



## Community Building for Old Age: Breaking New Ground The UK's first senior cohousing community, High Barnet

This paper offers a case study on the Older Women's Cohousing (OWCH) group's experience in active community-building. Building on the Housing LIN's series of publications around 'people powered change', it describes an initiative conceived and driven by a group of older women who, understanding that living alone as they grew old could leave them vulnerable, looked to each other to develop and share their social capital. To this end, they have built a cohousing community based on shared responsibility and mutual support.



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Written by **Maria Brenton**, UK Cohousing Network Senior Cohousing Ambassador, for the Housing Learning and Improvement Network

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## The UK's first senior cohousing community, High Barnet

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## **1. Introduction – making a start**

This paper offers a case study in active community-building. It describes an initiative conceived and driven by a group of older women who, understanding that living alone as they grew old could leave them vulnerable, looked to each other to develop and share their social capital. To this end, they have built a cohousing community based on shared responsibility and mutual support.

Long years of active preparation formed a bedrock of group solidarity upon which the women are now building new ways of working together and enjoyable ways of living. New skills have been learned and others shared. Policies designed for a ‘virtual community’ are now being tested against the reality of living together. Individual differences offer unexpected challenges; the early, defects period of a complex, modern building has added to stress and demanded resilience; an understandably high degree of public interest in the project has put pressure on the women at a time when they are themselves adjusting to a new life. Managing all this change, not all of it anticipated, shows the strength of the entity the Older Women’s Cohousing (OWCH) community has created.

Not all older people will be interested in the process of creating a community like the one outlined here. Not everyone wishes to live as part of a group; not everyone wants to live with other people who are old. Most people would rather not acknowledge the realities of ageing, which have a way of creeping up on one, and most older people are reluctant to move away from their home or a familiar neighbourhood, whether it meets their needs or not, until forced to do so by a crisis. However, loneliness among the old is now endemic, giving rise to increasing public concern in recent years, making huge demands on the health and care services, and suggesting a pressing need for remedial action.

This paper will, hopefully, encourage other older people’s groups to take OWCH’s experience and mould it to their own needs. Local authorities and the housing sector may also take key lessons from the self-directed activities of the OWCH group. Housing bodies planning housing provisions for older people could also take some of these lessons to heart and ‘do what they do, differently,’ planning with and involving their prospective end-users in a way that builds capacity and fosters the growth of an organic sense of community, alongside development of a physical building.

## **2. The Older Women’s Cohousing Community**

When ‘New Ground’ Cohousing opened in High Barnet at the end of 2016 it was the UK’s first ever senior cohousing community and mixed tenure. Providing 25 purpose built homes for 26 women aged from early 50’s to late 80’s in High Barnet, North London, as reported by the Housing LIN, it has received many accolades and awards for its very pleasing, age-proofed architecture. These are well deserved. The OWCH group had planned with Pollard Thomas Edwards, Architects (PTEA), for plenty of light, personal space and storage and for shared facilities for their community. In short, the building was designed for comfortable ageing and to enhance a sense of neighbourliness.

### **More than physical design**

Newly formed cohousing groups tend to become overly fixated on finding a site and delivering a building, while neglecting the parallel input into community-building. For cohousing to work, these two development streams need to keep in balance. There is not much point in striving for a lovely building only to move into it as a dysfunctional group.

Ask any member of OWCH what she values most about her new home and she would reply: 'I live in an active community where I know and can rely on all my neighbours'. To the many professionals who have visited 'New Ground' since it was completed in 2016, the group's message has been: 'The physical architecture is great, but it is the social architecture that makes this place stand out'. Visitors swiftly discern that group solidarity is well-developed in 'New Ground' and its communal facilities are well used.



Whilst a casual observer might mistake the building and its shared facilities for an up-market sheltered housing complex, 'New Ground' is in fact an 'intentional community' based on shared commitments, and the women themselves are in charge of it. They have chosen to live as a self-managing group according to an agreed set of core values. But before anyone re-defines them as a commune, please note that each has her own self-contained flat and front door and that one of those core values is to maintain an acceptable balance between personal and communal space.

*Cohousing is a global definition for a way of living in socially active self-managed communities. Cohousing communities are intentional communities, created and run by their residents...Cohousing is a way of resolving the isolation many people experience today, recreating the neighbourly support that many people yearn for.<sup>1</sup>*

### 3. Older people's growing interest in collaborative forms of living

My enquiry into Dutch senior cohousing communities (of which there are many) found that their members tended to articulate two main reasons for moving to cohousing: 'I did not want to end up like my parents, isolated and lonely. Neither did I want to live somewhere where someone was telling me what to do'. These two concerns resonate with many older people in the UK: avoidance of loneliness and staying in charge of their own lives. Equally, a commonly expressed need is: 'For someone to notice if I do not appear one morning'.

Times are changing in relation to older people's autonomy. Jon Stevens, in his Housing LIN [case study report](#), has highlighted rising demand among older people for 'housing that is shaped and controlled by older people themselves'<sup>2</sup>, but, in a follow up Housing LIN [practice briefing](#), notes that it is taking time for society to adjust to this. He comments:

*These processes of rebalancing, redirection and reinvention are enormously challenging for policy makers and for 'service-driven' institutions but the need for a significant change of direction is now being acknowledged and new thinking is beginning to be adopted in the sphere of health and social care. Such thinking is less common in relation to the provision of housing for older people.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> UK Cohousing Network Evidence to Communities and Local Government Committee Housing for Older People Enquiry, March 2017

<sup>2</sup> 'Growing Older Together: the case for housing that is shaped and controlled by older people', Housing LIN Case Study, Oct 2013

<sup>3</sup> 'Growing Older Together: an overview of collaborative forms of housing for older people', Housing LIN, March 2016

The high profile of the OWCH group and the activities of the [UK Cohousing Network](#) have stimulated a growing recognition among older people of the cohousing 'brand' and its benefits, giving shape to a still inchoate desire for 'something that is better than is currently on offer' for older people in our society. BBC TV's filming of 'New Ground' Cohousing in late 2016 prompted some 400 women to contact OWCH seeking either to be put on a waiting list or to find out how to replicate cohousing for themselves. This can safely be said to be the tip of an iceberg.

Media coverage and recent research findings<sup>4</sup> about loneliness in old age have raised awareness generally, causing women particularly, in their 50s and 60s, to look ahead more seriously. There are also too many collective settings where people are lonely, under-stimulated and dependent, unused to reaching out to each other, or reliant on a peripatetic manager to generate social activities and connectedness.

More challenging and less passive attitudes among the postwar baby boomer generation are the subject of enquiry and speculation.<sup>5</sup> The second half of the 20th century brought women new freedoms in control over fertility, opportunities in further education, the chance of careers, the impact of feminism. These social advances give rise to the thought that for these women in the early 21st century, 'being old' is a different experience from that of past generations, that of their mothers and grandmothers, around whom the early welfare state and 'welfarism' was shaped.

The UK Cohousing Network (UKCN), in its evidence to the CLG Select Committee Inquiry on Older People's Housing (op cit), has stated:

*'This interest (in cohousing) seems to represent the changing demand of the new older generation who do not wish to be done unto but rather want to define how they want to live.'*

## Co-production

The OWCH experience has been a hard struggle and the question arises as to whether older people will want to put in the kind of effort that the group has demonstrated. Stevens notes (op cit, 2016), that not all older people will want to take on a direct development role in housing and there are other development paths to collaborative housing which do not require this. One such is the retrofit model of cohousing, a form the UKCN has sought to explore with housing associations, whereby existing buildings are converted for a self-managing group, or active community development is introduced to existing co-resident groups of older people to put them in charge. Central and Cecil housing association drew on this thinking in its imaginative use of co-production with the [Dora House Design Forum](#), in St John's Wood, London. Involvement of the Dora House residents has not just taken on board their ideas for redevelopment but, as a by-product, has helped forge closer community bonds.

Co-production is where a group either commissions or works in partnership with a developer; its essence is that the developer listens to and works with the group, sharing power, even though the actual development expertise may be one-sided. Empowering the older persons' group will have an effect that stretches beyond the development process, if it also results in a group who come to know each other, share responsibility and experience a sense of agency in relation to their life together.

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<sup>4</sup> Age UK, Evidence Review, 'Loneliness in Later Life', S.Davidson & P. Rossall, July 2014

<sup>5</sup> K. Glasgow, 'A new old age? Exploring the values, attitudes and expectations of baby boomers', unpublished PhD Thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 2013



Co-production does not necessarily mean delay and extra costs, and can add a wider social value beyond considerations of monetary cost. OWCH, for example, learned from early Cohousing groups the need for real discipline in dealings with developers and the construction process, and the value of being an effective and intelligent client. The views of Pollard Thomas Edwards (Architects) on this were captured in a [futureoflondon.org](http://futureoflondon.org)<sup>6</sup> blog:

*“The design team insists that the collaborative process between PTE, OWCH and the contractors did not add time or costs to standard housing delivery, dispelling a common myth about community-led development.”*

### **OWCH: perseverance against the odds**

Adversity can be a great unifier, and it is arguable that the need to be resilient contributed to bonding and solidarity in the OWCH group and to the eventual strength of its community. For most of the group’s years of planning, the realisation of their cohousing community was a fairly nebulous concept, hard to hang onto and thrown into reverse very frequently. It was difficult to keep going. The composition of the group changed many times over those years, but a solid core of women remained steady. The group’s strong commitment to mixed tenure contributed to delay, but, throughout, they had the support of a small housing-management association, Housing for Women, in seeking a willing housing association developer. After 13 years of OWCH women meeting, discussing, looking for sites, losing sites, wooing housing associations, marketing, lobbying and despairing, the present site in High Barnet finally materialised through the Hanover housing association in late 2009. There is nothing so motivating as eventually finding a site!

The whole process was made much more difficult than it needed to be in the face of cultural norms that were not only unreceptive to what OWCH was trying to do but at times obstructive and ageist. Senior Cohousing could certainly be made much easier to achieve if developers and housing associations were more used to listening to and working creatively with older people in designing appropriate solutions to their housing and social needs. In contrast, Dutch older people pursuing the senior cohousing model have been able to draw on a broad infrastructure and culture of support in The Netherlands for collaborative initiatives. For both physical development and community-building, support was forthcoming from government policy, from local authorities and the voluntary sector, from housing associations and developers, and from local adult education services. Nowadays, there are so many established senior cohousing communities within reach, new groups can learn from them.

The UK lacks a similar infrastructure but there are recent, hopeful signs of coordinated action and policy support for a growing and vigorous community-led housing movement.<sup>7</sup> The Greater London Authority’s funding of a Community-led Housing Hub<sup>8</sup> will help groups like OWCH find their way through development and planning, and, hopefully, community-building. Power to Change will be supporting similar city-based hubs outside London over the next few years.

The All Party Parliamentary Group on Housing and Care for Older People, *Housing our Ageing Population: Positive Ideas* (or the HAPPI 3) report<sup>9</sup> encouraged housing associations:

*“to use their development skills and experience to assist the fledgling “senior co-housing movement”, custom-building for groups of older people”.*

<sup>6</sup> <http://futureoflondon.org.uk/2017/08/22/spotlight-older-womens-housing/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.bshf.org/our-programmes/community-led-housing/the-community-led-housing-alliance/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.london.gov.uk/press-releases/mayoral/sadiq-sets-out-plans-for-community-led-housing>

<sup>9</sup> Housing Our Ageing Population: Positive Ideas: ‘Making retirement living a positive choice’ June 2016

## 4. The importance of community development

Community cohesion does not happen spontaneously by merely placing a group of individuals under one roof where all that links them to each other is advancing age, frailty or incapacity. This is a truth experienced sadly too often in many institutional approaches to old people, when societal expectations of dependency and helplessness shape their perception of themselves. Cohousing is about preventing such disempowerment and enhancing capacity.

The OWCH women, who are all very different as individuals, are united in wishing to stay in charge of their own lives and they reject 'being done unto' - which is how many of them perceive the way UK society treats older people. Historically, a focus exclusively on need and welfare has coloured perspectives on the old and the ageing process.<sup>10</sup>

Nigel Appleton<sup>11</sup>, in his evidence to the CLG Select Committee Inquiry this year, draws attention, for example, to the confusion of purpose behind our limited range of established institutional models like sheltered housing and Extra-Care. He concludes that care and welfare stereotypes and allocation policies are at cross-purposes with promoting "a normal, active and positive lifestyle, with support". He refers to the inhibiting effects on older people of "the public perception of specialised housing as essentially a 'welfare' provision" rather than a "lifestyle choice". The time and energy that the OWCH group has put into creating their own lifestyle choice testifies to their dissatisfaction with the limited range of choices our society offers older people, and the ageism and paternalism that often accompany them. Housing and care providers need to catch up with modern values. They might develop a more empathetic approach if they were to imagine what they would expect for themselves in old age.

OWCH members gradually developed and designed activities and structures geared to creating a sense of community in advance of living together. The result was that 26 women who had lived all over London and beyond, arrived at 'New Ground' as ready-made neighbours with agreed guidelines for their life together - and their preparatory process is what this paper goes on to describe.

## 5. Features of community building

What are the factors that help build a community? Looking back over OWCH's long formative period, having a common purpose and agreed structures and decision making processes, together with a parallel focus on enjoyable social interaction, can be seen as contributing to the group's solidarity and mutuality.

Common purpose

- having an important shared project and promoting it to others
- a willingness/capacity to devote time to the project
- a core of shared values, frequently revisited
- a sense of ownership, involvement and personal 'agency'

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<sup>10</sup> M.Minkler & C.Estes (eds, 1991) *Critical Perspectives on Aging, The Political and Moral Economy of Growing Old*, Baywood Publishing, NY

<sup>11</sup> Nigel Appleton, Evidence to Communities & Local Government Committee Housing for Older People Enquiry, March 2017

Structures and processes that

- facilitate communication and familiarity
- devolve responsibilities
- give sufficient attention to formal procedure
- have clear decision-making pathways
- encourage conscious community-building

Social interaction

- frequency of meeting with sufficient time for social interaction
- enjoyment and sociability
- centrality of the communal meal

## 6. Participation in the building project



The High Barnet site, selected by OWCH against pre-set criteria, was purchased 'at risk' by Hanover. The ensuing development process itself then influenced the growth and internal cohesion of the group in many positive ways, as it began to look as if their dream might come true. Firstly, well in advance of completion, the prospective buyers had to pay down their 10% deposits to Hanover. Secondly, buyers and future tenants were 'tied in' to the OWCH project

itself around this time by being required to make a non-refundable 'commitment payment' to the group. This payment, graduated by tenure, was substantial enough for individuals to consider carefully their allegiance to the project.

This approach also helped to de-risk the project for Hanover, who became, in effect, a turn-key developer, with all homes presold or pre-let off-plan, before construction started. This is a common approach for commercial developers in the USA, working with local senior cohousing groups to develop a site-breaking phase of a larger new development. Developers may then use their marketing budget to work with the group, and the cohousing development also becomes a live marketing suite for the later phases of development once all the cohousers have moved in.

The group were offered the opportunity to choose an architect and they chose Pollard Thomas Edwards Architects. PTEA took up the ethos of cohousing enthusiastically, organising a location survey of the High Barnet site by the OWCH women, and following this with six highly participative workshops in designing their building.

This was a major shot in the arm for the group. Participation in the design boosted morale enormously and consolidated the women's sense of purpose. Agreeing the broad features of the building and, to a limited extent, customising their own units, gave them a sense of ownership right from the beginning of the 'New Ground' development and was an important additional motor for group cohesion.



The group's involvement throughout the six year planning and construction period, took the form of representation at the regular project planning group meetings by a future resident and by myself, reporting back faithfully to the whole group each month. We had to learn all kinds of technical detail and professional terminology, and the development team, in turn, faced a steep learning curve in the unusual exercise of involving their end-users throughout the construction process. Members of the group were consulted at various stages on detail and allowed onsite to monitor progress.



What is to be learned from this? Involvement in the design and participation in the development benefited from the already strong unity of the OWCH group but also served to reinforce it. When they finally moved in, after a stressful 9 months for many of them of being homeless because of the building delays, they each had a powerful investment in their new home, and a strong feeling of efficacy in having helped achieve it. It was also (mostly) designed to their satisfaction and it serves the needs of the group as a whole very well.

## **7. The ingredients of OWCH's community-building**

Building an effective community does not need years and years. In an ideal world it would not have taken so long and, hopefully, other cohousing groups will fare much better now that OWCH has shown what is possible. Many women came to the group and left again, and, as is the way with forming groups, much community-building input had to be repeated. Currently, the longevity in the group of the 26 residents of 'New Ground' ranges from 18 years to one year. Those who joined later brought their own contribution but could also take as given the legacy of a group already well developed.

### **Regular meetings**

In the years before moving in, OWCH met for a Sunday each month, in a venue large enough for various kinds of group activity. Coming together so regularly became a pleasurable social occasion and catch-up opportunity, with growing bonds of familiarity and affection. There was a danger that this would stay just a 'talking-shop' or a really nice women's club, but finding the site changed all that and kept everyone focused.

The format developed was a formal and minuted business meeting, followed by a potluck lunch and often a workshop or a fun exercise in the afternoon. The meeting discussed reports from the project team and from a series of small 'task groups'. These groups served the purpose of distributing responsibility but also furnished opportunities, in between the monthly plenary meetings, for small groups to socialise and work together. Early preoccupation with standard matters such as finance, legal issues, communications and membership was followed, as the site made progress, by plans for relocation, the future garden, the common area furnishings, service-charges etc. Decision-making was reserved to the full meeting, arrived at as far as possible by consensus, for which the group sought out training. Over time, members learned new skills, shared skills and grew in confidence.

## Lifetime skills drawn upon

OWCH members themselves brought rich resources to the enterprise. The networking and organising experience of some of the earliest OWCH members with a background in groups like the Older Feminist Network, the Older Lesbian Network and the Growing Old Disgracefully Network, was an important factor from the beginning. Many women over the years have come from the caring or teaching professions. At various times also, women with psychotherapy and group therapy training were drawn to OWCH. They didn't all stay, but their emotional intelligence and familiarity with group dynamics informed and helped build OWCH's capacity. I personally learned a lot from them. Their skills were useful in confronting and handling the odd spat or conflict in the group. Individual talents were also put to very good use in lightening the group mood at times - for example, getting everyone to do a silly dance, sing a song in rounds or form a circle holding hands and pass round a hula hoop without letting go of each other's hands. A group of older women wriggling through a hula hoop can be very funny.



Outside the monthly meetings, members participated in marketing and recruitment, designing and circulating their own leaflets, running stalls at London events, doing interviews on national radio and popping up at conferences. An OWCH member designed and maintained the OWCH website, which became the principal recruitment tool of the group. All this external activity also contributed to a sense of belonging and shared endeavour.

## Marketing activities

Membership criteria geared to core values

## Membership criteria geared to core values

A group that means to live together in cohousing has to work out whether their shared beliefs and intentions fuel that purpose sufficiently for it to be viable. That doesn't mean everyone has to agree on all or most things - but unless everyone can agree on the essentials, there is no point in the enterprise. For OWCH, agreeing a common understanding of cohousing and identifying the group's core values was an early task. Membership criteria and procedures were also key building blocks that changed over time and were firmed up as the site became a solid proposition. It was noted that it took a fair bit of courage for some visitors to come into a relatively large group of strangers, so the group set up a process whereby interested women were allocated a buddy who invites them to meetings and social events, encourages them to participate and join task groups, and eventually invites them to apply in writing for membership. After an interview with two OWCH members, admission to the group is formally decided upon by the entire community and, finally, every new member signs her commitment to respect and abide by the values of the group. Traditionally, this commitment has been renewed annually by all members of OWCH.

## **OWCH Values**

- Acceptance and respect for diversity
- Care and support for each other
- Providing balance between privacy and community
- Countering ageist stereotypes
- Co-operating and sharing responsibility
- Maintaining a structure without hierarchy
- Caring for the environment
- Being part of the wider community

## **Member selection maintains the collaborative ethos**

Sustaining the ethos of inter-dependence and reciprocity in the group - which, being mainly composed of single women, operates a 'tighter' community model than is the case in larger, family-based cohousing communities - depends on the group choosing its members carefully to maintain its collaborative purpose.

It is always a challenge to secure enough group commitment to a shared purpose without also imposing too much homogeneity on people and without discriminating unfairly, and the group is aware of this. It is a particularly sensitive matter in relation to access to a scarce commodity like housing. Choice of social rental tenants by the cohousing community itself (commonly permitted in The Netherlands) is perceived by some British local authorities as running unacceptably counter to their nomination rights. Their lack of familiarity with cohousing and a poor understanding of the requirements of community-building can make for difficulties. Additionally, there are very few mixed-tenure cohousing communities of any kind in the UK, precisely because including social rental accommodation has been made very difficult.

However, it should be noted that 'housing need' priorities as judged by a council housing department *can* be reconciled with the imperative for a collaborative group to select only recruits who understand and support its goals and values. This has long been demonstrated in the co-operative housing sector, through mutually acceptable arrangements negotiated between the co-op and their local council.

In OWCH's early days, an oft-voiced criticism that was encountered at public meetings challenged the legitimacy of 'choosing who you live with and expecting public money to fund it'. It goes without saying that the first qualification for a social housing tenancy *has* to be a demonstrable need for social housing. A cohousing community, however, especially a relatively small one, has to be able to select all its new members against its own membership criteria, and this needs to be recognised and accepted by local authorities for a mixed tenure community to succeed. The recruit who meets eligibility criteria for a social rental tenancy needs also to demonstrate compatibility with and commitment to the group's ethos. Without this, what would be different from an ordinary block of flats and how else could a group like OWCH survive?

OWCH has sought to offset any tendency towards becoming over exclusive through diversity training - an emphasis the present community continues today through its Diversity and Equality Team. This training is embodied in OWCH's allocations policy for its social rental flats, based on criteria agreed with Housing for Women, landlord for the 8 flats, and the Tudor Trust, whose funds enabled OWCH to include women lacking capital.



## Diversity

OWCH's choice was to remain women-and-adult-only, but, importantly, it has expanded the term 'older' in maintaining an inter-generational age-range (currently spanning from 51 to 88 years) with the express purpose of sustaining vitality, participation and continuity. Besides being mixed-tenure, the group is diverse in terms of sexuality, physical and mental disability, deafness, race and class. Training in diversity and equality and interviewing skills continues to underpin the group's processes.

To give the project the best chance of sustaining the cohousing ethos over time, a non-resident members' group of prospective owners and tenants has been set up to provide continuity and succession. This is a matter of some comfort to the landlord for the social rental flats, who might otherwise experience rent voids. It offers the opportunity for new women to get to know



the community in 'New Ground'. Around one dozen non-resident members have buddies, are invited to meals and community events, are welcomed to cooking or gardening rotas, and will therefore be able to integrate into the group more easily when a vacancy occurs.

OWCH has taken the opportunity, in selecting potential members for the non-resident group, to balance OWCH's age-profile towards the younger end and to seek women from BME groups other than those already represented at 'New Ground'.

Succession has not only been planned for in this way but underpinned by provisions in the lease which govern who may live in the OWCH Community.

## Social events and fun

All this attention to meetings, values and guidelines sounds tedious, but it was spread over many years, and the OWCH group has always tried to maintain a balance whereby women might actually enjoy themselves. Community-building was promoted and strongly reinforced by the importance given to shared meals, parties, social events and trips organised outside the meetings. The weekly communal meal is a key feature of life currently at 'New Ground'; as are groups for film, yoga, sketching, games, meditation and other interests, and a similar pattern of organised or spontaneous trips and outings prevails.

## Workshops

Over and above the routine cementing of social ties, the group always knew it had work to do and that this work was worth taking some trouble with. A pattern of themed workshops emerged, organised sometimes with an external facilitator, but more often latterly with a facilitator drawn from within the group. These workshops focused, through discussion and role-play, mostly on topics like decision-making by consensus or resolving conflicts, and on practical issues for future life as a cohousing community. OWCH's policy on mutual support, for example, was developed around a discussion paper raising the main issues, discussed in small groups, amended in the plenary group and ratified. It remains the basis for shaping expectations and guiding reciprocal exchange in 'New Ground'.

Today, mutual support is an integral part of the group's community life and prospective members can read the policy underpinning it on the OWCH website.<sup>12</sup> Three OWCH members have benefited from intensive support - two received daily visits and meals for periods well before they moved in, via a rota organised by the women travelling from all over London; another, over-whelmed by the move-in, received meals and visits until she recovered. Many less formal exchanges are the stuff of daily life in 'New Ground'. They all represent types of support that public services find it increasingly difficult to offer, and arguably could not have provided so sensitively or cost-effectively.

## 8. Conclusion

This paper describes a group of older women who feel validated and involved and able to influence their shared environment. They manage 'New Ground' together and hope that their ground-breaking status will inspire others to do the same.

The combination of personal autonomy and a sense of community, where neighbours meet easily and often, talk, exchange life-histories, share responsibility, look out for each other, generate shared activities, work together, eat together - and also respect each other's privacy - can add to older people's happiness, and therefore health, in uniquely valuable ways. Knowing that their parents live in a safe, convivial environment also provides considerable comfort and relief to their children. Happier, more active, healthier older people can be expected to make fewer demands on health and social care services - which are anyway struggling to keep up with the ageing of the population.

OWCH members are currently collaborating with an inter-disciplinary research enquiry into senior cohousing's impact on health and well-being - which it is hoped will be funded as a longitudinal study. The benefits of senior cohousing are self-evident, but a formal evidence base would be helpful in its promotion.

Placing "more emphasis on what people can do for each other" is a theme of the IPPR Report 'The Generation Strain'.<sup>13</sup> This cites my work on the potential of senior cohousing communities, but also highlights the building of informal links between people in 'Neighbourhood Networks' as a means to stimulate mutuality and keep older people socially and physically active in a locality. The authors comment:

*"In a future where we can no longer take the availability of family care for granted, we will need to revise our understanding of our collective responsibility for looking after each other in later life – as relatives, friends and neighbours. Some older people need professional care just to get by, but the vast majority need the kind of everyday help and human contact that neither the state nor the market can provide."*

The model described here offers a template whereby older people can actively collaborate to live as friendly helpful neighbours at the very least, whether they move house or not. Taking down the fences between gardens; persuading your housing association to rent you a flat as a 'common house' to meet in; getting a group together to plan use of that under-used common room in your residential complex so people can get to know each other better - these are strategies to think about.

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<sup>12</sup> [www.owch.org.uk](http://www.owch.org.uk)

<sup>13</sup> C. McNeil & J. Hunter, *The Generation Strain - collective solutions to care in an ageing society*, IPPR 2014. <https://www.ippr.org/publications/the-generation-strain-collective-solutions-to-care-in-an-ageing-society>



In this paper I have described a more intensive model of mutuality, based on sharing a building or a neighbourhood cluster as an intentional community. Older people who want to develop their own cohousing community will, hopefully, be inspired by OWCH's example to put in the necessary footwork in order to reap the rewards, which are many. Hopefully it will be made easier to achieve.

More generally, a culture shift is needed - older people need to be recognised as autonomous and powerful agents of their own futures, and they need to know themselves that another life is possible and that they can help shape it. Local authorities are urged to recognise the wider social value of cohousing communities and use their powers to facilitate their development. Housing developers could adopt the partnerships inherent in the co-production model, to their own competitive advantage, and work collaboratively with their end-users in pursuit not just of good buildings but of vibrant, self-sustaining social relationships within them. Co-production can be applied not just to the spread of senior cohousing communities but also to transforming the lives of older people in existing sheltered housing, extra care facilities and retirement communities. Service providers and managers need to relinquish power to boost the autonomy of service users and release their capacity. Older people should demand to define their own terms rather more than the dominant culture allows.

The baby boomers and the women who followed them in an era of careers, contraception and freedom of choice didn't get where they are today without taking responsibility for their own lives. At 'New Ground' Cohousing, the OWCH women continue to do so, and on a daily basis are actively engaged in dispelling ageist myths.

## **Note**

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Housing Learning and Improvement Network.

## **About Maria Brenton**

Maria Brenton's research for the Housing Corporation on Senior Cohousing in The Netherlands triggered the creation of the Older Women's Cohousing (OWCH) group. She subsequently won funding from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Tudor Trust to work alongside OWCH as its 'social enabler' and advocate.

If you found this case study of interest, view the 2 films made by OWCH.

- The first one, '*Senior Cohousing - the way to do it?*', emphasises the benefits of co-housing, and is intended for older people's groups & co-housing groups. <https://goo.gl/6Sf59h>.
- The second, '*Senior Cohousing: A Different Way of Living?*' is intended for local authorities, housing associations etc and highlights the beneficial strategies in which older women have come together to form a close-knit community, helping overcome issues such as isolation and promote good neighbourliness. <https://goo.gl/pHS9EZ>

## About the Housing LIN

The Housing LIN is a sophisticated network bringing together over 40,000 housing, health and social care professionals in England and Wales to exemplify innovative housing solutions for an ageing population.

Recognised by government and industry as a leading 'knowledge hub' on specialist housing, our online and regional networked activities:

- connect people, ideas and resources to inform and improve the range of housing choices that enable older and disabled people to live independently
- provide intelligence on latest funding, research, policy and practice developments, and
- raise the profile of specialist housing with developers, commissioners and providers to plan, design and deliver aspirational housing for an ageing population.

For more information about cohousing, visit the Housing LIN's dedicated pages at: [www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/browse/Housing/HousingforOlderPeople/Cohousing/](http://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/browse/Housing/HousingforOlderPeople/Cohousing/)

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Housing Learning & Improvement Network  
c/o EAC, 3rd Floor,  
89 Albert Embankment  
London SE1 7TP

Tel: 020 7820 8077

Email: [info@housinglin.org.uk](mailto:info@housinglin.org.uk)

Web: [www.housinglin.org.uk](http://www.housinglin.org.uk)

Twitter: @HousingLIN & @HousingLINews