

## Episode 28

### How Cohousing Helps Build a Community

With Mark Westcombe from Lancaster Cohousing

The show notes: [www.houseplanninghelp.com/28](http://www.houseplanninghelp.com/28)

Ben: Can you explain what cohousing is?

Mark: Cohousing is a form of communal living. It is different from communes in that everyone has their own home which has got their own bathroom, kitchen, living room, bedroom but then there are shared facilities on top of that. So the way I explain it to my mother's friends it's a bit like a cul-de-sac.

At the top of the cul-de-sac you've got a small village hall that's got a laundry facility, a children's room, it's got some spare bedrooms. You don't have to have your spare bedroom at home. You can have a smaller house, a smaller mortgage, and then when people come to stay they will stay in our guest room and pay £7.50 for a room.

Then we've got shared food stores, we've got shared outdoor space so we've got very small private gardens, in my case a deck. And then we've got, unusually, a couple acres of land, given the site that we purchased.

It's based on a Danish concept, originated in the sixties. I think the key is that it is trying to facilitate spontaneous interaction between the residents or the neighbours so our kitchens back onto or give onto the street so our front door is next to our kitchens. When people are walking up and down the street they see you in the kitchen and when you are in the kitchen the Danes understood that you are more likely to be willing to interact with people than when you are sitting in the sitting room. So our sitting rooms are at the back of the house and then that gives you your private space.

Then in the cul-de-sac we've got grassed areas. We haven't got cars coming down to the cul-de-sac; they park before you get to the village hall, so the kids are out playing, it's safe and you don't need a parent per kid. There's normally two or three adults. They might be parents, they might not be parents and the kids are running around with their bikes, and playing, the adults start chatting. They

see people coming home from work and they might stop and chat. Then somebody will be coming out to get their laundry and they might chat and then somebody else may be going down to our shop or store. So there is all this interaction that's happening.

You might have a five second nod of the head, a ninety second chat, borrow something, ask for something, or you might end up spending the whole evening with somebody or a group of people. That's the sort of spontaneous interaction and that means you get to know your neighbours really well and then that gives way more to coordinating things with your neighbours.

So in our village hall we have, at the moment, four meals a week together so I cook once a month and that means I get sixteen meals back in return. The meals are available from 5.45pm to 7.15pm, so an hour and a half. The kids are in there in the early bit, the adults are there in the last bit. Some people go every time there is a meal on and some people just go once a month. So I think that's the nub of cohousing.

Ben: How did you start Lancaster Cohousing because I'm aware this is not an overnight process, really, is it?

Mark: No we didn't know what we were getting into. One of us saw a school, a primary school, for sale and he with a couple of mates had done a green eco-renovation on a house that they had bought cheap and then sold on, renovated in their spare time, made a tiny bit of cash maybe, and he was interested in something bigger scale. So he saw it, sent an email around, said anyone want to do this with me. I didn't want to get left out so I said yes and there were two other people who said yes and so we put in a bid for the school.

In that process we got somebody else to come round to have a look at it. I suppose as we had been looking at how we could sub-divide this building up into fourteen apartments we started thinking . . . *Hey why don't we turn the school yard into a communal garden and then we've all got a big garden rather than fourteen titchy gardens? And then how shall we get people into that garden, so rather than us having front doors let's push people through the building into that back garden and make the main doors or the front doors off the garden, so people are seeing each other when they come home from work? And then we've got this corridor going through the school so why don't we put the post there and then people will pick their post up from the same place? And why don't we put a sofa there and why don't we put the newspapers there and then a kettle*

*and what about another sofa and what about a photocopier and a printer!*

So this corridor grew into a living room with a kitchenette and then when Chris came round because he was a builder to look at the roof and say how much renovation work we would have to do so we could inform how much we were willing to bid for it he said, "I know what you are doing. You are doing cohousing and I've got a book on it at home". So I borrowed the book and as I was like oh my god this is all I've wanted to do all my life! This is everything that is wrong with society. It's fractured. I've moved away from my parents, I haven't got a support network. I'm single so I don't have interaction with kids. I'm from a certain generation so I don't have interaction with people who are older than me so I don't learn from them.

My siblings live close to my parents, so my parents visit and my Dad helps to put rails up! So my siblings get to see how you do that and I don't get to see how you do that, so I have to buy people in to do it for me. I was just like, yeah, wow!

We didn't manage to buy the school and I guess that idea fermented in the heads of four of us for about a year and a half. Then the short story is we committed to doing it and then, what, maybe four years later we finally managed to buy a piece of land that was the right size, the right price, and yes the whole journey took us seven years from committing to doing it to moving in.

Ben: Is this privately funded? Is that what it adds up to in the end?

Mark: Our development is privately funded. I put in my life savings minus a thousand pounds and like many of us and we took the risk. Other communities in the UK are not necessarily privately funded and there are quite a few models available. So the Threshold Centre which is in Gillingham, Dorset, they have some privately funded homes and then they have a housing association that has got some shared ownership and some fully rented accommodation. So they've got quite a good range of mixed tenure.

LILAC in Leeds, which again has only recently opened in 2013, they've got, I think it's called mutual home ownership so it's a scheme where the community owns all the property and you buy into the company that owns the property. So some people might own the equivalent of eighty per cent of their home and some people might own the equivalent of one hundred and twenty per

cent and they've had funding from the government to do that the same way that some social housing gets funded.

At the moment we've got some exciting developments. Quite a few Housing Associations are interested in cohousing so we've got Hannover Housing Association that's exploring about three projects that will be mixed tenure.

The really interesting news, in early May 2013, the Housing Minister, Mark Prisk, has announced that some of the funding that's available for Community Right to Build will become available to cohousing projects so that's about £35,000 per community in supporting and putting together a business plan, doing some initial site design and getting to a point where a group could option a piece of land.

Ben: Let me see if I understand this correctly. So the four of you, does that mean you had to put up the money for the whole thing? Or you had to find the people who were going to live with you so they could invest the money? How did you get to the stage where we are now where that we are virtually complete, you're on that final phase at the moment?

Mark: Yeah, so there were eventually five of us who committed and worked solidly for six months as a project team to put together a business plan and proposal. We didn't have enough money between ourselves. Just buying the land was £600,000 plus stamp duty plus all the solicitor's fees. So when we bought the land we'd sold if you like - we had got other people to join us - the concept to I think we were 13 households so we were probably putting in an average of £45,000 each per household.

Then in order to pay for lawyers, accountants, architects I think we had to sell, and planning permission fees, another 5 houses or the concept. Then to get us going we had to sell another 6 houses, I think, and then that got us to the point where a bank was willing to lend us about £3 million and then we cash flowed it in a way that we finished some houses, sold those, got the money for those houses and then used that money then to build or pay the builders to build the later phases.

So we built 41 units in total - 35 houses, 6 flats - and I guess we've been finishing off on average about 6, 8 houses and now we'll be funding not the next batch but the batch after that.

Ben: Did you know how this was going to work? It seems to me that it's quite a big risk. If you are not sure of this process of rolling, setting one thing up and then moving on to the other, then suddenly you're talking about a big amount of money.

Mark: Yeah, you have to be not risk averse, I think. A bit of entrepreneurship comes in really useful. That's quite well understood in Denmark and the United States but there's lots of communities that the early joiners are entrepreneurial and risk takers, maybe early adopters. Then people have joined later in the project when things are more settled down and concrete and there's bricks and bricks and mortar going on, then that's an easier proposition to join at that point. But, yeah I had everything I owned invested in this company and it could have gone belly up.

We were close to closing a one million pound land deal when the world economy collapsed and so we pulled back from that with about two week to go. That project wouldn't have been financially viable I don't think cause we were in a rising house market. We certainly lost, in Lancaster, about 18% of housing value, so it is risky. I don't know of any project that has gone belly up and there's about 120 private developments in the US and there's about 15 in the UK, I imagine I would probably heard of one, but yeah it's a big project.

Ben: Tell us a little bit about the location, because it is very special and then how you spoke with the architects and came up with the design that we have now.

Mark: So the site that we bought just at the start of the housing crash was up for re-development for, I think, 60 houses and a multi storey car park. The company went bankrupt and we bought it, well we made an offer within a few days, I think, of them going bankrupt or at least of being in receivership.

The site is, I think it's about 5 or 5.5 acres. It's a pencil thin site, probably close to about 0.75 kilometre in length along the River Lune. It is south facing which is ideal for passive solar gain and a good 50% of us have got a pretty fantastic view of the river.

We've got a common house, a sort of village hall in the middle of us so most houses can see it and certainly most people when they are coming home from work will walk past it. So we found the site, we'd already tendered for an architectural practice, so we'd gone through a fairly rigorous process of exploring all the architectural practices that were either doing something eco or doing something social,

invited about twelve practices to tender. I think about ten did, or at least went through our first stage and I think then we invited four of those onto our short list and interviewed all of those for half a day each.

We contracted Eco Arc which were just clear, way and beyond anybody else. They brought both skills, they had won award after award for first off-the-grid house, first Passivhaus, first everything this but also they were very very interested in cohousing. They had both lived Findhorn Eco Village, they had visited lots of cohousing projects in Denmark and they had done some site layouts for another client on cohousing so they really understood the concept that we were doing so it was a match made in heaven, really.

Then they worked with us, which I'm sure must have been hard work for them at times! So they ran workshops with us, 40 adults in a room with the architects and they would be making suggestions and we would be giving feedback to them. They'd go away and two weeks later they would come back with a whole pile of new designs and then we would have to spend a day as a group of 40 coming to a consensus about what our houses were going to look like, because although we've built 41 houses we've essentially got four designs. All the two bedroom houses are identical and there's no individualisation whatsoever. I think only whether you've got a balcony or didn't get a balcony this is the only difference a house has got really. So that's unusual, I guess, in the self-build world that we were co-commissioning, I guess, custom built but that was more similar to what a traditional developer.

Ben: It's quite interesting these spaces because of the cohousing concept. You've mentioned your village hall where everyone can go and interact. The use of space, I'm intrigued, the living space is very modest.

Mark: Well one of the best things you can do environmentally house building is to build a small house, not to build a massive Passivhaus Code 6 [UK's Code for Sustainable Homes] with only two people living in it, like we see in Grand Designs. I mean I've probably seen one eco house even though they're all eco in inverted commas.

So I'm in a three bedroom house and I live in here on my own and that is considered an exaggeration by most of my neighbours but on the other hand it's only seventy eight metres squared, so it's open plan downstairs, it's really well designed. I mean, it absolutely maximises on the space both how the staircase works but also that

there's very limited wasted corridor space and that's even more so, I think, for upstairs.

Ben: You really do notice that, don't you, that there is no wasted corridor space. It's only now that I'm sitting here that I think, 'that's crazy'. Whenever we have a corridor that goes somewhere.

Mark: Yeah, it certainly wasn't part of the tender when we were looking at Lucinda and Andrew to do the design but it is one of the things that impressed me that we weren't looking at that but they've done a very good job, I think, of making best use of very small spaces and that must have been a really hard part of the brief.

Of course one of the great things about Passivhaus is there's only one radiator so that means that rooms are much more flexible. You know, I've got no radiator upstairs at all so you can put your bed against any wall. There's only one radiator. It's a small radiator, downstairs.

Ben: Have you used it?

Mark: Yeah, I have had it on. Because I'm a single person in a 3-bedroom house then I can't generate quite enough heat for this space. I'm also out at work a lot and I travel for work a lot and we've had a fairly cold winter.

I'm hoping next year, because I've got to know how to live differently in a Passivhaus, and it'll be the second winter so the house will have warmed up, because I moved in in autumn so the house was cold, it was drying out. So I'm hoping that next year I might not use the heating.

Ben: So what have you learnt about living this way? Was it just a clean switch-over or are there some elements of the Passivhaus standard that have surprised you or that you've had to learn about?

Mark: I've certainly done some learning. I might have to think what that's been. I have changed habits a bit. The surprises . . . It's just a delight to get up in the middle of the night, go to the bathroom and it's warm. I slept all through the winter with my summer duvet!

I did have to learn how to keep the upstairs cool enough for me to sleep, so I've learnt by closing all the bedroom doors it doesn't get as warm as the downstairs does. So I've learned to differentiate the upstairs heat from the downstairs heat.

When you do your washing your laundry dries in 4 hours or something. That's just incredible. I live in the north west of England. It's damp. Every house around you is damp and your laundry has normally got this musty smell on it [Mark laughs] by the time it's dried and I just haven't had that at all.

When I cook I don't get any condensation on the windows. In fact I have never had any condensation on the windows at all. The steam just seems to evaporate.

The filters . . . So we've got this, I can never remember, mechanical heat ventilation recovery system.

Ben: Mechanical ventilation with heat recovery. Almost there. [Mark laughs.]

Mark: That! So that's got filters on it so that's not bringing in dust. It's not bringing in pollen, so my sinuses have opened, my breathing is better, I'm much more sensitive to the smell of wine and food, and also to the smells in the house as well. And the house doesn't smell because all the air's being circulated once an hour. So it smells really fresh in here.

Ben: Yeah, it's fantastic. Going back to cohousing for a moment, when the people start to move in, was there a particular way that you recruited them or is it just as any property, you would fill that space, because I wonder whether just what you're trying to do attracts the right people?

Mark: I'm sure looking from the outside people might say we're all of a similar ilk but being on the inside we all look very different to me. I think there's about as much diversity on our street as you'd probably find on any street with houses of a similar mix of value.

We didn't have a vetting process. We had what we called an integration process so we made sure people got to know us and what they were letting themselves in for and we got to know them a bit. So there was a possibility, I suppose, to decide not to sell a house to somebody.

We tried to explain to people, as best we could given everything that was going on, as much of the detail of what they were getting involved in.

It's attracted people who are specifically interested in the community side of what we've done – the cohousing. Then there

are some who've been specifically attracted to the Passivhaus and then there are people who might be in the middle. Then there's people who've learnt, actually they didn't care about cohousing but now they're really quite interested in it.

We've attracted people from the local area in Lancaster but we've also attracted people from the north of Scotland, the south coast of England. Quite a few people have moved big distances to join this. Probably most of the movers because of the community element but some of them have moved also because of the Passivhaus element.

Ben: I was sitting with a mother and daughter, and having a bite to eat in your little village room, and the daughter had just returned from university. I was asking, is it a bit strange, because I think they downsized from a bigger house and she said: "What I really like is I know my mum's safe here." [Ben laughs.]

Mark: Yeah, I've heard that comment by a few parents who said that their kids are relieved that they probably won't have to do quite so much looking after them in their later years as they might feel obliged to do.

Ben: I think she's very capable. Don't get me wrong here! [Ben laughs.]

Mark: I mean, I've called this my pension plan, that instead of investing in financial savings I'm investing in social capital, that I'm getting to know people so that when I am in my old age, not sort of hospital stage but just need a little bit of help every now and again, 99% of the time I could be living in the house independently but there's just that one thing that would trip me up, that would require me to go into a care home. Hopefully, and the research in Denmark and the States has shown that the people who live in cohousing delay that process. So the average time that a cohouser spends in a care home is two weeks of their life. Hopefully, that will happen.

The first time I was ill, my next-door neighbour, no two doors up, came about 10 o'clock in the morning and just knocked on my door and said "Are you okay and is there anything you need?" I was just like, I am a bit ill actually, but how did you know that because I've only just woken up and worked it out for myself that I'm not feeling well. She just said: "Well, I noticed you weren't following your usual pattern!" And I was kind of like, what is my usual pattern and what has she noticed about it?

So I think that might play out and I think that's why quite a few people are attracted to this. There's this general sense of support so a couple of the kids go off to school together and there's only one parent taking them. Not all the time but sometimes the parents can bring the kids to the communal meal. Well, I suppose it happens relatively often. Sometimes the kids don't like the food. And they haven't had to shop and cook. The kids are just playing around and you don't know who's looking after them but you do know somebody's looking after them.

Yeah, you know next door sometimes, he's four, he comes in and it might take Jessica an hour or an hour and a half before she comes to check that I haven't got fed up of him yet. So, yeah, there's loads of forms of mutual support.

Ben: What's been the biggest challenge of this whole journey that you've been on?

Mark: Some people say that cohousing is awesome and awful, and that the best thing about cohousing is the people and the worst thing about cohousing is the people. Decision-making can be a bit of a challenge. The amount of work has been pretty . . . you know, it has been an £8 million project to manage in spare time. Some of us had appropriate skills but it's not something any of us had done before. Some of us were overloaded, burnt out, resentments built up with some people who others felt weren't doing as much so that's been hard work.

I think it's a bit like having a baby! It might be hard to conceive. There's a big, long pregnancy. There's giving birth. There's terrible twos, there's teenage years but you wouldn't know what to do without them. I think cohousing is a bit like that. This is my family and like in families, they drive me up the wall but also they are my life.

Ben: And finally, do you think cohousing has a lot of growth still to come around the world?

Mark: Certainly if we're going to follow a Danish pattern. Recently 10% of new build in Denmark was cohousing. 2% of the population in Denmark live in cohousing. Some of the surveys that have been done by the UK Cohousing Network, the national network that promotes cohousing, indicates that about 50% of the population are interested in living in a context that is similar to cohousing so it has the features of cohousing.

If you go out and ask people, do you want to live in cohousing? They're going to say, what's that? and they're going to say no. But if you ask people would you like to know your neighbours . . . If you break down the forms of mutual support about maybe having guest bedrooms, about having a children's room, about eating communally sometimes, consistently it seems to be about 50% of people say that they would like to live in that way.

So there's certainly the desire for cohousing. I think to make it really happen we need to see developers get involved because you need to be super-human really to manage the process so if we can, like in Denmark, Sweden, Netherlands and Germany and the US, there are commercial developers that do cohousing and there are housing associations that do it. We're starting to see that. We're starting to see interest come from commercial developers and housing associations.

At the moment, the current government is giving support to this concept, so we've seen a lot more interest and a lot more requests coming to us at the UK Cohousing Network, which I happen to be involved in, both from the media, from government and from community groups and individuals.

So yeah, I think everybody is wowed when they come here. Even though some people might think it's not for them I think when they see what it really looks like it's just like I could live like that.

Ben: Well, it's been a great overview of cohousing. Mark, thank you very much.