

A new tradition of neighbourly living

# Cohousing

Clusters of homes with shared resources



THE COMMON HOUSE TERRACE AT LANCASTER COHOUSING

# What is cohousing?

**Cohousing is all about community and people. It is that simple; a set of streets or a cul-de-sac where residents know each other well and are signed up to be part of a community. Residents have private homes complete with all the regular stuff – kitchen, bathroom, living and sleeping space – yet they also have use of great shared facilities such as a common house, gardens, car pools and micro renewable energy schemes.**

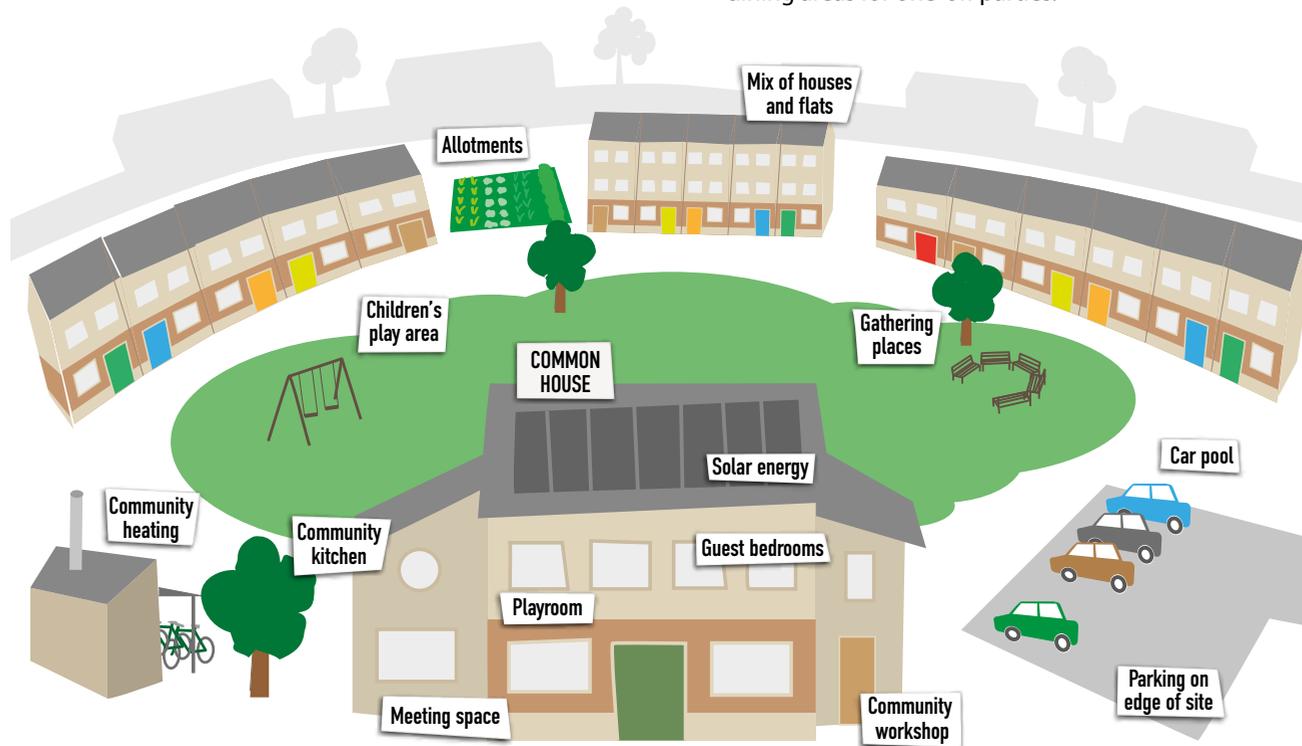
## Who is it for?

Cohousing is for anyone who thinks it would work for them. You can rent or own a home in cohousing. The essential value people need to have is a desire for community.

## How is a cohousing community organised?

The community takes decisions on how to run shared resources as a group. Each community varies in the time commitment residents volunteer. Your commitment might be two or four hours a week and you could be involved in a working group, garden duties or cooking a meal for the community. Sharing some of these chores can make everyday tasks easier, more fun and when others are cooking, cleaning and doing maintenance it gives you free time to do other things.

What would your cohousing community look like?



## Common house

Common houses are in a prominent position where residents will have cause to pass by and can pop in to collect post, check on laundry and so on. Most common houses have a kitchen and dining room large enough to cater for the whole community. Other features can include guest rooms, laundries, activity rooms and playrooms. It would depend on what your community likes to do – and, of course, what is affordable!

## The housing

You can build from the ground up, design around existing unused buildings or make a start by talking to your neighbours, taking down fences and cooking and eating together. Homes can be detached, attached, flats – it is really flexible. Homes can be smaller as you have use of the common house with guest bedrooms, work space and playroom; you don't need space for occasional visitors, or large dining areas for one-off parties.

## Sharing

This is both the hard part ... and the exciting bit. We are so accustomed to having our own cars, washing machines and a range of gadgets that we use rarely. A power drill gets used for just 13 minutes on average during its lifetime. Cohousing is a great way to share with neighbours, purchase collectively and reduce your environment footprint whilst making savings.

## Cohousing and older people

The neighbourly relationships of cohousing are particularly important to older people. Becoming part of a community, whether inter-generational or a similar age-range, offers continued active involvement in daily life and a mutually supportive environment. Senior cohousing initiatives are on the increase in the UK.

## Cohousing design

Design plays an important role in cohousing communities – for example, using buildings and landscaping to create meeting places and safe spaces to play, away from vehicles. Homes are orientated to provide privacy by positioning living areas and bedrooms to the rear of the property, and kitchens and work areas to the front. Cars are parked on the periphery of the community.

## What type of legal structures?

Most cohousing communities register as one of these:

- Company Limited by Guarantee
- Industrial & Provident Society.

It is also possible to be a Community Interest Company.

# Living in community



## Tina from Threshold

'In June 2010 we came to visit Threshold and immediately fell in love and felt at home. By August we had been offered a tenancy in one of the Synergy houses, and the rest is history. I was drawn to finding out about cohousing because I wanted to live amongst like minded people and to benefit from group support. Living in the city had left me feeling sometimes isolated and I wanted to live with others and to be part of something more.'



## Mark from Lancaster

'Cohousing is what I've wanted to do all my life, I just didn't find out until now. I've wanted someone to darn my socks, fix my puncture, help me paint and tell me the best first aid remedy as a swap for me, um ... err ... being a friendly face!? That I can come home late and there's food ready is great. Someone else has shopped, cooked and cleaned up and I get leftovers to take to work the next day.'



## Joe from Lilac

'I am most looking forward to living in a proper neighbourhood where you can help each other out, socialise when you feel like it, but still have a private home. A really important thing about LILAC for me is that it is affordable. It allows me to have a form of home ownership and build up equity instead of throwing money away on rent, while keeping the freedom to choose what I do for a living based on more than just how much it pays. It's a great way of taking more control of our own lives.'

## History of cohousing

The first residents moved into a purpose built cohousing community, Sættedammen in Denmark, in the late 1960s. A group of fifty families were inspired by an article, 'Children should have one hundred parents' by Bodil Graae, to build a different type of neighbourhood from the mainstream.

In 2013 there are 14 cohousing communities in the UK, hundreds across Denmark and the Netherlands and 130 in the United States. Many more are in development in the UK and around the world.



Members of Sættedammen, near Copenhagen, celebrate the first 40 years!

# Some benefits of cohousing

## Cohousing is a sustainable and affordable approach to living in community

### Affordable

Smaller, energy efficient homes cost less to build and run. Communities organise opportunities to reduce daily living costs through shared laundries, community meals and bulk food purchasing.



### Safe, welcoming neighbourhoods for children to play

Cohousing design code encourages shared pedestrianised walkways and car-free central shared gardens. People know each other really well and hopefully there will be play friends in the community.



### Sustainable

Community laundries, car clubs and larders cut waste and costs. Sharing equipment such as tools, lawnmowers and play facilities between households saves money and makes better use of them.



### Social

Loneliness is a growing problem in the UK. In cohousing communities residents often meet up to eat together, chat, organise and have fun. Gardens and shared spaces are situated to encourage interaction between residents and the host community.



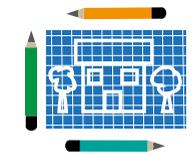
### Working together can achieve a better quality of life

More hands make light work! The care and connections that are fostered in collaborative communities lead to a wide range of possibilities. For example, residents report avoiding prolonged hospital stays, having fun community events and spending less time on maintenance.



### Independent community management

The community decides together how things are organised; there is no external management committee. It starts from the beginning when future residents have an active say in the design of the community. This also creates a sense of place and ownership of issues and solutions.



### Security

In a cohousing community people do not keep a check on each other's whereabouts, but will instinctively know if something is out of the ordinary.



# The route to cohousing

Every cohousing journey is unique. Use this routemap as a guide to the key steps.

## Cohousing sounds like a good idea!



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### How can I find out more?

- Go to our website
- Find links to cohousing books
- Attend a cohousing event



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### Find a cohousing group near you

- Look up the **groups** section on our website
- Visit an existing community

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### Start a new cohousing group

- Gather friends, hold a meeting in the pub, advertise locally
- See **how to start** on our website



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### Build membership

- Agree membership offer
- Make communications plan
- Put up posters
- Hold regular open meetings
- Network like crazy



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### Identify the group's site criteria

- Preferred location
- Type of location
- Existing property or new build
- Size and requirements
- Important features
- If group doesn't agree, revisit step 3



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### What is the core groups' vision?

- What do people want to build?
- How do they imagine living?
- Draw and/or write down a community vision
- Read resources on group decision-making and how to hold meetings
- Get training in group decision-making
- See **top tips for cohousers** on our website



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### Seeking to provide 'affordable' housing?

- Research Homes and Communities Agency 'Community Led Housing'
- Discuss working with a housing association
- If working with a development partner, agree how homes will be allocated



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### Time to get serious

- Create membership categories of *full members*, who make decisions and contribute funds and/or time, and *supporters*
- Decide organisation legal structure
- Establish working groups to share tasks like site options, finance and community development
- Keep an eye on your community vision and value statements
- Ensure full members can stay the course

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### Site search

- See tips on our website
- Talk to the local authority
- Use Google maps and drive around the area you most want to live in
- Contact neighbourhood planning group
- Establish relationships with estate agents, housing associations and land agents



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### Consolidation stage

- Formalise group membership
- Reinvigorate call for new members
- Draft outline community policies
- Fundraise
- Write outline business plan
- Check available sites against criteria
- Start talking to lenders
- Keep marketing
- Remember to have fun!

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### Consultation on group proposals

- Consult with local community, political champions and national supporters
- Keep marketing and integrating new members
- Make sure you have systems and capacity to do this

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### Group agrees design criteria

- Choose a build method
- Develop briefs for professional services
- Integrate new members and continue marketing (easier now you have a site).
- Agree policy with your local authority and/or housing provider for the allocation of the affordable homes.



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### Closing the deal on site or property

- Check out planning permission context
- Commission a site assessment study
- Negotiate an 'option to purchase' to hold the site until planning is obtained

Things are getting serious. Check core members are on board – do not avoid difficult decisions. It will be easier to go back to stage 9 or even 4 now than when you start to spend bigger sums of money in the next stages.



Move in and start living in community...

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### Do not pass this point unless...

- You have a business plan
- The project is viable
- You have proof of equity, cash, deposits and commitments
- Group agrees on final design



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### Get permission

- Seek planning permission, Neighbourhood Development Order or Community Right to Build Order



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### Big group development phase

- Confirm funding is in place
- Reformat task group roles
- Strengthen teams to support construction and design process
- Strengthen teams to refine community policies and process

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### Go for it

- Close the deal on the site
- Confirm construction method and contract
- Draw down and/or sign up confirmed investment

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### Start construction

- Huge celebration!
- Construction phase depends on how development is commissioned – see the **cohousing toolkit** on our website for guidance



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# Designing for community

## Deciding what you want in the common house

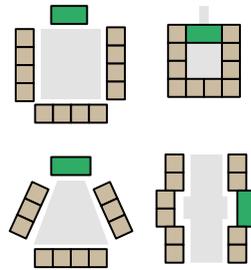
The common house is a building designed for use by the whole cohousing community. There is not a prescriptive design layout. The only fundamental criteria are a dining room and kitchen large enough to accommodate cooking and eating for large groups. Other rooms and uses can include; guest rooms, workspace, children's play rooms, music rooms and libraries, workshops, postboxes, laundries, larders, art, craft and spiritual rooms. The common house should feel like an extension of your home; warm, inviting and intimate.

## Designing together

Cohousing communities are designed by residents from the start to make best use of the site dimensions to suit the needs of residents and to incorporate features that will nurture community and a sense of place. There are different design guides to help the community with this task. With everyone together, start with a large sheet of paper and pens, and have a go!

## Thinking about different styles of layout

The communities that either develop cohousing in and around existing property, or select a site with very defined dimensions do not have the luxury of working with a blank canvas and lots of space. Sometimes this can be a blessing! The centralised location of the common house is paramount, after that there are variable options available like terraced rows and circles. Typical site plan layouts include; pedestrianised streets, one large converted building into smaller units and courtyards.



Some possible layouts of homes and common house

## Defining private and shared spaces

Cohousing is designed to achieve the optimal balance between community and privacy. Landscaping and porches can help create a buffer zone between private space and the public realm. Creating nooks for people to gather and talk in shared gardens and spaces, alongside the introduction of different materials to demarcate different uses. There is no need for six-foot-high fences!

## Elders designing cohousing for themselves

Cohousing is a viable alternative to the mainstream provision of sheltered housing and care homes. The important distinction with cohousing is that residents oversee the design and management of the community. As people come together to share their needs, interests and expectations, the community can coalesce around a shared vision, recognising that there is not a one sized model for vibrant active senior living.

## Design challenge



Try sketching out your own ideal community. Think about the layout of homes, the position of the common house, where to put parking, how to create privacy and space to meet and do stuff – and what you would like to share. Homes can be detached, terraced or apartments. They can be new build, or refurbishment of existing property. The common house can be attached or detached, but should be integral and central to encourage frequent use.

*Caution:* great cohousing design can only support sustained community interaction. People have to invest in the process of building community to make it happen. Building the homes is the easy bit!

## Some living examples



Threshold Centre, Dorset. Soft landscaping at the front of properties helps to separate private space from the shared community garden.

Laughton Lodge, Sussex. A warm and inviting common house dining room. Decorated with vibrant warm colours and using natural materials for furniture, alongside bookcases and comfy sofas by the wood burning stove.



Lancaster Cohousing. A car-free pedestrian walkway between some of the homes and the common house, creating safe spaces for children to play and informal areas to meet for a chat and a coffee.

# Some of the cohousing communities in the UK

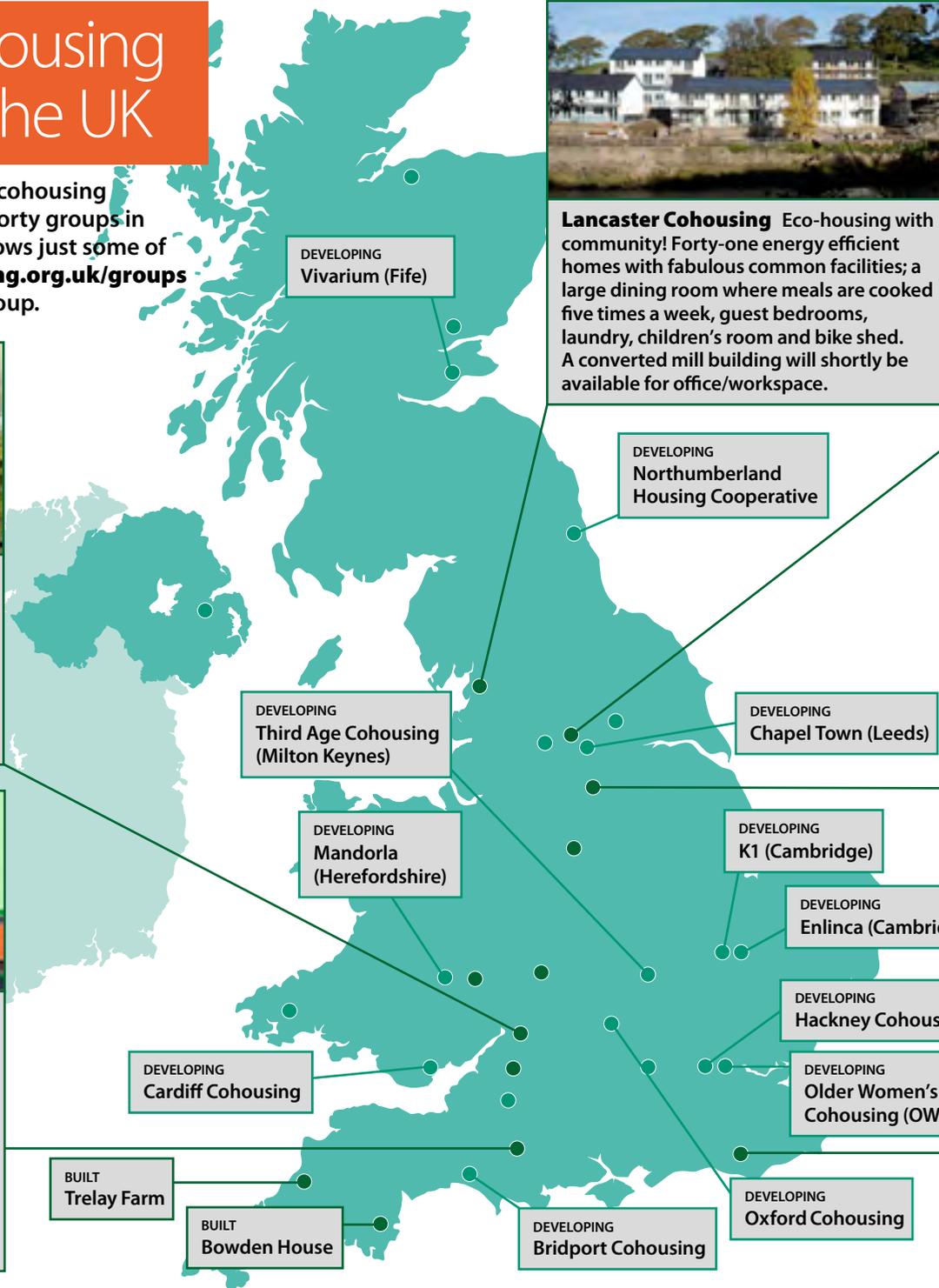
There are currently (2013) fourteen built cohousing communities in England and more than forty groups in development across the UK. This map shows just some of them. You can see a list at [www.cohousing.org.uk/groups](http://www.cohousing.org.uk/groups) and register your interest in starting a group.



**Springhill (Stroud)** On a gently sloping site, pedestrianised streets meander through a community of 34 homes (ranging from one-bed to five-bed). In the large common house the community cook three meals a week. Other features include a community room, games, laundry and workshop facilities, sustainable urban drainage and photovoltaic roofs.



**Threshold Centre (Gillingham, Dorset)** A farm converted to fourteen homes, seven of which are affordable rent and shared home ownership in partnership with a housing association. The community offers various courses to showcase living in community. The common house is a renovated old farmhouse, with eating and cooking facilities alongside a relaxation room and guest rooms. The community also manages a community market garden and a green energy system.



**Lancaster Cohousing** Eco-housing with community! Forty-one energy efficient homes with fabulous common facilities; a large dining room where meals are cooked five times a week, guest bedrooms, laundry, children's room and bike shed. A converted mill building will shortly be available for office/workspace.



**LILAC (Leeds)** Low Impact Living Affordable Community. Twenty homes and a common house. This first Mutual Home Ownership Society ensures homes are permanently affordable. Community food purchasing, shared laundry, car pooling and other facilities will help community members live sustainably.



**Thundercliffe Grange (Sheffield)** The UK's first cohousing community, established in 1980. Twelve households maintain this beautiful 18th century home and large gardens. The community shares a range of facilities including extensive garden land, a workshop, dining room, gym, bar and snooker room.



**Community Project (Laughton, Sussex)** Intergenerational cohousing set in 23 acres of land, with 20 family homes refurbished/constructed on a former hospital site and heated through a community owned wood chip boiler. Comprising of large communal facilities; kitchen dining room, workspace, performance space, guest rooms, shared gardens, allotments and chickens.



**UK Cohousing  
NETWORK**

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

The UK Cohousing Network is a membership organisation, established in 2007 to promote awareness of cohousing and to support the development of new cohousing communities.

## Contact us

We welcome your contributions and requests for further information.

Email **[office@cohousing.org.uk](mailto:office@cohousing.org.uk)**

Twitter **#ukcohousing**

Telephone **0757 215 5172**

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

Our website has a comprehensive range of information about cohousing, details of forming and established groups, events and frequent news updates.



## Our aims

The Network is involved in a wide range of activities. This is a summary of some of the work that we do:

- Promotion of the cohousing model
- Resource point for new and forming cohousing groups
- Advice point for planners, housing associations and other professionals
- Seeking ways to make cohousing financially accessible
- Creating opportunities for knowledge exchange through learning events
- Making resources available to enable group development and commissioning.
- Facilitate research on the benefits of cohousing and how to improve the development journey
- Undertake lobbying and policy development

## Join us

The UK Cohousing Network's has three membership options:

- Group Membership
- Individual Membership
- Associate Membership

Full information about the benefits and criteria for membership and how to apply is available on our website.

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