

Cohousing Resident Report 2024

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Executive Summary

CoHousing Australia's core work lies in advocating for a 'third way' in housing development and delivery. They do this by supporting established and emerging resident-led, (co)housing communities. There is a great deal of evidence from abroad around the benefits of models of collective living, particularly from European countries such as Denmark, where cohousing emerged in the mid-twentieth century and swiftly grew as a sector.

In Australia however, the cohousing typology remains niche. Historically, it has inclined more towards the rural 'ecovillage' model, often in a rural or semi-rural setting. But this is changing. As urban centres grow, and as Australians and New Zealanders look for new and more intentional ways of living, housing communities which focus on shared, ethical values and sustainability, cohousing is gaining attention.

In a socio-political climate where an ageing population, housing unaffordability, and cost-of-living pressures mean many Australians may never own a home, there is a need for new and affordable housing models. With social isolation and loneliness, a key health risk for both young adult and older people, housing typologies that actively facilitate social connection hold much potential.

Resident-led cohousing offers exactly the structures needed to support single people and others at risk of the alienation that can come from frequent house moves and 'apartment'-style building design. Focused on communal facilities and (some) pooling of resources, while at the same time offering private dwellings, cohousing has both the physical and social structures needed to 'create community'.

For any collaborative housing community to function well however, there needs to be a shared understanding of how residents will share costs and responsibilities; facilities and finances; and around the 'social governance' of a cohousing community will function.

This latter, at a minimum, involves agreed processes around (equitable) decision-making including participatory budgeting. Equivalence in 'sweat equity', the amount of work each resident contributes, is key to ensuring that the social culture of a cohousing community stays positive while progressing the work that is needed. As with any shared form of living, where the distribution of tasks is not shared equally, resentments can foment.

As calls for growth in the cohousing and co-operative housing sector grow louder, understanding best practice in developing good governance, maintaining productive and care-full relationships and is critical to the success of a 'third way' in the housing market. Understanding this, peak body CoHousing Australia commissioned this research with current and past residents of cohousing as a means of benchmarking the benefits and challenges of living in cohousing and developing resources to support the sector.

Methodology

In 2022, Urban Planning interns from RMIT surveyed urban planners in local government to capture their understanding of the cohousing model on behalf of CoHousing Australia. The aim of that research was to understand barriers to cohousing and related 'resident-led' typologies within the planning schema and planning culture. The survey was followed by a small number of interviews with planning professionals.

Using a similar methodology, this research piece included a survey and related infographics developed by student interns (see acknowledgements above) and interviewed led by Grassroots Research Studio. The survey was emailed to all known cohousing/eco communities in Australia and New Zealand and received 35 responses in total. 15 follow-up interviews were conducted. Both the survey and the interviews focused on the following themes:

- Any financial benefits/outcomes of living in a cohousing community;
- Any environmental benefits/outcomes; and¹
- Residents' reflections around social governance, including processes, benefits and challenges.

This report takes a deep dive into the interview data to understand and detail what it is like to be a resident living in a cohousing community, what the benefits are for residents, and also what challenges communities sometimes face.

¹ See Appendix A for the full survey data.

With a number of interviews emerging from the same community, we were also able to record a unique, '360 degree' picture of what living in a cohousing community is like from different perspectives. This story, (see Appendix B), shows how – despite an agreed collective vision – communities are still comprised of *individual households*, whose experiences and perspectives will inevitably differ.

Understanding the challenges as well as the benefits of living in cohousing is core to guiding the sector in relation in terms of support, conflict resolution, and best practice examples.

As one of the resident explained:

CoHousing Australia is really important...because...in Australia we need banks to understand what we're doing; councils to understand what we're doing. We need people to understand that there's an alternative, you don't have to be old and lonely. You don't have to live by yourself forever... we need a body that can do political advocacy [and] we need somewhere to go if, 'I don't know what to do, my group is gonna fall apart.' You know, to help. I think it's wonderful that CoHousing Australia exists.

Theme 1: Financial outcomes of living in cohousing

There are a variety of intentional communities in Australia. These range from 'ecovillages' established back in the 1970s, to (social) rental cooperatives, to the more typical cohousing model of individual dwelling owned by residents, with common facilities and social interactions. Typically, a cohousing community would include a common house, shared laundry, perhaps 'pool' vehicles/bicycles, and other amenities such as a shared garden.

At the time of writing, collective housing typologies in Australia can and do vary in significant ways, including legal structures and tenure, financial governance, elements around the pooling of resources and their values.

Differences in tenure can range from 'social' and private renters, to long-term (and mortgage-free) owner-occupiers, some of whom may own a number of dwellings in the community and act as landlord to tenants.

The built form also runs from established and largely self-sufficient ecovillages in rural settings to new build, urban apartment blocks with both a strata title overlay. Given these significant

differences, it was unsurprising that the economic benefits of living in a cohousing community were notably different between interviewees.

While there were expected economic benefits and financial security for [social/co-operative] renters, residents who had self-funded to build (using with support from an ethical

Our costs per meterage were comparable [to buying a private apartment] and we have significantly more shared spaces. We achieved that because...the community invested \$300,000 into the project and we funded the development and the land purchase and didn't take the same [financial] reward that a developer would have taken.

Similarly, but on a much smaller scale, other cohousing groups have made sure to create financial models which benefit all residents:

We bought it as a company and all own shares in it... One of our group works in ethical investment so that seemed to be a good way for us. Two couples - and we were one - had to get out a loan: we put in 300,000 each...we sold our family homes to clear that debt. We think we got a bargain in an area that is becoming gentrified, so that's one side of it. Because we're not quite ready to retire, we partly think of it as a property investment. None of us thought we would ever have a holiday home, but it's functioning as a half here, half there as we gradually all phase into living there [permanently].

We're in the final stages of developing one block into a hamlet of three self-contained dwellings, with some common space. We financed [construction] by drawing down on our mortgage until purchasers came in. We've ended up with a \$230,000 mortgage because of cost blowout, so that isn't very good, but this is an ageing-in-place strategy, so splitting costs of living split across the three properties over time [will bring economies of scale] ...

Residents highlighted how circumstances and decisions from the very beginning of the project could have long-term positive impacts on affordability:

One resident we spoke with was renting space in a shared household with some elements of cohousing, but not the collective governance which delineates cohousing from market models:

It's similar to a boarding house, but here I feel comfortable with the people, [selected through an application process]. It's not a cooperative but financially it's a bonus; \$200 a week includes all utilities [costs]. My room is small, but you share bathroom and laundry facilities and there is a common kitchen, but I prefer to eat in my room. The bedroom doubles up for a study space...it is a minimum six-month lease.

The interviews showed that overall, residents in established communities with well-embedded practices of self-production and bulk-buying recognised the greatest financial benefits that living cohousing can offer. For cohousers involved prior to the sharp uplift in land/housing prices of recent decades, the benefits were most keenly felt:

When we started 30 years ago, we had one big loan for the entire site. You didn't get your individual title and independence from the common loan until you'd done a certain amount of construction. It works like a retirement village basically. We built individually and even the common house was largely built by residents. A huge amount of physical energy went in which I don't think councils would allow anymore. I don't know whether people today would give that amount of time and effort either.

We have fibre to the home and our internet cost is only \$60 a month.

At the moment we've just got olive oil with the bulk buying. We buy a 20-litre drum and you can fill up for \$10 a litre. We are putting out feelers out for other bulk buying, liquid hand soap perhaps; dishwashing powder. We bulk buy toilet paper [with non-cohousing residents of neighbouring blocks]. You get a 25% discount so that's a big saving. We share our laundry [facilities] and laundry liquid is available for all.

However, residents did differ on the benefits of bulk billing and on what was considered to be affordable.

I am not an enthusiast for bulk billing. I don't think it will work in this situation, because...[of] the different kinds of levels of usage.

Laundry is more expensive per load (\$2 per load)!

We have a shared electricity system and shared internet, which mean our electricity costs [and] internet costs are quite cheap relative to normal living. Of course we have to offset that [with owners corporation] fees...

Many of these challenges were only discovered once the resident had already committed to living in community. However some were outcomes of choices around financial management structures before moving in. Equity relating to each resident's input and exchange of labour was often described as a trigger for conflict and [perceived] power imbalances.

Another thing I'd say about the economics of the place is that my landlord also owns another property [on site], and her partner owns another, so they had significant [financial] interests around the place. Economically, that was a real imbalance...

I'm not saying that it costs you more money to live in cohousing but it's not gonna save you money. It's about social [contribution]. You know, 'what's your time worth?'

The challenges of tenure

Standard co-operative housing sees residents become legal members of the cooperative with an equal vote or 'common equity'. This model structures in participatory governance in a similar way to traditional cohousing, but cooperative communities do not always engage in common activities and spaces in the same way as cohousers and ecovillages. Differences in tenure could be seen as having impacts on how sites were financially managed:

This community uses unit title like a block of flats, but with extended common facilities. I don't think that it's the best model; there's nothing 'co' really in that. Ultimately, all the economic stuff boils down to owners having the right to decide. For example, some infrastructure needs upgrading and there's a question of who's liable and who's not. It's a cooperative set up so everyone is a member, but long-standing owners have different mentalities than renters. When the rubber hits the road, it comes down to who has the biggest pockets.

While the rental co-operative model is better designed for affordability, accommodating even people registered on social/public housing waitlists, this sub-sector is mostly only available in NSW and Victoria and limited in access. Both states have a 'Common Equity', community housing provider (CHP) and as a legal CHP link rents to a percentage of household income. Typically, 25-35 percent of household income.

Notwithstanding the greater affordability and increased security of tenure over private rental housing, we heard from one resident of cooperative housing that the economic reality didn't always match expectations. That even cooperative cohousing could be 'more expensive for people with rent assistance, as the CEHL takes 100% of a tenant's commonwealth rent assistance and then 25% of the rest of their income'. It should be noted however, that income from rents (45% in one community we spoke to) is partly returned to the tenants to fund rolling costs and maintenance. (They are not expected to cover 'capital works').

Maximum-rent increases have been imposed - \$550 for my place, based on market rent! I never understood why it became based on market rates a few years ago...

Another cooperative residents noted that affordability could be impacted by changes after moving in:

Our [co-operative CHP] recently decided that teenager's earnings should no longer be counted as family tenant income for the purposes of means-testing rental charges: they should never have had that policy in the first place!

The cooperative manager wants to concrete our driveway very top down. They are insisting on the 'cheapest option' rather than asking what residents want.

Our property has now switched from a cooperative to become part of [the CHP's] "affordable housing" portfolio - 70% of the local market rent!

The financial conflicts and challenges some residents told us indicate there is much room for improvement if all residents are to fully realise the goal of financial sustainability and affordability. This, notably, means the potential residents should probably to both expect and to offer a degree of [personal] financial transparency:

When my husband and I bought in we wouldn't have been able to get a loan as owner-builders without the group going guarantor. But with that, everybody knew absolutely every nuance of our financial situation. Privacy was not there.

Improving affordability

Although advocates for collaborative and cohousing models may associate this typology with 'affordability', usually based on well-established European examples, significant financial barriers to community-led housing models remain in Australia. For people with limited assets, cohousing is not accessible at the time of writing unless you can enter as a renter. Like other housing typologies, skyrocketing costs of land and building materials means buying into a new build community is almost impossible without prior housing equity. This results in current cohousing residents mostly comprising cohorts which are able to bring some wealth to the table, such as older couples.

Although cohousing has the *potential* to become more inclusive of financial diversity, our research suggests that most cohousing/cooperative communities in Australia see a majority of white, middle-class residents tending towards older age.

Where we don't have a lot of diversity is around wealth. We're a privately owned community. We live in Australia. It costs a lot of money to buy houses, buy any home anywhere in Australia at the moment. So we don't have financially disadvantaged people in the community.

I don't think cohousing saves you money: that's my bottom-line thing. I don't think cohousing saves you money at all. I think there are great benefits [from] not having to own a whole lot of equipment - that you can share. But I think if you... I don't think anyone should ever be given the idea that moving into cohousing will financially save you money. I just don't think that. You'd be better off living in a sharehouse.

As noted above, some of the longer-established communities – ecovillages and cohousing built in the 1970s – have become/remained affordable over time, sitting outside normal market price mechanisms, but this may be changing, as also noted above with CHP cooperative models.

Beyond diversity in financial circumstances, future cohousing communities are also likely to see increasing diversity in resident characteristics, such as age, ethnicity, (dis)ability, etc. Some residents are entering into co-operative housing from 'social' housing waitlists. These tenants often come from 'priority' groups with particular economic, physical, and social needs. This includes people living with mental health problems, single mothers/families fleeing domestic violence, migrants and others with a history of being (vulnerable to being) marginalised. It should be noted that these traits often 'intersect' to compound risk of housing discrimination, precarity and from there, vulnerability to homelessness.

Improving access to rental cohousing/cooperatives will play an important role in making cohousing more affordable and diverse. With the support of governments at all tiers, cooperative cohousing has the potential to address housing injustice, if done well.

It is important that 'common equity' housing co-operatives do not succumb to sector trends around expansion. Research shows that Australia's community housing sector boasted 14 billion in assets in 2021; 15 percent of their revenue in surplus.²

² Community Housing Industry Association (2023), Australia's Community Housing Industry in Profile. <https://www.communityhousing.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/CHIA-Profile-2023-Final-1.pdf?x12978>

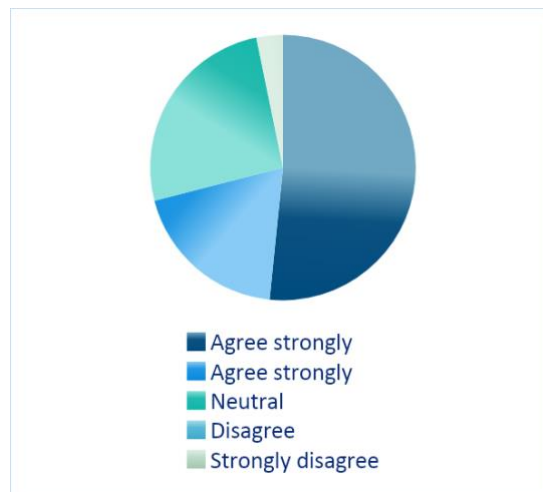
CoHousing Australia and allies should continue to strongly advocate for co-operative models, while also advocating that co-operative (owning) CHPs learn and potentially apply the social governance structures of cohousing, to ensure the benefits of collective living are maximised.

In relation to the financial outcomes of cohousing, another significant challenge sees emerging groups often facing expensive delays due to planning barriers/objections and rising investment/development costs. This can mean people who have been involved in creating cohousing for a number of years having to drop out due to financial constraints, leaving only wealthier - often older - people to see the project through.

It is not uncommon for cohousing development to evolve from kitchen table to over the threshold to take ten years or more, so this homogeneity around wealth/age/ethnicity is not a criticism, just an observation. Indeed, those who have the resources and stamina to create cohousing in Australia might be considered trailblazers, raising awareness of alternative ways of doing housing while breaking down entrenched barriers in housing policy and planning. As they do so, development costs should ease over time and growth in the 'third' sector will enable different models of collective housing to be tested, designed, and developed.

Figure 1 below illustrates however, that while the common facilities of cohousing provide good value for money for most residents, roughly a quarter were unsure or disagreed that they did.

Figure 1: Q 2. The shared facilities in my cohousing community have provided good value for money:

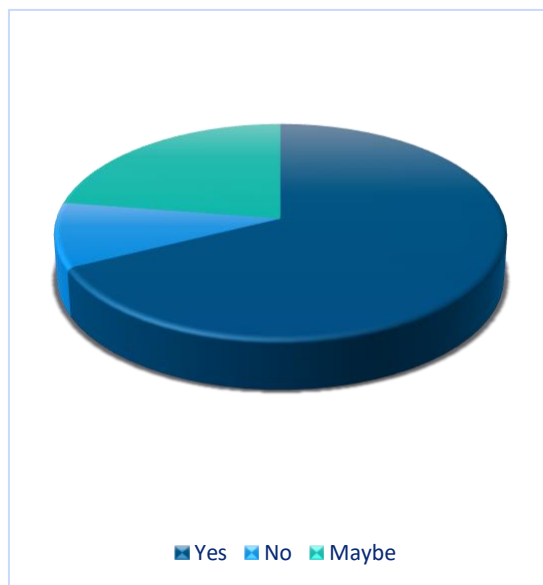


Theme 2: Environmental outcomes of cohousing

Concern around protecting the natural environment and sustainability are a key feature of most cohousing communities in Australia and New Zealand. Many of the earliest communities were developed using principles of ecological preservation and self-sufficiency; and are therefore often described as ‘ecovillages’, even though their style of communal governance fits within the cohousing umbrella definitionally. Most ecovillages are located outside of (sub)urban centres, allowing or even compelling them to include items such as tank water supply.

With growing awareness of the climate emergency and its relationship to how we live, this emphasis on environmental sustainability was recorded as a core value within every community in which we spoke to a resident, not only those in rural or regional locations. This valuing of environment stewardship, sustainability, and more frugal and carbon-neutral ways of living was reflected in the survey data, as shown in Figure 2 below:

Figure 2: Q 14. Many cohousing communities include features which aim to be environmentally sustainable, such as solar panels and low-flush toilets. Do you feel these provide residents with value for money?



Ecological/sustainability outcomes were mentioned in the affirmative by every cohouser interviewed. The benefits were most pronounced in the older communities and ecovillages, some of which had had decades to develop their natural environment and amenities. For example, one ecovillage produced enough homemade goods to run a small onsite shop selling soap and handcrafted goods, as well as food grown on site.

We all put a large amount of energy into building a home that is sustainable and also deeply connected to the community around us. I've had homes that are deeply sustainable but not anywhere near as connected. I can't imagine going into the uncertainty that the world is bringing us without community around me...being able to rely on other people, but also the enjoyment of helping other people.

One of our [working] groups is a waste management group. We have created about 12 different streams of waste so that residents can recycle...corks, batteries, light bulbs, polystyrene, worm farms, blister packs... anything to avoid going into landfill.

The environmental benefits of living in cohousing had already emerged in the resident interviews in the context of financial outcomes. One resident emphasised how the two are linked, with sustainability core to the Australian cohousing sector. Measures/benefits ranged from access to shared vehicles/bicycles, edible produce grown in communal gardens, and the minimization of waste through extensive recycling programs and bulk buying.

Many of the residents also spoke of the benefits of living outside of major urban centres with systems of self-sufficiency such as water tanks also in place in much of the broader local community. One resident related:

One of the biggest things in terms of sustainability is we've got a covenant on most of our property through Trust for Nature. That means that most of our land – other than where we have the houses – is locked up for 'bush' and can never now be developed.

While a greener lifestyle was seen to feature as an important value and practice in all the resident interviews, there were also differential benefits not only *between* communities but also within:

Living in a building that is well designed and thermally efficient is way more comfortable. Last summer we did really well. This winter we did really well. We had minimum heating [on]. We are north facing so comfort levels are through the roof in this building for us. Waste management is also spectacularly good...

The idea of using a car every day...we have built a life purposefully, to not have everyday reliance on the car...It's very, very intentional...

We're always mindful of sustainability, 'where do you buy what you eat'? [Common meals] work out very reasonably and residents can buy leftovers for \$5, so that's pretty good. I think people who are really tightly budgeting struggle with that though.

[Energy costs] have gone down for us [since moving in a year ago], but we were in a three-storey townhouse, which was quite a thing. Now we have a nice, really compact apartment, which is suiting us very well.

In our communal kitchen we have a big bowl of lemons that someone just dropped in. A big pile of kale and cos lettuce. Neighbours also go to [local community garden] and come back with armfuls of produce and just let everybody know it's there. It often gets used in our shared meals. We get a lot of greens for our shared meals and it's really, really great for those who work late, or live alone, to be able to just go to the fridge and see if there's a leftover meal there for \$5...

We're all leaning into it and learning. A couple of residents went to [recycling service] yesterday and learned what plastic bags we can recycle. It's a full-time job to keep on top of it though, and to keep reminding people. Some struggle with managing it.

Sustainability is absolutely core. Of our five cars, two are hybrid and three are electric. We've got gas to the premises, but we've brought an electric cooktop convector. We're changing the grass to natural native grasses, so that there's less mowing and water needed. We've solar panels and we're now talking about getting a battery. The thing that links the residents together is that we've all either worked for or have been supporters of [climate/social justice-type] organisations, so those core values have been really helpful for us.

Despite discrepancies amongst residents and amongst communities in terms of the ecological and sustainable living benefits, cohousing remains a leading housing typology in relation to environmental concerns.

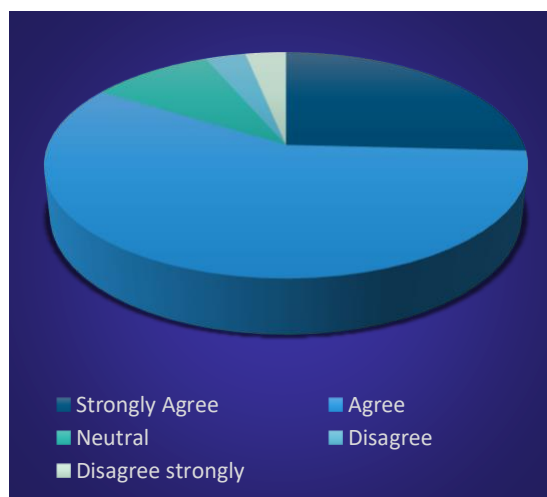
Theme 3: Social outcomes of creating/living in cohousing

The perceived health and wellbeing benefits of living in a cohousing community are a key driving force for many residents. Collectivist, and specifically cohousing models, aim to create physical and social structures that encourage social interaction, shared democratic control,

and intentional ways of living, as we saw with the focus on sustainability. Cohousing, done well, can generate a sense of connection and one of agency. The closely connected make up of residents in any given community also offers residents the opportunity to socialise and to work³ with a much greater diversity of people than the typical circle of friends and family.

Many residents we spoke with as part of the research noted benefits from, for example, regular 'intergenerational' interaction, mixing with children, families, as well as older adults. Evidence around the social, or 'co-care' benefits of cohousing for older people are emerging in the literature abroad, where communities of 'seniors' and of older women, who are at high risk of social isolation benefit greatly from awareness and support of neighbours. If an older resident had a fall, or their care needs suddenly changed for example, there is an immediate community able and willing to step in. Figure 3 below shows how significant a proportion of cohousers feel socially connected to their community.

Figure 3: Q 3. I feel socially connected to the other residents in my cohousing community:



Working together – forever

During the resident research however, it was evident that in addition to the foundational neighbourliness we see in cohousing in Australia and New Zealand, a parallel responsibility

³ Fuller consideration of the cohousing community as effectively a workplace is considered later in this report.

around *working together* was as important and as impactful upon residents in both positive and less positive ways.

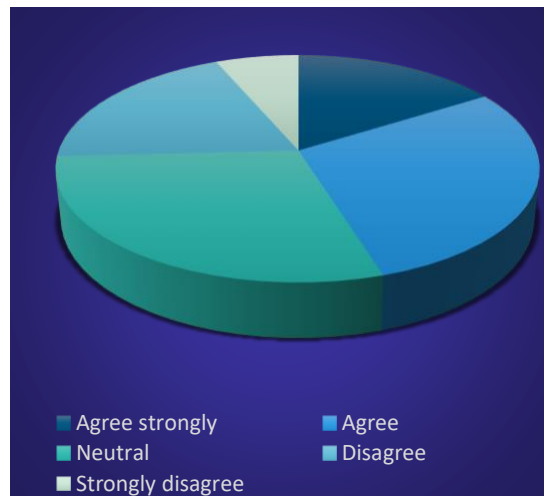
Because cohousing involves the sharing of resources and collective decision-making, most communities require or expect every resident to contribute a not insubstantial workload on a regular basis. The amount of time involved in consensus and or consent-based decision-making for example, can take up 2-3 hours per week alone. Add to that, financial administration, organising bulk-buying, recycling, repairs, capital works and so forth, and it becomes evident that cohousing is not only a residential community but also a *workplace*.

In the early days of a community, as both the legal structures and the physical buildings take shape, the work can be substantial and stressful. It is not uncommon for potential residents to drop out of a cohousing group due to the financial and work commitment. As CoHousing Australia embarks on a new research project surveying emerging cohousing groups, understanding the tensions and challenges will enable the organisation to offer support to groups.

Typically, this burden of labour continues when the community is established. Many residents interviewed described processes for streamlining the burden of governance and had established structures around 'sweat equity' to ensure the workload is fairly distributed, but a majority also expressed frustration with the inequity of work put in across multiple households/residents.

Therefore, it is critical that people considering a move into, or considering establishing cohousing recognise that the governance and hard work does not really end. It requires an ongoing commitment of labour and a willingness to work harmoniously with 'colleagues' that you may not always agree with or even like - as with any other workplace. Figure 4 below expresses some of the tensions around this:

Figure 4: Q5. The social governance model/commitment of my cohousing community can sometimes leave me feeling overwhelmed.



Of course every community – from neighbourhood block to family group – experience conflict from time to time. While the social benefits of cohousing were broadly expressed in the resident interviews, asking participants how their community managed conflict, and the methodologies which worked and which didn't always work was an important element of assessing the cohousing resident experience. It was noted, for example, that one cooperative housing community, with high outcomes around economy and sustainability, had a quite high resident turnover, with renters often only staying for around two years.

It is important to note that not all conflicts can be resolved, whatever the environment. Personalities will inevitably clash and residents did describe disagreements with neighbours over both small and larger decisions.

Another important consideration is that the originally closely bonded group that developed the community will change over time. Additionally they may have health or financial challenges to deal with, on top of collectively running their cohousing community. External (to the community) pressures may also affect how residents interact with their neighbours – even across the long-term. External and internal pressures will influence participation in group activities, whether social or around governance, which is likely to cause resentment and potentially, conflict.

This likelihood of conflict and challenging behaviour/relations was/is anticipated, however. Each resident we spoke with described governance structures around managing conflict. Some of the communities using sociocracy even had a circle specially focused on social

relations. Other communities had written guidelines and some - particularly where conflict was entrenched and/or impacting the whole community - had sought external mediation. Notably, these methodologies had challenges and were not always able to resolve issues.

Decision-making methodologies

Cohousing groups around Australia have used a variety of techniques to facilitate important conversations for the establishment and maintenance of their community. 'Consensus' models encourage agreement from *all* residents before a motion is moved. As mentioned above, other communities use sociocracy, a 'modified' consensus model where decision making is delegated to circles/groups. This reflects the reality that not every resident will be willing and able to participate in all decisions and therefore trust of the collective to do what is best for the community as a whole is important. Unfortunately however, a number of the residents interviewed spoke to us of power imbalances and even abuses in the cohousing community.

The sociocracy model is a more devolved model, we have a lot of groups tasked with managing whatever that area is. Supposedly how it works is that we trust the people who have self-selected to be on groups to make decisions in the best interests of the whole community. Is it working? I'm not quite sure about that...

We have a card system for decision making and that really didn't lend itself well to getting through the issues because long standing residents were more comfortable using the black card, naming things as 'interpersonal disputes' when really it was not about that...

[The card system] hides a lot. In name, they evoke this ability to converse freely and 'name conflict'. Really what it is that some people feel more comfortable using them and will play it like poker. It requires a kind of performance: you have to be comfortable standing up in a meeting of 60 people: there was no flexibility about other ways to input.

There is an equity issue for renters, for people with English as a second language, or with disability [with our decision-making system]. Kids [input] isn't included. And the system [of decision making] was held as gospel. It was really, really frustrating. Sometimes you get a bit of traction and then at the next meeting, someone would just red or black card [your suggestion] and you have to start all over. It's infuriating. The cards [system] are just a power tool, yeah.

Another resident agreed decision-making systems were complex and could be challenging:

Consensus decision making means everybody has to be accepting of a proposal at minimum. [However], if you've worked hard but you're not going to get total consensus, you can then go for a majority... 75% as a model [or], worst case scenario, 50 plus 1. My interpretation is that you do not do that [majority] if a decision is not essential. So for example, if we can't agree on which insurance, we would go for 75% majority. But if the question is, "shall we paint our front door pink?" or something else unessential, then as far as I'm concerned, you shouldn't be forcing consensus on us.

A couple of residents alluded to hidden practices of campaigning to progress decisions they supported. Others identified the complexity of relationships in their community and how no formalised system of governance could ultimately erase power imbalances or make up for a lack of willingness from any residents to participate in good faith or even show up.

There was a whole disconnect in the official portrayal [of the community] and what happens on the ground. It took a long time for me to work out that if you want a decision [on something you're proposing] you actually have to talk to key people independently, suck up to them one to one. You need to have both time and capacity to do that. I think that people fall into leadership behaviours from having been there for a longer time. There needs to be more honesty about the actual [governance] structures: the ones on paper and the ones that actually happen are in honesty very different. The same people get their own way because implicitly, they don't want their authority undermined.

Some of our longer-term residents benefit financially from promoting our community's lifestyle - that's very challenging to watch when some of us are trying to get in external facilitators to help with all the problems. The challenge is that everyone just thinks it's frickin wonderful here and we don't need support. The original residents think, 'I wrote the book about facilitation', so it should all stay 'in house'.

For another resident who had lived in community for decades admitted:

I've had a 'falling out of love' with cohousing. We've had a major incident with one neighbour and there's been issues like, 'that marriage has broken up, no one's should take sides', but then people say, 'We need the community to decide on this conflict.' That's caused a huge amount of issues. I feel horribly wounded by being involved in some very, very tense neighbourly disputes about boundaries. Basically, that [conflict] flowed into behaviour I was horribly wounded by. I couldn't believe it happened.

However, another resident felt the additional time needed to resolve disagreements and deviations of opinion had long-term value in encouraging understanding around the diversity of influences on every member; how these should be valued and respected.

What was clear from the fifteen resident interviews is that no cohousing community is or can remain stagnant. Therefore, an expectation and openness to embracing change, whether of

once-agreed values and mission; or of culture, built environment, resident diversity, is critical to the success of living in community. Being open to personal growth seemed to confer resilience, both for individual residents and for the collective.

Culture, whether in cohousing, a workplace, or even a family, is a *dynamic construct*. People, and what each person brings to a group at any given time, will be influenced by their past, present and future experiences. For a cohousing community to thrive therefore, every resident will ideally be open to change and to immense learning and personal growth.

I absolutely love this continual opportunity for personal growth. You stretch yourself and it's wonderful; it can be scary, but it's also really rewarding. We've gone through two very sad deaths in our first year together, which really stretched our community. It was really tough, but so much easier to go through living together.

There's just no room for complacency if you don't want relationships and the 'community as a whole' gestalt to atrophy, or to stagnate.

It's been fantastic for my personal growth just in relating to people. It's fantastic for kids too. When my kids were growing up people would say, 'Oh, you can have such good discussions with your children!' I'm sure it's because there's been so many parental figures for them to relate with...

It's growth of a community, and in that, there is a spiritual growth as well. If you're not learning what you need to do to be better every day, then we're not growing as a community. I don't know how you [can access training around] that. One thing that has really been powerful for [our community] is the stuff we've done around getting to know each other on a very detailed project level. There are particular skills to make projects happen but there's also community building and individual growth... We wouldn't have got there if we hadn't gone on a journey of 'how do we grow together?'

When I signed up there were a set of values around the community, around sustainability, around shared life experiences. Later, one particular [value statement] crept into it without discussion. At the time I sort of accepted it but ultimately, I realised it was getting so dominant that it was taking over. Then I said 'No. I don't want this anymore. It hasn't got a place [in our cohousing community]'. This is a message I've given many times: the community needs core values but anything beyond that is up to individuals.

The last example shows that, perhaps inevitably, we make assumptions about people we feel we know well, without always understanding or asking about the deeper context of their beliefs. Only by significant work to attend to early signs of discord and engaging meaningfully with 'challenging' or divergent behaviour before they risk becoming entrenched, are

(co)housing collectives able to maintain and progress their social culture and governance in positive ways.

Keeping a check on power

Many interviews with residents described uneven power dynamics. The presence of children and teenagers for example, the extent to which they are involved in community decision making varied greatly. Typically minors had no voting rights, or it was unclear what tools were the best practice to engage with them and with families more broadly.

It's really delightful to have children around. We've got [ages] 5, 6, 7 and teenagers [who] are starting to speak [in meetings]. They almost have their own language...

The systems and structures themselves do not support kids to participate because they're so long, unwieldy and unprofessional...

There's a lot of kids in the 8-10/11/12 age. They take up a lot of space, running around and are noisy. It is challenging having to represent their interests and needs, while getting pressure from the community. Being a parent makes it really hard to attend meetings too 'cause they run for three hours. If you're working full time and you've got kids as well, it impossible to find the space.

The kids never engaged much. Other kids have come and gone and teenagers don't like talking to random adults. Our kids loved our old house and the garden we had there. There is no privacy for that here. [Another resident] even yelled at my kids so son rarely brings his friends here. We have a common house and a mezzanine but they're not private and everyone moans about mess etc. Recently, kids were admonished for chalk drawing on the black walls! Some are given [parental] behaviour parameters and others do what they like. I remember someone telling me off for saying that we all have a duty of care for the kids here. That was not welcome.

One resident noted how involvement in the community through times of personal difficulty could lead to feeling both overworked and over-exposed to scrutiny:

My situation wasn't typical because I went through a traumatic experience [while living in cohousing]. I only stayed for six months but it was too much. There was fatigue on lots of levels. My direct neighbours were very supportive which I was very grateful for... Some dropped food at my door. [But] it was also hard with everyone knowing. I just wanted space to not talk about it. There's something about going through a traumatic event and being in a tight knit [community] that keeps the intensity alive... [it felt like] a goldfish bowl. I just wanted to be a stranger after a while. Cohousing was great in the initial aftermath, but not over for the longer term. The fact that everybody knows your business is difficult.

I still believe in the value of cooperative living arrangements, but I just don't know any more if the cohousing model I live in is the right one. It's challenging because there's always people, always ego. I certainly won't stay unless it [undergoes] radical rethinking of its fundamental processes and addresses the equity issues. I don't know how, but ultimately, having an open heart is the beginning. A new cohousing community has opened that I recently visited. It was fascinating because it was still new. I got a sense of excitement walking around it; what ours must have been like in those early days. It's everything that [the original group] wanted but didn't realise that the work doesn't stop.

Other power dynamics emerged around household income, age, and longevity of tenure; reproducing disadvantages that exist in broader society.

You never had the chance to make a case for anything. There is no kind of 'greater good' to direct decision making, it was just literally the whim of the individuals, particularly the people who had been there longest.

[Long standing resident owners] are just not able to handle people pointing out their vested interests. They contain that by black carding [to end the discussion].

While conflicts distressed many members we spoke with, as noted above, others accepted conflict and power imbalances as a natural consequence of life and the changing nature of communities over time. Some saw conflicts as a potential source of growth and learning, both individually and collectively. The challenge for the cohousing sector is how to encourage these more open and positive perspectives.

...I guess this is to do with my ageing. It's not necessarily all that easy to move over and allow people the freedom to do what they want without even considering what's going to change the core of this place and is worth preserving?

Having reviewed processes of managing conflict, our recommendations would be to consider that, as with workplace governance, policies and processes aren't meaningful unless there is a clear desire to abide by them and willing to act upon them. Resolutions of conflict cannot be forced.

The community should come together every three years and develop a community plan. Something that's developed in common, where everyone, even kids, gets input. The plan should set a clear direction and could be loosely written or tightly, just as long as it articulates, 'this is where we're going, this is what we're doing, this is what we will build.

One resident identified a way of managing conflict by proactively identifying challenges and vulnerabilities that could develop into larger issues if left unchecked, and intervening to offer support:

[We have a] group that keeps an eye out on anyone that may be suffering or not doing well. Somebody might speak with that person and identify ways to help or follow through. If there's a plan, different members of the group can reach out and perhaps mediate. A few of us have had mediation training, so have ability in that area.

Making the ethos of 'co-care' explicit and ensuring that residents are equipped with appropriate skills, whether through mediation training, group workshops or sociocracy structures, can only help structure in essential mechanisms and methodologies to mutually carve a path to understanding and walk along it in social togetherness.

One resident described how their cohousing collective had emerged from long-term friendships with shared values. Even here conflict had emerged. Luckily, the resident had the foresight and the confidence (having professional facilitation skills), which enabled the challenging situation to be managed successfully within good time.

Conclusion:

The social governance of cohousing communities needs to be inclusive and equitable. Our research suggested that in a majority of communities power imbalances (perhaps inevitably) arose and that they were only rarely tackled effectively.

Our interviews with residents of cohousing across Australia and New Zealand suggested that communities had a strong tendency to adhere to the values agreed when established, with long-term residents in particular often unwilling to review these values and adapt to incomers and more diverse resident groups.

Any community is a dynamic organisation; never fixed, as much as we might like it to be. Not recognising this inevitably causes tensions, as some residents cling to long-ago agreed rules and others want to introduce new ideas, change. For any cohousing community to be

harmonious therefore, there is a need for residents to be reflective and always willing to ask, and to answer, the hard questions.

Reflecting the broader population, residents of cohousing are increasingly diverse, coming from different cultures, ages, life experience, and influences. This can of course shape relationships and confer/withhold power and privilege. We saw this in the examples of cohousing residents who had bought up more than one property to then rent out their second or even third home. Despite the renters technically having the same rights and vote, the risks inherent in this are easy to see.

In addition to paying attention to issue of owners versus renters at the time when communities are being developed, or their mission/values being reviewed, it is important that bodies such as CoHousing Australia provide clear guidance to emerging groups around these equity risks and how horizontal decision-making and relationships might better be built into the structures of collective housing.

However robust governance structures may be however, it is inevitable that residents themselves will inevitably have changing needs and priorities - sometimes even values. During the COVID lockdowns for example, tensions arose due to differing beliefs (and vulnerabilities) or cohousers and caused problems that could not of course have been foreseen.

Changing needs of residents, the make up of households etc. which often also will affect people's capacity to be an active contributor to community and can even influence interactions and relationships outside of the communal relationship. Health conditions such as mental illness or dementia; financial pressures such as loss of income; increased family (care) commitments, can and will affect communities. Some residents may lose their capacity to contribute almost entirely, creating a heavier burden for others. While the benefits of co-care are significant, that mutual dependence, like community cultures, is a mutable thing.

Not one community member we spoke with described sufficient protocols to respond to such challenges. Conflict management strategies included in social governance were often not seen to be effective or to not suffice over time.

It is critical to the success of a cohousing community that governance can be plastic enough to respond to diversifying preferences of residents, such as updating methodologies of

decision-making, of managing conflict. How will groups know if there are issues? They need to find ways of asking their community routinely that are safe and inclusive. This might involve, for example, annual 'climate surveys' in which all residents – minors included – are able to anonymously articulate what is working and what might be improved.

Additionally, it would be beneficial if CoHousing Australia developed and offered a service as a 'critical friend', coming to communities, speaking to or surveying residents, offering insights and guidance around improvement – as we see in *other workplaces*.

Cohousing and other collaborative/collective forms of housing remain an important part of Australia's housing system. Despite being a niche 'product', with much reliance of those who have the financial and time resources to dedicate, cooperative and cohousing models provide a critical third way of living, something very different to the private homeowner/renter and public/social renter typologies.

As the climate crisis will only continue to snowball and create extreme weather events, disruptions to crops and to supply chains, and related challenges, the cohousing values of sustainable living that are typical to Australia's model are not only important for residents, but also work to provide a template for better ways of doing 'greener' housing and sharing resources and costs to make this possible.

Recommendations:

- Instigate/encourage [strategic] reviews of the values and mission of cohousing communities every one to three years to test whether they reflect the beliefs and priorities of current residents;
- Ensure that methodologies of social governance are regularly reviewed and inclusive. There are a number of methods around decision-making and conflict resolution which work well in cohousing, such as consent and consensus, sociocracy and non-violent communication. What works best for each community may depend on the diversity/homogeneity of residents; their time capacity, age and other variables. Like values, methods of decision-making should not be seen as fixed, but as dynamic and

changeable. It was noted that voting systems such as the use of [coloured] cards may have worked well for some communities but can be overly complex and were, in one instance, effectively being 'gamed';

- Longer-term residents tend to assume/display a greater sense of ownership in the community. This can exclude newer members and disrupt equity in work distribution, innovation and decision-making. Residents need to heed this bias risk and ensure that power overreach, whether from longer-tenure residents or those with greater financial equity in the community, is kept in check through governance. Cohousing is quintessentially about *the collective*; meaning that even those residents who established the group, secured the finance, wrote the values and perhaps even built the dwellings, need not only to accept but to actively invite ideas from newer residents;
- Few cohousing communities include children's votes in their decision-making. If children can make conscious [criminal] decisions at 10 years old in some Australian states/territories, they can surely make a positive contribution to their cohousing community. Reviews of age/voting policies should be conducted within strategic/mission review processes;
- To help manage the 'contribution fatigue' and inequities of sweat equity which residents related, rotation of roles such as in working groups and in chairing/minuting meetings etc. would ensure all residents get involved to the best of their capacity and potentially also mitigate the accumulation of power/authority that is sometimes conferred on long-term actors;
- Annual, anonymous 'climate' surveys asking residents about their experiences of (participatory) budgeting, how decisions are made, what new ideas and changed processes they would like to see, whether around conflict or environment, would encourage a sense of transparency and help build a knowledge base for the community to respond to;
- External support, whether from CoHousing Australia or some other expert 'critical friend' should be encouraged, as part of the 1-3 yearly reviews of mission and values, as seen with other workplaces/organisations. Note, this facilitation should ideally not

be led by a cohousing resident, but a knowledgeable facilitator with proven skills around diversity and inclusion;

- Review decision-making methodologies such as the carding system to ensure they remain inclusive; for example, of neurodivergent residents and residents with English other communication barriers.

CoHousing communities are not fixed entities; rather, they are dynamic, both over time and with changes of residents. Therefore people wishing to join a cohousing community must be *genuinely* open to change and real collaboration. Cohousing comprises elements of both home and also a place of work. This raises a number of ideas that will be useful in exploring how CoHousing Australia might support communities to function well and thrive.