



A greener, more neighbourly way to live in Sheffield

The Story So Far - July 2021

We have been working on setting up a cohousing project in Sheffield for some ten years. Over this time, we have done a huge amount of background work and bid for various sites. Despite many setbacks - especially having to compete with private developers - we have kept going, determined to make something work... and now we are very close!

Some of us were already friends, through such activities as Sheffield Socialist Choir and the Woodcraft Folk, and got interested in setting up a cohousing community. Early in 2012 we looked at the potential of a farmstead outside the city, though for various reasons that didn't work out. Since then, more have joined us, and a few have left. We currently have ten full members (eight households). Plus there are dozens of others who have asked to be alerted when we have a real prospect of a project.

Early on, there was interest in a site in the Loxley Valley but we were not then in a position to bid for it. In 2016, we bid for a Council-owned site in Stannington: we were unsuccessful but it showed that we could, at very short notice, produce a viable bid. In 2017, we had positive discussions with a developer about another site to the west of the city, but we decided not to go ahead, largely because of the lack of public transport by night. In 2018, we went to auction for a site in Pitsmoor but were outbid by another developer; we later met up with them but they would only sell to us at a huge profit. Meanwhile, we continued discussions with owners/developers on two other sites: one a privately-owned piece of land to the west of the city; the other Council-owned for a development in partnership with the Sheffield Housing Company. By mid-2019, they had both stalled for reasons beyond our control. A few months later, a Housing Association offered us the opportunity to consider part of a site they were developing, but then they withdrew the offer, saying it wouldn't fit their financial model after all.

Early in 2020 we were successful in getting grants from Homes England for pre-development costs. So we paid a land agent to search for a site, although sadly they came up with nothing we were not already aware of. We also hired a professional Development Consultant, Adam Broadway from Instinctively Green, who has since been helping us to develop our plans and strategies even more, and guiding us into our new exciting phase.

In late 2020, we re-contacted the company, Oakworth Homes, with whom we'd had early discussions in 2017. They had since got planning permission for a custom-build scheme on the site which they were buying from Sheffield City Council and, to our delight, were open to discussing building our scheme there. So that is what we are now concentrating on. This site - the top part of Spider Park in Wisewood, S6 - has great potential for much of what we want according to the **collective vision** that we developed over the years (see more on our 'Vision Statement'). We are planning to have 22 units there, of varying sizes, plus the Common House and plenty of garden space. It is south-facing, and big enough for shared open space and gardening. Also, the bus service close by the site now runs into late evening again! For more information on our plans for the site, see [\[add\]](#).

We have long said we want a project as affordable as possible. We are not about the 'housing ladder' but also not looking to disadvantage people financially. This has meant working hard on our **ownership model** and pricing policy. Early on, we registered as a company, modelling our rules on those of a successful cohousing project at Lancaster. Then we investigated the Mutual Home Ownership Society (MHOS) model used at LILAC in Leeds. However, we were unable to get clarity about how that includes members who have to claim housing benefit. So, we have settled on leasehold ownership plus a few units for rent. We have hired solicitors, Wrigleys in Leeds who are cohousing specialists, to help with such questions.

Getting the **financing** right is of course essential. From (confidential) financial surveys of members, we know what sums of capital we can raise from them, and when. We have an offer from a bank to lend 65% of the project costs, and we have been researching others from which members requiring mortgages might borrow. Our Finance Group works hard on the spreadsheets, and has benefitted from input from a highly experienced friend to develop our financial modelling tools. In the meantime, so that we could pay for that and other services such as solicitors, surveyors and accountant, we set up a Development Loan Fund, into which members contribute loans against the eventual cost of their unit. We will need a sizeable amount of loans from new members as well as supporters - family and friends - to pay for the construction phase.

Then there is the question of **what we want on the site** - from the types of individual units (one-, two-, three-bedroom houses, flats, etc.), to the facilities in the Common House (shared social space, kitchen, laundry, rooms for guests, shared tool workshop, etc.), the private and shared gardens, plus the type and standard of architecture and eco-build that we aim for. Over the years we have explored unusual construction methods such as modular and container-based housing homes, and we have benefitted from the work of students and graduates from the School of Architecture of Sheffield University 'Live Project' who have helped develop plans for particular sites and on such things as ecological design. The company we are now going with, Oakworth Homes, is a timber-frame specialist which builds to high eco-build standards.

We have developed our **membership process** so that those interested can get to know us, and vice versa, before formally joining. For internal communications we have a googlegroup and WhatsApp.

To spread the word, we are on the websites of the Sheffield Cohousing Network (SCN), the UK Cohousing Network (UKCN), and Diggers & Dreamers, and recently we have been developing our profile on social media.

We are also active in **promoting cohousing** more widely. With close links to other cohousing groups in our city - Shirle Hill and On the Brink - we helped set up the wider Sheffield Cohousing Network. Together, for several years we had regular meetings with City Council officers from the Housing and Planning Departments. Meanwhile, we are also talking with City Councillors to build their support for cohousing, as well as officers in the Sheffield City Region.

All these activities are carried out as **cooperatively** and **democratically** as possible. All members and prospective members are encouraged to come to Management Committee and Members meetings, currently held every few weeks, to share latest progress and discuss what needs to happen and who will do it. In between, we have various sub-groups who undertake the tasks: Executive/Admin, Finance, Design, Recruitment, and others as needed. Quite often, we hold a 'Social-Plus': a get-together to get to know each other better, and where time is set aside for a particular topic to be discussed informally. At the formal level, we are a Company Limited by Guarantee, and so we hold AGMs where we choose the Company's Secretary, Treasurer, and Membership Secretary, file our accounts at Companies House, and so on.

And that's the short summary!