

Involving the ‘community’ in environmental sustainability

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Environmental sustainability is central to housing issues. However, this is something akin to being one of a set of Russian dolls. Environmental sustainability is inextricably linked to human, social and economic activities as well as sustainability. As such, sustainable development needs to focus on encouraging people to foster respect for and pride in themselves and each other, and the planet that they are living on. For rather obvious reasons that means it's about culture and behaviour, which for a sustainable future, needs to change.

The challenge is how we can succeed in our aspirations towards a more equitable quality of life for everyone, now, and for future generations. At its heart is social sustainability. If you like, how we interact with each other – making life better or worse. It's what I refer to in this chapter as ‘community sustainability’. It is definitely a substantial challenge at a time when many of us in both our professional and personal lives encounter increasing examples of community breakdown, dysfunctional families and young people who are existing on the margins of their communities and society.

I want to offer two routes into some of the issues.

Route One: *Looking at ways in which we can encourage aspects of ‘communality’* – proactively putting the ‘community’ back into the street, the neighbourhood, the village, town or city that we are living in. This requires looking at why problems are occurring and ways in which we may be able to counter them. This is nothing inherently ‘new’ – it has always been a central aim of community development.

Route Two: A quick tour of some exciting, innovative developments that explore the link between *environmental greening of the places we live in AND the manner in which we live in them*. The common theme is the need for approaches which empower communities to creatively engage with their own environments.

The background to community, social and environmental sustainability

The Bundtland Report, sponsored by the United Nations stated eloquently that the purpose of sustainable development is: *‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’*. However, as Michael Gunter (2006) has stated, *‘sustainable development is about development not about growth’*. This uneasy equation is further complicated when one takes into account how action leads to reaction – cause and effect – which is at the heart of James Lovelock's Gaia theory (actually his friend, author William Golding suggested the name based on the Greek goddess) of seeing life on the planet as a set of forces which creates the conditions on Earth:

'... the physical and chemical condition of the surface of the Earth, of the atmosphere, and of the oceans has been and is actively made fit and comfortable by the presence of life itself. This is in contrast to the conventional wisdom which held that life adapted to the planetary conditions as it and they evolved their separate ways.'

Following from this, how we live, the decisions we make about our home, our lifestyle and or interactions with neighbours and our community all impact on the social and physical environment and ultimately the planet.

The following description from Robert Goodland of the World Bank, while a little academic in its phrasing and possibly contentious, seems to offer a useful indication of what social sustainability is, and what happens when the social capital – the glue that helps keep us co-operatively stuck together – starts to melt.

Social Sustainability

- Social sustainability means maintaining social capital. Social capital is investments and services that create the basic framework for society. It lowers the cost of working together and facilitates cooperation: trust lowers transaction costs. Only systematic community participation and strong civil society, including government can achieve this. Cohesion of community for mutual benefit, connectedness between groups of people, reciprocity, tolerance, compassion, patience, forbearance, fellowship, love, commonly accepted standards of honesty, discipline and ethics. Commonly shared rules, laws, and information (libraries, film, and diskettes) promote social sustainability
- Shared values constitute the part of social capital least subject to rigorous measurement, but essential for social sustainability. Social capital is undercapitalized, hence the high levels of violence and mistrust
- Social (sometimes called moral) capital requires maintenance and replenishment by shared values and equal rights, and by community, religious and cultural interactions. Without such care it depreciates as surely as does physical capital. The creation and maintenance of social capital, as needed for social sustainability, is not yet adequately recognized. Western-style capitalism can weaken social capital to the extent it promotes competition and individualism over cooperation and community
- Violence is a massive social cost incurred in some societies because of inadequate investment in social capital. Violence and social breakdown can be the most severe constraint to sustainability

From: Sustainability: Human, Social, Economic and Environmental, Robert Goodland, in Munn, T (ed.) Encyclopedia of Global Environmental Change, John Wiley, 2001.

From this, we can see that 'community sustainability' is about:

- Co-operation and collective interaction
- Respect, pride and tolerance
- A shared understanding/belief in the need for balance between rights and responsibilities

Some commentators believe that this is measurable as a set of targets that we can measure our performance against. For example, the Global EcoVillage Network has developed a free, downloadable assessment tool which allows us evaluate performance through a series of tick box ecological, social and spiritual tests. The following checklist comes from this on-line publication.

The Social aspects of community life are balanced when...

- There is a sense of social stability and dynamism in community life; a foundation of safety and trust enables individuals to freely express themselves to the benefit of all.
- Spaces and systems are available that support and maximize communication, relationships and productivity.
- There are adequate opportunities/technologies for communication within the community and for connecting as is appropriate with the world wide community.
- The talents, skills and other resources of the community are shared freely within the community and offered outside of the community to serve the greater good.
- Diversity is honored as a source of health, vitality and creativity in the natural environment and in community relations.
- Acceptance, inclusivity and transparency fosters understanding of the benefits of diversity, enriches our environmental and social experience and promotes justice.
- Personal growth, learning and creativity are valued and nurtured; opportunities for teaching and learning are available to all age groups through a variety of educational forms.
- Options for restoring, maintaining or improving health (physical, mental, emotional and spiritual) are available and affordable, including natural remedies and alternative health practices – such as meditation and body work.
- The flow of resources - giving and receiving of funds, goods and services - is balanced to meet the community's needs and wishes. Surpluses are shared.

Source: Global EcoVillage Network (2005) *Community Sustainability Assessment*

In this chapter there is an intentional micro-social approach. In other words let's consider community sustainability at a scale that we can understand and may be able to influence. It is a very similar commonsense approach to the '*Thinking globally – Acting locally*' maxim which may, or may not, have been coined by David Brower, prominent member of the Sierra Club in the United States and founder of Friends of the Earth. Graham Meltzer in his book on sustainable communities based on a co-housing model stated:

‘Social cohesion and trust facilitate sharing and collaboration that makes possible a range of practical savings, many with environmental consequences.’

In the next section of this chapter I will expand on this theme in examining ways in which communality can be encouraged and supported. It is perhaps one step beyond what the government has outlined as the aims of ‘sustainable community’ in the report, *Securing the Future* (2005) namely:

‘Sustainable communities should be:

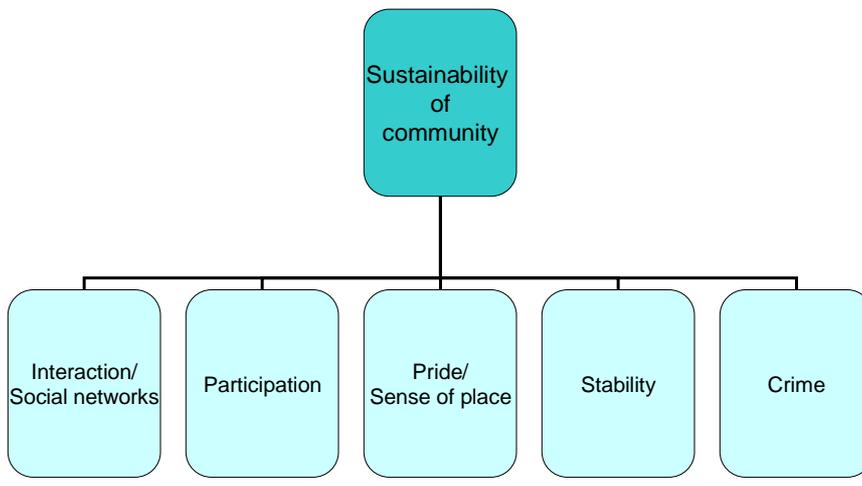
- *ACTIVE, INCLUSIVE AND SAFE – fair, tolerant and cohesive with a strong local culture and other shared community activities*
- *WELL RUN – with an effective and inclusive participation, representation and leadership*
- *ENVIRONMENTALLY SENSITIVE – providing places for people to live that are considerate of the environment*
- *WELL DESIGNED AND BUILT – featuring a quality built and natural environment*
- *WELL CONNECTED –with good transport services and communication linking people to jobs, schools, health and other services*
- *THRIVING – with a flourishing and diverse local economy*
- *WELL SERVED – with public, private, community and voluntary services that are appropriate to people’s needs and accessible to all*
- *FAIR FOR EVERYONE – including those in other communities, now and in the future*

Glen Bramley and his colleagues at Heriot Watt University in Edinburgh have been investigating how ‘social sustainability’ (which they appear to view as being virtually synonymous with ‘community sustainability’) can be assessed and how it relates to housing density, availability of services and community interaction. Their current research as CityForm based on 2,000 households in 15 neighbourhoods in five cities: including sample groups from inner, middle and outer areas, which are varied by social, tenure and built form mix indicates that:

- *Social sustainability concept is meaningful, measurable, policy-relevant and arguably important*
- *For most aspects of social sustainability, lower density suburbs appear ‘best’; so social perspective somewhat challenges ‘compact city’ orthodoxy*
- *However, disadvantages of compactness are more marginal once you control for socio-demographics*
- *Some aspects are neutral, some favour more compact forms*
- *Poverty is often more important – who lives where, and whether they choose, matters*

Their schematic model of how this inter-relates puts ‘community’ centre-stage.

Sustainability of community



Source: Bramley *et al.*, Heriot Watt University, EPSRC Research Consortium/CityForm – ongoing research.

The remainder of this chapter looks at examples at ways in which we can re-engage people in their own communities and how this can lead to a greater level of community sustainability which can have positive impact on the local and global environment.

Looking at ways in which we can encourage aspects of ‘communality’

Communality is not the same as living communally. There are a range of available definitions and they all appear to share a common theme, what Fulcher and Darling (1984) call, ‘...*the aspects of one’s life that one shares*’. In the UK there has been an increasing commitment to social policy planning of new or regenerated communities around the social engineering concept of ‘mixed income new communities’ (MINCs), meaning mixed by tenure, income and family size and possibly ethnic origin (see for example, Allen *et al.* 2005; Silverman *et al.* 2005; Rowlands *et al.* 2006). However, this does not necessarily lead to greater ‘stakeholding’ in such communities or greater social mixing. Indeed, there is a growing body of opinion that social mix alone does not create greater social interaction:

‘If the ambitions of a sustainable communities’ policy are to achieve social interaction within neighbourhoods more is needed than income, social or tenure mix policies. Social interaction may be affected by these policies but other ingredients related to shops, doctors, schools and other social facilities and services as well as wider issues related to employment and affluence and day-to-day interaction through governance and other structures affect how neighbourhoods work. Social interaction is a key to sustainable communities, but is difficult to measure. It presents more of a challenge for policy makers

than tenure mix but the challenge has to be faced to effectively foster sustainable communities.' (Rowlands *et al.* 2006)

This implied challenge to government policy is even more strongly stated by Hickman *et al.* (2007) in their study of residents in Yorkshire and the Humber:

'A key objective underpinning all aspects of the government's housing policy programme is the creation of mixed communities. The views, opinions and preferences of recent movers interviewed in this study, however, suggest that there is a major stumbling block that could trip up government efforts to create more mixed communities: patterns of residential mobility are, in part, informed by the propensity of people to seek the sense of comfort and security that can be gained from living among people considered similar and like minded.'

So where does this leave us? How can we can actively promote what recent governments have alternatively called 'citizenship', 'social inclusion', 'stakeholding' and 'social/community cohesion', and what I referred to as a 'living community' (Dearling with Meltzer, 2003), which I defined as a community of people who are active partners and: *'share a common respect for, and an appreciation of, the environment'*. I would see this as being an embracing term and concept which refers to place, people, social interactions, local history and culture(s). This is the bedrock on which communality has to be built.

As part of the problem-solving exercise, the process of identifying ways in which community residents (including the younger members of communities) and housing providers can promote positive community involvement seems especially important at a time when fear of crime, anti-social behaviour and community tensions are reported daily in the media. These shared challenges impact on the community environment at the local level, while climate change and energy use impact on the environment more at the macro level. At both levels, they present significant challenges for the present and the future.

In the final part of this piece, a number of examples of initiatives to improve community cohesion and community sustainability, within the setting of environmental sustainability, are offered.

But firstly, to round off this section, here is a summary table of some of the types of initiatives that could be considered by residents and landlords to improve community sustainability. They all have environmental consequences – and are inter-mixed to underline this fact. It is not meant to be a comprehensive list – rather it provides a starting point for thinking more inclusively about the wide variety of challenges that have an environmental impact. Many of us who are working in housing and community development fields will be familiar with these types of initiative, however, it is provided as an example of the types of opportunity that exist – and raises the question – have you undertaken a similar exercise of opportunities in your own area of operations?

The key is that all of them actively seek community participation in arriving at appropriate responses.

Perceived problems/challenges	Potential responses
Low levels of social interaction between residents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify potential events which could bring residents together in shared activities, for example, a street party, an area clean-up, a fete or car-boot sale, a sports event, family fun day etc. • Housing providers to proactively seek out active members of the community and seek their ideas/input • Support tenants' and residents' groups to participate in environmental community issues
Concerns about health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage healthy diets – how can we do it? • Exercise and sport (organise events – share information on combating health risks of cancer, heart, lung and liver disease etc.) • Build on the smoking ban to make local environments smoke free • Ban school pupils for going out to the chippie etc at lunch breaks • Alcohol/drugs awareness campaigns
What we eat – the quality and sourcing of food (and consumerism)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct surveys of local shops to encourage Fair Trade, ethical trading, and locally produced foodstuffs • Encourage moves towards food grown at home and in allotments • Raise awareness of organic food and locally produced issues through establishment of community gardens/city farms • Help to provide advice on growing vegetables and composting

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support local farmers' markets, Women's Institute markets and similar
<p>Energy efficiency in the home and work place</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share information about reducing energy consumption through the use of low-energy light bulbs, cavity wall and loft insulation. • Use newsletters, meetings and energy efficiency advisors/maintenance staff to raise awareness on these issues and options • Consider proactive ways to save energy by encouraging residents to turn off appliances including those in stand-by mode, lower thermostats for central heating by one or two degrees and using 30 degrees for washing machine cycles • Share information on photovoltaic cells (solar) panels, wind power and consider making grants available for alternative sources of energy production • Promote environmentally aware policies in the work-place
<p>Young people hanging around is seen as worrying/threatening by local residents</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use outreach/detached workers to make contact with the young people and then encourage opportunities for the young people to meet and work with older residents on shared projects • Conduct a community research exercise which offers young people and older people opportunities to identify needs and possible ways of meeting them. This could then be expanded into a Planning for Real type of exercise which is highly participatory and involves community members in looking depth at their own communities and seeking new

	opportunities for positive change
Anti-social behaviour, including vandalism and graffiti	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a coherent strategy which supports a range of options including: preventative work with young people (youth clubs and centres, drops-ins arts and sports projects etc); interventions such as Acceptable Behaviour Contracts, and Enforcement measures through use of tenancy conditions and possibly ASBOs • Support Neighbourhood Watch and similar community safety initiatives • Good partnership work with other providers in the statutory and voluntary sector such as education, police, social services etc. • Consider using community wardens, police community support officers, CCTV etc. where appropriate • Consider incentive schemes for young people to encourage them to engage in community involvement work and receive rewards for 'pro-social' behaviour (see Hirst <i>et al.</i>, 2007)
Local degradation or destruction of the natural environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actively protect the natural environment and wildlife, and work with other agencies such as the Woodland Trust to create new natural spaces, tree planting and land-stewardship
Designing new homes, and planning the refurbishment of older properties so that they improve the well-being of residents and are environmentally friendly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involve customers in the plans and employ environmentally sensitive/informed architects and surveyors • Develop ways to involve residents' groups in running and maintaining neighbourhood areas • Raise awareness of natural

	areas of beauty and the eco-systems involving wildlife and habitat
Too much household waste and a poor record of recycling and/or fly-tipping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Canvass opinions on current refuse collections. Use publicity to encourage greater use of recycling facilities • Use grey waste water for watering the garden • Actively monitor and deal with rubbish and fly-tipping in order to encourage a local culture that refuses to accept rubbish
Problems with local transport networks/car use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine opportunities for car pooling/sharing • Lobby for improved public transport at an affordable price • Cycle track route options (link in with Sustrans – the national cycle network)
A lack of community leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jonathon Porrit (2007) and others have made a plea that local authorities and policy makers in local communities actively seek/provide what they call the '<i>...Chamberlains, (Ken) Livingstones and Schwarzeneggers... 'to provide...strong sub-national leadership.'</i> See also the government initiative to recruit 'community champions' in the next section.

Innovative developments which help the environment and are community-focused or led

This section includes a number of examples of initiatives which are producing positive impacts on local environments. They provide models which can be considered as an 'ideas and resource bank'.

Firstly, at the national level is the Defra initiative, *Community Action Plan 2020* and the related programme, *Every Action Counts*, which perhaps confusingly is part of the *Together We Can* initiative and the *Sustainable Development Strategy* and the linked sustainable development indicators (Defra, 2007). The embryonic government policy on community development and civil renewal offered in *Firm Foundations* (2004) is another building block in these approaches. It suggests that community capacity building is a process involving:

‘Activities, resources and support that strengthen the skills, abilities and confidence of people and community groups to take effective action and leading roles in the development of their communities.’

Meanwhile, the *Community Action Plan* stated the following in the 2006 planning document aimed at tenders for implementation.

‘Focus of programme schemes

Sustainable development is a term which is difficult to engage with. It is also a broad concept encompassing many different issues. The Government’s Sustainable Development Strategy set out four priorities to provide a focus for action. This programme has identified seven community action topics which in turn flow from the priorities in the Sustainable Development Strategy. These topics provide a framework for the content of the schemes and the outcomes which we hope to achieve in terms of community action and behaviour change.’

Sustainable Development Strategy priorities	Community Action topics
Climate change and energy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Energy efficiency • Travelling sensibly
Sustainable consumption and production	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recycling more and reducing waste • Supporting local food initiatives
Natural resources and environmental enhancement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cleaner, safer greener and healthier communities (including local wildlife and natural greenspaces)
Creating sustainable communities and a fairer world	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating a fairer world (including ‘Fair Trade’ goods and services) • Planning a better future (encouraging links to be made to parish plans and Sustainable Community Strategies)

The *Every Action Counts* programme had by the beginning of 2008 made the following progress according to the government site, which is a useful site to visit for housing staff and community workers:

<http://www.everyactioncounts.org.uk/>

- Community resource bank - we will improve community access to ideas, advice, toolkits and information which can help community groups make a difference on sustainable development. The report bank will be primarily web based with paper versions of key information for community groups that do not have access to the web.

- More than 1,000 Every Action Counts Community Champions will be recruited and trained to help local people make a difference to their environment.
- More than 500 individual sustainable development action plans will be prepared by key voluntary community sector (VCS) organisations trained to put environmental sustainability into practice.
- More than 800 community workers trained to make links between environmental sustainability and their existing work with community groups.
- New good practice guides prepared especially for VCS bodies covering issues such as sustainable procurement and green office management.

Inevitably there is some scepticism about how much difference these government initiatives will actually make, however, there does seem to be a real effort to provide personalised examples of progress. The government's Sustainable Development website offers a number of case histories of individual involvement. Here's a typical one from: <http://www.sustainable-development.gov.uk/advice/volunteering-opportunities.htm>

Judy Yacoub (age 48): Pendle Environmental Network

'Judy is Secretary of the Pendle Environmental Network - an alliance of local and regional organisations committed to working for a sustainable future in Pendle.

(not clear at first that this is an account and not Judy's own words ... maybe the heading is confusing)

Helping run a network like this is a very different form on volunteering, since it means helping co-ordinate some very different activities. These range from setting up a £220,000 scheme for an ecological self-build built community building, setting up a Community Tool Store which loans non-power tools and provides training in their use, and helping develop the 'Pendle Floral Heritage' which involves another eco- building with a tree and wildflower nursery and a café. They also run other projects including a One World Living programme which brings people of different cultural backgrounds together through sharing recipes from around the world that use locally grown food and a big Green Fair.

PEN grew out of Local Agenda 21 activities and is important for Judy because it "gives us a chance to bring our values into action to see a real difference to the quality of our environment. It's about making it real - we are committed to seeing sustainable development projects take root in Pendle." Her volunteering varies widely but usually involves around ten hours a week, although events like the Green Fair mean a lot more work.

Judy's main piece of advice is "Do it now!" '

Oxford Solar city

There are a number of towns and cities in the UK which have been aiming to become largely 'solar' fuelled.

As reported originally in the *Built Environment* magazine in Volume 3, 2003: 'A team of experts from Oxford Brookes University are set to help the UK meet its Kyoto targets of 12.5% reduction of carbon dioxide emissions by 2010. How? By turning Oxford into the first solar city in the UK.'

The original aims of the Oxford Solar Initiative (OSI) were to have 10 per cent of all houses in Oxford using solar hot water systems by 2010 which is unlikely to be met, but the city has established a ground-breaking number of solar installations. There is a clear solar map of the city at: <http://oxfordsolar.energyprojects.net/>

The Oxford Solar Initiative ran between 2003-2005, and was run as a not-for-profit partnership that helped households and organisations in Oxford financially and technically to install solar energy systems and new energy efficiency measures in buildings throughout the city.

The OSI facilitated the installation of 80 active solar systems, over 450 energy efficiency measures and 3,000 low energy light bulbs (CFLs). In its publicity it outlined:

What we can do for you:

- advice on energy efficiency and renewable energy solutions for the home
- technical assistance with selecting EE and RE products and providers
- information on financing opportunities – grants, subsidies and discounts
- support with accessing and applying for grants and subsidies

What you can do for yourself:

Your house can be fitted with one or a combination of the following low energy technologies. The benefits are clear:

- Reduce your energy consumption by up to 50%
- Save up to £300 on your annual energy bill
- Generate your own power
- Make Oxford and the environment cleaner
- Cut harmful carbon dioxide emissions

The *Oxford Times* (16/506) reported developments saying:

'So with all this activity the 100th system was installed in Oxford recently. How close is Oxford to becoming a solar city?'

Dr Robinson said: "Oxford is very well-placed to move forward towards the ideal, a new planning directive under consultation at the moment says that

new buildings in Oxford must get 20 per cent of their energy from renewable sources.

If this goes through, then Oxford will really be a leader in this area, it will be a landmark. Hopefully it won't be watered down.

Oxford City Council is very serious about sustainable energy, it has already budgeted for two more officers and really wants to move forward with the whole idea. It is not just lip service." ‘

As a result of the initiative, there has been great interest in the developments in the city, which have included well attended conferences of community members, architects and planners in 2005 and 2006.

Perhaps tellingly, the reality and effectiveness of alternative power supply still appears to be marginal. One speaker at the Oxford conference, local resident, David Goodall, said in conclusion about his own installation:

‘The economics are marginal at best, but very satisfying.

We're yet to see full effect – but Photo Voltaic is certainly out performing expectations.

We needed planning permission – is Oxford really a Solar City?

And finding local installers was difficult – nearest quote was from Bristol.

Installation process was impressive and efficient – but probably needed 20 person days in total.

Conclusion: solar thermal makes sense for low rise houses with simple hot water needs. PV and thermal probably make sense in new build.’

Springhill Cohousing

Cohousing is credited as having first been developed in Denmark in the 1970s as a particular form of intentional community. As Meltzer (2005) has pointed out, it:

‘...has developed in direct response to perceived ‘social’ problems of the late twentieth century – personal alienation and the breakdown in community in particular.’

There are now many hundreds and possibly thousands of cohousing developments spread across the world. The term *cohousing* was developed by Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett in their book *Cohousing, a contemporary approach to modern living*, first published in 1994. The central concept is that ‘community’ can be created and that there is a need for people who are probably not related to live in a way that offers them both personal

space and common areas where they can interact, gain support. For it to work effectively it requires vision, commitment and a willingness to be adaptable, and actively share in activities and management of the cohousing development.

There are a number of common features – many of which are environmental – low-pollution, well-insulated buildings, energy and waste saving measures and often photo voltaic panels. In some cases the original residents are involved in the design of the cohousing development. As well as self-contained living space, community members have the opportunity to eat together and meet regularly in a large communal house.



The above shows the community area of Springhill being constructed.

(This account is based on information from: <http://www.springhillcohousing.com/>, coverage in *The Independent*, and other cited sources)

Springhill is the first new-build cohousing scheme to be completed in the UK. Located near the centre of Stroud in Gloucestershire, the development comprises of 34 units, ranging from one bedroomed flats to five bedroomed houses. There is a three-storey common house with a kitchen where meals are cooked and served three times a week - other shared meals and community-based social activities happen there too. Springhill Cohousing was recognised by the then Deputy Prime Minister's Award for making an '*...outstanding contribution*' to sustainable communities.

David Michael bought the site in Stroud in September 2000. David formed the Cohousing Company Ltd and invited new householders to become directors and transferred ownership of the site to the company. New plots were 30 per cent pre-sold (to members) before land purchase was completed in April 2001. The site received detailed planning permission for 35 houses/flats on in June 2001. Building work finally commenced in August 2002. The first residents moved in during the summer and autumn of 2003. Michael says that the original design was based on, and informed by the two books, *Cohousing* by McCamant and Durrett and *The Pattern Language* by Christopher Alexander. The site and the houses were designed by Architype.

The Cohousing Company received planning permission in June 2005 for the first Co-Flats community. CoFlats is similar to Cohousing but it's just flats. Stroud Coflats has two shared cars (70MPG), an on-site 2KW wind turbine, super-insulation, and is re-using an old chapel in the Town Centre.

Springhill Cohousing received the 2006 Eurosolar UK Award for inspiring renewable energy projects. The judges commented "*The dedication by the group to achieving the vision is much to be admired. This community demonstrates the important link between renewable energy and sustainable living.*"

As Clare Goff reported in *The Independent*:

'It's the best way of living since we left caves,' says David Michael, a property developer who now lives in Britain's first new-build estate based on co-housing principles. He and more than 100 families, couples and singletons, of ages ranging from 18 months to 76 years, have given up their self-contained, one-family properties to live along more communal lines in Springhill Co-housing Community in Stroud, Gloucestershire.

Michael believes Springhill is merely an extension of private living. 'We are social animals and like to live in a community, but we're lucky or unlucky with our neighbours.' There's no pressure to interact on the estate, he says: 'If you want to have a cup of tea with someone in the common house, you can.'

Whilst cohousing may not suit everybody, it is a successful model for small communities who want to live in a more communal way and at the same time live in a manner that is environmentally positive by comparison with the majority of households in the UK. One of the residents at Springhill, Sarah Lupton was interviewed in *New Consumer* magazine, and said:

'I've lived at Springhill with my husband and our three children since the beginning. Living in a community, knowing your neighbours, in a car-free

environment, is really, really nice. You can stop and chat in a way you wouldn't with traffic going past.

If it's a night to eat up at the communal house we go up as a family although the kids don't necessarily sit with us. We take turns cooking which is not that onerous - it's only once a month and we draw up menus in advance.

Some people have taken on responsibility for running the kitchen and they order goods from a wholesaler every month and vegetables are delivered weekly. Other residents are keen gardeners so they've taken on the communal grounds, organising a work party once a month. People put in the hours they feel able to. There's no compulsion to take part in any communal activities.

The kids are very happy here. There's a huge area the younger ones rampage around and I think it's good for people of all ages to interact. We've had table tennis competitions where everybody has played everybody else whether they're six or sixty years old. There's an informal car share scheme too and it's very easy to ask someone to keep an eye on the kids if you need to go out.

There have been disputes - it's obvious that there would be - but we have a system in place to resolve any issues. The main downside to co-housing is deciding how to move forward, that can take a lot of time and energy.'

Time will tell whether some of the aspects of cohousing can be transferred into other new developments or regeneration schemes for social housing, private housing and mixed developments. A concern aired by many is: is co-housing just a relatively expensive option for the middle class greens? One of the developments to watch out for is the Lancaster Co-housing Group (www.lancastercohousing.org.uk) who aim to complete their development in 2008 to the Association for Environment Conscious Building gold standard.

Transition towns and social enterprise

The Transition Towns movement was described on a Radio Scotland special investigation programme in autumn 2007 as, '*One of Britain's fastest growing movements*'. It's very much a bottom-up community initiative which is capturing the imagination and enthusiasm of businesses and policy makers in many UK towns, villages and even in some cities such as Bristol.

The central tenet is that we are the point of no return with peak oil production having been reached. Therefore the challenge is to have a local, sustainable set of responses planned for the period of transition into 'energy descent'. The BBC presenter put it rather more bluntly: '*We need strategies to reduce energy use at the local area level...rather than this sneak up on us and biting us on the bum!*'

At the time of compiling this section, there appear to be about 20 signed up Transition Towns (TTs) in the UK with more than a hundred waiting in the

wings. Felicity Lawrence in *The Guardian* (2007) recently wrote about this new movement to plan for a 'life beyond cheap oil'. She reported that:

'It was in fact the biggest public meeting in Lampeter anyone could remember. West Wales has a long tradition of alternative living, but the scale of this was different. More than 450 people filed into the hall in a place where the total population is just 4,000. They had come to turn themselves into a Transition Town - one of a rapidly growing network of places that have decided not to wait for government action, but to prepare for life after oil on their own.'

The drive for change in Lampeter has come in part from a group of local farmers - both Patrick Holden, the Soil Association's director, and Peter Segger, the businessman who was the first to supply the mass market with organic foods through the supermarkets, have their land nearby. Both have decided that the future lies in selling more of their produce locally instead of having it trucked round the country.

Segger and his partner Anne Evans have already switched from supplying the major retailers to selling half their vegetables within Wales.'

The challenges and the potential for community solutions

Rob Hopkins, the Transition Towns co-ordinator, says that faced with a growing 'unskilled population, we need to look for processes that re-localise our communities looking at ways of producing more local food that is sold locally; link up local businesses to work with each other; Totnes has even printed £10,000 worth of the Totnes pound which can be exchanged between local businesses. The vision is to reduce transport use and increase employment opportunities, at the same time reducing the local carbon footprint through addressing both environmental and community problems and challenges through community action.

What is heartening is that the Transition Towns seem to have found a source of inspiration that is both about community re-invigoration and involvement AND environmental activities that make the local community and spaces more sustainable. It seems to be an idea (or perhaps rather a forum for ideas and problem-solving projects) whose time has come.

Reproduced below are the basic aims of social enterprise businesses. These seem to be obvious vehicles for carrying out many of the activities, especially in the skills training required in the Transition Towns initiative.

The simplest definition of **social enterprise** - as business trading for a social purpose - allows for a wide range of interpretations and there is still an ongoing debate among practitioners and academics over the exact definition of social enterprise.

The Social Enterprise Coalition view is that a social enterprise is not defined by its legal status but by its nature: its social aims and outcomes, the basis on

which its social mission is embedded in its structure and governance, and the way it uses the profits it generates through its trading activities.

It is helpful to consider some of the common characteristics that social enterprises display:

- **Enterprise Orientation** - they are directly involved in producing goods or providing services to a market.
- **Social Aims** - they have explicit social and/or environmental aims such as job creation, training or the provision of local services. Their ethical values may include a commitment to building skills in local communities. Their profits are principally reinvested to achieve their social objectives.
- Many social enterprises are also characterised by their **social ownership**. They are autonomous organisations whose governance and ownership structures are normally based on participation by stakeholder groups (eg employees, users, clients, local community groups and social investors) or by trustees or directors who control the enterprise on behalf of a wider group of stakeholders. They are accountable to their stakeholders and the wider community for their social, environmental and economic impact. Profits can be distributed as profit sharing to stakeholders or used for the benefit of the community.

The Coalition also supports the UK Government definition which many of our members were actively involved in helping to develop:-

"A social enterprise is a business with primarily social objectives whose surpluses are principally reinvested for that purpose in the business or in the community, rather than being driven by the need to maximise profit for shareholders and owners.

Social enterprises tackle a wide range of social and environmental issues and operate in all parts of the economy. By using business solutions to achieve public good, the Government believes that social enterprises have a distinct and valuable role to play in a helping create a strong, sustainable and socially inclusive economy.'

Source: www.socialenterprise.org.uk

These are only beginnings – not a conclusion

This section can obviously be criticised for being 'fluffy' or over-optimistic. However, at very least there are a number of initiatives, some 'top-down', led by government departments, and many more 'bottom-up' which are exploring new ways of living more lightly on the planet. They may seem distant to the daily task of housing management, but where they help to aid the well-being of community members, they do seem to offer signposts towards some better futures.

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Gaia World: www.gaiaworld.org

Lancaster Co-housing Group: www.lancastercohousing.org.uk

Social Enterprise organisation: www.socialenterprise.org.uk

EcoBusiness: www.ecobusinesslinks.com/ecohouse_showcases.htm

Transition Towns Wiki site: www.transitiontowns.org

UK Co-housing Network: www.cohousing.org.uk

Woodland Trust: www.woodland-trust.org.uk

Community action topics

Related websites or initiatives but not necessarily aimed at community groups (from Defra's *Community Action 2020* document)

Energy efficiency <http://www.est.org.uk/>

Travelling sensibly <http://www.travelwise.org.uk/>

Recycling more and reducing waste <http://www.recyclenow.com/>

Supporting local food initiatives <http://www.localfoodworks.org/>
Cleaner, safer greener and healthier communities (including local wildlife,
natural greenspaces) <http://www.cleanersaferegreener.gov.uk/>
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/nature/animals/wildbritain/gardenwildlife/>
Creating a fairer world <http://www.fairtrade.org.uk/>