spaces.
- Planning for ‘succession’ – designing for a good range of ages and to be attractive to potential new members.

## The **challenges** of collaborative care services

One thing that the three cohousing communities did not do was collaborate formally to commission care services. The possibility of a live-in carer was often mentioned to us by each of the groups (usually making use of a scheme’s guest flat) but in none of them had the idea been pursued, in part because there was no agreement on how such a resource might be equitably shared or paid for, given that individual future needs are highly unpredictable. There was also a lack of clarity among the communities about related care costs at both individual and collective levels, as well as the legal and administrative implications of providing such services.



But the idea of building in care services was sometimes strongly rejected by members of the cohousing groups at a more emotional level, as unappealing and overly institutionalised. As one member put it: “I mean, if this cohousing [scheme] had been designed like my father-in-law’s sheltered housing, he’s 96, I never would have moved here in my 60s. I mean, as a woman of 60, who’s very active, I wouldn’t want to live in a place just for old people. You just don’t do it, you know, you may know that it would be the right thing to do, but for God’s sake, I’ve got another 30 years in front of me! I’m definitely not going to live in a mausoleum.”

While this could be regarded as simply personal preference, how a scheme ‘feels’ in this sense is extremely important in terms of the succession process, i.e. how to attract new, younger people into groups to avoid a scheme whose membership has all grown much older at the same time. The downside however of this rejection of planning for care as a group from the start is that, as we witnessed with the senior cohousing community, the question of how to design or plan for social care arrangements were only discussed on an ad hoc basis, usually triggered by specific health events.

We were however able to investigate some other projects that **did** present possibilities for collective care within our England-based project. These were a housing co-operative run for and by its older residents, a private retirement development where residents had taken on a legal right to self-management, and another scheme with a similar right to manage but comparable to ‘extra care’ and formally registered as a care provider. In all three projects, an external agency was employed to manage employment and other management issues, but crucially, scheme members had control over the cost, extent and quality of the services provided. Each showed in different ways that such collective commissioning can work well, if planned for and built in from the beginning.





There was a difference though between these other models and cohousing, in that none of the three other projects were intentional communities; no commitment to making a community was required and there was much less sense of communities made by their own residents. We wondered whether residents might have less agency in a scheme, if it was managed day-to-day by professional staff and employing a scheme manager. Certainly, we did find that in these schemes many residents took little or no part in the scheme's management: a trade-off perhaps between agency and security of care needs.

Elsewhere in Europe there are examples of cohousing communities that **do** employ paid carers within their community, but which often have development support from local authorities and other social housing developers. Another key takeaway from these European examples is that there is a clear need for group members to be much more open at an early stage of the scheme's development about issues of ageing, health, and care from the, even if the schemes are not intended as residential care homes. It may be that there is an important role to play for potential cohousing enablers such as housing associations to help support groups in their decision-making around these issues.



<sup>1</sup>See for instance, for schemes in Spain: López Gómez, Daniel, Mariona Estrada Canal, and Lluvi Farré Montalà (2020) 'Havens and Heavens of Ageing-in-Community: Home, Care and Age in Senior Co-Housing'. In *Ways of Home Making in Care for Later Life*, edited by Bernike Pasveer, Oddgeir Synnes, and Ingunn Moser, 159–81. Health, Technology and Society. Singapore: Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-0406-8\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-0406-8_8).

# Can social rental cohousing **respond to the needs** of the Ageing Well for All agenda?

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As the co-founder of the 'Ageing Well in BAME Communities' Network I recognise that whilst most older people enjoy the benefits of living longer and living better, 'Ageing Well' for many from the BAME communities is a struggle – a time of continuous financial hardship, ill-health and reduced life-expectancy.

There are almost 11 million people aged 65 and over in the UK, that is 19% of the total population. In 10 years' time, this is predicted to increase to 22% of the population – almost 13 million people.

The UK's non-White population is also ageing and according to the 2021 Census those aged 65+ stands at 700,000 (1.2% of the total population). The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) estimates that the Muslim population (the largest ethnic group) will increase fourfold between 2019 and 2036 from around 110,000 in 2011 to over 450,000 by 2036.

So why is government, statutory bodies, social care, NHS, funders and providers failing to address these demands and demographic needs and what can be done to begin to address the fact that there are stark differences in how people experience later life?

Lord Richard Best, Co-chair of the APPG on Housing and Care for Older People, following the publication<sup>1</sup> of its inquiry looking at dementia and housing said:

**“We noted the growing numbers of older people in BAME communities. We believe the old assumption that people from BAME groups look after their older parents / grandparents at home is an oversimplification, it can no longer be expected that extended families will take on the sole responsibility for their relatives with dementia as they themselves grapple with the demands of contemporary modern life”.**



**To address this and against the backdrop that:**

The government is not prioritising enough of the housing budget for elderly provision. **450,000 older people are privately renting and face affordability challenges** when stability, care and compassion are critical;

Just **7,000 homes** for older people were built in 2019, a **75% reduction** from 2010.



The APPG suggested a minimum floor target of 30,000 new homes a year to be targeted at older people. The APPG then turned its attention to the issue of ‘shared ownership housing for older people’<sup>2</sup> (SO-HAPPI), which Housing 21 sponsored. During the inquiry I raised the following questions:

- Will a greater emphasis on shared ownership increase the number of homes for older people with modest economic means and assets and crucially exactly how will ‘Affordable Home Ownership’ assist BAME groups to access these homes?
- What specific focus will the inquiry take to gather evidence of words, actions and impact for older people from the BAME groups, who are increasing in numbers as the 2021 Census has testified?

What was disappointing is that despite raising concerns during the evidence stage, the issue of access to the Older Person Shared Ownership (OPSO) for people from social minority groups was not given any attention. Unfortunately, the report lacks due consideration, evidence and impact of these issues and contains no specific recommendations to improve access.



<sup>1</sup> <https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/type/Housing-for-people-with-dementia-are-we-ready/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/type/Making-retirement-living-affordable-the-role-of-shared-ownership-housing-for-older-people/>

This table shows that the BAME cohort is far more likely to be living in housing deprivation compared to their remained white counterparts and that this has relatively unchanged between 2011 and 2021; and they continue to be:

- over-represented **in insecure and inappropriate** private rented accommodation;
- more likely to be **overcrowded and experiencing poor housing conditions** impacting health and lowering life expectancy;
- **3 times** more likely to be over-represented in the 100 most deprived local authority areas; and
- **3 times** more likely than white households to be homeless.

Housing deprivation 2011 and 2021 census

ETHNIC GROUP	AGE BAND	2011 CENSUS	AGE BAND	2021 CENSUS
WHITE BRITISH ↓	50-59	18,234 (6%)	50-59	359,606 (5%)
	60-69	13,492 (5%)	60-69	192,275 (4%)
	70-79	8,963 (5%)	70-79	117,322 (3%)
	80 or over	7,750 (7%)	80 or over	67,623 (3%)
BAME ↓	50-59	8,371 (20%)	50-59	232,706 (21%)
	60-69	3,071 (14%)	60-69	90,102 (15%)
	70-79	1,916 (14%)	70-79	33,210 (12%)
	80 or over	710 (13%)	80 or over	19,099 (12%)



Housing 21, one of the biggest providers of accommodation for older people have committed that 10% of their development programme will be targeted in areas where 30% of the population is from BAME background.

The first project will be in Lozells, for which planning has been submitted work has commenced on site and Housing 21 are working with Birmingham City Council to identify more sites. It is likely each housing project will be limited to around 25 properties in order to retain the community feel and aspect. Also discussions about projects are being considered in other parts of the country including Bradford, Kirklees and an approach made from a group in Milton Keynes.

**The challenge is quite simple:**

if Housing 21 has made a strategic commitment to do more and respond to diverse needs then why is this not the case for others, including members of UK Cohousing Network? As demonstrated by the Kirklees Study<sup>1</sup> there is a willingness for the local BAME community to see and learn more about local provision which sits right in the heart of existing BAME communities and a growing elderly population.

It is no longer good enough for providers to say that no one is coming forward.

**The onus is very much on providers to engage with the local community** and open our doors – we have groups that are waiting and willing.

According to the 2021 Census the number of people from BAME communities stood at **1,570,989 and increase of 1.2 million and a 5.5-fold increase from the 1991 Census**. This is highly significant, and we need service models that support people to ‘culturally right-size’ as we see a shift from living multi-generationally. Given that context, Housing 21’s model and strategic intent merits full support.



<sup>1</sup><https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/type/Older-People-from-Ethnic-Minorities-in-Kirklees-Housing-Needs-and-Preferences-Study/>

# Recommendations for Housing Association enabled cohousing:

## Options for social rental collaborative housing:

The diagram (below) 'How to decide on your collaborative housing model?' offers suggestions for approaching strategy design. The strategy or collaborative housing plan can emerge from exploring the intersection of the following key areas:

- a. Housing association aims, objectives and business requirements.
- b. Needs and aspirations of target audience: individuals and specific communities.
- c. Assessing 1) and 2) against collaborative housing options and models



## How to **decide** on your collaborative housing model?





### **Housing associations business requirements:**

Cohousing and collaborative housing bring many positives, but as with all new initiatives they can require significant long-term commitment and the development of a more extensive internal culture of collaboration with residents.

- What are the key drivers within your business plan and strategy for this?
- How much of your business might be cohousing or collaborative housing?
- What are the regulatory constraints?
- What are the non-negotiables vs areas for flexibility and potential compromise?
- What commitments to additional investment and staff development are in place and for how long?
- Are the board and senior management team signed up?
- Needs and aspirations of target audience: individuals and specific communities.

Many people would welcome the chance to have a voice in the design of their home and neighbourhood. However, given the nature of social housing allocations and the time it takes to develop a housing scheme it is not always possible to know exactly who will be living in the final homes. On top of that, community members may or may not be interested in taking on the running of their housing schemes. Individuals will have different experiences of running organisations and working in teams and may have different energies and desires at this point in their lives.



## What collaborative housing **options** are available?

### Cohousing (including co-operative models)

### Cohousing lite



Community-designed, led, and funded by residents as a custom build scheme.

**EXAMPLES:**  
**LANCASTER COHOUSING**  
**LILAC**  
**CHACO**



Community-led.  
Housing association enabled development and management of social rental units.

**NEW GROUND**  
**BRIDPORT COHOUSING**  
**CLT**



Housing association led, managed with strong community engagement and co-design.

**HOUSING 21'S**  
**INITIAL SCHEMES**



### Three strategy design options:

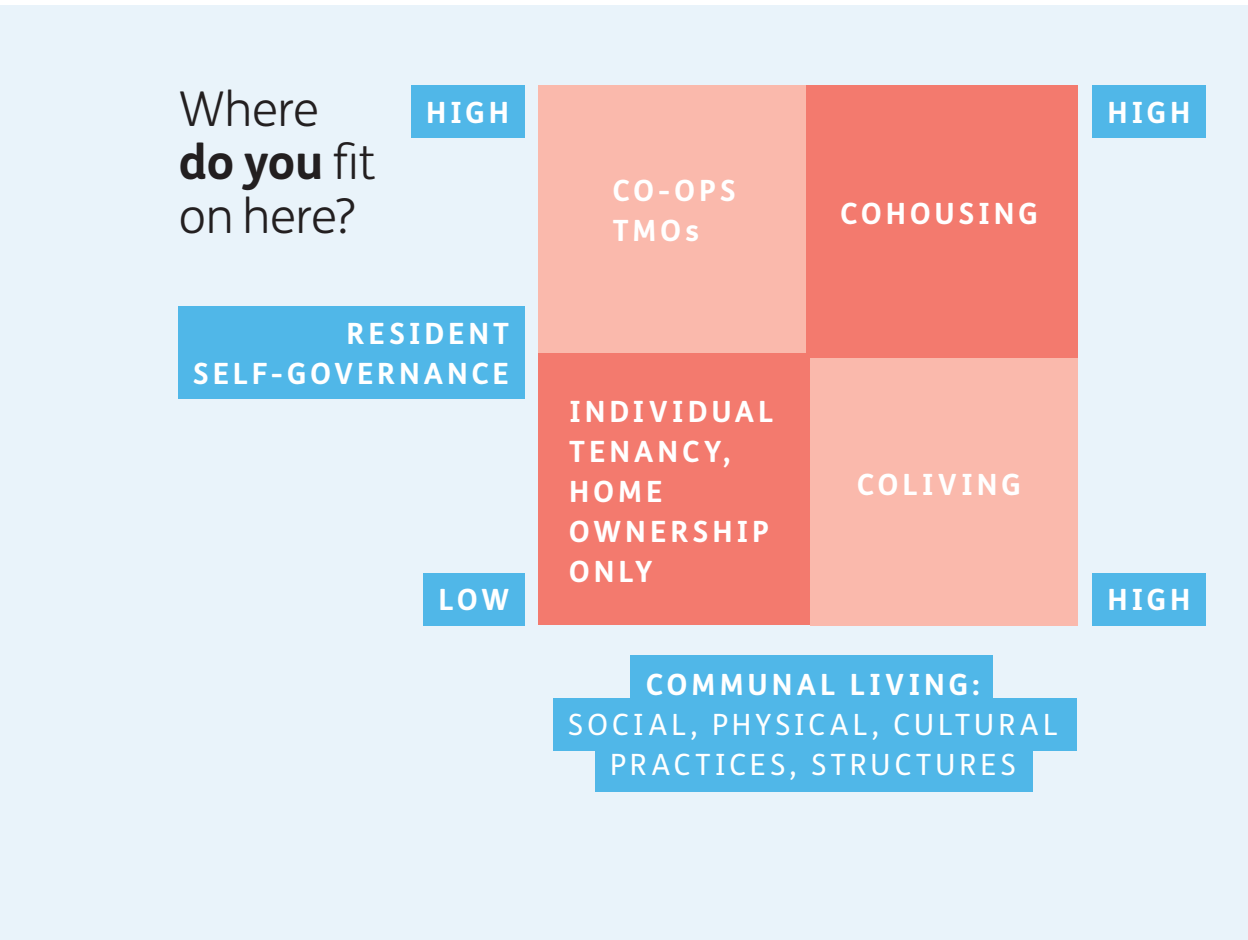
1. Decide that cohousing is the outcome and select those members within your target audience/community with the aspirations and commitment to highly sociable living arrangements as well as formal responsibilities for some level of management.
2. Commit to collaborative housing but remain open-minded as to which form is most suitable – await the results of your co-design process with your community.
3. Follow the steps for 2) but in addition factor in training and support over time that will enable residents to staircase towards greater levels of responsibility.

## How do you work out the **best match** for your project?

During the engagement process  
One way to visualise these options for residents is by using the “Boston matrix” right which sets out the types of collaborative housing models available.



/ Coliving	Mainstream
	
<p>Investor-led and managed, residents as paying clients within an area designed to promote social connection.</p> <p><b>COLIVING</b></p>	<p>Mainstream housing development constructed with an eye on promoting community connection.</p> <p><b>OAKFIELD, NATIONWIDE</b></p>





### Example of a possible staircase of collaborative housing over time

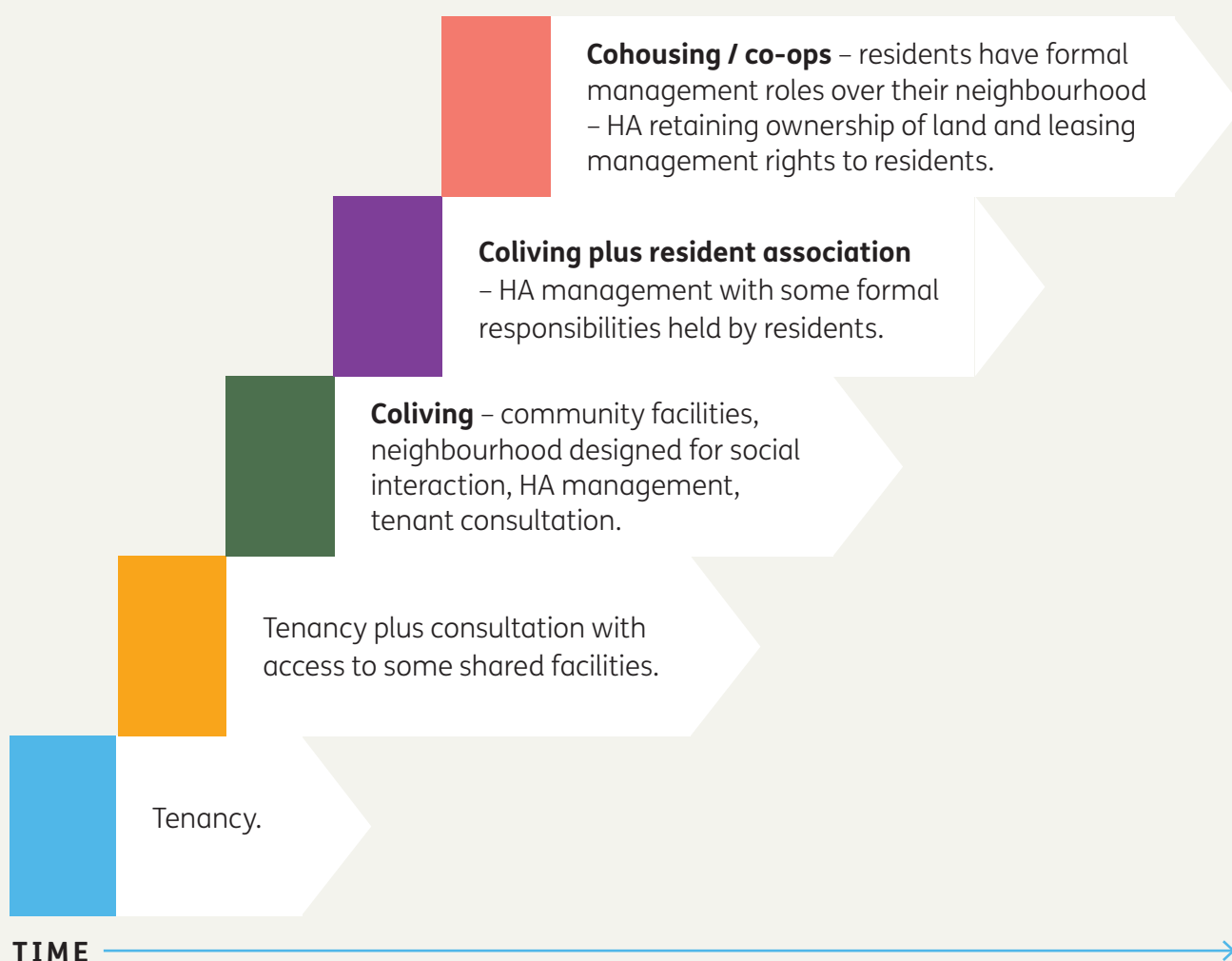
To go up the collaborative housing staircase you can add-on physical design for shared spaces, add in self-governance and management arrangements or indeed swap down at each stage.

However, underpinning this is a growing culture of participation, shared decision-making and responsibility given over to the collective. This might start with the group having a budget for estate management or social events, hosting and learning skills in consultation and coproduction, all the way to formal management agreements and processes. There is an element of “mix and match” rather than a fixed hierarchy of activities.

### Opportunities to staircase up and down the collaborative housing ladder

Where you start a project may not be where it finishes. It is possible to agree on a starting point that best suits a community and then over time review progress and move up or down a ladder of resident leadership.

This is one example – the specific steps and levels of responsibility might vary.







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