

Living In Co-operative & Community-Led Housing During COVID

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY (NOV 2020)



Wales Co-operative Centre
Canolfan Cydweithredol Cymru



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government



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1. Introduction & Methodology

“Owing to our communal structure, I think we were more resilient towards the negative effects of the pandemic.”

CCLH resident, 3+ years in scheme

The following report details residents’ experiences of living in co-operative and community-led housing (CCLH) in Wales during the coronavirus pandemic in 2020. It was commissioned by the Wales Co-operative Centre and produced by the Social Effectiveness Research Centre. This report follows on from a larger piece of pre-coronavirus research completed in 2019 that analysed the potential benefits more generally of living in CCLH to residents in Wales. In that previous report, residents of CCLH schemes had identified in their own words a large range of benefits gained from living in their schemes.

These included:

- Improved skills
- Increased confidence
- Better physical health
- Improved mental well-being
- A better financial situation
- Less loneliness/isolation
- Greater community feeling
- Increased ability to live in tune with their values and their environment.¹

¹ See B. Parkinson, L. Quinn, A. Hraboweckyj and V. Williams, ‘Assessing the Potential Benefits of Living in Co-operative and/or Community-Led Housing’ (Wales Co-operative Centre and the Nationwide Foundation, July 2019), p.2, available at: <https://wales.coop/assessing-the-potential-benefits-of-living-in-co-operative-and-or-community-led-housing-cclh/> <accessed November 2020>.

As that report also noted, there are several definitions of CCLH and the concepts that go to make it up, such as 'cohousing', or 'co-operative' or 'community-led' housing. This research makes use, as the previous report also did, of the definitions produced by the Nationwide Foundation's 'Backing Community-Led Housing' programme, which defines as its subject any housing scheme involving "communities that are taking a leading role in providing housing solutions for people in need".²



²Nationwide Foundation, 'Backing Community-Led Housing', available at: <http://www.nationwidefoundation.org.uk/our-programmes/backing-community-led-housing/> <accessed November 2020>.

2. Living in CCLH during COVID: Positive Effects

“I feel very fortunate to have been here for the lockdown as I have felt protected and supported, otherwise I would have been entirely on my own. The support has been physical and psychological, and I have space to move around in. We have experience in respecting each other’s wishes, which helped with social distancing. These things are, I believe, unique to cohousing.”

To begin with the positive effects of living in CCLH during the coronavirus pandemic, all but one respondent in the research identified at least one effect. More often, each participant identified several advantages they had observed during the pandemic and resulting lockdown that would not have been present had they been living in another form of housing.

In quantitative terms, the types of advantage identified broke down as follows:



Greater practical support (i.e day to day tasks, shopping)



Reduced isolation & loneliness / more social support



Greater financial security



Closer links to wider community



Reduced psychological / mental distress



Better physical living conditions (i.e more outdoor space)

3. Living in CCLH during COVID: Negative Effects

“Different interpretations of rules have made it difficult to make and stick to collective decisions and this wouldn’t be a negative living in a traditional form of housing as there are fewer people to consult with.”

CCLH resident, 1+ years in scheme

The first thing to note in this section is that compared to the overall number of positive impacts versus other forms of housing identified by CCLH residents in relation to the pandemic, the overall number of disadvantages identified was much smaller. As one respondent put it in relation to the virus: “Everything was tested to breaking point, but we are still here and looking forward”. Indeed, the total number of perceived negative effects reported by residents came in at barely a third of the total number of advantages

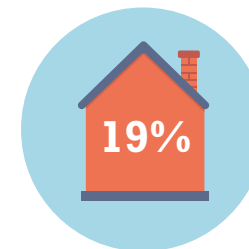
reported. In general, the fact that the overall number of advantages to being in CCLH during the pandemic, as opposed to being in a more conventional form of housing, hugely outweighed the number of disadvantages identified is probably the single most important finding to emerge from this research.



More difficult to agree social distancing / lockdown rules



Harder to shield (i.e. where facilities are shared)



Greater challenges running household day to day (when social interaction reduced)



Higher likelihood of household conflict support needs

4. Additional Support Needs Identified and Lessons Learned

“Shifting more people into secure situations with some or all of the additional benefits that I experienced during this time would be the best outcome of this time. So people can live with less fear and have the strength of a community around them. If this happens people will feel more prosperous and be able to contribute more to their community. The pandemic will make it harder for groups to achieve this, so I think the Wales Co-op Centre needs to see how it can help.”

CCLH resident, 5+ years in scheme

When it came to lessons learned, it should be noted first and foremost that – as with the perceived advantages and disadvantages of living in CCLH during the pandemic in general – these were mostly positive rather than negative ones. For example, one respondent, who had outlined the problems caused by the coronavirus-induced halt to their scheme’s building project, went on to make the specific point that the experience “has been challenging and difficult, but in many ways it has reinforced my wish to live in a housing co-op, working together and supporting each other”.

Other lessons identified by different respondents included more general observations, such as that “the key to everything is good communication”, along with lessons on the importance of ensuring “that formal channels of communication are in place with all members”, as well as the “need to blend feelings and facts in meetings, and build trust so endless meetings aren’t needed”. These

kinds of general reminder arising from the COVID crisis were summed up most comprehensively by one particular participant in the research:

“People need to be aware that you can’t assume others think the same way, especially at a time when you can’t articulate it, or explore it. Considering feelings is very important. How do we keep links going internally and externally with no light at the end of the pandemic tunnel yet?”

Taken as a whole, therefore, while living in CCLH appears to have played a significant role in reducing the impact of COVID for many of the residents participating in this research, many lessons have also clearly been learned and could play a useful part in increasing support efforts in the face of the virus by all those with an interest in the development and expansion of CCLH in Wales.



GOOD

COMMUNICATION

5. Conclusion

“Community support organised. Clear programme of cleaning and so on organised to ensure protection. Community organisations in place, so easy to organise special support for shielding and so on. Focus on members means we took the community with us when unpopular changes (i.e. closing leisure facilities) had to be made. All these could be achieved in any setting. Our democratic involvement just made it easier.”

CCLH resident, 3+ years in scheme

To draw some conclusions from the voices of those living in CCLH during the COVID pandemic, among the sample of residents participating in this research there were many more advantages of living in CCLH schemes during the crisis identified than disadvantages.

Another potentially important conclusion to emerge from this research is that, on the evidence of those participating in it, residents in CCLH schemes generally felt that they did better than they otherwise would have done in any other form of housing. Moreover, this was seen as being not just because of structural factors in their chosen form of housing, such as size or space or proximity to other people, but also as arising at least in part from the principles and practices of CCLH, with its traditions of co-operation, discussion, respect and mutual support, and all of the other values that underly every CCLH scheme to a greater or lesser extent.

In the era of COVID therefore, perhaps the most overriding need to emerge of all is for CCLH schemes, whatever their form, to stay close to their roots and their principles and pull further together than ever before.

Taking the lessons learnt from the pandemic, and making sure those lessons play a full role in building the new post-coronavirus world that will eventually emerge, is now the most important task facing all those living in, working on, or otherwise connected to co-operative and community led housing. Despite the ongoing challenges of COVID, the here and now is as good a place and time as any to begin that process.

Dr. Leon Quinn

Social Effectiveness Research Centre

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Contact

If you're excited to find out more about co-operative and community-led housing, we want to hear from you. We're also keen to talk to organisations, businesses, community groups or public bodies that would like to support co-operative and community-led housing projects.

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