

A day in the life...

Meet **Charlotte**, 70, who lives in New Ground Cohousing in Barnet, north London – created by women, for women

INTERVIEW **JANE YETTRAM**

🕒 7.45am

After a shower and breakfast I go to unlock the door that leads from the shared garden into our common house – a very large room with a big kitchen. There are 25 self-contained flats here and we all live separate lives, but the common house is the hub where we can gather together.

New Ground Cohousing has been home to 26 women for seven years, but setting up the project took much longer. Cohousing is something like village life used to be – you have your own home, your own front door, but there's a communal aspect that prevents isolation.

In 1998 an academic called Maria Brenton learned about cohousing during a research visit to the Netherlands. Believing it would attract older women, she gave a talk about cohousing in the UK. Following the talk, a group of women went to the pub – and, determined to make it happen here, they formed the Older Women's Co-Housing group, which became known as OWCH.

Over the years some women dropped out and others – like me – joined. The process was long – finding funding, finding sites, fighting for planning permission. It was also important to the group to have mixed tenures so the housing wouldn't only be for women who could afford to buy. And that's what we have: 18 flats that women own, and seven rented social housing units, all built to the same high standard.

🕒 8.30am

I like a walk every morning, so I stroll around the garden with its orchard and wildflowers, greeting others who are up and about.

Most women have been here since New Ground opened. We moved in between December 2016 and January 2017 – 26 new residents could hardly have had their removal vans here at the same time! Shirley Meredeen – an OWCH founder member, was in her 80s by then and lived here for almost six years until she died in late 2022.

We're still the only older women's cohousing development. Of course, male friends, brothers, nephews and sons are welcome to visit. But men can't buy or have a tenancy. When I first heard about it, I thought – all women? That's a bit odd! But it works. I can't now imagine living any other way. Sometimes people do find that cohousing isn't for them, though. It's not just somewhere to live. It's becoming an active part of a community.

🕒 8.45am

On my walk I pass Shirley's old flat, which someone will move into soon. Since the beginning, only Shirley's flat and two others (when residents moved to be near their families) have become available.

The waiting list for flats is closed for the time being – it's unreasonable to expect women to wait for what may be years before flats become vacant. However,



Resident Charlotte in front of the self-contained flats

New Ground's late founder Shirley Meredeen (foreground) on the day building started

“ We emphasise that we don't look after each other, but we do look out for each other ”

interested women can apply to become Friends of New Ground.

🕒 10am

On my way out to Age UK Barnet, where I'm a volunteer receptionist, I see residents heading to a yoga class. We're hoping to add Pilates to our fitness programme

I also volunteer for a cancer charity. Many residents – who range in age from 58 to 94 – volunteer or are in employment. The youngest and oldest are great friends. Both are still gainfully employed – as CEO of a charity and as a book editor.

Some women are widowed, some divorced, some single like me. And there's one married couple, two women, who've been together many years.

Jill Mead

🕒 2pm

Home for a late lunch. I sit in the garden and chat to Jude, a fellow member of New Ground's communications team. I'm also part of the buildings group, which makes sure everything is well maintained. Other groups look after the garden, our finances, membership and transitions, and the common areas.

A management committee is chosen every year and decisions are made together at our monthly business meeting. That's one reason I love living here – I wouldn't want to be stuck in a place where others tell me how to live my life.

🕒 3pm

I talk to a journalist via Zoom as part of my communications role. Many people want to find out about us – like PhD students who contact us from across the world.

We're keen to reach out to the local community, and those interested in getting involved without living here can

apply to join the Friends. We had a party with neighbours from the nearby streets last year and plan to have more.

🕒 4pm

Off to play Scrabble with a good friend who lives upstairs. Of course, not everyone is a bosom buddy, but we respect each other and treat each other with kindness and consideration.

In any community or family there are always differences of opinion. But we resolve things by discussion. It's give and take, like in all successful relationships.

🕒 5pm

I shop for a neighbour with a bad cold. We have a health buddy system – residents who know each other's emergency contacts and have each other's door key. One neighbour who had a hip replacement was able to come home from hospital early because we had a cooking rota to ensure that she had a hot meal every day for two weeks.

We emphasise that we don't *look after* each other, but we do *look out for* each other. Long-term care is organised by families or next of kin.

🕒 7pm

We're having a communal meal tonight so I head to the common house. These happen once a fortnight, with three or four people cooking for the community. Visitors are always welcome. It's my turn soon. I will cook something vegetarian – a ratatouille or risotto.

Every Friday we have 'Tea at Three'. Anyone can drop into the common house. Some knit or sew, some play board games, others just come to chat. Every three weeks it's film night. And once a year, on New Year's Day, we get together for brunch – croissants, coffee and Prosecco. It's a lovely start to the year.

🕒 10pm

I lock the garden door to the common house and remember how Covid really showed how special it is to live here. Although my old flat was lovely it had no outside area, and I hardly knew my neighbours. If I'd been there during the pandemic I'd have gone bonkers.

So, although lockdown was awful, the management committee had everything organised. We stayed as separate households but could meet outside with two-metre distancing. We had half an hour of socially distanced exercise each morning in our car park, watched plays online, and then met in the garden to discuss them.

And I – this is my claim to fame! – took on the role of drugs mule. I was the person who went to the pharmacy, wearing my mask and gloves, for any woman who needed a prescription.

Some people here were very vulnerable and could have died if they'd caught Covid, but everything was taken care of. It showed what a community can do.

In fact, we recently won an award from global charity World Habitat, which called us 'a groundbreaking model of community living... that empowers older adults to thrive and age with dignity'. We're very proud of that!

www.newgroundcohousing.uk