



# cohousing



## what is it?

It's a type of intentional community where people live closely with others, but have self-contained accommodation. Each home has its own bathroom and kitchen; shared spaces can include garden, laundry, workshop, kids area, guest rooms, parking, social / dining areas etc.

Economically, each household is separate. Decisions are made by members non-hierarchically. Housing co-ops are not necessarily cohousing – often they own properties spread around a town, not able to share facilities; and 'intentional communities' may not be cohousing as they may not have separate kitchens / bathrooms.

Communal meals don't usually happen every day. There may be shared projects, like food production, maintenance, splitting firewood etc. These could be carried out by members or by outside contractors. There may be voluntary hours required of members, or not – it depends on what the members decide together.

Cohousing projects can be for a particular age or type of person (there are many 'senior cohousing' projects, for example). They can be government / housing association led, architect / developer-led or community / people-led. Architect/developer-led projects (more prevalent in N. America than Europe), while better in terms of sustainability and community than most commercial developments, can often end up relatively expensive.

As a modern concept, that people deliberately join, cohousing started in Denmark in the 1960s, spread to the US and back to Europe – particularly Sweden, the Netherlands and the UK, and more recently, France, Germany and Spain. In Europe, projects range from 6-80 households. Some are in high-rise blocks, with professional services. Springhill Cohousing in Stroud is the UK's first new-build cohousing project.



LILAC in Leeds is a 20-household cohousing new-build using the new 'mutual home ownership society' model. The buildings are of straw-bale and timber.



Central area of the Threshold Centre in Dorset, with 14 units, 7 in shared ownership with a local housing association.

## what are the benefits?

- Community: it takes a village to raise a child, but also to support an adult – especially an older one - many experience loneliness and find it difficult to carry out everyday tasks.
- Support: in times of ill-health, bereavement, financial disaster, or a new baby – cohousing can provide support and assistance in ways long lost in mainstream society. 'Senior' cohousing projects are common - older people want independence, but don't want to be alone. They can even share carers. This can reduce the need for local-authority-provided services.
- Security: plenty of people to look out for your place and your stuff; also safe for kids – car-free play areas and oversight by lots of adults.
- Affordability: units can be smaller due to shared facilities; no need for every household to own a washing machine, lawn mower, etc., plus other resources; bulk purchases of foodstuffs etc.; swapping (books, clothes etc.); hand-me-downs (baby clothes, toys etc.). In a new-build project, you can provide the labour yourself.
- Skills: enables skill-sharing, and promotes grassroots governance skills that can be used in other aspects of community-building.
- Environmental: units can be downsized due to shared areas; sharing allows downshifting; food production, composting, renewables etc; less driving around for social engagements.

However, cohousing projects tend not to be as radical as co-operative housing. This can help mainstream collaborative living, but over time, the size of units can creep up, and consumption levels can reach, or surpass, national averages, despite sharing. Then cohousing can become an exclusive retreat for the wealthy, and increase gentrification. This doesn't have to be the case of course, and in most cases it isn't.



*Sunflower Cohousing is a limited company set up in France by Brits frustrated at land prices and the planning system in the UK. All members own the same number of shares.*

## what can I do?

Read everything you can and talk with people who've done it. Start with UK Cohousing, sites on our links page, and maybe some books too. Try to visit existing schemes – some have open days and events. You have to work out if cohousing is for you – e.g. some decisions will have to be made with other people – are you OK with that?

**Join an existing or forming project:** cuts out a lot of work. Find projects via UK Cohousing, which also has more information and advice. An existing project will already have rules and procedures – so whether buying or renting, read contracts and leases carefully, especially clauses on obligations, decision-making and how to leave, if the time comes. Get to know the members, as you'll be sharing lots of aspects of your life with them. Elsewhere in the world, see the Global Ecovillage Network or Fellowship for Intentional Community.

**Starting a project:** first get some people together. You'll be buying an existing property (or properties) or land for a new-build, and unless you're rich, you'll need people to pool resources. If it's a new-build project, expect it to dominate your life for a few years. It may be an idea to start with a smaller group, so that you can decide exactly what you all want. Details may be much more difficult to hammer out with a larger initial group.

**Legal / ownership options:** are many and varied – from community land trusts and co-ops to limited companies. Some require a solicitor, some may have off-the-shelf models. Often, an incorporated body holds the freehold, and members buy a

lease. Members can secure a mortgage against the lease. It may contain clauses restricting behaviour or a veto over future sale, which may affect the value of the unit, and should be discussed with the lender. Members could also rent, or own shares in a company. When members own their home, it could become difficult when selling – if other members don't approve of the buyer. Other things to consider are:

- Does an increase in value of the property accrue to members or the community? (If an ideal is the perpetuation of the community, then maybe the latter is the better option).
- Will your legal model provide the security for the community and/or members to purchase property / receive loans?
- Communal areas / equipment etc. have to be provided, maintained and replaced – the money has to ultimately come from members.
- The model has to allow for new members, in terms of rights and responsibilities, and approval by existing members.

**Planning:** in the UK, sites inside the development zone are likely to be snapped up by developers. They'll want to put more units on the site than you, and will probably outbid you. It's not impossible – it's been done in Stroud and Lancaster. You might get permission to build outside the development zone, if you persuade the local authority that your project will provide affordable housing, community cohesion and social care in perpetuity – in which case you won't be in competition with developers.

**Rules:** you'll have to work out rules around joining and leaving, maintenance, vehicles etc. There may also be rules concerning consumption and its environmental impacts – e.g. it makes no sense to share a laundry room if members have their own washing machines too. Rules are made by members, not imposed by anyone else.

## resources

- see [lowimpact.org/cohousing](http://lowimpact.org/cohousing) for more info, courses, links & books, including:
  - Anitra Nelson, *Small is Necessary*
  - Diggers & Dreamers, *Cohousing in Britain*
  - McCamant & Durrett, *Creating Cohousing*
  - [cohousing.org.uk](http://cohousing.org.uk): UK Cohousing Network
  - [owch.org.uk](http://owch.org.uk): Older Women's Cohousing
  - [collaborativehousing.net](http://collaborativehousing.net): seminar series on how to develop cohousing

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