

Sustainable Living for Over 50s **Building A Community for Our Futures**



photo by Ben Andrew

While June has been a bit of a cold damp squib so far, we continue to be busy with one thing and another since the last newsletter, meeting people who are interested in learning more about cohousing, looking into potential sites for retrofit and exploring some new areas. We've also discovered that one of our members knows a lot about swifts – we'll certainly know who to ask if we decide to include swift boxes in our cohousing!

Open Day at Chapeltown Cohousing (ChaCo) Open Day

by Sian, MUCH member

Early one morning at the end of May I took a train to Leeds, and then a bus to Chapeltown to visit the community who have been moving in over the past year or so. The event was [ChaCo](#)'s first Open Day.

We were a small group of visitors, with three of us being active members of the [Hub](#), two people associated with YorSpace Community Land Trust in York, one from Shirle Hill Cohousing in Sheffield, and a young local couple visiting just out of curiosity.

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The morning started in the Common House with Hannah giving a presentation about the project. The difficult brownfield site on a busy main road was sold to ChaCo by the council, who also paid for its remediation. The council wanted ChaCo to co-ordinate their development with the Housing Association who were building the over 55s scheme next door, which Bill Phelps (founder member of ChaCo) said 'turned out to be a good thing'. Built to AECB standards, which uses the same design package as Passivhaus, but is less costly to build, although energy costs will be a little higher.



Artists impression from ChaCo website

ChaCo is a housing co-op with a mix of flats, maisonettes and houses, and a commitment to being affordable for local people. Some are rented out at no more than Local Housing Allowance levels, and others are shared ownership with ownership of between 25% and 99% of the home, with the co-op retaining the remainder. One four bedroom house is set aside as a shared rented house, which runs as an informal mini co-op within the larger co-op holding their own monthly meetings, sharing meals and cleaning rotas. What has been built looks remarkably like the artists impression above!

Unbelievably not one but two contractors went bust during construction, and ChaCo are still making insurance claims and finishing off everything that was left unfinished as well as all the usual snagging. Bill touched on the finances, a real mixing pot of grants, commercial loans and loans from friends and family.

An interesting Q&A session and discussion followed, touching on decision making, sustainability, dispute resolution etc. The decision to have colourful front doors was made by consensus. The community are still working on the fine details of agreements as to how they will live together as they make the transition from development teams

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into work teams to cook, clean, look after the finances, maintain the site and garden, and everything else.

We then split into two groups to visit some of the dual aspect homes, which all overlook



the shared garden and growing space. I saw Bill and Ali's two bedroom maisonette, which has a private stairway going up from the 'front door' on the street, and shared terrace and steps going from the shared communal gardens up to the 'back door'. The two bedrooms, and open plan living space were spacious with a well-designed compact kitchen and felt very light and airy. To keep project costs down residents 'self finished' flooring and kitchens.

We also saw the shared facilities – laundry, guest bedroom/office, children's playroom, workshop (a work in progress!) and cycle storage.

The oldest resident is over 90, having moved into her own flat near to her daughter, and the youngest resident was just a few weeks old, with another baby on its way.

There are small private terraces or gardens, shared gardens starting to fill with flowers, and small grassy areas. A growing space is looked after by one of the work teams that are developing to care for the cohousing scheme. Interestingly, they have a chair in the growing area where you can sit undisturbed, and everyone understands that you don't want to chat when you do sit there, the opposite of a chatty bench for those who are lonely and want to chat with someone - which just goes to show that it's perfectly normal for cohousers to know and talk to their neighbours and will naturally chat to each other.

The visit ended with a delicious lunch prepared by ChaCo residents, soup from the garden and homemade pizza from the previous evening's shared meal with visitors helping to put out chairs and tables in readiness and clear up afterwards.

Thank you ChaCo for an inspiring visit!

Could an empty department store be repurposed for cohousing?

Looking further afield



We recently took the opportunity to look at a new neighbourhood and also a very different kind of potential site, as an exercise. The site consisted of a town centre building which was part of a late 20th century shopping centre, overlooking a market square, with an old market hall now home to several independent businesses. A public building on another side of the square is currently being restored with Levelling Up funding. There are plenty of services within a few minutes walk, including shops, banks!, a library, a Further Education college, and a choice of public transport options.

Commercial property

With High Streets everywhere in decline, councils are looking at the potential of

converting empty shop space into residential accommodation.

The building used to house a department store, which closed down over 20 years ago, and the upper floors have been empty ever since, and are starting to deteriorate.

The ground floor is in use as a shop, but the long leasehold on the upper floors failed to see at auction in May.

An architect's vision

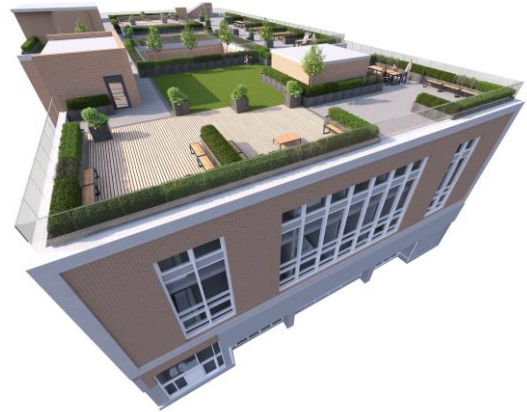
Planning permission for 32 flats over the two upper floors has been obtained.

No private car parking will be included, but cycle parking is shown on both floors (with a dedicated lift for bikes!). The main entrance will be from the market square, with taxi drop off points nearby, but no obvious visitor parking. With nowhere for even our

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limited parking requirements, and proposed car shares, it's possible that the location would be less attractive to future MUCH members.

It is also a very different prospect from our preferred design, in which dual aspect flats with balconies would overlook a shared garden. This building adjoins other commercial properties with only a few windows on the perimeter except for those which overlook the pedestrianised market square.



The plans show reasonably sized one and two bedroom flats arranged around two small courtyards, and with a roof terrace for use by all residents.

Next time we'd like to take along a friendly architect who understands cohousing principles to assess the potential for cohousing on such a site!

The swifts are here

by Jean, MUCH member

Swifts are small black birds most noticeable flying high in the summer evening sky, swooping and screeching. Swifts are unique in the bird world in that they do almost everything on the wing; sleeping, eating, drinking and mating on the wing, only touching down briefly to lay their eggs and tend their chicks.

Each year, during May, they arrive in the UK to nest, returning to Equatorial Africa in July; a round trip of 14,000 miles. For millions of years, they have nested in holes in trees and cliffs, and more recently in nooks and crannies in our built environment. But in recent years they have arrived in the UK to find that their usual nesting sites have disappeared under modern renovations, new roofs, or plastic soffits. Their numbers have declined so much that they are now on the UK Red list of endangered species.

I have been involved in South Manchester Swifts (SMS); a local newly formed group since early 2022. We are working to get nesting bricks installed in the eaves of new

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build properties and nest boxes sited on the walls of existing buildings.

Swifts have specific needs; they tend to return to the site they left in the previous years, but as their families grow, they need extra nests in close proximity. Ideally,



nests are positioned in a sheltered spot on a north or east facing wall to avoid overheating. The nest should be at least 4 metres from the ground. Before fledging, the chicks do 'press-ups' in the nest to strengthen their wings. Once they leave the nest, they quickly perfect their flying technique so that they can head off to Southern Africa with their parents. The swifts had a tough migration this year,

Photo by Eric Kaiser

unprecedented rainfall and tropical storms. Whilst they are here, they need a good supply of insects to feed on. Even the smallest pond can provide a breeding spot for the flying insects which are swept up towards hungry swifts.

The South Manchester Swifts group have been busy this year noticing where groups of swifts are and noting their nesting sites. We have had several enquiries from individual households and guardians of public buildings offering possible sites for new boxes in areas known to have nesting swifts already. One member of our group is a skilled woodworker and has made around 20 boxes. We are also working with Heatons [Men in Sheds](#) who are able to produce boxes with precision and at cost. In the last year we have installed 85 nestboxes. Many in Didsbury but also in Chorlton, Levenshulme, Middleton, Northenden, and Sale.

Do [get in touch](#) if you would like to know more and /or get involved.

Cohousing in the news

We haven't spotted anything in the mainstream media recently, but you might like to read this research by Hope Cohousing in the Orkneys: [Why cohousing is good for people and communities – the evidence](#) (updated February 2024)

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