

CASE STUDY

SUSTAINABLE HOME CASE STUDY:

SPRINGHILL CO-HOUSING (Stroud, England)

INTRODUCTION

This case study was prepared by BRASS (Centre for Business Relationships Accountability, Sustainability & Society) as part of an HCA/ESRC funded research project investigating Skills & Knowledge for Sustainable Communities. The research looked in depth at the skills and knowledge applied in a range of sustainability initiatives concerned with housing, land, food and transport.

BACKGROUND

The concept of co-housing originated in Denmark in the 1970s and has become increasingly popular across Europe and in the USA. Co-housing is a collaborative intentional form of housing whereby residents are actively involved in the design and operation of their neighbourhood. The principles of co-housing are based on residents being committed to living as a community in a built environment designed to promote social interaction. Co-housing communities consist of private homes with all the features of conventional homes together with extensive common facilities such as open space, courtyards, playgrounds, and a 'common house' that incorporates a kitchen and dining area, laundry area, and space for community based social activities. The key defining characteristics of co-housing include; a participatory process where future residents participate in the design of the community; the neighbourhood design encourages a sense of community; there are common facilities designed for daily use; the residents manage

their own co-housing communities; there is a non-hierarchical structure of decision-making; and there is no shared community economy whereby the community is a source of income for its members. This case study summarises new research (2008) on the experience of Springhill co-housing, Stroud.

THE PROJECT Springhill Co-housing

Springhill co-housing is the first new-build cohousing scheme completed in the UK and was awarded the Deputy Prime Minister's Award for making an "outstanding contribution to Sustainable Communities" in 2005.



It also received the [2006 Eurosolar UK Award](#) for inspiring renewable energy projects. It is centrally located in Stroud, approximately a 5 minute walk from the town centre and a 10 minute walk from the train station. The main principle of the original development design was to foster a sense of community whilst retaining an individual need for privacy. It comprises 35 units, including a range of one bedroom studio flats to five bedroom houses and a three-story common house at its centre.

Key Words

■ Skills

■ Community

■ Housing



A pedestrianised main street runs through and around the site to foster a village-like atmosphere which is safe for children to play on without the threat of cars.

The vision for Springhill originated from one individual who was inspired by books on *Cohousing* by McCamant & Durrett and *The Pattern Language* by Alexander. He subsequently began the search for land in 1999 and purchased the site in September 2000. Planning permission was granted for 35 custom built houses and flats in June 2001. Building work commenced in August 2002 and the first residents moved in during the summer and autumn of 2003. The land cost a total of £550,000 and the overall cost to build the homes amounted to £4.5million.

The development of the scheme operated with potential residents being offered a choice of a 3, 4 or 5 bedroom house or 1, 2 bedroom flat. Future residents were then asked to buy 5,000 £1 shares, which would be refunded on completion of the project. They were also asked to formally agree to the principles of co-housing. Residents then became part of the free-holding development company and would subsequently have a say in the site development. After the purchase of the shares, each household was asked to nominate one member to be a Director of the co-housing company (Ltd). Houses and flats are thus owned by individual households on a leasehold but a household member sits on the company which owns the freehold. Households exchange contracts with the development company to legally complete the purchase of the buildings.

Although the ethos of co-housing is firmly embedded in generating a sense of community, most people who choose to live in co-housing tend to be environmentally aware and will practice a range of sustainable behaviours such as recycling. The communal nature of the living arrangements which centre around the Common House promote sustainable lifestyles with the emphasis on shared meals and facilities (e.g. laundry). This means that less electrical and gas appliances are being used. In the case of Springhill co-housing, shared meals are practiced 3 days a week and are prepared by groups of 4

residents on a rotational basis. Residents do not have to attend the shared meals, but are committed to cooking at least once a month. These activities, in addition to a regular range of social activities are key in fostering the sense of community.



Many co-housing initiatives also incorporate elements of ecological design. All homes in Springhill have triple glazing with 15cm warmcell insulation in timber frame construction from renewable sources. All the houses have photovoltaic tiles which supply the national grid and include gas condensing boilers with connection for solar water heating. The site also has a system of sustainable urban drainage (SUDS) and is linked to the Stroud Valleys Community Car Club.

THE IMPACT

The impact of skills and knowledge utilised for developing the initiative included:

Property development skills were essential to all stages of the project in terms of having the broad vision of what Springhill would look like, and particularly the initial phases of getting the land and securing funding. *Legal/financial skills* were also crucial. The project required knowledge about borrowing money from banks, taking acceptable risks, how to go about purchasing land, getting planning permission and bringing in the appropriate professionals to get the property developed.

Marketing skills were required to promote the scheme in the national and local press in order

to recruit potential residents. Knowledge of the project and the broader principles of co-housing were also essential in marketing the scheme.

Synergy skills were important for bringing together different actors, their different skills, and managing those relationships. The Springhill project relied on extensive *technical skills* of architects, planning consultants, structural engineers, quantity surveyors, environmental consultants, and builders. However, what was important in the development of Springhill was how these different skills sets were brought together at different stages.

LESSONS LEARNED

In terms of skills required for further development, two key issues emerged:

Greater *leadership skills* might have assisted in handling certain tensions in the decision making process within the group of residents. The skills to manage group dynamics and different professionals were essential to the success of the scheme.

More developed *finance skills*, particularly in relation to budgets, were required. Keeping within the original budget and supplying more detailed finance information to residents may have reduced some emergent tensions in the decision-making process.

Wider issues emerged in relation to the development of co-housing initiatives and sustainable housing. In particular:

- Having residents involved in all stages of the *decision making processes* raises particular issues concerning the dangers of *over consultation*. A situation can emerge where residents have very strong opinions on the development of the project but little practical experience. This inexperience can thwart the progress of a scheme and raises questions relating to the extent that residents should be consulted on every level of detail of the project.

- Following on from the issue of over consultation is the issue of how to manage individuals with strong ideals in the decision making process. Sufficient thinking time needs to be set aside for considering the advantages and disadvantages of *different project management strategies*.
- The importance of *trust* in facilitating the development of a co-housing project and promoting the synergies between different skills sets should not be underestimated.
- *Gated versus socially inclusive community*: Many potential residents self-select to move into co-housing. This raises issues about what types of people co-housing attracts and how socially inclusive such a community is. However, this needs to be matched by questions concerning the 'appropriateness of size' factor as well as an interrogation of whether co-housing would actually work if it was more inclusive to a wider catchment of people.
- Confidence and willingness towards (acceptable) *risk taking*, both individually and collectively, is at present an essential feature of co-housing development.



REFERENCES

This case study was prepared by BRASS (ESRC Centre for Business Relationships Accountability, Sustainability & Society) as part of an HCA/ESRC funded research initiative investigating Skills & Knowledge for Sustainable Communities. For more information on the research, see:

http://www.brass.cf.ac.uk/projects/Sustainable_Lifestyles_and_Communities/sustainable-lifestyles--Sustainable-Communities.html

http://www.brass.cf.ac.uk/Virtual_Sustainable_Community.html

For more information about co-housing in Stroud, visit:

www.springhillcohousing.com

www.users.waitrose.com/~cohouses/index.htm

<http://www.users.waitrose.com/~artwork/>

For more information about co-housing in the UK and abroad, visit:

<http://cohousing.info/>

www.cohousing.org.uk

<http://www.e-cohousing.co.uk/>

<http://www.cohousing.org/> (American website)

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