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“Understanding Cohousing in the UK for the 21st-century” – Martin Field, England

It is appropriate that this piece on Cohousing in the UK is being prepared for a continental periodical, as the original development of contemporary Cohousing neighbourhoods in Northern Europe remains a source of great fascination and inspiration to many who wish to extend such success into the UK and who are always interested in knowing what particular mechanisms might exist in other countries to support new projects. The wider context for how and where new community-centred projects could be realised remains a much-debated issue in the UK, and there are always wistful glances at any different rate for this to happen in other countries. Only approximately 10,000 properties out of the UK's 24 million dwellings are collectively owned or managed by the 'mutual housing sector' (which include co-operatives, land trusts, Cohousing schemes, self build projects, and others...). While the current time is about the most optimistic for new UK schemes to be pushed forward, there is a constant awareness of the obstacles that groups have to face here in finding the suitable land and finance to make their schemes happen. The ambition of Cohousing groups to plan for their own futures is at odds with how the vast majority of new housing and neighbourhoods are built in the UK, for this is zealously controlled by large-scale speculative businesses with extensive power over the building sites and subsequent planning approvals that will be used to style new residential development. It is, however, precisely that context which motivates groups to dare to think of something different from 'the mainstream', to imagine being part of a shared creation of local environments that are shaped around the needs of the people living there, and not have to accept being offered soulless modern boxes whose origins solely lie in the ambitions attached to capital finance and other impersonal investments. 'Mainstream' residential development in the UK *is* 'Big Business' and Cohousing and other community-centred projects challenge that approach in a very direct way.

For those with only a sketchy understanding of the rate of cohousing development in the UK, it is worth noting the significant milestones achieved by particular projects that have become so inspirational to others. All basically display the characteristics that still distinguish Cohousing projects as different from other *kinds* of collaborative or co-operative schemes:

- (a) design and development creates 'intentional' places and spaces to encourage interaction;
- (b) the neighbourhood's size and scale will be sustainable for local 'community dynamics';
- (c) all dwellings and accommodation are self-contained;
- (d) there is provision of a 'common house' and other shared facilities;
- (e) the Cohousing residents control all aspects of developing and living in their neighbourhood.

The first such project in 'modern times' (i.e. as distinct from 'alternative' communities established in the 60's) was the **Community Project** in East Sussex, established in 1997 when the pioneering group members bought a disused village hospital site of 23 acres. Project development involved the reshaping of three large accommodation blocks previously used for hospital personnel into 16 dwellings for private ownership, and the old central hospital block was converted into large 'common house', along with other shared facilities and offices. 4 further

ownership houses were added later to the project on a 'self-build' basis. In 2009 the community numbered about 40 adults (of all ages) and 40 children.

The next few years saw a couple of cohousing-inspired communal living projects created by groups sub-dividing larger properties into a mixture of homes and other shared spaces, however it was not until a cohousing project acquired a greenfield site in 2000 close to the town-centre of Stroud in Gloucestershire that the first UK new-built cohousing community would commence. The first residents moved in during 2003, and **Stroud Springhill Cohousing** now has 35 houses and flats – from 1-bed to 5-bed in size - plus shared gardens and a three-story common house, for a total of more than 80 residents, ranging from infancy through to older age.

The next key milestone in UK cohousing was the development of the **Threshold Centre** – a community (in 2012) of approximately 22 people, ranging from the mid-teens to over-70 years of age, at Cole Street Farm Gillingham in Dorset. Having operated on the farm as a 'pilot' community from 2004, the Centre obtained planning permission and public sector grant funding in 2008 to create a cohousing scheme of fourteen dwellings out of the farmhouse and adjacent 'holiday' accommodation, plus a common house with shared facilities and guest rooms, green energy systems and a community garden for food produce. Crucially the project has been a close development with a local housing association, to create a final combination of long-leasehold, shared-ownership and affordable rental dwellings - the first such partnership in the short history of UK cohousing.

The next UK new-built cohousing scheme has been the Lancaster Cohousing project at **Forgebank** in Lancashire, a deliberate eco-focused project that has built 41 new dwellings and common house, alongside other community facilities, workshops and studios based within a converted mill building and other buildings that have been reused on the development site. The residential dwellings are all for ownership, from 1-bed to 3-bed in size, and all properties have been built to 'PassivHaus' standard. Due to the site location based on the bank of the River Lune, other work is connecting the project to future renewable energy supply from local hydro-electric production. All residents had moved in by second half of 2013.

The most recent cohousing project has been a further eco-inspired new-build development, the **LILAC** ('Low Impact Living Affordable Community') project on the site of a previous school at Bramley in Leeds. 39 adults and 9 children finally moved into the 20 flats and houses (1-bed to 4-bed in size), plus common house and shared outdoor spaces, by the end of 2013. A pioneering feature of LILAC has been their development of a 'mutual ownership' route to combine cohousing and 'green' development with 'mutual co-operative' principles to make the community affordable to a wide range of households. This has involved innovative use of 'eco-' and 'straw bale construction techniques, alongside an asset-sharing arrangement where member residents contribute 35% of their individual monthly incomes to cover their 'equity share' and the key running costs of the overall community.

Aside from these completed projects, the **Older Womens Cohousing** project in London (OWCH) has secured formal approval for their project in Barnet, while a number of other groups have agreed or acquired sites (like the **K1 project** in the Cambridge area) and are about to submit, or have already submitted, formal planning applications for the build phase.

What should be noted from the above details is that the number of such Cohousing projects in the UK remains modest – the UK Cohousing Network lists 14-16 established projects and a further 60+ groups progressing individual new proposals – and this probably represents the highest visible level of interest in Cohousing ideals there has ever been. Projects have been both new-build on ‘green sites’ and have made reuse of sites and some existing buildings. Almost all of the projects set up to date have been intergenerational and family-centred, although the OWCH group have remained persistent in pioneering the demands that older peoples’ desires for a particular approach to Cohousing development should also be taken seriously, and they are now no longer the only group comprised just of ‘older’ members. And persistence has been fundamental (and necessary) in many projects : the OWCH group first came together in 1998, so it has taken 15 years to find a suitable site and get the formal planning approval. The Lancaster group took about 8 years from starting the project, to finally moving in. Such times have demanded much commitment, effort and patience from the groups involved, and it certainly has been the case that groups have given up and their members have moved on to other things, because of insufficient progress to hold them together.

In terms of costs and affordability, while many groups have started with the desire to provide affordable accommodation and a mix of housing tenures in a single scheme (ownership, rent, etc...) for a range of households and original members, this has not proved to be an easy ambition to satisfy. For schemes like the Community Project, Lancaster and Stroud the site and development and purchase costs were subsequently shaped more by the wider housing market than by a new collaborative ownership arrangement such as like that devised by LILAC. In practice this has meant that those first projects have only really been able to provide properties for long-term leasehold ownership. Rental opportunities have been private arrangements subsequently created between owning-members and those seeking to rent, rather than between the Cohousing community and the renting household, and such arrangements are not without their implications and repercussions for who is or who is not ‘a member’ of the community. It has also been a factor in how ‘Cohousing’ has been interpreted by some commentators as something that is a bit ‘exclusive’, as it can look as if it is only providing good quality accommodation for those fairly well-off, and not able or prepared to help those who are ‘socially dispossessed’..... It is not a criticism that stands up to closer inspection, as it is clear that many Cohousing initiatives have tried hard to provide a range of properties for their different members - some even disbanding when that could not be done. It is also clear that amongst the range of current initiatives there are many groups that are committed to building and providing mixed-tenure and affordable properties for ownership and rent, and any superficial picture of ‘Cohousing’ will have to change to take account of the variety of new projects that will emerge.

So where is Cohousing in the UK heading for the future – what traditions or factors are likely to be of importance for how it develops in the years ahead? Certainly the manner in which Cohousing aspirations naturally fit with wider aspirations for ‘eco’-lifestyles or for other ‘self-sufficient or ‘low impact’ ways to live is unlikely to disappear : Cohousing typifies the ‘do-it-yourself-together’ approach to creating neighbourhoods, and this will remain distinct from the more traditional ways whereby anonymous mainstream development continues to build on a speculative basis for whomsoever comes along.... All the established UK Cohousing schemes have been set up and driven forward by residents themselves – the recent emergence of

projects being set up by commercial developers (such as at **Findhorn** in Scotland) could therefore be a little at odds with the spirit of the basic approach. That being said, Cohousing schemes to date have had little formal help by way of supportive structures or professional organisations of the kind available in some European countries or in the USA, and it could be encouraging if private sector bodies can emerge in the UK that are able to support grass-roots projects rather than over-shadow them. The UK Cohousing Network has been working hard to build the skill-sharing abilities and other dynamics of ‘group development’, in tandem with other organisations in the ‘mutual sector’ and associated professionals. The growing confidence of Cohousing groups to progress their plans and partnerships at local levels is testament to the growing benefits of such support. More material on Cohousing development with particular UK characteristics is also now available in books and magazines and on websites, so a more comprehensive understanding of the elements for creating and carrying new ideas forward is becoming that much more wide-spread. There are also an increasing number of university research projects now looking to examine the value and impact of Cohousing aspirations on local services and ‘quality-of-life’.

It is also a particular help to all kinds of community-centred projects that national UK government policy to stimulate house-building has been encouraging all parts of the broad housing and development sectors to increase overall housing production, and the ‘mutual’ sector (sometimes also given the broad term of ‘custom build sector’) has been encouraged to bring ideas forward alongside all others. 2011 saw a government-sponsored “Action Plan to promote the Growth of Self Build Housing” which gave explicit support to community-led build initiatives like Cohousing, and which was accompanied by new arrangements whereby the government ministry has made loan finance available for community-build schemes. There is admittedly a requirement that some of the new finance should be directed towards the creation of ‘affordable’ rental housing, however there is at least (at the moment) the recognition by the government that community aspirations to provide high-quality local housing can include both affordable housing and other tenures, and that all is acceptable in the modern age.

Whether or not there are particular constraints that will affect Cohousing in the future - more than they have in the past – remains to be seen. There is a substantial degree of resistance to all kinds of proposals for new housing development in the UK, and community-led initiatives have already found that they cannot expect to be automatically supported by other local people who may not want any new building at all, regardless of a scheme’s ‘community’ credentials. In some places (including those with no obvious space for new-build development) it is likely that aspirations for Cohousing ‘development’ will be focused on trying to bring the basic principles to impact upon *existing* places and properties – that is, to create a Cohousing identity through a form of ‘retrofit’ activity!. A few UK groups are embarking on this course of action, and it will be exciting to follow their progress and see how the vibrancy of Cohousing ideals can subsequently be demonstrated through more than one kind of collective approach.

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[Some of the above text appeared in 2011 within “Cohousing in Britain : a Diggers & Dreamers Review”, a 200-page commentary on recent UK Cohousing developments, published under a ‘creative commons’ licence by Diggers & Dreamers Publications / Edge of Time Ltd.
(www.diggersanddreamers.org.uk / www.edgeoftime.co.uk) – ISBN 978-0-9545757-3-1

The website of the UK Cohousing Network is www.cohousing.org.uk and holds details of all groups mentioned and other initiatives.