



Housing 

Cohousing Strategy

2026–2030

Co-designed Living for All



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“Rupali Court will bring joy to local people in the community; everyone is excited about it. There is a need for a cohousing community in Lozells, and thanks to Housing 21, it's finally happening.”

Anwara, cohousing resident



Resident testimonials

“Rupali Court will not be just a retirement home. These 25 people, we are a family. We should look after each other because we are all older people. This will be a fantastic opportunity for everybody to become a family.”

Mohammed, cohousing resident

“I have grandchildren who will visit regularly and having the darker surfaces (for the worktops) helps with any spills and stains as they are easier to clean. I felt very happy to be asked and given the opportunity to choose from the options.”

Rashida, cohousing resident



Executive summary

This revised Housing 21 Cohousing Strategy outlines our renewed commitment to developing inclusive, and culturally responsive cohousing communities. Drawing on recent research, pilot projects, and community engagement, this strategy sets out our vision, objectives, and implementation plan for the next phase of our work.

The key changes in response to the review are:

- Expanding the approach beyond Birmingham and the Midlands to cover all areas of England
- Committing to measuring and sharing the social value and impact of the strategy and all completed projects

Cohousing represents a bold and innovative approach to meeting the housing needs of older people from often marginalised communities. At Housing 21, our commitment to providing quality homes and services for those who live in our properties is rooted in the belief that everyone deserves to live well, with dignity, autonomy and with a genuine sense of belonging.

Our experience through developing our first cohousing scheme, Rupali Court, has demonstrated the transformative potential of cohousing when it is shaped by those who will call it home.

Cohousing is not just about buildings; it is about people, relationships and the creation of intentional communities. By placing residents at the heart of design and decision making, we can ensure our schemes reflect the needs and aspirations of those people in the local community who live in them.

Above all, cohousing is about creating homes and communities where people feel safe, valued and empowered; where diversity is celebrated and everyone has the opportunity to thrive.

Housing 21 is committed to making cohousing a key part of our portfolio of provision, learning from our experience and working with residents, partners and sector leaders to build a future where everyone can live well together.

Bruce Moore

Chief Executive



Social, cultural and economic rationale

Cohousing is commonly described as an “intentional community” or a group of “like-minded” people coming together.

We are keen to embrace diversity with a focus on a community that offers mutual support where neighbours look out for one another. We aim to create communities that are based on shared values of respect, inclusion and support.



L-R: Mohammed Kalam, Legacy West Midlands; Keith Carneige, Housing 21 Board Member; Tony Tench, Housing 21; Late Councillor Waseem Zaffar, Birmingham City Council; Dawn Carr, Housing 21 and Shamsun Choudhury, Legacy West Midlands

Cohousing offers a powerful alternative to traditional housing models, particularly for older adults from underrepresented and marginalised communities. It supports ageing in place, fosters mutual support, and allows residents to remain connected to their cultural and social networks.

Housing 21 is keen to develop a suitable model of cohousing that engages older people in areas of deprivation. This approach will inform both our designs and operating models to meet the changing needs and requirements of older people. Our initial focus is people from minority ethnic backgrounds.

Housing 21's proposed schemes should ideally have between 16 and 25 properties, providing a sense of community and belonging. The scale will enable us to work within urban areas where sites tend to be smaller whilst ensuring the schemes are an appropriate size where residents get to know each other and create their own community.

We will actively engage local communities, with a particular focus on older residents, to ensure the project reflects local diversity and fosters social cohesion. By involving older people in both the design of the buildings and the development of the community's values and ethos, we aim to create a strong sense of ownership and belonging before the cohousing project is completed.

Cohousing is not a "one size fits all" approach and the proposal is that there will be a choice of operating models agreed with residents at each location, ranging from self-management options, working with local agencies rooted in the local community or in some instances, Housing 21 may have longer term involvement in day-to-day management.

Respect and inclusion

At Housing 21 we want everyone to feel welcome and like they belong. The diversity of our employees and residents is fundamentally important to our success. We are driven by our people, residents and partners. Over recent years, people have become more aware of the strengths diversity of thought and culture bring to organisations.

We aim to provide the best experience for people of all backgrounds. They will have access to the standard of housing and support which is right for them within their community. We are committed to listen to diverse groups and conduct research into their requirements.

The Cohousing Strategy will help us to do this, as we seek to develop intentional communities in areas where 30 per cent of the population is identified as being from a minority ethnic group.

The learning from our collaboration with diverse groups in cohousing has given us the tools and confidence to explore cohousing opportunities for those from other underrepresented communities.

Our Cohousing Strategy will continue to inform our work around respect and inclusion by ensuring we listen to the diverse voices of residents and ensure the environments we provide enable them to feel safe, accepted for who they are and able to thrive.

Cohousing roadmap



1. Establish a cohousing group

- Engage with existing local community
- Attend information sessions
- Expression of interest questionnaire
- Training and support
- Regular group meetings to build core local vision



2. Site/ property search

- Type of location and size
- Opportunities include land disposals, community assets transfers, developers and land agents



3. Feasibility study

- Develop business case
- Project plan and design brief
- Group consensus on design and facilities
- Review tenure options
- Feasibility study and business case



4. Financial viability and planning

- Stage one approval
- Risks
- Land value
- Funding



5. Land purchase and build

- Land deal agreed
- Start on site
- Regular progress meetings with Housing 21 and contractor



6. Move in!

What we've learned so far

Our first cohousing project is Rupali Court in Birmingham. This flagship project has enabled Housing 21 to develop a cohousing model and capture lessons learned for future cohousing developments in England. Key learnings include:

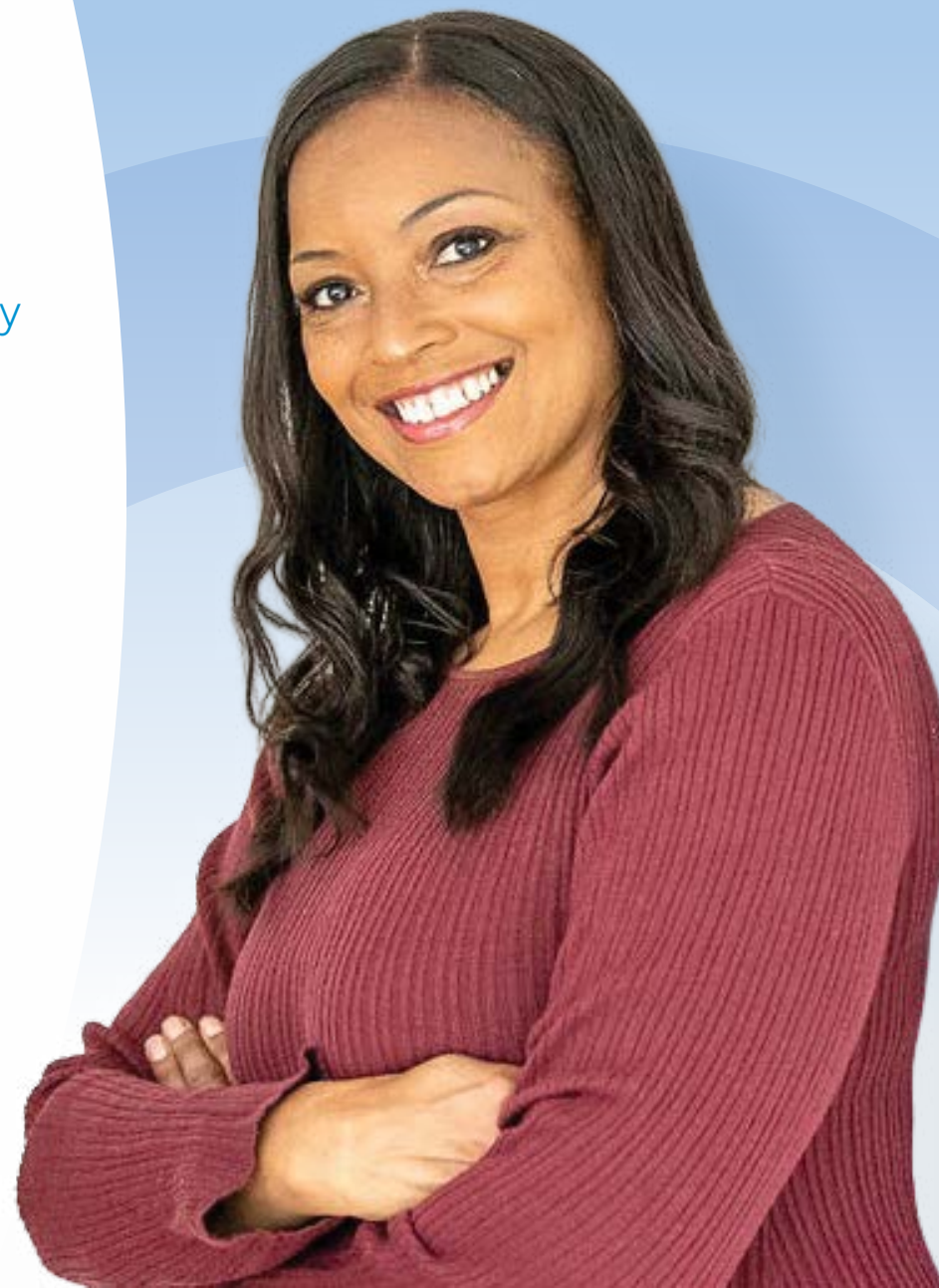
- Traditional nomination processes often exclude those underrepresented and most in need
- Cohousing takes time to develop, but housing needs are immediate; ongoing engagement is essential
- Cultural needs can be met through thoughtful design (e.g. ritual bathing facilities)
- Safety, affordability, and flexible management are critical to success
- Internal gatekeeping and lack of representation must be addressed to ensure inclusivity



“Rupali Court, our first cohousing scheme which opened in 2026, has been a valuable learning experience for Housing 21. It has shown us that meaningful change begins by challenging traditional systems and amplifying voices that are often overlooked. Building inclusive communities requires proactive engagement and a willingness to rethink established approaches. We’ve learned that cultural identity can be celebrated through thoughtful design.

While cohousing takes time to develop, housing needs are immediate, so continuous dialogue is critical. Above all, we’ve seen how cohousing can deliver lasting social value by fostering connection, wellbeing, and equity within communities. This includes creating opportunities for economic participation, reducing isolation, and improving quality of life for older people. Our new Cohousing Strategy marks the start of an exciting chapter for Housing 21, where community, culture, inclusion, and social impact are at the heart of everything we do.”

Dawn Carr, Cohousing Partnership Manager



Cohousing design and delivery principles

‘Making sure the design promotes a sense of belonging with the opportunity to meet and mix with neighbours’

Housing 21 is committed to ensuring our cohousing designs meet the lifestyle requirements of residents. We will do this by working in partnership with local older people and communities to understand their needs and aspirations and by taking a flexible approach to each project.



This is a generic layout and will be different for each site/ scheme. Not all will have bungalows for example.

Our key design principles are:



Co-design with community members from the outset:

Engage residents early in the design process to ensure the development reflects their needs, values, and aspirations.



Ensure affordability and financial inclusion: Incorporate models that support access for low and middle-income residents, ensuring long-term affordability.



Enable flexible management models that evolve with residents' needs: Support adaptable governance and operational structures that can respond to changing community dynamics.



Prioritise cultural and intergenerational needs in layout and amenities: Design inclusive spaces that support diverse cultural practices and foster interaction across age groups.



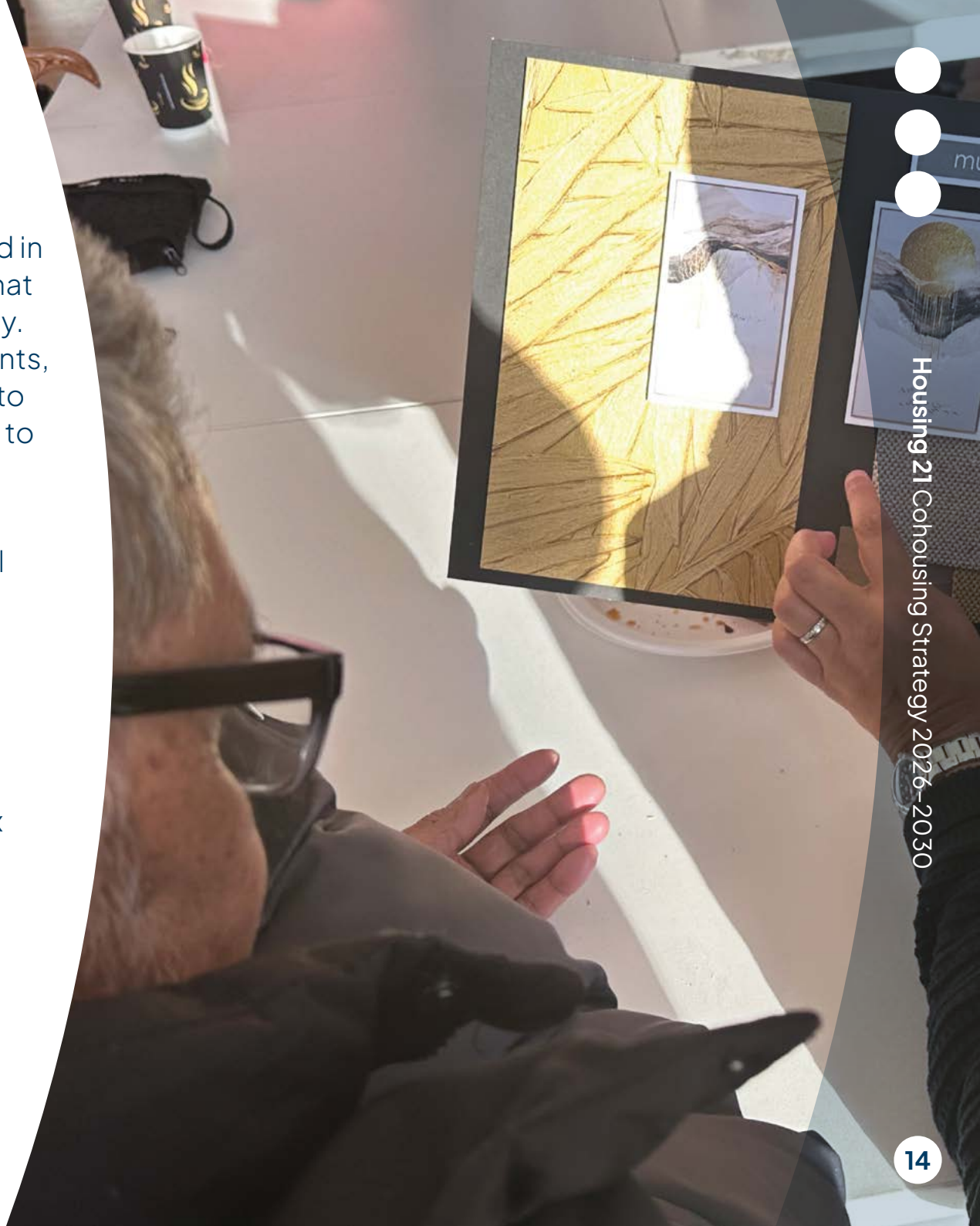
Adopt “secure by design” principles for safety: Integrate safety features into the physical design to promote wellbeing and reduce vulnerability.



Design for social impact: Embed social value into the project by fostering community cohesion, supporting local initiatives, and promoting inclusive growth.

All of our cohousing schemes will be built with sustainability in mind and renewable energy sources considered where appropriate. We will encourage and support residents to get involved in decisions about sustainability, thinking about what it means for them individually and as a community. Including more open space, car-free environments, and shared gardens within the projects will help to create a greener, healthier scheme for residents to live in and enjoy.

By engaging with future residents at the design stage we will agree a clear purpose for communal areas and gardens. For instance, residents may want to dedicate green space to grow fruit and vegetables rather than having flowerbeds and lawned areas. The community aspects of living in a cohousing project are key to its success so making sure the design promotes the sense of “belonging” with the opportunity to meet and mix with neighbours is essential.



Strategic priorities for cohousing

Our strategic priorities include some revisions to our earlier Cohousing Strategy to incorporate the lessons learnt and allow for innovation and flexibility.



Priority one

Develop inclusive cohousing schemes in areas of high deprivation and diversity



Priority three

Build a robust evidence base through research and partnerships



Priority two

Co-design with residents to ensure cultural relevance and community ownership



Priority four

Create flexible, scalable models that can be adapted across regions



Priority one: Develop inclusive cohousing schemes in areas of high deprivation and diversity

We will continue to develop intentional communities in areas where 30 per cent of the population is identified as being from a minority ethnic group.

This supports the delivery of cohousing schemes in communities that face economic challenges and have diverse populations. By targeting areas of high deprivation, these schemes will provide affordable, supportive living environments that foster social cohesion and resilience. Inclusivity will be embedded in design, governance, and community engagement, ensuring that marginalised voices are heard and represented throughout the process.

We will do this by:

Site selection: Identifying and securing at least two development sites in areas ranked within the top 30 per cent or more most deprived nationally (e.g. using Index Multiple Deprivation data).

Local partnerships: Establishing at least three partnerships with local organisations (e.g. cultural groups, housing charities, health services) to support inclusive development. Increase internal awareness and accountability around diversity and inclusion.

Legacy and capacity building: We will continue to empower communities and build a legacy of social capital, consensus decision making and governance.

Community representation: Ensure at least 50 per cent of co-design participants reflect the local community's ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic diversity.

Affordability targets: Ensure at least 60 per cent of units are accessible to households earning below the local median income.

Impact monitoring: Track and report on social inclusion and wellbeing indicators annually for residents in these schemes.



Priority two: Co-design with future residents to ensure cultural relevance and community ownership

This priority focuses on actively involving residents in the design process to create spaces that reflect their cultural values, traditions, and lived experiences. Adopting a co-design approach ensures that the physical environment and community practices are meaningful and inclusive, fostering a sense of belonging. This collaborative method not only enhances cultural relevance but also strengthens community ownership, empowering residents to shape decisions and take pride in the outcomes.

This will be achieved through:

Resident engagement: Engage at least 75 per cent of future residents in the co-design process through workshops, surveys, or interviews.

Inclusive design features: Integrate at least three culturally inclusive design elements (e.g. multi-faith spaces, communal kitchens, inclusive signage, garden areas).

Ownership and decision making: Establish a resident-led design advisory group with monthly meetings during the planning phase.

Feedback integration: Achieve 80 per cent alignment between resident feedback and final design elements.

Community satisfaction: Post-occupancy survey shows at least 90 per cent of residents feel the design reflects their cultural and communal needs.



Priority three: Build a robust evidence base through research and partnerships

To strengthen the case for cohousing, this priority focuses on generating credible data and insights through rigorous research and strategic collaborations. Partnering with academic institutions, housing organisations, and community groups will enable the collection of evidence on social impact, affordability, and wellbeing outcomes. A strong evidence base will help to inform policy, attract investment, and support continuous improvement of cohousing practices.

We will do this by:

Establishing research partnerships: Formalising at least three partnerships with academic institutions, think tanks, or research organisations.

Conducting community-based research and disseminating findings: Completing at least two resident-led research projects annually to gather lived experience data.

Developing a social impact evidence framework: Finalising and publishing a cohousing-specific social impact framework.

Data collection and analysis: Collecting baseline and follow-up data on at least five key indicators (e.g. wellbeing, inclusion, affordability).

Influencing policy and practice: Presenting findings at three sector events or policy roundtables annually.



Priority four: Create flexible, scalable models that can be adapted across regions

This objective aims to develop cohousing models that are adaptable to different geographic, cultural, and economic contexts. By prioritising flexibility and scalability, these models will serve as templates that can be tailored to local needs while maintaining core principles of inclusivity and sustainability. This approach ensures that cohousing can be implemented effectively across diverse regions, reducing barriers to adoption and promoting long-term viability.

We will do this by:

Model development: Developing at least two cohousing design templates adaptable to different urban and regional contexts.

Regional pilots: Implementing pilot schemes in at least three identified regions or combined authority areas.

Scalability assessment: Conducting annual scalability reviews to assess adaptability across different local authorities.

Policy alignment: Reviewing and updating to reflect Housing 21's respect and inclusion principles in relation to cohousing every six months.

Knowledge sharing: Publishing a Housing 21 Cohousing Toolkit and share with housing providers or local authorities.

How we involve those interested in living in a cohousing scheme:



Visits to similar cohousing sites: undertaking benchmarking visits to established cohousing schemes to gain insight into best practice and inform the development of a community that genuinely reflects and supports the needs of local people with housing needs.



Community coaching: developing and supporting local ambassadors who can guide potential residents through each stage of the cohousing development journey, offering insight, encouragement, and peer-led support.



Ongoing capacity building: supporting the cohousing group to develop the skills and knowledge needed to manage key governance areas, such as financial planning, budgeting, and risk management. This aims to ensure that the group has a solid foundation to build an effective community.



Digital inclusion: developing a series of localised programmes designed to support older people in building the skills and confidence to fully engage in a digital world. This will enable residents to be tenant-ready and feel comfortable navigating our systems and online services.



Develop a community activity programme: empowering residents to take an active role in shaping, delivering, and sustaining a diverse range of wellbeing and arts-based activities on the site, helping to build confidence, connection, and a strong sense of community ownership.

Appendices

Cohousing Strategy consultations

Housing 21 employees

Session was instigated to bring colleagues from across Housing 21 together to help build a better localised operating picture of what was happening, and to begin to identify key actions needed to improve the overall later living housing offer and outcomes for older people from the underrepresented communities.

This was the start of what will hopefully lead to more conversations with those who attended, and the wider organisation. This was essential if Housing 21 is committed to improving later life, particularly for those who are most at risk of missing out, and disparities in housing will play a key role in the work going forward.

Public consultation

In partnership with the Inclusive Housing Alliance (IHA), Housing 21 hosted a consultation exercise at an event in Leicester to engage local communities and stakeholders in shaping inclusive housing solutions for older people from underrepresented

communities. The event was targeted at local residents, community organisations and included key experts of community-led housing and relevant officers from Leicester local authority and locality.

Feedback

“ The conference was fantastic, a really valuable day. ”

“ This event gave us a real voice in shaping housing for our future generations. ”

“ It’s inspiring to see organisations working together to make inclusion a reality. ”

- Identify priority areas for culturally-sensitive housing design
- Establish a working group to develop actionable plans
- Secure strategic commitment from stakeholders to support pilot projects
- Build a database of people interested in cohousing
- Develop a toolkit or resources to better enable communities to engage in the design and implementation of local cohousing schemes

Testimonials

“ When looking at the ‘Ageing Well For All’ report the critical factor is fundamentally about choice which supports independence and values cultural sensitivity. The principles of ‘trusted people, trusted places, and trusted products’ is central. I am hopeful that as families, communities and providers have conversations, that solutions will be developed to better reflect cultural and faith diversity, and the cohousing product is not only now an option, but it is also inclusive, and I congratulate Housing 21 to help shift the narrative and delivery.”

Abdul Ravat, Abbeyfields Living Society

“ For many people, the idea of cohousing is new, simply put it is about agencies working in partnership with local people to build homes that people want and need. At a time where we are facing a housing crisis, cohousing, and other forms of community-led housing, offers local people an alternative pathway to affordable housing. For small housing organisations like Pathway Housing Solutions to collaborate with larger organisations in developing homes for people from our communities, is a powerful testament to real partnership working.”

Henri Baptiste, Pathway Housing Solutions

“ The relationship with Housing 21 is over five years in the making. Initially Legacy West Midlands supported with outreach and community support; two years later we were commissioned to take on the community engagement for the cohousing scheme. Housing 21 engaged a local organisation with deep roots in the community to reach the local community. This is something to be talked about and celebrated.”

Aftab Rahman, Legacy West Midlands

“ Housing 21’s cohousing model serves as a blueprint for specialist older persons’ housing that can be adapted for any group, particularly those from underrepresented groups facing barriers to traditional housing. By applying lessons from our Rupali Court project in Birmingham, we aim to build inclusive communities in all of our schemes, where residents—regardless of their ethnicity, sexuality, or gender identity—can live authentically, with stability and the care that they need as they age, without fear of isolation or the need to hide who they are.”

Rosemarie Jenkins, Housing 21 Board Member

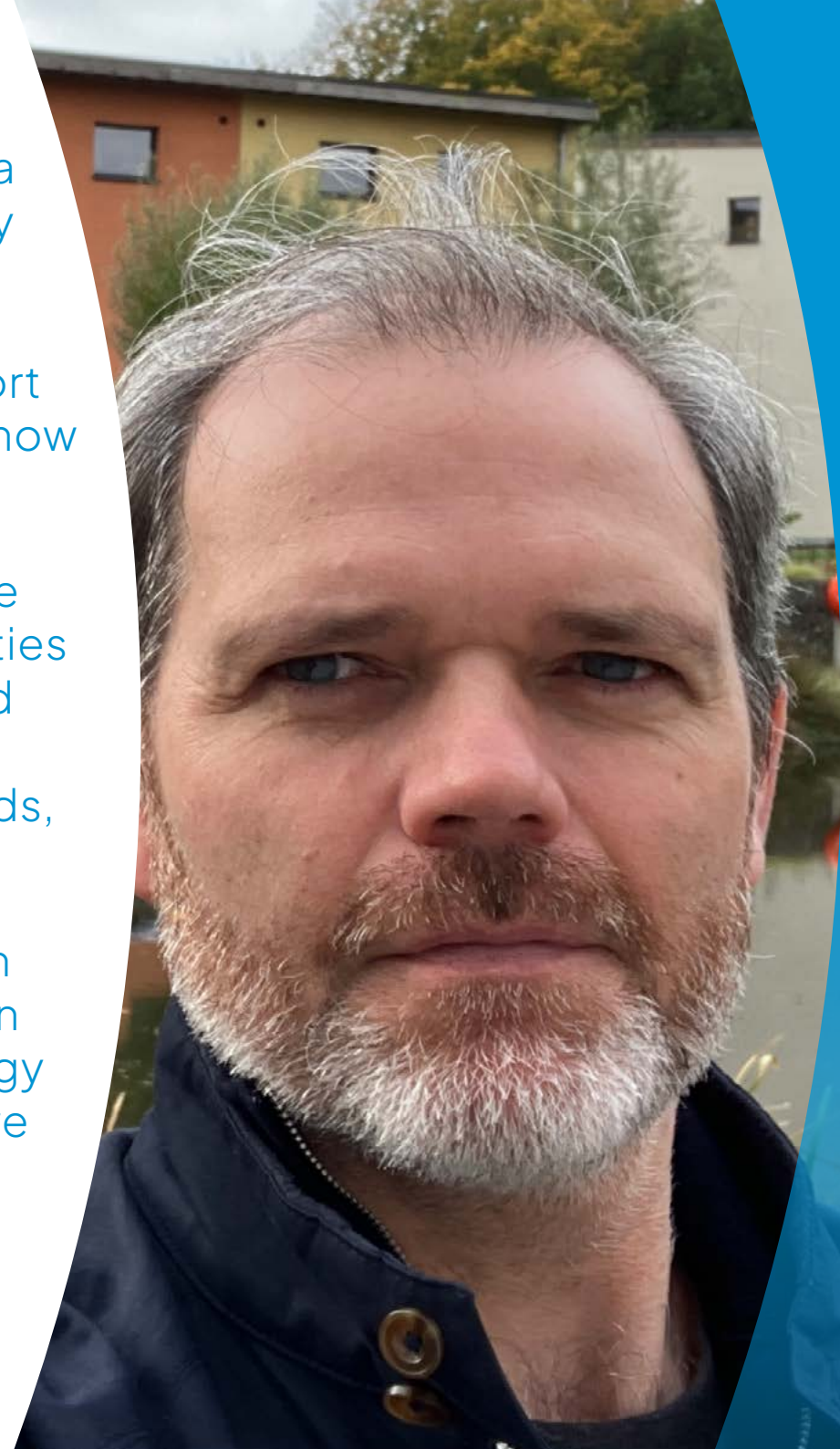


“ We know that cohousing can offer people a remarkable way to live: enjoying the privacy of your own home whilst being part of a neighbourly, sociable community, where residents come together not only to support one another, but to make decisions about how their community evolves and thrives.

Housing 21 deserves credit for adapting the principles of cohousing to reach communities that have not always had access to this kind of housing opportunity, whilst recognising that every community will have its own needs, aspirations and ways of working together.

As our population ages, we need more than housing. We need places where people can belong, contribute and flourish. This strategy is an important step in that direction, and we hope it inspires others across the housing sector to be equally ambitious.”

Owen Jarvis, Chief Executive, UK Cohousing Network



Scan the QR code to find out more about cohousing on the website.



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