

**COHOUSING - LOW CARBON LIVING AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT:
PAPER DELIVERED TO THE TCPA SEMINAR 'DELIVERING SUSTAINABLE
HOUSING FOR ECO-TOWNS', 11 FEBRUARY 2010**

**MARIA BRENTON
UK COHOUSING NETWORK**

Lifestyle choices

Beyond eco-towns and low-energy housing, individual lifestyle is an essential route to sustainability. You can build low energy systems and spatial design can encourage or discourage certain behaviours, like car-driving, but beyond this, individual lifestyle choices can make all the difference to the carbon footprint of a particular development.

To quote from BioRegional's website:

'sustainability cannot be achieved through bricks and mortar alone. In the UK, carbon emissions from our day-to-day lives are split roughly three ways between our homes, transport, and growing and transporting our food. Therefore, a development cannot be truly sustainable unless travel, food buying and waste are also addressed. Approximately one third of the average UK resident's eco-footprint comes from the production and transportation of their food'.

Communal sign-up

My theme today is that while each of our individual lifestyle choices is important, what can make a far greater impact than individuals acting on their own is a collective 'sign-up' to communal stewardship. I'm reminded of the aims of the 'City Repair' project in Portland, Oregon, which are 'to change the world one neighbourhood at a time'. The necessary foundation of sustainability, they hold, is 'localisation of culture, of economy and of decision-making'. 'Place-making' here is not just jargon or a technical fix - it involves activating real people from the grass-roots up so that they make a 'place' their own.

To achieve communal 'sign-up' to sustainability needs collaborative structures that go beyond our rather atomised and anonymous modern living arrangements. Signing whole

neighbourhoods up to 'reduce, re-use, recycle', would underpin every other eco-feature you can build into an eco-town. Cohousing is one way to do this and would provide tried and tested building blocks for local sustainability.

What is a cohousing community?

This is an intentional mini-neighbourhood of individual homes - where people know their neighbours and interact with them around common ideals, shared resources and co-operative practices - such as eating together. They live more or less as a group, take decisions together and manage their shared environment co-operatively. Typically, a cohousing community emerges after several years of community-forming - the time it takes for a group to take shape, explore its common goals and - most time consuming of all - search for a site to build on or a building to adapt. A cohousing community signed up to a low carbon lifestyle can offer mutual encouragement, opportunities to share resources and behaviour reinforcement to individuals who otherwise might achieve little on their own. It is most definitely not an elitist development, a gated community hoarding its resources away from the rest of a locality, but is essentially outward-looking and committed to being a resource for the world outside it.

Not all cohousing is ecological

Low-energy living is not a *defining* feature of cohousing, as there are many communities, primarily set up as a social investment in mutuality, which do not take full advantage of their close-knit neighbourhood structure to live more lightly on the planet. Common physical features, however, are

- a layout designed to encourage social interaction and prevent the car dominating living space,
- the location of key resources in a central common house
- and, increasingly in recent years, design for sustainability.

Space for social activities and for home-working also helps reduce a group's carbon footprint.

Achieve more than average neighbourhood

Many existing cohousing communities around the world and most groups aspiring to create cohousing in the UK are strongly motivated by a desire to use their collective

energies to promote sustainability. The outcomes they achieve are as yet relatively undocumented, but it can be said that the UK's few cohousing communities *are* making collective lifestyle efforts not seen in most ordinary neighbourhoods and they offer a compelling argument for fostering such intentional communities if you are planning on making an eco-town work.

Three examples

To give you an idea of the potential contribution of cohousing to sustainable living I will take three communities in the UK - the Community Project, in Sussex; Springhill Community in Stroud and the Threshold Centre in Dorset. These three exhibit varying degrees of sustainability by design and different levels of communal 'sign-up' to sustainable lifestyles.

Community Project

This community, the oldest, has lived for over ten years in an old hospital on a 23 acres site, near Lewes. 22 households with 40 adults and 35 children live in the beautifully converted ward blocks and their common house is a separate one-storey building used previously as an Occupational Therapy centre. The group's site-finding and community development stage took 8 years - simply because such a project is very difficult to achieve in the UK. All the adults are directors of the CP Company and all commit to a day's communal labour per month. In the beginning, this self-financed group of young professional families had ambitious hopes for recycling and environmental sustainability but much had to be dropped due to cost - including solar heating, grey water recycling / and a reedbed sewage system.

What they do have however is:

- A district heating system using a biomass woodchip burner with an oil burner as back-up. Wood chip supplied by local wood merchant.
- 90% houses have woodburners and often use these instead of C/H
- Own water supply (bore hole)
- A Local Area Network
- No formal system of car pooling but several jointly owned cars and lot of car sharing
- Lift rota for regular trips to station, school, college, local town

Also

- Office suite - 9 offices for working from home
- Joint business ventures on-site
- Shared childcare
- On-site youth club, sports teams, games room, music room, children's room
- Chickens, vegetable garden & poly tunnel and some bulk buying of food supplies
- A significant proportion of social life is on-site - no travel required
- Sharing and caring, including support during illness or domestic crises
- The community eats together one evening a week

The Springhill Community, Stroud

This is the first new-build cohousing community in the UK so far and more advanced in sustainable design terms therefore than the CP. The 34 households - ranging from one-bedroomed flats to five bedroomed houses - share one lawn mower and there is a high degree of sharing of tools and cars. Many members also belong to the local car-club and Springhill is five minutes walk from the train station. There is little space for growing food on-site but a number of the community members have external allotments.

There is a three-storey common house with a kitchen where meals are cooked and served three times a week - other shared meals and community-based social activities happen there too. Communal meals represent a considerable energy saving on 34 individual households cooking three nights a week.

Physical eco-features

Physical features at Springhill include triple glazed windows and effective insulation (Warmcell recycled paper) and the community has the largest photovoltaic generation on top of private homes in the country. The actual roof tiles themselves are PV generators saving the need for one layer of roof tiles.

Springhill cohousing was recognised by the DPM's Award for making 'an outstanding contribution' to Sustainable Communities. The main street is pedestrianised and there is a ground-breaking Sustainable Urban Drainage (SUDS) system which flows to a pond

near the community house and eventually replenishes aquifers. Springhill wanted to install grey water recycling and rainwater harvesting but couldn't afford the outlay.

The two communities

The main intention behind these two cohousing communities was to create a collaborative and social enterprise to sustain individuals and families. A by-product of both, if you like, has been a certain level of sustainability built into their environment, the signing up of the two communities to specific lifestyle behaviours that would be difficult to sustain in an ordinary neighbourhood and a learning environment for children which is an investment for the future.

Threshold Centre

This is a cohousing community, in Gillingham, where a small group of people have committed to a shared goal of environmental sustainability. With group behaviours based on both informal and legal agreements, they aim to reduce their collective footprint to an agreed level that can be assessed and verified.

This community is doubling in size to 14 units as we speak having become the first mixed tenure cohousing development in the country. They bought a redundant farm and have formed a partnership with a local housing association to turn the farm buildings into seven additional households. They have recruited tenants and buyers to these recently. The community aims to reduce environmental impact in three ways - the first two of which, you will notice, are *lifestyle* commitments:

- A community market garden and local food-sourcing
- Car-pooling and social activities to reduce car-use
- Shared energy systems: biomass (wood pellet) heating and photovoltaic electrical - towards the cost of which they got grants.

There are also water saving measures and recycling provisions.

Basic commitments

Members share two evening meals a week and the gardening and maintenance work. The community's leasehold conditions commit all fit resident adults to contribute an average of 20 hours per month of unpaid time to work for the Centre. If this commitment is not

met the Community has the right to invoice the resident for hours not provided at the cost of substitute labour. This they have all freely signed up to.

Eco-footprint

The Threshold Centre's main aim - besides to live as a mutually supportive community around shared values - is to demonstrate and teach about cohousing and sustainable living and it hopes to achieve one of the lowest ecological footprints in the UK. The lease requires members to restrict the number of vehicles owned and used to one per household and to commit to a car-pooling scheme, with daily meetings to arrange this. Their ecological footprint is projected by Sustain, an environmental consultancy, to be **2.4 hectares per person**, which is less than half the average for North Dorset or the UK and lower than the footprint estimated for BedZED.

As I suggested earlier, a commitment to low-energy lifestyles can be more effectively delivered by shared endeavour than by individual action. This is far easier to deliver and sustain in an intentional community than in a random, unconnected neighbourhood. **The cohousing model, itself an important contributor to social well-being in a society where few of us know our neighbours, can make a valuable contribution to planetary well-being.** How many of you know your neighbours? At BedZED - which is about 100 households, residents know at least 20 neighbours by name, compared with an average of 8 elsewhere. In cohousing, the aim is that you know and work with *all* your neighbours.

Cohousing districts

I want to end by mentioning how cohousing has moved on recently in Denmark and to relate this to the building of eco-towns. 40 years ago, Denmark pioneered the cohousing model that has spread through the US and is being emulated here in the UK. Recent Danish developments have seen the creation of whole districts which consist of several separate but linked cohousing communities. Imagine that! Close-knit and inter-linked neighbourhoods where people actually know each other and live co-operatively by agreed values! In the Netherlands, some years ago, I came across older people who had formed a cohousing community but didn't live as a group yet. They informed me that they were to move all together to a new satellite town that was being built. They were delighted, as they all knew each other already; the planning authorities had seen the investment value

of a ready-made micro-neighbourhood and a useful addition to the age-structure of a new town.

The contribution that a cluster of intentional communities could make to the social infrastructure of an eco-town would be immensely valuable. In the planning process, you could allocate a block or blocks of land for this from the start. Cohousing communities are a significant local social asset and a source of stability. If they were also signed up to sustainable lifestyles - and the indications nowadays are that they would be - then the circle would be completed of which zero-carbon housing is only one part. If planners and developers, housing associations and the Homes and Communities Agency could grasp the value of cohousing's unique form of community development and actively support these self-managing enterprises - and there are many around the country looking for sites - you will have solid local building blocks for sustainable living.

See: www.cohousing.org.uk

also

'The Cohousing Approach to 'Lifetime Neighbourhoods', Maria Brenton.

http://networks.csip.org.uk/library/Resources/Housing/Support_materials/Factsheets/Factsheet29.pdf