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Creative Housing Design: Promoting sustainable living in cohousing community in the UK

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Abstract

Cohousing is a new collaborative housing concept to foster closer social bonding and sustainable communities. This paper discusses the key principles, priorities and challenges of Cohousing design through interviews with four architects. The interviews were carried out i) to demonstrate the application of the design standards, ii) to understand residents' thinking and behaviour change, and iii) to establish the environmental and social sustainability in a cohousing setting. The findings could lead to a toolkit and guide for Cohousing design process and to establish a better understanding of Cohousing design and development process in the UK.

Keywords: Cohousing design process; Environmental Sustainability; Social Sustainability

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1.0 Introduction

Traditional forms of housing no longer address the needs of many people. A lot of people are mis-housed, ill-housed or unhoused because of the lack of adequate housing options (McCamant & Durrett, 1994). The term 'Cohousing' is derived from the phrase 'co-operative housing'. It is a creative housing model, which offers an alternative solution to the housing crisis (Priest, 2015; Wang et al., 2016). Typical Cohousing communities have between 15 to 35 families, about 50 to 100 people (Lietaert, 2009). According to Berggren (2016) and Lietaert (2009), Cohousing residents are involved in the design and planning processes. In other words, residents manage the whole community with the help from experts (developers, architects, facilitators). It is a new collaborative housing concept designed to foster meaningful relationships, closer social bonding and green living (Wang et al., 2016). The research aims to discuss the key principles, priorities and challenges of Cohousing design process through interviews with four Cohousing architects. This paper explores Cohousing theories to reflect on both architectural design languages and Cohousing community social interactions within UK cultural and context.

2.0 Literature review

2.1 What is Cohousing?

The origin of Cohousing is in Denmark. The concept spread rapidly and reached the Netherland, where the first Cohousing community was completed in 1977. "The original Cohousing was designed for two main purposes: to increase the quality of cohousers' life and to

lessen the burden of everyday life, while increasing free-time at home” (Lietaert, 2009, p.578). Its concept is also well established in Sweden, Germany, the UK and the US.

Cohousing is a new type of urban or semi-urban housing model (Lietaert, 2009). Through Cohousing, residents are committed to living together as a community and gain the benefit of a supportive social network (Garciano, 2011). According to Lietaert (2009), there are six key features to define a Cohousing community:

- A. Participatory process
- B. Intentional neighbourhood design
- C. Extensive common facilities
- D. Complete resident management
- E. Absence of hierarchy
- F. Separated incomes

Cohousing communities are neighbourhood developments where private and common facilities are combined in response to the social and the practical needs of contemporary urban citizens (Lietaert, 2009, p.577). Cohousing residents organize and participate in the planning design process for the community development and make decisions collectively through consensus.

Physical Design

In Cohousing community, each household has their front doors. Homes are grouped around and overlook common spaces. This offers the access for everyone to the open areas and the chance to socialise with neighbours under the ‘casual surveillance’ (Berggren, 2017; Ruii, 2014). The common house is one of the key features of a Cohousing community, which includes a shared kitchen and dining area, common laundry and guest rooms, and sometimes a workshop, children play area, a shop, and a library (Berggren, 2017). McCamant and Durrett (1994) point out that extensive common facilities are an integral part of the community, and common areas are designed for daily use to supplement private living areas. The physical design and community layout aim to encourage a strong sense of home and also create the belonging of the community.

Social Design

Cohousing residents commit to the concept, contribute to the community and also share resources, spaces, tools, time, ideas and skills. There are four fundamental characteristics of cohousing social setting: 1) weekly shared meals; 2) regular membership meetings; 3) resources sharing; 4) diverse membership (e.g. age, religion and household type) (Sargisson,2012; Berggren, 2017). In some respects, Cohousing is not a completely new concept. In the past, most people lived in the village or closely-knit neighbourhood, such as a commune. However, Cohousing community is not a commune, and it offers a contemporary approach for re-creating the sense of community and neighbourhood while responding to today’s needs for a less constraining environment (McCamant & Durrett, 1994). There are obvious practical advantages by living in Cohousing community, such as rich social atmosphere, reduce loneliness, supportive child and care for older people, and sustainable living.

2.2 Current cohousing communities in the UK

The origin of British Cohousing started by the end of the 1990s. Along with the development of the housing market over the past two decades, there are 19 built communities all over the country and more than 60 Cohousing groups are in development (UK Cohousing Network, n.d.). A growing number of housing practitioners, funders and policy-makers have started to consider Cohousing as an ideal and realisable model for sustainable and affordable housing development (Garciano, 2011). At the moment, there are diverse types of Cohousing around the UK, such as low impact affordable Cohousing (LILAC), Cohousing for older people (Older Women Cohousing), Eco-village (Cambridge Community Land Trust), Vegetarian cohousing (Veganic Cohousing), etc.

In England, Cohousing has been working with DCLG (Department for Communities and Local Government) to ensure the New Community Housing Fund is available to Cohousing Groups. In Wales, Cohousing has contributed to the Welsh Government Expert Group in response to an ageing population. Cohousing has been recognised as an important role in the widening choice of housing options. Hence, financial and professional support and advice should become available to facilitate community-led housing solutions. In Scotland, one document has been published by the Scottish Government in 2011, Age, Home and Community: A Strategy for Housing for Scotland’s Older People: 2012 - 2021. This document points out that the Scottish Government is keen to encourage the development of new and innovative models of housing that enable older people to maintain their independence in the community. In Northern Ireland, there is an active intergenerational Cohousing group, promoting Cohousing in the area (UK Cohousing Network, n.d.).

2.3 The Cohousing approach to 'Lifetime Homes'

2.3.1 Lifetime Home Standards

Lifetime Home Standards were established in the mid-1990s to incorporate a set of principles that should be implicit in good housing design (The Lifetime Home Design Guide, 2010). It includes 16 design criteria under five principles (Inclusivity, Accessibility, Adaptability, Sustainability and Good Value) that can be widely applied to new homes and housing retrofit. Lifetime Homes can provide benefits especially to older people, disabled people and anyone with the physical impairment to make their home more accessible and inclusive. The 16 design criteria were designed to improve the property to be convenient for a wide range of people and also introduce the flexibility and adaptability into the housing layout, housing outdoor spaces and interior design. Bring Lifetime Home design into mainstream housing will allow older people to stay their home for longer and postpone/reduce the need for expensive home adaptation and personal care. Also, it will benefit disabled people to achieve independent living due to suitable housing design. In the UK context, Cohousing models can be described into two types: a) The intergenerational community where older people and families live side by side, such as Lancaster cohousing; b) The peer-group community where a range of people over 50 prefer to live in child-free environment, such as The Older Women's Cohousing Company in London (Housing LIN, 2008, p.5). However, limited literature is available to evidence inclusion of Lifetime Home Standards into Cohousing models. Besides, it is more challenging to use these design standards to Cohousing models compared with mainstream housing due to the complexity and variety of the Cohousing community design and its operating model. A detailed discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of the Lifetime Home Standard application in Cohousing community is presented in the following sections.

2.3.2 Lifetime Home Standards and Cohousing Models

In Cohousing context, Lifetime Homes Standards can be applied to benefit both types of Cohousing models. Therefore, Lifetime Cohousing could become an effective housing model to maximise the opportunities and potentials of housing and community design for Cohousing members and promote better neighbourhood sustainability. In addition, Lifetime Homes also affect social interaction and activities, as Kelly (2001, p.72) suggested, "flexible, usable and adaptive building design of lifetime homes is able to influence social patterns and processes. It will encourage neighbourhoods to evolve and flourish [...] they represent the best way to achieve community sustainability." Despite the many advantages of Lifetime Home Standards, there are also some limits to be considered. On the one hand, within the 16 design criteria, Lifetime Home Standards do not incorporate sensory factors, such as temperature, humidity, air quality, sound insulation, lighting control. On the other, the design criteria cannot be fully applied in multi-generational families, because they exclude children from the design requirements (Allen et al., 2002; Imrie, 2006). Due to these limitations and the specificity of Cohousing model, local authorities will need to be willing to modify some standard domains for tenancies and agree a better way and criteria meet Cohousing group's needs. Also, the research will address these challenges and maximise the potential to evaluate the role of lifetime Cohousing.

2.4 Cohousing Design Considerations

The participatory process initially creates a sense of belonging and sense of community among Cohousing members, the design of the physical environment that will support and shape residents social life and daily routine. The environment can promote or discourage interaction between people, resulting in either a lively or lifeless place (McCamant & Durrett, 1994, p.173). McCamant and Durrett (1994) address these important design considerations (environmental and social factors) from their research:

Table 1: Design Considerations

| | |
|---|---|
| • The site plan and community layout | • Creating an intimate atmosphere |
| • Car-free living space | • The design of private units |
| • A child-friendly environment | • Choices of housing models |
| • The transitional space between private and common space | • Transitions between community and surrounding neighbourhood |
| • Location of the common house | • Design of the common house |
| • Pedestrian circulation | • Accommodating future changes (Flexible architecture and Lifetime Homes) |

(Source: McCamant & Durrett, 1994)

3.0 Methodology

This research aims to examine the key principles, priorities and challenges from the architectural perspective, also, to explore how Cohousing community design affects residents' attitudes, behaviour and daily living. Qualitative approach (interview) has been used in this study. The strength of qualitative interview is precisely its capacity to access self-reflexivity among interview subjects, leading to gather likelihood of the telling of collective stories: respondents may reveal feelings, beliefs, and private doubts that contradict or conflict with 'what everyone thinks' (Silverman, 2016, p.130). The methodology is presented in the following flowchart (Fig.1):

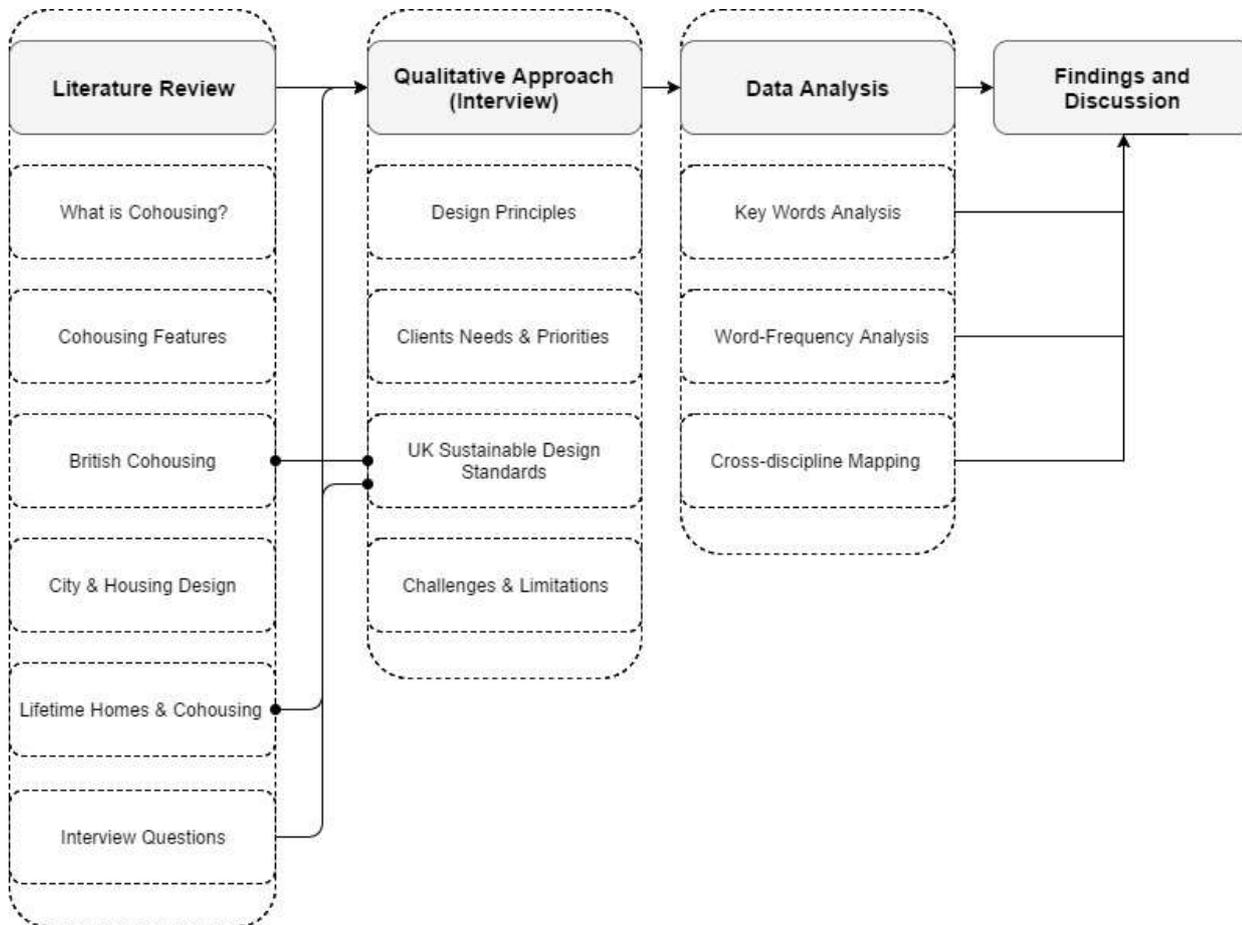


Fig 1: Methodology Flowchart
(Source: authors)

3.1 Data Collection

This study aims to discuss the key principles, priorities and challenges of Cohousing design process through semi-structured interviews with 4 Cohousing project architects. These projects are located in Sheffield, Lancaster and Cambridge.

Each interview took 60 to 80 minutes on site or by telephone. The conversations were recorded with the participants' permission for further analysis. Also, the interview activity follows the University's ethics guide by using Participants Information Sheet (PIS) and Consent Form (CF). When the architects cannot sign the consent form by hand, it used oral consent instead. The interview questions were developed based on findings from the literature review. Eleven open-ended interview questions were carried out to target six aspects of the cohousing community, which are:

- A. Motivations
- B. Sustainable/community living
- C. Residents social interaction
- D. Options for older people
- E. Affordability
- F. Design principles and standards

The questions are listed below:

A. Residents' Motivation

What is your 'motivation' to create/ join a Cohousing community?

B. Sustainable/ Community living

How can Cohousing scheme contribute to sustainable living and sustainable communities?

C. Residents social interaction

What motivates and sustain social interaction in cohousing?

How Cohousing community living affects your thinking and behaviour?

What are the criteria to select the new residents?

D. Options for older people

Do you think Cohousing is a good option for older people and contribute to multigenerational living?

E. Affordability

How can Cohousing be an affordable option for different social groups?

F. Design principles and standards

Could Cohousing model fit into Lifetime Home standard?

Could you highlight the challenges during the design process?

What are the main (environmental) technologies applied in Cohousing communities?

The comparison of the private living area between Cohousing and previous house

3.2 Data Analysis Strategy

There are six steps for the data analysis (Fig.2). The data analysis took interview audio recordings as the start point, followed by the word to word data transcript. Then, the keywords of each interview question answer are coded manually. Next, the keywords were abstracted from each aspect and have been compared between four interviewees. Afterwards, the calculation of word frequency aimed to show the core opinions, which were heavily repeated by the interviewees and how interviewees value these opinions (positive, neutral, negative). The keywords mapping is according to the interview question categories. This step aims to visualise the details of the interview data. The final step was the cross-discipline mapping to also illustrate the interrelationship between 6 aspects (A-F), and also to identify what are the important drivers of the Cohousing design process.

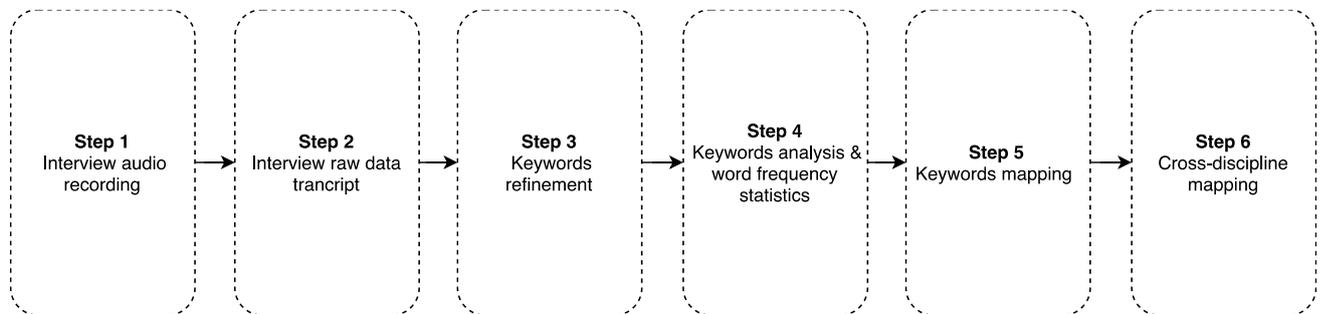


Fig.2: Cross-discipline Mapping
(Source: authors)

4.0 Findings

The interview findings include four parts:

- i) Key concepts abstracted from the interview answers (Fig.3);
- ii) Keywords analysis: strengths and weakness analysis (Fig.4);
- iii) Cross-discipline mapping (Fig.5);
- iv) List of current design standards analysis (Table. 2).

Through the interviews, 'social aspect' and 'sustainable living' are the popular considerations to the residents' motivation. Shared resources, meals and community facilities are the key drivers which contribute to sustainable living. In addition, sharing also becomes the part of community identity to the whole group. The answers from the interviews also show that Cohousing could be a good living option for older people, it is able to provide the opportunity for multigenerational living and sense of belonging and reduce loneliness. Moreover, the age-friendly design could be applied to the community as it plays an important role in the mobility and accessibility for older residents. Many design standards have been pointed out during the interview process, such as PassivHaus and Lifetime Home standards. However, there are various challenges to apply these standards to the common spaces and private units. For example, Lifetime Home standards require more circulation space; PassivHaus standard may need more investments from the beginning of the project. Therefore, Cohousing may become more expensive than the mainstream housing, in other words, Cohousing is not an answer to affordable housing at the moment. This type of housing scheme still needs more government and organization support in the UK. In addition, 'Design Principles and Standards' and 'Sustainable Living' have been pointed out as two core determinants to affect people's motivations, social interactions and affordability (Fig.5).

Data display

To better display the qualitative data, the study focused on the use of visuals to “amplify cognition.” The visualisation data display method can well explain the interview data and show the dry data in an efficient way. As Fekete et al. (2008) found that the following advantages of using information visualisation method:

- Increasing memory and processing resources available
- Reducing search for information
- Enhancing the recognition of patterns
- Enabling perceptual inference operations
- Using perceptual attention mechanisms for monitoring
- Encoding info in a manipulable medium

Figure 3: Keywords refinement and word frequency statistics

For each interview question, the number of black dots links to the opinions which are showing on the lower portion of the figure. The number showing in brackets means how many times of this opinion has been repeated for four interviewees (e.g. (4) means four interviewees all mentioned this opinion). These opinions have been listed according to the number in the brackets, sorted from high to low. The answers have been divided into three categories by interviewees’ attitudes: positive, neutral and negative.

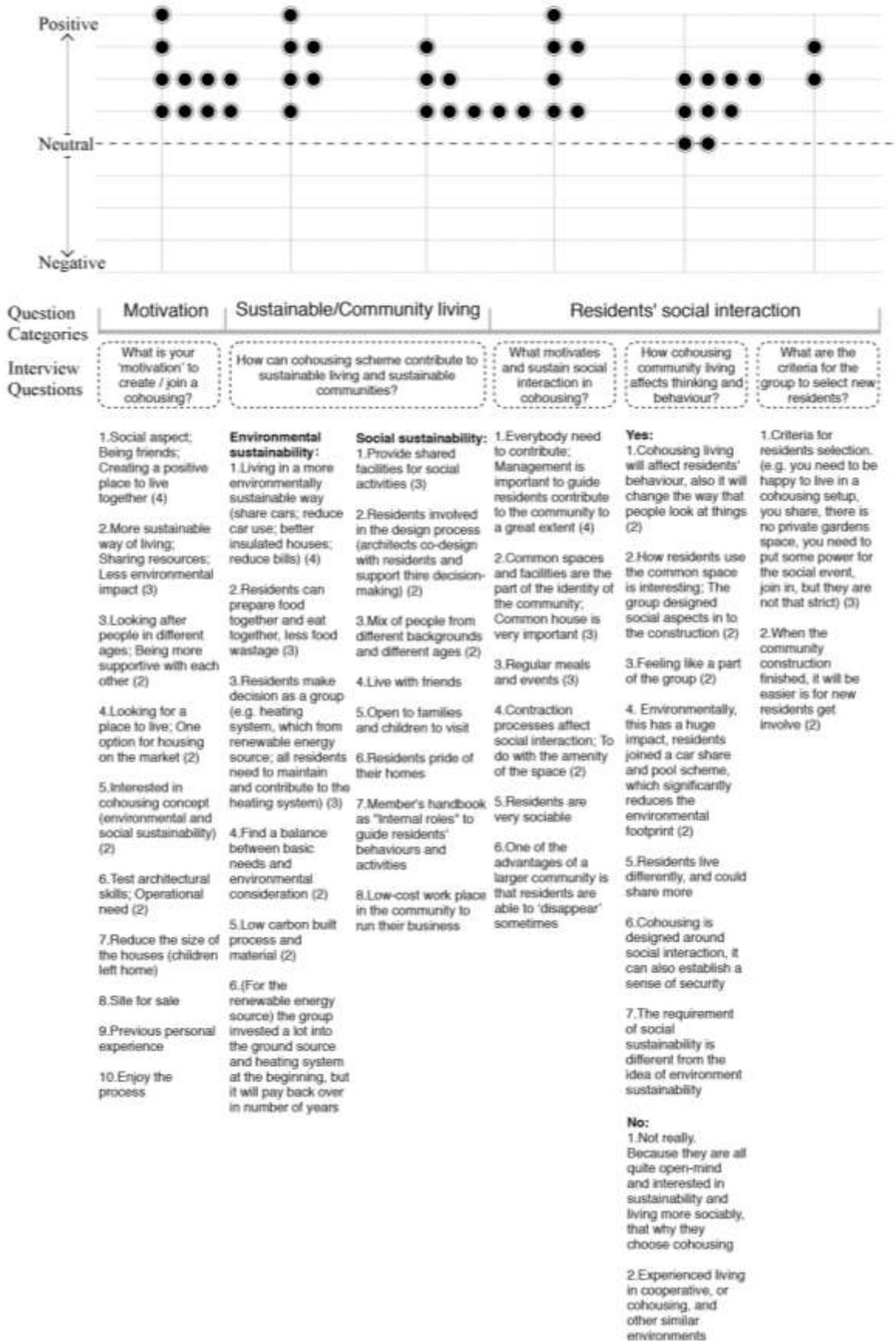


Fig.3 Keywords refinement and analysis. (source: authors)

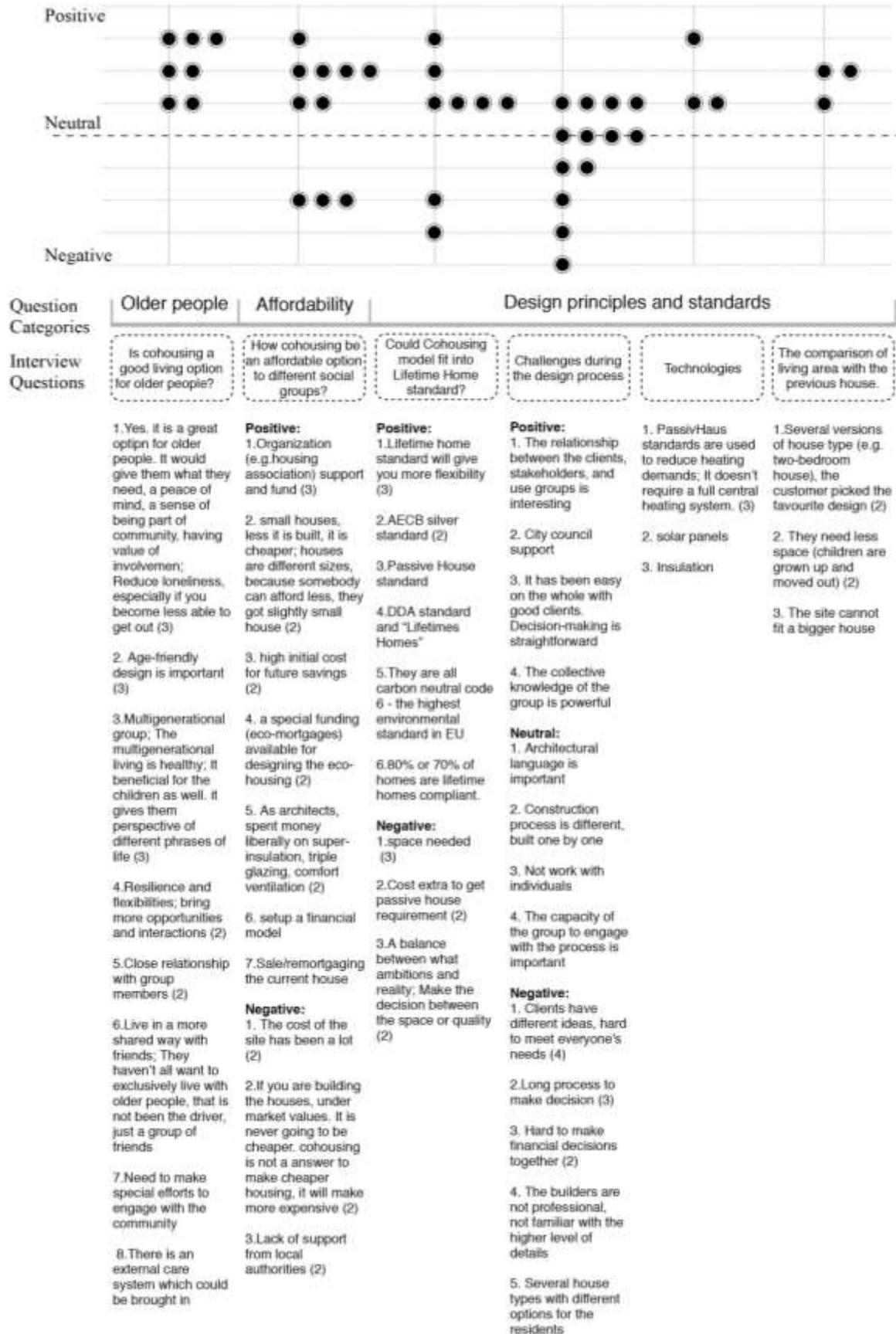


Fig.3 (continued) Keywords refinement and analysis. (source: authors)

Figure 4: Keywords analysis and mapping

The figure shows the key aspects of the answers, the attitude of the opinions (positive, neutral or negative) and the degree (grading) of the interviewees value these opinions.

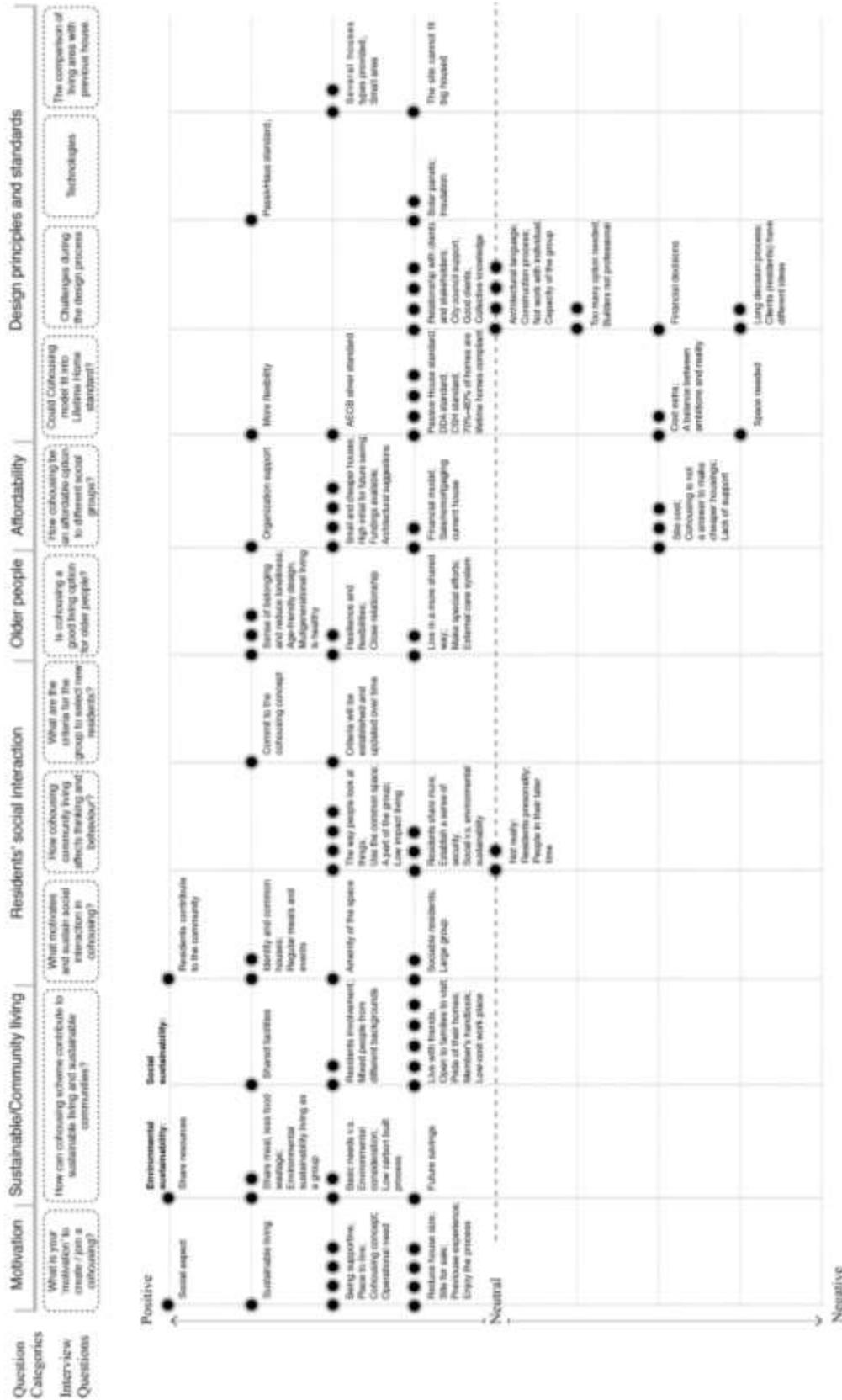


Fig 4: Keywords analysis and mapping. (source: authors)

Figure 5: Cross-discipline mapping

According to the findings of step 5, the evaluation of the answers has been produced, which presents the interrelationship of the six categories (A-F). The outcome of this step is to show the important and priority factor(s) which could lead the design procedure of Cohousing communities. This is the valuable foundation to explore the design guidelines for current and future Cohousing groups.

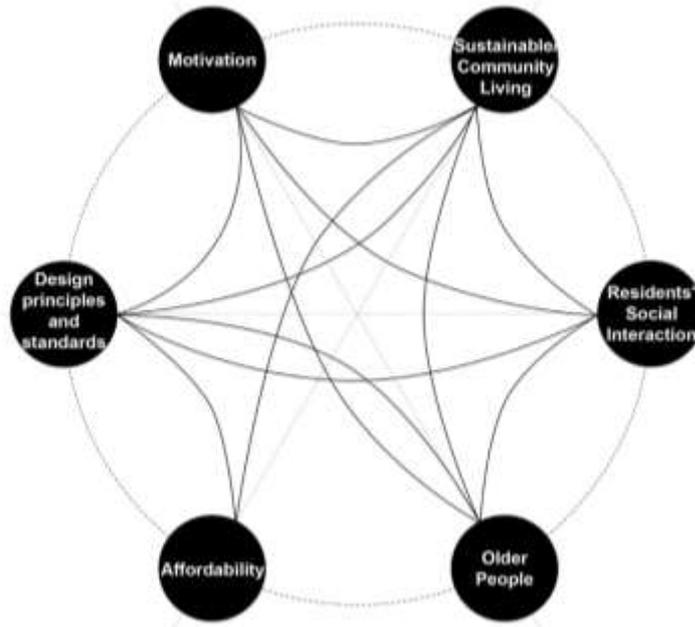


Fig.5 Cross-discipline Analysis.
(Source: authors)

4.2 UK Sustainable Design Standards

The following table lists the design standards which were pointed out during the interviews. This shows the following standards have been considered or applied in a Cohousing setting during the development process. The pros and cons have been discussed and summarised by the architects. This information could benefit more Cohousing group members by providing simple and clear information if the members hope to target low impact and low-carbon community living.

Table 2. Design Standards

| Name of Design Standard | Application | Pros and Cons |
|--|--|--|
| Lifetime Homes Standard | Lifetime Homes are ordinary homes designed to incorporate 16 Design Criteria that can be universally applied to new homes at minimal cost. Each design feature adds to the comfort and convenience of the home and supports the changing needs of individuals and families at different stages of life. Lifetime Homes are all about flexibility and adaptability; they are not 'special' but are thoughtfully designed to create and encourage better living environments for everyone (The Lifetime Home Design Guide, 2010). | More circulation space needed, not fit well with the small house (-); More expensive (-); It gives a lot of more flexibility. Especially for older people (+). |
| Association for Environment Conscious Building (AECB Standard) | The AECB Building Standard is aimed at those wishing to create high-performance buildings using widely available technology at little or no extra cost. We estimate that this low-risk option will reduce overall CO2 emissions by 70% compared to the UK average for buildings of each type. Individual self-builders and large-scale residential and non-residential developers could make a valuable contribution to low-carbon building by meeting the AECB Building Standard (AECB. n.d.). | Little or no extra cost (+); Apply to residential and non-residential buildings (+); The Low-carbon building (+); |

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| PassivHaus Standard | <p>PassivHaus or 'Passive House' is the fastest growing energy performance standard in the world with 30,000 buildings realised to date with the majority of those since the turn of the century. The PassivHaus standards strengths lie in the simplicity of its approach; build a house that has an excellent thermal performance, exceptional airtightness with mechanical ventilation.</p> <p>This robust approach to building design allows the designer to minimise the 'Heating Demand' of the building and in some residential buildings only specify a heated towel rail as means of conventional heating; this heat can then be recovered and circulated by a Mechanical Ventilation and Heat Recovery (MVHR) unit (BRE. n.d).</p> | <p>More investment required at the beginning (-); Good for future savings; Lower running cost for the living space in the future. e.g. less heating and cooling cost (+);</p> |
| Code for Sustainable Homes (CSH) | <p>The Code for Sustainable Homes (the Code) is an environmental assessment method for rating and certifying the performance of new homes. It is a national standard for use in the design and construction of new homes with a view to encouraging continuous improvement in sustainable home building.</p> <p>The Code for Sustainable Homes covers nine categories of sustainable design: • Energy and CO2 Emissions • Water • Materials • Surface Water Run-off • Waste • Pollution • Health and Well-being • Management • Ecology. (Council, 2012)</p> | <p>More investment required at the beginning (-); Good for future savings (+); Low-carbon (Zero-carbon) emissions (+)</p> |
| Disability Discrimination Act (DDA Standard) | <p>The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) was introduced in 1996 and Part III gave disabled people a right of access to goods, facilities, services and premises (Gawler, 2000).</p> | <p>Perfect for disabled people and older people (+)</p> |

(Source: authors)

5.0 Discussion and future research

This paper aims to examine the main design principles, design priorities and challenges of Cohousing communities by exploring the design experiences of four Cohousing project architects and their opinions on shared community living. This research found that 'social aspect' and 'sustainable living' are the top two motivations for the group members to join a Cohousing community. Sharing (resources, meals and facilities) plays a significant role to contribute to the sustainable community living. Moreover, design aspects and sustainable community living as two drivers which are largely related to residents' motivation, social interactions and affordability. The findings of this study highlight the focus, priorities and challenges when designing a Cohousing community. It also identifies the limitations of current sustainable and lifetime design standards in the UK context.

A research gap has been identified which confirms that there are little-structured design knowledge and frameworks for physical and social settings to guide British Cohousing design development. Therefore, this paper could be an important reference to support cohousing design and also demonstrate a better understanding of new forms of community living in the UK. The limitations and drawbacks still remain in this study, such as limited sample size. In addition, due to the differences of in the construction process and stages in Cohousing projects, it is very hard to compare the design experiences between various Cohousing communities. Also, some architects who were involved in this study are also the Cohousing members, they designed the Cohousing community to suit their needs and other family members, there is no comparability to the architects who design the community for non-family clients.

According to Garciano (2011), the unique characteristics of Cohousing neighbourhood, such as the intention to establish small houses and communities, the participatory planning process with residents and community-focused operations, may not always fit well in the current world of a Cohousing scheme and its funders. Its development may be influenced by several factors, such as personal experience, educational level, government policy, culture and underwriting criteria of public and private funders. "Resident participation in the development process is Cohousing's greatest asset and its most limiting factor. It is a huge task for a group of people inexperienced in both collective decision making and building industry, to take on a project of this complexity. Most residents have little knowledge of financing, design and construction issues for housing development" (McCamant & Durrett, 1994, p.155). But, Cohousing can be an innovative community model to enhance residents' interaction with each other and with nature (Sangunietti, 2014). However, how do you make Cohousing models benefit a wider society and the environment? Some Cohousing settlements in the UK showed a better performance, such as LILAC project, Leeds. While, as Marckmann, et al. (2012) stated, the outcomes and developments are not unambiguously in favour of Cohousing, especially not compared with an average apartment building.

Cohousing communities use more sustainable technologies built into houses, but at the same time, the risk that technology would take up a disproportionate amount of maintenance time and energy (Marckmann et al. 2012). In other words, it is vital to keep the balance between having environmentally friendly technologies and what would be acceptable to residents. Usually, most environmental protection measures are linked with residents' behaviour. It will make this study data collection harder and also remains uncertain how the Cohousing scheme would work in a broader population. Finally, a long time is normally taken by the development process, where the group is seeking finance are future questions to consider. This will help to reduce the development time and get more people involve the project if they are interested.

Compared with the literature review above, this study focuses on the design aspects of Cohousing community development. The findings of challenges facing cohousing are listed below, which could be the important information for the future design work.

- If the builders are not familiar with the higher level of building details or energy performance, the construction process could be challenging.
- Lifetime Home Standards are not always fit with small housing, they require more circulation spaces.
- Achieving PassivHaus Standards may cost more at the beginning stage, but it is good for future savings and the environment.
- People have different ideas and views. If architects work with individuals to design their private living units, the decision-making process will take much longer.
- There are usually very intense group meetings during the development process.
- It is difficult to make financial decisions as a group.
- The land costs a lot of money. Cohousing scheme is not a perfect answer for cheaper housing. It needs lots of support from local authority and organisations.
- Due to the financial reason, it is difficult for young people to join a Cohousing group.
- If the architect could spend money on super-insulation, triple glazing, comfort ventilation, and do not spend money on complicated heating systems for space heating and hot water, and also reduce the cost on renewable energy, that could be very helpful.

Future research will concentrate more on how physical design settings affect residents' social interaction and behaviour. Also, how to build age-friendly environment for older residents who live in Cohousing communities. The architects, designers and Cohousing group members could better weigh determinants which have been found in this study and also consider how to manage the Cohousing challenges and limitations during the development process.

7.0 Conclusion

This research examined the Cohousing model by focussing on physical design and social aspects and provided a better understanding of the design principles, design standards, priorities and challenges of the Cohousing communities development process. The comparison between four architects' Cohousing design experiences has highlighted the strength and weakness of the Cohousing development procedure. The findings also highlight Cohousing could be an option for older people to achieve ageing-in-place. Additionally, the research is able to show the limitations of the cohousing model and to provide sustainability and affordability guidance for Cohousing designs. At the same time, the Cohousing study could potentially become a milestone for the evolution of housing provision, leading to the change of people's thinking and behaviour.

The findings of this study could be a useful tool to develop sustainable community building and could benefit a wide range of stakeholders. It could also potentially be applied to different settings and environments in the UK and beyond, accelerating the implementation of environmentally friendly homes and sustainable communities.

8.0 Acknowledgements

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