

# Annual Report of Oxford Cohousing Association 2018-19

This is the eighth Annual Report of the Association, covering the period from March 2018 to the present time.

## 1. Legal status

We have remained functioning as an association throughout the year. The company limited by guarantee that was set up in 2012 is our legal body in bids for land. The company's Memorandum and Articles of Association are standard ones, not yet tailored for cohousing - when we secure a site we will update our legal status to give prospective residents appropriate control of the project. During the year we have discussed what changes might be required when we apply for a grant from the government Community Housing Fund, and how our model can provide for the management of affordable housing on our site.

## 2. Land

Last year we reported on our exchanges with CALA, to whom we had proposed the purchase of part of their site at Wolvercote. Communication was infrequent and we had lengthy waits between contacts. In May we were offered a possible area of the site that CALA deemed suitable for us. Its configuration of houses took little account of our requirements, but it appeared there might be scope for negotiation. We agreed to await the schedule of accommodation proposed by CALA and then hold a meeting to consider our options. However, the prices of the houses looked prohibitive for most of our members. Also the layout of the whole site had almost been finalised, and this made it hard to achieve an appropriate mix of homes for cohousing on the land suggested for us. In the end we gave up on attempts to negotiate further - a sad outcome of a long period of hope, working with a developer who had at first seemed positive towards our project.

Our developer partner for Stansfeld, TOWN, suggested we look at part of another large site. But again there were tight constraints on the number of houses and sizes permitted, due to decisions already taken for the rest of the site. This mix of homes was not suitable for us and we did not pursue this option.

Other sites came and went in our discussions, including the car park at Whitehouse Road and St Augustine's playing field (both owned by the county council) and others owned by the city council. See below for more information about our meetings with both councils.

## 3. Membership and core group

We currently have 7 households who are full members and 2 associate members. Two associates left us during the year, and one new associate joined us. We have a Core Group of 7 full members. We have a mailing list of interested people with 130 names on it! Experience has taught us that when we have land and can begin to make our project happen, there will be many candidates for membership, but while things remain uncertain it is harder to attract people. We have discussed during the year the fact that most of us are older people, and that our focus for recruitment will need to be younger members with young families.

The core group met on a monthly basis, alternating morning and evening meetings, in order to include members who work during the day. The weekly email to full members continued throughout the year; it sends out useful information received by members, reports on the activities of subsets of members, and invites comment if required.

Our open meetings have been held every quarter this past year, in Florence Park Community Centre. These give anyone interested the opportunity to find out about cohousing and one person has joined as an associate.

## 4. PR and visibility

We took a new step this year in order to make ourselves more visible among other social enterprises. We agreed to share a desk at Makespace with OCLT (Oxford Community Land Trust), effectively giving ourselves an 'office'. Makespace is a new and affordable working

space for individuals and organisations in Oxford. It offers subsidised rents to social enterprises, charities and workers' cooperatives working on social and environmental justice issues. Two of our members go there one day a week and there have been a number of meetings about housing held there; the one in February this year on community-led housing was attended by 17 people.

## **5. Work with councils**

We have for some time put a lot of work into lobbying local councillors and officers about cohousing, in an attempt to strengthen support for it in local policies. During the year, a briefing document was drawn up for this purpose, to use when appropriate.

During the year, the new Local Plan for Oxford has been in consultation, with invitations to consider the wording of draft policies, and we have participated in these. Following our submission of appropriate wording about community-led housing, two members attended the Housing Panel of the city council's Scrutiny Committee in October; we were very well received and pleased with the interest shown by councillors. The draft plan was out for further consultation and we submitted a response in December, asking for the opportunity to speak when the government Inspector examines the final version later this year.

Using money from central government, Oxford City Council commissioned Community First Oxfordshire with Oxford Community Land Trust and Oxfordshire Community Foundation, to undertake a study of community-led housing in the city, to better inform future policies. We contributed a case study on our bid for the Stansfeld site, and helped to assemble evidence of the value of community-led housing, both socially and economically, compared with regular housing. The report was completed in October and submitted to the Council. Its conclusions were that community-led housing is practical and viable.

Two meetings were held with Alan Wylde, the officer responsible for developing council-owned sites through the Oxford Housing Company. At the first meeting, Alan underlined the need for councillors to actively support cohousing on Housing Company sites. The meetings were positive and several sites were mentioned where our project might be included.

Other meetings with other councillors have been held, all with the aim of reinforcing the concepts of cohousing and community-led housing and their value. Generally support is positive but seems to stop short of the impetus needed to earmark land for us.

A meeting was held with the County Council leader and another councillor to discuss sites owned by them. The meeting was positive but there has been no response to a follow-up letter from us.

We addressed a meeting of the Oxford and District Labour Party in September, which was well received.

## **6. National Government support**

We were encouraged when the government set up the Community Housing Fund to include support for groups in the early stages of projects, but its terms seemed restrictive and its timescale very limited. We discussed it in many of our meetings as we tried to find out what exactly we could apply for and when to apply. We have a regional representative who clarified some of our questions. We lobbied our two local MPs to extend the deadline for the fund and received responses from both of them. Layla Moran asked four parliamentary questions as a result of her interest. Both MPs forwarded our letter to the minister for housing and received a standard response which they passed on to us. We learnt that a group in Thame had successfully obtained money from the fund to do a feasibility study, so we are currently preparing an application to support feasibility studies in Oxford.

## **7. Other meetings and activities**

Several of our members visited Marmalade Lane, Cambridge's cohousing scheme, which was built by TOWN, our developer partner for Stansfeld a few years ago. The scheme was finished in late 2018.

One of our members attended the AGM of the National Cohousing movement.

Two people met Charles Couzens, the project manager for Bridport Cohousing, to talk about their legal model for managing affordable housing.

The National Cohousing organisation consulted all members on a definition of cohousing which would have legal status in any national legislation. Our contribution was positively received.

We also responded to a Government consultation on proposed changes to the law on leasehold, and a further consultation on the same issue by the Law Commission. Both of these consultations were drawn to the attention of cohousing groups by Wrigleys solicitors because leasehold tenure can be beneficial for cohousing developments.

A meeting in Oxford on Women and Housing was attended in March last year.

We also talked about our need for a project manager, as and when we get land, and we met a possible local candidate for this work.

## **8. Conclusion**

This Oxford Cohousing group has existed for nine years. During that time we have put in three bids to buy land, all unsuccessful. An enormous amount of work has been done during this past year on trying to influence policy-makers, and our thanks go to those few members who keep going with painstaking work, writing briefings, responding to consultations, carefully crafting definitions and proposing favourable wording for policies that might help us bring our project to fruition. Compared to when we started, we have seen a marked improvement, both at local and national level, in awareness of the community-led housing movement and its important role in addressing the housing crisis that the country faces. We still hold out hope that our cohousing project will eventually be a success story!

Sarah Westcott,

Steward,

June 2019