

Lancaster Cohousing

CSO Platform Interview Questions

1. What was the main consideration or motivation to participate in this CSO initiative?

As an ecological cohousing project, the two main considerations for members were either to join and participate in an intergenerational community or to live in a high standard eco-home.

2. How was the final group formed? Were there many changes of participants?

Lancaster Cohousing was formed by five people who met through a combination of social, work and group contacts in the Lancaster area. Some of them had initially considered the purchase of a former school in the city which they would have converted to units for each of them to live in, with some shared communal spaces, however they were unable to purchase the school. One of the five had done research into communities and communal living and written about this through Diggers and Dreamers, which is a directory of communities within the UK. After further discussion the group considered that cohousing might be the model that they wanted to pursue.

At that time, 2005, cohousing was a little known concept in the UK. This group arranged the National Cohousing Conference to be run in Lancaster on 25-27th February 2005. This enabled them to understand the concept better and to promote it locally. Following the conference the group spent some time reflecting and considering if this was the way forward for them. Once they had decided that cohousing was the model they wanted to follow they set about attracting other members. The first way that they did this was through a public meeting held in Lancaster March 2006 for anyone interested in joining as a member or as a 'friend'. This meeting was attended by about 30 people and generated 5 new members. The founder members established several key Policies new members had to agree to in order to become members (Food, Visits, Smoking, and Pets). New members were also expected to attend meetings and social events in order to understand the group and what would be expected of them, as well as getting to know the other members.

3. What was the biggest problem in the formation stage, and how was it resolved?

Attracting members was a key aspect for many years. This was more difficult when there was no site or design and just a concept. The risks associated with the project changed over time as more aspects became certain, e.g. site acquired, design finalised, loan agreed. Members were asked for a 30% deposit of the target price of their chosen property type. Until 2010 there was a sliding scale of discounts for members to recognise the risk that they had taken. After that date a new members were expected to pay the anticipated total cost of the property with no discount offered.

4. Did you use the services of a process facilitator? If so, what were your experiences with him/her? If not, would you recommend to use one?

An external process facilitator was only used for early meetings and to assist with developing our consensus decision making process. This was beneficial before the group developed their own internal skills and resources. Members took on the facilitation of meetings and new members joined who either had group facilitation skills or were keen to develop them.

5. Had the group any expertise/experience in (energy efficient) construction?

There was some building experience within the early group members – but specific professional services were needed to ensure the final project met Passivhaus standards.

6. What information / tools were you most in need of?

At formation stage the most needed information was to do with land search and selection and with group processes. There was much to learn about cohousing design from other projects. Members visited developments and read and researched widely to discover experiences and good practice.

7. How did you find a contractor / architect? If so, what were your experiences with him/her?

The appointment of the architect was conducted in 2006 by a thorough selection process. Four architectural practices were shortlisted on the basis of their experience both in eco-build and cohousing. Group members visited the architects' previous projects to help to inform their decisions. The final decision was made on the basis of an interview panel which comprised four members of LCH. In relation to the procurement of the site, the architect assisted with sketch layouts of sites which were used to inform net value calculations. The architect was instrumental in the appointment of the remainder of design team. There was a high degree of participation between the design team and LCH at all stages in the design. It was important that the key members of the design team understood the vision of LCH and were able to contribute to the vision and enable it to be achieved. This was especially true of the architect.

The contractor was selected through a tendering process. That process was set up relatively speedily and involved selection on the basis of a combination of a limited pricing submission, quality submission and interview. The tendering process that selected the contractor was a three stage process. There were a limited number of contractors of a suitable size within the local area, and two contractors withdrew from the process after shortlisting. Amongst the reasons cited were the uncertainties surrounding delivering an unprecedented number of dwellings to Passivhaus standard and the human resources required from the contractor side to engage with the detailed design process. Twelve contractors were contacted and asked to return pre-qualification and this was then increased to 14 when the return rate was poor. Six contractors were then invited to submit formal tenders. Finally four contractors were interviewed by a panel comprising QS/Contract Manager, Architect and Client Representatives. The project requirements were set out in a Project Briefing document to introduce the design information. This specified Passivhaus as well as Code for Sustainable Homes level 6.

8. Do you cooperate on maintenance / energy supply?

Different aspects of maintenance are outlined in the Lease agreement that is whether LCH or the tenant are responsible for different aspects. LCH acts at the ESCO and supplies hot water and heating from a district heating system (using a biomass boiler) and electricity from solar photovoltaic panels and the local hydro-electricity plant based on the river Lune. Each house contains individual meters and LCH bills members for their heating/hot water and electricity use.

9. If you could do it all over again, what is the main thing you would do differently?

- LCH took on the client project management aspect themselves and would recommend that groups do not do this. Although there may be some perceived financial benefit, it can create difficulties within the group.
This role is best assigned to a professional who is not involved in the project.
- Resist the pressure from the lender to apply conditions on the design team as this increased the costs