

Housing 21: a more inclusive model of cohousing?

Findings from a one-year study of a Housing 21 cohousing project



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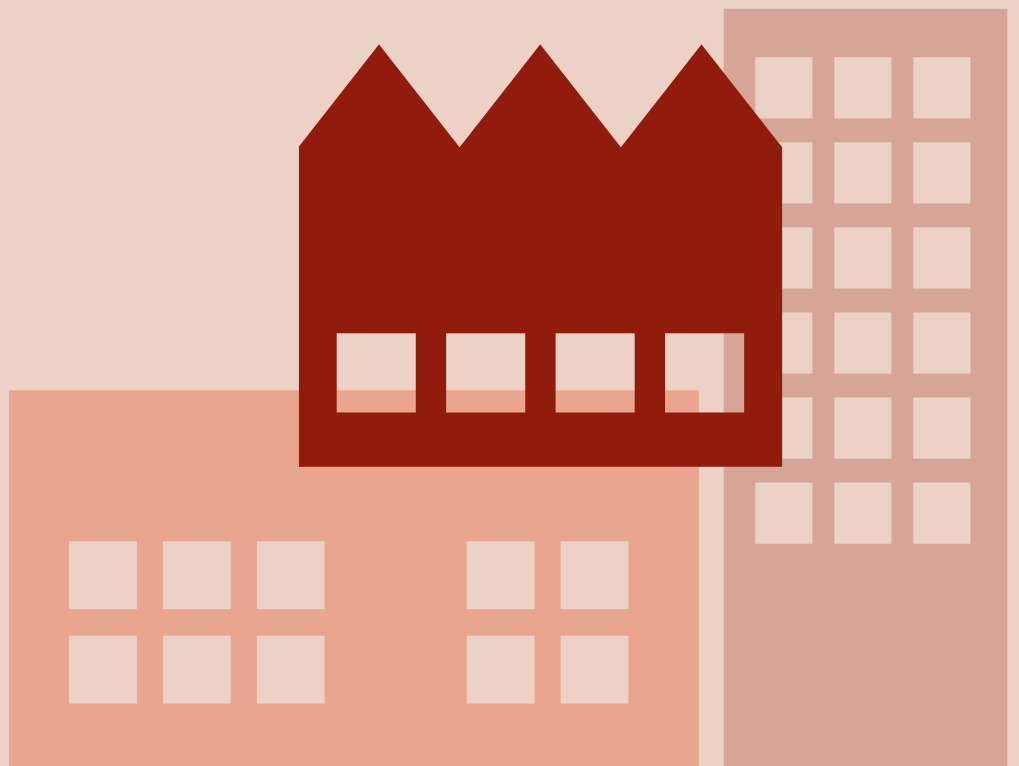
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Who is this report for?

We wrote this report for practitioners who are interested in the lessons from this pioneering model: housing associations, NGOs, architects, community-led housing practitioners and communities interested in housing co-production. The report is structured around the key questions and key lessons we have identified and discussed with stakeholders.

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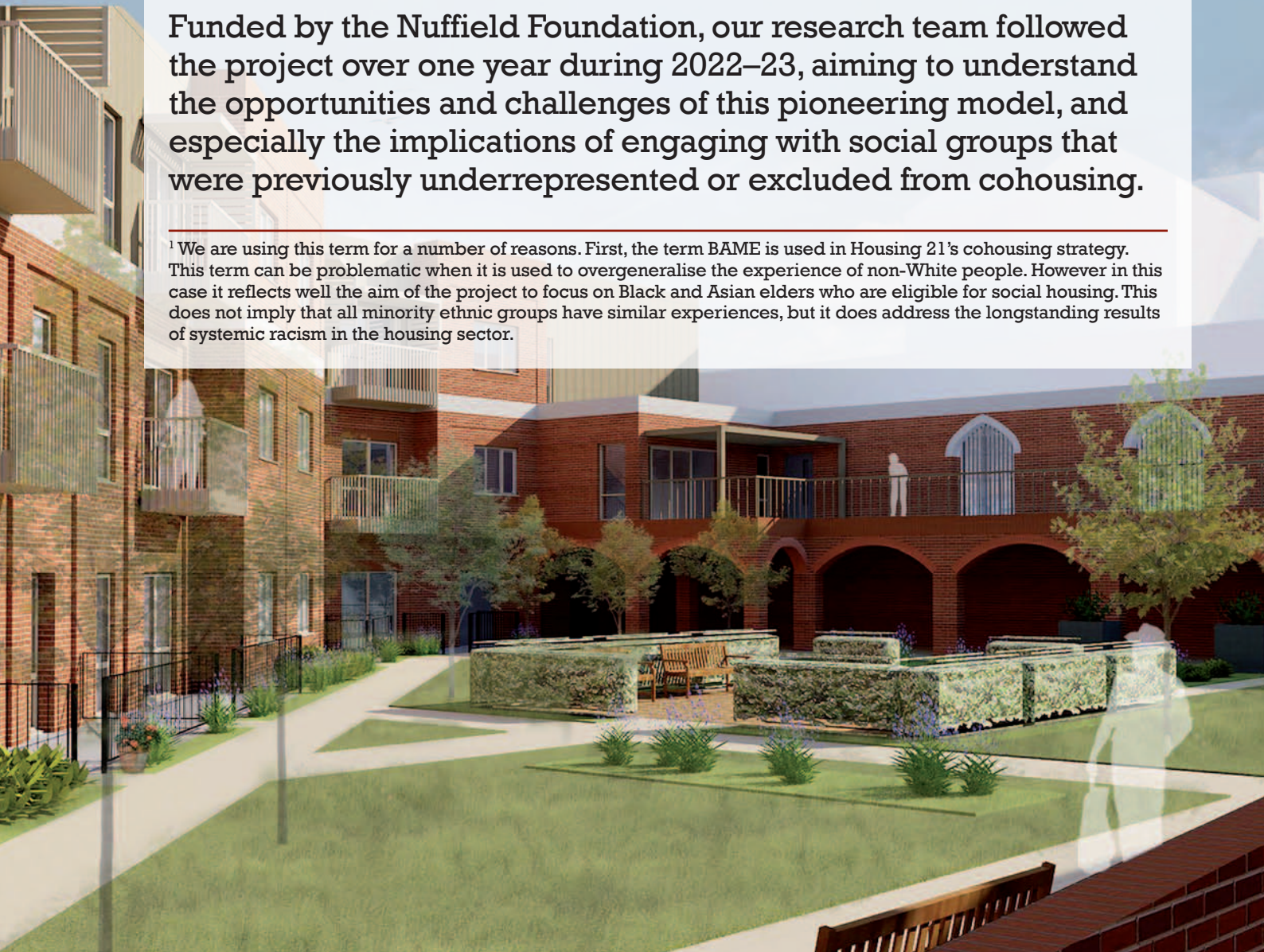


Executive summary

Housing 21, a national affordable housing provider, has launched a cohousing scheme for ‘older people of modest means’ (Housing 21, p.1) in ten deprived areas in Birmingham and areas with a large BAME¹ population. Cohousing developments offer private living spaces with shared facilities (e.g. gardens, communal sitting and eating areas) that are collectively managed by residents. The social and physical design of cohousing aims to enhance social interaction between neighbours. Housing 21 have contracted Triangle Architects and Legacy West Midlands (a community organisation that works with migrant communities in the area) to engage local communities in consultation, design and capacity-building.

Funded by the Nuffield Foundation, our research team followed the project over one year during 2022–23, aiming to understand the opportunities and challenges of this pioneering model, and especially the implications of engaging with social groups that were previously underrepresented or excluded from cohousing.

¹ We are using this term for a number of reasons. First, the term BAME is used in Housing 21’s cohousing strategy. This term can be problematic when it is used to overgeneralise the experience of non-White people. However in this case it reflects well the aim of the project to focus on Black and Asian elders who are eligible for social housing. This does not imply that all minority ethnic groups have similar experiences, but it does address the longstanding results of systemic racism in the housing sector.



We focused on Housing 21's first cohousing project in Lozells, where a site was purchased and a small group of seven prospective residents joined a committee and were planning to move in. At the time of research, building hasn't started yet. We interviewed 14 stakeholders (including residents, staff, housing professionals and organisations with an interest in the project), observed meetings and events, and facilitated a stakeholders' workshop to finalise this report. Our findings focus on lessons in five areas: residents' aspirations and concerns; Housing 21's aspirations and challenges; community engagement; design consultations; and comparing the model to the common cohousing model.

Residents' aspirations and concerns

We found that good quality affordable housing and a supportive community were the most important aspects for residents. Prospective residents were living in intergenerational homes or precarious private rented homes. As society changed and more South Asian families were moving away from intergenerational living, some elders needed a new housing solution. They felt that a neighbourly community would empower them to live independently from their children, as they could rely on their neighbours.

In terms of involvement in the development process, residents enjoyed the design consultations but generally found self-management undesirable. They mentioned some barriers to active participation, including health, work and family commitments, lack of experience in community organising, language barriers and digital exclusion. Some were concerned that these issues will prevent them from active participation once they've moved in, and were looking forward to having a larger group of residents to share the responsibility with.

Housing 21's aspirations and challenges

We found that Housing 21 wanted to offer a more empowering model to its tenants and to fill a gap in the offer for BAME elders. There was excitement within senior management to encourage greater agency in social housing, and a hope that the pioneering scheme would inform its mainstream offer too. The schemes were experimental and not profit-oriented — this required strong support from Housing 21's board and a new way to assess value and benefits.

There were challenges: the development took longer than hoped for, with rising costs making it harder to start building. Potential sites were not granted planning permission until after consultation with local residents had already started. Local council land was sold at market value, and the best way to access grants was through developing homes for affordable rent, thereby limiting the offer. Questions remain about whether the development of shared ownership homes would be beneficial and/or viable for the intended beneficiaries. Changing regulations for social housing will also affect the level of responsibility the housing association will have to assume, limiting self-management on key issues such as health and safety.



Credit: Housing 21

Community engagement lessons

We found that community engagement was a skilled work that benefited from the experience of Legacy WM as a local, BAME-led community organisation that specialises in supporting and empowering migrant communities. Investing time and money in a contract with an organisation that specialises in outreach and capacity-building was one of the projects' strengths. The approach was holistic and saw prospective residents not simply as individuals but as part of the fabric of the local community.

There were many challenges to introducing this new concept to marginalised communities and to quickly building capacity for self-management. It was confusing to community members, and as the use of the term 'cohousing' here is not conventional, it was also not entirely clear for staff; there was a sense that it's not exactly cohousing as other communities use it, but rather a very neighbourly community with more decision-making opportunities. In that sense, the common cohousing experience of grassroots-led projects for more privileged groups was of less relevance, and it was tricky to prepare people for something that no one has done before.

Residents struggled to commit to regular meetings, and generally had little enthusiasm for self-management or for capacity-building towards this. Selecting people based on their housing needs rather than their capacity to self-manage steered the community in a certain direction; perhaps selecting people with different motivations and experience will lead to a different dynamic. Greater participation requires ongoing involvement and support after moving in. Court managers (who oversee the day-to-day workings of retirement homes schemes) or external providers will have a unique role to empower and encourage self-management, conviviality and decision-making.

Design consultation

In terms of design consultation, we found that it started from the very first engagement and involved at least three consultation events before planning applications were submitted. This meant that residents' input affected the design at an early stage and over a relatively short period of time.

The offer included 1 and 2 bedroom flats, each self-contained with a kitchen, a living room and other facilities. At 58.2 m² for the 1 bed flats, they could accommodate a couple and were larger than the minimum requirement for this type of housing. In addition, the scheme offers a communal space with a large kitchen and dining area for shared meals and a communal lounge. Within the constraints of regulations and Housing 21's requirements, residents had opportunities to comment on the interior design and the external layout, including the door design and kitchen layout. The consultation was unusual for housing association tenants, but the process was shorter than the average in grassroots cohousing communities. This meant that residents had little time to learn about what life in cohousing might look like prior to the consultation, so their input was based on their current housing experience. Considering that, it was helpful that the Triangle Architects had very good knowledge of cohousing. We found that there were some aspects of culturally sensitive design and that, where possible, the design was attentive to people's needs.

Comparison with the common model of cohousing

We found that the project differed from other cohousing projects in some important ways: developer-led rather than community-led; fully rented and affordable and not involving homeownership; aimed only at marginalised communities and not for privileged groups; focusing on conviviality and not on self-management and shared values.

We also found that the term cohousing itself was alien and confusing for many people involved. Housing 21 is aiming for a cohousing-style model in the future, acknowledging that this is a long journey. We suggest that the model will not be wedded to a rigid concept, and that the cohousing model may be just one of many options residents will be able to choose from over time.



Credit: Triangle Architects. Artist's impression of Chain Walk Cohousing

Key recommendations

We conclude with recommendations and insights on the next steps. These include the importance of investment in community engagement and a long design consultation process; the role of public landowners in assessing social value; the importance of alternative assessment of social value for housing associations' development; and the potential for community participation of recruiting younger people in their early 60s and residents with some experience in activism or volunteering.

Housing 21's investment in the consultation and engagement process meant that residents were building trust and confidence over time and had an opportunity to be meaningfully involved in the design process. Contracting a specialist organisation (Legacy WM) to deliver the engagement meant that it was tailored to local people's needs.

Housing 21's senior management and board agreed to evaluate the development differently to their normal offer, focusing on social value and investing more money in a relatively small scheme.

To improve residents' management skills, we recommend that the housing association devolves a small budget to residents, for example to be able to agree collectively on decorating the communal spaces or managing the garden space.

Residents had some concerns regarding their capacity to remain active in the community as they age. We recommend focusing on older people from the younger side of the 55+ spectrum, to enable continuity and better chances of good health to support active engagement. In the common cohousing model, residents often have a background in activism or volunteering. This is an asset to the community and can be replicated in a top-down model too. This can help empower the community and equalise the power dynamic with the housing association.

We acknowledge that Housing 21's offer is not limited to the cohousing model: the strategy invites residents to choose this from a range of other options. It is therefore advised that this is communicated more accurately, using a terminology that is familiar and clear.

We also capture some of the more practical lessons learnt, like checking residents' eligibility at an early stage to avoid disappointment, and considering a pre-planning application process with the local authority prior to design consultations, so residents are presented with a proposal that is more likely to secure planning permission.

Going forward, we expect that to maintain the community as more than just a small block of flats, the community will have to engage in ongoing community building, learning, support and capacity-building. Cohousing communities teach us that when people work together, they bond together, get to know each other and feel committed to each other. Given that residents will not be brought together through significant self-management work, it will be Housing 21 or Legacy WM's role to work with residents to develop the scheme in line with Housing 21's strategy and according to their wishes. The housing association and supporting community organisation have an ongoing role in supporting, empowering and training residents in relevant skills for community living, from practical management aspects to the soft skills of conflict resolution, decision-making and living with difference.

The project is still ongoing and many lessons are yet to be learnt. This report reflects the initial stage of the project, before the building of the first scheme started and at a stage when most of the residents are yet to join.

Introduction

Cohousing and the emergence of Housing 21's cohousing strategy

In 2020, Housing 21 — a national housing association with a mission to provide 'extra care and retirement living for older people of modest means' — launched its cohousing strategy. As discussed in detail below, cohousing communities are generally defined as places where 'residents come together to manage their community, share activities, and regularly eat together' in what are 'intentional communities' (UK Cohousing, 2023). In this sense they are both physical and social developments, creating new housing and social relations.



Credit: Triangle Architects. Artist's impression of Chain Walk Cohousing

What is cohousing?

The term 'cohousing' normally refers to small housing developments that are developed and managed by residents, and in most cases owned by residents collectively. In cohousing communities, residents have private homes and shared facilities, including a shared garden and a common house where members can cook, socialise, have shared meals and other social activities. The social and architectural design of cohousing is focused on increasing social interaction and encouraging members to look out for each other and work together. Cohousing communities often make decisions by consensus, involving all members in direct participation (rather than delegating responsibilities to an external agent or elected representatives). The daily management of the development is the responsibility of members, normally in the form of dedicated task groups. Through cooperation and daily interaction, stronger community ties are forged.

In the UK, cohousing is a small sector of about 20 neighbourhoods nationally. Most of these were initiated and developed by a small group of volunteers over several years. Communities offer predominantly privately owned homes or private rent, although some offer affordable housing in the form of affordable rent, mutual home ownership or shared ownership. The demanding and highly skilled job of setting up and managing cohousing communities, the focus on private ownership and the unique lifestyle it offers are some of the reasons why cohousing membership is predominantly made up of middle class, White, progressive and highly educated people. In the UK, people from ethnic minority groups, especially South Asians, and people with low educational attainment are almost absent from cohousing communities (in contrast to other forms of community-led housing such as housing cooperatives).



Credit: Housing 21 Cohousing strategy 2021-2023

Housing 21's strategy sets the aim of developing ten individual cohousing projects in the West Midlands, specifically in areas of multiple deprivation, where 'at least 30% of the population are from ethnically diverse backgrounds' (H21 cohousing strategy, p.7 and 15). Historically, cohousing has not developed in any significant way in these areas or been led by people from non-White British backgrounds (Arbell 2021). These communities are often grassroots organisations, and require many years of hard work by self-managing communities with little external financial support (Chatterton, 2014; Field, 2020; Tummers, 2015). Consequently, people on low income and from marginalised communities are often excluded from cohousing communities.

Housing 21's strategy is pioneering in that it prioritises enhanced consultation with tenants prior to building and moving in, and focuses on marginalised communities and residents who are Black and South Asian. Specifically, Housing 21's Cohousing projects aims to address some issues of housing deprivation faced by older Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) people. (Reflecting Housing 21's focus and language, we have adopted the 'BAME' acronym when discussing the communities and individuals being supported, though acknowledge this is contested.) It is well established that Black and South Asian residents, in general terms, experience a disproportionate level of housing problems, related to overcrowding, poor-quality privately-owned homes and poor quality homes in precarious private rents (HM Government, 2023; De Noronha, 2019).

With attention to the changing housing needs of older people from these communities, Housing 21, through its cohousing schemes, aims to offer good quality, affordable and secure housing to people who are not necessarily on the local council's allocations list, but nonetheless have housing needs. Through its work with a community organisation that can engage with people whose needs are not met, it can increase its outreach and identify more bespoke solutions to the needs of specific communities.

Aims and research questions

This research project set out to explore how a more inclusive and accessible model than other cohousing developments in the UK might shape the culture and practice of cohousing. Focusing on Housing 21's first project while also learning from their other developing cohousing schemes, we have sought to explore:

- a. How are people getting involved in these schemes?
- b. What is their perception of cohousing?
- c. What is good practice for housing associations working collaboratively with tenants?
- d. What is the role of community organisations in facilitating such a project?
- e. What might hinder or aid the development of these types of projects?
- f. Can the cohousing sector learn from this model and its development process?

We aimed to consider these questions in collaboration with participants (namely the residents and professionals working on the scheme) so that the research can inform their practice.

Scope and limitations of the research

The report summarises the findings from a one-year scoping study of the cohousing project, focusing on the work with the first members of the first Housing 21 cohousing group in Chain Walk, Lozells, Birmingham. To supplement the insights from this scheme, we also visited a consultation event at another location in Birmingham (Smiths Street, Jewellery Quarter), where Housing 21 was beginning to engage with a different community to develop a second cohousing project. We also gathered information about other projects in the pipeline and two other projects in Birmingham that started before our research commenced but were discontinued after failing to secure a planning permission.

The development of Chain Walk is still ongoing, and at the time of writing the building has not started yet and the community is still forming. The report therefore provides answers to our research questions regarding a specific point in time and a specific place. The learning is focused on this initial stage of recruitment, engagement, design and capacity-building. We cannot say what is good practice for the lived-in stage, or what community engagement looks like with a fully allocated development. Readers should consider the importance of context and the risk of generalisation: each community will have its own story, and the preliminary findings of this pilot research did not capture the different experiences of different communities with different backgrounds, skills and aspirations.



Credit: Triangle Architects. Triangle architect during a 1 to 1 consultation with a prospective Chain Walk resident



Credit: CRESR. Research workshop with stakeholders

Methods

This is a qualitative research project with a critical realist approach, which means we wanted to understand what works for whom in collaboration with the research participants. Through semi-structured interviews we asked participants to reflect on the way the project was developing and their involvement in it.

Interviews were conducted with prospective residents and a wide range of stakeholders. Through the course of the research, we have interviewed 15 people in total, with some interviewees engaged multiple times. Ten interviews were conducted with senior and frontline staff at Housing 21, Legacy WM and Triangle Architects, as well as stakeholders from other local and national organisations. We conducted nine interviews with five prospective residents of the Chain Walk scheme, alongside informal conversations with other prospective members at group events. Four residents were interviewed twice between the end of 2022 and mid-2023 (after the scheme design was agreed and before the building started). This allowed us to understand how their involvement evolved over time.

The residents' group consisted of seven members, the majority being of Bangladeshi heritage, over 70 years old and living within one mile of the site. We attended consultation events with residents, committee meetings, and the Housing 21 'focus group' meetings (where staff discuss the strategy's implementation with selected professionals to capture learning). We also attended a learning day at Summerhill Cohousing in Stroud, organised by Housing 21 and UKCN. The visit enabled staff to deepen their understanding of cohousing and to reflect on their work up to that point.

Interviews were held online and in person. Where participants were not fluent in English, interviews were conducted with the aid of an interpreter. All in-person interviews were recorded and transcribed. Online interviews were recorded and transcribed automatically using MS Teams auto-transcript. We have recorded some conversations at the consultation events, but due to difficulty in gaining informed consent in a drop-in setting in which participants could not read our leaflets about the research project, we took extensive notes instead. Interviews have been mostly anonymised, and due to the small number of



Credit: CRESR. Research workshop with stakeholders

participants we did not use unique identifiers to prevent easy identification, and instead refer to them as members of staff or prospective residents. In one case we received consent to use an interviewee's name in the report, as his role grants credibility to his views. We also read Housing 21's strategy and the internal learning documents that were generously shared with us.

Finally, a draft of this report was presented to participants for discussion and further comments and insights in a workshop. At the day-long workshop, professionals from Housing 21, Legacy WM and Triangle worked with national stakeholders and our research team to discuss the findings, suggest corrections, and reflect on key findings, offering additional insights to those collected in interviews and observations. This included a deeper understanding of the challenges and aspirations for the future, of the scheme's position within the wider community-led housing field, and reflections on key lessons learnt. This version of the report reflects these discussions.

Data from these multiple sources were organised against our research questions and against other emerging themes. Data on practices, process and resident perceptions were captured, as we explicitly focused on 'what works' and the challenges involved in this pioneering project. This applies to the stage of the project, and focuses on community engagement and consultation. Drawing on our

previous research on other forms of community-led housing developments, we were able to add some comparative insights to reveal the unique nature of Housing 21's work.

Report structure

The following section sets out more context in terms of the cohousing strategy created by Housing 21, and the delivery processes for it. The cohousing development has many aspects, and we expect different readers to be interested in different aspects. We present lessons for five different but overlapping audiences: those interested in the housing association's perspective; the community engagement processes; design consultations; the perspective of the Chain Walk residents; and those interested in understanding where this project sits within the community-led housing world. Our findings are set out in five sections:

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Housing 21's cohousing strategy and its implementation

Why cohousing?

Cohousing neighbourhoods — private homes and shared facilities that are managed collaboratively by all residents (Field, 2004) — are considered a model for social cohesion and successful ageing (Warner et al, 2020). It helps to tackle loneliness and social isolation, offers a sense of belonging and an opportunity to collaborate with others and learn new skills (Scanlon, Hudson et al, 2021).

In the UK, these communities are member-led and involve mainly White and highly educated homeowners (Arbell, 2021). Limited state support or interest from housing associations limit cohousing's accessibility both financially and culturally (Archer, 2020a; Arbell, 2021). Only a few UK communities have made cohousing accessible to people in social housing (examples include Threshold, Bridport Cohousing, New Ground; see Fernandez-Arrigoitia and West, 2019). The decision to work specifically with economically deprived Black and South Asian communities is pioneering for cohousing communities in the UK, where people from these groups are currently marginalised.



Housing 21's plan to develop up to ten cohousing schemes in deprived neighbourhoods opens up a version of bespoke community living to new people in housing need and drastically changes the development process from community-led to professional.

Inclusion in cohousing can tackle some of the key issues affecting older people from marginalised communities. Older people in the UK face loneliness, social isolation, and a deficient social care system, which adversely affects their physical and mental health (Gardiner et al., 2018). Bangladeshi and Black-African older people in particular experience higher levels of housing deprivation than White British older people (De Noronha, 2019), and this has a significant impact on their health and wellbeing (House of Commons, 2018).

Specifically for older people in South Asian communities, housing needs are changing with the cultural and social landscape, affecting forms of support from extended families that were available to previous generations. Older people are now looking for independent housing solutions, away from overcrowded intergenerational homes, and increasingly engaging with options such as residential care and nursing homes (UK Gov, 2022). Cohousing is praised for tackling some of these issues through collaborative living and mutual aid, and is even said to decrease demands on health and social care services (Warner et al, 2020).

Housing 21's cohousing model is different from the way residents-led projects use the term 'cohousing'. Most crucially, these schemes are initiated by a housing association and the community forms around a specific site (normally, cohousing groups are formed by members who start looking for a site, sometimes for several years). While cohousing communities emphasise residents' agency and control of all aspects of the development process, the strategy suggests a range of

management models. Housing 21's strategy is also clear that they will not establish intentional communities for 'like-minded people' and that communities will not subscribe to specific values, thereby making them more diverse and inclusive than other cohousing communities. Finally, social housing is highly regulated in comparison to most cohousing schemes, and even more so following the 2023 Social Housing Regulation Act. New requirements, such as professional qualifications for housing managers, strict inspections and requirement for transparency on their compliance performance are all likely to have implications for the degree of residents' control the housing association can delegate.

The strategy aims to provide social rented homes that are more appropriate for the client group and also perceived by investors to be lower risk (H21 strategy, p.8). However, if there is strong local demand, Housing 21's strategy is willing to provide up to 25% of the units in a project as shared ownership.



Images from the consultation display board with design ideas. Credit: Tim Crocker

Project timeline

The cohousing strategy aims to achieve its goal within a specified timeline. However, as discussed below, this was dramatically affected by the emergence of Covid-19 and other external developments. The following diagram sets out the development of the cohousing project to date:

2020

- H21 Cohousing Strategy launched
- Triangle Architects selected
- Legacy WM contracted to engage with the Chain Walk community
- Community engagement at Chain Walk begins
- Covid-19 national lockdown

2021

- Consultation continues
- Exploring additional sites across Birmingham
- Consultation events with 3 communities begin
- A committee of core prospective residents formed in Chain Walk
- Design work on several sites

2022

- Consultation continues with Chain Walk committee
- Consultation events in other areas in Birmingham
- Planning permission granted for Chain Walk site
- Building is planned for Autumn 2022
- Engagement in two areas in Birmingham stops after failing to secure planning permission

2023

- Consultation with Smiths Street continues
 - Housing 21 purchases Chain Walk site
 - Building is planned for Summer 2023
-

A new offer

Housing 21's cohousing strategy takes a step forward from its normal business, and is different in some important ways. All of Housing 21's residents are already encouraged to be actively involved in their retirement schemes, for example through involvement in gardening or encouraging residents to join the national Residents Engagement Groups or form a Residents Association to raise a collective voice democratically (Housing 21 Residents' Handbook, pp.8-9). Their cohousing projects take residents' voice further. They connect with residents at the development stage and involve them in the design of the scheme, encouraging them to take responsibility for some aspects of the scheme's management. Ideally, court managers will have limited responsibilities and residents will have more direct control over the management of the court.

In terms of design, the offer included 1 and 2 bedroom flats, each self-contained with a kitchen, a living room and other facilities. The flats meet the CAT 3 regulations for accessible homes and exceed them on space: '1 bed is meant to be 54 square metres. Ours is 58. A 2 bed is meant to be 68m² and ours is 70'. The single bedroom is large enough for a double bed. In addition, the scheme offers communal space, with a large kitchen and dining area for shared meals and a communal lounge.



Consultation

The strategy's implementation relies on collaboration between the Housing 21 team, Triangle Architects and the local community organisation Legacy WM, who worked directly with a group of Chain Walk prospective residents to design and plan life in the scheme. This collaborative approach required investment of time, money and coordination and made engagement with prospective residents effective and consistent. The same team worked in a similar way in other areas where Housing 21 sought to develop cohousing projects.

To engage effectively with local people in areas where Housing 21 has not worked before, Housing 21 contracted Legacy West Midlands, a local community organisation that specialises in supporting and empowering migrant communities in the northwest inner-city wards of Birmingham (see box, p.17). Legacy WM was already working in the area, and was contracted by Housing 21's head of cohousing to lead the delivery of the outreach and capacity-building elements of the project, including training in skills like finance or English language.

Community engagement is a skilled job that requires time, expertise, and resources. Literature on co-production and community engagement often identifies lack of training for professionals and resources for meaningful engagement as a weak link that leads to poor results and disengagement (Welford et. al. 2022). Investing resources in professional community engagement helped to address this issue.

The consultation process



The development process involves consultations and capacity-building sessions with residents to prepare for life in cohousing. In 2020, Housing 21, Triangle and Legacy WM started engaging with local residents around the Chain Walk site through leafleting, public consultations and — during Covid-19 restrictions on public gatherings — one-to-one consultations with older people in their homes. The consultations involved staff from H21, Triangle Architects and Legacy WM. The Housing 21 team answered questions about the homes and the development process. The architects prepared large display boards with sketches and floor plans of the flats and communal areas, and even teamed up with Manchester University to produce a 3D model of the flats with moveable parts.

At first, Legacy aimed to approach all local people over 60, but over time staff specifically targeted those who are eligible for social housing and are in housing need. Once local residents showed interest, they were invited to attend regular meetings with Legacy WM's team. In these meetings they worked to plan life in the scheme and trained to develop skills that will help them after moving in. Based on residents' input in consultations and at follow-up meetings with Legacy WM, the architect made some changes to the design, for example creating more space for gardening and moving the location of the common house (for detailed information about the engagement process, see page 27).

Tailoring the nominations process

Considering the early engagement with residents and the expectations that residents will invest time in the scheme after moving in, Housing 21 has reached an agreement with Birmingham City Council to use a different nominations system to the common practice of nominating tenants for social housing only shortly before moving in. Instead, residents were involved some years before moving in, and included people in housing need who were not on the social rent registry, for example those living in multigenerational homes and who are formally home-owners.

Similarly, in search of suitable residents and in recognition of the involvement required, the strategy suggests that cohousing schemes may welcome people under the age of 65, which was the original preference. While working on the project, Housing 21 decided to welcome residents as young as 55 years old. This strategic decision is a response to the health conditions in ethnic minority communities, where disability-free life expectancy is lower than the national average, especially for 'Gypsy or Irish Traveller, and to a lesser extent those identifying as Bangladeshi, Pakistani or Irish'. Moreover, those living in the most deprived areas have a significantly lower life expectancy than the least deprived: under 80 for women and under 75 for men (Marmot et al, 2020 p.16).

Legacy WM

Legacy WM is a charitable organisation based in Handsworth in Birmingham, with a mission to celebrate the legacy of migrant communities in the northwest inner-city wards of Birmingham and support and empower these communities through their work in health and wellbeing, arts, heritage and housing. The organisation delivers a range of projects with different communities and age groups across the northwest of the city. (See legacy-wm.org).

“ Legacy West-Midlands is an organisation that exists to support the ethnic minority community in the Handsworth and Lozells area. And that's all the ethnic minority communities. So I think our particular expertise is the South Asian, Caribbean and African communities, but we, you know, we provide support and services for the Eastern Europeans and, you know, other new communities within the area. ”

Legacy WM staff

Triangle Architects

Triangle Architects is a Manchester based employee-owned architects' practice. The practice focuses on projects in the housing and healthcare sectors, but also includes urban regeneration, community and workplace projects. Their work involves professional organisations as well as collaborations with communities. Their approach emphasises carefully listening to clients and refraining from making assumptions about their needs.

Housing 21's aspirations and challenges

Aspirations

Housing 21's cohousing strategy sets out to offer the benefits of cohousing to social groups that are currently excluded from cohousing and are also less represented in Housing 21's retirement homes. The strategy focuses on building community spirit for a diverse group of residents rather than a community of like-minded people, emphasising relationship-building and engagement more than decision-making and self-management. Senior staff described cohousing as a way to support successful ageing. In their view, cohousing was an attractive offer that could help older people have more agency and see the move to a retirement home as a positive step, which is different from the stigma of older people's housing as giving up on independence or dignity.



Housing 21 encourages all their residents to be involved in some decision-making and activities in their courts, but the cohousing scheme is unique in some important ways. First, residents were engaged before the building started, and were consulted over a long period of time about the design. They were encouraged to form a group and attend regular meetings, getting to know their future neighbours some years before moving in. Importantly, Housing 21 will encourage cohousing residents to have a higher level of control over the management of the development, either by direct management or through selecting an external management provider. One member of staff explained that in their 'traditional retirement and extra care we have a court manager on site all the time and they cater for all your needs... We'll have an element of that, but people's own destiny will be in their own hands, so they will be involved with running operations.'



Credit: CRESR. Comments from participants at the research workshop with stakeholders

Experimenting

The cohousing scheme is undertaken in the spirit of experimentation and calculated financial risk. Staff acknowledged that the project will be different: 'We knew there'd be some extra costs, we knew it wouldn't stack within normal financial parameters.' There was hope in Housing 21 that residents' self-management and community living choices will inform Housing 21's mainstream offer, and that learning from the cohousing 'experiment' will be 'translated' into H21's offer. The strategy states that cohousing can inform Housing 21's work to 'meet the changing needs and requirements of older people and specifically those from BAME backgrounds'. Housing 21 was hoping that through greater agency for tenants, Housing 21 will learn new things about their clients' needs: 'I'd like to see them taking decisions, I like to see them doing some things which, you know, cause us a little bit of surprise...'

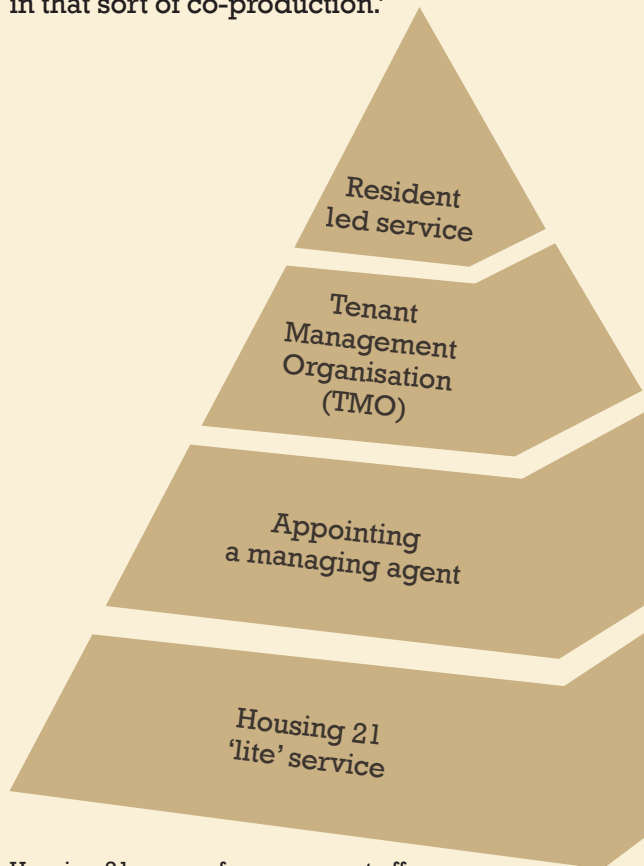
The project represents a big departure from standard housing management practices. Under pressure from regulators, lenders, and asset managers, housing associations might prefer to default to centralised control and cost control. Indeed, some members of staff raised concerns over the level of control they can start with and the cost of the project. Adapting to this new approach requires learning from all sides, as this is a new experience for both residents and Housing 21: 'I think we should help people understand the options and they could come to us with problems and then we would say, "Well, here's what we could offer" and we will need a different sort of philosophy.'

Tenant control

“ It’s going to blow their minds effectively in terms of what they could and couldn’t do and we need to help them transition to that rather than throwing them in the deep end. ”

Housing 21 staff

The strategy aspires to see residents taking control over some management aspects of the development, while also offering a range of options from ‘light touch’ Housing 21 management to full control. This aspiration came from an understanding of the diverse needs of older people and of the needs of people from different communities: ‘We tend to homogenise them [older people], they’ve all got the same circumstances etc, and... actually how we tailor our services and understand our services for difference... I’m a strong believer in that sort of co-production.’



Housing 21 range of management offers. Source: Housing 21's cohousing strategy

Three years into the project and before the building has started, the assumption is that residents of the first scheme in Chain Walk will not form a Tenant Management Organisation (TMO) or engage in significant self-management when they first move in. As the consultation process developed and a core group of prospective residents was forming, it became clear that the leap into self-management was huge, and residents found the prospect of self-management overwhelming and unattractive. To support residents in the transition to active involvement, Housing 21 and Legacy WM developed a skill enhancement plan and worked with residents on a range of skills that would set them on course for more involvement in management, if they decided to do so at a later stage. It is likely that different communities will have different preferences, depending on their capacity, interests and aspirations. This diversity of management styles is anticipated in Housing 21's strategy.

At this stage it is difficult to predict which model the Chain Walk residents will choose. They may be more interested in shaping their community once they have moved in, gradually learning new skills. Conversely, if residents were pleased with the services once they have moved in, they may not be motivated to take direct responsibility. The community-led housing literature suggests that participation fatigue is a common feature of housing projects (Arbell 2020), but staff at Housing 21 and Legacy WM were optimistic that residents will develop a growing appetite for self-management after having a tangible experience of its potential. All the professionals involved in the project agreed that ultimately it should aim for high levels of social involvement and self-management, while recognising that the first community will start with very low levels of self-management.



Credit: Triangle Architects. Consultation board

With greater tenants' control, there is a long-term aspiration within Housing 21 that cohousing can be more cost-effective. A member of staff explained: 'The benefits of cohousing longer term is that... [communities] don't need so much time, support... because they're self-serving. They work out what they can and can't do and how they can resource it and what they can do within the capacity they've got available to them. And that's about neighbour support and mutuality.' (Housing 21 staff). At this very early stage, with the first community, there is no expectation for reduced cost, but rather a recognition of the required investment of time and other resources in capacity-building. Other communities with a different starting point may have greater ability and interest in a self-serving model.

Limitations to tenants' control

In addition to residents' capacity and enthusiasm for self-management, Housing 21 is legally responsible for some management aspects, in order to secure their liability as a social housing provider. This included, for example, elements of health and safety like gas checks or fire safety. Most cohousing communities in the UK are privately-owned and not regulated in the same way. An example of this difference is Housing 21's capacity-building programme for residents, that was internally shared with our research team. This programme included extensive detail on practical management aspects, above and beyond the level of training most cohousing members in the UK expect to go through. This different policy context explains Housing 21's focus on health and safety training for prospective residents.

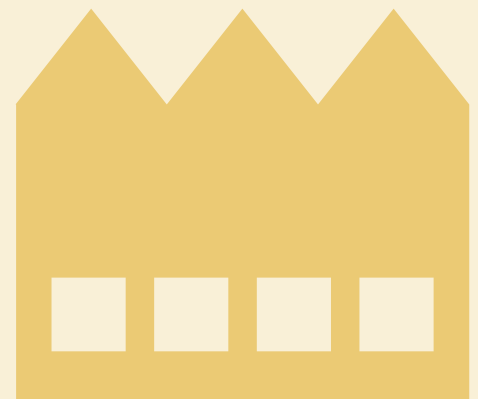


Credit: CRESR. Research workshop with stakeholders

Health and safety concerns became more prominent following the new Social Housing Regulation Act (2023) that introduces a more proactive regulatory regime for social housing providers, as well as more attention to residents' voice and empowerment. Under this Act, Housing 21 will need to demonstrate effective oversight of homes, including their cohousing schemes. As the board and senior management were personally responsible for the safety of the homes provided, they felt it was important to have direct powers over these 'so they can sleep at night' (Housing 21 staff). Concerns around health and safety regulations are a significant difference between predominantly privately-owned cohousing and the highly regulated social housing sector. Blase Lambert, chief officer at the Confederation of Cooperative Housing, estimated that the Act's requirement for professionally qualified housing management officers may pose a challenge to small-scale community-led housing like H21's cohousing projects, as projects of this size do not normally employ a qualified housing officer, 'which could mean this requirement falling to a member of the project.'

Another potential limitation to tenants' control was that residents will not be motivated to take on more responsibility over time if they are satisfied with the service. In a discussion in the research's final workshop, staff at Housing 21 and Legacy WM were confident that residents will be keen to take on more responsibilities and have greater control over time and through ongoing training and experiencing cohousing life. Lambert framed this challenge as a cultural issue: 'I think that's one of the challenges because we have in this country treated publicly funded housing as essentially something that is provided to people rather than something that is provided by people. There is a cultural assumption that people requiring social housing are all needy and vulnerable and need to be passive recipients of charitable services.'

However, there is an opportunity for a greater residents' voice following the Act, if registered housing providers will rise to the challenge and be willing to begin a process of gradually handing over some control to residents. We found that Housing 21 prospective tenants were more interested in maintenance and conflict resolution than rent collection and safety checks. Lambert suggested that with sufficient, accessible training and willingness from providers to change the culture of charitable service provision, there is opportunity for this cultural change that the senior management at Housing 21 was also keen to promote.



Filling a gap in the housing offer for BAME elders

The cohousing strategy combines two key aspirations or aims: it offers a unique model and aims it at a client group that is currently under-represented in Housing 21. Housing 21 recognised that the strategy addresses inequalities in society: 'It's an additional investment, additional resource in those communities which traditionally haven't had a huge amount of extra investment.' This was particularly relevant to their work in Birmingham, as a Housing 21 staff member said: 'In a city that's so diverse, in the next four years more than 60% of the population will be from BME (sic) backgrounds. But we're not doing anything to address those issues.'

Especially in South Asian communities, there was a growing need for a new housing solution for older people. '[In] South Asian communities ...The old concept of the nucleus family living together, it's coming to an end...So there's older people in their 70s who require homes. They are no longer able to stay with their children for a whole host of reasons and social economic reasons...So I think we really are pioneers.'

Housing 21 saw a role for itself to start providing a solution for this group. To do that, a new type of local lettings plan was needed: older people in multigenerational homes, sometimes of poor quality and overcrowded, were still considered homeowners and therefore excluded from the council's housing register. Legacy WM's team encountered a number of older people in unsuitable housing conditions, including those sleeping in the dining room of a small terraced house, or those of families who could not afford to improve or sufficiently maintain their home. In conversations with the local council, Housing 21 proposed that people with these hidden housing needs could find a suitable alternative to the support of their extended family.

Interestingly, while offering affordable cohousing to BAME communities was pioneering at the time the strategy was launched, Birmingham has a rich history of affordable, community-led housing cooperatives, including BAME-led cooperatives. However, Housing 21's project was not connected to the local co-operative housing sector: staff and residents were not familiar with this history or with existing co-operatives. There was, though, some awareness among staff of the rise and fall of local BAME housing associations over the years. There is potential in connecting with these projects for mutual learning.

Supporting residents towards independence

To join Housing 21 cohousing developments, residents had to be eligible for social housing, and those eligible in Chain Walk were typically on low or very low incomes, and often not fluent in English or confident using the internet. Some have been living in intergenerational homes for years, relying on their children or partners to manage finances and formal interaction with authorities. There was therefore a sense amongst staff and residents alike that moving into independent housing will require some support from their families but also from Housing 21 and Legacy WM.

One Housing 21 interviewee saw a role for Housing 21 in supporting residents into greater independence, similar to supporting much younger families starting a life in their first home: 'We need to start to talk about savings because people are going to need a fridge and a washing machine and some carpets and some curtains... So we've started conversations about potentially working with the credit union, so people can start to live. So we are all really taking it back to very basic stuff.' Considering the need to develop capacity for management and decision-making over time, Housing 21 is planning for ongoing 'customer engagement' after occupation, to ensure governance systems eventually arise.

Measure of success

The success of any community life is hard to measure: different communities aspire to different things, and can achieve them in many ways. There was an underlying assumption, however, that greater autonomy will lead to greater satisfaction. Housing 21 staff suggested that a measure of success should include a higher degree of community living, residents' satisfaction and autonomy. Triangle Architects emphasised the importance of community-building and suggested that right design is 'all pointless if you just end up with 21 independent people not really interested in living together or not understanding how to live together or accepting of each other's demands and needs... I think that relationship is key ... because if they ended up building this on the basis of it being a cohousing scheme, and in the end, it just becomes a block of flats ... it's not really what they're after. It's not what they were trying to deliver, and no one will be happy at the end of the day.'

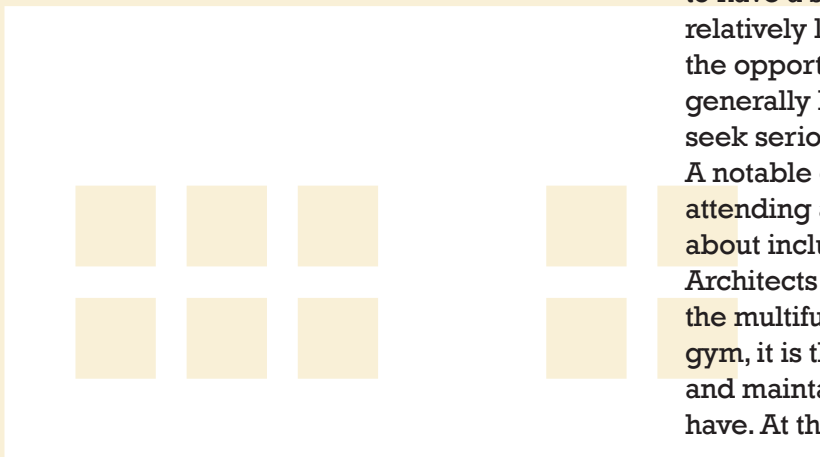
Housing 21 senior staff proposed that, 'People wanting to live there is a good measure, so if we're struggling to persuade people to come and live here we [have] failed.' Finally, the ultimate measure of success is: 'How content are people? How fulfilled are they, how autonomous are they, how much do they feel that they can be self-actualised? Happiness... it's difficult to measure.'

What worked well?

Managing expectations

The cohousing project is unique both in its offer to residents and in its expectations from them. It was mainly Legacy WM's role to engage with residents and manage their expectations. One Legacy WM worker emphasised the importance of 'making sure that they totally understand what they're getting into and [are] not just, like, wowed by the prospect of a shiny newbuild apartment.' One prospective resident commented that the process is 'different from a normal Housing Association development in that you don't just put your name down but [you are] expected to go to meetings.' For some members, participation also involved an expectation to attend training, including in language, financial skills and digital skills. Some at H21 felt that these requirements may be too onerous for residents: 'It becomes quite a big ask: we need you to improve your English a bit.' Some even questioned whether it was appropriate to require training as a condition to eligibility for secure, good quality homes in an area where good housing is rare. This indicates ongoing learning about the different aspects of expectations management.

Design was another area where managing expectations was important. Some in Housing 21 were concerned that prospective residents may be 'wanting everything' given the opportunity to have a say, but in fact, most residents had relatively low expectations and, faced with the opportunity to suggest what they wanted, generally had modest requirements and did not seek serious changes to the original drawings. A notable exception to that was some residents attending a consultation event enquiring about including a gym in the plans. Triangle Architects had to explain to residents that while the multifunctional space can be used as a gym, it is the residents' responsibility to source and maintain any equipment they decide to have. At this initial stage, the conversation was



hypothetical as local residents were not in a position to plan specific uses or investments in the communal space. Another example is a resident who wanted to ask for larger size rooms after the planning application was already approved. A better understanding of the design process could improve expectations management in this case. Overall, though, there was a sense that residents' expectations were realistic.

Support from local and central government

The cohousing strategy proposes a different approach to affordable housing development in terms of its scale, costs, allocations process, community engagement approach and target client group. To support this, Housing 21 and Legacy WM worked with local and central government, including local councillors, Birmingham City Council officers, as well as Homes England.

On a strategic financial level, Housing 21 senior staff thought that 'Homes England have been positive about this. So I think they recognise that we are doing something that's slightly – well a lot – a lot [different] to normal scale...' Evidence from interviews suggests that for a project of this nature, Homes England's financial support was generous, especially considering the small number of flats. However, considering the many additional costs involved in the project, it may still not be enough.

Support from the city council included help with community engagement and flexibility in allocations policies. Elected members were often keen to support. Legacy WM's worker said: 'We went to go and see the local councillor and she's very, very supportive and she opens doors for us. So she has a quiet word with people and says, "Listen, [it's in] your best interests to work with Housing 21... [They're] there for the benefit of the community." Those kinds of conversations, you know.'

In terms of allocations, Housing 21 has agreed with Birmingham City Council that a different approach is required. Residents will engage with the project some years before moving in, to allow time for consultation on design before securing planning permission and commencing the building. Therefore, predicting their housing need (and their status on the housing register) at the point of completion is not possible. Moreover, there was recognition from the local council that Housing 21 is filling a gap in housing provision for people in housing needs who are currently not on the council's housing waiting list, but whose need was nevertheless significant.

The broader picture in Birmingham is that there is political support for new forms of community-led housing, with the current administration making manifesto commitments to 'support community-led housing schemes' between 2022 and 2026. The city council has adopted a dedicated policy on this issue, and there are newly emerging community-led schemes in places like Stirchley, where all the homes being developed will be affordable on local incomes. This provides a backdrop for Housing 21's cohousing strategy, although it is not at this stage clear how much of an enabler this political and policy context has been.



Credit: New Ground Cohousing

Challenges

The project faced several challenges, from external circumstances that caused significant delays, to challenges that are integral to the project and were, to some extent, anticipated. Some challenges related to community engagement, such as Covid-19 lockdowns, residents' capacity to participate, language barriers and overcoming cultural differences to build trust. We discuss these issues in the next section on community engagement (page number).

Financial challenges and rising costs

Developing a cohousing scheme is long and resource-intensive, especially considering the small number of homes created (26 units). One Housing 21 staff said: 'Developers wouldn't touch a cohousing scheme because they are not going to make any money from it. Generally, registered providers are not really interested.' That position can change when these organisations understand some of the additional, potential benefits (Moore, 2018).

The time investment was disproportionate to the scale of the scheme: 'a 2,000-unit scheme to get planning consent, land acquisition etc. takes the same timescale as delivering a 25-unit scheme'. For Housing 21, the scheme was experimental and some additional costs were anticipated and accounted for: 'The drivers are very much about the social dynamics, it's not money driven.'

As the project continued, the UK faced a cost of living crisis, with soaring material costs leading to a significant rise in the project's costs in comparison to the original budget. As materials and labour costs went up, it was becoming more difficult to complete the site's purchase and begin work on the site. Housing 21's representative said: 'Bills [are] going through the roof at the moment... The schemes were kind of more or less breaking even and now ... everything's gone through the roof.' Land costs were also a financial challenge, as land was sold at market value.

Challenges for the local authority

Birmingham City Council (BCC) has a community-led housing strategy and is supportive of the project. However, staff also faced challenges working with the council, which is the largest in Europe and was facing cuts to local services and undergoing restructuring at the time. Housing 21 staff thought it was not clear how BCC could support the strategy while maintaining its financial stability. While BCC has offered a number of sites to sell for potential schemes, no discounting was offered on these sites; land was sold to Housing 21 at market value. While staff understood the pressure on BCC finances, it still meant that financing for cohousing was hampered, as one way for local authorities to improve the viability of cohousing schemes would be to offer reduced land costs. In addition, working with the local council involved different departments that at times were not effectively joined up, while the turnover in planning officers made it difficult to build long working relationships.

Risk of low community engagement

One challenge is the risk that residents will not engage meaningfully with the ethos of cohousing, and the development will eventually turn into a block of flats rather than a community. Housing 21 saw a role for itself in navigating this and supporting residents to live as a community and develop some structure. However, there was also recognition that too much involvement from Housing 21 can be counterproductive. A senior member of staff at Housing 21 said: 'You go too far one way, it'll fail for lack of structure, lack of control, lack of personnel. You go too far the other way and it becomes bog-standard and we wasted all your time, effort and resources doing it. You've got to find that sort of sweet spot.'

What worked well in community engagement? What are the challenges?

Legacy WM: The role of the community organisation

Investing in community engagement was, in our view, one of the strengths of the project. Staff at H21 and Legacy WM acknowledged the importance of this partnership for building trust and capacity, especially in areas where Housing 21 has not been active before and with communities it had relatively little engagement with in the past. Especially when working with BAME communities, there was a sense from all involved that a BAME organisation is better placed to engage with communities and introduce a new concept, especially considering Legacy WM's experience in building civic capacity in similar communities.



Credit: CRESR. Research workshop with stakeholders

Having an established connection with and understanding of the area and knowledge of some of the languages spoken by local residents were also important factors for community engagement. In addition to resources invested by Housing 21, Legacy WM invested resources at a cost to themselves in training and capacity-building for prospective residents, which meant the offer was rich and holistic. Legacy WM saw its role as ‘the advocate of the community. We were the go-to between the community and Housing 21’.

The engagement process

“ I think the way they’re doing it now with all these meetings and understanding with us how we would want the houses, it’s a good idea. ”

Prospective resident

Advertising and recruitment

Residents got involved following outreach activities by Legacy WM. These included a range of strategies, from established connections with older people in the Lozells area through Legacy WM’s ongoing work in the area, through targeted events, leafleting and support from local community leaders (for example, councillors and local mosques). Legacy’s established work in the area ‘lent itself quite naturally and organically for us to kind of speak to elderly people about the housing situation, their challenges, and see if they were willing to be involved in a cohousing scheme locally’ (Legacy WM staff). A significant number of prospective residents joined thanks to good relationships with Legacy WM’s staff. Legacy staff’s fluency in different languages helped where prospective tenants were not fluent in English.

Publicity was hyper-local, with leaflets specific to the one-mile radius around the potential site and consultations focusing on the immediate area around the plot. This strategy meant that the target audience were mainly BAME communities in lower income areas, and, in the immediate area around Chain Walk, predominantly Bangladeshi. Legacy’s recruitment focused on people with pressing housing needs who could benefit from living in a safer, community-oriented environment. Selection was not based on prospective residents’ capacity to engage deeply in the development.



Consultation events

Legacy WM invited local people to consultation events, where Triangle Architects presented boards with images of the planned scheme and explanation about cohousing and the process of working with Housing 21. Staff talked residents through the display, introducing the design of the flats and explaining key concepts of cohousing to residents, especially the use of shared facilities, the opportunity to make decisions and plan their own activities in the space, and the expectation that people will behave in a neighbourly, respectful way to fellow residents. Residents were then invited to comment on the design and attend further consultations to tell the architect about their aspirations for space. (For more detail on the consultation process, see the next section.)

Once eligible people expressed their interest, they were invited to join a committee that met regularly with Legacy WM's staff, worked slowly to build relationships, and in some cases underwent training to build capacity for self-management. These included spoken English lessons, digital skills and financial inclusion training for residents who needed them. In summer 2023, the committee involved 6 to 8 members, some of whom were involved from the beginning of the project. There were no other prospective residents actively engaged at that stage.



Housing 21, Legacy and Triangle with prospective residents at a consultation event during Covid social distancing restrictions.

The need for a BAME-led organisation

Housing 21, despite its national reach and Birmingham base, was not known in the areas targeted for cohousing projects. Moreover, Housing 21 was perceived as a predominantly White organisation and has not specialised in working with minoritised communities, although it does offer housing for these groups too. The professional team at Housing 21 and Triangle relied on Legacy WM to bridge cultural and language differences. It felt that the novel concept of cohousing was best delivered by familiar people who can speak residents' language – both literally and figuratively. A Legacy WM staff member explained: 'We translate the challenges on the ground for people, you know, the senior people we're working with... Translation is not just about language, it's really about translating the capability of those communities and their capacity to engage.'

Triangle's architect had the advantage of fluency in some South Asian languages, but some residents only spoke Bengali. 'That's where Legacy come into it. It really does come down to Legacy... When we are speaking to people that have English as a second language or don't speak it at all, it's literally doing that with a translator from Legacy and keeping it short, keeping it brief.'

One of Housing 21's staff emphasised the importance of a community group's closeness to residents' experiences: 'We're a White-driven organisation with people living in not quite the challenging parts of the world, should I say. So it's a bit difficult for some of my colleagues to rock up at consultation events and feel comfortable. So the principles of using a local organisation to run those events I think were well intended.' Legacy WM's team also suggested that their established connection and BAME identity were important to building trust with minoritised communities.



Credit: Housing 21. Prospective residents visiting a Housing 21 retirement home

Trust

Legacy WM built trust with prospective residents. They spent time getting to know them and had a pastoral role, calling residents to check in with them between meetings, and supporting them with lifts and encouragement to engage in training. Prospective residents said that they could speak openly to staff about their concerns and issues, even when they had criticism. In interviews, they gave examples of sharing their concerns and suggestions with Legacy staff.

“ They feel comfortable, they feel that they can talk to us. It’s building that friendship and that trust, the most important is that trust. Because believe me, when you’re working in communities, if they don’t trust you, it doesn’t matter how much you try, you will not be able to get into it because nobody opens up. You have to build that trust for years and years. ”

Legacy WM staff

Locally focused, culturally appropriate approach

Legacy WM’s team adapted their work to the context of the local community and to the needs and capabilities of the small number of residents involved in the committee. When accessing a community, it was important to understand the local history and context. For example, when approaching a community around a site that did not eventually go through to development, staff had to consider the impact of the local community’s previous negative experience with consultations; on another site, there was potential conflict around land use, where other parties had different interests.

Legacy WM’s approach saw the project embedded in its local environment. Community work therefore involved close work with local councillors, local leaders and other networks of community organisations supporting older people. A Legacy WM staff member said: ‘Say for example, when you’re working with the South Asian communities, you have to have the faith groups on board, so you know we don’t want opposition from local mosques. So we make sure that we work with local faith groups as well.’

Acknowledging the steep learning curve involved in joining the scheme, the team explained the new concept of cohousing in an accessible way, focusing at first on interior design and conviviality rather than self-management and decision-making. Legacy staff shared the view that residents will achieve that slowly and gradually. One member of staff emphasised the need to ‘take six small steps. You can’t be doing it from zero to 100. It’s not gonna work. So it’s getting there, and they understand the concept because I’m saying it in my own language... So slowly, slowly, you know. But we’ll get there. We’ll definitely get there.’

Building a community

Prospective residents in the core group of committee members appreciated the opportunity to engage at an early stage. They especially acknowledged the value of having a voice in design and getting to know their future neighbours.

“ I think it's nice, all these meetings and stuff, because you get to meet everyone, you get to see who's going to be there. It's nice, you get together, you eat, you talk, it's nice. ”

Prospective resident

“ It's good that we're involved before the making because then I can give my input about the bigger rooms. It's good it's being done like this because then I know who my neighbours are, I know who I'll be living with. If it was made then we had to come in, we wouldn't know any of the people, the neighbours, so it's good. ”

Prospective resident

Getting to know their future neighbours and working together gave people an opportunity to build relationships before moving in. In conventional cohousing groups, this formative stage is important in creating a sense of belonging and safety as people learn about each other and work towards a shared goal. Building relationships and developing agency some years prior to moving in are rare for social tenants, who are normally allocated shortly before moving in.

Site visits

Visits to other Housing 21 developments in the area were a good way to engage members and help them imagine what life in the community might be like and what Housing 21 flats look like. One resident said: 'That encourages me to be excited about it, to be involved.' The visits also caused some confusion, as some residents thought that these were cohousing schemes, and some were not sure how their flats would look compared to the ones they visited. Legacy WM made an effort to coordinate visits to local housing cooperatives, but these were more difficult to arrange, so residents did not yet have an opportunity to see how residents might organise to manage their housing collectively.



Credit: Tony Finnerty

Challenges

Covid lockdowns

Community engagement started just before the first Covid-19 lockdown. A Legacy WM staff member said: ‘We started having community groups and then suddenly had to stop because you couldn’t go meet anybody or do anything... [It] knocks at least 18 months, probably two years out of our programme.’ As public events could not take place, Legacy WM’s staff conducted consultations in older people’s homes as part of their broader care initiatives in the community like their food bank and other forms of support for isolated older people. The architect also took part in one-to-one consultations, engaging with residents using pictures and language support from Legacy WM’s staff.

Training the team was also challenging during that time, as they could not visit cohousing communities due to lockdown movement and gathering restrictions. Where visits and face-to-face learning were not possible, H21 strategy was an important source of guidance for the Legacy WM team. Other sources of guidance, for example the UK Cohousing Guide to Cohousing, was not seen as a suitable resource for their special situation (on the comparison between Housing 21 and other cohousing communities see page 52).

Knowledge, skills and confidence

“Working with those communities, as you know, has its challenges, especially if you’re trying to deliver change and trying to deliver a project that people have no understanding of, and especially one that ... needs a certain set of skills like understanding plans and architecture and all sorts of different things.”

Legacy WM staff

Meaningful participation in the development of a large housing scheme requires time, confidence and sophisticated skills that most ordinary people have no experience of. It is challenging for privileged middle-class grassroots communities (Fields, 2022), and even more so for the group of Chain Walk residents who were eligible to join the scheme. Most of these had lower levels of education and a background in non-professional jobs. Normally, life in cohousing involves committee meeting and work, agenda reading, formal decision-making and minute-taking. At the time of research, the majority of Chain Walk members had very little experience in formal volunteering, project management and collective decision-making, and some prospective residents were not fluent in English and could not read well. Under these conditions, explaining new concepts and retaining information was challenging.

Legacy staff pointed that older Bangladeshi women rarely have experience in formal volunteering or public involvement due to their domestic and closer community commitments: ‘So what you’ll find with Bengali women of a certain age is that they’ve never been part of a committee, they’ve never engaged as citizens, and they engaged with the citizens within their own community... They’re very well known within their own community and are assertive when supporting the local community, but they haven’t engaged in wider citizenship in their local area.’

Prospective residents echoed this in an interview when asked about their previous experience in organising or volunteering: ‘Personally, no, I’ve not really done anything like this before, it’s just been Housing 21.’ Most of the committee members said in interviews they had no experience in formal volunteering or organising in the public sphere, but some members supported community events, for example organising large weddings or supporting religious events. One member said:

‘Sometimes there’s Islamic gatherings where they talk about Islam. So sometimes I cook and bring stuff there.’ The shift from this to active involvement in community management is, as a Legacy WM worker described it, ‘quite a big jump’.

At the same time, few prospective members have had extensive experience in community organising, for example through involvement in the local church. A Legacy WM staff member said: ‘One of the ladies at the Chain Walk is a Caribbean lady. She’s a Christian, she goes to church. She’s always run, you know, like, finances as part of being on the church committee. The church committee has always met every month and she knows how to keep minutes.’

The gap between residents with management abilities and those with no experience or inclination can potentially lead to power imbalances in the community, or cause frustration to more experienced members. There were also different opinions about skilling up amongst residents (see pages 48-49).

Finally, residents’ low expectations or passive approach to the consultations were a barrier to active participation for some members. Reflecting on their part in the consultation process, one prospective resident said:

“ I just said the way everyone wants it is fine, I haven’t really given any ideas, they’re not going to give me different if I say I want it different. ”

Q: They’re not?

“ I don’t think so, no. How can they give me different, they’ll give everyone the same, I understand that. ”

Language barrier

The ethos of the project was enhancing communication and relationships between residents. Language barriers were frequently mentioned as potential challenges for the cohousing community. A Housing 21 staff member said, ‘It’s going to be very challenging if there isn’t a common language.’ The language barrier was challenging for direct communication between Housing 21 and residents, and between residents from different backgrounds. Some members spoke mainly Bengali, and this raised concerns about communication and decision making — especially among native English speakers, both staff and residents. Thinking about this, one prospective member said: ‘There’s at the moment a language barrier, I’m the only one who speaks English at the moment, sorry one or two... Others don’t, so there’s a language barrier and that might cause communication problems when it gets going unless we have an on-site interpreter.’

For community engagement, it was vital that Legacy WM’s staff were able to speak Bengali to prospective residents. This worked particularly well in a small group that is predominantly Bengali. As the group grows and new people join, staff will be likely to use other strategies to suit a more diverse group.

It was notable that research participants who were used to using a language other than English in the UK (both professionals and prospective residents) were more confident that the community can handle this challenge. Having lived in the UK for decades without fluent English, older residents have developed coping strategies to overcome the language barrier. ‘I know how to say hi, hello, so when I say stuff like that, they understand but if I was to have any other issues then I’d get maybe my children [who lived nearby] because of that language barrier.’ Moreover, they said, ‘There are other people that will be living in the

cohousing that can speak English and speak Bengali too so if needed they can communicate and get our points across as well.' The role of bilingual residents will be important: 'If you speak English in a group of, say, five or six Bangladeshi ladies, even if it's broken, you're gonna become the spokesperson for that group... and to be honest, most people that have English as a second or non-language that's how they live anyway... So that's just an extension of the way they live now.'

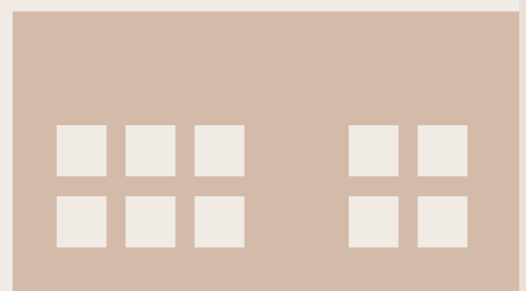
Maintaining consistent engagement

One of the main challenges to community engagement was retaining consistent engagement and recruiting new prospective members. Lack of regular meetings with a stable resident involvement was a source of concern for some residents and for some in Housing 21. Participation in meetings was affected by people's work commitments, family commitments and health conditions. In addition, some members lost their enthusiasm for participation as the building kept being delayed due to the changing financial context nationally and constructors' challenges. Some participants, both staff and residents, suggested that it is difficult to recruit new residents before the building has started.

Regular meetings were seen as vital to create continuity, build the group and progress with planning life as a community. However, residents often struggled to attend. A prospective resident told us: 'They come to one then miss one. Everyone has problems, so they just happen to not be here today.' Two prospective members were still taking casual work after retirement. In May 2023, one prospective resident said: 'If it clashes with the meeting, I can't make the meeting. So there may be more than two meetings but I think I've only attended two since [November].'

Health was an important barrier to persistent participation. Residents commented that as they are getting older their health is deteriorating and they found it challenging to attend meetings, let alone take on responsibilities for managing the housing development. One prospective resident said: 'I can't always attend meetings because I'm not well. My son's taking me to the meetings because if I walk I fall, I lose my balance, so my son normally takes me places.' This is particularly important in minoritized and deprived communities where older people are more likely to suffer ill health at a younger age, and disability-free life expectancy is lowest for Black and Asian people (Marmot report, 2020, p.23). Legacy WM's worker said: 'The difference between a 60 year old and a 65 year old in terms of health and cognitive ability is quite substantial and that gap gets even bigger and bigger the older that they get.' Residents' deteriorating health was therefore a source of concern for the future of the project: will they be able to be active members of the community at a later age?

Inconsistent participation in a very small group meant that the group struggled to move forward with more pragmatic planning. One prospective resident said: 'The last meeting was about the garden management, but only two or three people came.' Asked about their opportunities to talk about their preferences around the management of the community, one resident replied: 'Not yet, no one's mentioned that yet. There haven't been much meetings anyway. I think because of the delays I think there's only, as far as I know, before the one last week only one other meeting this year.'



Slow development time

The slow development process meant that some prospective residents were losing enthusiasm and becoming frustrated: 'To be honest, things at the moment are slow, almost to a standstill... If there are any more delays I think, I don't mean to be hard, but that might be the first nail in the coffin for the project if there's another delay.' The delays resulted mainly from reasons out of Housing 21 and Legacy's control, but it was difficult to explain the technical aspects of the process to the residents. Maintaining involvement in the face of stalling development is a critical but challenging task.

Recruiting new tenants

The delays, said some residents, were hampering the recruitment of new members, since the project was so intangible. One prospective resident said, 'I've asked two people here on the road, I've told them about it, they didn't seem too interested because they're not seeing anything, they're seeing wasteland. But once that starts to get built I know they're going to start asking questions: "What's going on here, how do I get involved?"'

All prospective residents of the Chain Walk scheme were very positive about cultural diversity and were looking forward to living in a diverse community. One member felt that the group was not diverse enough:

“ I think we need more people to be involved, I think we need to get, I don't know how to phrase this, we need to get more people involved that perhaps, to reflect the community, Black, Asian, White... More diversity, that's the word. I said to [Legacy staff] we need to get more people involved, there's only half a dozen of us here, it's not enough ... so we need to get more people involved to reflect the diversity. ”

Cohousing: a new concept

The novelty of the cohousing concept was a challenge for community engagement. It was new not only to the local people engaged but also to most members of staff both in Legacy WM and Housing 21. The novelty of the cohousing model meant that it was difficult to explain to prospective residents and challenging to train frontline staff, especially during Covid restrictions.

“ The cohousing concept is so new that nobody has a reference point for it. They can't say "oh I know that" or "I've been to that one"... It's not even something that's showing on the TV or anything... so you can see the challenges to get people on board. ”

Legacy WM staff

Residents were not sure what the term cohousing meant. Due to their age and health condition, they could not travel far to visit a cohousing scheme and learn about it first-hand. Moreover, in the context of Housing 21 policy, the term 'cohousing' is used differently to the way it is used elsewhere: a neighbourly community with some aspects of self-management, rather than an intentional community of grassroots self-managing residents, making decisions to live together with like-minded people. This confusing terminology meant it was difficult to know what people thought cohousing actually was.

The difference between Housing 21's approach to cohousing and other cohousing schemes in the UK meant that some Housing 21 and Legacy WM staff felt alienated from the cohousing movement, and did not expect to receive relevant advice from existing cohousing communities. A Legacy WM staff member said: 'Our scheme is so different because ... I think it's the first of its kind and delivered specifically for Black and minority ethnic groups. And delivered in very urban areas of Birmingham

that don't normally engage in this way.' The team was interested to visit other cohousing developments but were also sceptical about the relevance of these communities' practices to their work: 'Obviously the cultural nuances, you know that appear within the programme [mean that] even though, yes, I can look at all the best examples of cohousing, they probably won't be the same as ours anyway.'

Risk of early community engagement

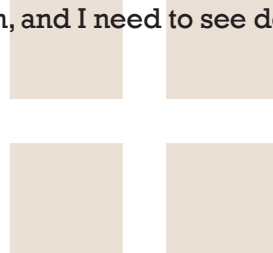
Since launching its cohousing strategy, Housing 21 has engaged with several communities in Birmingham, but some of these engagements were discontinued, either due to financial feasibility or planning considerations. Some in H21 were concerned that early engagement may lead to disappointment in the community if the project raises high hopes that are then frustrated if, for example, planning permission is not secured. Staff were concerned for Housing 21's reputation and worried about harming an already deprived community and leading to consultation fatigue and apathy when things fail. At the same time, others were of the view that an honest, transparent risk-sharing approach can be empowering and more respectful. A local housing professional suggested that taking a risk with potential tenants could be a step towards meaningful co-production and reduce the risk of paternalism that is often a problem of co-production.

'I don't think there's anything wrong with optimism. You know? They're older people. They've had plenty of rejection in their life... They've had plenty of things not go the way they expected. And they're not bright-eyed 17 year olds that think the world would go to their tune, you know.' Moreover, shielding residents from potential disappointment could be interpreted as a paternalistic position towards ethnic minority communities: 'This whole kind of discourse about that... treating them like children, you know, "Oh well, you know, you have to be gentle with them." No, they're adults, they are grown adults, treat them with that respect.'

One strategy Housing 21 and Triangle tried to use to avert some of the risk was to take a pre-application approach, where prospective residents are brought to the consultation with information from the council about limitations and requirements. It is likely that most residents will not be interested in the technicalities, but presenting them with a design draft that has already considered the constraints is a pragmatic option. This approach was only partially successful, as the advice from the pre-application stage was limited and did not include crucial opinions from a range of council departments.

Checking eligibility

Recruitment has been hampered by practical issues around checking people's eligibility for social housing, leading to some uncomfortable conversations about residents' personal information. At first, some local residents were recruited based on their interest in the project, only to discover later that some of them were not eligible. One local resident was very keen to join but since she owned a house could not apply for a place in the scheme. Learning from that initial experience, Legacy WM and Housing 21 had to make sure prospective residents were eligible at an early stage. A Housing 21 staff member said: 'So you either have to have a British passport or a passport that gives you indefinite leave to remain, so I've started to go through that because I don't want to take anybody on this journey of 18 months if I legally can't let them a property, so that's also quite an uncomfortable place because it's almost like, you know, this White woman rocks up and says, "Yeah, and I need to see documents."'



What worked well for design consultation?

The time and resources invested in design consultation were a clear strength of the project. This was a tangible, exciting subject for prospective residents, and offered them a sense of agency and involvement in the process. The consultations were conducted over time, including one-to-one sessions during Covid's gathering restrictions and group sessions with visual aids such as display boards, drawings of floor plans, elevations, 3D images and a 3D model of the flats. Resources were invested in redrafting the design several times following residents' input.



Credit: CRESR. Community consultation event

The design consultation process

Local residents were consulted on the design from a very early stage in the engagement, when the project was presented to all interested people in the local area. This meant that the project involved local people from the start, and incorporated the views and suggestions of people who did not necessarily plan to move in or remain involved over the years. This is a common situation for community-led housing where the process tends to be slow. Triangle Architects found that high numbers are not necessarily crucial for effective consultations: two residents can have important input.

The first design consultation took place in the first public engagement. This session, said the architect, 'is more for testing the water' — the real consultation begins on the second event.

Over the years, Triangle and Legacy have held five to six consultation events with the Chain Walk residents, including one conducted solely by Legacy staff during Covid movement and gathering restrictions. As expected, the number of participants went down as the process went on, as the group of interested residents formed. Triangle explained that there was a need for a minimum of three consultations before applying for planning permission. This level of consultation, pointed Triangle, is significantly more than in most conventional developments.

During consultations, local residents were presented with display boards explaining the concept of cohousing, the co-design process and the proposed layout of the scheme. The display boards offered a brief but comprehensive explanation of the process and the ethos of the scheme using photos, diagrams and short text, as well as detailed

What is Co-Housing?

Co-housing is all about community and people. Its a place where residents know each other well and are signed up to be a part of a community together

Co-housing can offer a place where you can get to know your neighbours. A place to share with others. A place where you have a say in how your community is managed. A community that is more than just "Bricks and Mortar" and that offers mutual respect and support for all its members.

Some of the things Co-housing offers is:

Your Co-Housing community vision

These are some suggested values. Do you agree with these?

We want our Co-housing community to be:

- Supportive**
Be a good neighbour and look out for each other. Agree to be part of the community and make decisions together. Be willing to give some time each week to support the cohousing project and your neighbours.
- Diverse**
Agree that the group should reflect the local community by welcoming difference. Celebrate what we have in common whilst respecting our diversity. Resolve disagreements in a sympathetic and democratic way. Always think about the impact our activities will have on our neighbours, and our environment.
- Sustainable**
Properties should be easy to keep warm and tackle fuel poverty. To create more open space, car-free environments, and shared gardens within the scheme to create a greener, healthier environment for everyone.
- Working together**
That all members of the community will want to contribute to decisions that affect the scheme, and that no members should feel left out of decisions that affect their household.
- Affordable**
That residents and Housing21 commit to retain each house as affordable, and for the scheme to provide low-cost, high quality housing for rent, for residents throughout its lifespan.
- Social**
Shared spaces for all residents are everyone's responsibility. Communal kitchens and common house should be a welcoming space for people to cook and share meals, ideas, or just to meet and make friends. Remember that other people will sometimes need privacy, and private space should also be respected.

Please add your own:
Write your own values and stick them here:

How can we create it?

DESIGNING

BUILDING

MOVING IN

Get started:

- Attend 2 to 3 consultation events
- Respond to flyers/ questionnaires.
- Meet as a group, neighbours, friends outside of events
- Help us to design the building with you
- Tell us how you want to live

What Housing21 will do

- Organise events
- Keep you up-to-date
- Help you organise your group

The next steps:

- Attend progress meetings once a month with Housing21 and the Builders
- Listen to, and ask questions about the building
- Help to choose colours, wallpaper, front door etc.
- Decide how you want your flat decorated
- Organise a rota, which jobs do you want to do?

What Housing21 will do

- Help you agree on membership
- Help you to decide on community policies
- Help with training for group decision making
- Help with how to hold meetings

The exciting part!

- Move into your new flat
- Make friends with your neighbours
- Have a barbecue, start gardening, invite the neighbours round
- Hold your first community meeting in the common house!
- Share a meal with the community
- Make new friends for life
- Grow your co-housing community

What Housing21 will do

- Help with the first few meetings and rotas
- Help you understand how to look after your building

Credit: Triangle and Housing 21. Consultation sheets for local residents

examples of external and internal design. However, on reflection, one member of staff said, 'I don't necessarily think we've got it [the display boards] just right... especially with the language barrier.'

The display boards were used as anchors for conversation, with no expectation that participants would read them. A Triangle staff member said: 'When we're doing the consultations we kind of walk through it rather than just leave it there... You've got to focus people sometimes when you do these consultation events.' Using the boards as an anchor meant that each member of staff engaging with residents used the boards in their own way, depending on their own knowledge and the person they walked through the display. In some cases, staff skipped the boards about the communal elements and focused on the internal layout of the flat. It was

clear that the entire display had a lot more information than people can grasp in one event, especially when this novel concept is explained through an interpreter who is also new to the concept.

The lengthy consultation process was enabled through the key role of Legacy WM in continuing the conversation between consultations. A Triangle staff member said: 'If people are making comments, they can pass those back to us and we can kind of say, right, OK, this makes sense, but this doesn't make sense. And then that can be picked up in the next consultation event.' Triangle could not spend more time on community engagement, both because it was not financially viable and because this kind of community engagement is an expertise that Triangle does not have, 'and so Legacy are important'.



Credit: Triangle Architects

Understanding of cohousing and residents' needs

Triangle architects' knowledge of cohousing and experience in community consultation were a strength of the project. In research interviews and observations it was evident that the architect had a clear understanding of cohousing's design principles and social value and was familiar with UK examples. Some partners in Triangle learnt about cohousing during their professional training, and brought this knowledge to the firm. This has been an asset to the project during consultation, where the team was able to explain cohousing to members of the public in a simple, engaging way. Through its work with Housing 21 on several schemes, Triangle is in an unusual position for an architect practice: designing more than one cohousing scheme over a very short period of time.

The architect is from a minoritised ethnic group, bringing a lived experience of BAME communities and understanding of language and literacy barriers, which were important assets for successful consultations, similar to the choice of a BAME-led organisation to engage with residents. The team's commitment to the aims of the project and high interpersonal skills were important to consultations and resulted in good engagement from prospective residents.



Cohousing garden. Credit: Betty Farruggia

How consultation affected the design

Residents were presented with initial drawings and offered feedback on a range of design elements, from significant aspects like the layout of the site and the size and use of the garden, through input on internal design such as a preference for separate kitchens and baths rather than showers, to more minor details like the doors and plant boxes in windows. The first residents will be able to choose from a range of door types.

In some ways, residents' design preferences were different from other Housing 21 schemes. One Housing 21 interviewee said that the residents and architect made some unusual choices, for example including a courtyard that other housing associations would see as 'dead space': 'Actually they [residents] have been very closely involved with the design... There's a water fountain in the middle of the scheme. We have courtyards in a very, very tight scheme.' This amount of communal space would not normally be included in '0.5 acres of land'. The dimensions and different external features made the scheme look and 'feel [...] very, very different'.

Outdoor space was a key element for prospective residents. The original plan for a lawn with flowerbeds was changed in favour of a vegetable garden, following comments from some keen gardeners amongst residents. This meant that the original layout was changed to offer better sunlight for food growing on site.

As for internal design, here the consultation faced some challenges. Residents generally had a strong preference for separate kitchens with gas hobs, but gas hobs were no longer on offer for Housing 21 homes. As an organisation, Housing 21 were no longer using gas for environmental reasons. Considering the legislation forbidding the installation of gas boilers in a new property from 2025, it made little financial or logistical sense to include gas connection for cooking only. However, following the consultation Housing 21 has agreed to install

a gas supply to the common house for cooking, for an ‘eye-watering’ sum.

Another compromise was achieved for the kitchen layout. The design allows for an open plan or a separate kitchen. The first residents will be able to choose whether they prefer an open plan or separate kitchen, as well as the colour of the cupboards. The development will then have flats with both options, so future tenants will have two options on site, if they become available.

Some residents wanted space for prayer, exercise classes, functions, and leisure activities. To incorporate the different needs, the communal areas are designed with multifunctionality in mind. A Triangle staff member said: ‘Ultimately the designs we’re doing are about ultimate flexibility... allowing that flexibility within that space to allow for different activities to happen and maybe even allowing activities to happen in different spaces so that multiple activities can happen in the same building.’

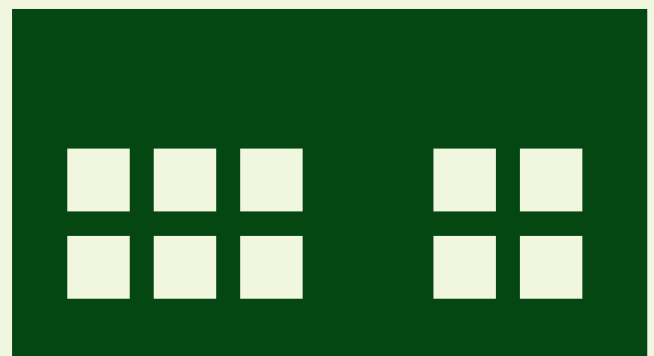
Empowerment

The opportunity to be involved in the design was rare for the residents. One resident said that in their privately rented house they cannot feel at home because they cannot make changes. The new homes, while still rented, will feel like their own. A Legacy WM worker echoed that: ‘It’s empowering to them that people like the architects and like [Housing 21 staff] or whoever, they’re asking them about the doors, you know, the windows. My God. Do you wanna plant out there? Do you want a door? You know the colour scheme... Because, you know, it’s like their own home... Even if you move into a brand new house, you can’t tell them about the doors and the windows. It’s fixed, but they have a say in things. So it’s empowering to them, they feel important.’

Limits to consultations

While residents were invited to feed back on some elements, the design framework was dictated by others: planning and building regulations, housing regulations, Housing 21’s budget and policies, and the site itself. A Triangle worker explained: ‘It’s the site that dictates that. As much as people might have a preference for where they think the common house should be, it can only really go in a space where you’ve got access to the external environment because that’s a point at which it allows interaction between the people in the scheme.’

Some prospective residents accepted the limitations and had very few comments, while others wanted to be more involved. One prospective resident wanted to know more about ‘the materials being used, by materials I mean the walls for instance, are they soundproof, what insulation is going to be used, and heating, heating is a hot topic these days because of the costs and that.’ Some had views about the scheme’s orientation: ‘I like to face a certain way when I am living in a property, you know just get plenty of sun or no sun at all, depending which way you are facing.’ These aspects were not open to consultation.



Special design considerations

Design for the needs of older people

Some design decisions were made to accommodate the needs of older people, despite some push-back from prospective residents. One example is the decision to offer showers but not baths, as these are safer and more practical for older people.

Triangle noted that there is an overlap between cohousing design and designing for older people:

“ With the older generation, the external environment is really key anyway... because it is a point of interaction and it's exactly what cohousing wants anyway. ”

One concern raised during the development was accommodating future needs for on-site carers. As the flats were designed to be affordable for people on housing benefits, there were no spare bedrooms in flats. Would there be room for carers elsewhere on site? The first drawings included a guest suite but this was abandoned in the consultation. Later on, some residents suggested that the smaller room in the common house might be used for guests and carers further down the line. Potentially, future residents may be able to negotiate with Housing 21 and repurpose one flat as a guest or carer space.



Credit: Housing 21 Cohousing strategy 2021-2023

Culturally sensitive design

From Triangle's perspectives, there were very few culturally sensitive design aspects, such as a preference for kitchens separate from the dining area; most of the design aspects are universal.

“ I think it's a kind of othering of BAME communities. Thinking that you have to design a certain way because they're Muslim or you have to design a certain way because they're Sikh. But not really. You know, they're still human beings, so they still want a bedroom to sleep in and a living room to have breakfast and watch TV [in]. ”

This also applied to the communal spaces — shared meals and movie nights can be equally attractive to any community. ‘The only thing in terms of a Muslim community, the only thing that we have to add in is an ablution toilet [suitable for ritual washing]. But we're putting in an accessible WC anyway, so making it an ablution one is not really that much of a stretch. It's just putting in somewhere to wash.’

From an architectural perspective, the design had to include multifunctional spaces that could be used in different ways by different residents over time. Thinking of the plan for a prayer room, the architect explained: ‘It's not just a prayer room. That's the thing. See, it's a multifunctional space. A prayer room doesn't have anything in it that makes it a prayer room. A prayer room is a room. It's the function that you apply to it that's different, that can be dictated by who moves in and how they live.’ In that sense, the design is culturally sensitive simply by offering flexibility and adaptability.

Prospective members did however say they have some culture-specific issues, especially relating to the kitchen. Some members expressed the view that the need of a larger kitchen is of cultural significance: ‘We Bengalis have a lot of pots and pans and cooking things

so a nice bigger space would be good.’ This was also raised by Housing 21 staff, who expected this client group to cook more than their main client group of older White British people. The desire for gas hobs was another culturally specific design issue, as cooking on fire is essential for the preparation of some staple foods. Finally, while open plan kitchen-dining areas are trendy, some residents and housing professionals saw them as culturally inappropriate: ‘It just doesn’t work for a lot of us because obviously we do cook a lot... and we do use a lot of spices or, like, we fry fish and stuff like that, so you don’t want all of that in in your living space. And also, it’s just messy... There’s a difference I’ve seen, like the concept of an English dinner party and then the concept of a Caribbean or Indian party. There’s loads and loads of food... you don’t really expect your guests to see you preparing the food... It’s like a private world, our kitchen, compared to the English concept.’



Credit: CRESR. Consultation board at a community consultation event

Design consultation challenges

The design process faced some challenges, from the difficult start during lockdown through challenges related to the timing of the process and its length and residents’ capacity for participation (see page 51).

Informed participation and time limitations

Timing was a challenge for meaningful, informed participation (see also pages 32 and 35 on community engagement). The team had to consult with residents at an early stage and adapt the design to their input before applying for planning permission. Once permission is secured, no significant changes can be made, so residents had to learn fast and those joining later could not affect the design.

Residents repeatedly said that they will only fully understand cohousing once they’ve lived in it. They acknowledged that without visiting other communities and without professional knowledge in architecture, it was very difficult to envision what it would be like, what their needs might be, and what their aspirations will be: ‘Well, the plans and ideas they’ve given us, we’re happy with those so far. So only when it’s completed then we’ll know whether it’s done the way we want it or not.’

In grassroots developments, members are better informed because they normally spend a lot of time learning about cohousing before they begin the design process (UKCN Guide to Cohousing 2023). Working with a housing association after a site was identified meant that the process was much quicker, so the few residents who engaged first had a lot more influence on the design than the majority of residents, who will have joined after planning permission was secured. The tight timescale in comparison to other cohousing groups and the external challenges (for example difficulty travelling due to health issues and

Covid restrictions, and difficulties accessing information independently due to a language barrier and digital exclusion) meant that residents had little time to consider what designing for cohousing can entail. Their comments reflect their presumed needs and understandings at the beginning of the journey. One factor that helped to overcome some of these challenges was Triangle's in-depth grasp of cohousing in terms of its social and architectural design. Designing multifunctional spaces and aiming for social interaction are cohousing design principles that are accepted as good practice for any cohousing community.

Retaining knowledge over a long time

As the development process went on, the resident group's involvement was inconsistent. Some residents are old and not well, and as time went by some have forgotten or did not understand some aspects of the design. This common situation for cohousing residents was evident in individual and group interviews, where members were generally unclear about the design. Visiting Housing 21 schemes helped them to visualise the space, but at the end of 2022 and the middle of 2023 there was still some confusion amongst prospective residents about the communal spaces and what the homes will include. For example, thinking about the communal space in 2023, one resident said: 'I think, is it four houses have one space or two houses have one space?', while the plan was for one communal space with a kitchen and sitting area for the entire development. Thinking about the kitchens in 2022, a prospective resident was not sure if the homes will include white goods, one was unsure if they will have gas hobs and another wanted to know if they will have separate, private kitchens. In 2023, one resident only remembered seeing the drawings for the external layout but had not seen any internal design, while others referred mainly to the individual flats and could not recall discussions about the garden: 'I wasn't sure that happened with the gardens, I didn't know about that.' This

is perhaps to be expected where residents' engagement might ebb and flow over longer time periods.

Asked about their input in the design process, members struggled to recall examples of suggestions that were then taken on board. Some members of the core group said they did not take part in design consultations. One member who was involved for a long time said: 'I can't remember that, maybe it was a meeting that I missed, I can't recall that. That hasn't happened, I haven't been to a meeting where I met the architect, if I did I would have remembered.' They added that they did recall that at 'the very first meetings we had a look at some diagrams', but only had pictures from the external design. Legacy WM's staff confirmed that some of these residents attended consultation events, and this suggests that it became difficult to retain the knowledge in the group over time.

Visiting other Housing 21 schemes helped residents visualise how the new flats will look, but was also confusing as they were not sure how the new flats would compare with the ones they visited, and some had concerns that the bedrooms were too small. After visiting the scheme, some residents raised concerns that the room will only fit a single bed, although the internal drawings clearly show that the rooms are designed for a double bed. A prospective resident said: 'We're not sure if the internal design is going to be exactly the same as the current one, but I was impressed with it and I'm looking forward to seeing the properties being built, so that was very useful for us I think.'

What were the aspirations and concerns of prospective residents?

In summer 2023, the core group of committee members for the Chain Walk cohousing scheme consisted of six to eight members. These were the local residents who wanted to be involved in meetings, consultations, site visits and training in the lead-up to the building. Housing 21 started engagement in other areas too, but these were either discontinued or still at an early stage before a committee was formed, so our research project focused on the Chain Walk project. The aspirations and concerns discussed in this section are therefore specific to this group at this stage. Different communities at other times may have different views, skills and culture and life stories that will shape their vision and needs.



Aspirations

For prospective residents, the main motivation to engage with the project was their aspiration for safe, secure, affordable, good-quality homes in a neighbourly community. Prospective residents were living in homes that were precarious, unsuitable, expensive to heat or unsafe. For some residents, moving into a supportive community was a step towards greater independence from their children, empowering them to rely on neighbours rather than immediate family. Self-management or greater agency in a public way were not desirable at this stage.

Asked to explain what cohousing meant for them, residents focused on mutual aid and conviviality, as this representative sums up: 'I would say it's like a community where you get on, you do things together.' This view reflects Housing 21's emphasis on neighbourliness in their cohousing schemes.

Security and safety

Some prospective residents were currently living in homes that were insecure or unsafe, for example privately rented homes where they were worried about rising rent and poor maintenance by their landlord, or suffering antisocial behaviour. Legacy WM's team have identified safety as a key issue for older people in the area. 'It is important for housing because the housing around here is absolutely appalling.' One local person, for example, was suffering antisocial behaviour and window smashing, 'so he needs housing because he wants to move to somewhere safe'. Cohousing, said a Legacy representative, was attractive: 'When the man heard of this, he responded, "Wow, yes, that's for me."' Some prospective residents thought that moving to a community for older people was safer. One said: 'The young ones, if you were with a family with young kids, smoking weed, then you got that problem but it is all going to be that mature age group.' Another said: 'I think it'll be good because we're all elderly. Who's going to mess with the elderly? It'll be good... I think it'll be safe.'

Secure, affordable rent

For some members, becoming tenants in a housing association, where rent and maintenance are regulated, was attractive. One said: 'I'm still having problems, they want us to leave, they want to put the rent up and they want us to leave.' Prospective residents believed that the rent would not only be regulated but would be lower (especially for those who were downsizing). Another prospective resident emphasised the poor maintenance of their current house: 'We are having issues, they come and take the rent, we pay it but he doesn't fix any problems, any issues we have he doesn't listen.' In a Housing 21 scheme, prospective residents were expecting higher standards for maintenance. They were certainly looking forward to having a landlord they can trust to look after the homes. This had implications for their desire for self-management.

Independence

The prospect of being part of a close community that aims to support neighbours was empowering for residents, as it offered them a path for greater independence in older age.

“*If I was to have any problems in the house or something happened to me, before I call my children I'd shout out to one of the neighbours, obviously they'll help me in my time of need. So it's good that there's people close so I'll have to be nice and be friendly and get on.*”

Prospective resident

One prospective resident explained that the cohousing offered some reassurance for the big step of moving out of her son's home: 'I feel comfortable knowing that if I get in any kind of trouble people are just at my doorstep to help me. I won't feel lonely if I have that. I feel a bit brave.' Indeed, tackling loneliness is what cohousing is known for (Scanlon et al, 2022), which is particularly important for older people.

Like many older people who are drawn to grassroots cohousing, the community was an attractive offer for older people whose children live far away. Some potential residents were already facing the challenges of living without support from extended family as their children have moved away or had other commitments. Legacy WM workers said: 'The widowers, they have nobody... Things have really changed so that's what's happening and these, the women especially... realise "Hang on, my children won't be here for me so I want to maybe go somewhere that I'm friendly with", and the reality is kicking in and they are thinking "Actually (...) I don't want to depend on them [children] any more" and live independently because that's the way of the world now.'

A supportive, neighbourly community

Social connection and mutual aid were important to some residents. However, while none of them was naive about the challenges of living closely with strangers, some were more optimistic than others about relationships in their community. One said that living harmoniously with neighbours was a necessity in the situation: 'We'll be so close to each other we'll have to get on, you see each other as soon as you come out so you have to get on.' Some were looking forward to mixing with a diverse group of residents and getting on with everyone: 'I've met most of the people and they seem like good people so I feel like it will be good. Obviously, we've come from abroad here to settle and get on with people so hopefully it will be good.' Prospective residents also gave many examples of living closely with their neighbours in their current homes: 'I know it's all people from different communities but I've been with other communities before and we somehow get on, everyone understands little bits of English I can probably speak and I think we'll get on.'

Residents were also sober about potential challenges, emphasising that in cohousing they will always have their own space to retreat to if relationships with neighbours were difficult. One resident also said: 'I've never been somewhere or perhaps worked somewhere where everyone gets on with everyone... You tended to have your own little circle... There's bound to be one or two or three that you don't get on with. I've never known any place where everyone gets on with everyone.'

Sense of ownership and belonging

Prospective residents were already developing a sense of ownership of their future rented flats and a sense of belonging to the community, following the long consultation period. They were looking forward to making more decisions about the colour scheme and the use of the communal spaces. They were also looking forward to having a home that feels their own, where they have more control. One prospective resident said: 'If anything was to happen I can fix it myself, whereas in a rented property I'm constantly telling the landlord this has gone, that's gone and it's not getting done and I feel bad when I have family and people coming over to my house, I feel embarrassed, whereas this way it's my own new place that I can look after.'

Good location

Housing 21's decision to select a site and form a community around it proved to be a good strategy in terms of community connection. Since prospective residents were recruited hyper-locally, they were already connected to the place. All prospective residents were pleased about the location: 'It's very close to friends and family... So there's a doctor's surgery there, I know a lot of people around the area, so I feel like I'll get on well in the area as well, shops and everything are local, the area's good.'



Residents' concerns

Self-management

“ When it comes to managing the project, the first thing that comes to mind [is] that [it] is Housing 21's responsibility to manage the property, not the residents. ”

Prospective resident

Residents knew there would be an expectation that they will contribute to the management in some way. This was a source of concern for some, who felt that key management aspects should be the responsibility of Housing 21. Before building commenced and while the core group consisted of six to eight members, most prospective residents had similar expectations from Housing 21: to take responsibility for maintenance and infrastructure and support with conflict resolution and possibly with finance around buying equipment such as white goods for their new cohousing home. 'I mean, like, if the electrics go or something breaks or one of the neighbours has a fight, what do we do in that situation? So if you could call Housing 21 and they could help in that situation I think it would be better for us.'

In summer 2023, it was accepted by Housing 21, Legacy WM and the core group of Chain Walk residents that they were not interested in self-management similar to a TMO (Tenant-Managed Organisation), apart from some willingness to look after the shared garden and manage mild conflicts within the community. One prospective resident suggested that after moving in, residents will have a clearer idea of community life and will learn new skills with some support from Housing 21: 'If Housing 21 helped for a bit maybe the community would see and learn from it, maybe things would be different then if they maybe manage at the beginning and kind of teach everyone how to do it.' But other residents were more sceptical:

‘I can’t see that happening, no... It depends on what skills, I’m not looking to learn new skills, I’m past that stage in life, I’ve worked for 33 years non-stop.’

While Housing 21 staff were committed to maintaining control over health and safety and other basic infrastructure, residents were not sure what management entails: ‘They need to tell us what they mean about management... If there’s a faulty device [in the communal areas]... is that Housing 21’s responsibility or the residents’? Surely it’s not down to the residents to take care of that.’ They were also not sure if they could choose to outsource all the jobs or if they would be ‘told to’ do jobs on site, for example gardening. Visiting some Housing 21 schemes added to the confusion: while it helped residents envision the environment, they struggled to imagine what the difference would be between their development and more mainstream Housing 21 schemes, with on-site management. One resident said: ‘They’ve got some gardens there so in the conversation, to me it sounded like none of the residents were actually doing the gardening, although that was offered to them... Who was going to volunteer or be told, for instance, to cut the grass in the grounds?’

In summer 2023, residents said that management was not discussed in detail in their meetings: ‘I haven’t heard that part of things but again maybe in meetings to come that may be brought up. I don’t think all these matters have been discussed properly.’ Legacy WM suggested that the early stage of development and the make-up of the core group made it difficult to focus on management: ‘Because there’s no tangible example of what does that really look like on a day-to-day basis... you know, some of the things they feel might be overwhelming... they’d rather just outsource that to, you know, a local provider.’ Indeed, one prospective resident said: ‘I’ll be honest, I wouldn’t step forward and openly volunteer to do something, but if I was chosen to do something I could perhaps do it. If it was offered to me, I would rather include that in the service charge so Housing 21 can get an outside contractor to do it.’ So while there was little desire for self-management at this stage, it became apparent that to foster greater participation, Housing 21 and Legacy WM will need to continue developing a process to explore and define responsibilities with residents.



Image credits, clockwise from top left:
Threshold Centre
Betty Farruggia
Shades of Black
Swann Design

Barriers to self-management: age and health

Similar to the barriers for community engagement in the development stage, residents expected to face challenges such as limited previous management experience, language barriers and their health condition as they were getting older. One prospective resident said: ‘It would be good if we got help with the maintenance. I’m old so I wouldn’t know what I’m doing properly or who to call, so it would be good if we did get some help.’ One resident said that at their current home, their landlord expects them to contact workmen for maintenance jobs, but they found this tiring and difficult. One resident suggested that with their current age cohort, self-management would be a challenge: ‘Other residents are much older than me so I can’t see them doing gardening, cutting the grass and that, I can’t see that happening unless we get younger people.’

Another resident simply expected care for the elderly rather than more responsibility: ‘I think whatever Housing 21 will decide to do will be good. We’re the elderly so however they think is best to take care of us, that would be best.’

Shared facilities

While generally optimistic about living in a community, there were also some concerns around shared spaces. Prospective residents visited a Housing 21 scheme where residents had a shared laundry facility. Responses to this were mixed: one resident was concerned about cleanliness in a shared laundry facility, but another saw it as an opportunity for social interaction: ‘A communal room where washing machines would be situated and you go down and do your washing... could be a good thing, because when you go down to the room where the washing machines are, that’s a great place to meet other people and get to know people, people you haven’t met beforehand.’

When asked about managing the communal space when people want to use it for private events, one resident said it would be ‘nice’ to update neighbours about plans ‘because we all have a say in that communal space so it’s only fair if we tell each other if we’re going to use that space. I did ask for maybe a small guest area for ourselves just in case, say, for example, there are problems or issues.’ After moving in, residents will have to find a way to manage this shared resource.



6. Common House/ Shared Spaces

Image credits, clockwise from top left:
 David M. Christian
 UK Cohousing Network
 UK Cohousing Network
 Tony Finnerty

Examples from UK based cohousing communities on the consultation display boards

Dealing with conflict

Members had some concerns about living cooperatively with their neighbours. Will everyone agree to share the costs for work in communal areas? Will it be Housing 21's responsibility or will residents have to cover some additional expenses themselves? In 2023 there was a lot of uncertainty amongst prospective residents about these questions. 'If the costs are not shared and nobody does it then what will I do? I will have to do it myself.' Neighbour disputes were another issue. To avoid conflict, some members considered paying for some jobs from their own money or doing it themselves. Others mentioned Housing 21 as a potential solution to challenges: 'I feel like if everyone took part and did their bit it would be good, but I have a feeling that everyone won't, that's when, I don't want to use the word fights... conflicts might start. So if Housing 21 took control of it I think that would be better for us.'

Delays

All the residents who were interviewed were concerned about the time the project took. Some had pressing housing needs, others were losing enthusiasm and felt the project remained intangible after some years: 'There's a lot of wait and see at the moment in my opinion about how this is going to work.' Some felt that the delays meant recruitment of new residents was also slow and the committee was not making much progress: 'There haven't been much meetings anyway, I think because of the delays... Once it's started, there's encouragement, people start getting excited, other residents on the street here are going to start asking questions and want to get involved, it needs to get started and more meetings to discuss these matters... it hasn't been discussed whatsoever.'

Greater diversity

Members of the group were keen to live in a diverse community. At this early stage, some aspects of diversity were missing: people were generally older than the minimum entry age of 55, and many members of the committee were Bangladeshi. One member said: 'I think we need to get, I don't know how to phrase this, we need to get more people involved that perhaps, to reflect the community, Black, Asian, White... Diversity, that's the word. We need to get more people involved. There's only half a dozen of us here, it's not enough... we need to get more people involved to reflect the diversity.'

At the same time, there were also some concerns about diversity. In interviews with the core group of residents, none of the prospective members had raised any concerns about cultural differences and all were very open to different cultures and faith groups. However, living closely together could potentially raise a challenge. One Legacy WM worker said 'Will that same level of tolerance be there in a confined kind of complex, and living together?' In one consultation event at another community, there were concerns that people from different ethnic communities will not get on well due to cultural differences — for example, some drinking alcohol and enjoying loud music, while others object to alcohol on religious grounds.

How does the project compare with other cohousing communities?

As the findings above show, the Housing 21 model is different in some significant ways from the usual approach to cohousing in the UK. It is developer-led, focuses on neighbourliness rather than shared values and self-management, targets marginalised communities, is fully rented and affordable, and is open to low levels of self-management. It also begins with a site and recruits the community around the site — a practice that is less common but does exist in other cohousing projects. This section compares Housing 21's project with cohousing on an organisational and social level. Our key finding is that the Housing 21 project differs from cohousing in some important ways, to the extent that it may be more accurate to use a different term to describe it.



Credit: LiLAC Cohousing

Site first: opportunities and limitations

Housing 21 staff explained how their development process is different to the development process of most grassroots cohousing communities. From the start, Housing 21 was aware that cohousing development tends to take longer than other types of housing. To address this complication, 'we wondered... rather than waiting for a group to organically form and then trying to find a site, it's "Here's a site, recruit the group to go to the site" effectively.'

In cohousing communities, it is common for members to form a long time before a site is found, and members often move into their community from another area or even region. The 'community first' approach means that members chose to join cohousing, have commitment to its values and lifestyle, and formed as a group before making key decisions. The difficulties in defining a shared vision, learning about each other's requirements, and searching for a site to meet these needs, is an important formative phase. Moreover, cohousing is an alternative way of life and not attractive to everyone (Riedy 2019), so recruiting within a mile radius of a site can pose a challenge to finding members who are a good fit for community living, especially in a highly participatory and demanding model like cohousing.

The Housing 21 project is an experiment in fast-tracking formative social processes, with hands-on support from a housing provider. However, it also meant that the prospective residents did not have a clear collective vision when they entered the project with the housing association, but were presented with a vision by Housing 21. This made the process quicker, simpler and a lot more culturally, socially and financially inclusive than other cohousing projects, but it also compromised residents' agency in comparison to the community-first approach.

Self-management

In cohousing communities, residents often own and manage their land collectively. Where a housing association is the landowner, tenants can lead a Tenant Management Organisation (TMO), where they do not own the homes but are managing the development. Housing 21's strategy proposes TMOs as the highest level of participation for their cohousing residents, offering not only a sense of community but also delegating powers to residents. Birmingham City Council has a clear sense of what a TMO will do and how it will operate, with responsibilities including:

- managing and controlling management and maintenance budgets
- employing staff to carry out day-to-day estate management and maintenance
- day to day repairs, cleaning and caretaking
- collecting rents and chasing arrears
- dealing with anti-social behaviour
- services to leaseholders
- dealing with tenant disputes and complaints
- supporting the council in the letting of void properties to new tenants
- regular block inspections to ensure the safety of residents
- ensuring tenants and leaseholders are communicated with regularly by newsletter, website or noticeboards
- statutory consultation

Source: Birmingham City Council

At the time of research, prospective residents were not interested in the TMO model, which raised a question in the cohousing network whether the development qualifies as cohousing. We can understand differing levels of control and communality/neighbourliness in the form of a matrix (Figure 1 below), which enable us to understand where H21's scheme fits within a broader range of housing forms.

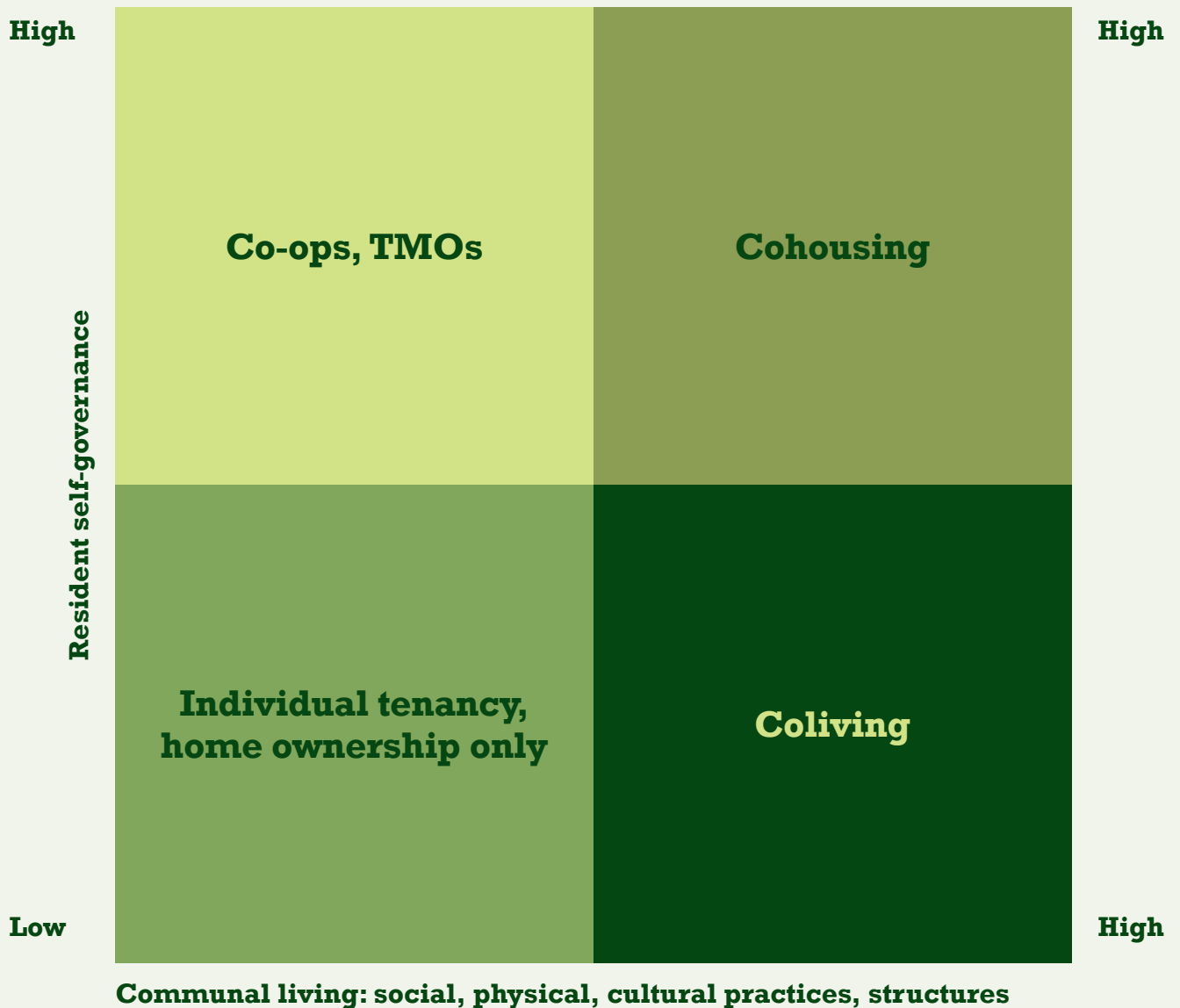


Figure 1. source: UK Cohousing Network

Prospective residents in Chain Walk were very clearly not interested in self-management, were not aware of collective decision making involved in community living, and while some were interested in sharing, many focused on the opportunities for privacy. They did not join for the community activities but for mutual support and good quality secure homes. Professionals on the project, on the other hand, agreed that at first the project will be low on self-government, but were optimistic that with time residents will not only develop a strong community but will increase their level of collective self-management to the levels of most cohousing communities (top right side of the matrix).

Housing 21 staff often shared the residents' view that housing development was complex work which is best left to professionals. One member of staff said: 'What we're doing is we're reverse engineering the whole thing. We will be the

land owners in perpetuity. We will pay for the bricks and mortar, we will pay for the design. We will take all the pain of the project building.' This is another contrast with many cohousing communities, where residents appreciate the empowerment involved in setting up a housing development with little expertise in housing development (Archer et al 2022). In fact, cohousing members view the challenge as a social glue and an opportunity for personal growth (West and Fernandez 2019; Archer et al 2022). Working together on management and overcoming challenges collectively were important in creating a sense of community with a shared goal, and helped residents get to know each other and make friends (Arbell 2020). There is a risk that without meaningful, tangible collective work, the sense of belonging, community, and agency in Housing 21's schemes will be compromised.



Credit: Housing 21 Cohousing strategy 2021-2023

Motivations and lived experience

Involvement in the design and self-management were not, in the views of residents, the most attractive aspects of the scheme. While they did appreciate the opportunity to provide input, they did not speak of this aspect as central to their participation. The main motivations of prospective residents were solving their housing needs and to live in a safe and supportive environment. For some members, the promise of well-built new affordable housing was the main attraction. This is in contrast with the common motivations of cohousing members, who value the autonomy and collaboration involved in self-managed bespoke communities, and often relate this housing model to broader value systems like sustainability and alternative culture. Most cohousing members in the UK were not in urgent housing needs prior to joining (Arbell 2021).



Credit: Housing 21 Cohousing strategy 2021-2023

The community engagement section identifies some barriers to active participation for interested residents: language barriers, skills, commitment and knowledge of the model. None of these are standard barriers to community-led housing, which are mostly around the aspects Housing 21 is responsible for: land, planning and finance. Knowledge of cohousing and the skills involved in developing this knowledge are important differences between the Chain Walk resident group and cohousing groups. Cohousing members often decide to join after learning about the model, reading about it and visiting communities. Chain Walk residents were not familiar with the concept of community-led housing and were not aware of local housing cooperatives, for example. Unlike many cohousing members, there was little sign that residents had conducted independent research on cohousing. This may be because they were satisfied with the information they received, or because they could not access the information independently due to literacy and technological barriers. There is perhaps an 'ideological gap', in the sense that there is a lessened commitment to the idea of cohousing. This commitment can fuel the demand for self-management.

Previous research has suggested that cohousing participants' perceived sense of agency, and their background characteristics related to, for example, education and skills, has a significant impact on participation and involvement (Arbell 2022). We suggest the evidence gathered in this study corroborates some of this previous research, highlighting specific challenges for marginalised BAME communities. An important example relates to decision-making. Cohousing communities tend to make decisions by consensus or sociocracy (Field, 2020): sophisticated methods that require training and normally involve engagement with written documents like agendas, minutes, policies and written proposals sent in advance. This approach fits the cohousing sector, where most members are highly educated, are confident with technology and fluent in English and have previous experience in activism or volunteering, but it can be a barrier to people from other social backgrounds (Arbell 2021). Chain Walk's prospective residents were generally satisfied with a simple message delivered via interpreters, but it is unclear how they will be able to make complex decisions where everyone can be actively involved. One of cohousing's defining features will therefore require significant adaptations to fit a group dealing with a language barrier and no experience in this style of work.

Another striking contrast between Chain Walk and cohousing communities was relatively little experience of core group residents in organising in the public sphere. In Chain Walk, the core group consists mainly of Bangladeshi women with Bengali as their main language and limited experience in committee work. Some had experience planning and organising large family events, managing orders and workmen. One resident had some organising experience at work, and while not taking a managerial position felt more confident with teamwork. Working with the Chain Walk residents, Legacy WM identified digital skills as an area that required training in order to

work effectively as a cohousing community. In cohousing communities, members often join cohousing with some experience in activism or formal volunteering, and are normally familiar with practices such as minute-taking, attending facilitated meetings, decision-making processes and using written documents and email as means of communication (Arbell, 2021). Importantly, as a predominantly middle-class model, cohousing members are very often homeowners and own the site collectively, which allows them greater control over the site than Housing 21 tenants will have.

It is therefore hardly surprising that there was a sense both from Housing 21 and Legacy WM staff that the experience of most cohousing communities was of limited relevance to theirs. For example, the recently published UK Cohousing Guide was seen as speaking to a different audience and to different challenges: 'I think because our scheme is so different in terms of being a BAME scheme and in terms of the complexities of urban areas, I didn't feel like the guide tackled those particular challenges.' Attempts to connect with local housing cooperatives were unsuccessful, despite staff's efforts. This limited staff's learning opportunities as they were experimenting with a completely novel model. This reaffirms the uniqueness of Housing 21's approach, charting a new course and developing an alternative model, which draws on (but is not synonymous with) other forms of community-led housing.

How does this compare to other forms of co-production?

The Housing 21 initiative has potential to be a form of housing co-production, where residents and professionals share power to design and deliver the service together. In summer 2023, the project was still forming and had not, as yet, developed into a form of co-production.

The literature on housing co-production focuses on situations where an established community group collaborates with a housing provider like a housing association or a local authority on a project they cannot manage on their own (Trigg and MacKay, 2022). In these cases, a group of residents with a vision and established relationships is supported by the resources and expertise of a larger, wealthier and more professional partner to realise their vision. The Housing 21 model, on the other hand, is driven by the housing provider and the site, and then seeks the residents. Where residents are not previously organised and have an agreed collective vision, this approach compromises the partnership's power dynamics. In fact, the model is not based on a partnership between two organisations that were established to some extent prior to the development. Under these circumstances, it is more difficult to agree the terms of the partnership from the start.

Considering these aspects, it is more accurate to describe the model so far not as co-production but as enhanced consultation. This is not a criticism, as the engagement style was that preferred by the core group of prospective residents and was the most suitable way to engage with them. However, it is possible that a different group of residents will have different aspirations and a different starting point to engagement and participation, for example through independent research and experience in formal volunteering.

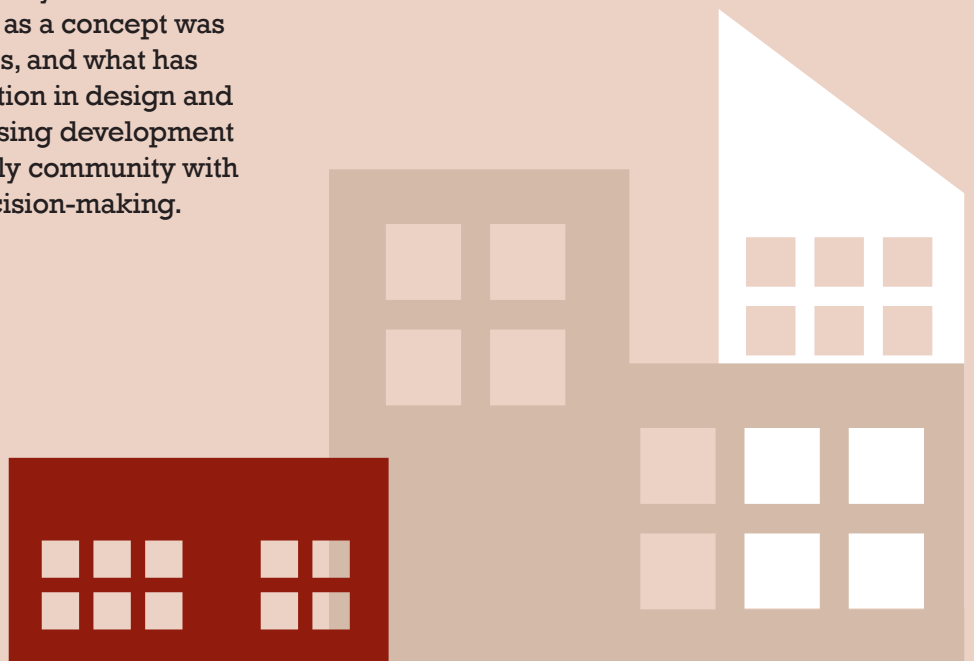


Conclusion and recommendations

This report has presented learning on an emerging and novel form of housing and community engagement. It has charted the efforts of a housing and care provider, Housing 21, and its partners, as they have sought to develop cohousing schemes for older residents living in deprived parts of Birmingham. Specifically, it draws on interviews and observations relating to their first cohousing development, Chain Walk. Much has been learned in relation to community engagement, project governance, finance and development, as well as in relation to the broader organisational strategy for developing cohousing.

Engaging with social tenants and involving them in the design of their future retirement housing — years before they move in — is a novel idea. Offering them a range of participation options is incredibly rare. It is hard and requires time and resources. As discussed in section 6, the residents we spoke to valued certain involvement processes, but their prime motives were not to manage housing collectively. Rather they prioritised access to good quality, affordable housing, where they could live independently. Cohousing as a concept was somewhat alien to residents, and what has emerged through consultation in design and planning is a model of housing development which creates a neighbourly community with opportunities for more decision-making.

There have been significant barriers to developing schemes in this way. Understanding the social value and benefits likely to be created by these schemes is one issue, having implications for both organisational assessments of funding/finance requirements, and how public landowners value the sites to be developed. Challenges in community engagement have been significant, but these have been partly addressed by effective partnering with local community organisations and architects who have taken the lead in varied engagement activities. We offer important reflections on who is engaged through the process of creating such cohousing schemes, as the skills, capacities and motivations of residents will affect involvement in decision-making and management tasks when they come to live in the schemes.





Credit: Housing 21 Cohousing strategy 2021-2023

At the time of research, the Chain Walk residents' group was not developing as a self-managing or decision-making community, and focused on neighbourliness. In fact, residents were looking forward to living in new homes that are being looked after by a housing association. Different partners had different visions: Housing 21's senior management assumed that greater agency for residents is desirable, and planned a strategy to fulfil this need, while frontline staff in both Housing 21 and Legacy WM emphasised conviviality and neighbourliness as the most important aspects of this project, with more agency as a secondary aim. The first group of residents saw their agency mostly in terms of providing input into the design brief, and focused on a vision of a safe, friendly community.

We suggest that the difference relates to different partners' positions. The position of most residents in this case study was of experiencing urgent housing needs, poor health and old age with little formal education or experience in formal community action.

This was partly a result of the decision to focus the recruitment efforts on local residents in precarious situations and urgent housing needs. A different recruitment approach and a different set of core residents could result in different aspirations and powers from the residents and a different relationship between the resident group and the professionals working with them. Our recommendations below reflect this emerging theory.

Taking a realist approach to explaining why this happened, we suggest that residents' position, powers and liabilities (Sayer, 1992) have shaped their ways of acting. Using the Circle of Commoning framework (Arbell 2023), we can see that participants' subjectivities and identities shape their visions and practices. In this case, different participants (the prospective residents and members of staff from Housing 21, Legacy WM and Triangle) occupied different positions and therefore developed different visions and potential practices. We expect that different relational structures between residents and professionals will result in different outcomes. It is also reasonable to expect that through living in the new housing development, the residents' position will change, and with that, their visions and practices might also change.

Are the outcomes so far worth Housing 21 investment? It is too early to say. Is it wise to invest resources in a small group of beneficiaries? We believe it is. While we cannot yet say how Housing 21 communities will operate once they are occupied, we can already see that the Chain Walk resident group was excited about knowing their future neighbours prior to moving in, were highly invested in their future cohousing homes, and felt they could have a say about aspects that most residents leave to a housing association. It may be a small step towards greater tenant agency, and may be a small step in comparison with the level of self-management in other cohousing groups around the country, but it has the potential to shift the culture of housing as a service towards

housing as a co-production of residents and housing providers. We cannot yet say if Housing 21's projects will work like typical cohousing communities, but our research suggests that residents have had a say on how they want to shape the project. They may decide to take a different approach, and Housing 21 is open to that, too.

Under the new 2023 Social Housing Regulation Act, there is greater emphasis on professionalism in housing management and on housing associations' responsibility for health and safety, alongside greater emphasis on tenants' voice. These can potentially be conflicting, as housing associations' liability can lead them to restrict tenants' powers, and the requirement for professionalism can limit residents' scope for direct management. Housing 21's pioneering model reflects the tension within the Act but also offers a platform to attempt a degree of self-management and resident voice in a small-scale development while maintaining direct responsibility on key operational issues.

A number of questions remain, and we are committed to research which tries to understand these. Will residents form a strong community? Will they aspire to take more responsibilities than other residents of retirement homes? Will they work collaboratively to create a cohousing community, or a different form of a neighbourly community? This one-year project can only offer insights into the design and community engagement elements, and how Housing 21's broader strategy for cohousing is being operationalised. Nonetheless, this enables us to offer a series of recommendations, targeted at different audiences.



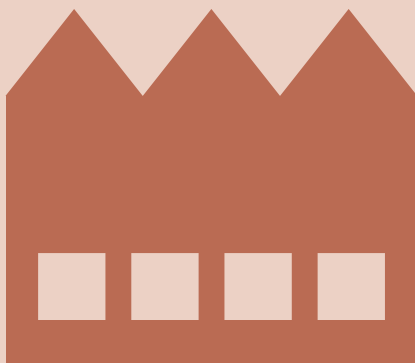
Recommendations

The following recommendations and thoughts on the next steps are based on the insights of participants and the research team, which were collected in interviews and the final workshop with the professionals working on the project. At this stage, we cannot evaluate the strategy as a whole or offer recommendations regarding the value of this approach to cohousing. We do however offer some recommendations regarding the development stage.

Housing 21 and other housing associations

Public landowners support

There is a role for public landowners (such as local authorities and health bodies) in supporting this type of initiative. Using existing powers and processes, the full range of future impacts can be factored into land valuations to ensure that community-led or community-engaged schemes like Housing 21's are made possible. In this way land can be disposed of at a lower cost, which in turn will make cohousing a more viable proposition for housing associations and other community-led developers. Indeed, this is a point being made by the broader community-led housing sector and partners (CCIN, 2017).



Informing mainstream offer

There is an opportunity, over time, to consider how greater tenant engagement or even self-management can be supported not in new housing stock, but existing stock too. There are a variety of lessons that can be taken from the development of TMOs and, for instance, the Right to Manage, that housing providers like Housing 21 could draw on, in combination with the experience of running consultations with residents in other Housing 21 schemes and new insights from the cohousing project. Lessons have been learned about effective consultation and engagement with specific groups, and these lessons could be carried into Housing 21's work with existing tenants.

Agreeing management responsibilities with residents

It is important that there is a process in place for clarifying and negotiating with residents around what can and cannot be self-managed, both in the planning of schemes and after their occupation. These processes will demand staff time, and the outcome of negotiations will have financial and organisational implications for Housing 21, so it is important this is planned for. There are opportunities to draw on existing skills and processes, and perhaps upskill court managers to facilitate future discussions about self-management.

Budgeting for consultation throughout the project

Consultation and design require time, including consultation for contractors and residents once the building is occupied. Housing 21 is planning to invest in consultation and updates for residents during the building period, and invite them to make decisions on internal decisions such as kitchen colour schemes and doors. It may be important that this momentum on consultation is maintained post-completion. Importantly, the social value generated through this investment is likely to be evident over time.

Documenting key decisions and dilemmas

One of the project’s strengths was Housing 21’s board support in this experimental endeavour. There are lessons on ways to develop alternative types of schemes that do not fit the standard grant funding models, assessments of viability and demands of the regulator. Some of this relates to governance, and how boards handle the dilemmas of financing schemes that may be higher on social impacts, but also higher on costs. We recommend that other housing associations use the learning in this report to explore different ways of valuing and financing schemes that do not fit the mainstream model. It is also important that the Social Housing Regulator understands that these schemes may bring a different balance of costs and benefits.

Community engagement

Investing in community engagement and partnering with a local organisation was a strength of the project. Capacity-building and recruitment require resources and time.



Credit: Housing 21 Cohousing strategy 2021-2023

Encouraging active participation

Recruiting younger residents

Participants recognised older residents’ declining capacity to actively participate, especially in more physical work. Recruiting younger members who can actively participate, learn new skills and stay for longer can enhance the community’s agency. Targeting more members in their late 50s and early 60s can support this without compromising the core mission of housing older people.

Engaging with existing local groups

Even when taking a ‘site first’ approach, housing associations can identify existing community groups who are already working together on local issues. Groups of local residents (for example a local soup kitchen, a campaigning group or a litter picking group) are more likely to be able to work together effectively than previously unconnected individuals, and have a clear vision and discuss the terms of the partnership with the housing association. This can bring the project closer to the concept of co-production and away from a service. Even a small core group of organised members can shift the power dynamics between a housing association and tenants.

Selection criteria

Members were recruited firstly based on their housing needs and secondly based on their agreement to live respectfully with others. Engagement with people in housing need who are also skilled and empowered in other ways can enhance the community’s agency. This acknowledges that people in housing need often have experience in activism and valuable skills, as the recent and distant past of community-led housing shows (Bunce et al, 2020, Archer, 2016; Ward, 1976). Residents who qualify for social housing and bring these skills

may assert more agency and control in the planning and management of housing. Adding more nuanced criteria around participation can also contribute to a more thriving community.

Ongoing support and training

The UK Cohousing Network has identified a need in all cohousing communities to develop their soft skills such as conflict resolution and decision-making. Ongoing training in methods that are suitable for each community can contribute to communities' resilience and spirit of cooperation, and there is increasing focus on building the capacity of tenants to work with landlords (CCH, 2023). Including this training in the broad range of activities offered to residents can encourage those who are interested to develop further, acknowledging that not all residents will want to undertake this. Effective engagement and co-production requires 5 years of funding to support residents and avoid staff turnover (CLH London, 2022; LGA, 2019).

Sandpit

Devolving a small budget to residents: Where members have little experience in budgeting and collaborative planning, the housing association can consider devolving a small budget to the community for a specific use (common house decoration, landscaping). With the right support, a practical, tangible decision-making exercise can support members in future decisions.

Maintaining conversations about design

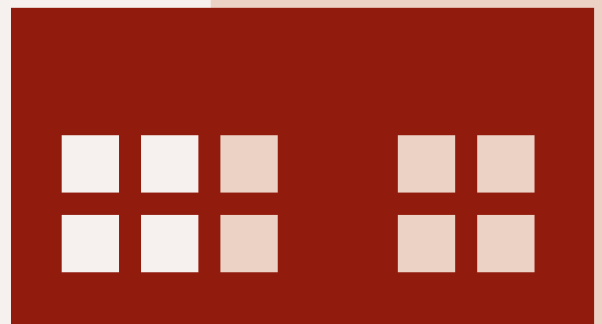
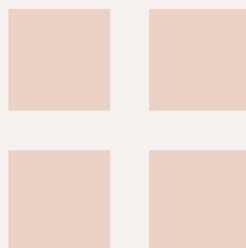
Over the years, some members struggled to recall key design aspects of the scheme. Ongoing conversations and access to information about previous decisions would help maintain key points in members' memory.

Mixed tenure

Offering shared ownership can help local people who already own a home to retain their capital while improving their housing experience both in terms of the building quality and the social value. Wider literature on cohousing in the UK has identified the importance of mixed tenure approaches to both the financing and sustainability of cohousing schemes (Field, 2020).

Involve extended families

Staff suggested that involving extended family members in the project from the start can increase families' involvement and support and can ease the transition for older people. This will enable older people to live more independently but not feel isolated, especially when transitioning from intergenerational living arrangements.



Be clear about what is being offered

The term ‘cohousing’ is not familiar to most people, especially in Housing 21’s target communities. It refers to a highly participatory form of intentional community that aims to increase social interaction. Housing 21’s model aims to achieve the latter without focusing on the former. For those familiar with the term, it raises expectations for a more intentional, community-led approach and higher levels of residents’ participation and management. For those unfamiliar with it, it is alienating and confusing. At this stage, residents used the term cohousing as a framework but interpreted it in a way that served their needs: affordable, good quality secure housing in a supportive community. There is a risk that in the attempt to achieve greater inclusivity, the name is used while providing a compromised version of the model. In fact, Housing 21’s strategy is open to many models, of which cohousing is only one. Introducing the concept using a simple, clearer name that focuses on community engagement can add more clarity to the offer for future communities.



Going forward

Changing management models

Communities are dynamic and may choose to use different management models at different stages as the project develops. At this stage, prospective residents at Chain Walk preferred a model with less self-management; they are more likely to adopt one of the more outsourced models, either relying on Housing 21 or on a self-appointed provider (an option that some residents and Legacy WM were discussing). One question to consider is what might motivate residents to take on additional responsibilities if their needs are met.

Research shows that despite the effort involved in managing their own communities, this interaction produces stronger community ties and more opportunities for collaboration and interaction and a stronger sense of purpose and collective action (Arrigoitia and West, 2021). These in turn contribute to higher levels of belonging and connection. Another question is how residents can develop the skills and structures required for more direct involvement in managing their community, and whether they will be motivated to take these responsibilities and acquire those skills.

The role of the housing association over time

Related to the previous point, housing associations should be prepared to step in and offer support when needed over time, and be ready to step back if tenants develop an appetite for more control. Importantly, previous research found that in later life, collective self-management becomes more challenging, and may require more support from the housing association or another external source. If a housing association aims to encourage more agency, it will have to invest in long term training and capacity-building, tailored to specific communities.

Housing associations should consider a gradual transition of responsibilities, along with appropriate training and capacity-building. Training is a crucial element for the success of an active community. The delegation process should consider which aspects residents want to be responsible for and reflect their aspirations. Our findings suggest that residents are more likely to be interested in simple maintenance and conflict resolution than rent collection, safety checks and complex structural issues. Once they have established themselves, residents will be able to train and take on more responsibilities, if they want to. It is the role of the team working with the residents to encourage them to find a suitable way to have more agency where it is most needed.



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