

**Islington Park Street Community: a model for  
alternative housing in London**



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## Headlines

- **Islington Park Street Community (IPS) is a long-established mixed-needs housing that provides a mutually supportive permanent home for people with mixed backgrounds, needs and abilities.**
- **IPS is financially and socially self-managed with a robust decision-making protocol and operates a shared resources model that offers community, health and environmental benefits. Though it originated in the 1970s, its approach is consistent with the current political agenda in terms of community self-determination, voluntary action and the integration of vulnerable and differently abled people.**
- **Islington Park Street Community provides a model that could help those facing mental or physical challenges to sustain healthy independent living via mutual support. Housing associations should be educated in this approach.**
- **Public and private financial support should be sought to support this innovative, alternative form of community and to allow affordable mixed needs communities and neighborhoods to continue to thrive in London's city centre.**
- **IPS could be seen as a possible model for the effective and low cost reuse of obsolete owned sheltered housing and care homes.**

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## Introduction

Islington Park Street Community is an exceptional case of mutual support and collaborative housing in London. While not formally recognised as such, it is probably the oldest example of a longstanding co-housing project in the capital city – abiding by all of the key social and design principles of this alternative and increasingly sought after form of living. Established in 1976, it is also a story of resilience, surviving the ebbs and flows of the capital city’s housing and economic policy waves. The community’s flexible model of self-managed communal living has successfully tackled the social isolation of vulnerable and older people, included a system of shared resources that is economically and environmentally resilient and provides a living example of mutual care in the increasingly inaccessible heart of London. Today, as Islington Park Street Community (IPS) approaches its forty-year mark, its 18 long and short-term residents face an uncertain future. Their landlord, the housing association One Housing Group (OHG), has served a ‘notice to quit’.

This case study report looks briefly into the history and community-life practices of this unique group to understand what is distinctive about Islington Park Street, how this translates into value beyond (but not outside of) the economic and how it may be considered a model for other London housing schemes to embrace and develop, rather than dismantle and displace. It links interview material and wider documentation to lessons learned and recommendations made in LSE London’s recently completed project ‘Housing in London: addressing the supply crisis’.

## Historical context

*‘We are a blank canvas defined by constant evolution and change, constant giving and taking.’ (IPS resident)*

In 1976, through a small housing association called Patchwork that handled numerous short-life properties in London, three people--Gregory Moore, an ex-LSE social administration student with knowledge of Franciscan community living, his wife Rose Moore and Mike Grainger--set up Islington Park Street community. A Housing Corporation grant and Islington Council loans facilitated the purchase of the property<sup>1</sup>. They sought to provide an alternative *non-professional* living environment to hostel accommodation,

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<sup>1</sup> With a 24.5 year mortgage and 30 year nominations agreement with Islington Council that has rarely been used.

which at the time they felt was inadequate and patronising. These new housing environments would mix people with needs (e.g., ex-prisoners on probation, ex-psychiatric patients, students, individuals with disabilities, etc.) to people without them, allowing them the opportunity of more permanent group living. Patchwork itself 'began as an idea to form a Community within which ordinary [sic: single] people interested in living communally should live with some people in various kinds of need' (Moore 1976).

Since its inception, IPS has been a 'permanent group home' in London, providing indefinite stay to those who continued to pay rent<sup>2</sup>. One of the key distinctions of a 'group house' versus other short-life properties managed by Patchwork concerned the collective rather than individual payment of rent. While no individual or group tenancies, contracts or licences existed for IPS residents, declarations were made and repeated in PW's annual reports, general meetings and correspondence with IPS over the years regarding the self-management ethos of the properties, with group control over allocations, budgets and collective rent payments.

During the early 1990s, as Patchwork began to experience financial difficulties, discussions about regularising allocation procedures, tenancy agreements and policies of 'group homes' (PW had set up a number of these but later de-phased all except two) began. In 1995, the Housing Corporation deemed IPS's allocation requirements and application procedures to be satisfactory. Still, PW (merged in 2005 with Community Housing Group [CHA]) and IPS continued to have exchanges regarding the regularisation of tenancies, the status of which remained unclear. On several historic documents PW notes that the group held a licence to occupy (e.g., the house paid a collective licence fee and service charge that increases annually) and were well aware of their form of self-management, occupancy agreements and allocation policies. Sometimes these are seen as reasonable, other times as insufficient. Options like a co-op structure or joint-management solutions between residents and their HA were raised as early as 2000.

In 2006, One Housing Group (formerly CHA) took over ownership of IPS and other PW properties through a transfer of engagements (which involved a nominal £1 payment). Since then, there has been no change to the group's legal status, while IPS has kept up its commitment to diverse-needs and mutual support. OHG is now seeking a 'notice to quit' claiming that the way IPS works in terms of tenancy agreements, allocations policy and management practices does not fulfil the HA's regulatory obligations. Like

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<sup>2</sup> In the formative years, Patchwork rented a room in the IPS premises, which they used as an office.

other large housing associations today, OHG is enveloped in a larger and constrained political and economic environment<sup>3</sup> that is increasingly pressuring for new housing supply to be generated quickly and efficiently<sup>4</sup>. Their main argument for 'decanting' is that IPS's lack of formal tenancy agreements between the housing association and IPS over their forty-year occupation does not give them the right to stay- and that OHG has a duty to allocate 'in a fair, open and transparent way to those in proven need' (OHG 2015).

This action is remarkable on a number of fronts: first, it penalises residents for a legal ambiguity that can only- or at least mainly- be the responsibility of the various housing associations that have owned the property over time. In other words, any lack of regulatory clarity with respect to the community is a testament to their own negligence as a housing organisation; second, it fails to recognise IPS's rich social history and its model ecology of care, demonstrating a highly partial vision towards the definition of housing value; and finally, it is contradictory to some of the UK existing policy priorities under the aegis of the localism agenda that seek to support the ability of community groups to manage or develop their own homes, as well as policy concerns regarding health, well-being and ageing.

Counter-arguments are being made by the residents, opposition has been voiced by all local councillors, by a number of leading housing experts (Stephen Hill, Blase Lambert, Linda Wallace and David Rodgers) as well as other politicians and public figures (Green Party National Leader, Natalie Bennet and local MP and Labour Party Leader, Jeremy Corbyn) who claim that the group's allocation policy does stand up to scrutiny and that decanting IPS is both unnecessary and destructive, when mediated options of formalisation and regularisation are available. Represented by Bindmans LLP, legal defence is currently underway based on Article 8 of the Human Rights Act.

## **Islington Park Street today- what it is and how it works**

*Home is not just the bricks and the walls, or the postcode; it is the people in the house and the local community around us. We believe in living together and sharing resources. Each individual contributes according to their abilities for the benefit of all.*

(IPS web page: <http://islingtonparkstreet.org/>)

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<sup>3</sup> These range from land availability and uncertain planning processes, to increasingly limited capacity of planning departments and difficulties associated to partnerships of different kinds.

<sup>4</sup> In their web, [OHG describes themselves](#) as "a 'not-for-profit' that loves to make a profit" (in order to build more affordable homes).

### *Who lives there*

Today, there are 18 single adult residents, or housemates, living at 38-44 Islington Park St Community and supporting each other physically and socially. They are an intergenerational group spanning ages from 18-80. They maintain a 50% female to male ratio, and remain faithful to an original decree that stipulated having residents in need of care (either physical or emotional by way of previous vulnerabilities). But such formal systems belie a more sophisticated language of need, where by years of practice and collective engagement residents have come to learn that those with explicitly defined needs can also help those that don't appear to have any. This is how they define 'mutual' and how they respect each other as individuals with something to offer.

Residents past and present include cancer survivors, previous victims of domestic abuse, ex-prisoners, those with mental health issues in need of housing, adults with special needs who grew up in care and others with difficult beginnings or stories that make them particularly vulnerable. Some of the present-day residents have lived there almost since the beginning; others have been there over fifteen years, and others for less. The way in which they emphasise mixed needs and engage in supportive mechanisms geared towards autonomy and independence are very similar to the close-knit social networks and neighbourhoods that are intentionally practiced by senior co-housing communities (discussed at greater length below). This form of conscious community-building, which includes shared responsibility and commitment, democratic decision-making, shared meals and continued self-management, has been shown to reduce the use of adult social care services and to decrease the damaging health impacts of loneliness and isolation (Brenton 2010). It is now a common housing option in places like the United States, Canada and Australia and a growing, subsidised form of housing in many European countries like Germany and the Netherlands.

### *Space and layout*

The community comprises four adjoining terraced houses that were bought in 1973 and converted into a large community house. Except for the individual bedrooms in the buildings, all of the spaces comprising the IPS buildings are treated as a shared resource: from the hallways, meeting rooms and bathrooms to the kitchens, gardens and terraces. There are three guest bedrooms that residents can use for family or friends on a short or long term basis, provided they reserve the space beforehand. This represents a maximal use of the house's floor-space and it works actively against the sense of

avoidance that is so often practiced in London's privately rented shared flats. Residents feel that what they may lack in terms of personal space and larger areas for privacy, is more than made up for by the communal areas and the social benefits they afford.

One resident usefully describes the combination of the house's physical layout and their internal socio-economic unit as a modern version of an urban village; a place where a robust ecosystem of support gives a place for everyone and allows for a mix of necessary skills that in turn shapes the way the community operates. Another resident said that the respect offered by the group towards differences of all kinds, including ethnic and sexual, adds to a trusting familial *non-professional* environment that is often missing in city housing environments. In the end, IPS' business, I was told, 'is the business of its support'.

#### *Neighbourhood and sense of place*

A home is defined not just by its internal shape and form but also by the neighbourhood within which it is embedded. Local environments that feel familiar, secure and accessible are key to the quality of everyday life. The Islington Park Street community is located in a highly accessible area that is close to shops, work places, a range of health facilities and social services and open public spaces. It also has comfortable links to public transport, making commutes to work and traveling times manageable and affordable. In a context of growing austerity and cuts to the welfare bill (and associated benefits) the latter is particularly crucial.

Those who had lived in Islington or its environs their entire life expressed a strong sense of local identity of place and belonging. Others who had been there for less time and did not voice the same emotional attachment to the area still felt strongly about the accessibility of their location and their equal 'right to the city' — to being close to their family nearby, to hospitals or other social care services they were already enrolled in, etc. Convenience of location, they feel, should not be the remit of wealthy Londoners alone.

#### *Access and tenure*

*We continue to provide low-income, single adults with a supportive permanent home. We also remain committed to the ethos of community living. (IPS web)*

When a room vacancy opens up, IPS advertises widely through local and community-oriented websites to obtain as diverse a group of respondents as

possible. They are currently trying to establish an acceptable working nominations mechanism with the council – something that is enshrined in their original community specifications and which, as historic documents evidence, they have been continually open to.

As a community that adheres to a social housing, equal opportunities brief, IPS seeks out individuals who are:

1. In genuine housing need
2. On a low income (less than £23K per year)
3. A non-property owner
4. Unknown to existing residents

The group gives priority to applications from those living or working in Islington and partners of existing members can apply as long as they fulfil the above conditions and an internal room transfer policy is in place. One of the core concerns for some of the existing residents who have lived at IPS for a long time and who under social housing rules would be entitled to secure tenancies, is (a) how to regularise that position in light of their legal insecurity; and (b) how to reconcile official definitions of ‘genuine housing need’ with other needs established by the community as part of its core purpose (and recognised under HCA’s categories of vulnerability<sup>5</sup>). Some existing IPS residents would qualify as having a ‘priority need’ for new social tenancies, have additional special needs or vulnerabilities’ that make them particularly eligible to live there, or contribute actively through their voluntary in-house care-work to the benefit of the larger community. The latter is not an official condition towards social housing allocation but if we consider that 40% of social tenants in the UK include someone with a serious medical condition (Whitehead 2014), then the idea of including intentional forms of in-house care and mutual aid seems, at the very least, warranted.

Once all resident applications are received, residents meet over a meal to decide on a shortlist that follows a strict and minuted voting procedure. As a form of interview, candidates are invited to a meal and another vote is put to the table. If the group and individual decide to pursue the application further, they are invited to live in the community as a guest for a week before a final decision is put to vote. If process breaks down, second and third options from the original shortlist are revisited. Before moving in, accepted applicants must provide references and sign IPS’s formal Communal Agreement. An appeals process is in place for those who want to seek recourse.

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<sup>5</sup> See: <https://cfg.homesandcommunities.co.uk/ourwork/vulnerable-and-older-people>

Like the housing provided by councils or other housing associations, rents are typically low rates and depending on their personal circumstances some residents are in receipt of the housing benefit and local housing allowance. For IPS, then, the missing link is access to some form of secure and legally binding tenancy, as well as a memorandum of understanding between themselves, the housing association and the local authority to guarantee their group status and mechanisms.

### *Shared and self-managed economy*

*'The community organises all house finances collectively under the care of a treasurer, who is a resident elected to the position by the other house members. Each resident pays a lump sum, which includes rent, utilities, food etc. The treasurer is then responsible for recording residents' payments and ensuring that all bills are paid. The community keeps accounts of all monies received from residents, and all transactions it conducts with business and service providers.'* (IPS web)

Key to IPS' success is their group control over financial matters. While they do not operate under a group tenancy agreement because these are not legally available in England as such, their collective pooling of rent and dues works effectively. They have an established rent and arrears policy. If a resident is facing financial difficulties or falls into arrears, the treasurer and two other individuals (one selected by the affected party) will meet them confidentially to set up a system of loans and repayment. Residents say that over time this system has enabled many to develop responsible attitudes to rent payments. Any collective cash is principally used to buy all of the food and general household products for the entire group, with attention to individual diets<sup>6</sup>. These kinds of saving are an obvious financial advantage in living collectively.

Even though individual tenancy agreements would require residents to pay their rent separately, there is no reason why the group's established form of treasury and mutual economic could not be maintained. There is a strong case to be made for setting up a system that allows for rental payment through collective means—especially as it gives residents confidential knowledge of other's financial circumstances and therefore control over how to deal with moments of increased need. It allows for the possibility of mutual support to continue to extend to the financial and not just the social- as well as ensuring with less risk that the HA gets their full rental income. The additional

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<sup>6</sup> Individual expenses for all food and household utilities amount to around £27 per week, an amount that is adjusted annually depending on variable product costs.

payment that individuals make towards their common shared items can also continue to be made to a separate common pot and managed by a treasurer in the same way as it has successfully been done until now.

### *Communal responsibilities*

*'Residents share all the tasks necessary for the smooth and safe running of the house. This may involve doing a weekly shop, cleaning toilets, vacuuming stairs or even feeding our resident cat, Lily.'* (IPS web)

The group has informal organic systems of communication in place to support newcomers while respecting the need for space and privacy. They recognise that living together and supporting each other- for instance, in cleaning, in buying food, in cooking and caring for the ill- is an on-going process of learning, and that the initial stages after moving in are key to confronting and adjusting attitudes and behavioural patterns towards the domestic. Specifically, living in a self-managed community of mutual care may require residents to sacrifice deeply held personal preferences for the benefit of the community. While a codified handbook of rules and responsibilities exists, the group encourages new residents to ask questions about how things work as a way of coming to know not just the everyday goings on of the community, but also each other. This, together with the monthly meetings and individual community management tasks provides a solid non-institutional form of integration.

One of the important lessons they have learnt over time is that even though everyone has responsibilities and tasks to fulfil, these will vary according to personal circumstances. Therefore, rather than enforcing all tasks equally, like a mandatory cooking rota, a voluntary system is now in place that allows for people to contribute what they enjoy or feel they are good at. If there is ever a lack of contribution in one activity, these sorts of 'inefficiencies' can be addressed and revisited collectively in group meetings.

These group meetings can last up to three hours -- a time-intensive commitment that is not readily possible or desirable to society in general. This factor alone demonstrates the necessity of a screening process for new members. For the group, it is crucial that the ethos of collectivity and participation be as faithfully maintained as possible. The formula is rather simple: the continuous and responsible engagement in matters of the house by those living in that space will develop a sense of home. Once it feels like a home, there is a stake in what one does or doesn't do. All residents I spoke to said this form of involvement represents a long-term process of 'maturing' as

individuals and community. It is one of the key elements which makes them stand out from mainstream social housing and which undoubtedly, has contributed to their 40-year success.



### *Decision-making and conflict resolution*

*'The community operates on a purely democratic basis, and all decisions are made collectively at our monthly house meetings.'* (IPS web)

A rigorous decision-making system is core to this community's form of self-management and has developed over time through trial and error to fit their ethos of mutual support. There is a mindfulness and pragmatism embedded in all of their systems, where they understand and use the varied abilities and skills of a diverse resident population to their common advantage.

Monthly meetings are held to come to agreement on items listed on a board by community members. To ensure fairness, all decisions that affect the

community are typically made by voting. But there is also an awareness of ‘the tyranny of the majority’ and the right to veto helps protect them against it. In certain contexts, individual voices and needs may sometimes need to be heard louder than the group and they allow for any decision to be looked and voted on again if people remain unsatisfied with outcomes. They strive to achieve this middle ground -- where decisions can be made but also resisted—by revisiting rules and procedures when needed.

It is common for experimental dwelling forms to evolve gradually (Dearline and Meltzer 2003), and IPS is no exception. All of the procedures in place today have developed cumulatively over time. They have required patience and communication—as well as collective forms of ‘nudging’ that have impelled them to improve slowly but steadily over time by the flexibility of rules, by new incomers and their visions.

While there is a formal written ‘house processes’ guide provided to newcomers, residents feel that goodwill develops over time and they allow for this adjustment. The guide is a living document that must be flexible to the changing realities of the group. Their basic rule is to respect the ethos of the house and show consideration to other residents.

If and when conflict arises, as it does in any family or community setting where different personalities and interests coincide, they rely on the group’s ability to listen and negotiate as a way out of it. They also draw on the specialist skills of those residents who have a background in care and mental health to resolve it.

#### *Community activities*

*For us it is important that we try to eat together. There is a cooking rota and each resident is asked to contribute once every three weeks. This means that there is a communal meal available most evenings. Our visitors say that this is one of the things that makes our community special and so warm and welcoming. Mealtimes are a great opportunity to touch base with other residents. (IPS web)*

Everyone has to eat. In IPS, kitchens are shared, and cooking and eating are at the core of their internal workings. Mealtimes provide opportunities for more informal and intimate communication as individuals and as a group. This is true across many collaborative communities worldwide. In fact, co-housing communities design their spaces to facilitate regularly shared activities like communal eating. This has been recognised as a core facilitator of interaction, and a much-needed social space in which to practice community making beyond bureaucratic meetings and decision-making processes.

This is not an inward community. Residents also bring their personal, organisational and specialist skills to the table to the benefit of the broader community. Music therapy workshops and an active LGBT counselling, for instance, are offered for those who can't afford it. IPS also provides theatrical or music rehearsal space for arts groups, and hosts an annual garden party with music and a cake competition, fostering sense of togetherness, neighbourliness and celebration.

They have worked with neighbours on a number of activities including the beautification of their structure and street and organising as a neighbourhood in formally resisting a planning proposal for the development of a large development directly behind their premises. IPS spearheaded the opposition and worked successfully with its neighbours towards a common cause.

### **Benefits of the model**

Resource efficient housing forms like the collective model practiced by IPS which includes behaviour like shared cooking, DIY and gardening as well as the use of shared resources like water, heating and tools all help to avoid waste, consume less energy and reduce the negative environmental impact of one-person households (Williams 2006; Jamieson and Simpson 2013). IPS has an internal green policy where residents use ecological products, practice a strong recycling system, create their own compost and are drawing on a previous resident's training in permaculture to design the garden. OHG should harness this existing ethos further, and invest in some ecological retrofitting for this older house using environmentally sound materials and technologies that will generate further economic and green benefits for everyone.

The links between housing, health and well-being, especially for older or ageing populations are also well known, so much so that a Memorandum of Understanding between 14 UK governmental and non-governmental organisations has been established to help improve health through an appropriate home environment. One of its chief aims is to 'develop the workforce across sectors so that they are confident and skilled in understanding the relationship between where people live and their health and well-being and are able to identify suitable solutions to improve outcomes.' It is also understood that community support can be a strong

strategy to help combat older people's isolation and promote their social inclusion<sup>7</sup>.

This echoes some of the conclusions and recommendations made by the 'Housing our Ageing Population: Panel for Innovation' which, in contemplating the growth of older people in the UK and their future care needs made a strong case for 'improving the quality of life of our ageing population by influencing the availability and choice of high quality, sustainable homes and neighbourhoods' (HAPPI 2009). While not limited to the elderly, IPS is an existing example of such a choice. At the same time, the older residents of the community are benefiting from a social environment that prevents their isolation.

In a recent report by the Local Government Association (Robertson 2015, citing Future Cities Catapult 2014), intergenerational relationships within integrated 'all-age' friendly communities were described as a positive approach that 'pays attention to the needs of different generations across a number of different spheres of life and seeks to ensure that these needs are catered for'. The energy and diversity offered by living in an intergenerational arrangement is what many cohousing groups look for, stressing the value this mix brings to both the younger and older residents, with isolation and depression actively countered and tolerance and responsibility towards others fostered. One of the most obvious benefits of IPS's form of intergenerational living and self-management is that tenants give and gain practical skills to one another, as well as life skills. All residents support each other in moments of sickness, with cooking being one of the integral elements of this care.

A sustainable communities agenda challenges all professionals 'to think holistically and to draw on the expertise of their own profession and others' (Bailey *et al.* 2006). IPS provides a clear example of this in practice. We do not argue that this solution would work everywhere, as local variations and circumstances will of course play a role in the different social, economic and environmental needs of LAs. But IPS does offer one example of best practice in long-term self-management and mutual support.

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<sup>7</sup> See Bristol's Ageing Better Programme: <http://www.bristolageingbetter.org.uk/>

## IPS as alternative housing

### *Comparisons to cohousing*

*“We have no overriding philosophy apart from our desire to live communally. We believe that living in London as a single adult does not have to mean living alone in a one bedroom flat or in a house with others where little is shared. Living collectively creates the possibility of a home environment which is so much more supportive and nurturing.” (IPS web)*

The way IPS defines itself resonates strongly with many of the existing (varied) ideologies and practices of co-housing-- an intentional model of living- in both design and social standards- that emphasises social interaction and community. Now familiar in Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands, Germany and the United States, where there are many hundreds of such groups, cohousing is becoming increasingly popular in the UK (see [UK Cohousing Network](#)). Historically, it is related to practices of self-build, sharing or communes. Below, each of the core defining characteristics of cohousing are described and put in relation to IPS's own characteristics:

- ‘Most co-housers today are motivated by a desire to live as a community that actively participates in its own creation, maintenance and management, and to have a neighbourhood lay-out that includes both private dwellings and common space’ (called the common house) (Fernández Arrigoitia and Scanlon 2015 *forthcoming*). While not all IPS residents were involved in the nuts and bolts of creating their living space, some long-term residents did move in almost at the outset and have been continually involved in the production of its non-hierarchical social architecture and decision-making processes. Moreover, even though their space was not designed by the residents or made to ‘recreate neighbourhood’, as its creator Greg Moore explained, “Each house is so arranged that living space and the kitchen will most naturally be shared and people are encouraged, though not compelled, to arrange to buy food, cook and clean on a communal basis.” The group has more common house spaces than some intentional communities, who often struggle financially to fit this additional floor space into new build design. IPS's many common rooms offer both core and ancillary meeting spaces where being together or having greater privacy are both possible. They have both internal and external common space and can use these throughout the year for a range of activities.
- ‘[Cohousing] Communities can be organised as owner -occupation, mutual ownership, rental or mixed-tenure’ (*ibid.*) Although their tenure is

not secure, these could be regularized and organised in all kinds of ways, provided their core community ethos and practices can remain in place. What's more, the characteristics of IPS residents means they actively contribute to the idea of a 'mixed community' (Berube 2005) that, in the UK, typically refers to a diversification of tenures within the same neighbourhood or housing estate (to reduce problems and deprivations associated to poverty). Mixing diverse needs within IPS and in its immediate environment can do the same, as well as tackle loneliness and encourage wellbeing to reduce negative health outcomes.

- 'They [cohousing] may accommodate households of all ages (intergenerational co-housing) or cater specifically for older households (senior co-housing); they can also be developed for particular groups, notably women' (*ibid.*) These elements also ring true to IPS, which provides accommodation for a particular group of people: single adults with mixed needs (and with a 50/50 gender ratio).
- 'Some co-housing groups come together in a 'bottom-up' approach because of shared ecological or social visions, while others are assembled in a 'top-down' fashion by housing associations or even for-profit developers' (*ibid.*) IPS would fall into the latter category, as it was created under the aegis of Patchwork—and now falls under One Housing Group's portfolio. Their 'top-down' origin did not preclude them from having control over their internal community matters and management. The collective ethos that guides them and their commitment to combating loneliness and isolation is similar to that of senior cohousing initiatives that seek an alternative to living alone, but reject conventional forms of housing for older people as paternalistic and institutional. Echoing well-documented and established connections between loneliness in older adults and its negative health risks, impacts and decline (Hawkley and Cacioppo 2007; Perissinotto, Cenzer and Covinsky 2012; Glass 2013a, b), IPS group members believe that collaborative living arrangements can accommodate singleness in old age and can "Act as bulwarks against both the natural ageing process and the constructed dependencies of old age...attenuating those symptoms of physical and mental decline which are linked to dependency, social isolation, loneliness and lack of stimulation" (Brenton 1999:80).

The parallels here are more than superficial. The definitions above place IPS firmly within the framework of what a co-housing community is, or should be. This is a striking discovery for London, a city where cohousing groups have been trying with great difficulties to get off the ground because of land and development costs, and a general misapprehension of what they are and

how they work. Those that do manage to set up often face difficulties of attrition. The established set of allocation policies, rules for incomers and a strict yet flexible system of cooperation and self-management IPS maintains, as well as its evolving (if tenuous and complicated) relationship with its developer/HA, could be seen as a model for communities elsewhere, with historic lessons to be learned. At a time when so many groups in London are struggling to set up in ways that resemble IPS's established way of living, it seems absurd to rid ourselves of the lessons this community offers in practice. It has taken IPS years of dedication and commitment to achieve its social, financial and health benefits. They should be considered a social, community and health asset, be valued as such and emulated.

Finally, the autonomous structure of cohousing communities (and of IPS) resonates with the UK government's current emphasis on 'localism', or decentralisation of state power by encouraging individuals, communities and councils to take more control over local democracy and governance. Requiring simply a shift of perception by their HA, IPS could easily be regarded as an additional 'alternative' housing typology to the benefit of London's housing environment.

#### **BOX 1: A new innovative housing option in another London Council**

**Barnet** granted planning permission for Older Women's Co-Housing ([OWCH](#)), a co-housing community of 25 homes to be developed with Hanover Housing Association. A mixed tenure development, the rental units will be managed by the Housing for Women housing association. To be completed in March 2016, this will be the first co-housing development for older people in London and the only with a women-only provision. This model complements other housing types in Barnet like specialist extra care sheltered accommodation built to HAPPI standards and accommodation for those with social care needs in regeneration areas close to a social care hub with the explicit aim of maintaining mixed community.

#### **Conclusions: what next?**

*'People do not realise how much it's cost to get where we are.'*

As with the future of so many social housing projects in London today, costs are of course central to Islington Park Street community's current struggle against eviction. For One Housing Group, there appears to be at least a

partial, if undeclared financial motivation to what Local Authority officers from Islington and other councils, as well as leading housing experts are defining as an unnecessary call for eviction. Like all housing associations, they are under pressure to develop new housing. But costs incurred are not just monetary. IPS is the result of inputs that can and cannot be quantified. It has involved forty years of care and support activity both within and outside the community, organisational and management efforts, and a living legacy of the enormous amount of work and energy that went into setting it up as a permanent community with health and wellbeing at its heart. Their community arrangement has social, environmental and community benefits—and therefore, value.

While the social assets and positive impact of intentional communities like IPS have yet to be quantified, their links to health and well-being are increasingly studied and documented. Their shared communal spaces and lack of self-contained units is also significantly more economic and sustainable both in terms of utility costs and in terms of environmental impact (equipment, gas and water use, etc.). Given these combined characteristics, any attempt to remove and decant them should at the very least be founded upon a robust evidence base that includes an economic appraisal of their social and community value.

Design is also a focal element in all intentional communities, central to the possibilities of successful group dynamics and interactions (Williams 2005). It is key to understanding how resources can be managed and shared successfully over time. Lessons could be learned from IPS in regards to the size, scale, density, and layout that supports mutual-support living and minimises the use of resources. Further studies should also be commissioned to look at the unique socio-spatial qualities of this housing site and how they contribute to sustainable communities and neighbourhoods. Supported by the Tudor Trust, the UK Cohousing Network is currently preparing a national action research and project development programme to promote ‘cohousing where you live’, retrofitting co-housing principles into existing homes and neighbourhoods. This will be done with the Housing and Learning Information Network and its partner organisations. According the Network’s chair, IPS will now very probably feature in the programme as an exemplar of good practice and learning.

Despite the government’s and society’s increasing interest in finding measures that can help alleviate some of the most pressing social, economic and environmental issues, including the supply of varied forms of affordable housing that fits diverse needs, there is a dearth of examples of successful schemes in London. Where they do exist—like in IPS—these are not being

sufficiently recognised as the models that they are. Moreover, both the ideas of self-organisation in collective housing maintenance and mutual care are still considered anomalies within the mainstream housing and health discourse and practice. It is in this sense that IPS's internal mechanisms *alongside* a continuous but hands-off approach by their HA constitute a remarkable example of success.

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