



**Swansea CoHousing
Research Report**

**From COVID-19 to
Neighbourhood 20**

February 2021



*Photo of Swansea Bay and Mumbles Head taken by Rosemary Havard-Jones
Picture on front cover painted by Rosemary Havard-Jones*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Swansea CoHousing (SCH) is a Community Benefit Society and Community Land Trust that is seeking to encourage community cohesion and connection through the development of multi-generational, sustainable and inclusive housing with shared indoor and outdoor facilities.

In February 2020, the SCH team were examining the feasibility of different sites around Swansea and preparing for its launch. In March 2020, COVID-19 lockdown occurred and the UK was required to isolate and stay at home. Like all organisations, SCH's meetings had to change as did the conversation around community-living. We wondered what our neighbourhood community was feeling and how lockdown was affecting people's thoughts about interdependence within communities, wellbeing and cohousing. To ascertain community feelings towards their local area, their housing and their thoughts of future cohousing, SCH embarked on this study.

The design of the study involved structured interviews with an opportunity sample of people within the postal code areas: SA1 and SA2, which cover the central, densely populated area of Swansea city. SCH interviewed 61 participants over the course of the initial Covid-19 lockdown between 4 May and 29 June 2020. The interview questions centred on people's experiences of lockdown in the context of their housing and their local area. There was a before and after question about cohousing and what it meant to our interviewees.

Summary of Key Findings

Overall, the enormity of the crisis was explicitly acknowledged by our interviewees, one of whom summed up the situation as: "consumer capitalism turned on its head ... lives prioritised over economy and a reversal of societal values." Lockdown, to another interviewee: "I feel like a bucket has been picked up and shaken."

Regarding participants' experience of the initial 2020 lockdown period, thematic analysis found eight themes emerge:

1. Using **time** to reflect/grow/produce/join new communities/prioritise family;
2. The appreciation of **space** for work, exercise, living;
3. The importance of gardens for growing plants, flowers and **food**;
4. A more acute sense of local **communities**, key workers and being cared for;
5. A new reliance on **technology** and remote working;
6. Active **travel** by foot or by bike and exploration;
7. Low **noise** levels and low levels of traffic;
8. Cleaner **air quality** and connecting with nature and wildlife.

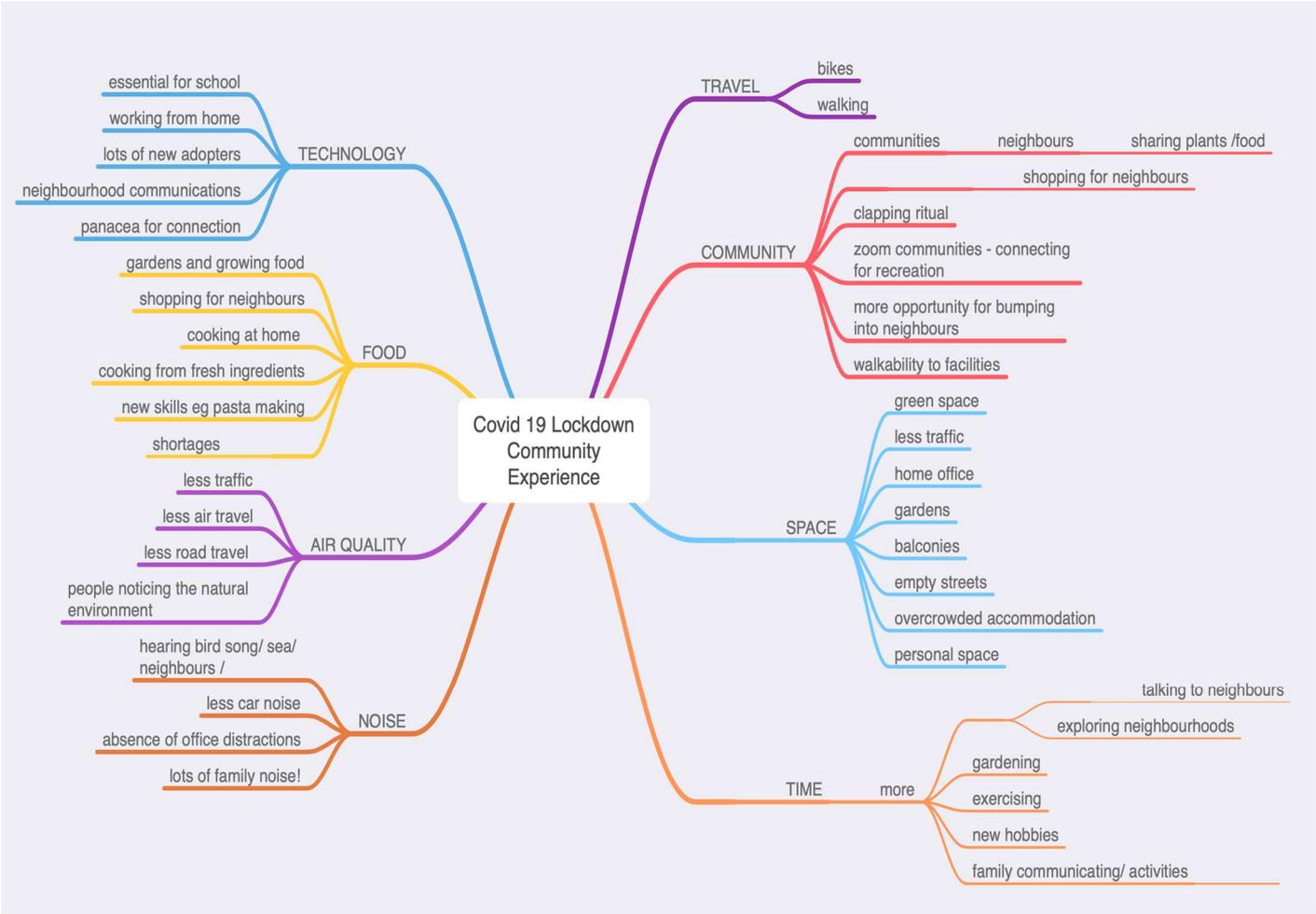
Time saved from commuting, time spent with family, time in the home and time to grow plants and improve gardens was vastly appreciated. Space both within homes and outside was a common theme: either not having enough or being very appreciative of having plenty and access to outside space such as parks, walking/cycle paths, beaches and the sea. The importance of green space for

wellbeing was high among everyone’s priorities. Many people highlighted the importance of the garden, growing food and how this increased their wellbeing. Important too was the sense of community and neighbourhood. As a result of the new conditions and restrictions, people talked about their newfound recognition of key workers and the value they place on essential jobs. In the context of people’s homes and work lives, technology was increasingly used to enable home-working as well as social connection amidst the requirement for reduced travel. Active travel by foot and exploration of local areas highlighted, for many, the better air quality. Less traffic increased people’s awareness of Swansea’s wildlife. Many interviewees worried about food poverty and the need to build our resilience through local food supplies. Primal survival issues were mentioned, people facing their own death, not only through the realities of COVID-19, but also in the context of their enforced isolation and the fear response of surviving alone.

Amidst the expanse of issues, interesting paradoxes were highlighted: “It is far quieter... we’re more aware of one another because of social distancing.”

These themes were captured via a mind map tool (‘mindnode’) illustrated below.

Figure 1 Lockdown themes of community experience



Cohousing Themes

In the pre- and post-interview questions, people were asked to rate their understanding of cohousing and to say some words to capture what cohousing meant to them. Space and independent living units were highlighted as important. Sharing carers, and cleaners, and maintaining and managing the buildings and gardens were felt to be central to cohousing. Some highlighted the potential financial savings to the local authority through the sharing of social care.

A degree of conflict was expected to be an inevitable part of living in a larger group of people with different wants and needs but also a healthy sense of developing as an individual and growing through the experience. Conflict resolution skills were felt by a number of interviewees to be important in order to manage disagreements, plus skills in organising meetings, discussions and making key decisions.

Following the interviews, after reflecting on living in lockdown and what cohousing might entail, interviewees rated their understanding of co-housing higher than at the outset.

Conclusions

COVID-19 brought home with clarity and urgency the importance and fragility of access to personal and community connections and space at home and outdoors. Home owners reported a greater sense of agency and resilience, while renters generally experienced greater helplessness and trauma.

The pandemic is forcefully teaching us the importance of our home and community spaces. It became evident that our before and after questions deepened people's understanding of Cohousing, once participants reflected on their experience during lockdown.

We therefore urge planners, policy makers and housing developers to expedite community-centred planning and cohousing design into future housing developments, especially in the context of post-COVID-19 economic stimulus new build and town centre regeneration.

We request that planners and policy makers collaborate with the public and community organisations, early on, to embed their needs into housing developments and regeneration schemes.

SCH plans to publicise this report and encourage more communication channels between grassroots communities, the Welsh Assembly and Swansea Council. SCH recommends regional and local government to not only inform but to promote cohousing planning and policy.

The COVID-19 pandemic lockdown has highlighted needs for agency and space. Cohousing fits the model of providing both across a broad range of socio-economic groups.

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“In April, the RSA launched a round of Catalyst Award funding for projects run by RSA Fellows that were responding to the impact of Covid-19. We are pleased to announce the 20 projects that have been awarded funding.

**SWANSEA
Co-Housing**

This was a global call. We aimed to prioritise projects that could respond to direct need immediately but also show a strategy to scale beyond the immediate pandemic response period. We also wanted to see embedded collaborative working and a design-led approach to social change as much as possible.

Setting aside the shocking circumstances in which these awards have been made, we are excited to be enabling these projects. We find great reassurance in the extent of the good work our Fellows are catalysing to support their communities and the wider world as the crisis continues to unfold.

Congratulations to the exceptional projects.”

RSA (2020) Announcing the Covid-19 Catalyst Award funded projects. 22 July 2020.
<https://www.thersa.org/blog/2020/07/covid-19-catalyst-award-projects>

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 COMMUNITIES IN A PANDEMIC

A new conversation in the context of coronavirus

The global coronavirus pandemic, manifested as the disease COVID-19, has caused us and our communities to relate to each other in different ways, not least using communications technology, but also on a more connected local level, where neighbours called across to each other from their front porches. With all the constraints of lockdown, creativity and kindness emerged from adapting to what was suddenly important; buying food, growing food and obtaining basic supplies. Alongside ensuring sustenance and survival, the sudden need to socially distance ourselves from our loved ones put a significant emotional strain on people. Together with the government's daily briefings showing the increasing toll of the pandemic, our way of living and relating to our support networks changed dramatically. On-the-ground, the dialogue was focused on trying to find our way in this world suddenly redefined by coronavirus.

1.2 COHOUSING COMMUNITY GROUP

Combining the autonomy of private housing with the sharing of a community

Amidst this global crisis, a small community group in Swansea that was about to host a launch conference, found itself having to ask: what now in this new world? Swansea Co-Housing (SCH) was established in 2018, with a multi-skilled team, focused on researching community-led housing issues, extending its networks and exploring potential cohousing sites.

Cohousing was first developed in 1972 near Copenhagen, Denmark. Irritated by the limitations of their housing options, 27 families combined the autonomy of private dwellings with the sharing of community living and deemphasised the car from paths and communal areas (McCamant & Durrett, 2011).

In February 2020, the SCH team were examining the feasibility of different sites around Swansea. Twenty-three days later in March 2020, COVID-19 lockdown occurred and the UK was required to isolate and stay at home. Like all organisations, SCH's meetings had to change as did the conversation around community-living. We wondered what our neighbourhood community was feeling and how lockdown was affecting people's thoughts about interdependence within communities, wellbeing and cohousing.

1.3 OBJECTIVES

Engagement to build local resilience, dialogue and good housing

The pandemic was highlighting structural problems of social isolation, poverty, poor housing and lack of public space in the local area. SCH wanted to benefit the community by building local resilience and explore the aspects that emerged during

the lockdown, regarding what people wished to sustain and whether the crisis had stimulated more appetite for cohousing initiatives.

Furthermore, SCH aims to develop and encourage others to develop cohousing schemes that embrace environmental practices, are intergenerational, inclusive and co-created with the wider community. With this study, SCH aimed to bring the different strands of its mission together, within the context of other related work.

1.4 SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES IN WALES

Cohousing & the wellbeing of future generations

Such related work included the RSA's Building Bridges-COVID-19 and the Welsh Government's net zero and decarbonisation targets, which explore ways in which we live sustainably in community-cohesive groups.

SCH acknowledges that cohousing initiatives offer ways of living within the realms of the Welsh Government's Wellbeing of Future Generations Act (2015). The Act's seven goals are:



These goals are aligned with the UN's global Sustainable Development's Goals (SDGs).

1.5 GLOBAL RECOVERY FROM A PANDEMIC

Unprecedented wake-up call & the need for a reset

In its report 'Our Framework for COVID-19 Recovery' the UN Secretary-General states the need to make the recovery a way to "do things right for the future." The UN report states:

COVID-19 is spreading human suffering, destabilizing the global economy and upending the lives of billions of people around the globe. The pandemic is an unprecedented wake-up call, laying bare deep inequalities and exposing precisely the failures that are addressed in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement on climate change.

These goals, from the UN to the Welsh context, provide guiding principles for 'building back' following the pandemic's national and regional lockdowns as they continued.

Additionally, on 13 May 2020, a report was released from the Welsh Government, proposing a National Wellness System. In this release, Commissioner Sophie Howe stated: "we are all at a crossroad. We can either go back to the old ways...or we can change to better things for the benefit of everyone." Opportunities, cited in this report, fed into the SCH research framework, including:

1. maintaining falls in carbon emissions and air pollution;
2. valuing hard-working volunteers;
3. new enthusiasm for helping others;
4. nurturing and developing the community spirit emerging from this crisis.

To ascertain current community feelings towards lockdown in their local area, their housing and their thoughts of future cohousing, SCH embarked on this study.

***Terrace Road
Primary School
at the heart of
Mount Pleasant***

The view from the school over Swansea Bay looking over the stacked terraces, characteristic of the area.



The Fynone area of Swansea; part of the extended Mount Pleasant community

The Swansea Co-Housing Group are interviewed about the future of Cohousing next to a candidate site; two dilapidated heritage buildings that would be ideal for a community-led housing project



Central Swansea housing in terraced formation

The Swansea Co-Housing Group is interested in both the heritage aspect of development and how it can offer Cohousing opportunities

2 APPROACH

2.23 DESIGN

The design of the study involved structured interviews with an *opportunity sample* of people within the postal code areas: SA1 and SA2, which cover the central, densely populated area of Swansea city. Opportunity Sampling is a type of nonprobability sampling, where participants are selected based on naturally-occurring groups. Instead of taking a fully random sample of residents, the members of SCH used its networks to approach respondents across the neighbourhood, local community groups, co-workers and some interviewees randomly selected in the local green space (Rosehill quarry) and in the streets during daily exercise walks.

Our neighbourhood is high on the deprivation index with 3 times the national average of renters, including asylum seekers, students, social housing. The area has a history of active community engagement which gives energy to grass-roots projects.

Given the shielding requirements during this period, the researchers used social distancing when interviewing outside and telephone and zoom interviews where possible (prioritising the safety of all participants during this time and within government guidelines).

2.24 PROCEDURE

Six voluntary interviewers of SCH were briefed by the lead researcher on the structure, recording, length and approach to the interviewing stage. A structured interview proforma was developed, piloted with one interviewee, subsequently adapted and then used by the interviewers on the full sample. The interview entailed 10 exploratory questions with follow-up prompts where necessary.

The team interviewed 61 participants over the course of the first COVID-19 lockdown between 4 May and 29 June 2020. The majority of people approached, agreed to participate. Six people refused to be interviewed because they were not interested and several families refused to be interviewed because they were experiencing high levels of distress. The data was anonymised and demographics can be found in the appendix.

The interview centred on people's neighbours, their housing and their local area. They provided an opportunity to ask specific questions about cohousing and what it meant to our interviewees. The discussion also provided the opportunity for interviewees to ask about different cohousing initiatives and find out about the aims and principles of SCH.

2.25

COHOUSING EVALUATION

The question we asked our interviewees, at the outset of the study, was their views of cohousing and how likely they might be to consider living in cohousing schemes in the future. One of the aims of this work was to increase people's understanding of cohousing. We asked interviewees to rate between 1 and 10 (where 1 was no understanding and 10 was full understanding) their understanding of cohousing. Before and after responses were compared to establish whether this work had achieved an increased understanding.

SCH visit to case studies: London's pioneering Community Land Trust in Bow

Swansea Co-Housing Group are refining ideas for Cohousing projects in Wales and taking on board lessons learned during the Covid-19 pandemic



3 FINDINGS

The qualitative data from the 61 interviews was analysed and categorised by theme carried out by the core research team. Themes arising by frequency were illustrated in the mind map visualisations presented below. The cohousing question was categorised and the quantitative cohousing questions were graphed. Detailed collation of interview themes and graphs are provided in the appendix.

3.23 LOCKDOWN THEMES

Regarding participants' experience of the 2020 lockdown period, thematic analysis found eight emergent themes:

1. Using **time** to reflect/grow/produce/join new communities/prioritise family;
2. The appreciation of **space** for work, exercise, living;
3. The importance of gardens for growing plants, flowers and **food**;
4. A more acute sense of local **communities**, key workers and being cared for;
5. A new reliance on **technology** and remote working;
6. **Active travel** by foot or by bike and exploration;
7. Low **noise** levels and low levels of traffic;
8. Cleaner **air quality** and connecting with nature and wildlife.

Time saved from commuting, time spent with family, in the home and time to grow plants and improve gardens were vastly appreciated. As was better air quality as **less traffic** increased people's awareness of Swansea's wildlife. The importance of **green space** for wellbeing was high on everyone's priorities. So too was the sense of **community** and **neighbourhood**. People were surprised and pleased to find themselves part of a community: "to feel, safe and supported in that community." Another interviewee said: "I met neighbours I didn't know of and I wasn't afraid to ask for help... normally, I wouldn't 'put on' people."

In the context of people's homes and work lives, **technology** was increasingly used to enable home-working as well as social connection amidst the requirement for reduced travel. Inequalities experienced by people with disabilities, age and ethnicity were mentioned. Difficult living conditions, increased exposure to drug & alcohol misuse, poverty and domestic abuse were raised as worsened threats in the context of the pandemic. All those who cited housing insecurity were private renters.

Space within homes and outside space was brought up many times throughout the interviews, either not having enough or being very appreciative of having plenty and access to outside space such as parks, walking/cycle paths, beaches and the sea. Many people highlighted the importance of the **garden**, growing food and how this

increased their wellbeing: “gardening is very important and I would have cracked up without it.”

As a result of the new conditions and restrictions, people talked about their newfound **recognition of key workers** and their value for essential jobs.

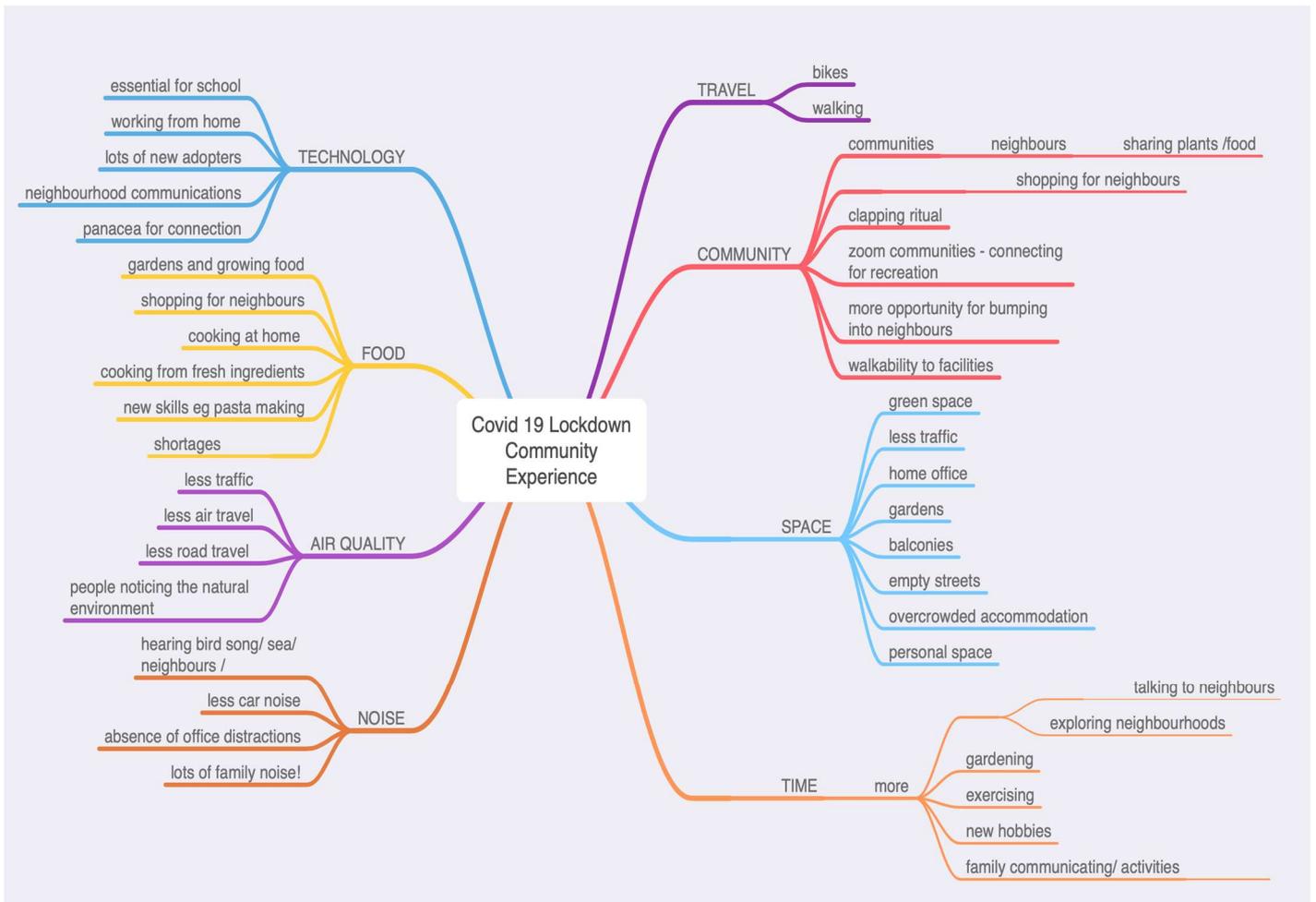
Food was a key theme. Many interviewees worried about food poverty and the need to build our resilience through local food supplies. The need, capacity and capability to grow their own food was a major theme, together with relating the growing of food with wellbeing and neighbourliness. Sharing food brought about contact with neighbours and a sense of wellbeing: “I gave fish and chips to an older lady over the garden wall which I’ve never done before and we were both thrilled.”

Primal survival issues were also mentioned, people facing their own death, not only through the realities of COVID-19, but also in the context of their enforced isolation and the fear response of surviving alone.

Amidst the expanse of issues, interesting paradoxes were highlighted: “It is far quieter... we’re more aware of one another because of social distancing.”

These themes were captured via a mind map tool (‘mindnode’) illustrated below.

Figure 1 Lockdown themes of community experience



3.24 COHOUSING THEMES

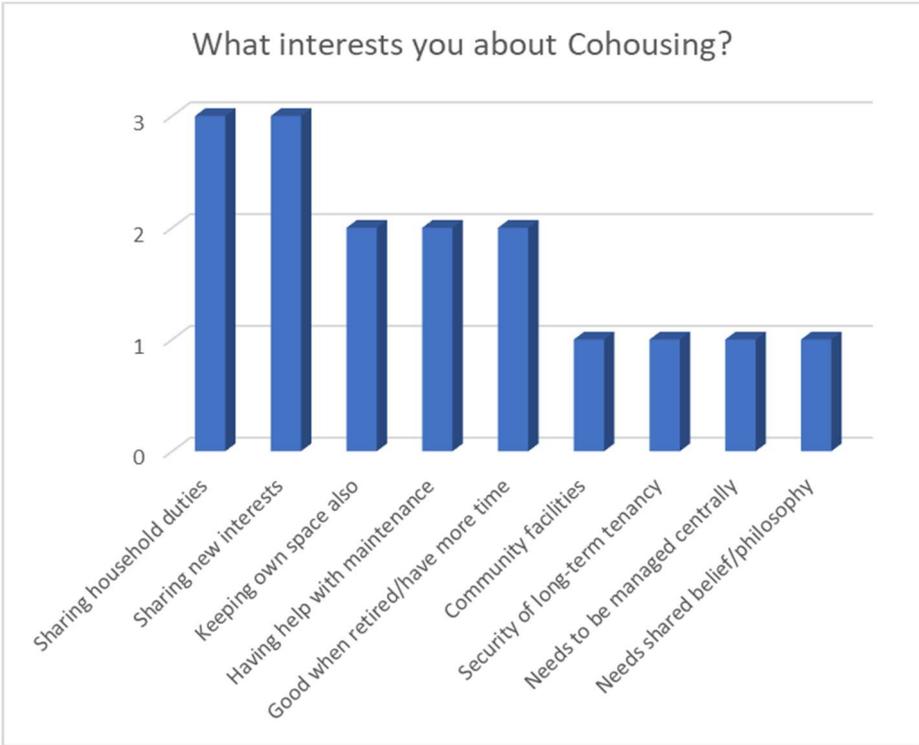
SCH also asked people about what cohousing meant to them and what concerns they had about cohousing initiatives.

Space and independent living units were highlighted as important. Sharing carers and cleaners, and sharing the maintenance and managing of the buildings and gardens were felt to be central to cohousing, while some interviewees highlighted the potential financial savings to the local authority, through the sharing of social care.

Conflict resolution was felt to be an inevitable part of living in a larger group of people with different wants and needs but also a healthy sense of developing as an individual and growing through the experience. Conflict resolution skills were felt to be important in managing disagreements, meetings and discussions, and for key decision-making.

Positive aspects of cohousing were acknowledged, together with the challenges that were envisaged if the interviewees envisaged living in cohousing. These themes are illustrated in the bar chart below.

Figure 2 Cohousing concerns and benefits



Our findings highlighted a broad range of thought about cohousing and community-led housing schemes (see appendix for anecdotes). In general, people had positive and optimistic views of what cohousing meant to them, using words like social, cooperative, sharing, communal, flexible and mutual. People were aware of the

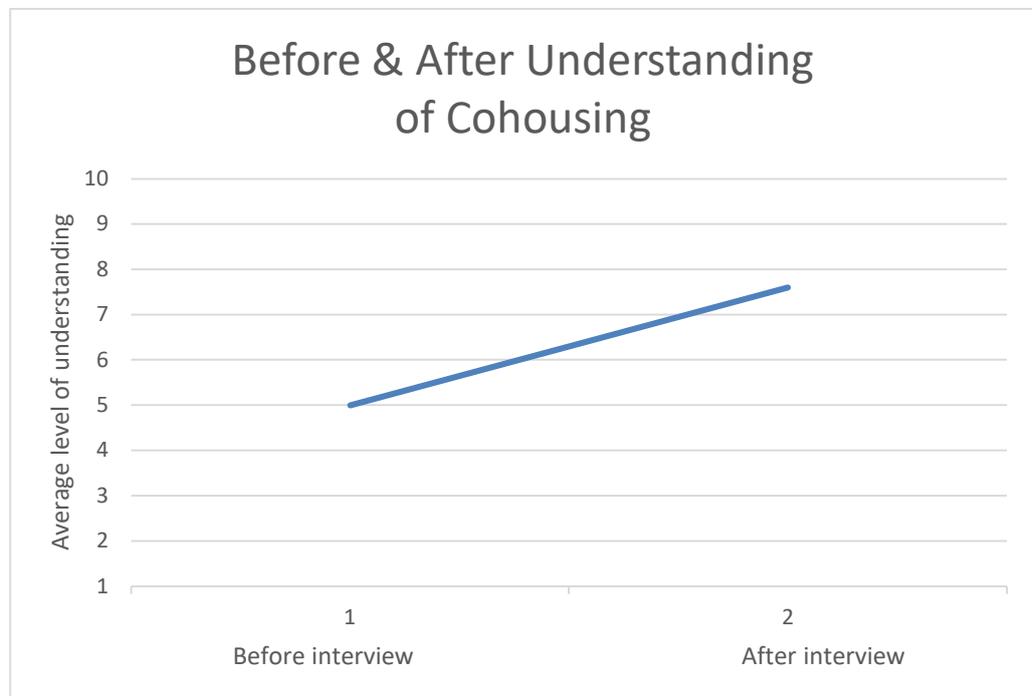
potential pitfalls and possible limitations of cohousing. These concerns have been useful for SCH to take forward into its own planning for future schemes.

3.25 COHOUSING EVALUATION

The interviews included conversations about cohousing to clarify its nuances and explain the different types that exist globally. The conversation enabled participants to ask questions to the SCH team and to clarify points or assumptions they may have held about cohousing. The research included a before and after question regarding interviewees' understanding of cohousing.

As an outcome of these conversations, we saw an overall increase in their understanding of cohousing. A graph of people's reported ratings before and after the interviews is illustrated below.

Figure 3 *Cohousing evaluation question*



In addition, as a result of the community engagement through this research, SCH found more people interested in joining as members and interested in discussing community-led planning and development.

As one of the aims of the research, this work has gone some way in giving a voice, albeit a quiet voice, to our grassroots community and it builds on current successful community programmes taking place in the local area, such as community park volunteer groups. SCH is, as a result of this engagement, more aware of people's understanding of cohousing in the local area and what they would find attractive about or detract them from a cohousing scheme.

4 DISCUSSION

The following discussion covers some key findings from this study relating to the wider research context.

4.1 HEALTH AND HOUSING REGULATION

During lockdown, existing problems became intensified. The findings from the Resolution Foundation Briefing *'Lockdown Living'* (2020) were that inadequate regulation has left the private rented sector (where so many young people and children reside) with the poorest quality standards of any tenure. In Wales, the pre-pandemic report *Making a Difference: Housing, Health A Case for Investment* (2019) points out that the very few recommendations made by environmental health teams dealing with the private sector has led to an unacceptable risk to health. For example, one of our interviewees said: "My neighbour's landlord has given them a warning eight times and it's making no difference to the excessive noise and threats from next door and their drug-use." Lack of space, particularly for those in rented accommodation, was also an issue noted by many of our interviewees. The Resolution Foundation (2020) states that, in future, policy makers need to include improved housing quality and space standards and fund the Local Authority to enforce private renting regulations. Having space inside and outside was vital to many in our study, respondents specifically mentioning the benefits of owning a house and garden. These were the fortunate ones, and many recognised this. The Resolution Foundation (2020) reported that:

Well-being indicators associated with mental health have changed little among homeowners, those of renters have deteriorated ... and 25-34 year-olds are twice as likely to lack access to a private garden as those over 65.

According to a recent *Lancet* article, women, especially with young children, were most likely to be affected by COVID-19 lockdown mental health issues (Pierce et al, 2020). In our study, women disproportionately talked about the importance of gardening and growing food during this time.

4.2 GREEN RECOVERY

Our study highlighted the attraction of working both from home and 'going into the office' on a reduced number of days. In an interview for BBC Radio Wales, the head of Natural Resources Wales (2020) stated that promoting 'green' houses, and green spaces near housing are objectives necessary for the post-COVID-19 planning. The interview with Sir David Henshaw highlighted that the Welsh Government has called for work on a Green Recovery. One of the challenges is the changing way we live and how we use office space. In future, for example, the need for travelling to and from work for certain jobs is likely to be reduced. Therefore, empty city centre buildings

will afford opportunity for more sustainable city-living and potential for cohousing schemes to be situated centrally.

4.3 FOOD AND GARDENING

Our interviewees consistently talked about growing food and gardening as an essential component of their wellbeing during lockdown. Many interviewees enjoyed gardening, and the new levels of peace and quiet of lockdown. The garden walls were a place for neighbours to chat and the importance of access to green spaces came up time and time again. This work highlighted the importance of private gardens, connected green spaces with easy access, and abundant parks and gardens for maintaining residents' mental wellbeing.

Cohousing schemes could provide an abundance of activities that are now on the social prescribing lists of primary care, social connections that can act as antidotes-to-loneliness and tasks that provide a huge sense of purpose, all on the doorstep of cohousing residents.

4.4 FOOD SHORTAGES

Post COVID-19 and Brexit, food production will become increasingly important: the NFU Cymru President John Davies said: "we believe it is vital.. that food security and resilience are embedded as key objectives" (Davies, 2020).

One of the biggest challenges to the world in the coming decades will be how to prevent food shortages. The World Food Programme Executive Director has said that "even before COVID, the year 2020 was on track to see the worst humanitarian crises since WW2. If we don't prepare and act now ... we could be facing multiple famines of biblical proportions." (Beasley, 2020) On a smaller scale, growing our own food, and gardening in general, is one answer. This is acknowledged in the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act (2015); educating the next generation in horticultural skills and conservation will be critical.

The pandemic has highlighted the relationship between food and inequalities, such as the increased need for food banks (Baranuik, 2020). Through the lockdown, our interviewees noted that we have been saved by those with little power, carrying out unskilled labour, and on either part-time or low incomes. The importance of keyworkers like shelf-stackers, delivery drivers and waste collectors were heralded by our interviewees.

4.5 LOCAL AREA

Overwhelmingly, interviewees found that their area made lockdown more bearable. People talked a lot about the importance of green space, access to parks, gardens, allotments and the outdoors. People talked about visiting places they had never known existed. Many talked about feeling safe and supported and this having positively made a difference. Some decided to stay on in Swansea, rather than pursuing careers in bigger cities.

4.6

WHAT TO KEEP FROM LOCKDOWN

In June 2020, YouGov COVID-19 public polling and the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission (FFCC) commissioned a survey on what people wanted after the pandemic was over. This survey found 85% of the respondents wanted recovery to be different from what life was like before. Just 9% wanted everything to go back to how it was before.

In her Statement introducing the Future Generations Report (2020), the Commissioner for Future Generations highlights that following lockdown, there will be challenges but opportunities and refers to the most significant things that should be done in the next 5 years. Reflecting the overwhelming view of responses from the Commission's interviews, the Commissioner reports that "connectivity is important to everyone's lives, and we spend on average an hour a day commuting. If we get connectivity right, it will have a significant impact on our ability to improve community cohesion, reduce air pollution, improve health and well-being, and meet carbon reduction targets." Before lockdown, transport accounted for 14% of Welsh greenhouse gas emissions and 80% of journeys to work in Wales were made by car.

In people's responses to the lockdown and the question of what they would like to keep, many reflect the changes in social habits we have had to adopt. One of our interviewees thought it is likely that legislators will be out of step with people's attitudes and hopes. The World Health Organisation (WHO) report (2020) states that the policy to 'Build Back Better' "involves using the crisis as an opportunity to transform bureaucracies, attitudes and infrastructures; to improve peace, equity, sustainability and adaptability." Even before the pandemic the report by the Future Generations Commissioner (May 2020) points out that public bodies had not taken into account long-term trends in housing, or the need for better access to green space, placemaking and zero carbon homes. The Commissioner goes on to recommend that "there should be fully integrated transport, housing and land use planning to minimise the need for people to travel" and that the Welsh Government should "recast the whole of the planning system in depth" to realign other policy areas, such as education and housing with the Act.

This resonates with the comments made by the interviewees in this study during the first lockdown in 2020; that sense that people coped and, in some cases, wanted to keep hold of some of the changes from lockdown. The appendix has further details of what people said about how their neighbourhoods and their housing had affected them during lockdown.

This work is a unique record of what local people felt in May, June and July 2020 as we came to terms with living under lockdown. We acknowledge that there were many unheard voices. Nevertheless, these interviews can provide the basis for many conversations with public bodies about what the future could hold in this part of Swansea, if not further afield.

5 CONCLUSION

The first lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic gave many people a chance to re-think the sort of society that they would like to retain once the likelihood of infection was reduced. In the launch of the Welsh Government's National Wellness System, the Commissioner for Future Generations requested information about the effects of COVID-19, commenting that "society was at its best during the pandemic". The interviews SCH has conducted have shown that most people have been resourceful, even the more vulnerable people in our society. When asked what people wanted to keep after lockdown, the majority mentioned fewer cars, which led to less noise, less pollution and enabled street neighbourhoods to meet more easily, generating a greater sense of 'street community'. SCH has many suggestions for promoting these important strands particularly through cohousing initiatives, including quiet road surfaces in busy areas, e-car and e-bike sharing schemes and planting more food trees. However, many are long-term changes that will need joined-up thinking by communities, councils, third sector and commercial organisations.

COVID-19 brought home with clarity and urgency the importance and fragility of access to personal and community connections and space at home and outdoors. Home-owners reported a greater sense of agency and resilience, while renters often experienced greater helplessness and insecurity.

The pandemic is forcefully teaching us the importance of our home and community spaces. It became evident that our before and after questions deepened people's understanding of Cohousing, once participants reflected on their experience during lockdown.

We therefore urge planners, policy makers and housing developers to expedite community-centred planning and cohousing design into future housing developments, especially in the context of post-COVID economic stimulus new build and town centre regeneration.

We request that planners and policy makers consult and collaborate with the public and community organisations to embed cohousing design into future housing developments and regeneration schemes.

Our research report aims to inspire further local connections and vision building. SCH wishes to build its capacity for facilitating community-led design and to catalyse a more active participation by local residents in local planning & development. The £1.3bn Swansea Bay City Deal involves significant infrastructure and town development and will benefit from empowered community engagement. Swansea has, in the past, suffered from underfunding and neglect of historic sites, heritage buildings and the upkeep of green spaces, with many grass-roots volunteers keeping these areas maintained. Projects which further promote this kind of community leadership will benefit Swansea and further afield.

As our programme continues, we find ourselves in alignment with the Welsh government's circular economy strategy. We aim to open a communication channel between grassroots communities, the Welsh Assembly and Swansea Council to inform cohousing planning practice and policy.

SCH will hold further engagement discussions about cohousing. As one interviewee said: "community-living is a sweet subject." In keeping with the drivers espoused by expert bodies, cohousing could be a way to strengthen our neighbourhoods in the face of future pandemics as well as threats from climate change.

The pandemic is a health and environment issue. If we are to have a significant reset, we will need to find agreement on the facts that will make a difference together with consensus about what people are ready to change to make that difference.

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7 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The SCH team would like to thank all participants in this research for their time during such a highly uncertain period, their openness, willingness and honesty in thinking about their local area and in what ways the pandemic has influenced their views of housing and neighbourhood both during and following lockdown restrictions.

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We are grateful for the support and grant from the National Community Land Trust Network (NCLTN), which has funded SCH to develop as an organisation and carry out community engagement activities, which have been key in informing the development and direction of SCH.

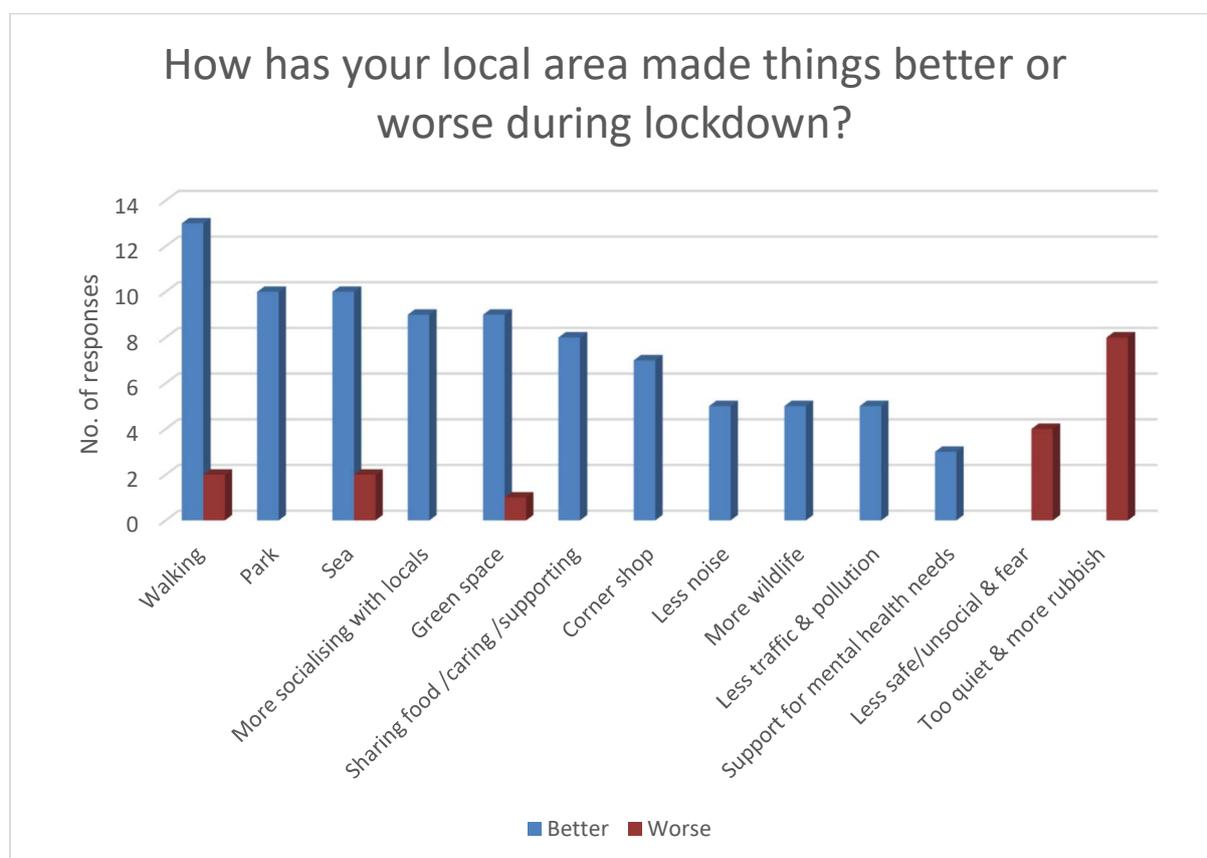
8 APPENDIX – INTERVIEWS

8.1 LOCAL AREA

The first question to our interviewees was: **how has your local area had made things better or worse during lockdown?** Were things better, or worse, or no different? People’s experience was very divergent – there were many paradoxes.

Swansea has been famously described by Dylan Thomas as “an ugly, lovely town ... crawling, sprawling ... by the side of a long and splendid curving shore.” Perhaps unsurprisingly, 80% of interviewees said that their local area had made lockdown more bearable. People went on to mention pros and cons about their locality, and the difference it had made to their lives, but on the whole, more people felt better for where they lived. Five interviewees said that things were worse for them because of their local area.

The main issues cited for making things better (blue bars) or worse (orange bars) can be seen in the bar chart below.



Are they expected to wear nappies?

Interviewees mentioned practical things affecting their lives and how they felt about their area, most of which made lockdown in that area a bit worse. One pointed out that

there were no buses (though also some said how good it was that there were any buses at all). Interviewees pointed out the impact of restricted local services: dog waste bins were not collected in the parks; lack of small, local shops open to pick up a drink or food on your run/walk; closed facilities, like public toilets: “elderly people can only walk a short way in

case they can't find a toilet - are they expected to wear nappies?" In fact, the closure of public toilets was something that interviewees of all ages were unhappy about.

I'm desperate to go out but then there are too many people.

An individual's immediate surroundings frequently made a difference, often negatively - a typical comment was that the area had made things worse during lockdown because "I only have a tiny terrace so I am desperate to go out but then there are too many people." Many with health problems found it too difficult and limiting to be able to go outside in comfort. A single parent carer admitted: "In our autistic group, a husband and wife are separating after this pandemic because they can't cope with lockdown. Normally, he has quiet space when children are at school and the house is quiet, now, he can't recharge his batteries. People use exercise to regulate their excess energy, in lockdown we don't have that outlet."

People not wanting to acknowledge that you are there, seems worse than ever

Difficulties created by social distancing were reflected by many, which could make the area both better and worse in terms of the effects of lockdown. An interviewee commented that "social distancing and people not wanting to acknowledge that you are there, seems worse than ever. Then there's the opposite, so it's brought out people's traits more. Some people want to chat massively, and others, to lock themselves down." To another person,

this was a benefit: "I can get away from people because they are not around!"

The sea really helps me to chillout

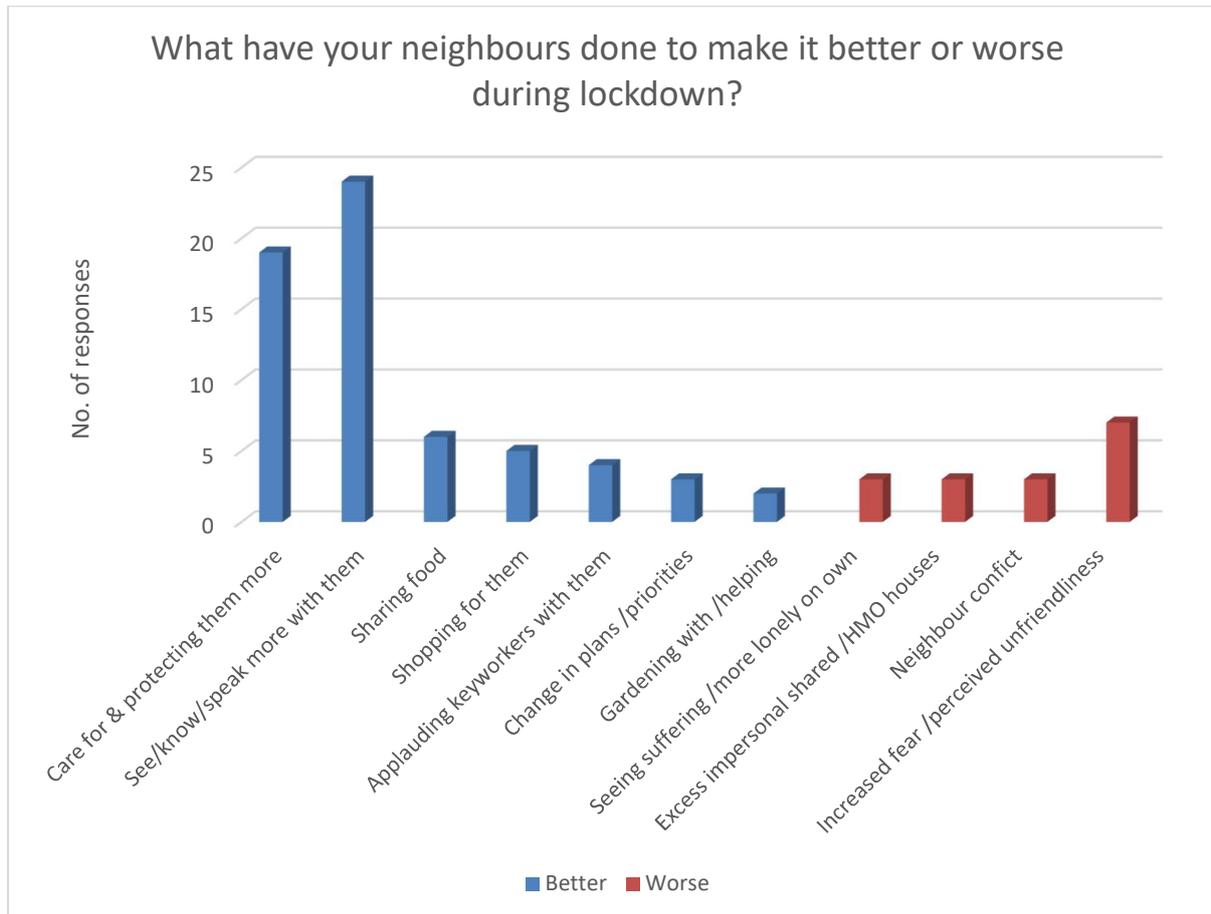
Many quotes reflected the stress in people's lives before the pandemic - caused by busy lives, noisy traffic, long hours at work and commuting - the peace and quiet during lockdown soothed many: "the 2 schools and student houses in this area are all empty now and that has lowered my stress levels" and a typical comment was "the sea really helps me to chill out and has been a godsend for being able to walk to work and bus around the place."

We can get to green places/nature - this has positively made a difference

Overwhelmingly, people found that their area made lockdown more bearable. The experience of many was that lockdown "reinforced the importance of communities supporting each other." The importance of green space, access to parks, gardens, allotments and the outdoors were found to be critical in making lockdown more bearable and people acknowledged: "I've gone to places that I never knew existed in the lockdown radius - like Rosehill Quarry and Mumbles nature reserve" and: "we can get to green places/nature, we feel safe and supported and this has positively made a difference." Two interviewees decided to stay on in Swansea, rather than pursuing careers in bigger cities. Another interviewee in an inner-city flat noticed: "no reckless traffic speeding down local roads past the school."

8.2 NEIGHBOURS

The next question was: **what have your neighbours done to make things better or worse during the lockdown period?** Most people identified both better and worse aspects (hence the proportions here total over 100%), 77% of interviewees cited actions that had made things better, 33% of people cited actions that had made things worse and 11% said their neighbourly experience in lockdown was no different (from key workers to people shielding themselves). 8% said things were worse. The main issues cited for making things better (blue bars) or worse (orange bars) can be seen in the bar chart below.



More people on foot, opportunities to talk more

Of the general comments people mentioned, the Thursday night clap in support of the NHS was a visible connection with neighbours, that many said they had never experienced. One interviewee commented that the clapping had given people "a common purpose, a community feeling and people were talking

over hedges" – something they hadn't done before.

I got to know the names of my neighbours, one of them dug my garden for me.

Many people mentioned that they enjoyed talking to neighbours they may just have said hello to in the past. People shared a lot more. One interviewee said: "I got to know the names of my neighbours, one of them dug my

garden for me.” Another said: “I gave fish and chips to an old lady over my garden wall - we were both delighted.” A single parent acknowledged that her neighbours made her feel better, that they gave her a sense of feeling protected.

We work together, people are not alone in the street, it is a good community.

Many people who worked full time, or did not spend much time in their homes, got to know neighbours better. Talking over garden walls was mentioned frequently. Many felt that their neighbours were a life-line, that: “we work together, people are not alone in the street, it is a good community.”

People are not wanting to acknowledge that you are there, seems worse than ever. Neighbours are avoiding waving or eye contact.

Unfortunately, not everyone perceived such good fortune. One single mother living in a cul-de-sac in a house with children found that no-one in the street exchanged birthday cards, or greetings, after the start of lockdown when they had before. The same neighbours stopped waving as they went passed the house, when they had previously. Another man commented that his neighbours no longer looked at him when they passed, and certainly didn't look him in the eye. Many interviewees found that elderly neighbours were particularly careful about avoiding any contact whatsoever.

I have extra fruit and veg and can't give it to my neighbours as I used to. I'm feeling isolated.

People found that their neighbours' existing conditions, such as mental health problems, were made worse by the lockdown. One young man said that the person in the flat below him had always had mental health problems but had accused him of “aggressive plant-watering” during the lockdown, which had made things more difficult. Another said: “I've always disagreed with the complete lockdown, as there are no pubs or places to gather for people and there are no half-way house places between lockdown and open-air spaces for them... for elderly people this is possibly their only social outlet, especially for elderly men. What might this mean for them?... more social isolation, especially if they're technophobes. They could have allowed us out more for exercise per day.”

There's a grass bank near to my street, which is owned by the council, which a private resident has landscaped – it's his own project and we're all using it.

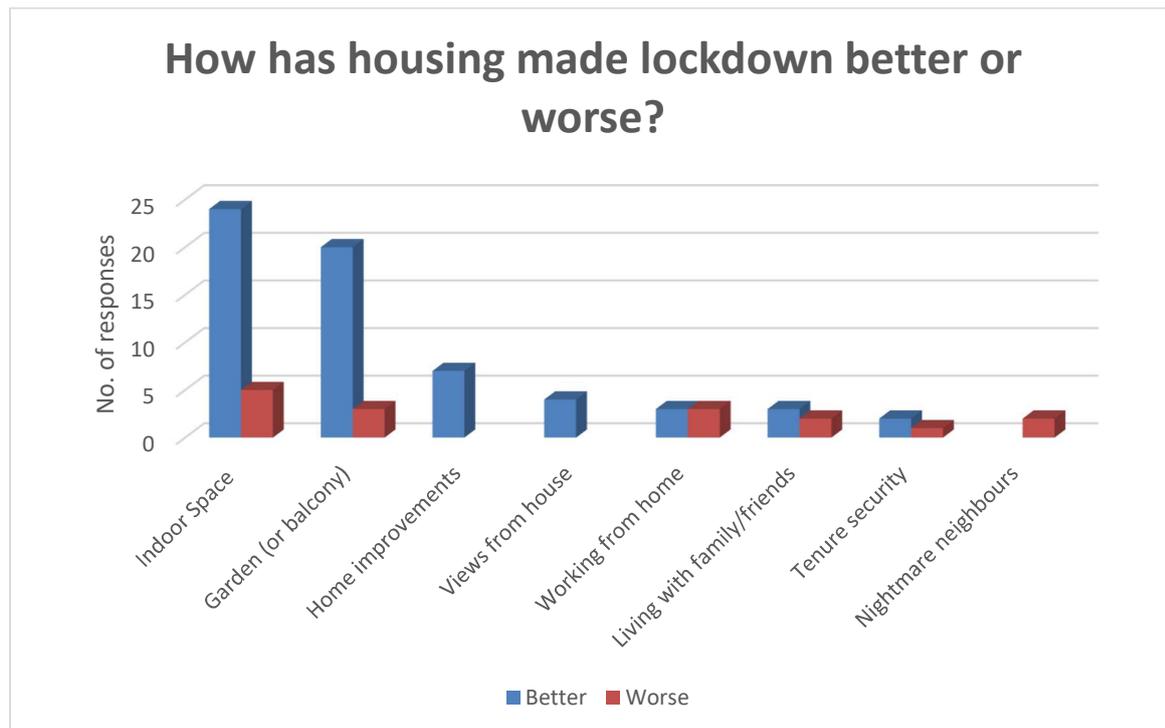
Given these observations of avoidance and fearing connection, neighbourliness and the protective, kind actions of neighbours was a key aspect of people's heightened sense of a community pulling together.

8.3 HOUSING

During the months of May, June and July, 2020 we were being urged by Welsh and UK governments to “Stay at Home, Save Lives” to curb the spread of the virus. As a cohousing group, we wanted to find out what differences people's housing had made to them during the lockdown.

In response to the question: **how has your housing made lockdown better or worse to be in lockdown?** 70% of interviewees said that their houses had made life easier during lockdown and 30% said worse. Most people identified both better and worse aspects.

The aspects that made housing better (blue bars) or worse (orange bars) are shown below.



The insecurity of private rental agreements

The comments made by our interviewees reflects other research in England and Wales about the effects of housing during the pandemic and their comments reflect the inequalities in housing in the general population. Interviewees in private rented houses were the most insecure of all categories. One parent said that she was relieved that her rental agreement had been put off, she was “fed up with the insecurity of private rental arrangements.” Another said:

“living in a shared house which is an HMO with no garden is quite challenging.”

The licence duties are toothless

Problems became intensified in lockdown: “the junkie upstairs is having numerous house parties” and: “where landlords have 3 or 4 houses, the licence duties are toothless ... they can still find loop holes and people are exploited.” Conversely, an interviewee said: “my neighbour’s landlord has given them a warning eight times and it's making no difference to the excessive noise and threats from next door and their drug-use.”

Overcrowded, my two teenage boys have to share a bedroom and I work at home

Lack of space, particularly for those in rented accommodation, was also an issue noted by many of our interviewees. One interviewee, who had tested positive for COVID-19, highlighted the problem with a lack of individual facilities in a pandemic: "I had to use a communal shower and disinfect it each time... and the shower was down one level." Another single parent in council property pointed out that her housing "is overcrowded...my two teenage boys have to share a bedroom and I work at home."

Of the people who enjoyed their housing during lockdown, most were owner-occupiers. Many said that they didn't normally spend much time in their houses: "I love to spend time here, spending more time here is wonderful, usually I am out Monday-Friday." Others were pleased that families were together more, one interviewee, whose son was home-schooling and wife was home-working said: "I am feeling less isolated, sharing space more with others in the family – now it is like a weekend all the time!"

The house itself has a wonderful view and ... garden. These are major factors for my well-being

Having space inside and outside was vital to many, with 48% specifically mentioning the benefits of having a house and garden: "Having the balcony and the beach as my back garden has helped a lot. It is an incredibly small space, but it is a nice space to work in, because of the views outside." "Space within the house and garden, including the enclosed back garden, has allowed me to keep myself fully occupied. It would have been much worse in a 1-bed flat."

I have a floor to myself which I turned in to my workspace

People found their houses became projects that kept them going: "the house is better than it was, it is a project doing-up an old house;" "my house is tidier – better." Many mentioned housing and well-being. One unpaid carer said: "the house itself has a wonderful view, and the right-sized garden. These are major factors for my well-being." Another said: "I have a great deal of space to myself and a large garden. I have definitely felt grateful for the house – I could sit and look at the view all day."

Challenges of working from home, use of IT, adjusting to having to work from home.

Working from home challenged people differently: "my biggest problem is that I don't have a spare table to work on in this small flat. I do everything from here, eating and working. It would have been horrendous if I had had other people living here during lockdown." Others said: "working from home was ok but I am invading others' space." People cleared or made space where they could: "I cleared out attic just before lockdown, so I have extra room. If we hadn't done that, it would have been worse."

Flexible working can support more service-users

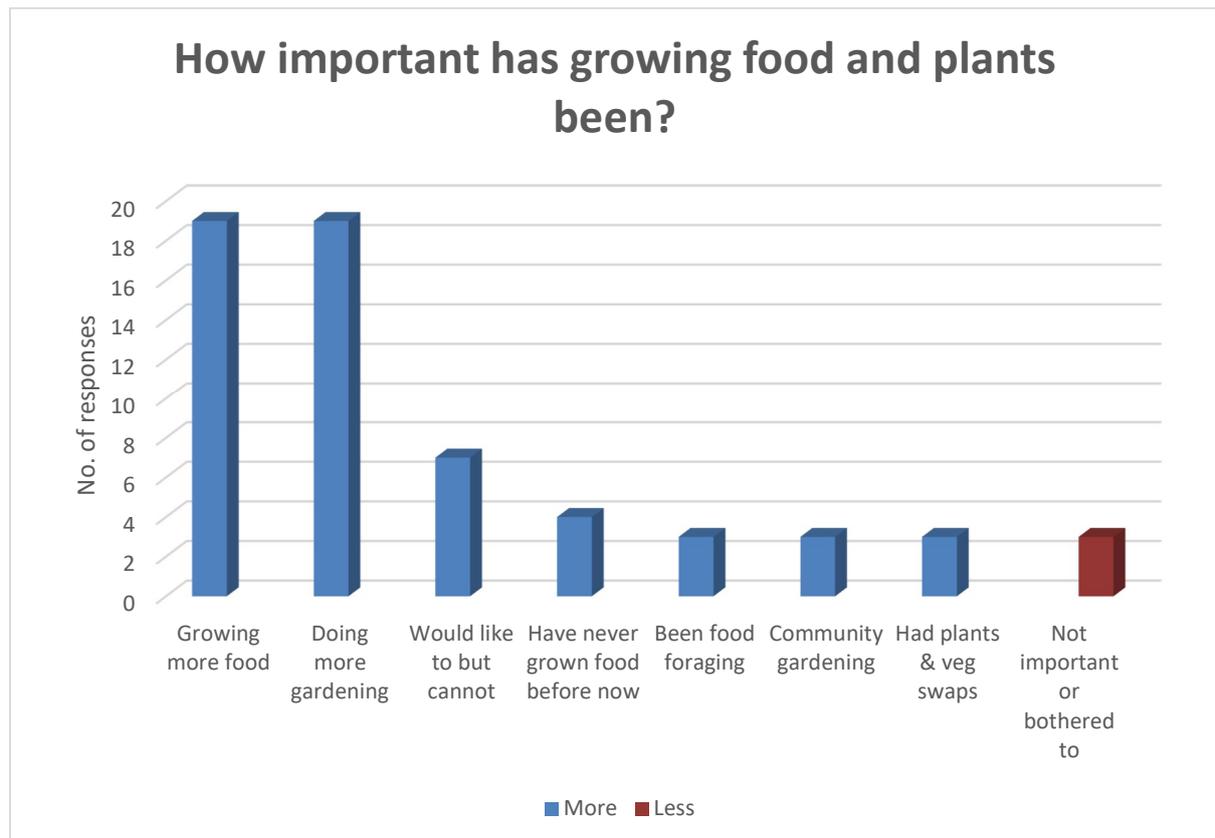
A small number of interviewees mentioned that it was a blessing not to waste time and energy commuting, though many acknowledged that working from home was a mixed blessing, recognising the advantages and disadvantages: "I would like a bit of both working from home and coming in on a reduced number of days. Flexible working can support more service-users than traditionally we could."

8.4 FOOD AND GARDENING

During lockdown, many people took to gardening and, as supermarket shelves became empty, took to growing food for themselves. This was one of the themes emerging from our analysis of the interviews. Our question was: **how important has growing food and plants been for you?**

From our interviewees, 77% answered important, 23% described why it had not been important for them or there had been no difference in amount of gardening they did during lockdown.

The main issues cited for being important (blue bars) or not important (orange bars) can be seen in the bar chart below.



Growing food and flowers is vital and the garden is vital

An overwhelming theme of these interviews was how much people have benefitted from gardening in general through wellbeing, sharing, nurturing and observing growth. Gardening for wellbeing was critical: “Gardening is very important; I would have cracked up without it.” Another: “Growing

food and flowers is vital and the garden is vital.”

Gardening has taken on a new importance

Sharing knowledge and produce with friends and neighbours was a recurring theme: “we swapped information about growing plants and that’s been really nice.” The garden walls were a place for neighbours to chat and the

importance of access to green spaces came up time and time again. People had “become involved in community gardening and seedling exchanges.” One interviewee said that she “had to garden” because she found buying food fresh from the shops was “poorer quality than her (previously used) local Community Farm.” Another, that gardening had taken on “a new importance,” and who was now growing food. Tomato seeds having sold out in shops, she used seeds from her own tomatoes. Another, who was “planting food now that I have time.” In our interviews, three times as many women as men mentioned the importance of gardening and growing food for their wellbeing.

There’s no point in putting energy into a garden I’m unlikely to use for long

However, some interviewees in small flats or private renters were deprived of an activity they valued. One private renter said that, in her previous house, she had planted food crops, fruit trees and kept chickens. In the present rented house, she was not permitted to touch the garden. Another private renter found he couldn't grow anything apart from pots of herbs on a window sill, as there was “no point in putting energy into a garden I’m unlikely to use for long.”

Interested in exploring and finding wild food

Foraging for food, while walking and exploring areas of Swansea, became more important. Families gathered elderflowers in Cockett

Woods and one interview talked about becoming “very interested in exploring and finding wild food.” Many talked about having enjoyed the garden but not having planted vegetables before the lockdown: “I couldn’t have done this before as I would have been travelling for work ... staying at home has focused me on the garden and growing a lot of different foods.”

You connect with the food process and what it entails to grow food – the caring that it needs

Others had found a deeper connection with “the growing, the looking after” and making plant-growing “as organic as possible.” One interviewee discussed the importance of knowing where food comes from and how much effort it takes to grow food, focussing on the process of growing more than the fruits of her effort: “I haven’t received yet the benefits of being able to eat it but, already, it has given me loads of pleasure.” Others talked about loving their gardens and “nurturing something.”

Feeling more capable that I could grow my own food. That joy of planting them from seeds and seeing each stage, it was so exciting

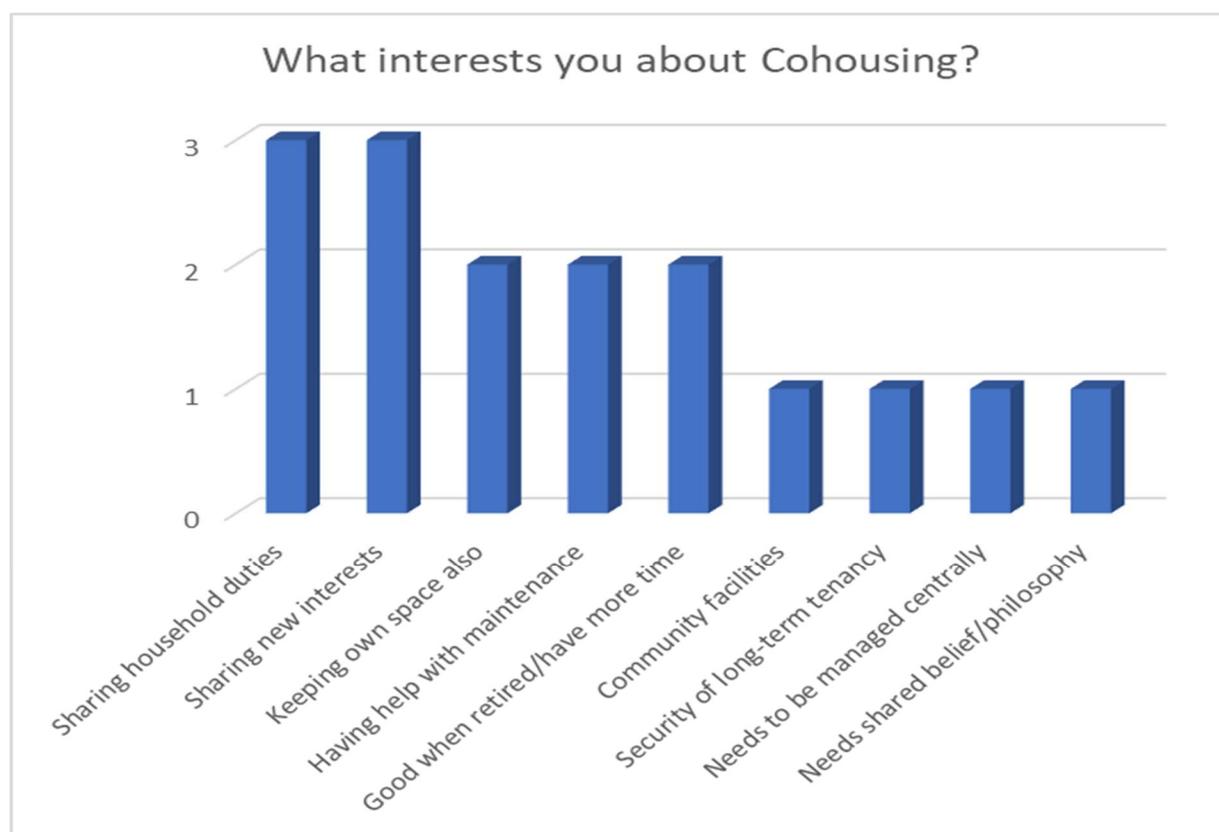
The sense of self-reliance felt from growing plants and food was clear: “I have been meaning to build a veg patch for years and have done it now ... I’ll carry on.”

8.5 COHOUSING CHARMS & CHALLENGES

The next part of the research was to explore people’s thoughts and understanding about cohousing. (Thought bubbles are used in this section to depict people’s opinions, rather than speech bubbles in the previous section depicting lived experience.)

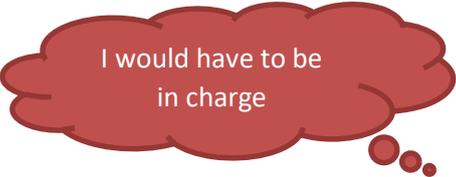
The next question for interviewees was: **what would you like/dislike about cohousing?** Reactions ranged from the charms to the challenges of cohousing, though many talked about the overall benefits of sharing.

The main issues cited for cohousing being of interest can be seen in the bar chart below.



Cohousing was created in Denmark in the 1970s. It means having your own home but sharing some common space and purpose. Different cohousing schemes have a different balance between privacy and communal living. Many are multi-generational.

Cohousing has been described as “wonderful but it isn’t for everyone” (Saga, 2017). It is still a relatively unknown housing idea in Britain, although when the *Older Women’s Cohousing Project* (OWCH) opened in London, 4.5 million people watched the video about it (OWCH, 2016). Regional leaders in the housing sector have asserted that: “The need is obvious, 3.64 million people over 65 live alone in the UK, 70% of them are women.” (Sheppard, 2019).



I would have to be in charge

Reactions from our interviews ranged from: "I am not keen on human beings ... I would have to be in charge" to: "the family vibe ... meals together".



the family vibe of having evening meals and BBQs together

Many interviewees find the idea of cohousing attractive, and had tried it before in various guises. One interviewee had cohoused in Germany for several years and enjoyed "the family vibe of having evening meals and BBQs together." He suggested, however, that the UK emphasises individualism and the layout of many houses makes it impossible to have a community atmosphere, which would affect cohousing groupings.



Living together prevents loneliness and children have a community of adults

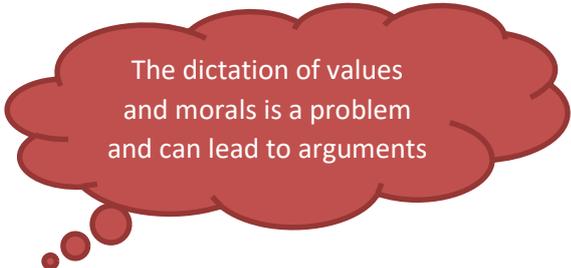
One interviewee had lived in a communal house in Bristol for 6 or 7 years and had decided it was not for him at the moment, as he was "too individual." At the same time, he acknowledged "there are problems with living in a nuclear family." This was echoed by others suggesting that it would be good to "break household barriers apart." Another rents out rooms but they all live communally as "it makes sense environmentally." She

used to live in cohousing in Denmark where everyone cooked one meal a week. She said that living together "prevents loneliness and children have a community of adults ... people can pool resources."



If I came home at 3am would the communal room still be open?

Many people thought that the main problem in cohousing would be personal differences and arguments. One interviewee said it was for a "utopian society" and that, in our society, "egos get in the way." One interviewee covered a number of practical challenges: "if I came home at 3am would the communal room still be open? How would parties work for those trying to sleep nearby? If you owed money, the freeholders would want to control things. I like my space. If I have something to say, I'll say it and that might create conflict. My business is my business and I need to know people before I trust them. There would be extra work that I don't want, I would prefer to tinker away in my garage."



The dictation of values and morals is a problem and can lead to arguments

Another person, who has been looking for communal housing for a while had found "the dictation of values and morals is a problem, and can lead to arguments. Can one have cats? ... One place I nearly joined had a policy about cats e.g. dogs were ok because they are vegan, but not cats." Additionally: "People

dictate how everyone should be; a pack mentality, some dominate others."



The legalities and structure would put them off

Some recognised that the duties, which might be part of cohousing might be off-putting: "I can see the benefits of people coming together but the legalities and structure would put them off." An interviewee, who was considering finding a community-led housing project thinks: "people don't like taking on the responsibility for gardening and helping to wash up etc."



I would need my own garden and sitting area ... a range of people is good.

Another said "It depends on the amount of personal space. I would need my own garden and sitting area. Depends on the people, a range of people is good." An interviewee, currently disturbed in her current home by a troublesome neighbour was concerned about "who you might end up living with."



I like coming home to quiet

Another view was: "I am with people and their problems all day. I like coming home to quiet. When retired, that would replace social activities at work."



Beneficial for youngsters ... something for them to do

Some had views that were generally in favour of communal housing. One interviewee, who had lived in communal settings, thought there were "no problems sharing community space" and that it had been: "more beneficial for youngsters ... something for them to do." Another acknowledged that: "living in co-housing is cheaper." It has been found that houses in community-led projects keep their commercial value above those on the commercial market.



Being part of a community and having people around me who can support me and who I can support

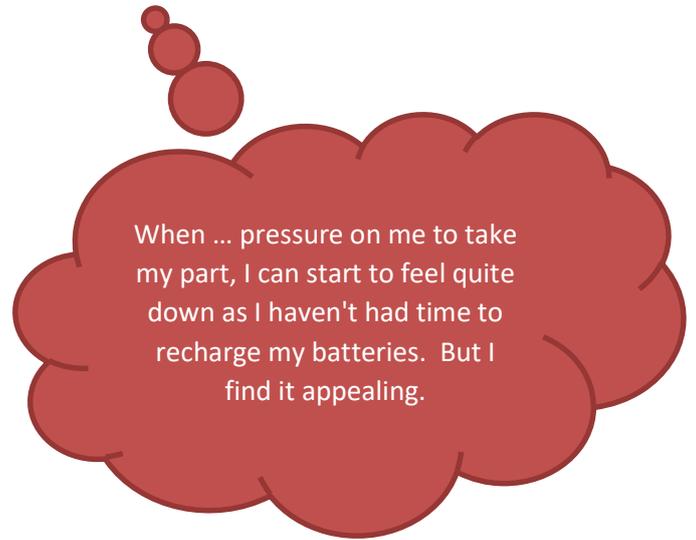
After a long interview, one working woman gave cohousing an accolade. Her thoughts on cohousing were as follows:

"It would depend on how much involvement, because I know that I am quite an introverted person and like my own space and my own time. When there are too many people around, and pressure on me to take my part, I can start to feel quite down as I haven't had time to recharge my batteries. But I find it

appealing. Being part of a community and having people around me who can support me and who I can support - sharing skills, resources, being around to chat with and



share food. The kind of things I do with work mates but in a community space."

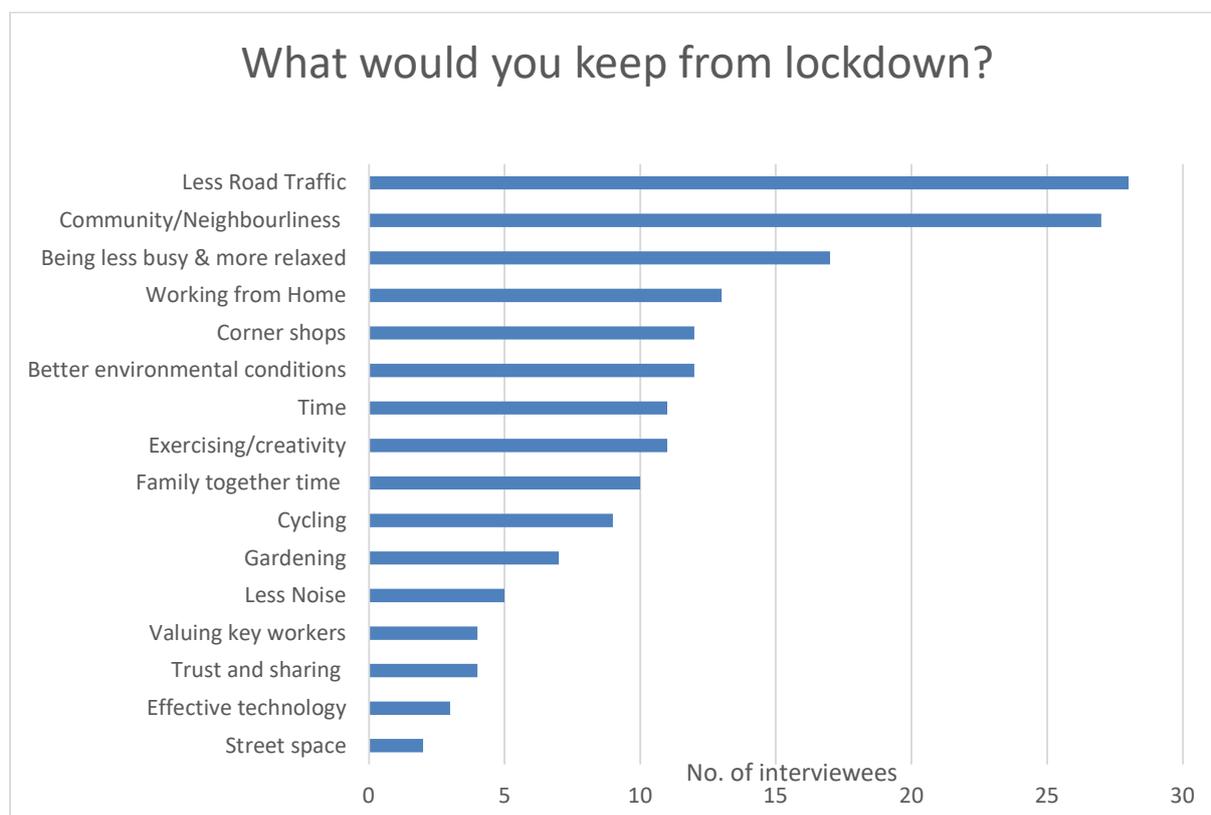


Generally, interviewees' preference for cohousing environments comprised supportive but non-oppressive communities with a good degree of personal space and autonomy, and a diversity of thought and opinion.

Doubtless, there is also space for groups of individuals to get together and form close-knit highly communal cohousing projects around strong common ideologies (e.g. veganism, low carbon) but those models would appear to be limited in their ability to recruit members and residents from the wider community.

8.6 WHAT TO KEEP FROM LOCKDOWN

The last question Swansea CoHousing asked of our interviewees in May, June and July 2020 was what **people would like to keep after lockdown**. 46% wanted less road traffic (5% mentioned consequent less noise) 44% mentioned they wanted to keep community and neighbourliness.



Many interviewees mentioned well-being - 28% of them wanted to keep the feeling of being less busy and more relaxed; 18% wanted to keep saved time, 16% mentioned wanting to keep family time, and 21% wanted to keep working from home. Eight people mentioned things they did not want to keep: mainly faulty or lack of technology and work being too busy.

Below are the views spoken by people in answer to what they would like to keep.

The time I save from commuting. I am still able to work from home twice a week. I get more done at home. Life is less rushed, though work is busier. Hope the sense of community continues. I live on a busy road but now I am able to talk to neighbours across the road, I want to keep it like that.

Space for fun and creativity, worry less, stress less.
Focus on simple things.

The quietness. Valuing people like lorry drivers. Things are circular, we all need each other.

The psychological shift. Respect for nature. The exploring that people are doing. All the positive stuff like growing things, working from home, community and neighbours, helping each other, being kind to each other.

The display of altruism. Society has been eroded in the past, people acted just for themselves now willing to make sacrifices, for others not just themselves.

The quiet, roads less busy, slower pace of life, not so frantic, working from home.

CO2 down. Environmental benefit. Spending time with my family.

The importance of key workers: front line staff, bin people, shelf-stackers.

The time that people have for each other and themselves. The peace and quiet, being able to hear the birds. Less pollution.

The hope that there will be a re-set. Less pollution, more cycle lanes. I want to live in a society which cares more for a space we created ourselves. There's been a mental shift, the world is not going to be the same, but my feeling that something special is happening is evaporating.

Every aspect. Less traffic, walking, being outside. Lose the noise pollution from Oystermouth Road.

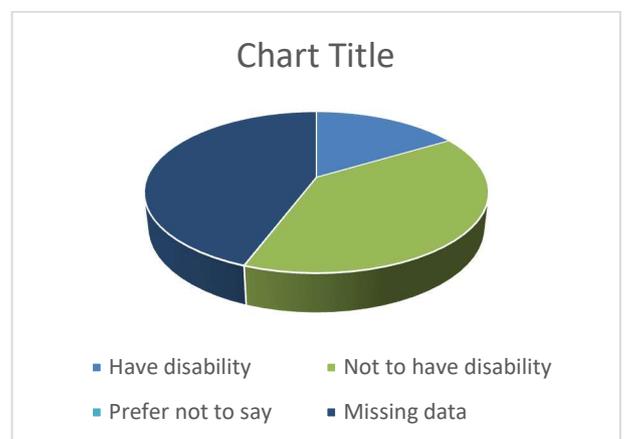
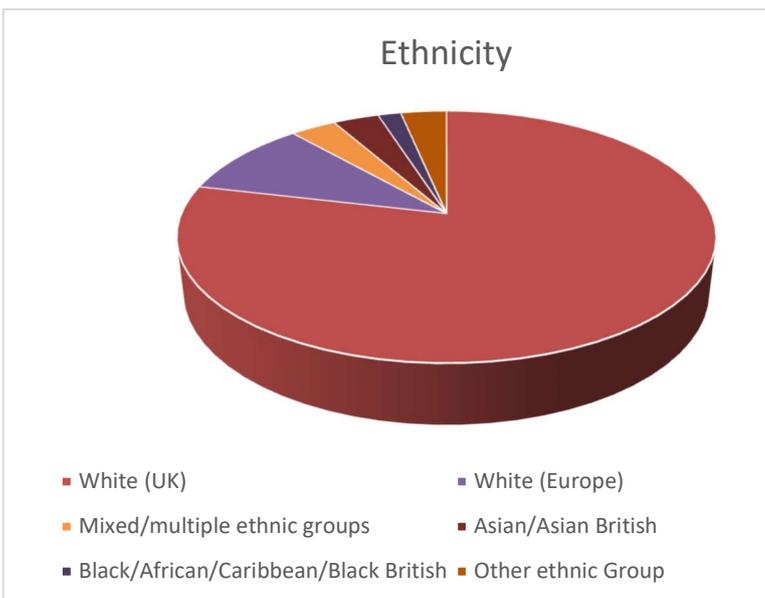
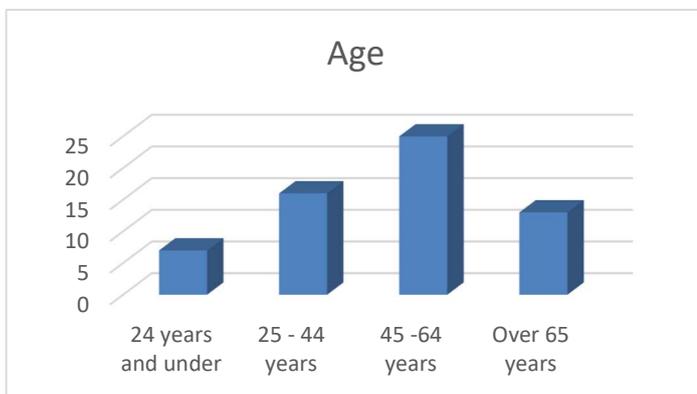
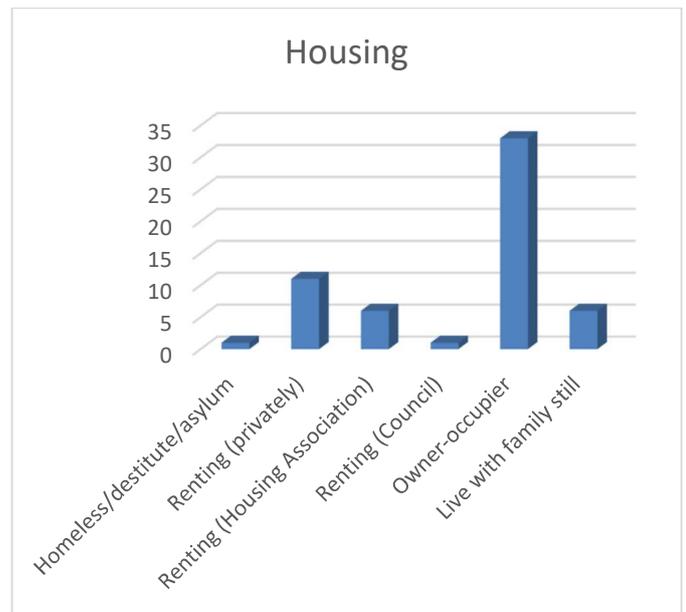
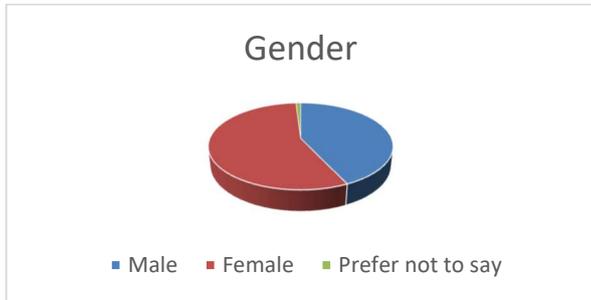
Less traffic. Mumbles Rd should be one way with cycle lanes. Alternative ways of working. Use of technology to avoid travelling so much for work.

Less traffic, less rush, better pace of life, less crowding, better quality of time - just having time. The beauty of simple things, the beauty of routine. Care for other people. The low-paid and low-skilled being the most important people.

Consumer capitalism turned on its head ... lives prioritised over economy and a reversal of societal values.

9 DEMOGRAPHICS

The demographics of the interviewee sample is illustrated graphically as follows.





Lockdown Tulips by Rosemary Havard-Jones 2020