

Episode 129

Setting up a cohousing scheme – with Chris Wilson from K1

The show notes: www.houseplanninghelp.com/129

Intro: Chris Wilson has been involved in the K1 scheme in Cambridge for the last few years, and while they haven't yet started building, they have been doing a lot of the required background work.

I started by asking Chris why he wanted to be part of a cohousing project.

Chris: I was working for a non-profit company and they were run by consensus, so I was sort of familiar with how consensus-based organisations work and I liked some of the things I was hearing. Some of them lived in a cooperative housing society and they found it was great for kids who lived in that group. They had a lot of adults around who could be good influences on them and could help look after them. And a lot of space to run around and play in and lots of friends.

So I thought it sounded like a great idea for families with kids and I happened to be looking on Cambridge City Council's website for information about recycling and I saw a note on the side about a cohousing project that was looking for members to get involved to come to a meeting, and I thought that sounded interesting.

So I got in touch with the contact there who turned out to be Adam Broadway, one of the consultants who we're working with who's helped us to set up the whole scheme and get everyone together. And came along, met a lot of the other people who had also seen the advertisement or found out in other ways and were getting involved, and decided that I wanted to do more. So that was in November 2012, so 3 and a half years ago.

Ben: These things always take a while, that's why it's quite nice, because having been to LILAC and Lancaster cohousing and seen completed cohousing schemes, you're right in the middle of this and not a brick or whatever construction type has been laid yet. So

this is good in terms of us understanding how a cohousing scheme gets together.

Did you say it was the council who first initiated this?

Chris: Yes, so the city council own the land and they had been very interested, and I think particularly with the instigation and encouragement of Adam Broadway and Stephen Hill who are two consultants working with them who are very much into cohousing.

They encouraged the city to use this plot of land that had been allocated to a developer but the developer had pulled out in the housing crisis in 2007. They encouraged them to use it for a self build community housing project and that turned into a cohousing project and the city agreed to use their marketing budget for selling the land to a commercial developer but instead they would use it to help facilitate the formation of a group of people who wanted to form a cohousing community and find a developer to buy the site, the land and build the houses on it. And that group is us.

Ben: When you joined it then, how did you move forward and take in more responsibility?

Chris: Well I was one of the people who volunteered for a sort of management role right at the beginning when I got involved. I wanted to be secretary and take minutes at meetings, because I'm organised and I can do that kind of thing.

And I also became a director when we set up a limited company because I'd been a director of companies before and I quite like being involved at that level and being able to help the company and take on responsibility to help make sure it works.

And then when the opportunity came up for a new Chair I volunteered for that and I became the Chair. I was elected.

Ben: What tasks have been done at this very very early stage?

Chris: Well right now we are working on the lease and the contract which will be a three-way contract between the City Council, the developer and us. So we're having discussions with our lawyer, and our lawyer and their lawyers are working together on creating this joint draft that we'll all sign.

We are putting together a budget for things that we're going to need in terms of consultancy and professional support, equipment that

we'll need for the common house, for all the common areas, for management, gardening, that kind of thing. Both before the build starts and also after we move in as well, the sort of ongoing maintenance of the project and all of the shared areas.

We're working with the developer on improving the designs, making minor tweaks and changes and refinements to the designs of the houses that will be built and the common areas. Planning the layout and furnishing of the common house, and managing the group's finances and investment.

Ben: That's a lot of stuff. It sounds like you know what you're talking about. Was someone leading this? Did you have to learn all of this?

Chris: We had the help of Adam Broadway and Stephen Hill who are...

Ben: Consultants!

Chris: Yes, they're consultants!

Ben: What kind of consultants?

Chris: I'm not sure how to describe it really. I guess they help Cambridge City Council to decide how to further social aims with the resources it has available, including cohousing and affordable housing and other things, but I haven't actually asked them!

Ben: That's alright. So they haven't necessarily lived in cohousing, or have they?

Chris: Adam hasn't, although he works for a housing association. Stephen Hill is working on setting up a cohousing group that's probably in a similar stage to ours in North London at the moment.

Ben: Right, so they're people who have professional experience more?

Chris: Yes, exactly.

Ben: Okay, so they're your guides on this. Was it easy to fill out the number of people? How did you determine how many people you needed for this scheme? Was it dictated by the land?

Chris: It was kind of dictated by the land. There was an existing planning permission for 37 houses on the land which was about to lapse when we got involved and subsequently has, but we knew it was likely that we would get in the region of 37 houses.

We also knew that the city wanted to ensure that it got a decent capital receipt for the land which meant that the developer would have to build as many houses as reasonably they could on the land in order to be able to win the tender, effectively.

And in the end it's worked out being 42 houses in the planning application that was approved and that means ideally we would have 42 people in the cohousing group. We currently have 25 members who have reserved places, and plenty more members who are still thinking about it, but we're also still actively recruiting to try and get as many of those 42 as we can.

Ben: Is the site Orchard Park?

Chris: It's not the whole of Orchard Park. It's one plot of land called K1 on Orchard Park.

Ben: And was that something that because the council initiated it, that was where it was always going to be, or have you ever considered other sites?

Chris: It was always going to be, this project was always going to be on K1 because the council was supporting the consultants' work specifically to organise a cohousing project around that site.

I thought about other sites as well but there was nothing really advanced in Cambridge. Nothing that had the kind of momentum, even another cohousing project called Enlinca that has been running in Cambridge for many many years. As Robert, who is one of the people running it has said, one of the difficulties they had was every time a suitable site came up they had a big discussion about whether or not it was suitable and whether or not to go for it. It was very hard to make a decision so they could never commit to any site.

Whereas the fact that this site has a specific plot of land that it has to be on means that that whole argument about the location is out of the way and people will decide to join us or not, partly based on the location.

Ben: How did you move your ideas forward in deciding what this cohousing scheme was all about, or is this open to everyone? How do you start to shape it?

Chris: Well we were lucky to have the council marketing budget and the support of Adam and Stephen, particularly in the first year in 2013 when they organised a series of workshops to help us identify what we wanted to do. And we ended up producing a document called the client brief, which is on our website and that basically sets out what we agreed as a group we wanted to use the site for, so roughly how many houses we wanted, what shared facilities we wanted, the layout of the site, the sorts of activities that we would want to do in our homes versus potentially have on used shared facilities for. And also helped us as a group to get to know each other through having those conversations to realise whether this was something we wanted to be part of and make it more concrete for us.

Ben: In terms of the design, how did this develop and what have you finished up with?

Chris: So we had the support of Cambridge Architectural Research, who are architects and designers, in that first year in 2013 where they came up with a first draft site layout effectively that fitted our houses, 37 houses and a common house and some shared gardens and parking, onto the available space in a way that looked nice and we generally agreed with.

We had difficulty getting planning permission for that design and layout and we had to refine it a number of times in order to get the agreement of the planning authority and also the developer who came in and won the tender, TOWNhus, they had their own system which meant that placed some constraints on what they could easily build, and therefore they modified the design as well in order to make it easier to build.

So the end result has been a design that we've also had a lot of input on as well over the years, both through the workshops and also from a consultation process and working with TOWNhus and their architects Mole in submitting requests for changes or clarifications on the design and updating our own ideas about what we could achieve with the space we had available.

Ben: Are we nearly up to date in terms of the timeline? Is that where you're at now?

Chris: The outline is fixed by the planning application at this stage, so all of the external appearance is fixed. The internal designs are going through a detailed design process which the architects are doing right now and for the next 15 weeks I think. And once that's done

they will be looking to send an order as soon as possible to the factory in Sweden where the structural panels are made which will be used to assemble the houses. So at that point the structure can't be changed either.

Ben: So you've got a pretty firm idea of where this is going, it's just biding your time for the last bit?

Chris: It's fairly firm and it's firming up quickly as well.

Ben: I'm sure we've jumped through quite a lot of this, so what was the actual process from having these workshops that you're going to? Were they all themed or how did that work?

Chris: Yes the workshops were themed. We had a great guy called Jim Ross who works with CAR – he's an architect. He's also a facilitator and he led the workshops around his concept of what the client brief should look like, so what areas it should cover, and which processes we could go through that would be interesting and fun and would help us to both work out what we wanted and agree on what we could agree on, work out the areas that we weren't all agreed on for future discussion and gel more as a group.

So we went through those workshops and we produced the client brief and then we've been having business meetings and members meetings, two a month, since then to keep the momentum going and make decisions and make investments in the company, and organise events, things like that.

Ben: How is it structured then your group? Because obviously not everyone can be a leader, so what positions do you have within K1 cohousing?

Chris: I think we have a very flat structure. We have a limited company which manages really just the financial matters and anyone who wants to can stand to be a director of that company. I think we have 8 directors at the moment.

We have a number of working groups which have delegated authority to make decisions and plan various aspects of the project, such as the common house, the gardens. We have legal, the lease working group, a community working group that is organising events to help us get to know each other and have fun together before we move in as a community.

So those working groups aren't run by directors, they're run by volunteers from the members and volunteers from the members are members of those groups and we encourage everyone to be on at least one working group. So we hope that people will get involved and do something they enjoy and help to build the community.

Ben: Have there been any decisions that are tricky to make because the consensus is pretty much split down the middle?

Chris: I'm sure there have been decisions like that. I can't think of any off the top of my head, although financial decisions are always tricky because some people can afford more and would like everyone to put in more and other people are on very tight budgets and find that difficult.

Ben: How are you all committed then financially?

Chris: So far we have all invested a non-refundable membership fee and a refundable investment in our company in order to pay for the professional services. 25 of us have also paid a reservation fee to the developer TOWNhus in order to secure our plot on the site.

Ben: What sort of percentages are these? How much do you have to invest at that point, or this point?

Chris: They're quite small at the moment. So our membership fee is £250 and the investment that we've made in CCL, the minimum investment is £1,000. Some of us have invested up to £5,000 and we expect that the total amount that all members will need to invest by the end will be in the region of £2,500-£5,000 depending on what we decide to do with things like kitting out the common house, how much we need to do now and how much we can defer for later.

The reservation fee to TOWNhus so far is £1,000. We are expecting to have to exchange contracts and pay a deposit or an option fee to TOWNhus later this year which is where the big money comes in. A deposit would be 10% for example so that could be £25,000-£40,000 depending on the house.

Ben: What have you thought about in terms of the ecological standard of what you're building?

Chris: We've always aimed for a very high ecological standard, very efficient houses. Our client brief says that we wanted Passivhaus standard. In the end that didn't turn out to be feasible. TOWNhus' system wasn't able to provide Passivhaus at an affordable level

that we could manage. So we ended up agreeing to use their standard climate shield system which has a very high level of insulation and low energy usage. The energy budget is about twice Passivhaus but about 75% or 80% better than building regulations as far as I understand it, so they're still very efficient but there's no way they could qualify as Passivhaus.

We aim to grow food on the site. We aim to use energy as efficiently as we can. We want to have a car club and solar panels on the roofs and rainwater recycling and basically be as environmentally friendly as we possibly can be. We also plan to have no gas on the site at all. So we want to have renewable energy heating and power and hot water.

Ben: What research did you do in terms of other cohousing groups?

Chris: We've been to visit some groups. Some members have been to LILAC, some have been to Hockerton or Lancaster. I've read some books about other cohousing projects. We've been contacted by other groups as well and gone to meetings and we're members of the Cohousing Network. Some of us went to their conference last year I think and I've been in touch with the new Chair of Cohousing Network, Anna Kear, so I'm hoping that there will be another event soon that I'll be able to attend personally on that.

Ben: Is that a good line of support or is most of your support coming from these advisors that you've already talked about?

Chris: I think most of our support is from our professional advisors and from members who have experience or knowledge of cohousing already. We're also figuring out a lot as we go along.

I think a lot of these things really depend on what the group want, rather than trying to force it into a particular mould, we're trying to find a level that all members are comfortable with and a model and structure and make the best out of that that we can.

Ben: Do you feel different from any of the other schemes that have been seen? Can you tell at this stage or is that just a silly question?

Chris: I don't know enough to comment about differences but I was struck by the similarities to LILAC's situation in particular. They also had support from their city council. They also had to reach market value for bidding on the land, although they had the offer to reserve the land as we've had for a while so they were able to put together their bid. They built all the houses at the same time, new-build on a

greenfield site and they seem to have had and overcome many of the same issues that we have encountered and overcome as well.

Ben: Is diversity something that you almost try to create, or do you just let it happen?

Chris: I think diversity does need to be actively worked on and we have tried hard to maintain a variety of units and prices. We particularly want to have a range of ages and abilities and skills because I think that makes a healthy community and a valuable community where people have things that they can offer that are unique and they feel valued and want it because of that. And it also will mean that more and more of our needs, if we had 42 accountants for example you can imagine our accounts being great but the gardening being a bit rubbish!

Ben: What about the challenges? What sticks in your mind and this first three and a bit years, the tough stuff?

Chris: I think the membership challenge has been tough. We were set very high levels of standards by the city in order to show that we were serious and capable of putting together a viable project. So we've had to recruit quite a lot of members.

Also the timetable I think, simply the fact that it's been a long time coming has meant that a lot of great people have had to drop out because they needed a house sooner than we could give it to them, and that's one of the saddest things I think. But we have had new members join and we have a great team and a great community, and I think even though we've parted ways with some people it will still work.

Ben: What about you emotionally, your family being invested in this? Is it a little bit of a rollercoaster and you just have to hang in there?

Chris: It can be a challenge. Getting agreement between 42 households with different ideas is always interesting and yes we've had interesting discussions about what we wanted and whether we could achieve it and how can we put up with or deal with the things that we find most difficult about coming to these agreements and the time that it takes, and the compromises that need to be made. But in the end we've succeeded and I'm very happy that we're still here and still committed and still on track.

Ben: What advice would you give to someone who's thinking of starting up a cohousing scheme?

Chris: I think people are the most important resource. You need people who are committed and enthusiastic and flexible and motivated and with a group like that you can do anything really. Setting up a cohousing project is not easy but it's certainly possible and I think it would be a very rewarding experience for anybody who goes down that route.

Ben: Is there more of a sense of people knowing what cohousing is on a general scale?

Chris: It's hard for me to say. I think that worldwide cohousing awareness is growing massively. There's more and more projects in the US. There are a large number of projects that are in the early stages in the UK as we can see on the cohousing network website. In Scandinavia tens of thousands of people live in cohousing.

I think that cohousing is a ball that has just started to roll in this western capitalist society effectively, because it's kind of a counter current to that. It's more let's see what we can do for each other, rather than let's see how to follow the traditional model, the nuclear family. I think community has been neglected in a large part and I think there will be a change in the tide and people will come to value community more than ever before.

Ben: What are you most looking forward to, if we could fast forward to the end?

Chris: I think relaxing in the shared garden. Gardening with friends, living with friends. I think one of the best things about cohousing is that I think we'll be the best neighbourhood I could possibly be in. I'll be surrounded by people that I know well, that I'm willing to look after their kids and let my kids be looked after by them and the same for them. And we help each other out in whichever ways are possible, we have parties together, we make decisions about how we manage our shared resources together. I think it will be a better way of living than I could have had any other way.

Ben: Well maybe we'll catch up a few years down the line Chris!

Just one more question because you're mentioning about the cohousing scheme but because it's on this larger scale development, what does that mean? Are you going to have it very open towards that or will there be a boundary?

Chris: There's no walls that stop people from going through the site or onto the site. The lane is free for anyone who wants to walk down or cycle down. It's certainly not a gated community. We want to be welcoming to the area and the outside world. In fact I think we want to be an example of a great cohousing community that can light the way for many more in future.

And we also need to take care of ourselves. We need to make sure that people feel safe and are happy to let their kids run around anywhere on the site and we need to find a happy medium between those two.

There has been some sensitivity with Orchard Park community about them worrying that our common house was an alternative community centre that we would be using to run events that would compete with their community centre, which we've had to make sure that it's very clear that it's not going to be that. That it's more like a big shared living room than an activity centre.

I think we'll have to see how it goes really. And it goes both ways. We want to be open and inviting but we will need people to want to come and check us out and meet us and talk to us if it's going to work both ways.

Ben: And is there anything else in this conversation of setting up a cohousing scheme that you think is of value to finish on?

Chris: I think that cohousing is something that I would encourage anybody and everybody to check out, because I think it's not really that well understood and I think if people look into it and see what the benefits are, they would be motivated and encouraged and want to join a community if at all possible, because I think it's fantastic.

Ben: Chris, thank you very much.

Chris: Thank you Ben.