

Episode 248

The benefits of joining a cohousing development – with Jan Chadwick

The show notes: www.houseplanninghelp.com/248

Jan: Okay. Well, we became involved – it must be more than five-and-a-half years ago now. We were in Cheshire. It was 2013 and we read an article in The Guardian about cohousing and the benefits of community as you get older. We were in a small village in Cheshire, not far from Knutsford. We felt that really as we got older, we didn't have enough of a community that we felt comfortable with.

So, having read the article, we then started exploring cohousing. My husband did his usual thing. He's a business analyst. He went on the net, found out stuff, and we visited Spring Hill down in Stroud some months later.

We went for one of their immersion weekends where you go and stay with a family and you meet and you have a social and then you do some community work with them. And after that weekend, we really felt that yes, cohousing was for us, but where was going to build before we died? Because it is as rare as hen's teeth.

Ben: You've said a few interesting things there. First, let's talk about community as you get older. What support are you hoping to get from a cohousing community?

Jan: Neighbourliness. We're a mixed community so, we're multi-age and eleven nationalities. We all know each other. It's a case of not expecting support but knowing that your neighbour is there to look out for you and if you're stuck, give you a lift, get you some shopping, come and have a chat. There are places to go to have a cup of coffee, tea. We have shared meals.

So, it's neighbourliness, not care, if you get what I mean.

Ben: But there is research, I think, almost to show that it does work. You can often live longer before you have to go into care, if that was necessary. I'm intrigued because this has come up a few times when I've interviewed people.

Jan: Absolutely. There is quite a bit of research out there that talks about older people – I'm in my later sixties now – older people who are engaged with community stay 'younger' for longer. Because they remain active both physically and mentally, they're engaging with multi-ages. So, they stay more youthful and happier in their older years. And I think that's what my husband and I absolutely want. And what we're getting here already.

We're building some great, fantastic community events here, we're all working together to do the stuff that we need to do. Last weekend we had a street party because it was Easter. So, the kids had an Easter egg hunt, they made hats, and then we had a bring-and-share lunch. This coming weekend we're having a May Day celebration. We have a monthly celebration where we celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, significant things like my husband retired three weeks ago so, that's pretty significant. So, we have that on a regular basis.

It's really showing that the proof is there that people want this kind of environment. But you can't top-down it. You've got to build it from the bottom up. And we've been building it, as you know, for many, many years.

Ben: But you also said that at that point of thinking, 'I want to do this,' there are very limited opportunities. So, was it just relocate, you had to relocate to where a scheme is really going to get going soon?

Jan: Totally. Absolutely, totally. And we had no problem with that. We've moved around a little bit. My husband's from New Brighton in Wallasey, we met in Manchester, I'm from London, we moved to Cheshire. We're not scared of upping sticks for what we want.

Ben: Obviously, there are a couple of things that you could have done. You could have gone to an existing cohousing community which do have a turnover. So, were you very keen to be part of the initial journey?

Jan: We were looking for what was actually out there. When we went to Spring Hill, they didn't have any properties so, we put our name on the waiting list. Lancaster was in their build, almost finished process, but I said to my husband I didn't want to go further North and West with the rain. I wanted to go somewhere drier.

Ben: But we're in a passivhaus!

Jan: [Laughs] it's not that. It's just when you're getting out there and you're walking and you're enjoying yourself, it would be nice not to

have ten months of the year that are wet, which is what happens when you live on the rain tail in the Manchester area.

So, when we researched, we found that actually K1 Cambridgeshire Cohousing was actively seeking members. They had a piece of land, they had a plan, they had a project manager, we could see that there was an active way forward that would result in a cohousing community. Whereas a lot of communities don't even have land. You can do nothing unless you have land.

Ben: That is definitely a big part of it. So, what was it like joining a community that was well underway? Were you accepted easily enough?

Jan: We have no criteria.

Ben: I'm not saying you needed criteria, I'm saying what's it like? Because obviously, a lot of decisions have been made.

Jan: Oh, it's challenging, it's fun, decisions can take a long time to come to fruition because we have consensus decision making so that everyone can either support or at least accept a particular position or something that we want to do.

When we joined, it was a group that had gone from nine core people which had been there for quite a number of years with people moving in and out, to suddenly I think we went up to, like, thirty-six over the May bank holiday. Which is what the Council wanted, to prove that this idea of designating this slice of land for cohousing was the right move because people were prepared to buy properties on it. It was always going to be a purchase build.

So, we joined online. We had a conversation with people. About a month later, we actually came down to meet Chris in this field, as it were.

Ben: I was going to ask you. Because I've actually seen it when it was a field and actually, most of the development I think had been completed at that point. So, what was it looking like? Was it completely a field, the whole thing?

Jan: Yes. You can see now, we have the belt of trees and scrubland through the middle which we're retaining. So, basically it was that, a scrubby, rubbly field.

Ben: This could be a good point to talk a little bit about the design. Because seeing those mature trees out there, was that almost a starting point of how the development might progress around it?

Jan: Absolutely. It was really important both from us and for planners, because these trees have TPOs on them, to retain the belt. It's also an ancient ditch way. There was some research done on that. So, it was key to how we wanted to see it designed really.

So, the design kind of had a number of different morphs over the period of time that we worked both with Cambridge Architecture Research and Adam Broadway as our project manager, and then as we moved into the appointment of our developer, we then worked with Meredith Bowles at Mole and his team. And this has been a very long process of getting us to what I think is a great design that absolutely enhances community, enhances the environment, gives us the southern open aspect that we wanted, which no-one else on Orchard Park has; it's all courtyard built with parking in the middle [chuckles].

Ben: Do you know, one of the funny aspects when I arrived here just now, I almost thought the grid that had existed would be the way it would all be orientated. Of course, that was stupid because it has to be south facing for Passivhaus. But that's just interesting, to break that mould in this massive developer estate.

Jan: We've broken a lot of moulds and the design guidance, we had the Making Building Beautiful Commission here the other month. So impressed. They actually said, 'actually, you've broken a lot of the design guidance but you've come up with something hugely better.'

Ben: That was always the hope for this though, wasn't it? This particular space.

Jan: Yes.

Ben: Now, quite a lot of different parties involved here. So, it's not just architects, contractor. Can you just explain a little bit more about how they all work together?

Jan: Well, initially we had a relationship with ourselves, Cambridgeshire Cohousing Limited, and the City Council. The City Council helped us get the project off the ground with our project manager, providing the payment for him initially.

Then we had money from the Homes and Communities Agency that we applied for to work out our client brief, which was done over a number of workshops with Cambridge Architectural Research with Jim Ross. We did that over months and months of working with members and Jim and his team and Adam to get the brief, which is sixty pages long, right.

Then we worked with the City again to develop a tender for a developer. So, once we tendered for a developer, we then obviously had a selection process of which we were intimately engaged with. It wasn't just about money, it was about quality and money. So, the Council have got the money they wanted for the land, we got the quality we wanted for the building of the houses and the environment.

Then when we worked with TOWN, we were working with Neil Murphy and Johnny Armstead who were new developers at that time, called TOWN. They created a consortium with Trivselhus who is a large Swedish housebuilder, as part of the Södra Group, which is a massive organisation in Sweden of wood growers.

We worked with Trivselhus who provided the frame. It's a close frame construction, Johnny and Neil from Town who facilitated it, Meredith from Mole Architects who took the outline design that we had, worked with us to get something that was more for us than we initially envisaged, and that actually ticked the correct boxes with planning, because obviously we had to work with South Cambs District Planning Authority to make sure that it ticked their boxes.

Ben: What sorts of things were they looking for? They weren't giving you free rein, which they can sometimes on more pioneering...

Jan: No, nobody gives you a free pass on planning. There is no free rein.

So, we had obviously – we worked with Bonnie from the Council who came to one of our early workshops when we were selecting the final developer and there were some ideas that she brought to the table around the design guidance. We then challenged some of the design guidance and we got what we wanted because it seemed to be a better design.

It has been a long, hard journey. We've had to have a whole transport plan because we wanted our parking on the periphery. We didn't want two parking spaces per property, which was what the idea was. We now have one plus point-two-five of a space for visitors.

Ben: You also have, if I remember rightly, an electric bus route or something that goes past you?

Jan: We're right on the guided busway, which is brilliant.

Ben: So, that's very handy. You can't dispose entirely of cars if you're in the middle of nowhere.

Jan: No. We're on the guided busway, which is fantastic, we're right next to the A14 so if you're travelling distance – and a lot of our members do work a way away. A lot of our members work down in London so, they pop on the train. They hop on their bike down to Cambridge North which has been open for the last year and go down to London on the train. We have academics and various other people who do that.

We've got the guided busway. So, hopping into town on that is brilliant. Fifteen minutes into the centre of Cambridge. But a lot of us use our bikes. We've got a hundred-and-forty-six bike spaces.

Ben: You're in Cambridge.

Jan: Yes, absolutely. What's not to like about a bike in Cambridge? So, we have families with cargo bikes, we have a lot of really keen cyclists – and I mean keen; hundreds of miles cycle riders – we have the leisure cyclists, we have me; I'm the commuting type cyclist; I do my shopping on my bike and go to the hairdressers by bike and pop into town on my bike.

So, it's a fabulous location. It really is brilliant.

Ben: What did you want from the buildings then? Cohousing has a common house and its various apartments and so-forth. So, what was it going to be for this development?

Jan: The key issue was that we wanted it to be multi-generational. Therefore, we wanted properties that would kind of 'cradle to grave' you, almost. So, we have one-bedroom apartments, two-bedroom apartments, three-bedroom houses, four-bedroom houses, and I think we've even got one five-bedroom house.

The original members were able to configure the design for their particular property they wanted to reserve, in a way that suited them. And then obviously we haven't sold all the properties. The remaining properties were configured by Meredith from Mole and his team.

We wanted to make sure that if people wanted to move within the site, there could be opportunities to move. If you're upsizing or downsizing. We wanted to make sure that the common areas were of a sufficient size that would accommodate what in actual fact is a small village. We've got forty-two properties. We'll have a hundred plus people on site when we're fully sold out plus kids, and we already have, I think, eighteen kids now and we've got two pregnancies so, we're going to grow.

We wanted to have a garden that we could use as productive land. We wanted a wild space, we wanted to grow stuff, we wanted to interact with the community hence the common house for events. We're sitting in one of our quiet rooms at the moment so, we wanted retreat rooms. We wanted meeting rooms.

Everything is moveable. We've just taken delivery of forty-five wonderful chairs which go on a dolly and can move into a cupboard. We'll soon be buying tables which will roll into a cupboard. So, the big space downstairs can be used for dancing, music, events that we want. So, the flexibility of the space, I think, is key.

We've got three bedrooms upstairs that members with smaller houses or even those who don't have a spare room in their house because they've got a lot of kids, can use for their guests. It's already booking up for Christmas, would you believe.

Ben: You've got yourself a hotel here, almost.

Jan: Well, no. It's for our families and our friends here.

Ben: Is it all Passivhaus standard?

Jan: It's not Passivhaus, it's a standard developed by Trivselhus which is their own, if you like, version of it. It's seventy percent of Passivhaus.

So far, we're finding them excellent. We really are. We're in one of the apartments and we hardly ever have the heating on. Our construction is a little bit different. We're not made of the close frame. We are a building of CLT – Cross Laminated Timber. Massive insulation between the timber and the interior walls, cladding on the outside – it was absolutely fascinating watching it arrive because it arrived in big, huge walls and floors from Austria where the wood has come from. So, massive bits of building arrived and it's a bit like Lego. It gets bolted together. So, each flat is like a box that went up and joined together with the common house.

We have a lift access for this particular building because we also wanted these buildings to have longevity. The apartments are Lifetime Homes compliant, as are the bigger houses also. Some of us already have a wet room, but we can actually put in hoists if we want to, all the doors are huge so they open in a way that you can get a wheelchair in and out of the property.

So, we're looking for really sustainable longevity and flexibility.

Ben: Can you describe then what they look like.

Jan: Yes, well the lane and the houses look like a typical terrace. They look like something that you would find potentially in the Netherlands because of the way that they are built with very big windows, but they also chime with older terraces in Cambridge.

So, we wanted to tick that box of being in keeping with Cambridge but also being modern and also being very light and airy. So, if you look at them, you might think you're on the canal in Amsterdam, potentially – I don't know whether you feel like that – it looks a little bit like that. That's the houses. We have three terraces of houses.

We have one apartment block with a gym and workshop underneath which is on our South West corner. That has two apartments above it. That had to be designed as a landmark building according to the planners, and so that looks rather different. It's a grey brick, it has bits of brick sticking out. I mean, to see it, look on our Facebook page or website and you'll see that kind of landmark building there.

The common house itself is brick clad with a metal roof. The apartment block which leads on from the common house is a brick faced construction that looks on to the garden, but a timber faced construction that looks out on to the roads, walkways and carpark. The walkways are very wide, which is lovely, and they all have inset balconies, very large windows, and they all overlook the garden.

Ben: So, that moment when you move in, we've talked to one of your neighbouring cohousing projects, Cannock Mill, which is just trying to get past that final hurdle. So, what challenges do you face when you move in?

Jan: When you move in, obviously it takes a lot of time getting your own house sorted out. We moved in, in two tranches. So, we had a whole load of people move in just before Christmas, and a whole load move in just after Christmas. So, managing the removal vans was interesting.

We had a plan where we staggered the moving in and the completion with Savills. We have a lovely young woman called Jess who has been with us all that time doing all that work from the point of view of the developer and Savills is their agent.

The other challenge is then making it work, getting the common areas setup. If you look around you, you'll see a lot of this stuff has been donated from our members. So, our key issue was first of all, reuse and recycle. We said, 'the stuff that you think is worth keeping that you don't want in your own house, if you're prepared to

donate it, bring it and then when we have time, we'll have a selection day where we actually go, yes, we can use this in this particular area or that particular area.' And we did that. We had a community work day which we'll be doing once a quarter. We did that about three weeks ago.

So, everything you see is donated. We've had to buy a few odd things. We created a budget for that. So, everyone who joined had an investment to make and that investment covered the costs that we'd already had to go through – because at one stage, we were paying for our own project manager's costs and there were other costs of course that we had to incur – and also, we have our members investing, I think it's, two-thousand-one-hundred pounds and that goes in a pool for furnishing the common house.

Because there's an awful lot that you don't think of. When you move in, you go, 'ah, we didn't buy that. We need one of those.' And it's amazing.

Ben: And that's on top of your own house. I know that perhaps you're maybe downsizing from where you've been before, which is why you've got the extra furniture ...

Jan: Yes, indeed [chuckles].

Ben: But you're doing two lots of buildings to think about. So, I can totally understand that.

Jan: Yes.

Ben: And how long have you been in for now, personally?

Jan: Four months nearly.

Ben: Is it what you expected or has it really just not stopped yet?

Jan: It's exceeded expectations. It really has. Both from a community point of view and from the point of view of how happy we are with the construction, the fundamental construction of our houses. The quality of the houses and the energy efficiency.

At the moment, we don't know in the apartment blocks what energy is costing us because we run off a main plant room and we don't have a supply yet. So, we're waiting for that to happen.

Ben: And I've seen you've got quite a few air source heat pumps around.

Jan: Yes. All the houses have air source heat pumps, we have a major plant room for the apartment in this common house which is also a heat pump. It's a different type of fuel usage but actually, we're right ahead of the curve because we have no gas on site.

We always said as a group we didn't want gas. We wanted electric so that we could go to renewables. So, we can always head to a renewable supplier. And now of course, the government is saying new builds, no to gas. You have to have electric. So, we were absolutely ahead of the curve there. Pretty proud of that.

Ben: Very nice. Well, I really appreciate your time today. I'm looking forward to having the full extensive tour now. But Jan, thank you very much.

Jan: You're very welcome.