



Cannock Mill Cohousing Colchester: The long search for a site

By Lesley Scordellis

Of course, we weren't called that at the beginning! We were originally called London and Countryside Cohousing, as we had no idea at the start where we would end up.

The seven founders of the group lived in London and first set about building a viable group by persuading others to join them. By 2009, there were enough people committed to the concept of cohousing to enable the group to form a company. As a self-funding group, forming a company was an essential step to being considered a serious land buyer. We also established some guidelines for what we were seeking; in particular, the site was to be in reasonably easy reach of London as most of the group had family there. In the course of our site searches we concluded that we would prefer a vibrant town rather than a rural location - we looked at plenty of both.

To identify possible sites, we used land agents and local authority sites lists, which include sites designated to meet their demand for housing. We quickly learnt, though, that developers often had these in their sights already. It's no coincidence that several well-known cohousing groups are built on 'difficult' sites: ones that developers rejected as being too wet, too sloping or too constrained by existing buildings - all aspects that can make them attractive to cohousing groups.

Sometimes a small group would visit a site first. Then, if it looked promising, everyone would go, so it would be a group decision. We devised our own forms for site visit reports including a desk-top search into local amenities and public transport, so we were comparing with our heads as well as our hearts.



Over the next few years, we looked at a huge range of sites: from Gloucestershire, through Berkshire, Sussex, London and Kent to East Anglia. They were owned by developers, landowners or speculators, some of whom we met and with whom we might have gone into some sort of partnership. Some sites we considered in conjunction with a housing association, others on our own. Considerable energy was always spent visiting and discussing the possibilities but, for a variety of reasons, none of them was a real starter. It might have been unlikelihood of getting planning permission, being too remote, legal issues or it just didn't feel right. Even so, every possibility gave rise to the thought that 'this could be the one!'

In 2011, we became serious about a site in the Cotswolds. However, legal problems could not be satisfactorily solved, so we reluctantly withdrew after many months' work, and started the search all over again. Tenacity is definitely a useful trait in this business! But even this wasn't wasted time - we learned from every experience.

During this time, besides searching for a site, we also thoroughly investigated our internal and external financing options, including considering partnerships, and put in place appropriate legal arrangements ready for the next steps. We eventually made the decision to remain



entirely self-financing, and on the legal side, opted for a firm of solicitors that already had experience of cohousing.

In 2013, we visited several sites in East Anglia, one of which was Cannock Mill. We wouldn't say it was love at first sight - it was a wet November day and the ground was rather boggy. It is at this moment that architectural and building experience is really valuable. We were fortunate in having Anne Thorne, a successful architect, as a founder member as well as other members with related skills. They could see the potential and put together some ideas that looked possible within the existing outline planning permission.

It was the combination of the drawings of what could be with the reality of what already existed that persuaded most of the rest of us. Even so, we lost seven members, including three founder members, at this point - we fell from a group of 20 to 13. This should be expected - it might be the area, the design possibilities that the site permitted or simply the risk. We were not just talking about our dreams but putting significant sums of money into the pot to buy the site. The remaining 13 metaphorically held hands and jumped!

It wasn't until July 2014 that the purchase of the Cannock Mill site was confirmed, and the process of detailed design, applying for full planning permission and seeking a building contractor could finally begin.

Five years on, and moving in to our new cohousing homes is at last in prospect.

For more information on Cannock Mill, please visit our website <http://cannockmillcohousingcolchester.co.uk/>

Our top tips

- Put lots of work into deciding what it is you want and what you are likely to be able to afford. This is not time wasted; it is building the group and developing levels of trust that will be essential to seeing the project through.
- Get your legal structures and financial arrangements in place - it is no good seeing your dream site if you are not able to move quickly to make an offer.
- Make sure you have the professional skills available to do a sensible appraisal of a site. You will need an architect, so make sure you have someone that understands cohousing design principles. Maybe work with this person on the early stages of a design brief.
- Be realistic about how you will raise the money - while we managed to secure a loan to help finance the development, we never found a financial tooth fairy - and acknowledge and manage the risks.
- Expect to lose some members when you finally do have a site. The solution may not be to look for another site that everyone agrees on - they won't. Instead decide if the remaining group can make it work.

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