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'Those little connections': Community-led housing and loneliness

Report for the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities

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FOREWORD

The origins of this report lie in the development of an England-wide Loneliness Strategy following publication of the Jo Cox Commission report on Loneliness in late December 2017 (see : https://www.jocoxfoundation.org/loneliness_commission) – an issue which has taken on heightened significance during the Covid19 pandemic.

Loneliness matters. It can affect all of us and at any at stage in our lives; not only – or even mainly – in later life. Loneliness can impact on our mental and physical health, our wellbeing more generally and through these a broader range of economic and social outcomes we are concerned about.

The Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness dates from 2015 when she (then Labour MP for Batley and Spen) set up the cross-party Commission with her colleague, the Conservative MP Seema Kennedy.

Her vision was that the Commission would work with charities, businesses and government to turbo-charge the public's understanding and policy response to the loneliness crisis. Following Jo's murder in 2016, this work was taken further forward by Seema Kennedy MP and Rachel Reeves MP. Through the Commission, 13 organisations came together to highlight the scale of loneliness through the lifecycle and across all areas of society.

The Government's strategy for tackling loneliness, *A Connected Society*, was published in 2018 in response to the recommendations of the Commission and included a Foreword by the then Prime Minister, Theresa May. Its aim was to provide a vital first step in a national mission to end loneliness in our lifetimes.

DLUHC is a core contributor to the strategy (alongside eight other departments) which dovetails tightly with the department's ambition to build stronger, more resilient and more integrated communities.

The strategy contains a specific commitment that: *"The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (now DLUHC) will fund research into innovative community-led housing projects to understand how these can help to tackle loneliness and support social connections."*

This study was commissioned in order to explore how innovative housing can help to tackle loneliness.

Community-led housing enables ordinary people to instigate housebuilding projects that help better to meet local housing need at a locally affordable cost. Such housing gives communities an opportunity to shape the character of their built environment. The places we live in – whether our neighbourhood, our street or our homes – can have a profound effect on our general wellbeing. Our quality of life can literally be designed in – or designed out – of our homes.

Community-led housing has the potential to promote community cohesion and tackle loneliness. From designing the development, agreeing a location and raising the funds, it helps to bring local people together in constructive common endeavour. Once occupied, the homes

themselves are collectively managed by a group (such as a community land trust or housing co-operative) drawn directly from the local or resident community. The co-housing model, in particular – where individually owned or rented homes are associated with shared and commonly-owned facilities such as a meeting place – can engender a stronger sense of community where individuals are never far from supportive company.

But, with an annual output of probably only a few hundred homes per year, the community-led housing sector is relatively under-developed in the UK. Elsewhere in Europe or North America, the notion of local communities taking responsibility for meeting their own housing needs is mainstream, delivering a substantial proportion of total housing output. In Sweden, for example, housing co-operatives deliver over 40% of all net additions. The Government would like to see the community-led housing sector grow further towards its full potential. The strong response to the Community Housing Fund in particular has demonstrated that the potential is substantial with development proposals under the Fund planning the delivery of over 10,000 homes.

DLUHC is grateful to the team led by Kath Scanlon at the London School of Economics for taking this research forward. I would also like to thank Nigel Kersey and Kirsty Roberts for leading and overseeing the work in the department. By highlighting the social and health benefits associated with this form of housing delivery, this report will help policy-makers improve the way that we meet housing need, help tackle the loneliness crisis and help improve lives.

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Map data copyrighted OpenStreetMap contributors and available from <https://www.openstreetmap.org>.

Advisory group

The research team has benefitted throughout from the advice of an external advisory group of distinguished academics and practitioners in the fields of community-led housing, social care and gerontology. The members were

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The conclusions and interpretations in this report are those of the authors, and may not reflect the views of the advisory group

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Executive summary

Background

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) commissioned this piece of research in late 2019 to address an identified evidence gap around the link between loneliness and participation in community-led housing (cohousing in particular). The study is the Department's contribution to the government's 2018 Loneliness Strategy, which seeks to embed loneliness as a consideration across government policy.

Community-led housing (henceforth CLH) is an umbrella term for a range of models that includes cohousing, community land trusts (CLTs), cooperatives, self-help and self-build housing. CLH emphasises resident decision-making, collaboration and inclusion. Research suggests that residents feel intuitively that this form of housing helps to reduce feelings of social isolation and loneliness, but the links between CLH and loneliness have not been systematically studied. The pandemic has made understanding these links even more vital.

Loneliness can occur across the adult life course and not just only – or even mainly – in later life. Experts identify three types of loneliness: *social loneliness* arising from social isolation or a deficit of social connections; *emotional loneliness* from a perceived absence of meaningful relationships or sense of 'belonging'; and *existential loneliness* where a person feels completely separate and isolated from others.

Researchers have found that social connection with neighbours and sharing spaces with others—both features of community-led housing—are essential to place attachment and wellbeing, which in turn may help prevent loneliness. The most successful interventions to alleviate loneliness foster meaningful social interaction through sustainable, community and place-based solutions.

Within government, support for CLH and interventions around loneliness have until now proceeded largely on separate tracks. The reasons for supporting CLH have not related specifically to loneliness but rather to housing need, affordability and empowering local communities. Our empirical work provides evidence as to whether supporting CLH could contribute to combating loneliness.

Research methods and effects of Covid

We used a mixed-methods research approach including an online survey of CLH participants across the UK, and in-depth case studies of five communities in England. The project began in late 2019, with fieldwork concluding in January 2021.

Invitations to the survey were distributed just before the start of the first pandemic lockdown, with responses received up to June 2020. Responses to a few of the survey questions may have been conditioned by the restrictions on face-to-face contact. Because of Covid, we adapted our case-study protocols to conduct most of the interviews and 'visits' remotely rather than in person. Given that the study was exploring residents' experience over many years, the fact that empirical work was carried out during the pandemic is unlikely to affect the overall conclusions.

Research questions set by the Department, and key findings

1 Does CLH (and cohousing in particular) have an impact on loneliness?

Yes, involvement with CLH as a resident or non-resident group member is associated with reduced loneliness. CLH residents are also more likely to trust neighbours and to feel like they belong in their communities.

2 Is this impact achieved through design/community consultation process or subsequent occupancy models and shared space (or both)?

The channels through which social loneliness is mitigated include regular common activity, including self-management of the housing; shared spaces, both indoor and outdoor, for organised activities and spontaneous interaction; and purposeful pro-social design. The demanding joint endeavour of creating a new community together can create long-lasting ties that help mitigate loneliness. Emotional loneliness is countered by the meaningful relationships and sense of belonging fostered by CLH. Existential loneliness can arise at key life events, and may be mitigated by involvement with CLH.

3 Is there a broader impact for the residents, for example in participation (volunteering), health or service use?

CLH residents offer each other ongoing mutual support. In some schemes this is underpinned by formal policies, but it can also be unplanned and spontaneous--for instance support in raising young children together. The groups' responses to the pandemic illustrated this underlying capacity for support. We found that CLH members and residents were often active in their neighbourhoods and communities, and many were involved with wider networks around alternative housing. We were unable to examine questions of health or service use.

4 Is this impact broader than the immediate resident community?

We could not assess the impact of CLH schemes on *loneliness* in surrounding neighbourhoods, but the case-study schemes were clearly knit into their localities in myriad ways. The limited evidence gathered suggests that surrounding neighbourhoods value having CLH communities in their midst, but the nature, strength and reach of these positive ripple effects, and how they might be extended and strengthened, are topics that deserve further investigation.

Are CLH participants less lonely than others?

The online survey, administered from March – June 2020, attracted 221 responses from 93 different community-led housing groups and communities (see Map 1, p. 16). 54% of respondents were currently living in a CLH community; the rest were group members or supporters. Respondents were most commonly involved in cohousing communities, co-ops and/or community land trusts (some CLH communities fit into more than one category). Cohousing accounted for the largest proportion by far, with 61% of respondents.

Our statistical analysis compared the CLH survey responses to a control group of similar individuals in the general population, using questions taken from the 2018/19 *Community Life*

Survey (DCMS, 2019). We found that people involved in CLH were significantly less likely to feel lonely than similar members of the general public and that CLH residents' perceptions of their own communities were significantly more positive than those of the control group about their neighbourhoods.

How does CLH affect loneliness? The case studies

We chose five CLH schemes for detailed case studies (see Table 3, page 29). These were

- Lancaster Cohousing, a purpose-built intergenerational cohousing scheme on a riverbank outside Lancaster
- New Ground (Older Women's Cohousing), a cohousing community for older women in Barnet, north London;
- Tangram Co-op, an intergenerational co-op housed in a number of Victorian houses in Leeds, with some residents who have lived there for more than 40 years;
- 325 Fishponds Road (Bristol CLT), a recently built scheme of 12 houses around a communal garden; and
- The Yard at Ashley Vale, a neighbourhood of self-build homes, also in Bristol.

They represent a range of organisational models (CLT/co-op/cohousing); demographic profiles (including both intergenerational and age-restricted); locations; and ages. We studied schemes where residents played a major role in co-design and schemes where they played none. This report focuses on the commonalities across these places, not on their differences.

Loneliness is reduced by joint activities, the use of shared space and physical design

Broadly, we found that the most tight-knit places, where members knew and trusted each other most, performed best as supportive communities. This sense of belonging emerged from the interaction of several factors including the use of shared space; social and communal activities (which were not necessarily explicitly aimed at community building); and physical design. The first two factors seemed to be key: not all the case studies were purpose-built or designed, but all had some shared space and engaged in joint activities. Intentionally pro-social design elements like activity rooms and dining spaces were successful in those schemes that had them, especially where they were equally available to all community members.

Emotional loneliness was countered by fostering meaningful relationships and 'belonging' through physical proximity, sharing similar values, a reciprocal commitment and care, looking out for and supporting each other. Mitigation of existential loneliness includes examples of self-organised community responses for CLH residents affected by life-threatening illnesses. Many communities had both informal and organised systems to support members through individual life transitions (such as maternity, older age, poor health or the loss of a partner) and wider emergencies such as Covid-19 and flooding.

Design and community consultation can be an intense period that galvanises founder members into a cohesive group; the challenge is to sustain this sense of community over time, and to incorporate new residents who were not part of the birth of the scheme. There are many ways in which senses of internal community are created or arise – through physical design, through

social design (explicit values enshrined in formal policies and governance arrangements) and through social processes (housing activism and self-building, but also exercising, eating and playing together).

We also explored questions about inclusivity as CLH is often charged with being exclusionary and of merely being enclaves for the privileged middle class. Barriers to participation can be high, both in terms of the time and energy required to start a new community, and (often) money. But knowledge of and interest in the sector is growing, and many more people would benefit from access to this housing option. We found that specific groups such as LGBT people may find living in CLH appealing. The consensus decision-making processes that CLH groups almost invariably employ are designed to enable maximum (if imperfect) resident participation, and to nurture innovative approaches to community life.

Discussions about CLH often focus on the degree of intentionality, i.e. the extent to which a given community explicitly sets out to be a mutually supportive community from its inception. But intentionality is not a prerequisite for a sense of community, our research showed. We also found significant evidence of social connection, belonging, friendship and support among residents of schemes that were not intentional communities.

Tenure and mindset also matter. In a few of the case-study schemes, private tenants felt like outsiders, and said the insecure nature of their tenancies affected their sense of belonging and commitment to the group. And in some groups—particularly those that were not intentional communities—tensions arose because not all residents valued community to the same degree.

We were not able to draw any firm conclusions from this study on the impacts of CLH on health and service usage. Parallel research recently undertaken by the team suggests that the mutual practical and emotional support available in these communities has potential to reduce members' use of health and social care services; these links are being explored in separate, ongoing research¹.

Volunteering and neighbourhood connections confer benefits in both directions

The impact of the schemes on their wider neighbourhood should not be considered as a simple matter of a one-way benefit. Our case studies showed a wide range of local ties, degrees of embeddedness and interactions with the wider community, with some projects arising out of an existing neighbourhood, others whose members have come from elsewhere and have built local connections. Some CLH schemes have facilities that are open to neighbours and other groups, offering activities and connections that benefit people at higher risk of loneliness like young parents and older or retired people.

The limited evidence we were able to gather suggests that surrounding neighbourhoods value having CLH communities in their midst, but the nature, strength and reach of these positive ripple effects, and how they might be extended and strengthened, are topics that deserve further investigation.

We have eight recommendations:

¹ sponsored by the National Institutes for Health Research School for Social Care Research

Recommendations

1 Support resident control over management and decision-making

We found that residents' involvement in running their communities increases their sense of agency, belonging and wellbeing, which in turn reduces loneliness. We recommend that self-management, decision-making and mediation be supported through training.

2 Promote the design of spaces for social interaction

We found that shared spaces (indoor and outdoor) contribute to organised and casual social interactions in CLH communities. We recommend support for the inclusion, careful design and maintenance of shared spaces in all new CLH schemes.

3 Help CLH communities that want to provide facilities for neighbourhood use

We found that many CLH communities allow neighbours to use their gardens or common rooms for classes, performances, meetings and other events, benefitting local people. We recommend that CLH communities be encouraged and supported – thought not required -- to provide spaces for neighbourhood use.

4 Support efforts to improve the data nationally on CLH

We found that data on CLH were fragmented and poor. We recommend support for efforts to improve data to help decision-makers and stakeholders better understand the sector.

5 Promote inclusivity

We found that interest in CLH is strong, but more needs to be done to ensure that the option is accessible to the range of individuals and communities that could benefit. We recommend adoption of strategies to increase inclusivity and affordability for underserved demographics.

6 Encourage and support tenure security

We found that lack of tenure security, especially for private tenants, weakens the sense of belonging and participation—key factors in loneliness reduction. We recommend support for CLH models that ensure equal security for all residents.

7 Adapt CLH features for existing housing, and non-CLH new-build schemes

CLH schemes can be seen as incubators for loneliness prevention strategies that could serve as examples for the wider housing sector. DLUHC should investigate how CLH's beneficial features could be incorporated into existing housing and conventional new-build schemes.

8 Reinvigorate targeted funding streams to make CLH options more widely available

Government funding would help groups, communities and the constituent organisations of Community Led Homes to enact our recommendations. Long-term sustainable capital funding is essential for groups to plan and deliver schemes that by their nature need continuity of funding. We recommend DLUHC investigate the scope for reinvigorating targeted funding streams, whether through the Community Housing Fund or other avenues.

1 Introduction and research questions

MHCLG (now DLUHC) commissioned this research in late 2019 to address an identified evidence gap around the link between participation in community-led housing (and cohousing in particular) and loneliness. The study is the Department's contribution to the government's Loneliness Strategy², published in 2018, which seeks to embed loneliness as a consideration across government policy.

Social isolation and loneliness across the life course are persistent social and public health problems that have come to the public attention in a more dramatic fashion since Covid-19 related lockdowns began in 2020. The government's strategy for addressing loneliness stresses the importance of personal relationships, social networks and community in preventing ill health, supporting people's sense of wellbeing and building resilience. It argues that, when thoughtfully planned and designed, housing can be a key avenue through which to encourage social interaction and tackle loneliness (DCMS, 2018, p.36). As a signatory to the Memorandum of Understanding on Improving Health and Care through the Home (Public Health England, 2018), DLUHC also advocates home environments that support health and wellbeing--of which loneliness is a critical dimension. Whilst these policies were agreed a few years ago, the principle of addressing housing, health and loneliness together is crucial for addressing the myriad health-related aspects of the current pandemic and any future ones.

There is evidence that well-designed, specialist supportive housing environments can contribute to greater wellbeing and social connectivity (Holland et al, 2017; West et al, 2017; Shaw et al, 2016) and reduce health and social-care spending (Holland et al, 2015). To date, most specialist housing has been conceived for older people and designed to accommodate (the possibility of) failing health; these schemes therefore suit only a small proportion of households. There is an urgent need for non-institutional housing innovations that can contribute to combating social isolation and loneliness for *all* age groups, including younger people, as these models could help delay future incidences of ill health, and/or support the wellbeing of those that, for different reasons, face loneliness-related challenges during the life course.

Community-led housing (henceforth CLH), an umbrella term for a range of models, offers such an alternative. There are a variety of approaches to CLH including community land trusts (CLTs), cohousing, cooperatives, self-help and self-build housing³. These are not mutually exclusive: a cohousing community may lease its land from a CLT, and may involve new build or the use of existing buildings. Across these models, CLH shares an emphasis on resident autonomy, community collaboration and inclusion, and may have the capacity to reduce social isolation across residents of all age groups. Although research suggests that residents feel this intuitively (Fernández Arrigoitia et al, 2018), and there is some evidence of the general health and wellbeing benefits of cohousing in particular (Glass, 2012), the links between CLH and loneliness have not been systematically addressed in the literature.

Cohousing, probably the best-known and most-researched type of CLH, comprises intentional,

²https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/936725/6.4882_DCMS_Loneliness_Strategy_web_Update_V2.pdf

³ See Chapter 2 for a fuller discussion of the various models.

collaborative, resident-led, self-managed communities. They combine private and shared spaces and common activities and can be inter-generational or age-specific. By their very design--both material and social--cohousing communities encourage interaction, neighbourly contact and informal mutual support in everyday life (Ruiu, 2016). Cohousing⁴ thus seems to offer the kind of local, personalized approach that the government's strategy recommends to prevent loneliness (DCMS, 2018. See also Lubik and Kosatsky, 2019).

Not all types of CLH are as avowedly oriented to shared living, but they may nonetheless affect loneliness. Self-help and self-build housing, for example, may reduce loneliness by enabling future residents to bond through mutual help and learning, although their occupancy models may not be designed to sustain ongoing resident interaction (Benson & Hamiduddin, 2017). Even shorter-term community participation has been shown to contribute to lasting psychosocial change. For example, taking responsibility for the development of a neighbourhood may result in lower levels of anti-social behaviour (Cooperative Councils Innovation Network, 2017) and a greater sense of security and wellbeing. Those who once participated in earlier waves of cooperative housing, but did not sustain that participation, may, nonetheless, derive a greater sense of agency from that participation that sustains them over the life course.

This research represents a timely opportunity to examine the many ways in which the various forms of, approaches to and experiences of CLH can impact on loneliness. Building on a growing evidence base, and responding to local and international policy interest in CLH, it provides new data and recommendations for identified gaps in the housing-loneliness nexus. Understanding these links has become even more vital in the wake of Covid-19, as it is becoming clear that individuals and communities have been affected very differently by the experience. Our research (whose methods were inevitably impacted by pandemic conditions) also looks at how CLH has responded to the crisis, asking whether its existing governance and social infrastructures mitigated some of the more negative social impacts of the pandemic.

1.1 Research questions

The overarching questions set out by the Department were:

- (1) Does CLH (and cohousing in particular) have an impact on loneliness?
- (2) Is this impact achieved through design/community consultation process or subsequent occupancy models and shared space (or both)?
- (3) Is there a broader impact for the residents, for example in participation (volunteering), health or service use? and
- (4) Is this impact broader than the immediate resident community?

⁴ Our research excludes co-living schemes, which are often erroneously conflated with cohousing. Co-living schemes are purpose-built high-density rental residences for (mainly) young single professionals. The model is akin to a university residence: tenants have individual en-suite rooms and the schemes offer a range of shared facilities including kitchens as well as co-working spaces, cinemas, cafes etc. As commercial ventures with little or no resident involvement in management, co-living schemes do not fit the definition of community-led housing.

We also addressed issues around participants' motivations; financial and institutional factors conditioning participation in CLH; identification of the key features of CLH and how they might become more widespread; and local-authority policies towards the sector. Finally, after the advent of the Covid pandemic in early 2020, we expanded the research to explore how CLH communities had responded to the demands of lockdown.

The report is structured as follows: We first review the main types of loneliness and their causes, and briefly summarise official interventions to address loneliness. We then turn to housing, describing those features of CLH that could be expected to alleviate loneliness and government policies to support the sector.

In the empirical section of the report, we present findings from our national online survey of individuals involved in CLH. Using statistical techniques, we compare responses to our survey with those from the population at large to assess whether those involved in CLH are less lonely. We then present qualitative material from the survey and from detailed case studies of five CLH communities in England to examine how and why participation in CLH affects loneliness. Finally, we pull together the main threads of the research and make recommendations for government and the sector.

2 Loneliness, CLH and the links between them

A review of scientific literature shows that loneliness can occur across the adult life course and is not just – or even mainly – a risk associated with later life. Three types of loneliness are identified: social loneliness arises from social isolation or a deficit of social connections; emotional loneliness comes from a perceived absence of meaningful relationships or sense of ‘belonging’; existential loneliness is where a person feels completely separate and isolated from others, for instance due to serious trauma or life-threatening illness. Substantial evidence shows that social connection with neighbours and sharing spaces with others are essential to place attachment and wellbeing. Successful interventions to alleviate loneliness involve fostering meaningful social interaction through sustainable, community and place-based solutions. Different forms of Community Led Housing support inclusion, regular social interaction, mutual support and self-management, and links to the wider communities. Policy overlaps are identified in a review of the HM Government Loneliness strategy and DLUHC’s support for community housing.

This section summarises the full literature review, which appears in Annex A. Full references are in Annex G.

2.1 Types of loneliness

Our understanding of loneliness, and survey of the literature on successful interventions, builds on the systematic reviews developed by the *What Works Centre for Wellbeing* (Daykin et al. 2019; Victor et al., 2018) to identify and assess interventions that have had success in helping to reduce different forms of loneliness. Daykin et al. (2019) identify three broad types of loneliness, which, while not strictly divided, can be regarded as useful framings to better understand this multifaceted phenomenon:

Social loneliness arises from social isolation or a deficit of social connections, sometimes explained as dissatisfaction with the quality or quantity of a person’s social network. We also employ the term ‘social capital’, meaning an individual resource that a person can utilise to improve their situation, and lacked by those with insufficient social connection or contact (Bourdieu, 1986). This sociological term is widely used in academic writing on CLH but rarely appears in the loneliness literature.

Emotional loneliness arises from a perceived absence of meaningful relationships or a lack of sense of belonging, for instance to a social group, family or loved one.

Existential loneliness is when a person feels completely separate and isolated from others, felt most commonly by those experiencing isolating trauma such as the death of a loved one or a life-threatening illness.

The causes of loneliness are complex and multiple, affecting different groups in different ways. Below we draw out some of the relevant key themes that have been addressed in the literature.

2.2 Life and environmental circumstances and loneliness

While the focus of research into loneliness in the UK and North America has been largely on old age, there is increasing recognition in the UK at least that loneliness is a phenomenon that can occur across the adult life course and is not just – or even mainly – a risk associated with later life (for example Qualter et al., 2015; Victor and Yang, 2012). Further, while it is likely that everyone will experience loneliness at some point in their lives, the phenomenon is increasingly understood as an outcome not just of household makeup or life stage (e.g. working or retired) but also as related to social class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, physical environment and so on, and is thus unlikely to respond to simplistic or single-approach interventions (Daykin et al., 2019; Kantar Public, 2016; Victor and Yang, 2012).

Age

The literature on loneliness is largely focused on older people (generally defined as over 55, but in some literature as young as 50). Numerous examples of social loneliness are cited, stemming from disruptions to social networks and meaningful engagement in later life. Often these changes in life stage culture such as retirement were triggers, but were also often related to the physical restrictions of illness and disability, loss of a loved one, or a sense of lost community. Loss of a partner was often also found to be a catalyst for *emotional* loneliness; notably many older people hide feelings of loneliness for fear of becoming a burden on family.

Evidence on loneliness among other age groups is lacking at present, although there is an emerging literature on social loneliness experienced among young people as they face changes through adolescence, and how this might be compounded by issues such as navigating social media, difficult living situations, weak social networks, cuts in support services and poverty (Batsleer et al., 2019; The Mental Health Foundation, 2018; Teppers et al. 2014; Yu et al., 2016).

Although not specifically focused on age, there is evidence of loneliness related to other factors that might indirectly impact on those at a particular life stage.

Paid and unpaid work, caregiving

Social loneliness has been identified as a significant risk in certain socially isolating work, whether paid or unpaid, with informal caregivers being especially vulnerable. A major reason for loneliness among domestically based caregivers was their sense of powerlessness and the impossibility of sharing the care burden with others. Such loneliness is also highly gendered and racialised, as much informal paid and underpaid work is done by women, often from migrant communities.

Gender

There is significant evidence that men and women experience loneliness differently, both in later life but also earlier, not least due to commitments such as caregiving. Women are more likely to experience social loneliness during periods of being at home with young children, children leaving home, or bereavement, and this is often exacerbated by poverty and lack of access to local amenities, job opportunities and personal social activities (Bates & Machin, 2015; Targosz et al. 2003). Emerging evidence from research on later-life bereavement suggests that older

men are less inclined to seek support from neighbours and friends at this time and, post-retirement, do not have the distracting benefits of work.

Physical and mental health issues

While chronic illness, physical conditions and long hospital stays can be socially isolating, there are examples of isolating illnesses – most notably cancer – where individuals experience existential loneliness through a lack of contact with others able to understand them, even if surrounded by friends and family (Nystrom, 2006). Loneliness and mental wellbeing are intrinsically linked: loneliness can bring about mental ill health (there is increasing evidence that this has been one of the many negative side effects of the pandemic), and conversely those with mental health issues often feel cut off from friends, family and wider society (Nilsson, 2008).

Place, environment and a sense of community

There is no suggestion in the literature that a particular type of geographical location (e.g., rural or urban) might lead to greater loneliness *per se*, albeit loneliness arises in different ways in these different places. Rather, it seems that emotional loneliness can be an outcome of an individual's insecurity or lack of attachment to place, or that other factors such as poverty play a more important role in terms of environment. Victor and Pikhartova (2020), in a quantitative UK study of older adults, found that the only notable correlation between place of residence and loneliness was an area's degree of deprivation.

There is evidence that emotional loneliness impacts older people more in terms of place, in the sense that places which support social interaction might change, disappear, or become more inaccessible. This is especially true for older migrants – those for whom geographical dislocation has had the greatest impact. Migration as a life-changing event contributes to social and emotional loneliness in later life; this disproportionately affects older women, especially in widowhood.

Intuitively, neighbourhood design and arrangement of housing would seem to play a role in alleviating loneliness. However, Victor et al. (2018) were unable to identify reliable evidence beyond one study in Chile, in which the authors found more evidence of psychological distance between those living alone in high-rise apartment blocks than among those living in lower-rise construction where there was greater chance of serendipitous social encounters. In a broader context, Scharf and Gierveld (2008) in an Anglo-Dutch comparison found stark differences in older people's experience of loneliness (significantly lower in the Dutch case), which in large part was linked to the quality of residential neighbourhood. The authors blamed this in part on an increasing focus in urban planning terms on the needs and desires of a younger demographic, combined with the loss of public meeting places that served a wider (and older) range of people. Corcoran and Marshall (2017), in a rare consideration of place design and loneliness, draw on their own research and others' to warn against simplistic approaches such as design guides, and instead call for a greater role in urban design for strategies that create 'prosocial places'. This is echoed by the extensive literature on quality public space (the 'third space' between buildings) and its potential to counter loneliness (Worpole and Knox 2007).

There is substantial evidence that social connection with neighbours is important, and that spaces shared by a community are essential in feeling a sense of place attachment. This sense

of belonging linked to place is cited in multiple studies, primarily for older people, as being an important factor in avoiding loneliness. Huijbers (2019), in a study of older mental health service users in the UK, notes that perception of place is important to sense of belonging, and conversely that a lack of identification with, or feeling insecure in, a locality leads to feelings of loneliness. Relatedly, community engagement and neighbourhood support, including childcare and shared resources, have been established as arenas that can help improve the challenges associated to the triple bind faced by single parents (Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado, 2018) as well as individual health and well being (Ochieng, 2011). Single mothers in particular, who tend to lack such support (Harknett and Hartnett 2011; McArthur, Morag, & Winkworth 2017), can benefit from such networks and connections, particularly when these are reciprocal in nature (Gottlieb and Bergen, 2010).

The stigma around loneliness

Although loneliness is widespread, the government's 2021 Loneliness Annual Report noted that it remains highly stigmatised, which in turn exacerbates the problem because those who suffer from it feel unable to talk about their feelings to others (Rokach, 2012). Further, the level of stigma appears to vary depending on gender, age and culture; men are less likely to admit to feeling lonely, but counter-intuitively, older people may perceive loneliness as less stigmatising as a common cultural association with later life (Barreto et al., 2021).

Covid-19 and loneliness

Evidence of loneliness during the pandemic continues to emerge through the academic literature, and the broader quantitative assessments in particular draw on data gathered during the first lockdown in the UK (March - May 2020). Studies thus far suggest that Covid restrictions heightened the prevalence of loneliness for those already at risk, including young adults aged 18-30, adults living alone and those with mental health problems (Groarke et al., 2020). Bu et al. (2020) support this, but note that being a student emerged as a higher raised risk factor than others in the same period.

In the first summer of the pandemic, the incidence of loneliness increased across households in all tenures according to data from the English Housing Survey (MHCLG 2020b). In June-July 2020, 8% of household reference persons reported that they often or always felt lonely, up from 6% in 2019-20. The increase in loneliness was most marked amongst private renters: the proportion reporting that they felt lonely often or always more than doubled, from 5% to 12%.

Other qualitative work is also emerging, for instance an exploration of the experiences of single women living alone, notably the experience for many of virtual/remote working as socially isolating (Gao et al., 2020).

2.3 Interventions to alleviate loneliness

There is limited rigorous evidence on successful interventions against loneliness, and what there is almost entirely focused on old age. The systematic review by Victor et al. (2018) identifies the key evidence. The importance of the wider environment is emphasised in many studies, in particular access to decent secure housing and stable employment. Beyond these, the

interventions found to be most successful have one or more of the following characteristics:

They foster meaningful social contact

While social contact of any kind may well be beneficial (everyday contacts through local shops for instance, or with formal carers), *meaningful* social contact is seen to be essential in combatting loneliness. Further, the quality of social connections rather than size of network plays a role. Support by those who are peers in some sense, or who offer empathy through similar experiences, is most effective. In numerous examples of ground-level social interventions, indirect approaches such as schemes that bring younger and older adults together around aims like supporting the use of tech, or intergenerational living schemes such as the 'Homeshare' project (Macmillan et al., 2018) where there is an element of reciprocity, find greater success than those conceived entirely in terms of loneliness. Avoiding the stigma of loneliness may play a part here.

They are community- or place-based, and enable self-empowerment

Local interventions that encourage friendships to be made in an 'unsupported' way, for instance weekly lunch clubs for older people, appear to be more successful than those that encourage only one-to-one contact. Place is often key. Price's (2015) extensive UK-based study of what he describes as 'platforms' for individuals making better and deeper local social connections shows that these are rarely intentional or explicitly regarded as a means of social connection. The study looked at a range of initiatives including The Big Lunch (neighbourhoods eating together), shared allotment and community garden projects, The U and Streetbank (two programmes that connect local skills, building social capital on 'weak' ties between those not already close friends). Giving the example of social interaction among parents at the school gate, the author views such informal social nodes as creating and sustaining a range of relationships of different kinds and strengths, that were little talked about but '*... largely seen as an implicit, win-win exchange in which people invested time and effort to create a sense of the "good community"*' (2015: 5). One thing these examples have in common is self-determinism – unfacilitated arrangements made between peers which emphasise the earlier point that paternalistic approaches might tend to stigmatise loneliness (Moore & Preston, 2015).

They are sustainable

A frequent critique of community- and place-based schemes to alleviate loneliness is that programmes that meet with some degree of initial success often are not sustained, and thus have little long-term benefit. Bess & Doykos (2014) are not alone in pointing out that successful interventions need to address wider underlying issues such as poverty and poor or insecure housing that restrict access to building social connection beyond a specific programme.

2.4 The different forms of community-led housing

As noted in the introduction, the term community-led housing is a broad one, and includes cohousing, community land trusts (CLTs), housing cooperatives, as well as other models of self-help and self-build housing. These are not mutually exclusive: a cohousing community may lease its land from a CLT, and any model may involve new build or the use of existing buildings; the different forms are thus perhaps best understood as a broad spectrum or ‘ecology’ of different housing types, communities and levels of commitment or intentionality. What they do all share however is an emphasis on resident autonomy, community collaboration and inclusion.

Here we briefly describe the features of the most common forms of CLH, as the differences were relevant to inclusion in our survey, our case study selection and to some aspects of our findings.

Cohousing, probably the best-known and most-researched type of CLH (in terms at least of social interaction and design), comprises intentional, collaborative, resident-led, self-managed communities. It combines private and shared spaces and common activities and can be inter-generational or age-specific. By their very design--both material and social--cohousing communities encourage interaction, neighbourly social contact and informal mutual support in everyday life (Ruiu, 2016).

Community land trusts are set up and run by ordinary people to develop and manage homes (and also other assets) on behalf of that community (UKCLTN, 2021). The trust is created as a legal entity, and in the case of housing is usually a response to a lack of affordability in a particular location or community. While the housing is not necessarily designed for social interaction, nor are residents required to commit to a set of shared values as in cohousing, the schemes are generally of better quality than standard speculative homes and have greater resident and local input into design (Thompson, 2020). CLTs sometimes do integrate other models: Bridport CLT, for instance, is also a cohousing scheme.

Housing cooperatives are democratic, not-for-profit organisations run for and by their members. While there is a history of housing cooperatives in the UK that stretches back 200 years, the 1975 Housing Act provided public funding and triggered a rapid growth in the sector; despite a later decline in public funding (Thompson, 2020), there are nearly 700 housing cooperatives across the UK (Community Led Homes, 2021). Many surviving co-ops have demonstrated their sustainability as CLH over several decades. There are some very large co-ops with many thousands of homes, but we include only smaller co-ops in our definition of community-led housing as these involve greater autonomy, collaboration and inclusion.

Various models of **self-build and self-help housing** are also considered to fall under the umbrella of community-led housing. The former comprises homes either physically built, or developed by, a community, while the latter generally refers to groups bringing disused buildings back into use as homes.

For the purposes of this report it is not necessary to delve deeply into the differences in terms of legal structures, ownership and financing etc. This is in part because there are as many different models as there are projects, but also because they are of limited use in discussions of

social connection and loneliness. Instead, we consider a more useful approach in the context of this study to be a consideration of groups in terms of:

- The *physical design* and arrangement of the housing
- The *social design*, i.e. the extent to which the residents explicitly set out to be a community
- *Process*, i.e. the extent to which legal or financial structures require residents to work together, or through the complex and often protracted challenges of developing the housing.

These themes will be returned to in our analysis of the data.

2.5 Loneliness and social contact in the community-led housing literature

Despite growing interest in the various forms of CLH, there remains a relative dearth of empirical studies or data about sociability and social capital within groups, and about groups' connections with the communities in which they are based. The published research to date that specifically addresses CLH and loneliness directly is very limited, and focuses only on later life. Even so, the existing literature (predominantly qualitative case studies) does give strong indications of the potential of CLH models in the context of loneliness and social isolation. Several characteristics are seen to be relevant:

Shared space

Several studies have identified a common sense of ownership where a close neighbourhood shares a space that is distinct from residents' private homes. These studies note that such spaces, by facilitating regular social interaction, reduce social isolation (Bay, 2004; Carstens, 1993; Chile et al., 2014).

Mutual support and self-management

Various studies explore the related concepts of 'wellbeing' and social capital through mutually supportive behaviour in cohousing and other forms of CLH, finding more social interaction and formation of supportive social bonds. Two rare studies that collected quantitative data on a significant scale in Scandinavia (Choi, 2004; Choi & Paulsson, 2011) concluded that in comparison with the wider population, CLH residents socialised and shared time more with neighbours, and that members enjoyed good or at least better health into old age.

Lang & Novy (2014) found higher levels of social capital in community-led housing cooperatives than in housing developments created and managed by others, highlighting the importance of self-organisation for wellbeing. The (often lengthy) process of forming CLH groups and developing projects helps to forge social connections and bring together groups of like-minded people (Hudson et al., 2019; Jones, 2017).

Some researchers have asked whether those individuals attracted to joining CLH groups might already be predisposed to greater sociability and have stronger social networks than average. We found a single study with a bearing on this: Markle et al. (2015) compared the experience of members of cohousing groups across the USA with others who had expressed interest but had

not joined a group, and found significantly more socially supportive behaviours in the former than among their non-cohousing peers.

Inclusion, and links to the wider community

In the UK, residents of cohousing in particular tend to be older, middle-class homeowners, but the literature demonstrates that this is not intrinsic to the concept: where financial support can be accessed, schemes can include homes for social rent that in turn broaden the demographic (Jakobsen et al. 2018; Fernández Arrigoitia and West, 2020). Boyer and Leyland (2018), as well as Sanguinetti and Hibbert (2018) both find in studies that low take-up among a more diverse population is more likely due to financial inaccessibility than lack of appeal. Other models of CLH, including co-ops and CLTs, are often established with the explicit aim of serving social groups not able to access market housing (Czischke and Huisman 2018).

Looking beyond relationships within CLH projects themselves, multiple studies suggest that members are more engaged locally, and also politically in wider society (Arbell, Middlemiss and Chatterton 2020). While this perhaps reflects in part the higher level of engagement by those who are likely to support CLH to begin with, one quantitative study of cohousing in the USA (Berggren, 2016) does find an increase in residents' political and local engagement when comparing pre- and post-move-in.

Cohousing and older people

There is a small but growing literature specifically on the experience and potential of ageing in cohousing. It addresses the motivations for joining cohousing (for instance life stage changes, not having children, or family and friendships being geographically dispersed), and the social connection and mutual support that is possible within such groups. Members of our own team have since 2016 been exploring these themes in research with the Older Women's Cohousing project, whose New Ground scheme was the first explicitly senior cohousing community in the UK (Fernández Arrigoitia & West, 2020). The inclusion of OWCH in this study continues and builds on that research.

Covid-19 and CLH

Although academic literature on the response of collaborative communities to the pandemic is scarce so far, our own research team undertook a small study of 18 communities in the summer of 2020, with some initial findings published (Hudson et al., 2021). While the restrictions, predicated largely on assumptions of nuclear family units, were often difficult for groups to adapt to, we found significant evidence of mutual support among members both in practical terms but also in terms of social contact.

2.6 Government policies around CLH and around loneliness

Support for CLH

The *Community Housing Fund* (established in 2016 as a fund of £60m per year for four years) has met with considerable success. Initially focussed on supporting locally-led affordable housing projects (with funding via local authorities), the fund's renewal in 2017 expanded its scope to create a nationwide network of advisory hubs; there are now 29 of these regional hubs across England and Wales. From the total pot, the fund also allocated £38m to London, administered by the GLA. However, with a drastic reduction in the scale of the fund in the last year (£4m for a renewed 2021/22 fund allocated as revenue funding only), UKCLTN argue that other funding pots such as the Government's new Levelling-Up and Shared Prosperity funds should be opened up to CLH (UKCLTN, 2021).

The Community Housing Fund is the most recent manifestation of government support for CLH over the past decade. Its origins can be traced back to Big Society ideology and the 2011 housing white paper, which included the Community Right to Build. This enabled local communities to form corporate bodies and build new homes, shops, businesses or facilities that reflected local needs, without going through the normal planning application process (MHCLG, 2011). More recently, the green and white papers on social housing highlighted the role of social landlords in supporting community activity (MHCLG, 2018), but also the specific role that CLH can play in creating better places (MHCLG, 2020). The Community Right to Build is echoed in the current consultations on a community 'right to regenerate', which would allow the public to require councils and the public sector to sell unused land and assets (MHCLG, 2021).

The Loneliness Strategy

The government's 2018 loneliness strategy does not focus mainly on housing but rather covers a number of themes relevant to social contact (DCMS, 2018). It recognises that home and neighbourhood matter in terms of loneliness, citing evidence that people who feel satisfied with their neighbourhood are less likely to feel lonely (ONS, 2018). The policy draws together a range of existing policies and initiatives. Those relevant to housing and planning include

- a commitment to improve the situation of private renters in view of findings that those in insecure housing have often lived in an area for less time, feel less of a sense of belonging and are also more likely to feel lonely;
- a recognition through the National Planning Policy Framework of the need to create inclusive public spaces that promote social interaction;
- a requirement that for DLUHC to encourage the consideration of loneliness in measures of design quality, beginning with Homes England and other programmes;
- building on the Ageing Society Grand Challenge to work with local partners in order to '*develop inclusive homes and communities that support people to remain healthy and independent for longer*'; and finally
- the appointment of an DLUHC panel to rethink the future of our high streets.

The two policy areas described above--support for CLH and the loneliness strategy--have until now proceeded largely on separate tracks. The reasons for supporting CLH have not connected to loneliness directly, but rather with housing need, affordability and empowering local communities in responding to these issues. In the following sections we therefore turn to the evidence from our empirical work to ask whether there is evidence for supporting CLH as a way of combating loneliness.

3 Structure of the research

This chapter outlines the different phases of the research, the process of identifying the CLH schemes, and the mixed-methods research techniques employed.

3.1 Phases of the research

Briefly, the overlapping phases of the research process were to

1. Review the existing literature
2. Gather data on cohousing and CLH schemes for selection process and online survey
3. Conduct an online survey of CLH participants (residents and non-residents)
4. Analyse the survey findings, using both quantitative and qualitative techniques
5. Select five CLH communities in England for in-depth assessment
6. Carry out case-study fieldwork, including interviews of CLH participants and local stakeholders
7. Carry out a meta-analysis of the case-study findings
8. Convene an expert round table
9. Analyse the evidence and put together this report.

The original timescale for the project envisioned case-study fieldwork in spring 2020, with the final report produced by June of that year. The research team had completed only two interviews when the Covid situation stopped face-to-face research contact, and the remainder of the interviews were carried out remotely using Zoom. The Department's original brief stressed the importance of local evaluation, but the advent of the pandemic meant members of the research team were able to visit only three of the five case-study sites. Even though we could not see all the schemes in person, innovative approaches such as walk-along tours of the projects and surrounding areas, filmed by residents on their phones, gave us an idea of the layout and 'feel' of each community and its situation in the neighbourhood. Some research participants also shared photographs and videos, and recordings of video tours.

The quantitative research methodology is addressed in detail in Chapter 4, and the qualitative methodology appears in Annex B.

3.2 Identifying the universe of CLH schemes

When we began this research, there was no existing comprehensive list of community-led housing schemes that would give sufficient detail for case study selection and we recognised that we would need to gather the information as part of the project. This was a more significant undertaking than we had envisaged since the key umbrella bodies held information about their own members but did not necessarily maintain detailed lists of all the groups or communities

that fall within their remit⁵. We therefore spent considerable time developing a more comprehensive database of the known population of community-led housing communities⁶.

Drawing on the definition of community-led housing given by the Department in the ITT for this project -- namely, housing communities which involve the '*close engagement and creativity of local people*' -- the work started with a desktop search to create a spreadsheet of email contacts. This was supplemented by 'intelligent' filtering to broaden the search bases as far as possible, to exclude organisations that did not fit our criteria (such as large-scale housing cooperatives whose members are unlikely to represent coherent communities) and to avoid duplication. This procedure generated a list of 622 communities, of which 339 had contact details available in the public domain. While this piece of research focuses specifically on England, the database includes communities across the UK.

3.3 Mixed-methods research techniques

This was a mixed-methods study using both quantitative and qualitative techniques. The quantitative element, reported in Chapter 4, was designed to look for evidence as to whether involvement with CLH affects loneliness. The statistical analysis employed a propensity-score matching technique to compare survey responses from CLH participants with those from the general public. The statistical methods are described in detail in annexes E and F.

The qualitative element was designed to explore *why* and *how* involvement with CLH might impact on loneliness. Qualitative data collection included semi-structured interviews (most conducted remotely) and video tours of CLH communities conducted by residents. We used standard qualitative-analysis techniques to identify and code the main concepts. The interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed. Each transcript was read by at least two members of the research team, who identified and coded recurring themes then compared their work to ensure analytical rigour and coding alignment. Findings from the qualitative element appear in Chapter 6.

⁵ The situation has evolved since then, and the Community Led Homes partnership is now assembling a database of CLH schemes.

⁶ We are grateful for additional financial support from the University of Bristol to carry this out.

4 The survey: Are CLH participants less lonely than others?

This chapter outlines the results of the online survey study (N=221 respondents, across 93 CLH communities) and offers a portrait of CLH participants. In the statistical analysis, it compares the CLH survey responses to a control group of similar individuals in the general population from the 2018/19 Community Life Survey (DCMS, 2019). It finds that people involved in CLH were significantly less likely to feel lonely than similar members of the general public.

To determine whether people involved with community-led housing were less lonely than people without such a link (our first research question), we conducted an online survey of CLH participants across the country. Respondents included both CLH residents and group members who did not themselves live in CLH. They were asked about their experience of loneliness; interactions with neighbours, friends and family; and participation in social and community activities. Many of the survey questions were drawn from large-scale national surveys, which allowed us to benchmark the results from CLH participants against the general population. This chapter presents the survey methodology and its key findings. We then turn in subsequent chapters to qualitative case studies of five CLH communities.

The online survey ran from March – June 2020 and included both quantitative questions and qualitative questions that allowed for open-ended responses. We issued survey invitations to all the CLH groups we could identify, including both inhabited communities and CLH groups still in the development or pre-development phase, and asked them to distribute these invitations to all their members.

4.1 A portrait of CLH participants

There were a total of 221 responses to our survey, representing 93 different community-led housing groups and communities. Map 1, overleaf, shows where the survey respondents came from. The dots represent locations, not respondents; many CLH schemes had multiple respondents. Nearly two-thirds of respondents were women⁷.

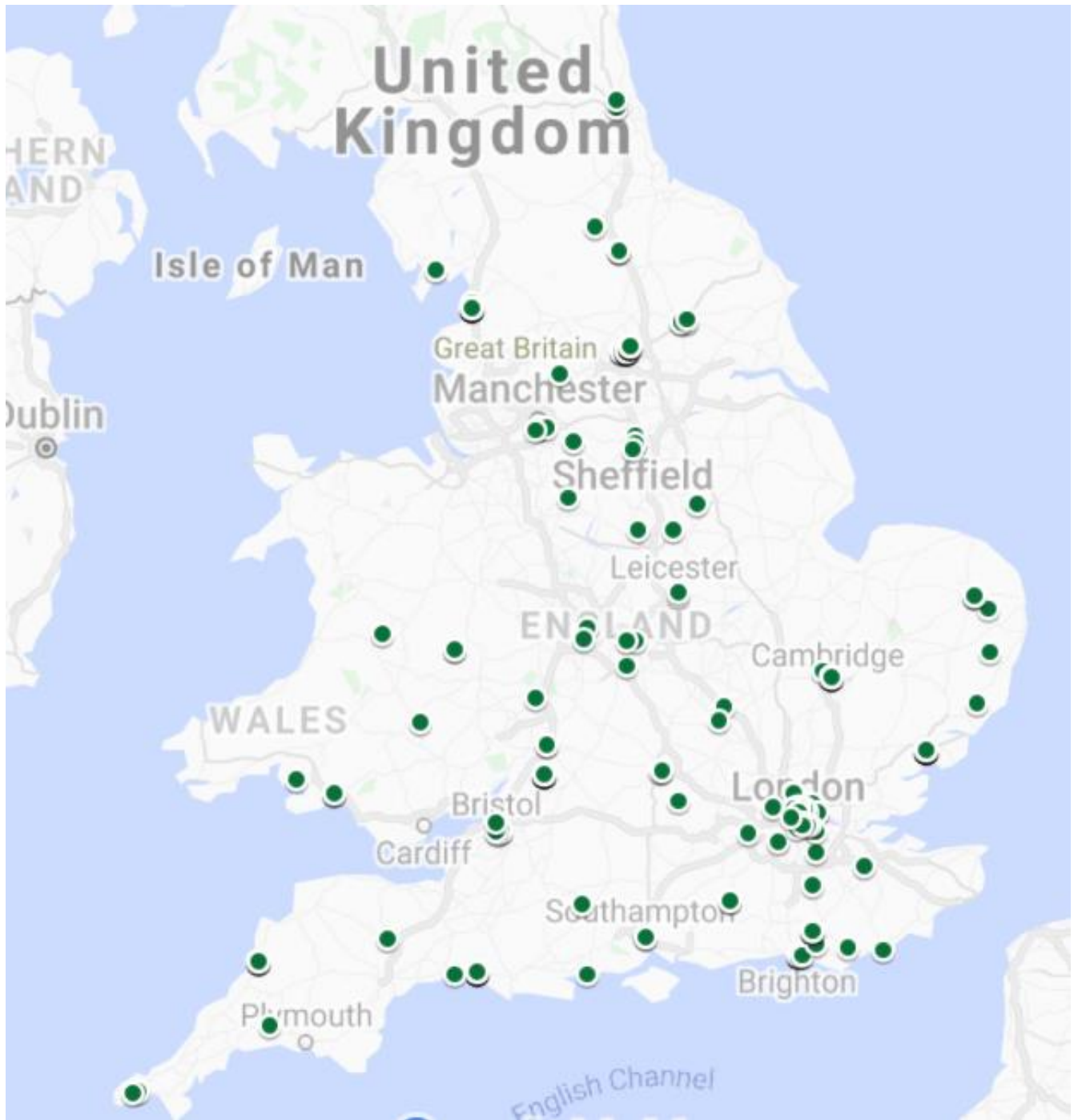
Some 54% of respondents were currently living in a CLH community; the remainder were members or supporters who were not currently living in CLH, as well as a few who lived in CLH in the past but no longer do. Most of those not living in CLH were working towards it.

Respondents were most commonly involved in cohousing communities, co-ops and/or community land trusts (some CLH communities fit into more than one category). Cohousing accounted for the largest proportion by far, with 61% of respondents saying their community or group was cohousing.

Of those currently living in CLH, about three fifths had been resident for ten years or less. Three quarters of those not currently living in CLH had become involved with their current group in the last five years.

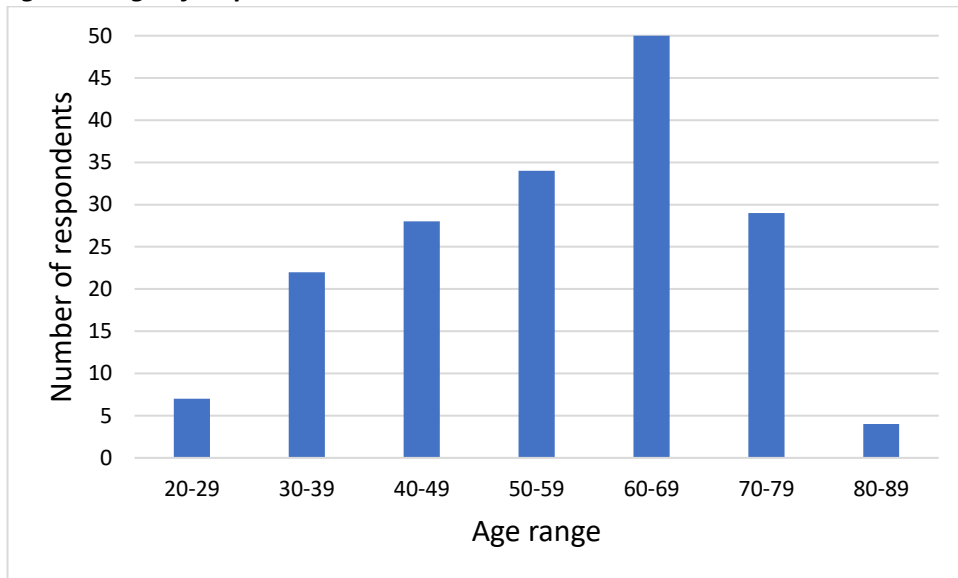
⁷ Detailed survey data tables appear in Annex D.

Map 1: Locations of respondents to online survey



Overall, respondents tended to be middle aged and older (Figure 1), with the highest number aged 60-69. 35% were married or in a civil partnership and a further 9% in a domestic partnership. 31% were single. Most households consisted of single adults or couples; only 19% of respondents had resident minor children. 57% were in paid employment (full- or part-time) and 31% were retired, as to be expected given the age profile of the group.

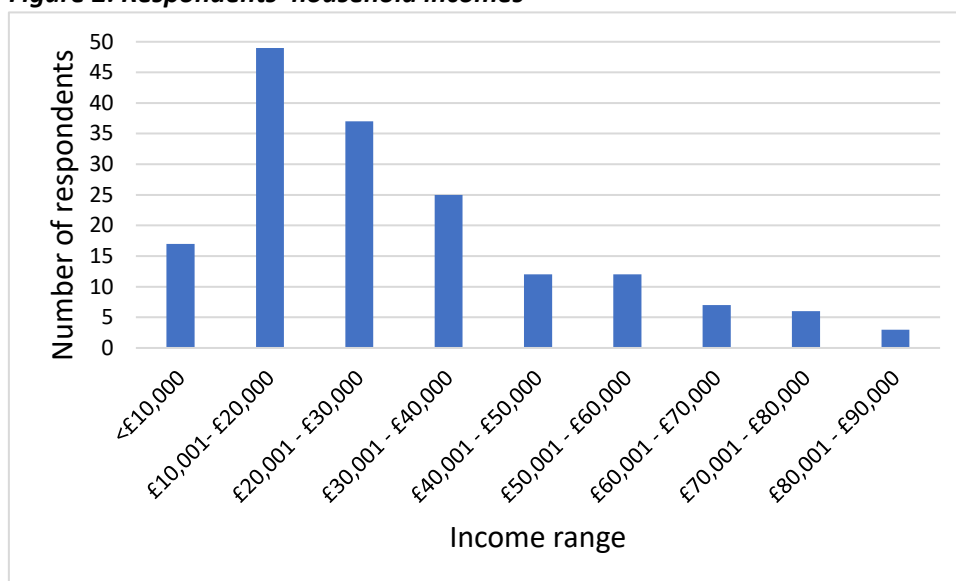
Figure 1: Age of respondents



Source: Survey Q3.6 (all respondents)

Respondents reported relatively modest incomes (Figure 2), with a median household income in the range of £20,001 - £30,000 per annum. As a group they were well qualified: 72% had at least a university degree (vs 42% in the UK adult population as a whole), and of those most had graduate degrees. More than 80% were originally from the UK or Ireland, and 93% were white (including Irish). Most said they had no religion.

Figure 2: Respondents' household incomes



Source: Survey Q3.12 (all respondents)

The most common reason given for becoming involved with CLH was that it aligned with respondents' values. Other strong reasons were its social and environmental qualities. Strictly practical concerns such as sharing responsibility for home maintenance or living in a particular area were much less cited. One of the benefits adduced to community-led housing is the degree of agency it affords to residents, and the survey responses tended to support this, with 83% of respondents said that decision-making in their community or group was 'very participative' or 'participative'.

Involvement in CLH normally entails participation in various shared activities, which create the social glue that binds members together. We asked respondents what kinds of activities they took part in with their groups or communities. Most respondents were active in a range of ways. These typically included meetings of one sort or another (the whole group and/or committees and/or group facilitation meetings). Meetings were the most important activities during the period before moving into a scheme; when residents were living in a scheme they continued to take part in meetings, and also took on the more practical requirements of running their communities including cleaning, group meals and gardening. The survey showed strikingly high levels of participation in almost all types of group activity listed, with the exception of group outreach to the wider community, where only a minority of current residents said they took part.

Respondents were asked how often they felt isolated from others, left out or that they lacked companionship. These three questions came from the UCLA Loneliness scale, a standard tool for assessing loneliness. ONS guidance recommends assigning a score to each response and creating an overall score by summing the individual figures. On this basis,

- Rarely or never = 1
- Sometimes = 2

Often = 3

The lowest possible score on the loneliness scale is 3 (indicating less frequent loneliness), and the highest is 9, indicating more frequent loneliness. The ONS Guidance says there is no standard accepted benchmark for the scale, but suggests it is useful to compare the average scores of different groups.

Figure 3 compares the overall UCLA loneliness scores for our respondents to those of adult respondents to the *Understanding Society* survey⁸, as reported in Bu et al (2020). This gives a general indication of how CLH participants compare to the wider population on these measures. The figure shows that CLH participants were more likely to report low levels of loneliness (total score of 3), and less likely to report high levels (scores of 7, 8 or 9).

Figure 3: Combined UCLA loneliness scores, survey respondents vs wider population

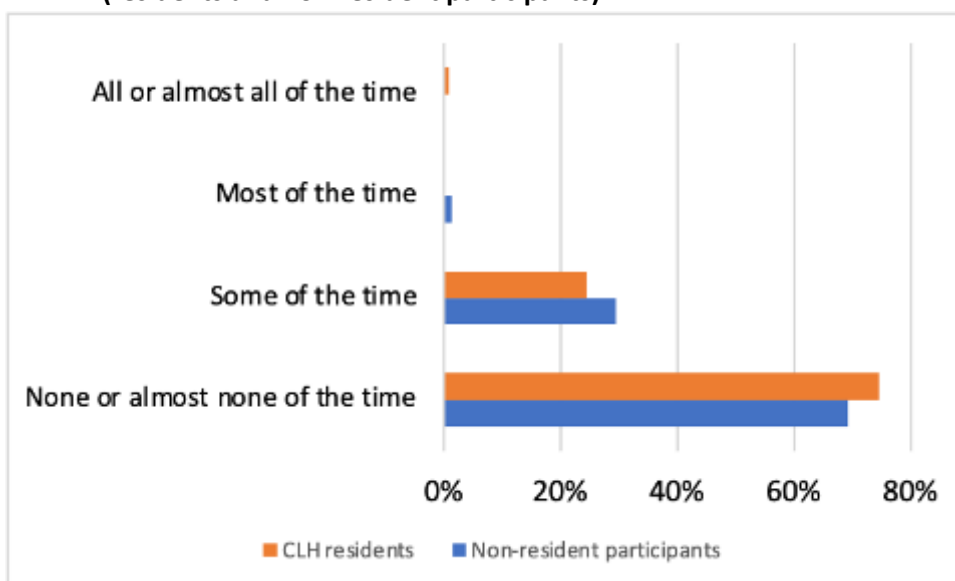
Source: Survey Q5.24 – 5.26 (all respondents); Bu et al 2020 from *Understanding Society* wave 9



The survey also asked a fourth, summary question, ‘How much of the time during the past week did you feel lonely?’ (Figure 4).

⁸ The authors used data from *Understanding Society* wave 9, collected between January, 2017 and June, 2019, for participants aged 18+ for whom the relevant data were complete. The final sample size was 31,064.

Figure 4: Responses to ‘How much of the time during the past week did you feel lonely?’ (residents and non-resident participants)



Source: Survey Q5.27 (all respondents)

Respondents overwhelmingly said they had felt lonely ‘none or almost none’ of the time during the preceding week. Those living in CLH were slightly more likely to say this than non-resident participants, but the difference was small. At the other end of the scale, only two CLH respondents said they felt lonely ‘most’ or ‘all or almost all’ of the time. This question is the subject of further statistical analysis in the next section.

4.2 Loneliness compared: statistical analysis of survey responses

The statistical analysis⁹ of the responses to our survey of community-led housing (henceforth SCLH) can help us answer the first overarching question: **Does CLH (and cohousing in particular) have an impact on loneliness?**

Definitions of treatment and control

The literature on the formation of CLH groups, and our own research in this field, makes clear that the frequency and intensity of group interaction may be higher in the community-formation stages than once residents are living in their homes. Given that such interaction is likely to be correlated with reduced loneliness, we defined *all* CLH participants, whether currently living in a community or not, as receiving a version of the ‘treatment’¹⁰.

⁹ A list of references for the statistical techniques used appears in Annex G2.

¹⁰ Our original intention was to compare survey responses from those living in CLH and those involved in CLH but not yet living there. In this approach, those currently resident in CLH would be defined as the ‘treatment’ group, while those not yet living in a community (who were likely to be similar in terms of demographics and motivation) would be defined as the ‘control’ group. During the research process, and after consultation with our steering group, we revised the definitions of ‘treatment’ and ‘control’.

We then compared two treatment categories--everyone involved with CLH, and the subset of residents--to a control group of similar individuals in the general population. In this report the following terms are used to distinguish the treatment and control groups:

Treatment group *CLH participants*: respondents to the survey of CLH participants, whether currently living in a CLH community or not. Includes those who are intending to move into a community in future, as well as former residents and supporters

CLH residents: a subset of the above: respondents currently living in a CLH community

Control group matched comparators selected from respondents to the Community Life Survey. Also sometimes referred to as the general public.

The control group was drawn from respondents to the annual Community Life Survey, a major national survey on issues that are key to encouraging social action and empowering communities, including volunteering, giving, community engagement and wellbeing (for details see DCMS, 2019). It asks about a range of topics including identity, social networks, sense of community, civic engagement, volunteering, social action, subjective wellbeing and loneliness. The inclusion of questions from the Community Life Survey in our questionnaire enabled us to compare CLH participants' experience of loneliness with that of the population at large.

The statistical approach is set out below.

Identifying comparators in the general public

The quantitative analysis used a standard evaluation technique to compare the 'treatment' group (CLH participants, including both residents and participants) with the 'control' group (substantially similar individuals who do not participate in CLH).

In evaluating a project whose participants were randomly selected, the impact of the project can be calculated by comparing the participants with randomly selected non-participants. In the case of CLH, however, the participants are not randomly selected but rather join intentionally. One concern in evaluating the effect of CLH on loneliness is that participants might be less lonely than non-participants simply because participants tend to be more active, sociable people in general. In order to calculate an unbiased estimate of the effect of CLH, we needed to compare CLH participants to similar people in the general public, and this needed to account insofar as possible for major factors that might affect loneliness.

With this in mind, we selected the treatment and control groups through a Propensity Score Matching (PSM) technique¹¹. The propensity score expresses how likely a person is to take part in CLH based on observed socio-demographic characteristics and lifestyle. Our survey asked a

¹¹ The approach is described in more detail in Annex E.

number of questions about engagement in community activities, and we used these to select a control group from amongst the respondents to the Community Life Survey. This control group had similar levels of sociability to the treatment group, as measured by their participation in clubs and organised social activities.

The treatment and control groups were then econometrically compared to find out whether there were statistically significant differences between them with respect to (a) loneliness, (b) perceptions about the neighbourhood and (c) communication with families or friends.

Wording of questions about loneliness and socialising

Our survey¹² of CLH participants included a set of questions from the Community Life Survey, which we classified as follows:

Category A: Questions about loneliness and socialising

- How much of the time during the past week did you feel lonely?
- To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
- If I wanted company or to socialise, there are people I can call on
- If I needed help, there are people who would be there for me

Category B: Questions about communication with friends and family

- On average, how often do you...
 - Meet up in person with family members or friends
 - Speak on the phone or video or audio call via the internet with family members or friends
 - Email or write to family members or friends
 - Exchange text messages or instant messages with family members or friends

In **Category C**, five questions from the Community Life Survey ask about respondents' relationships with their neighbours. In our survey, the non-resident participants saw the original versions of those questions. We modified their wording slightly for CLH residents, to distinguish between neighbours who were fellow members of the CLH community and neighbours outside that community—see Table 1.

Survey timing and the pandemic

Invitations to the survey were distributed just before the start of the first pandemic lockdown, with responses received up to June 2020. It is possible that responses to some of the survey questions were conditioned by the restrictions on face-to-face contact. For example, respondents might have reported less frequent meetings in person with families and friends, or

¹² see Annex C for full survey text.

a lower degree of agreement with 'Generally, I borrow things and exchange favours with my neighbours'. We do not believe this affects the conclusions of our survey analysis, as only a few questions were worded in terms of face-to-face contact. In any case, if some respondents would have answered differently in 'normal' times that would strengthen the association between CLH and loneliness reduction, not weaken it.

Table 1: Category C: Questions about neighbours and the neighbourhood

(Modified language used in online survey underlined)

Original questions (seen by non-resident CLH participants)	Wording of modified questions in SCLH (seen by CLH residents)
How strongly do you feel you belong to your immediate neighbourhood?	A How strongly do you feel you belong <u>to your CLH community</u> ? B How strongly do you feel you belong <u>to the immediate neighbourhood around your CLH community</u> ?
How often do you chat to your neighbours, more than just to say hello?	A How often do you chat <u>to fellow residents in your CLH community</u> , more than just to say hello? B How often do you chat <u>to the neighbours around your CLH community</u> , more than just to say hello?
How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Generally, I borrow things and exchange favours with my neighbours.	A How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Generally, I borrow things and exchange favours <u>with fellow residents of my CLH community</u> . B How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Generally, I borrow things and exchange favours <u>with neighbours outside my CLH community</u> .
How comfortable would you be asking a neighbour to keep a set of keys to your home for emergencies, for example if you were locked out?	A How comfortable would you be asking <u>a fellow resident of your CLH community</u> to keep a set of keys to your home for emergencies, for example if you were locked out? B How comfortable would you be asking <u>a neighbour outside your CLH community</u> to keep a set of keys to your home for emergencies, for example if you were locked out?
If you were ill and at home on your own, and needed someone to collect a few shopping essentials, how comfortable would you feel asking a neighbour to do this for you?	A If you were ill and at home on your own, and needed someone to collect a few shopping essentials, how comfortable would you feel asking <u>a fellow resident of your CLH community</u> to do this for you? B And how comfortable would you feel about asking <u>a neighbour outside your CLH community</u> to do this?

Comparing loneliness and socialising in CLH participants and the general public

To determine whether CLH participants were less lonely than the overall population, and whether these differences were statistically significant, we conducted a set of econometric tests.

Recall that all CLH participants, whether living in a community or not, are defined as receiving the ‘treatment’; those currently living in CLH are a subset of the treatment group. Using the matching technique described above, we paired 160¹³ participants (of which 84 were residents) with matching individuals from the Community Life Survey, then compared the treatment and control groups econometrically. We conducted one set of tests comparing *all CLH participants* (160 individuals) to the control group, and another set of tests comparing the subset of *CLH residents* (84 people) to the control group. We tested 12 questions, and for each question conducted four tests (Table 2), so there were 48 tests overall¹⁴.

Table 2: Statistical tests conducted

Statistical tests vs control group	Treatment group: All CLH participants N = 160	Sub-group: CLH residents N=84
Test 1: Chi-square	X	X
Test 2: McNemar	X	X

Two kinds of econometric tests were undertaken – a chi-square test and a McNemar test¹⁵, both of which look for correlations between two sets of data. The chi-square and McNemar analyses gave almost same conclusions with regard to statistical significance.

Table 3 summarises the results of the 48 statistical tests conducted. Each coloured cell summarises the results of both chi-square and McNemar tests.

¹³ These figures differ slightly from the numbers reported in section 4.1, and may vary across the items compared, as exclusion or imputation of missing values affected the sample sizes.

¹⁴ Full results of the statistical tests are reported in Annex F.

¹⁵ The **chi-square test** is especially appropriate for looking at distributional differences across categorical variables—for example, where there are several possible responses to a question (e.g., agree, tend to agree, tend to disagree, disagree)—and for situations where the treatment and control groups are independent of each other. It is often used for PSM comparisons. If the values in the two sets were equal (unlikely in practice), then chi-square would be zero and the test would indicate that there was no difference between the two groups in terms of the distribution of that variable. The higher the value of the chi-square test statistic, the greater the difference between the two groups.

A **McNemar test** is often used for treatment-control studies based on matched pairs. The McNemar test is run only for binary variables (e.g. Agree or Disagree), so we created ‘collapsed binary variables’ from those questions with several possible answers—for example, categorising ‘tend to agree’ and ‘agree’ as AGREE and ‘tend to disagree’ and ‘disagree’ as DISAGREE. When comparing the answers of treatment and control groups, the McNemar test indicates the statistical significance level (known as the p-value). In general, if the p-value is less than 0.05 the difference between the two groups is statistically significant.

- **Green** cells indicate that **CLH performed better on these variables**: CLH participants reported less loneliness/more communication and trust than the control group
- **Amber** cells indicate that there was **no significant difference** in loneliness, communication or trust between CLH and control
- **Red** cells indicate that CLH participants reported significantly **lower communication and trust** for these variables than the control group

4.3 Main survey findings

CLH participants were less lonely

The results of chi-square and McNemar tests can often be ambiguous or difficult to interpret, but in this case both were clear. They strongly indicated that people involved in CLH, whether residents of CLH communities or not, were significantly less likely to feel lonely than similar members of the general public.

CLH residents felt strong belonging and trust in their communities

For all five of the questions about neighbourhood belonging and trust in fellow residents, CLH residents' perceptions about their own communities were significantly more positive than those of the control group about their neighbourhoods.

...and average levels of belonging to their wider neighbourhoods

We asked CLH residents about attitudes to the neighbourhoods around their own communities. It should be remembered that neighbours 'beyond' the community are physically further away than the neighbours of non-CLH residents, and this difference in proximity means we are not entirely comparing like with like. In terms of their feeling of belonging to their wider neighbourhoods, CLH residents' responses were more or less similar to those of the control group. We found no evidence of sectarianism/exclusionism associated with CLH: residents did not have significantly negative feelings about the neighbourhoods outside their communities.

In critical matters, residents trusted their CLH communities most

In casual matters, such as collecting shopping, CLH residents' degree of trust in their wider, non-CLH neighbourhood was similar to that of the control group. But in more critical matters, such as leaving a spare key or exchanging things, CLH residents appeared to trust their fellow community members more than they trusted non-CLH neighbours.

CLH members interacted regularly with fellow members; less with other friends/family

In terms of their interactions beyond the CLH community or group, CLH participants were more likely than the general public to write to family and friends, but *less* likely to conduct synchronous communication by telephone or chatting face-to-face. There may be some substitution occurring, with real-time interactions with fellow group members or residents to some extent replacing those that otherwise would occur with family or friends -- indeed, CLH members and friends are likely to be overlapping sets. The comparative advantage of CLH in reducing loneliness thus seems to arise from increased interaction with fellow CLH members rather than from high levels of interaction with families or friends elsewhere.

Table 3: Summary of test results comparing CLH participants (participants and residents) to control group

Key:	Significantly less loneliness/more communication and trust in CLH group than control	No significant difference in loneliness, communication or trust between CLH and control	Communication and trust significantly less in CLH than control	Statistical significance of diffs ++ or -- strongly significant + or - significant ± not significant	
Category	Specific questions compared*			All CLH participants	Of which residents
A Loneliness and socialising	How much of the time during the last week did you feel lonely?			++	++
	To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?	If I wanted company or to socialise, there are people I can call on		±	+
		If I needed help, there are people who would be there for me		±	±
B Communication with family and friends: 'On average, how often do you...?'	Meet up in person with family members or friends			±	--
	Speak on the phone or video or audio call via the internet with family members or friends			--	-
	Email or write to family members or friends			+	+
	Exchange text messages or instant messages with family members or friends			±	±
C Neighbours and the neighbourhood*	How strongly do you feel you belong to your immediate neighbourhood?			±	++
	How often do you chat to your neighbours, more than just to say hello?			±	++
	How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Generally, I borrow things and exchange favours with my neighbours.			--	++
	How comfortable would you be asking a neighbour to keep a set of keys to your home for emergencies, for example if you were locked out?			-	++
	If you were ill and at home on your own, and needed someone to collect a few shopping essentials, how comfortable would you feel asking a neighbour to do this for you?			±	++

*Wording of questions from CLS. See Table 1 for wording of modified questions seen by CLH residents; see Table A1 for answer categories.

5 Introducing the case study communities

This chapter introduces the five in-depth CLH case studies. The schemes represent a range of models (CLT/co-op/cohousing); both intergenerational and age-restricted, and with various demographic profiles; in different parts of England and in urban, suburban and rural locations; recent schemes and those with long histories; and schemes where residents played a major role in co-design and where they played none. Key features of each CLH scheme are presented alongside with maps of the surrounding conurbations and the local areas.

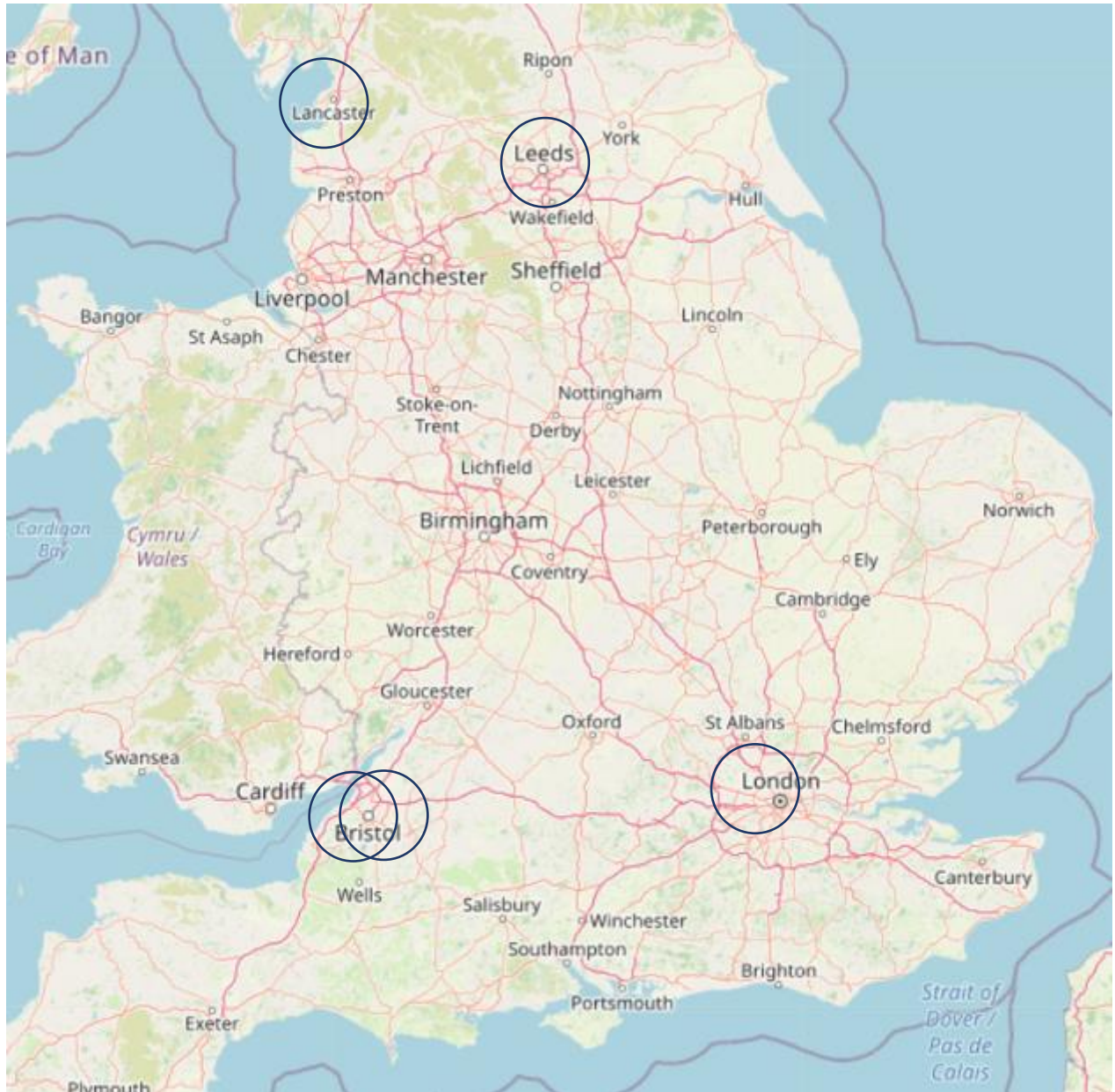
The statistical analysis reported in the previous section strongly supports the hypothesis that those participating in CLH are less likely to feel lonely. We used qualitative research techniques to explore why this is the case, and what features or processes of CLH have the most effect on loneliness. At the heart of this research were in-depth case studies of five CLH communities in England (Map 2).

The case-study selection procedure appears in Annex B. We tried to include schemes representing a range of models (CLT/co-op/cohousing); both intergenerational and age-restricted, and with various demographic profiles; in different parts of the country and in urban, suburban and rural locations; recent schemes and those with long histories; and schemes where residents played a major role in co-design and where they played none. Each community is briefly described below, with maps of the surrounding conurbation and the local area (roughly the 'walkable neighbourhood' – i.e., the area that can easily be reached on foot in 15 minutes or so [Pozoukido & Chatziyiannaki 2021]).

Table 3: The case study communities

	1 LANCASTER COHOUSING	2 OWCH COHOUSING	3 TANGRAM CO-OP	4 Bristol CLT (325 Fishponds Road)	5 ASHLEY VALE SELF- BUILD
Number of households	35	26	41	12	41
RESIDENT AGE					
Intergenerational	X		X	X	X
Senior		X			
GENDER					
Single-sex		X			
Mixed	X		X	X	X
LOCATION					
	LANCASTER	LONDON	LEEDS	BRISTOL	BRISTOL
Urban		X	X	X	X
Suburban/town					
Rural	X				
PARTICIPATORY DESIGN					
Strong	X	X		X	X
Weak or none			X		
CONSTRUCTION TYPE					
New-build	X	X		X	
Self-build					X
Retrofit/refurbishment			X		
LENGTH OF OCCUPATION					
Occupied <5 years		X		X	
Occupied 5-10 years	X				
Occupied >10 years			X		X

Map 2: Locations of case studies



Source: This and subsequent maps © OpenStreetMap contributors

Scheme 1: Lancaster Cohousing, Halton, Lancaster

Map 3: Location in relation to Lancaster



Map 4: The walkable neighbourhood



Lancaster Cohousing at Forgebank is a new-build rural eco cohousing community located along the pathway of the river Lune on the edge of the village Halton, about a 20-minute bus ride north of the centre of Lancaster. Inaugurated in 2012, it is an important example of an ecologically-oriented project with diverse, multi-generational residents (approximately 65 adults and 15 children). In addition to shared elements often found in cohousing (a common house with a dining room and kitchen, shared office, laundry and guest bedroom), the scheme also has a two-storey co-working, studio and event space called Halton Mill ('a former engineering site). The scheme has extensive bicycle facilities and a shared food store. There is limited car parking at the edge of the site, with shared ownership of cars and a community car club.

Most of the 41 terraced houses line a pedestrianised street. The units, which range in size from one-bedroom flats to three-bedroom houses, are built to Passivhaus standard with photovoltaic solar panels, so running costs are very low. This includes six more conventionally designed three-bed houses with private gardens and parking spaces, whose residents have an option to opt out of the community.

Some of the current residents worked in the original co-design process with architects Eco Arc. Local builder Whittles Construction was responsible for the main construction work, but residents were involved in project management and some peripheral site preparation.



Source: see references

Resident profile and eligibility

The project, which took nine years from first ideation to completion, was initiated by five friends living in Lancaster. The group soon expanded to accommodate a wider set of early joiners. It was designed to be intergenerational, and residents range in age from 1 to 78 years old. Those who want to purchase a unit and join the group must agree to abide by the principles of shared life.

Residents' backgrounds and interests are varied. Some are locals from Lancaster and the northwest, while others moved from elsewhere in England or Scotland, attracted by the scheme's cohousing and ecological principles.

Development history, ownership and tenure

While some of the ecological components of the homes were funded by grants, the development project was financed by capital from some of the original members, loans from Triodos Bank and the sale of the homes. Except for these six more 'conventional' homes on the edge of the site, which are freehold, the properties are privately owned on a leasehold basis. Owners are permitted to rent out rooms or entire homes and several are rented this way.

Resale of homes is at market price. There is a waiting list of people wanting to join and rent, who must 'buy in' to the community living ethos. The group is currently buying one of the homes in order to rent it out, using loans from members and former members. This would produce a mixed-tenure model, which was considered originally but not pursued as 'the sums did not add up'; it is now seen as necessary to build a more diverse community.

Management

Forgebank residents are all members of Lancaster Cohousing, and service is built into their leases. This includes taking part in management meetings and actively participating in the day-to-day running of the community, with groups covering responsibilities like communal finances, maintenance, gardening, meals and cleaning. The scheme's limited company is run by directors (resident volunteers) on rotating two-year terms. While the members have a range of skills they contribute to the project, they also contract out for work as and when necessary.

All decision making is by consensus in regular and annual (AGM) meetings. In addition to the regular management meetings (called General Meetings and now held over Zoom) dedicated to running the community and other community building elements, residents communicate informally using WhatsApp. Since the pandemic started, they have been using Slack to remotely manage their service groups and a vast range of other interest groups including among others – a wild swimming group, and a Black Lives Matter group.

The scheme's public profile

The group is very involved in outward-facing social and activism activities, and many residents are closely linked to life in the nearby village as well as Lancaster through work, volunteering and/or social connections. They regularly (pre-Covid) cooked meals for each other in the common house and in one another's homes. Their mill acts as a focal point for activities for the local community and beyond, providing workspace for local small enterprises, freelancers and artists, as well as venue hire and performance space (e.g., for a local choir, or for shows from the Edinburgh Fringe). Despite recent turnover of some of the original residents there is a continuing commitment to low-carbon living principles, while a new influx of younger residents is re-examining the group's principles and updating approaches to tenure, diversity and access.

Scheme 2: New Ground, OWCH (Older Women's CoHousing), Barnet, north London

Map 5: Location in London



Map 6: The walkable neighbourhood



New Ground, the OWCH scheme in central Barnet, north London, is the UK's first senior cohousing development. This is very much an intentional community: the 26 residents share a strong commitment to agency, self-determination and mutual support in older age.

The building, completed in 2016 on the site of a former school, is unremarkable from the street, but inside there are 25 light-filled one-, two- and three-bedroom flats that enclose a communal garden with ornamental planting and a vegetable patch. Many of the current residents worked closely with architects PTEa on the design of the overall development and of their own flats. The award-winning

design incorporates many elements designed to foster informal social interaction, including a communal laundry and a large common room just inside the front door that is used for meals, events and shared activities.



Source: Image courtesy of PTEa architects

Resident profile and eligibility

The project was initiated by a group of North London women who, inspired by hearing about cohousing in the Netherlands, decided to create a place where they could age together on their own terms. From inception to moving in the project took 18 years, and many hundreds of women took part in the group for part of that time. The group's long shared history has created strong social and personal bonds, even among those relatively new to the group.

The scheme is open to women aged 50 or over, and the current residents range in age from early 50s to over 90. All residents are members of Older Women's CoHousing. There is a small group of non-resident members--effectively a waiting list.

Development history, ownership and tenure

The main practical difficulties were finding a site (at least 11 were investigated before the current location was found) and securing planning permission, as many local authorities were concerned that an influx of older people would increase the call on their social care budgets. The OWCH women undertook extensive political outreach and lobbying to try to counter these preconceptions.

The scheme was developed by Hanover Housing Association. 17 of the OWCH flats are owned by their residents, who bought the completed units from Hanover. There are also 8 social rented units managed by the Housing for Women housing association. All residents, regardless of tenure, play an equal role in the management and life of the community.

OWCH received funding from various philanthropic sources over the years, including the Tudor Trust.

Management

Decisions about the management of the homes are made by the resident OWCH group via a monthly meeting. All residents are expected to contribute to New Ground and the life of the group in some way, and there are a number of work teams responsible for tasks such as cleaning, gardening, finance, membership, etc. Some jobs, including heavy cleaning and gardening, are handled by outside contractors.

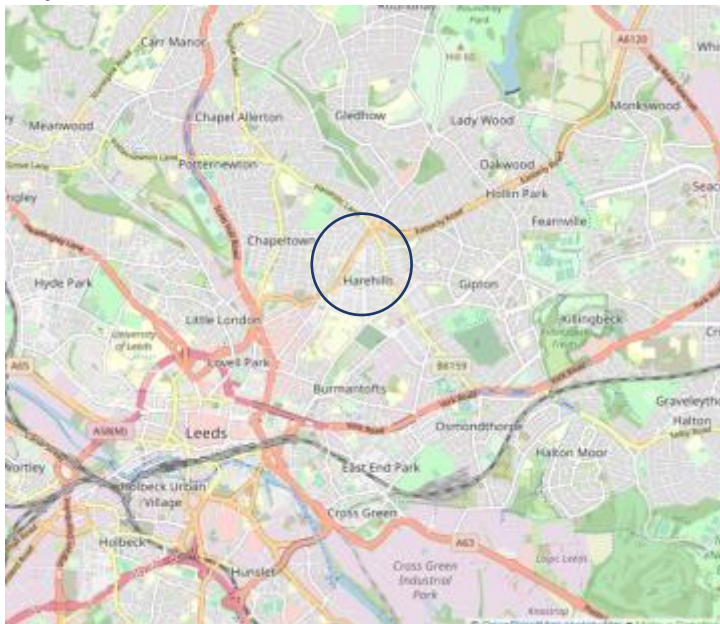
The scheme's public profile

OWCH members are active ambassadors for the cohousing concept. Their home has featured in documentaries and news programmes, and is visited by politicians, urbanists and architecture students from all over the world. Their website makes clear their view:

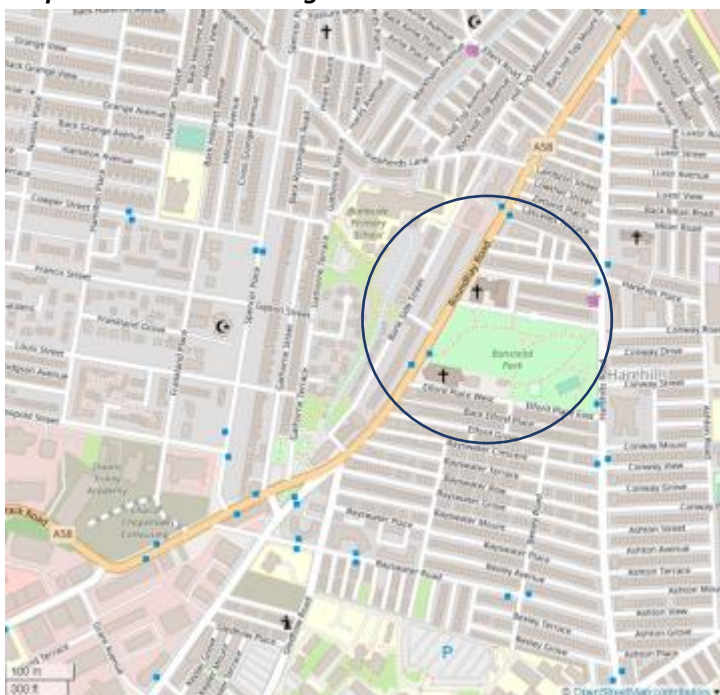
We are carving out a path for others in our age group to follow. We hope they have an easier journey than ours, now we have shown the way. The senior cohousing community could enrich the last years of many, and reduce pressures on health and care services, if local authorities, planners, policy makers and housing developers helped to remove the many obstacles society puts in its way.

Scheme 3: Tangram Housing Co-op, Leeds

Map 7: Location in Leeds



Map 8: The walkable neighbourhood



Tangram Housing Co-op in Leeds is a fully mutual cooperative in which all tenants are members and vice versa. It was founded in 1977 and consists of 28 refurbished properties, mostly terraced houses, on three streets in inner Leeds. The accommodation includes one-adult units in the same building (HMOs), three- and four-bedroom family houses and studio apartment conversions.

The properties are not easy to distinguish from other homes on the same streets. The common garden and two shared spaces (meeting room with kitchen and a small office annex) are at the back of one of

the buildings and invisible from the main road. These spaces are used for co-op meetings and social events.

The co-op does not have a specific mission statement or a target demographic, but members share a commitment to two key principles: self-management and keeping rents affordable to people on low incomes. Since the co-op's inception in 1977, the only major architectural decisions concerned the internal subdivisions of town houses into apartments and the redesign and refurbishment of the common meeting space in the 2000s.



Source: courtesy of Tangram Co-op

Resident profile and eligibility

The co-op is a registered social housing provider and accepts referrals from the local housing register, but the infrequent vacancies are usually filled through direct application and referral by existing residents. Applications by prospective tenants are managed by the admissions and allocations working group, but final decisions are taken collectively by all tenant members at the regular meetings.

The co-op currently houses about 45 residents. More than half have lived at Tangram for over a decade, and some for over 35 years. They range in age from young children to people in their late 70s, with an average around the mid-40s. Newer members tend to be younger single people; the area is possibly less appealing to families due to some incidents of anti-social behaviour. About a third of the units are currently occupied by single-person households. Until recently there was also women-only house-share.

The scheme started in 1977 as a short-life cooperative with around 15 adult members and some children, in a terrace of council-owned houses due to be demolished. The original intentional community emerged from two distinct groups: a gay men's group from London interested in communal living, and local residents looking for self-organised affordable solutions to housing needs. The resulting group formed a relationship with the local council and with the Housing Corporation, and became a tenant-management cooperative in properties leased by the council and by a local housing association.

In common with many other housing cooperatives set up in the same period, Tangram was able to buy and refurbish the dilapidated dwellings with government assistance, thanks to provisions in the 1974 Housing Act and amendments to the 1975 Rent and Subsidies Act. These for the first time included housing cooperatives as beneficiaries of central government grants and loans. Original co-op members also received technical training on acquiring and managing properties from the Cooperative Housing Agency, which had educational officers who supported new cooperatives. This agency was closed in 1979.

By 1981, Tangram's membership had increased to 28 members. The co-op registered as a social housing provider and was able to obtain a mortgage to purchase the first 17 houses from a housing association. At the same time, it managed other housing-association and short-life council properties. The process of purchasing the properties spanned several decades, and the last two houses were bought in the early 2000s. The cooperative currently owns all its properties outright and leases them at social rent through indefinite tenancies. Rent increases are set at the co-op's general meeting but must follow government regulations for social rents.

Management

All residents are expected to contribute to the operation of the scheme through the various working groups (e.g. management, maintenance, gardening, admissions and allocations). The co-op employs a part-time worker who acts as building manager and coordinates external contractors for regular required maintenance including roof repairs and gas and fire safety checks.

Decisions about the management of the homes are taken by majority vote at monthly general meetings; each member (not household) has one vote. Working groups can themselves decide on small expenditures.

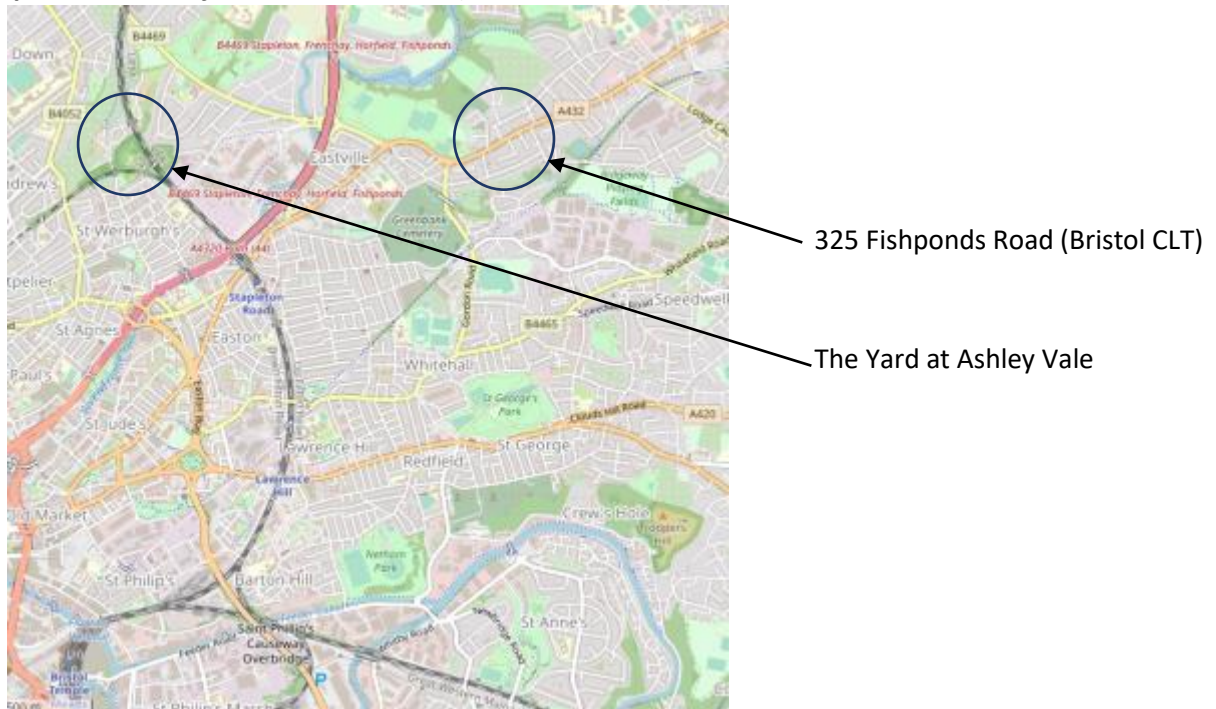
Long-term perspective

Tangram is in many ways typical of the fully mutual co-ops that developed through the management of short-life property in the mid to late 1970s. Some of its long-term residents lament the loss of the original communal ethos, but many value the close proximity of the houses, the low rents and the indefinite tenancies. Together these offer both stability and a diffuse sense of community. In the words of one long-term (37 years) tenant member,

It's a way of living where you don't have to be on the treadmill of a high salaried job just to stay where you are. So it is a loose community that's supportive of you and you, by interacting with it, support it and it supports you.

Scheme 4: 325 Fishponds Road (Bristol CLT)

Map 9: Locations of Bristol case studies (Schemes 4 and 5)



Map 10: The walkable neighbourhood



Completed in 2016 and known by its original site name as 325 Fishponds Road, this Bristol CLT development lies on a main road in a suburban area to the north-east of the centre of Bristol. The site is in a relatively central suburban part of the city, with a park immediately on its eastern boundary, though it is less well located for local urban hubs or shopping streets. The centre of Bristol however is a fairly easy half-hour bus ride away.

The development comprises 12 homes: six three-bedroom family houses and six one-bed 'duplex' flats, the latter in a converted Victorian school building. While each property has a small front garden space of its own, the housing overall is arranged very communally with all units facing onto a central shared garden, maintained by the residents.

The roughly 35 residents are a mix of young families, couples and singles, ranging in age up to their early 60s. The average is younger: the residents include 12 children from new-born to late teens.



Source: Image courtesy of Stride Treglown Architectes / Bristol CLT

Eligibility

All residents must be members of the CLT and support its objects. Those who rent their homes must be registered with Home Choice Bristol (i.e., in effect be on city's housing waiting list), and those who purchased through shared-ownership leasehold had to register with Help to Buy South (now Help to Buy, the Government scheme which offers the chance to buy a share of your home, and pay rent for the remaining share). The current residents played an active role in the design phase and contributed 'sweat equity', self-finishing their homes to offset some of the cost of buying or renting. Unlike some comparable schemes, the work was done as a team, with everyone working across all the homes. Thus although Fishponds Road is not an intentional community as such, the residents knew each other well before moving in and to some extent shared a common aim.

Ownership and tenure

The project was created by Bristol Community Land Trust (CLT), formed in 2008 by a small group of local housing campaigners. It was strongly supported by Bristol City Council, which provided the site and much of the initial funding as well as a dedicated CLT development officer for 18 months. All of the houses and one of the flats were sold as shared-equity leaseholds, and the remaining five flats are rented. The CLT retains the freehold of the site. Leasehold owners can increase their stakes or sell, but

the CLT imposes some restrictions to ensure the scheme continues to meet local housing affordability needs—for example, the CLT has eight weeks to find a purchaser if the leaseholder decides to sell their share (a model that has recently been successfully tested).

Bristol CLT is a membership organisation whose aim is to enable people, many of whom have little access to the traditional housing market, to realise their vision of building sustainable homes and creating inclusive communities. 325 Fishponds Road was the first; a second project known as Shaldon Road, intended to be cohousing, is currently under construction in partnership with United Communities, a local community-based housing association.

Relations with the wider CLH community

Bristol is a centre for community-led housing. The city has a strong history of community build and there are several ongoing projects, many with strong support from the city council as well as a network of dedicated activists and organisations. Both 325 Fishponds and Ashley Vale, our fifth case study, are well integrated in this network—for example, a resident of Ashley Vale was instrumental in setting up the CLT and in the development of Fishponds Road, and runs the CLH-enabling consultancy Ecomotive. Community Led Homes West, the CLH-enabling hub for the west of England, is hosted by BCLT. The hub has strong connections to other projects including Knowle West Media Centre’s We Can Make project, and has been instrumental in supporting CLH groups in their bids for sites under Bristol City Council’s recent CLH land disposal.

Bristol CLT is a membership organisation but the CLT’s schemes can accommodate only a minority of its members. While many joined in the hope of meeting housing need, the several-hundred-strong membership also reflects widespread local support for the CLT concept.

Scheme 5: The Yard at Ashley Vale, Bristol

Location in Bristol shown on Map 9.

Map 11: The walkable neighbourhood



The story of the Ashley Vale self-build community, known as 'The Yard' started in 1999, when a group of local residents got together to object to a development proposal. This scheme, put forward by a volume house-builder, was to build private housing on a two-acre site formerly occupied by scaffolding yard. Under the aegis of the Ashley Vale Action Group (AVAG), a non-profit community action group, the surrounding community developed its own proposals for a sustainable, self-build community housing project. The scheme has since garnered national recognition and awards for its design and community governance.

Completed in three phases, the development has 39 dwellings including custom-designed, self-build houses; self-completion bungalows; and self-completion flats. Some of the original house builders and owners, the majority of whom were first-time buyers, have since sold and moved on, but most have remained. The multigenerational community ranges from new-borns to people in their 70s and includes families, couples and single people.

Location

The Yard is situated in East Bristol, flanked to the south by the community of St Werburghs (accessed via the graffitied Mina Road tunnel under the Narrow Ways nature reserve), to the east by St Werburghs city farm, to the north by the Ashley Vale allotments, and to the west by the mainline railway from Bristol city centre. The Yard's unique, distinctive houses face onto Mina Road and Boiling Wells Lane and its bungalows, flats and community facilities front onto The Yard. The houses and bungalows each have a small garden, and all the homes share a central common garden which is maintained by the residents.



See references for source

Eligibility

AVAG bought the land in 2000 and secured planning permission in 2002. Although the scheme started as a local grassroots housing campaign and its founders were co-op members, only those able to raise their own funds could join the self-build project. When some of the original cooperative members were unable to raise funds, the project was advertised more widely. The original self-builders were all Bristol-based.

The Yard is managed according to a set of shared values centred on environmental sustainability, cooperation and collective decision-making. While incoming residents tend to share those values, there are no formal eligibility criteria for owners or renters. Some of the original self-build houses have since been sold on the open market and are regarded as desirable properties (they are known locally as 'Muesli Mansions').

Ownership, tenure and management

The original intention was for the community to be a mix of owner-occupation and social rentals. The land along The Yard where the bungalows were built was originally bought by a local housing association to provide affordable social rented accommodation for local residents. Their development did not materialise and AVAG bought the land back, then constructed the bungalows for sale and self-completion by their eventual owner-occupiers. The phase-three self-completion flats were built on the same basis. The community now consists in the main of owner-occupied dwellings, with some private rentals in units sold by the original owners.

The self-builders formed a separate entity when they bought their plots. This estate management company owns and manages the gardens and the site road under which the services run, while AVAG own and manage the community room and the three workshops. The flats in the old office block are commonhold and own their own gardens, and are also part of the EMC.

6 How and why involvement in CLH affects loneliness

Living in CLH is strongly associated with reduced loneliness. This chapter draws on online survey responses and case studies and explores how and why involvement in community-led housing reduces different types of loneliness across the life course. Self-management is shown as a significant feature that fosters active participation and wellbeing. Social loneliness is mitigated by physical (e.g. design features for social interaction) and organizational characteristics (e.g. regular meetings, shared activities). Sharing spaces and activities are balanced by the possibility of privacy; conflicts are negotiated through supportive relationships and formal and informal mechanisms. Emotional loneliness is countered by fostering meaningful relationships and 'belonging' through physical proximity, sharing similar values, a reciprocal commitment and care, looking out for and supporting each other. Mitigation of existential loneliness includes examples of self-organised community responses for CLH residents affected by life-threatening illnesses. Community-led informal and organised systems of support are shown to aid both individual life transitions (such as maternity, older age, health deterioration or the loss of a partner) and wider emergencies such as Covid-19 and flooding. The chapter discusses inclusivity as well as challenges, particularly the risk of poor tenure security and different degrees of commitment across people and over time.

Having introduced our five case-study communities, we now set out the findings from the qualitative phase of the research. The statistical analysis reported in Chapter 4 supports the idea that living in CLH is strongly associated with reduced loneliness. In this chapter we explore how and why involvement in community-led housing appears to reduce loneliness, drawing on evidence from the five in-depth case studies. The chapter also incorporates material from the free-text responses to the online survey.

The chapter is loosely structured around the three types of loneliness identified in the literature review. *Social loneliness* arises from social isolation or a deficit of social connections. *Emotional loneliness* comes from a perceived absence of meaningful relationships or a lack of sense of 'belonging'. *Existential loneliness* is where a person feels completely separate and isolated from others. We also look at other themes including CLH and loneliness across the life course; whether CLH could be suitable for more people; tenure and housing security; and whether CLH reduces loneliness in the wider neighbourhood.

In the following section, quotes¹⁶ drawn from the case studies interviews appear in blue boxes, while those taken from the online survey are in orange.

6.1 Self-management in CLH communities

As context for the discussion of CLH and loneliness, it is important to understand how most CLH communities are managed, as residents' involvement in management tasks underpins many of the loneliness effects we found. Self-management requires active input from residents, usually working

¹⁶ Some quotes are condensed. We have omitted ellipses for ease of reading. To preserve interviewees' privacy, more sensitive quotes are reported anonymously.

together. The self-management of their homes is central to everyday life in community-led housing and is key to the residents' sense of agency, participation and wellbeing.

With the exception of Fishponds Road, the case studies have broadly similar self-management structures, operating at various levels and with different degrees of formalisation. At the top there is usually a formal committee or board, where residents in rotation take on responsibility for coordination and overall management. Lancaster Cohousing, for example, has a board whose membership includes both leaseholders and tenants, while Ashley Vale has an estate management company with a board of resident-directors, responsible mainly for managing the communal areas.

Amongst our case studies, only 325 Fishponds Road is not self-managed. The CLT, which developed the homes in partnership with a local housing association, stands largely separate from the residents as a group. One current resident was formerly a CLT board member but has since stepped down. While the residents' work to jointly self-finish the properties entailed a formal structure of meetings and responsibilities, this ended at move-in, and the residents now meet infrequently as a group. They have full control only over the development and use of the shared garden and outdoor spaces, but the housing association (United Homes) manages the rental and shared ownership properties and the building maintenance.

In the other four groups, the board or management committees usually respond to and operate alongside regular general meetings or assemblies. In some cases, important decisions must be taken at the GM before they are enacted by the management committee.

General meetings are where we agree, come to consensus on big issues-- whether we sell houses, buy houses etc.--and decide policy. [Tangram]

Under this there are various subcommittees, also referred to as working groups or teams, that report to the management committee or board. There are generally three types of committee:

- 1) building maintenance or service committees, concerned with the upkeep of the housing stock and communal areas;
- 2) membership committees (or admissions and allocations groups) that manage the applications of new members; and
- 3) treasury, legal and financial committees, dealing with payments, contracts and other financial matters.

Self-management does not preclude the use of external contractors. In most cases, the structural upkeep is outsourced: Ashley Vale, for example, employs a paid gardener to maintain the common yard and at Tangram, a part-time building manager deals with external contractors and general administration, including organising general meetings. Generally, though, the residents themselves manage their schemes and there is an expectation that each member will join one or more subcommittees or working/service groups, often in rotation. The self-management of communal spaces and resources is key: the case-study schemes have teams covering gardening, common rooms, allotments and even car sharing, as well as groups representing different interests and social activities (see Table 4).

Table 4: Self-management and social committees/groups of case-study communities

Scheme	Lead committee	Self-management and social committees and groups		
<p>1 Lancaster CoHousing</p>	<p>General meeting Lancaster Cohousing directors</p>	<p>Service team Membership & integration team Community governance team Information service team Finance team Land service team</p>	<p>Buildings service team Common areas service team Travel service team Wild swimming and river group Science fiction book club Wellbeing team Car club (car sharing)</p>	<p>Allotments Art & craft club Black Lives Matter group General book club Good Food Coop Covid-19 team Running group</p>
<p>2 OWCH</p>	<p>Management committee</p>	<p>Membership team Buildings team Finance team Treasurer Service charges team Communications team</p>	<p>Fire alarm team (health & safety) Consensus decision-making team Equality, diversity & inclusion team Covid team Gardening team Film group</p>	<p>Health and wellbeing group Board play games group Yoga group Play-reading group Theatre review group</p>
<p>3 Tangram Co-op</p>	<p>Management committee</p>	<p>Secretary group Complaints and mediation group Treasury group</p>	<p>Communal area and garden group Maintenance group Admissions and allocations group Participation group</p>	<p>Mother and toddler group (in the past, discontinued) Covid mutual aid group (not limited to the co-op)</p>
<p>4 325 Fishponds Road / Bristol CLT</p>	<p>Membership committee</p>	<p>No formal subgroups; the upkeep of the buildings is managed by others on behalf of the CLT. An informal group has developed and manages the shared garden.</p>		
<p>5 Ashley Vale</p>	<p>Estate management company with directors</p>	<p>Management meet-ups about maintenance of shared spaces (e.g. the communal climbing frame, yard, green spaces) Treasurer</p>		

Self-management extends to facilitation of social processes. Specific working groups on participation and governance look after the formal and informal social infrastructures that are key to the functioning of the CLH (Jarvis, 2015a). Lancaster Cohousing, for example, has a community governance team that works on processes for collective decision-making, including practical solutions like a buddy system for new arrivals into the CLH. Similarly, Tangram has a participation group, ‘who are trying to encourage people to make policies, to ensure that people do take part’ (Tangram), and OWCH has a consensus group to improve decision-making mechanisms and ‘find processes by which everyone can be involved’ (OWCH).

In terms of loneliness, one of the key features of CLH is that socialising and wellbeing are often actively managed. Schemes have working groups dedicated to health and wellbeing, or to communal activities such as regular common meals, culture and exercise (e.g., walking, wild swimming, yoga, tai chi). Some also have groups dealing with equality, diversity and inclusion.

6.2 Features of CLH that can counter social loneliness

Many of the physical and organisational characteristics of CLH seem to militate against social loneliness, which arises from social isolation or a deficit of social connections. Some of these characteristics are intentional (e.g., design features that encourage social interaction); in other cases, the social interaction is a positive side effect of the way these schemes are organised (e.g., regular meetings or task groups).

Many residents moved to CLH in search of close community—in some cases of a kind they had never experienced before. Some interviewees told us they had previously lived in places where they were physically or geographically isolated, or had no close connections and felt socially isolated:

I haven't been back once [to previous home]. I could get there, but I have nobody close there. The couple of people that I've kept in touch with love coming here, so that's what they do, and I've got no other reason really to go back. I don't think I've ever felt I belong to an area really. I've always had a circle of friends, some close friends, some less close, and family, (but) I've never really belonged in the area. [OWCH]

Shared activities and joint creation of community

In all the case-study schemes, residents worked and socialised together. In some places, or for some residents, these interactions were regular and formal; in others they were sporadic and informal. Interviewees said they grew to know and trust each other through these shared experiences, which often were structured around the self-management groups and activities described above. Similarly, respondents to the survey said that through taking part in CLH, they engaged regularly in activities with other residents or members. Involvement in CLH was also seen as a way of making new friends and expanding social interaction, both of which helped to prevent loneliness.

For the residents of 325 Fishponds Road, who have relatively shorter history together and perhaps less of a shared vision than a group like OWCH, working together to self-finish the properties played a strong role in shared identity and social connection:

Having the meetings (and) the different groups does actually enable people to get to know each other. You join in a group and you might not know somebody, you know that they're a member of the co-op but you don't actually personally know them, so I think it does help people get to know each other. You could probably end up becoming a friend rather than just a neighbour, through socialising, through meetings. [Lancaster]

I go to a weekly yoga class, went this morning, in the common room. I wouldn't get out to attend a yoga class regularly if it didn't come here, but I do, I'm very faithful. And there's tai-chi and other sorts of things going on and communal meals. People have parties there, there's the film night there. It's wonderful, just wonderful. And it brings us together. [OWCH]

The interaction with my neighbours either side is entirely different from living in a building of 20-something apartments where I didn't know any of my neighbours. The memory of helping my neighbour with her flooring and she helping me with mine because we'd bought similar flooring--that creates a bond. (It's not) a deep friendship, but when you've worked with somebody physically on something there's a connection that you wouldn't get in a regular flat somewhere. A history. [Bristol CLT]

The many tasks involved in creating a new community bring people together in a spirit of joint endeavour and forge working relationships that go well beyond purely social ties. OWCH has an extremely rich shared history, but for a negative reason: because it took such a long time to get the place up and running. For Ashley Vale, the original sense of community was generated through the shared experience of planning and self-building.

In all the schemes there were degrees of common history, as each had some members who had moved in relatively recently. While having a sense of shared history does serve to cement a community, newcomers are not necessarily excluded; in one case study more recent arrivals had strongly influenced the community's practices and values.

We have people who've been living here since the 80s, people whose families have grown up here, people who've lived here in the 80s, moved away and then have moved back, we've got families, three generations who've grown up here or people who live here and their children still live in the area, so we've got that kind of a core of continuity. [Tangram]

Spaces for proximity and social interaction ...

A key characteristic of many (though not all) CLH communities is the purposeful design of environments that support social interaction--both casual everyday interactions and more formal socialising--while maintaining privacy. The cohousing communities in particular featured common spaces designed for community use, as well as design features intended to increase social interaction. Some other case-study groups had similar facilities (e.g., Tangram's common room).

In communities where residents worked with architects in the co-design process, one of the main aims was often to achieve a balance between communal and individual spaces. At Lancaster, for example, the kitchens all look out onto the narrow pedestrian street, where children play and residents chat.

The public/private split is often not ready-made but achieved over time, as residents learn what works best for their everyday environments and enact informal DIY tweaks as a response. At OWCH, for example, some residents draw or open their shades to signal their willingness to socialise, and plant pots are used to demarcate private outdoor areas.

Apart from Fishponds Road, all the case-study schemes had some shared internal spaces. The thoughtful location of shared facilities generated regular spontaneous interactions.

(We have a) single point of entry, (which is) critical. (It's) very, very important, that, because when you pass the noticeboard, you probably see people. [OWCH]

We don't have washing machines in our house and the post boxes are all in the store in the common house, so for those kind of essential services you have to leave your house and all come to the same place. That's a way to see people from the rest of the project. And then we're on an old mill building site [and] we always have events going on for the community. [Lancaster]

We have a communal room which we've spent a lot of money on recently. So that's great, we have fires and events, parties, people use it for their birthday party. [Tangram]

Since I retired, I've decided I would go and read a book for an hour outside the common house every day, just so that I would get some random connections. [Lancaster]

Shared outdoor spaces were also a feature of all the case-study schemes. These were especially valued at Fishponds Road, where there was no shared internal space (a source of regret to some).

The main social place for families and friends would be the green--as you walk through The Yard you don't even know it's there. There's a centre which all the houses back onto, (and) part of the pleasure with a young family here is being able to know that your child is going to be safe playing on the green within a group of kids they already know from The Yard. [Ashley Vale]

We have an outdoor fire space and we have a fire at the solstice, things like that, (but) for me, having come from cohousing, I always struggle with the lack of a shared indoor space that felt neutral. [Fishpond Road]

...and the possibility of privacy

There is an understandable assumption that those who choose to live in CLH communities are naturally sociable people, but many of our research subjects refuted this. Some characterised themselves as introverted, and said they valued CLH because it offered occasions for spontaneous social interactions and support. Some said they occasionally preferred not to interact with fellow residents and valued their private space and the choice to disengage periodically. This is important, as pressure to be permanently sociable may reinforce a sense of emotional or existential loneliness.

It's not that everybody is engaged all the time, you can shut your door and you don't have to talk to other people. It's not like it's a big commune or something, so you do have as much privacy as you want. There is a lot of activity on the streets, so if you just stop and chat to people then you get to know folk and if you don't want to talk to them then you can choose not to. [Ashley Vale]

If people choose to be in their flats all day most days, then so be it. So all this lovely socialising doesn't suit everybody. You don't have to be a social butterfly to live in cohousing, you don't. [OWCH]

I lived in shared houses all my life until I moved here, so I wouldn't particularly want to move back into a shared house. I think I've got the best of both worlds. I've got a number of friends around me and I also can lock my door. [Tangram]

Introverts like cohousing because it's somewhere where they can relate to people and they know people, they can get to know them. It doesn't feel so threatening as a normal street, say. [Lancaster]

Supportive relationships within groups

Interviewees said a striking feature of living in CLH was the way that supportive relationships developed within schemes over time. Such relationships do not spring up spontaneously; according to one Lancaster resident they are the result of 'a slow build-up of a history of kindness.'

Those little connections, especially a shared project, doing something together, it feels very different from a kind of classic middle-class street with hedges and fences and front doors where you mark the separation. Actually, the very thought of going into a house on a street and shutting the door makes me feel I don't ever want to do that again. [Lancaster]

Not all members of CLH schemes form friendships with each other, and indeed it was clear that in some of the case studies, certain members did not like each other personally. Many interviewees said close friendships with fellow residents were a bonus but were not necessary for the healthy functioning of their communities.

I don't have to be best friends with all these ladies, but I've known them now for twenty years. We have a commitment to look out for each other so I will do the same. Wouldn't matter whether I like them particularly or not. It's bleeding obvious, it's the way to live really. [OWCH]

I have a life but it's not here. I wouldn't come here for my friends, I come here for structure, for support, interesting things. I don't have best friends here. [Lancaster]

Formal ways of negotiating conflict

As in any tight-knit community, conflicts can arise in CLH schemes. Many groups have formal processes for mediating conflict, which sets these places apart from other forms of housing. This approach to problems and consensus building requires an openness to experimentation.

If you can't sort your issues out with your neighbour, you go through the Complaints and Mediation [group] or you go through the Management Committee. In some housing estates you get people that are frightened to go out into their own garden because the next-door neighbour is so abusive. And I think in community-led environments that doesn't happen as much. It's a way of educating people, isn't it?
[Tangram]

(Resolving conflict requires) mental flexibility or willingness to move towards each other with a kind of curiosity if somebody's got a different position or view from you; a capacity to see conflict as something positive, or not as something to be avoided anyway. And a kind of slight lightness, a kind of, 'Let's try this, this is all a big experiment, let's see what happens. Oh, didn't work? Right, okay, let's try something else.'
[Lancaster]

6.3 Features of CLH that counter emotional loneliness

Emotional loneliness arises from a perceived absence of meaningful relationships or a lack of sense of 'belonging'. Our qualitative research suggests that sense of belonging is one of the strengths of many CLH communities. Just knowing that one is surrounded by familiar people—even at a Covid-safe distance—can be a powerful antidote to loneliness.

Knowing others are around

Many survey respondents said they liked knowing there was 'someone there', both in terms of physical proximity and reciprocal commitment and care. This knowledge was valuable both in everyday life and in difficult personal moments of emotional loneliness.

Having 25 neighbours all of whom I know well and all of whom (like myself) have agreed to be mutually supportive to each other means that loneliness is not an issue. [CLH resident]

There is always someone to call on if I need company. I have day-to-day contact with people just by walking down my street. The problems for me are more about sometimes needing to get away from people, but cohousing enables that to happen. [CLH resident]

The case studies reinforced the importance of knowing there was always someone around for a chat, a coffee, or just to say hello to.

I think that's an antidote to loneliness, just the knowledge that you know who lives either side, and that you can just have a nice conversation about the sunset or what we're growing in our gardens. It doesn't have to be a really deep conversation about anything political or even about Covid, but just a nice interaction. (That) is in itself very comforting. [Fishponds Road]

I definitely do feel very lonely at times and I do feel that the community alleviates a lot of that. I just need to step outside the door and I'm surrounded by people that I not only know but have had some experiences with. [Ashley Vale]

Any time I want to hang out with somebody there's somebody to hang out with, or somebody to call or somebody to have come round and sit on the terrace and have a socially distanced coffee or whatever. [Lancaster]

Shared purpose and values

Survey respondents and case-study interviewees agreed that taking part in CLH could help build a sense of belonging, purpose and connectedness through shared values, and said this shared ethos was valuable in times of crisis like Covid. Amongst our case studies, the two cohousing schemes had written expressions of their values and ethos, which all members were expected to subscribe to. But even in schemes without explicit values statements, residents felt they were united by a largely shared worldview. This was seen as generally positive, though some interviewees observed that it could lead to the exclusion or ostracization of residents who had nonconforming views or different lifestyles. Values may have to be revisited as new people join.

Because we all agreed these fundamental values, there's a bedrock of trust here which we wouldn't find anywhere else. [OWCH]

I was into communal living, I was into those ideas of the 70s and whatever, of a greener, a more sustainable, a more friendly (lifestyle), and those ideas have carried me through and I've stopped with the co-op. I feel while occasionally it's been bad for me, on balance it's been really good for me. That's been my life support. [Tangram]

Looking out for other members

In our case-study fieldwork, we heard of many examples of mutual aid, ranging from support for those with serious medical conditions to lending a hand with DIY. These interactions can reduce loneliness for both the recipients of aid, and those who offer it. For some, it was as important to know that help was there if needed in the future.

Given the age profile of its residents, OWCH has spent much time considering the question of how much support residents can expect to receive from fellow members with social care and medical needs. OWCH has a formal protocol on mutual help and some of the other groups have recognised they need to think about this, particularly in light of Covid.

I just moved to this flat from another one and over the week I painted the flat and moved my stuff and somebody brought me dinner every single night. They were like, 'You need this!' I'm like, 'Ooh yes.' So that's so nice. [Tangram]

Unlike some of the senior cohousings which really lay out how we help each other or what the boundaries are for that, this place doesn't have that, which can be very challenging especially when somebody needs extra help because we haven't talked about those things yet. [Lancaster]

There's a sense of security here, just knowing that you can just literally put your message on WhatsApp or just knock on somebody's door if you're struggling with something. It's knowing things are there even if you don't use them but just if you needed it. [Fishponds Road]

6.4 How CLH affects existential loneliness

Existential loneliness is when a person feels completely separate and isolated from others, perhaps because of serious trauma or a life-threatening illness. The evidence we have for the impact of community-led housing on existential loneliness is less strong than for that on social loneliness and emotional loneliness. Nevertheless, we can infer something of the potential of community-led housing in this regard through residents' reflections on how they have been supported or given support to others through particularly challenging times.

It was very nice just to lie on the sofa when I was doing chemo and listen to (fellow residents) chattering away outside. I never felt lonely. There's no way I could have survived if I'd been in my (previous) flat. [Group name withheld]

(The group has) had the experience of somebody getting cancer and dying, that's the first one, and they did it really well. They formed a little working group around this person and supported him and they kept him in his own flat till about ten days before he died, and he transferred to a hospice and the people at the hospice said, 'How on earth have you managed this up till now? He's so ill.' They were very impressed. We're learning all the time. [Group name withheld]

(My partner) had a heart attack four years ago, and the community was just brilliant. I remember going to see him in hospital, coming back late in the evening in a bit of a state of shock and there was just a bowl of soup sitting on my windowsill from one of my neighbours—'Just thought you might need this.' And someone drove me to pick him up when he was discharged, so when there is a crisis people are fantastic. [Group name withheld]

6.5 CLH and loneliness across the life course

Loneliness is often thought mainly to affect older people, but scholars of loneliness say it can occur at any stage in life, and recent research has found a worrying increase in loneliness amongst younger

people. All of the case studies except for OWCH are intergenerational, so we were hoping to be able to explore the effects of involvement in CLH for people of different ages. However, we found it challenging to recruit research participants in their teens and 20s, and most of our interviewees were in their 40s or older.

For the old and the young

OWCH, which is among the best-known CLH communities, is age-exclusive. Most others are not, although the founding date of the community is often reflected in the age profile of residents. But even in OWCH the age span is almost 40 years—more than a generation. The ‘younger old’ residents there told us they drew inspiration from older members. Living in CLH may afford older people more opportunities to contribute and garner respect than many ‘ordinary’ communities.

People say to me, ‘You’re living amongst a lot of old people!’--but, you know, we’re not old people. I have to say that I find the older members of the community so inspiring and I want to be like that. [OWCH]

I’m aware that we are a group of older women, that’s what we signed up for, that’s what we are, but I don’t think we treat each other with kid gloves. We’re quite resilient, and some of the 80-year-olds are such great role models. [OWCH]

By contrast, Fishponds Road is overall a very young group (fourteen children across twelve households). While the adults interviewed painted a picture of the residents as perhaps less explicitly thinking about community bonds and mutual support, it was notable the strong role that the community played for the children.

Four (children have been) born, including mine, since we all moved in. For them, it’s like a gang, they’ve all grown up together and they all look out for each other, including [resident’s own toddler]--he toddles out to join them too. It’s an idyll really, they just roam freely around the garden here, they make camps, and the park, that’s their territory, we know they’re all fine. I wish I could’ve had a childhood like that. [Fishponds Road]

During life transitions

Research has found that periods of life transition can trigger different forms of loneliness (ONS, 2018), and some of our interviewees said they had particularly appreciated living in CLH when going through significant life changes such as maternity leave, older age, health deterioration or the loss of a partner.

When I first moved in [my young child] cried every night for six months. I wasn't alone as such, but I did feel quite lonely and isolated. But I really did get support from neighbours here. When someone asks you how you are, I felt I could actually tell them. And there was more than once I went and knocked on someone's door. Not just because there's a lot of people with young kids, but we all knew each other already, we all worked together. So it's different to just neighbours I think. [Group name withheld]

I can think of two instances when people came together after a crisis and provided a lot of support. One was a breakdown of somebody's marriage. It was pretty unpleasant but people were very supportive of her during that time. And there was a boy of 18 who committed suicide and there was a lot of support about grief and about funerals and about making it a good and positive experience to have a good memorial. [Group name withheld]

Some research participants said moving to CLH, especially when it represented a radical change of geography or living environment, led to loneliness or sadness at leaving behind families, friends or other networks. This was mostly outweighed by strong systems of support within communities, but a few respondents reported persistent loneliness or even depression.

6.6 Responding to crisis: Covid and other emergencies

Our research fieldwork began a few weeks before the first Covid-19 lockdown began. This unanticipated crisis allowed us to explore how these special communities, with their emphasis on social connection, fared during a period of enforced apartness. We hypothesised that with their shared values and well-developed self-management systems, they might be more resilient than most residential environments. We explored this working hypothesis with three qualitative, open-ended questions added to the survey on 24 March (the day after lockdown was imposed), as well as with questions and discussion during the case-study interviews.

Many of the experiences of CLH communities were of course shared by households all over the country, regardless of their housing situations. Respondents said their households' day-to-day lives had been affected by changes in employment including the sudden need to adapt living spaces to home working, but also the reduction in or even loss of work, with significant economic and social implications. Many talked about an increase in caring duties, both within the household and outside, particularly for children, older people and those who were unwell; and the distance from family members caused by enforced lockdown. Some also mentioned the changes needed to safeguard vulnerable individuals within households. In other cases, however, little change was noted as participants were workers in essential jobs.

Respondents to the online survey reported a range of responses to Covid, including suspension of some or all social activities in shared spaces, agreeing formal Covid protocols, and developing or strengthening mutual support through increased communication in person and online, shared food shopping, and responding to economic and financial issues.

Setting up systems of support

Three of the case study communities adopted formal responses to Covid. At Lancaster Cohousing, for instance, they adapted an existing system of support that grouped adjacent houses in a cluster to look out for each other, while a few Tangram members set up a Covid mutual aid group for the wider neighbourhood. OWCH formed a Covid group to guard against social isolation for members who were shielding or otherwise alone.

One of the ideas (was to) form almost internal bubbles which we would call health buddies, so each of us opted to choose two or three people to literally keep an eye open for you. Where you are in the building might have an impact on that, for example I'm with Carol and Luna and I can see both of their flats from where I live, so if the blind isn't up I know something's wrong. [OWCH]

Because of the existing infrastructure of CLH communities, respondents said they were better able to source food and other help, and that it made it easier for them to support other members who were self-isolating. These benefits flowed from communities' collective ability to self-organise and set up effective mutual aid networks. Some survey respondents said the pandemic had led to greater connection with their fellow residents as they developed forms of additional mutual support, and that the regular contact had helped mitigate the loneliness occasioned by lockdown.

(Our community is responding) very well. There are teams buying in food for those like us in self-isolation, and everyone is looking out for each other. As part of the lockdown we have sometimes played email games, such as a limerick contest to lighten the mood and help us all still feel involved. [CLH resident]

I'm very lonely but it would have been so much worse without the co-op! [CLH resident]

Case study interviewees agreed that lockdown conditions were more bearable for those living in a CLH community.

One of my neighbours is in her late 70s and more or less shielding. She just said she could stick her head out of the door or sit on the deck and talk to people...you're not isolated. You might be lonely, but I don't think you're isolated in quite the same way. [Lancaster]

Beyond their immediate communities, many also said they had set up or joined local mutual aid groups or were involved in networks with other CLH.

At the same time, the distancing and online measures put in place to respond to Covid were not universally liked or accepted, and in some cases led to conflicts or anxieties about the future of the CLH structure. In some groups, disagreements arose about what constituted a 'household' in such a community and what sort of self-isolation was required.

Replacing face-to-face with online interaction

One source of tension was the sudden shift to exclusively online communication. For the technologically less sophisticated this often represented a challenge. This could often be overcome with the support and help of neighbours, but sometimes led to isolation. In the absence of face-to-face checking in, or established wellbeing subgroups, some said they became depressed and lonely. Moreover, the sudden, if temporary, loss of everyday exchanges with fellow residents due to lockdown was perhaps felt more strongly in CLH communities than in regular neighbourhoods, precisely because residents were accustomed to unusually high levels of social interaction.

Some interviewees lamented the almost total switch to platforms like Zoom for organisational matters, saying it was onerous, disruptive and less social. In one scheme, the different tenor of online interactions had led to proposals for format changes, which raised concern around the potential loss of key governance principles like consensus decision-making.

I thought we were doing pretty well on developing our consensus decision-making (but) that is so difficult with Zoom. There's a lot more written reporting prior to the community business meeting. People are expected to have read it all, we go to the meeting on Zoom and it's just tick, tick, tick, done, done, done. I think it's a little worrying really, because there isn't that opportunity for proper discussion if you've got people clicking in, clicking out, and (saying) 'Unmute, unmute!' [OWCH]

There's a bit of a debate going on about whether we actually need these (full group) meetings or if we should make them much less formal. I would regret that because I think anything that needs to be decided that affects the community must come to the whole group; otherwise we will start getting devolved power and we were beginning to get that under lockdown. People were making decisions in small groups according to their remit, but I didn't like that at all, it's a potential loss of community and proper consensus decision-making. [OWCH]

These problems apart, virtually all survey respondents and interviewees agreed that involvement with CLH improved residents' ability to cope with the Covid-19 situation. Many of our survey respondents did not yet live in a cohousing/community-led project but were members of groups that were still planning and designing their future homes. Like the members of established communities, these prospective residents said the shift from face-to-face to online meetings disrupted the dynamics of their groups. But there were pluses: single parents said their CLH groups had set up mutual support networks and social media groups, helping them feel more connected, safer and less isolated. Some said the experience had strengthened their commitment to the CLH concept.

Since lockdown I am even more compelled to support and be supported by other humans in an 'intentional neighbourhood'. [non-resident CLH member]

6.7 Promoting inclusivity

As noted above, some CLH communities have given those otherwise excluded from living in a socially supportive environment an opportunity to create their own. Specific groups such as LGBT people may find living in CLH appealing: one interviewee described her community as a ‘sanctuary’ for her as a lesbian. Our findings belied preconceptions of self-managed communities as merely enclaves for the middle class: one scheme was notable in continuing to support members’ housing needs over the long term, including during periods of mental ill health and drug misuse. Although senior cohousing schemes like OWCH are sometimes portrayed as somewhat exclusive, they can offer independence and companionship to those who may be excluded from mainstream society, especially in very late life.

One community created new groups addressing Black Lives Matter and their own racial privilege and divides. Not all groups are equally self-reflexive on these matters, but the consensus decision-making processes that CLH communities almost invariably employ are designed to enable maximum (if imperfect) resident participation, new initiatives, changes and challenges from within over time. Their governance structures, then, can generate greater inclusion not just of residents as decision-makers, but of progressive ideas.

These forms of intentional inclusivity do not, of course, preclude exclusion. Like any community or organisation, each CLH group has its own power dynamics. While governance structures (including rotating management leads, consensus, etc.) are designed to prevent the formation of insider/outsider divisions, it is not unknown for individual members to feel left out or unrepresented in certain decisions.

6.8 Challenges

Poor tenure security

In a few of the case-study schemes, one group was particularly likely to feel like outsiders: the tenants in the private rented sector. The insecure nature of private tenancies can affect residents’ sense of belonging and commitment to the rest of the community.

You can't commit too much to an area or a community or anything because you know that it's not a permanent thing because you're renting. I wouldn't plant any vegetables in the garden because I know that I'm not going to be here in a year. I definitely can't commit to getting a pet that would relieve some of the loneliness, because as a renter you haven't got that option. It's really difficult to find accommodation if you've got an animal. [tenant renting privately, Ashley Vale]

OWCH, Tangram and Bristol CLT offer security of tenure for renters, who are usually on social tenancies. By contrast, residents of the other schemes included private renters, often younger people who were not project founders. For example, at Ashley Vale, where the original motivation was self-build rather than pursuing an egalitarian ownership model, some of the original owners had moved on and rented out their homes privately.

At Lancaster, some founder members acknowledged that private renting could be problematic for tenants and might prevent a wider diversity of residents, even if there were support and flexibility from the more permanent residents. The group is now considering buying back some of the rented homes into community ownership, mirroring the CLT or cooperative housing models.

The people renting here have a poorer quality experience of life in cohousing. They've got no real security of tenure. People are really supportive, so once you're losing the flat that you're in, somebody else will say, 'Well, you can move into this one for the next three months.' So you see these people just going up and down the street living at different places, and the people who've got properties frantically juggling to try not to lose anybody. After a while (they just decide), 'This is not sustainable, I'm off'. We've had some great young people leave the community and that's hard. [Lancaster]

Waning enthusiasm

Securing the benefits of CLH involves time, energy, commitment to working with other people and a willingness to compromise—not just at the outset but over the long term. Case-study interviews showed that over time, groups and/or individual residents could lose enthusiasm.

When I first came here all gardening was done by the residents, but it's sort of slowly fizzled out. [Ashley Vale]

I think in the early stages there was definitely a big network of people who felt quite connected. As they moved out other people came in, but that heart was never quite as big and strong, and the co-op as a whole is less cohesive than it was in the late 70s, early 80s. [Tangram]

Differing degrees of commitment

In some groups—particularly those that were not intentional communities—tensions could arise because not all residents valued community to the same degree. The quotes below, both from Fishponds Road, illustrate two approaches to the balance between affordability and community.

Many of us living here definitely value community, some of us had done community stuff before, and it felt like a conscious thing, like this is what I'm stepping into. Whereas (for) some people it was affordable housing and that's it, and that makes a bit of a dance to navigate. [Fishponds Road]

I'd been one of these serial living-in-other-people's-houses people. I don't know how many addresses I've lived in over the years, and I just desperately needed that sense of security, but I couldn't afford open market. (I was) also looking for something that had community. I'd been traipsing all over looking at shared ownership options but it was often so anonymous, and miles out from the centre. [Fishponds Road leasehold owner]

7 Wider impacts

This chapter discusses the impact of CLH (and cohousing in particular) on loneliness beyond the immediate resident community. The variety of case study locations is reflected in diverse neighbourhoods. The chapter finds that CLH communities generally engage with the surrounding areas through 1. the volunteering activities of individual CLH residents and 2. organized outreach programs and uses. Activities such as senior and intergenerational educational project, growing projects and artistic programmes can help counter social loneliness and the active role taken by CLH residents provide some indication of positive wider impact. Some of the CLH studied manage communal facilities open to the wider community, which can provide spaces and infrastructures for social connectivity for immediate neighbours and wider communities, including groups at higher risk of loneliness like young parents and older or retired people. Respondents consider that more people could benefit from CLH's offer of connections with fellow residents, co-operation, support, and sharing of care, provided they learn how to negotiate difference and deal with disagreements

7.1 CLH communities and their neighbourhoods

When discussing the impact of CLH on loneliness, the literature mostly addresses effects on existing and prospective CLH residents. One of the Department's research questions expanded this focus, asking whether the impact of CLH (and cohousing in particular) on loneliness is broader than the immediate resident community.

We explored this theme through our questionnaire and through interviews with residents and people from the immediate neighbourhoods around the CLH communities. For each case study we asked how CLH residents viewed their immediate neighbourhoods and the social connections they established with other residents and organisations; we also asked neighbourhood stakeholders for their perceptions of how the CLH communities were connected to the wider neighbourhoods. We originally planned an organic approach to recruiting neighbourhood interviewees, based on personal introductions and participant observation, but because our fieldwork was heavily impacted by Covid-19 restrictions we were only able to undertake a field visit of one of the case study sites and had to rely on online recruitment of external interviewees.

As the maps in Chapter 5 show, the surrounding neighbourhoods of the five case study sites vary enormously as they were purposely selected to include a variety of locations. Our online survey included a few questions about attitudes to 'the immediate neighbourhood around your CLH community', but for the five case studies these range from quite literally 'next-door' neighbours on densely built urban streets (Tangram Co-op, OWCH) through suburban communities on the fringes of a large city (Ashley Vale, and, to a lesser extent, 325 Fishponds Road) to a rural village (Lancaster Cohousing).

The activities of individual CLH residents

Across the survey and the case studies, respondents distinguished their own personal involvement in outside activities from organizational outreach by the group. Individually, residents volunteered in

local schools and not-for-profit organisations, organised outdoor activities, participated in community growing projects and allotments, were members of artistic and musical groups, volunteered in food banks and local migrant support groups, and were active in political parties. Many of these activities aligned with the core principles of their CLH communities. A number of Ashley Vale residents, for instance, work or volunteer in the local city farm: they run education projects for children and youth and a supported training project for vulnerable adults learning about gardening and animal care. OWCH residents volunteer in a number of senior and intergenerational cultural and educational projects, including the University of the Third Age. These kinds of activities help to counter social loneliness, and the active role taken by CLH residents provides some indication of positive wider impact.

Some of these outside activities were local but others were not. At Lancaster Cohousing, many residents were completely new to the region so began by building connections and social relations within the residential community, then with the local village and the nearby city. By contrast, OWCH members' networks and activities spread across London, as they build on the women's lives prior to joining the project.

Outreach by schemes themselves

The location and typology of the developments affect their relationships with the surrounding areas. Some schemes are virtually indistinguishable from their neighbours: for example, Tangram's homes are in existing properties which are not contiguous but spread across a few streets. One neighbour said, 'lots of people on the street don't actually know there's a co-op in the street because it really blends in.' Some Tangram members saw this as a plus, saying the co-op had a more positive effect precisely because it was knitted into the neighbourhood.

We're supposed to be integrating with the community and doing what we can to help the community become a nice place to live, where everybody's included, not just this elite little community that runs its own housing. I think that would be totally wrong. And I wouldn't have joined. [Tangram]

Even when there is a clear physical separation, especially in rural or suburban CLH such as Ashley Vale, the boundaries between CLH communities and their neighbours are often perceived as porous.

The boundaries between The Yard [i.e. the self-build development at Ashley Vale] and the wider neighbourhood are porous in some ways. The local WhatsApp group for instance includes both the new-builds but also a much older terrace of housing across the road. [Ashley Vale]

Some of our case-study communities have a formal programme of engagement with their local areas (eg Lancaster through the activities at Halton Mill), and even those that have no such structure do reach out in multiple ways. For some, like OWCH and Lancaster, this engagement began with planning consultations even before the schemes were built. Though these consultations were often fraught, they allowed members to connect with (future) neighbours over an extended period.

Several of the case-study schemes allow non-residents to use their communal spaces, either for ad hoc events or more regular activities. The Yard (Ashley Vale), for example, runs the Wild Goose Space, a community room and set of work units. The community room can be hired out by local groups such as yoga classes and bring-your-own-baby singing choirs, and those who live locally pay less than those living further away. Once a year, the space is also open to the public for the city farm's annual festival.

(For the festival) they close all the roads down here and they just open it up to stalls and lots of music and it's a big thing. The Yard are very helpful, and the Wild Goose Space at the bottom (is given) to the farm for the day so we can have the green room for the musicians. It's lovely, that's a really nice coming together of all the community. [Ashley Vale]

Similarly, Lancaster Cohousing owns and manages Halton Mill, a redeveloped water-powered mill on the banks of the River Lune. The Mill has an event space, a coworking space and a café, and is valued by Lancaster residents as a bridge to the wider neighbourhood.

If you move somewhere to go into cohousing (and) you don't have your network there already, you could end up being very internal looking, and (it) could almost turn into a gated community. The Mill has given us all, but me in particular, a kind of membrane into the outside world. [Lancaster]

(The Mill) is porous. It's not just a cohousing thing, there are non-cohousers in here, and bits of our cohousing rub off on them and bits of them rub off on us and it connects us into the rest of the wider world around us. [Lancaster]

Conclusions on neighbourhood effects

We have found that CLH reduces loneliness for those who participate in it, but the evidence for neighbourhood effects is less clear-cut. We can say that none of the case studies is completely divorced from its wider neighbourhood, and none is a gated community. The examples above demonstrate that CLH projects can provide spaces and infrastructures for social connectivity and activities for their immediate neighbours and wider communities, including individuals and groups at higher risk of loneliness like young parents and older or retired people. Access to such space is increasingly recognised as fundamental to neighbourhood cohesion (Klinenberg, 2018).

Residents of all the case-study schemes are active personally in their communities, and there are suggestions in the academic literature that CLH participants, with their deep commitment to place and community, are more likely than most to engage with their local areas. The presence of a CLH scheme could thus represent a wellspring of neighbourly human resource. Conversely, it is possible that the energies of CLH residents, especially in new schemes, are mainly directed inwards. We were able to examine these questions only superficially because of the restrictions imposed by the pandemic. We cannot say whether the presence of a CLH scheme reduces loneliness in the wider neighbourhood, but what we can say is that they add value to their local areas.

7.2 Could more people benefit from living in CLH?

In both the online survey and our interviews, we asked respondents whether living in CLH would be a good option for more people. Many respondents said yes, citing three main reasons:

- (1) CLH provided a community of affinity and a sense of belonging through shared values, and gave participants a common goal towards which they worked together
- (2) CLH participants had control of their own homes
- (3) More people could benefit from CLH's offer of connections with fellow residents, co-operation, support, and sharing of care

(Responses to 'Would living in CLH be a good option for more people?')

Yes, helps increase co-operation, mutual aid, and general interconnectedness of people.
[non-resident CLH participant]

Yes, absolutely. All of us have our own private space when we wish it, but we also come into contact with others without needing to leave the house. We share meals, we do things together in the house and garden. We pop in and out of each other's houses and exchange brief conversations. I think a lot of people would benefit from this. [CLH resident]

While respondents thought many more people could benefit from the option of CLH, it wasn't necessarily for everyone. Some said CLH was 'not for loners', due to the social interaction required.

I don't think it would suit everyone as it does involve a lot of interaction with neighbours and others may find this daunting and unwelcome. Also involvement means working to keep the community going and a pleasant place to live. For me these are not a problem and I love the involvement with others. [CLH resident]

Others stressed that CLH living required negotiating difference and dealing with disagreements—skills that some possessed but others had to learn. They mentioned boundaries and conflict, and the energy, skills and effort required to maintain long-term sociability with other people.

(CLH is suitable for people) only if they are willing to negotiate difference, compromise and be able to work with others with different values, cope with the group dynamics that are part of any non-familial cooperative environment. [CLH resident]

I think it depends. Living in a community is rich and vibrant, but it can also be challenging as you learn to make compromises and adjust to people that wouldn't typically be your 'friend'. [CLH resident]

Learning to compromise and mediate conflict was seen by many as a positive process that could be personally enriching and collectively transformational. Several respondents said residents and prospective residents had to be willing to put in work and time. Some saw CLH as a natural way for humans to live, harking back to medieval or even prehistoric communities. Others felt residents had

to overcome their instinctive or culturally specific negative reactions and learn to live more collaboratively, possibly with the help of social facilitation.

The case studies showed that the processes of collaborative decision-making were not always easy or pleasant.

(To live here people must be) willing to sit in meetings and discuss things and listen and be willing to adopt opinions, however painfully, that they didn't have to start with. You have to. You have to. You can't just do what you were going to do anyway. [OWCH]

Sometimes I think I see too much of (my neighbours), I have too many meetings, I have to read too many fucking emails, but you don't get a place like this by sitting on your arse really, you have to do some work. [OWCH]

The meetings can be quite tense, intense, and there's been a lot of problems within the co-op. The running of the co-op is never a smooth place to be, it's never straightforward, there's always somebody who doesn't agree, there's always somebody that's not happy. [Tangram]

Some case-study interviewees saw CLH as particularly suitable for single people who would otherwise be on their own. Some OWCH members chose to move to New Ground precisely because they were ageing and single, and the number of later-life cohousing groups in development suggests that this is a widespread concern. Sexuality was an intersecting factor in some cases, as CLH represented a safe haven from social stigma and exclusions (particularly in older cohorts) of LGBTQ+ people. Others highlighted its benefits for families, especially those with young children.

This co-op is ideal for people that don't want to live on their own and they want to have a bit of a community around them. [Tangram]

*I don't think [living here] would suit everyone. But it should be **available** to everyone. I think you'd have to like having a lot of kids around! There are people here without kids of their own, but everyone loves having them around, is really supportive. I don't think you'd live here if you didn't. [Fishponds Road; emphasis in original]*

8 Discussion and conclusions

This chapter brings together a discussion of the findings set out in the previous sections, structured as a response to the original research questions. Direct and indirect benefits are achieved through the interaction of multiple factors, including the physical design, the community building process, and the use of shared space. We discuss the importance of intentionality across a spectrum and of occupancy models, including day to day organization and management, and conclude that involvement CLH has a positive impact on loneliness within the resident community. Evidence of the impact of the schemes on their wider neighbourhood remains limited and deserves further investigation.

The discussion of the findings set out in the previous sections is structured as a response to the original research questions, which were:

- Does CLH (and cohousing in particular) have an impact on loneliness?
- Is this impact achieved through design/community consultation process or subsequent occupancy models and shared space (or both)? and
- Is there a broader impact for the residents, for example in participation (volunteering), health or service use;
- Is this impact broader than the immediate resident community?

CLH has a positive impact on loneliness, and other benefits

The survey results indicated that people involved in CLH (whether residents of CLH communities or those involved in other ways) were significantly less likely to feel lonely than comparable members of the population at large. Our evaluation method controlled for the possibility that members of CLH projects might be more socially engaged than average by comparing them to members of the general public who were equally involved in social and community activities. Our case studies gave us an opportunity to explore more deeply how this positive impact arises out of the different aspects and forms of community-led housing, as discussed below.

Beyond the specific theme of loneliness, one key finding of both the survey and the case studies was that CLH members had more trust in their neighbours and immediate neighbourhood, sometimes expressed as a greater sense of belonging. Evidence from our case studies suggests that this trust in neighbours (generally but not exclusively other group members) emerged over time—a ‘slow build-up of a history of kindness’ as one resident put it—creating long-term supportive relationships. It was notable that these relationships did not always need to take the form of close friendships; rather, members had a reciprocal though not necessarily explicit commitment to look out for each other, within a broader supportive structure.

At OWCH the commitment of group members was made primarily in the context of support in later life, but in other groups there we found numerous instances of support across age groups or between those sharing similar challenges, such as the emotional and practical benefits for parents raising young children (at Fishponds Road). The Covid-19 pandemic challenged groups by limiting in-person interaction and use of shared spaces, but at the same time highlighted their capacity to respond

rapidly and equitably to members' needs by building on their existing frameworks and practices of mutual support¹⁷.

CLH communities can provide a particularly supportive environment for some groups, such as LGBT people. Our findings belied preconceptions of self-managed communities as merely middle class enclaves: more than one scheme exhibited a high degree of flexibility and understanding for members experiencing periods of mental ill health or drug misuse, offering the kind of informal support that is rarely a feature of mainstream housing.

Impacts come through joint activities, the use of shared space and physical design

Broadly, we found that the most tight-knit places, where members knew and trusted each other most, performed best as supportive communities. Our case study projects were a diverse group. They were structured according to different models (cohousing, CLT, co-op) but there were other important differences as well: length of occupancy, purpose-built or existing buildings, the demographic profile of residents. In all of them we found a sense of community and trust. This sense of belonging emerged from the interaction of several factors including the use of shared space; and social and communal activities (which were not necessarily explicitly aimed at community building); and physical design. These two factors seemed to be key: not all the case studies were purpose-built or designed, but all had some shared space and engaged in joint activities.

Joint activities – including responsibility for management

In our case studies, these joint activities ranged from the hands-on practical (helping each other with self-build construction tasks) to the purely recreational (book clubs and wild-swimming groups). In several schemes, the initial residents formed strong bonds while working together in the intense phase before moving in. This created a reservoir of mutual trust that they drew on in subsequent years, even if there were no ongoing group activities.

In all the case study communities to varying extents, day-to-day organisation and management of collective assets and tasks drives a sense of community. The formality and scope of these arrangements vary, and our table at the start of Chapter 6 summarised the range of these degrees of governance for the different groups. At Tangram, OWCH and Lancaster, community life is meticulously organised with numerous permanent sub-groups and working parties in addition to their main management committees. Fishponds Road's governance arrangements are of a different nature to the other groups, in that it is managed by a local community largely separate from the community of the project's residents; at present management is largely by the former, but the scheme is in its infancy and there is potential here perhaps for a stronger resident role over time. At Ashley Vale, collective organisation is notably less intense than for the other established communities and revolves mainly around its formally legally constituted Estate Management Company, with other ad hoc working groups dealing with the management of shared space.

Shared spaces

Four of the five communities have shared internal spaces, which are fairly routinely used for social activities. In the two cohousing communities, communal spaces are a key design element, and planned

¹⁷ Our team was involved in a small follow-on study of 18 groups drawn from our main survey respondents, carried out through the summer of 2020, which further supports this argument. The study was supported by the National Institute of Healthcare Research – School of Social Care Research. A summary is available at <https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/type/What-collaborative-housing-offers-in-a-pandemic-Evidence-from-18-communities-in-England-and-Wales/>

activities revolve around them. At Tangram and Ashley Vale the shared spaces are more sporadically used but are nonetheless a focal point. The exception here is Fishponds Road, which has no common internal space. Like all our case study communities, it does have shared outdoor space however, and is notable in that the housing is purposefully arranged so as to entirely face onto this garden as a communal focus, but also that the garden is the main access and circulation route to the homes. This space has been a focal point for the community particularly during the Covid lockdowns and seems to play a key role in supporting the ‘community of children’ noted earlier.

Design for social interaction

Purposeful design is not the only way to foster social interaction—tight social bonds can form without it—but it does seem to improve the chances. Spaces such as the common room at OWCH or the pedestrian street at Lancaster were specifically intended as pleasant places for chance encounters and shared activities, and residents told us they work very well. Some pro-social design interventions are subtle: the width of corridors, the placement of seating and the arrangement of doors can all affect the likelihood of spontaneous interaction. Schemes where social interaction was *not* part of the original design can also perform well, and some very successful places are simply serendipitous accidents. Perhaps more common, though, is a situation like Tangram’s, where the common garden and community room are inconveniently located for some of the residents. Although they are formally shared resources for the co-op as a whole, they are in fact used mostly by those with easiest physical access to them.

Intentionality

The literature on CLH typically considers these various elements in the context of intentionality, i.e. the extent to which a given community explicitly sets out to be a mutually supportive community from its inception. Our case studies represented a spectrum of intentionality. Cohousing groups such as OWCH and Lancaster espouse community as an overarching value and emphasise it in their physical design. OWCH members are clear that in joining the community they want to share some parts of their lives, and are committed to mutual support as they age.

But intentionality is not a prerequisite for a sense of community, our research showed. We also found significant evidence of social connection, belonging, friendship and support among residents of schemes that were not intentional communities. 325 Fishponds Road, for instance, while not having the mutual commitment that exists at OWCH, was especially striking as a supportive environment for the many children who live there, and for the sense of community and sharing of childcare from which their parents benefit. At Tangram, the long history that many members have in common has contributed to an ethos of inclusivity and social connection. Ashley Vale was perhaps the least cohesive scheme, and its residents have no social commitments to each other beyond the original ethos of self-building homes. It works well as a friendly neighbourhood, but the other case-study schemes—and particularly the cohousing communities—seem to be more successful in directly addressing social isolation for their members.

Involvement in a demanding joint endeavour can forge strong connections. At both Bristol schemes, fending off commercial development and the process of self-building and self-finishing created a durable sense of community among founder members. For the first set of residents at Fishponds Road, jointly self-finishing their homes has clearly been an ongoing source of community and mutual support. At Ashley Vale, those who arrived after the homes were built, including recent joiners, also support and partake in the ongoing spirit of self-sufficiency and mutual aid that came from original self-build ethos, but there is some evidence that those who came later into the community may feel

somewhat more tangential to it. That seemed to be particularly the case among those who were renting privately and who, until recently, were not permitted to participate in its key decision-making forum.

At Tangram, the strong communal ethos typical of the cooperative movement at the time of its founding in the 1970s has perhaps given way to a looser sense of community. This is based on ongoing resident responsibility for management and maintenance, and underpinned by the equality of tenure and sense of housing security that its residents enjoy.

There is clearly a temporal aspect here. In all communities, the common aims or values that bring a group together might fade over time as members grow older, or move on, especially in the case of groups such as Tangram that were dominated at an early stage by young families. Conversely, a group might equally develop or rediscover its spirit of community over time: the Covid pandemic had a positive effect for some groups in this regard.

So do the beneficial effects of CLH come through the design and community consultation process, or through subsequent occupancy models and shared space, or both? We found that all these elements contribute. Design and community consultation can be an intense period that galvanises founder members into a cohesive group; the challenge is to sustain this sense of community over time, and to incorporate new residents who were not part of the birth of the scheme. There are many ways in which senses of internal community are created or arise – through physical design, through social design (explicit values enshrined in formal policies and governance arrangements) and through social processes (housing activism and self-building, but also exercising, eating and playing together). All contribute to creating the sense of belonging that protects residents against loneliness.

Effects on use of health or other services not assessed

The brief asked whether involvement in CLH affects members' use of health or other public services. Because of the restrictions imposed by the pandemic we were unable to address this question in the research. It has long been posited that those living in a mutually supportive community, especially in older age, could be less likely to require formal social care services. The effect of living in CLH on demand for social care services is the subject of a new 30-month research project led by Prof West and funded by the National Institute for Health Research School for Social Care Research.

Volunteering and neighbourhood connections confer benefits in both directions

We were unable to assess the impact of CLH schemes *on loneliness* in surrounding neighbourhoods, as our original research plan had to be modified due to Covid. We can, however, comment on the general impacts of CLH communities on their surroundings, and on resident engagement through volunteering.

The impact of the schemes on their wider neighbourhoods should not be considered as a simple matter of a one-way benefit. Our case studies showed a wide range of local ties, degrees of embeddedness and interactions with the wider community, with some projects arising out of an existing neighbourhood, others whose members have come from elsewhere and have built local connections. The housing scheme at 325 Fishponds Road is part and parcel of its wider neighbourhood, but also a part of the CLT that represents a wider grassroots network across the city. Through its sheer physical situation, Ashley Vale is very much embedded in and continuous with its neighbouring community. Residents are also very involved in other community projects, including other CLH communities (indeed there are strong connections with Bristol CLT including the Fishponds Road project) and the neighbouring city farm and community woodland.

Yet it was clear that knowledge of and affinity with the wider neighbourhood was common to many residents, and seemed likely to play a role in protecting residents against loneliness: many of those we interviewed said local ties outside their CLH communities were important and valuable to them. Lancaster Cohousing is intentional in its efforts to connect with the wider community of Lancaster (from which it is actually geographically quite separate) through its low-cost community hub, Halton Mill. OWCH, by contrast, is arguably more internally focussed, although individually its residents are active volunteers in the immediate neighbourhood and beyond. It does have a broad membership focused on future resident recruitment, and makes considerable efforts to nurture other cohousing communities, but does not evince the strong ties to the immediate neighbourhood that are evident in Lancaster Co-housing. Tangram, likewise, reaches its wider neighbourhood through the individual efforts of its residents rather than by dint of any collective intention; in fact its residents consider themselves a part of that wider community rather than as representatives of the co-op.

The limited evidence we were able to gather suggests that surrounding neighbourhoods value having CLH communities in their midst, but the nature, strength and reach of these positive ripple effects, and how they might be extended and strengthened, are topics that deserve further investigation.

Conclusion

This study provides statistical and qualitative evidence of the effect on loneliness of housing developments that provide increased social connectivity. Our findings show that participation in Community-Led Housing (CLH) schemes has a positive impact on loneliness: individuals involved in CLH, whether residents of CLH communities or not, are significantly less likely to feel lonely than similar members of the general public. These benefits are an outcome of the interaction of the main features of CLH: joint activities and responsibilities, shared space, and physical design. Aside from reducing loneliness, these features provide other benefits to members. How CLH groups are embedded in their wider neighbourhoods and the potential benefits to both is a topic that deserves further investigation.

It should be emphasized that our findings relate to projects of a size that *feel* like a single neighbourhood and community, i.e. up to around 50 households. While there are other much larger organisations such as tenant management organisations that may meet some definitions of community-led housing, they are unlikely to be relevant in this context.

9 Recommendations

The UK Government recognises that loneliness is a key societal challenge, with the need to tackle loneliness an even more urgent task in the post-pandemic recovery. It is notable that the recent APPG Loneliness Inquiry (2021), in recognising the need for targeted interventions to tackle the short- and long-term social impacts of Covid-19, sees housing as a key site of intervention: recommendations include improving the design of housing developments and neighbourhoods to promote and increase social connections (APPG on Loneliness, 2021).

Our study has provided statistical and qualitative evidence that CLH communities present wellbeing benefits in terms of reducing loneliness for the individuals involved, but also may have beneficial effects for wider neighbourhoods. We have identified several CLH features that contribute to a reduction of loneliness including self-management, shared spaces, working and socialising together, design that encourages social interaction, tenure security and a clear community identity. On the basis of this evidence, our findings strengthen the case for greater policy support to widen access to community-led housing.

This report recommends the following actions:

1 Support resident control over management and decision-making

We concluded that CLH resident involvement in self-management and decision-making contributes to the reduction of loneliness within communities, and therefore recommend that this model be supported through training. Involvement in CLH management tasks is central to everyday life and underpins positive effects on loneliness by increasing residents' sense of agency, belonging and wellbeing. The existence of solid organisational infrastructures has proved central to formal and informal support at times of crisis, such as during lockdown periods. CLH schemes at formation stage should therefore be supported through training that should include management techniques, approaches to decision-making and mediation of disagreements and conflicts.

2 Promote the design of spaces for social interaction

We found that shared spaces (indoor and outdoor) are central to both organised and casual social interactions in CLH communities. Well-maintained and designed shared spaces provide both physical and social infrastructures for alleviating social loneliness and for supporting wider outreach and local embeddedness. We recommend support for the inclusion, careful design and maintenance of different shared spaces (both internal and external) in all new CLH schemes, including supporting co-operatives and community land trusts to consider this aspect when planning new developments.

3 Help CLH communities that want to provide facilities for neighbourhood use

We found that many CLH communities allow neighbours to use their gardens or common rooms for classes, performances, meetings and other events. These spaces knit CLH communities into their surroundings and can be ideal venues for the kinds of activities known to forestall loneliness. We recommend that CLH communities be encouraged and supported to provide spaces for neighbourhood use. This should not, however, be a requirement--communities themselves must decide how much access to offer.

4 Support efforts to improve the data nationally on CLH

Across the country, we estimate that there are currently between 9,500 and 40,000 residents in the various types of CLH communities. Decisions about the sector should be based on good evidence, but the quality of data about these schemes is currently poor. The UK CLT Network is now compiling and maintaining data on behalf of Community Led Homes, but at the time of writing there is no specific funding stream available to maintain this.

In order to form an accurate picture of the sector, the government should continue to support efforts to improve data about existing communities and groups. This would help the government and stakeholders better understand who is currently benefiting from these housing typologies, and identify underserved locations and demographics that can inform future development opportunities.

5 Promote inclusivity

We found that involvement with CLH can ameliorate or prevent many types of loneliness for people at different life stages. Many more could benefit from CLH if it were a realistic housing option, accessible to a wider range of individuals and communities. Moreover, the risk of social isolation and loneliness can be compounded by origin, gender and sexual identities, national and international migration, economic conditions and different abilities. DLUHC should investigate barriers facing underserved demographics and work with CLH schemes and the wider sector to devise strategies to increase inclusivity.

6 Encourage and support tenure security

CLH schemes in England operate under different tenure and ownership models, and wholly private schemes often have high financial costs of entry. Belonging and participation are key factors in loneliness reduction, but we found that lack of tenure security could weaken the sense of belonging and participation, particularly for private tenants, putting them at higher risk of loneliness and isolation. DLUHC should identify and support CLH models that ensure equal security of tenure, across both home-ownership and rental.

7 Adapt CLH features for existing housing, and non-CLH new-build schemes

Even if CLH were to be scaled up considerably, it would be available only to a small minority of the population. But existing CLH schemes can be seen as incubators for loneliness prevention strategies that could serve as examples for the wider housing sector. DLUHC should investigate how some of CLH's beneficial features – such as self-management, design that encourages social interaction, shared spaces and tenure security – could be incorporated into both existing housing developments and neighbourhoods, and also into new-build schemes. Many housing providers and local authorities are interested in exploring ways of doing this. Action research with pilot schemes should be considered, based on existing and proposed neighbourhoods and housing developments that are of a comparable size to the CLH schemes, i.e. no greater than 50 households.

8 Reinvigorate targeted funding streams to make CLH options more widely available

Although in England, CLH residents currently make up less than one-tenth of one percent of the population, experience elsewhere suggests that the model is scalable: in Denmark more than 1% of the population are estimated to live in collaborative housing. Interest in living in CLH is high and growing, but many people who would benefit are unable to access it because it requires a high investment of time and, often, money. In recent years the Community Housing Fund (£163 million to 2020) was key to scaling up community-led housing through creating a pipeline of CLH schemes. This fund ended on 31 March 2020 outside London and was renewed at a much smaller same scale, with £4 million announced for revenue support in 2021/22.

Government funding would help groups, communities and the constituent organisations of Community Led Homes to enact our recommendations. Long-term sustainable capital funding is essential for groups to plan and deliver schemes that by their nature need continuity of funding. We recommend DLUHC investigate the scope for reinvigorating targeted funding streams, whether through the Community Housing Fund or other avenues. The lasting success of the co-operative housing sector (including Tangram), which was supported by public funding in decades past, offers a precedent for what can be achieved.

Sources of information about case-study schemes

Scheme 1: Lancaster Cohousing

- <https://www.lancastercohousing.org.uk/>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rWok6UEIsVI>
- <https://selfbuildportal.org.uk/case-studies/lancaster-cohousing-project/>
- Photo source: <https://www.houseplanninghelp.com/hph028-how-cohousing-helps-build-a-community-with-mark-westcombe-from-lancaster-cohousing/>

Scheme 2: OWCH

- <https://www.owch.org.uk/>
- Fernández Arrigoitia, M. and West, K. (2020) 'Interdependence, commitment, learning and love. The case of the UK's first older women's cohousing community.' *Ageing and Society*: doi:10.1017/S0144686X19001673

Scheme 3: Tangram Co-op

- Tangram Housing <http://www.tangramhousing.co.uk/>

Scheme 4: 325 Fishponds Road (Bristol CLT)

- <https://www.bristolclt.co.uk/fishponds-rd>
- <https://bristolclt.wordpress.com/current-bclt-location-options/>
- <https://stridetreglown.com/projects/325-fishponds-road/>

Scheme 5: The Yard at Ashley Vale, Bristol

- <https://www.academyofurbanism.org.uk/ashley-vale/>
- <https://clarenasharchitecture.co.uk/ashley-vale-bristol/>
- <https://selfbuildportal.org.uk/case-studies/ashley-vale/>
- Carrie Hitchcock (2013) *The Story of the Yard. Building a Community*. Tangent Books
- Photo source: <https://www.houseplanninghelp.com/hph077-inspiration-as-a-big-developer-loses-out-on-a-plot-to-a-local-group-with-jackson-moulding-from-ashley-vale/>

The research team

Each member of the interdisciplinary project team has a longstanding interest in community-led housing, and they have for some time worked collaboratively with each other in the field: from designing mixed methods projects, carrying out ethnographic field work and facilitating co-housing workshops, to organising and presenting multi-stakeholder events nationally and internationally. Incrementally, and since 2011, each has brought their unique expertise in housing, economics, sociology, geography, gender studies, social policy and gerontology to develop a far-reaching and on-going set of research and practice-based projects. The team is invested in generating longitudinal data and cross-disciplinary analysis that can deepen and improve our understanding of CLH and its potential for society.

Kath Scanlon, Distinguished Policy Fellow, LSE London

Kath, an economist and planner, is a career researcher at the London School of Economics. Her work is grounded in economics but also draws on techniques and perspectives from other disciplines including geography and sociology, and aims at improving the evidence base for policy decisions at national or local level. She has a longstanding interest in cohousing and other types of community-led housing, carrying out seven years of research into the attempt to establish a cohousing community in southeast London. She has conducted post-occupancy evaluations of a number of major housing developments in London. A longtime collaborator of the Council of Europe Development Bank, she helped develop their framework for evaluating projects to improve housing for migrants and vulnerable groups.

Jim Hudson, Research Associate, LSE London

Jim is a social researcher whose work focuses on community led housing and ageing, and who recently completed a PhD that examined the social dimensions of cohousing projects established by groups of older people in Berlin. Prior to academia, he lived in Berlin for several years, running a business but also writing about the city's housing architecture. In an earlier career, Jim worked for more than a decade for various architecture and building consultancy practices, primarily on social housing and public sector regeneration programmes across London. Most recently, he co-authored a report on the benefits of cohousing, which took a project in Bridport, Dorset, as a case study.

Melissa Fernández Arrigoitia, Lecturer in Urban Futures, Sociology Department, Lancaster University

Melissa is an urban sociologist focusing on issues of housing transformations and home futures. Her work has looked at the destruction of social housing across the global North and South, resident-led activism and the production of alternatives through models like cohousing. She's carried out a range of research projects looking at the social and material development of cohousing groups in London, at the professionalisation of the sector transnationally, and at the communal and interpersonal meaning and relations of living in a new scheme— including a focus on the gendered and age dimensions that run through these. Relevant publications can be accessed here.

Mara Ferreri, Vice Chancellor's Research Fellow, Department of Geography and Environmental Sciences, Northumbria University

After a PhD in Geography from Queen Mary University of London, she held a Marie Curie Postdoctoral Research Fellowship at the Autonomous University of Barcelona where she coordinated the *Commoning Housing* project (commoninghousing.net) on emerging community-led housing in Catalonia. Her work has been published in international journals such as *City, cultural geographies, Urban Studies* and *Geoforum*. She recently co-authored the comparative report 'International policies to develop user-led cooperative housing' (LaDinamo, 2019).

Professor Karen West, School for Policy Studies, Bristol University

Karen is a professor in social policy and ageing and has a broad background in public and social policy. The focus of her work for the last twelve years has been on ageing, social care and later life housing. She has carried out many projects on these themes, including research on local community support services for older people, extra care housing and support, housing-based bereavement support and, most recently, the co-housing model and its suitability and relevance to later life. She is also a Senior Fellow of the National Institute of Health's School for Social Care Research (SSCR). She is leading on a further project on collaborative housing and social care innovation, which explores the potential of collaborative housing to support social care users and to prevent the need for social care intervention. This project also involves members of the community-led housing and loneliness team.

Chihiro Udagawa, LSE London

Chihiro has been carrying out quantitative analyses of UK housing issues for several years, including micro-simulations for local housing policy evaluations and tenure projections for the next few decades in the national policy planning context. His econometric examinations are often on affordable housing issues (both for purchase and for rent) and draw on big datasets as well as information from various national surveys including the English Housing Survey, Family Resources Survey and Community Life Survey.