

Cohousing: 'It makes sense for people with things in common to live together'

New housing scheme offering older people the chance to live independently but in a shared community will open to residents next year

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Angela Ratcliffe was talking to her daughter on the phone one day when “apropos of nothing, she said to me: ‘Mum, have you thought about the future?’ And I said, ‘No, I haven’t.’” Ratcliffe’s husband had died more than a decade earlier and, as someone who had always been extremely independent, she was determined on one point in particular: “I just didn’t want to become a problem for my kids.”

Of course, Ratcliffe and her friends had vaguely discussed their later years - “a few of us had said, ‘Why don’t we buy a stable block somewhere and employ a housekeeper or whatever?’” - but nobody had taken it any further. Now that they were reaching their mid-70s, however, many of those friends were selling up and moving to be closer to their children.

So it was a stroke of good fortune when, on the same day she had spoken to her daughter, Ratcliffe saw a poster looking for new members to join a pioneering new housing scheme for older women near her home in Barnet, north London.

Members would move together into a custom-built housing development, in which each would have her own self-contained apartment and front door, but where they would share communal facilities, commit to eating together regularly and, in the words of one of its members, “sign up to be neighbourly”.

Their homes would be “future-proofed”, allowing them to make mobility adaptations in later years if they needed to and thus to live independently for as long as possible. But crucially - unlike standard sheltered housing - the development would be designed and managed by the community itself, and the residents would choose each other.

Schemes like this have been an established option in parts of mainland Europe since the 1970s - there are 200 senior cohousing schemes in the Netherlands alone, according to the UK Cohousing Network - but no one has successfully imported the model to the Britain until now. When Ratcliffe and the other members of the Older Women’s Cohousing group (Owch) move into their properties next year, they will become Britain’s first cohousing scheme specifically designed for and by older people.

It is an option that the charity Age UK would like to see available much more widely to people moving into old age, according to policy adviser Joe Oldman. “We think it makes

sense, especially for people who are friends or have things in common, to be able to come together and to support each other. We think [cohousing] could have a really important role.”

“I think the problem has been with the practicalities of actually setting up cohousing schemes,” says Oldman, and in the case of the Owch development, that is quite an understatement. The project was first conceived 15 years ago, since when the group has explored numerous potential sites and development partners before finally securing the Barnet land in association with the developer Hanover.

Maria Brenton, trustee of the UK Cohousing Network, said delays to these kind of projects were due to sky-high land prices, councils that don’t always understand the cohousing model or which prioritise housing for younger age groups, and the difficulty of securing developer or housing association partners.

“Cohousing is such a lot of work, it’s not for the fainthearted,” she says. “But certainly there are older people clamouring for it.”

On a small, steep plot of land on the outskirts of Colchester in Essex, another group of enterprising older adults are making plans for their own cohousing scheme - one of a dozen or so similar projects in development across the country. Unlike Owch, the London Countryside Housing Group (LoCo) is open to men and women, and is being developed without the help of a housing association, meaning that its members have had to privately buy their site, on the grounds of a historic wooden-clad mill, in open competition against commercial developers.

The group started, says Anne Thorne, with friends who took regular walks together: “All of us were looking after our decrepit parents and thinking, ‘Oh God, there must be a better way’.”

Thorne, an architect, has designed 23 low energy houses and flats they hope to build in the grounds of the mill building, which will be used as a communal house with shared kitchen, lounge and guest bedroom facilities. Her designs will be submitted to the local council for planning approval next week.

The LoCo group, too, has been working for almost a decade to get the scheme off the ground. It is “madness”, agrees Thorne, that setting up a scheme like this should be so difficult. She hopes the government-backed self-build and custom house-building bill, which seeks to increase the self-build housing market and is passing through parliament, could encourage cohousing developments, by requiring councils to create a register of people interested in building locally and to take that into account when allocating land. There is no guarantee, however, that the bill will be passed before the election.

Some suggest that more could be done to encourage a range of different housing options for older people, given the shortage of suitable homes. Retirement home builder McCarthy and Stone is calling for “a national strategy led by government that looks constructively at the needs of older people”.

“Our position is that different people want different things from their housing, and cohousing is one thing that should be available to them. But it might not suit

everybody,” says Oldman. “The point is to have a range of things that will give people choices.”

With building work finally about to begin on her home, Ratcliffe, who is 81, admits she is “desperately keen” to get on with her new, collective life.

“People don’t have to be bosom pals, but there will be social activities if you want to join in, maybe once a week we’ll cook a meal together, we might employ someone to do our cleaning. There are a lot of decisions to be made. But the important thing is, they will be our decisions, and there won’t be anybody imposing them on us.”

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