

# Annual Report of Oxford Cohousing Association

This is the fourth Annual Report of the Association, covering the period from February 2014 to the present time. This has been a very significant year in terms of pushing our project forward, as we have been able to focus on a specific site which has made the project seem much more real. There is a definite sense of optimism as we move into our fifth year.

## 1. Legal status

We have remained functioning as an association throughout the year, and the company limited by guarantee that was set up in 2012 has remained dormant but is ready to use as soon as we make a bid.

## 2. Site search

During the year our attention has focused increasingly on the Stansfeld Outdoor Education Centre in Headington, and other sites have been put on the back-burner, with no significant progress to report on any of them (Wolvercote, St Augustines). Stansfeld OEC is owned by Birmingham City Council who are planning to put it on the market in early 2015. We have had good communications with BCC and met them at the site to reinforce our interest in making a bid. We have learnt recently that the site (6 – 7 hectares, comprising old buildings – classrooms, dormitories and offices – and secondary woodland) will be marketed as a whole on a 250 year lease.

Focusing on Stansfeld has enabled us to appreciate the work that has to be done to acquire a site, and much progress has been made as a result of this. This work includes identifying people to work with around design, finance and planning (see more details in the paragraphs below). We have also been meeting with groups in the neighbourhood to make them aware of us and our interest in the site. We are aware that many local people don't want any development on Stansfeld and hope to keep it as an outdoor education centre. So, during the year, OCH members have met with Friends of Quarry, Headington Action, and Friends of Stansfeld (groups with overlapping membership), to explain that, if development is to happen on Stansfeld, they would benefit from having us as neighbours!

We know that the local community is going to be very concerned about increased traffic as a result of building houses on Stansfeld so we have been keen to point out that we will have a car-sharing scheme. We commissioned an access survey from a highways expert which indicated that there should be no concerns about vehicle access for the number of houses that we might plan to build.

We have also commissioned an ecology survey on the brownfield part of the site (where the current buildings are) to find out if there are ecological reasons which would prevent building. The survey was carried out in October, which was a bit late in the season for some plants, but it indicated that there are no major reasons that would prevent building. Great crested newts and badgers do live in the secondary woodland and experts would need to advise us on the impact on them of any construction work.

## 3. Partners

In last year's report we talked of Urban Self-Build, a local firm who were interested in working with us. They made a presentation to members in April 2014 and another group, Transition by Design (TbD), a group of architects who produced our publicity poster last year, made a similar presentation in May. The latter presented an impressive team of people, willing to work with us, not only on design, but also on finance and project management, and we decided to work with them. One member of their team, Stephen Hill, has been involved with a cohousing scheme in London and is currently working on the Cambridge cohousing project

([www.cambridge-k1.co.uk](http://www.cambridge-k1.co.uk)). Since agreeing to work with the TbD team, we have commissioned them to do a site appraisal for Stansfeld (completed in September), and then a 'massing exercise' to determine the number of houses that we might put on the site. We have also commissioned work on our cashflow from Jimm Reed, who project-managed the LILAC cohousing build in Leeds ([www.lilac.coop](http://www.lilac.coop)). We have also recently met with Charity Bank to discuss the possible terms of a loan to help us purchase the land.

A group of us, including Stephen Hill, met with Oxford City Planners in September last year and presented our ideas about Stansfeld. We felt we were well-received, with genuine interest shown in our project. Of course, we are aware that there is no planning policy to promote cohousing in Oxford so no commitment on the part of the planners to support a planning application from us. But it was the most optimistic meeting we have had with planners so far.

We are currently looking for a Registered Provider (Housing Association) to help us build and manage the affordable homes on the site. We have not managed to find one locally but are hopeful that another RP with some existing experience in cohousing will partner us. We will also consider the possibility of becoming a Community Land Trust (one of our members set up the Oxfordshire CLT in recent years so has considerable knowledge of what is involved) and becoming our own registered landlord.

#### **4. Membership and core group**

Membership has grown slowly during the year. At the beginning of February we have 11 full members (including 3 households with families) and 10 associate members. We have a steady trickle of people interested in cohousing. We find that the first question people have is 'how much will I have to pay' and, of course, many are hoping that the price of a house on a cohousing scheme will be lower than on the open market. We are fast approaching the time when we will be able to give figures for these costs.

We have continued with a monthly open meeting, but changed the format and moved to Florence Park Community Centre where we meet on the fourth Saturday of the month. We have a members' meeting between 11am and 12pm, which updates members who are not part of the core group on work in progress, and then an open meeting from 12pm to 1pm to which anyone interested in cohousing can come and find out more. Then we have lunch together. Eating together is part of the 'social' glue of the group, and we are conscious that we need to do more social activities together. We had a Christmas party in December which was well attended.

Our membership secretary deals with communications and keeping the members' information up-to-date. During the year a lot of work was done on the membership paperwork and some changes were made. We agreed a new category of member – a 'committed' member – as someone who has paid money into our funds over and above the subscription fees. This category of member was needed as we became liable to pay the bills for pre-development work.

The core group of eight have met on a fortnightly basis and a smaller group have a discussion on Skype on alternate weeks when there is no core group meeting.

During the year members discussed the decision-making processes in the group and we learnt about 'sociocracy', an approach to decision-making being promoted by Diana Leaf-Christian who attended the national UK Cohousing AGM in 2013. We are planning some training once we have a site, as this is a great way to build the cohesion of the group.

#### **5. PR and Publicity**

Using the new poster designed by Transition by Design last year, our website has been updated. We use Mailchimp to communicate with members and friends and have provided regular newsletters and updates.

We plan to hold a public meeting to attract new members once Stansfeld goes on the market.

We have continued to promote cohousing when opportunities arise locally and one or more of us is available to attend events. Two members attended a meeting of BOB-MK – an association of planners in Berks, Bucks, Oxfordshire and Milton Keynes – and spoke about cohousing. National Cohousing UK ([www.cohousing.org.uk](http://www.cohousing.org.uk)) ran a well-attended Briefing Meeting in Oxford in the spring. There was a 'House of the Commons' event in Oxford in October, which some members attended and spoke at (<http://houseofthecommons.org>).

## **8. Other activities**

Two members attended the UK Cohousing AGM at LILAC ([www.lilac.coop](http://www.lilac.coop)) the cohousing scheme in Leeds. We also had a social evening with some people from Earthsong, a cohousing group in New Zealand ([www.earthsong.org.nz](http://www.earthsong.org.nz)).

Sarah Westcott

Steward

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