By the end of this decade, 4.2 million people in Britain will be over 65, and by 2040 over-65s will make up nearly a quarter of the total population (ONS, 2015; Hoff, 2015). The consequent strain on healthcare and social services is regularly reported in the media, but increasingly there is also discussion about the widely accepted links between social isolation and poor health in older age, amid a growing realisation that such problems in later life can no longer be addressed from a purely reactive, medicalised perspective. One idea gradually gaining a foothold in the United Kingdom might provide a practical response: the concept of small housing communities that are created by groups of older people themselves – often referred to as ‘senior cohousing’ (Brenton, 1998, 2013).

The co-housing movement shares many of the aims and concerns common to community-based projects that come under the umbrella of alternative and self-build housing; although not necessarily constructed by the residents themselves, all are commissioned and designed to meet the specific needs of the community or group, with a focus on participative design and often on different aspects of sustainability (Fromm, 1991). However, specific to co-housing is the concept of intentional community; although formed of individual, self-contained homes, cohousing is created and run by and for its residents, with the intention of making and sustaining a community. In physical terms, this means that all schemes incorporate a shared space, referred to as a ‘common house’, which ideally includes cooking facilities and is intended as the focus of the community (Field, 2004). Maria Brenton further emphasises the
advantages of specifically senior co-housing: informal mutual support between people in later life which aims to combat increasing isolation and offer the chance of a more engaged, healthy and independent old age (Brenton, 2013).

From its origins in Denmark in the 1970s, co-housing is well established in northern Europe, most notably in the Netherlands where, unusually, senior co-housing is the dominant form with well over 200 established senior groups (Kähler, 2010; Tummers, 2015a; LVCW, 2016). Recent years have also seen significant growth in the USA, Canada and Australia (Glass and Vander Plaats, 2013; Rogers, 2014; Jarvis, 2015). The UK has around 20 established co-housing schemes (UK Cohousing Network, 2016), although so far only one of these is specifically for older people – Older Womens Co-Housing (OWCH) in north London, whose members moved into their new homes at the end of 2016. Promisingly though, the UK has a larger number of older groups at formative stages, two of which are examined in this chapter.

Perhaps because senior co-housing is such a small phenomenon in most countries (albeit a growing one), there is at present relatively little academic literature, which is often either of a descriptive or prescriptive nature (cf. Durrett, 2009; Sangregorio, 2000; Sandstedt, 2010), or focuses on the practical or economic challenges of development (see, for example, Scott-Hunt, 2007; Scanlon and Fernández Arrigoitia, 2015; Tummers, 2015b). There are a few studies that describe the importance of community and social connection, as well as the greater quality of life and well-being that senior co-housing groups can offer (see, for example, Andresen and Runge, 2002; Choi and Paulsson, 2011; Kang et al., 2012). Forbes (2002, 6) finds that for co-housing schemes, ‘connectedness and social participation contribute to a happier and healthier old age’.

There is, however, a lack of literature so far that explores the deeper motivations of those who join co-housing groups, their aspirations for such projects, and what co-housing might mean to them in the broader context of ageing and the choices available to them. The study of two senior co-housing groups presented in this chapter seeks to begin to address this deficit and, in doing so, will draw on wider theories and issues that relate to the ageing process. While recognising that in the UK at least, private wealth is key to the ability to develop such schemes, it aims to explore the attitudes and motivations of individual members in the broader contexts of social connection, class and belonging.
The case studies

Cohousing Woodside

The group, whose members are drawn largely from the Greater London area, aimed to develop their co-housing scheme on a former hospital site in north London. The site, in a relatively expensive area, is being built by the Hanover Housing Association as part of a larger development of around 160 homes, all for the over 55s (Hanover Housing Association, 2015). However, the housing association regards the co-housing element as a purely private venture, and in early 2016 a rise in anticipated sale prices led to the homes becoming unaffordable for a majority of the members. It currently seems very unlikely therefore that the groups will proceed any further, or that co-housing in any form will be a part of the completed development.

Cannock Mill Cohousing

The Cannock Mill group membership is also drawn largely from the Greater London area. But given the prohibitively high land costs, it was decided at an early stage to consider sites within 90 minutes by train from the centre of the capital. The group has purchased a site on the outskirts of Colchester in Essex and has recently gained planning permission for the development, which will incorporate a Grade II listed mill building on the site as the project’s common house.

Co-housing group members: a general picture

Not all members of these two groups were of British origin, but all were ethnically white. Although there were exceptions, the interviewees shared a broadly middle-class background; a majority were educated

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<tr>
<th>Year group established</th>
<th>2011</th>
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<tr>
<td>No. of units planned</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of members at time of study</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of households at time of study</td>
<td>19 (7 couples, 12 single women)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender split</td>
<td>19 women, 7 men</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age range</td>
<td>56 to 79 (large majority under 70)</td>
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to degree level (with more than one to doctoral level), with professions that ranged from a London taxi driver, social and healthcare workers and those in the charitable sector (including international aid workers), and several academics; they are what Savage et al. (2013) might define as the ‘technical middle class’. Often, professional skills were brought to bear on the work necessary to develop the co-housing projects themselves: the Cannock Mill group includes four architects, one of whom is the designer of the scheme, with others whose professions have involved community development and public financial administration. Many of the group members remain in full-time or part-time employment, and intend to continue after moving in.

What was perhaps most notable about the membership of both groups, however, was the relative lack of close family: although complete figures for the groups were not available, of the 13 households interviewed 4 had never had children, and among the total 19 interviewees only 3 reported parents still alive.

### Methodology

The study comprised 13 in-depth interviews with members of both groups (a total of 19 people, some interviewed as couples), alongside attendance at group meetings and wider co-housing networking events, with interviewees recruited via an open invitation made via a ‘gatekeeper’ from each group. The semi-structured interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded using an inductive process, with categories evolved to reflect themes as they emerged, although the original interview transcripts were regularly referred back to so as not to lose the original sense or context.

<table>
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<th>Table 9.2 Key figures – Cannock Mill Cohousing</th>
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<td>Year group established</td>
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<td>Age range</td>
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Key theoretical issues

Although having a certain level of economic capital is generally a necessity for developing senior co-housing in the UK at present, this is a qualifying requirement rather than a motivation; after all, many people currently reaching retirement age have significant wealth in the form of housing, but have not chosen to embark on a collaborative housing project. There is a need therefore to understand motivations for senior co-housing in terms of attitudes toward ageing and expectations of later life, and how these fuel such a commitment of time and emotion. Perhaps one of the most under-discussed aspects of senior co-housing is the necessity of relocation from an existing home and neighbourhood to join a small, proximate community in a new and often unfamiliar location.

Thus, in seeking to explore the individual motivations for belonging to such groups, a number of broader theoretical issues will be drawn on. The first is the concept of older people’s changing expectations of later life over recent years, often framed by the current phenomenon of the baby boomer generation reaching retirement age. Second is the idea of belonging, both in terms of a particular neighbourhood but also through social ties to a group, and how this relates closely to aspects of social class.

Changing conceptions of later life

Later life, or ‘old age’, has long been regarded by Western society as a period of physical and mental decline, dependency, economic and social disengagement (Estes et al., 1982). However, an academic understanding of the ageing process has shifted considerably over the last half-century, from a view of decline and dependency in later life as something innate, toward the idea that ‘old age’ is socially constructed, with what we consider to be ‘unavoidable’ behaviours and tropes of old age actually fluid and negotiable in myriad ways (Biggs, 2007). If broader society remains ageist in many of its attitudes, there is evidence that older people themselves think differently about what it means to be ‘old’ (Gilleard, 2008), popularised most notably by the polemical work of Peter Laslett in the late 1980s. Laslett promoted this third age as a ‘new’ post-retirement life stage, as a period that offers new opportunities for personal fulfilment and productive activity to those who find themselves freed from the bonds of work and child-rearing, but who are yet to suffer the physical or mental decline threatened by very old age (Laslett, 1989). Although criticised for its uneven mix of academic rigour and populism (see, for
instance, Siegel, 1990), the appeal of such ideas might be argued as having represented an empowerment of a social group – those who have reached retirement age – that has previously been regarded as no longer of value in Western society because it is no longer of economic value (Higgs, 2013). People in their fifties, sixties and even seventies no longer regard themselves as ‘old’, rejecting ageist stereotypes and embracing the idea of the third age and its call to ‘age successfully’ (Biggs et al., 2007; Gilleard, 2008).

It could also be argued that such shifting conceptions about later life are currently most strongly personified by the baby boomer generation: those aged between their mid-fifties and mid-seventies, who fall within the age range represented by those forming the senior co-housing groups explored here. In many ways the use of the term ‘boomers’ is a shorthand to describe a cohort that is perhaps more diverse than any previously, but that nonetheless grew up through a period of intense social change that has markedly separated them from the behaviour and attitudes of previous generations (Biggs, 2007; Leach et al., 2013; Pruchno, 2012). They are also often framed as the first consumer generation (Harkin and Huber, 2004), the term here used in a broader sense than a predilection for spending, rather as a rejection of the social and cultural norms of their parents’ generation through an expression of personal tastes and greatly expanded expectations (Phillipson et al., 2008). Others see this as matched by a ‘blurring of the generations in terms of identity’, in which the boomers attempt to ally themselves far more with members of successive generations (Featherstone and Hepworth, 1995).

But for many, conceptions of older people as frail and dependent are increasingly substituted by the idea of a wealthy boomer generation (Phillipson et al., 2008). In the UK, housing wealth is increasingly concentrated among those over 60, at a time when home ownership overall is falling (Rowlingson, 2012; Meen et al., 2016, 244), with 83 per cent of over-sixties owning their own home, most without a mortgage (Wood, 2013). Yet such statistics perhaps hide a more complex picture of inequality: those over 60 include a majority of both the wealthiest but also the poorest in UK society, with great differentials in wealth and income across social class, gender and geographical location, and with home ownership not always equating to a higher income (Rowlingson, 2012). For London and the southeast of England, the period since the mid-1990s has seen unprecedented growth in house prices far beyond inflation; those who bought before this period stepped onto a ‘wealth escalator’, which exponentially boosted property values, but made them increasingly unaffordable for those who did not (Chamberlain, 2009).
For those many boomers who can be considered wealthy, there are shifts in attitude and need that relate to economic capital. There are signs that those in their fifties and sixties might choose to expend more of their equity in later life than previous generations (Rowlingson and McKay, 2005), reflecting a broader change in generational attitudes. At the same time, Holmans (2008) notes how living longer – and more years in retirement – means many older people will need to draw on the funds accumulated earlier in life, an increasing amount of which will be on care and health-related costs.

These perspectives on ageing and the cohort currently around retirement age help to situate the members of the two groups in the study here, as potentially having a very different set of attitudes to previous generations of similar age. More specifically, given the current model of senior co-housing in the UK as without any form of public subsidy, they can also be positioned within the context of those who have benefitted from a set of circumstances particular to their generation and especially to the southeast of England, and who might be broadly described as (or at least, numerically dominated by) the property-owning middle classes.

Ageing, middle-class belonging and social bonds

One little-explored aspect of senior co-housing (or indeed co-housing more generally) is the implicit act of relocation, of moving from an existing home and neighbourhood to a new locality to become part of a tight-knit social group. An exploration of the motivations for joining a senior co-housing project therefore raises questions of what role ageing has in changing attitudes toward the places that members live in now, and how this relates to their social networks and connections.

Given that, in the UK at least, ownership of property or other significant capital is a prerequisite for joining senior co-housing, it is not possible to separate these issues of social connection and place from social class. The term is used here in the sense developed by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who theorised social class as being produced – and reproduced through successive generations – by a complex interplay of different forms of capital: not just economic but also social and cultural capital. He defined ‘social capital’ as the use of resources based on group membership, relationships and networks, and ‘cultural capital’ as representing the knowledge and skills specific to an individual (Bourdieu, 1986).

There is a body of literature inspired by Bourdieu’s conception of social class that does explore the aspects of belonging and place,
specifically how the middle classes often move to and claim a specific urban area or neighbourhood as their own (Butler and Robson, 2003; Savage et al., 2005; Benson and Jackson, 2012; Benson, 2014), and which Savage et al. (2005) describe as ‘elective belonging’ – a defining of place as having not only functional but also symbolic meaning for them. Benson (2014) explores these concepts of middle-class mobility, belonging and place attachment further in studies of various residential locations in London, portraying how such tactics were used to achieve a ‘fit’ with their own needs by changing the place in question. But each of these studies is implicitly about an earlier life stage, one where individuals aim to invest economically, socially and culturally for a period during their working lives, where raising families and schooling are perhaps the crucial aspect. How might this compare with those of a similar social class but at a later life stage, who find themselves increasingly outnumbered by younger cohorts? Might the senior co-housing groups examined here to some extent represent those who are no longer able to find a ‘fit’ with their neighbourhoods, which have become what May and Muir (2015) refer to as ‘generationed’ places: still a site of dominance of one social group over another, but divided by generation as well as social class?

Central to this lack of fit, it could be argued, is an individual’s ‘stock’ of social capital – in this context the support through friends, family and social networks that changes through different parts of the life course. Kendig et al. (2012) have noted how, as we age, close social ties often diminish; how, as working lives end, it is easy to lose touch: people die; friends and family move away and become more geographically dispersed, leading to isolation.

Thus, an exploration of the motivations of the individuals in the two groups needs to acknowledge how changing needs in later life might result in a changing response to place, examining the degree to which a person is no longer able to ‘adapt’ a neighbourhood or existing situation to provide the social capital they perceive is needed. Senior co-housing in this context might represent an alternative response to that need.

**Changing attitudes, new expectations**

Given that members have self-selected into a housing concept in which group sociability is an integral part, it is unsurprising that those interviewed could be described as busy, engaged and socially active, very much an image of the ‘young old’ or successful agers discussed earlier. It should also be noted of course that the age range straddles a transitional
period; many are still working full- or part-time, while others have no intention of ever fully retiring from some form of work. A number of themes were notable which seemed specific to the groups, or at least that might be considered more pronounced than for members of the same cohort more widely.

One idea frequently repeated was a firm rejection of the choices the interviewees’ own parents had taken in later life. Specifically, a sense emerged that the previous generation’s fixation on ownership of a family home as an end in itself failed to address what interviewees felt would be more practical for them as they got older. As one male resident from Woodside recalled:

My parents [were] the sort of people referred to as ‘retiring badly’. After me and my sister had already left home, they bought a five-bedroom detached house quite far from either of us, then pointedly refused to move out of it, even when it became completely unsuitable.

There was little sense among the interviewees of attachment to their own homes, at least not to the extent that this outweighed more practical considerations, notably the difficulty of maintaining large properties when set against the possibility of downsizing. And while two couples did make specific mention of arrangements to leave their children some part of their assets, issues of inheritance also never seemed central to members’ long-term planning, perhaps the consequence of the research including a disproportionate number of childless individuals. However, members’ strong focus on their own plans contrasts with their perception of their own parents’ behaviour, and perhaps reflects Rowlingson and McKay’s (2005) findings that those in their fifties and sixties are prepared to expend more of their equity in later life than previous generations. Among those who had children, an important idea was that their offspring should not be required to support them as they grew older, and they strongly rejected the idea that moving in with their children at some point would be desirable or possible.

A further major factor, as previously noted, was an anticipation of a greater need for economic resources by a generation who are likely to live much longer, with the likelihood of the continuing withdrawal of state care services in the future also undoubtedly playing a part in decisions over housing assets. In this context, it was clear that membership of the group was perceived as a strongly positive move towards avoiding both the potential isolation and the difficulties with day-to-day support needs.
that some had witnessed with their own parents. As one interviewee explained:

We need to be sensible about our old age, you know, if you read all the statistics about things, isolation and loneliness, health and going in and out of hospital ... all of these kinds of things. So assuming we live to be 90, it made us think, well, we have to do something about it, and do something proactively. (Female interviewee, Cannock Mill)

This apparent willingness to consider the future practicalities of ageing contrasts perhaps with many people of a similar age, and seems not to reflect the previously discussed tendency in later life to deny or reject the potential negative aspects of ageing. At the same time, specific aspects of declining physical health were generally not discussed (which perhaps was in part due to the nature of a ‘one-off’ interview setting). It was however sometimes acknowledged that in the case of significant physical or mental incapacity, co-housing would no longer be an option. No clear plans seemed to have emerged for how such issues of ‘succession’ might work in practice, especially in terms of ownership of each separate home as an asset in the case of future care requirements. Some argue that understanding senior co-housing as a substitute for organised care misses the point however. Baars and Thomése (1994) view the tradition of co-housing groups for older people in the Netherlands as a response to the heterogeneous nature of the boomer generation, who do not fit within a binary system of ‘independent life’ versus ‘care home’, arguing, as do others (Brenton, 2011), that it enables older people to resist the need for dependency and care.

Thus, it was unsurprising that another common thread in interview discussions was not only a rejection of ‘care homes’, but an aversion to all forms of retirement housing currently on offer, and which included the product offered by developers such as McCarthy and Stone (whose name, raised by several of the interviewees, seems to be synonymous with all such accommodation). One female Woodside interviewee was typical in commenting that although it was ‘alright for my dad’, such housing offered her little control in later life where it mattered, concluding that she and her husband ‘could end up being forced to live with anyone’.

Despite the fact that central to the senior co-housing concept is a response to the vicissitudes and potential decline of later life that emphasises personal control, there was a reticence among interviewees in
discussing how these issues might unfold in practice. In part, this might reflect the tensions, previously discussed, between the positive connotations of living a third age as opposed to the difficulties of thinking about a fourth, especially in discussion with a researcher in an interview setting. But an overriding impression was of two groups of people sharing the excitement of doing something new, in being part of a shared project with like-minded others. Although interviewees were prompted to speak about what life in the group might be like after moving in, there was considerably more reflection on how the co-housing project offered a chance to reject societal expectations of ‘winding down’ in later life, and enter a new, active life stage, as part of a group of pioneers:

I think there’s something else going on here which is to do with taking a positive view of getting older. Which is our issue, we’re going to show people how it’s done, it’s pioneering, that’s the underlying thing. (Female resident, Cannock Mill)

While these ‘pioneering’ attitudes may on the one hand represent a challenge to a perceived apathy among their cohort, or wider societal age-ism, there was also a strong sense of a specific shared culture that had helped maintain group cohesion over prolonged planning and development periods typical for such projects. Members quickly recognised in each other broadly shared progressive politics, if not necessarily a shared party political affiliation, as one male interviewee from Woodside related of his group:

You will find most people in the group are old lefties and read the Guardian … it is self-selecting politically with a small ‘p’. You won’t find many Daily Mail readers. I think you need that sort of sympathy and certainly when we had a social event a while back, it was interesting that so many of us had separate but very similar experiences, and we all sort of coalesced in the same point.

But these shared values came across most strongly in the context of housing, unsurprising given that the groups have come together through a mutual housing project. Interviewees took a very positive view of communal forms of living, with many having thought about the idea in the past, with several having lived in some sort of communal arrangement beyond their student days. One male Woodside resident described how the group discovered ‘quite a strong history of activism and community involvement’ and that this had helped bind the group together socially.
through the various development challenges, where ‘the aims and objectives of the group represent what you still believe in’.

These shared ideas around housing also included a critique of what interviewees perceived as a problematic culture of home ownership in the UK in comparison with other countries. Several interviewees acknowledged the irony that all group members had benefitted from the disproportionate rise in property values in recent decades: all those interviewed (and, it is understood, all members of both groups) owned their existing homes with either no or minimal mortgages, while many had second homes. One owned several properties as a semi-professional landlord. Further, the ease with which property had been acquired in the period prior to the 1990s was also striking, with stories of cheap pre-gentrified areas where landlords were keen to sell unprofitable houses, mortgage tax relief and easily available loans.

But the broader shared thinking about housing, especially where it is focused on how older people might live together in co-housing, has led to a feeling of ‘pioneer status’ among both the groups, which in some ways they felt had isolated them from wider society; some interviewees jokingly referred to how friends and family regarded them as ‘hippies’ or ‘a bit mad’. Some had even elected not to inform others of their plans at all. One interviewee related how this sense of separateness was reflected in prejudice from the media, where they felt often misrepresented as ‘an alternative form of care home’, but also by friends:

our friends … they find it scary, they don’t want to acknowledge that we’re getting old. Yes, we’re getting old, but wouldn’t it be good to have a different kind of lifestyle? Do we have to try and emulate everyone else? (Female resident, Cannock Mill)

In summary, the two groups can be depicted as having attitudes and expectations that in many ways reflect their generation but especially their broadly similar social backgrounds, including the benefit of often significant housing wealth that has allowed them to consider their respective co-housing projects (although it is important to acknowledge that, even then, the Woodside group’s assets could not match the rising development costs).

At the same time, there are shared attitudes and expectations that on the one hand suggest the very epitome of ‘successful agers’, but on the other represent a set of ideas that might be considered particularly forward-thinking, seeing themselves in many ways as different from their cohort, as pioneers. It is certainly true that there is not only a willingness
to think about some of the vicissitudes of later life, but a perhaps unusual readiness to use their existing housing assets to pool resources in what they hope will be a successful model for a better later life, especially in light of what they fairly imagine will be a declining level of public care services as demand increases.

Notwithstanding such progressive attitudes, senior co-housing projects remain a huge commitment, especially given the dearth of practical examples to follow, in the UK at least. Also as previously noted, the process of how the formation of such groups actually plays out and is intertwined with the negotiation of ageing in terms of place and social connection has been little studied, and is the focus of the section below.

Ageing, belonging and social connection

As previously noted, an overlooked aspect of creating a senior (or indeed multi-generational) co-housing community is the implicit need, for most members, to give up existing homes and neighbourhoods in favour of a new life with fellow co-housing members who are not always established friends, in a new location. This section therefore considers some of the data from the interviews in light of the themes of place, social class and belonging discussed earlier, and how these relate to the ageing process and motivations for joining a senior co-housing group.

It was quickly apparent in many interviews that there was little emotional attachment to members’ own homes. But also, often striking was the lack of attachment to, or engagement with, an existing neighbourhood. In part, this might be a reflection of the smaller number of children and thus lower likelihood of having raised families locally (and, as is not unusual among the urban professional classes, very few had themselves grown up in the area where they now lived). Yet even among those with children – the majority of interviewees, after all – there was a notable lack of connection; a few regarded where they currently lived as the result of compromises made, for instance, because of children’s education. One male resident from the Woodside group was not alone in his reservations about the area he had lived in for many years, describing his suburban neighbours as ‘a bit dead from the neck up, cleaning their cars, talking about house prices, reading the Daily Mail’. Others had no strong opinion on their locality at all, at times because they were often elsewhere: in more than one case, children had grown up locally for a
period, but one or both parents living and working abroad for several years had resulted in fewer social links locally, with the home as a ‘base’ to return to at different periods of their lives.

In terms of ‘social capital’ – existing networks of friends and family – there was a distinct sense of dislocation, which interviewees perceived as potentially growing into problems of isolation as they got older. Several related stories of how friends had died or moved to distant locations, and thus of lack of close social ties in any useful, local sense. A female interviewee from the Woodside group, who has lived with severe disability since she was young, already appreciated ‘how difficult life can become, in terms of not being able to travel, to see friends. I can’t get around the neighbourhood … it’s very hard to visit. Life can get very isolated, without you realising it.’

There were exceptions, most notably a couple who had strong local social connections acquired mainly through bringing up young children in the area, and were ambivalent about leaving their neighbourhood of many years (and even more so about leaving London for Colchester). As they reflected on this, however, it became clear that on balance the chance of realising a successful co-housing group ‘trumped’ these other reservations; there was also a realisation that their own life stage was no longer a fit with their locale:

As an older person, I don’t feel I need to stay around. You know, [daughter and her partner] are so passionate about Brockley, they have a baby, and there’s all these people having babies. But really, I want to be somewhere which permits me to be a senior person.

Thus, although several interviewees still felt positively about the places where they lived in many ways, there was broad agreement that as they grew older members were finding it an increasing problem to make or maintain social connection locally. This seems to stand in stark contrast to the phenomenon described by Benson (2014), where an in-migration of middle-class residents worked to remake and define their neighbourhood as a ‘place of the mind’, through which to engage in the social reproduction of their own social class through raising families in a socially supportive environment. Rather, it seems closer to ‘generationed’ places (May and Muir, 2015), dominated by younger cohorts who have achieved and are maintaining a better ‘fit’ with their environment. In this context, the interviewees could be considered ‘temporal migrants’ (Westerhof, 2010) who are no longer able to maintain social ties and cultural connections that had previously been possible through work, children and
school systems, or through local social activities predominantly associated with younger people.

Thus, it could be argued that the focus of the two groups is responding to a deficit of social capital as they grow older, specifically by developing the ‘bridging’ social ties that individual members possess through shared backgrounds and attitudes. From this perspective, their respective co-housing projects represent a site where they hope to build the ‘bonding’ ties that they anticipate will help support each other in later life, crucially, in a close, proximate community.

Conclusion and emerging issues

Senior co-housing as it emerges in the UK appears to offer a very positive response to the increasing problems of loneliness, isolation and consequent strain on services that are forecast as the outcome of an ageing population. In the absence of completed developments, however, this study has presented an examination of the character and motivations of two nascent groups as they progress their plans. While the development of co-housing schemes presents numerous challenges – not least the self-funding issues that have already effectively meant the end of Cohousing Woodside – the focus of the study here has been on the broader motivations and social implications of such plans.

The picture that has emerged is of two groups who position themselves as pioneers of a new, socially engaged approach to later life, hoping to create momentum for senior co-housing as a realistic option for more older people, with group members keen to help shift perceptions of older people from images of dependency to a model that allows them to be fully in charge of the later part of their lives. While on the one hand they could be seen as reflecting the changing perceptions of older age personified by their generation, they are also defined as groups by a relatively specific set of shared cultural attitudes and politics, remaining unusual perhaps in their willingness to address practical decisions about housing and social connection in later life that most people prefer not to think about.

More problematically, both groups could be regarded as representing a part of the population very specific to their time and place: a distinct intersection of a small but significant middle-class group who have benefitted, like many in certain parts of the UK, from the disproportionate rise in property values over recent decades. They are also individuals who have acknowledged a deficit in their close social ties as they age,
exacerbated in part by noticeably fewer offspring or close family than the norm, even for the relatively mobile middle class. This deficit in social capital is closely related to their changing relationship with members’ individual neighbourhoods, which have changed over time as they have grown older. In several cases, there has always been a lack of close social ties locally. Many felt they had been ‘aged out’ of their neighbourhoods, contrasting strongly with literature portraying the middle classes as most able to move to and dominate place through different tactics. Thus, for them, co-housing represents a chance to develop social capital in the form of strong social ties, and to bring these together where they will be most useful as they age: in the form of a physically proximate group, in short, a tightly defined new neighbourhood.

This relocation and formation of a new – effectively exclusive – community does in turn raise other issues, however. Despite limited literature on co-housing, and senior co-housing in particular, some argue that the inherent close-knit nature of co-housing, together with its thus-far privately funded nature in the UK, creates the risk of senior co-housing becoming a form of gated community (Chiodelli, 2015a, 2015b). Several of the interviewees in fact raised the issue, albeit refuting the idea that this might be an outcome in practice. At the same time, there was an acknowledgement that the cohesion of the group rested on more than simply mutual support to help maintain each other’s physical and mental health, as one interviewee commented when discussing the screening process for new applicants:

people are applying now just to ensure they’re not on their own at the end, we’re not screening closely enough to see what they actually add to the group. We’re not looking for people who have the money, and are just inoffensive. We want people who are intellectually curious. (Female resident, Cannock Mill)

In Denmark, where senior co-housing is well established in both social and private forms, Pedersen (2015) notes how the latter has become relatively exclusive, sought-after by the middle classes for the quality of the housing rather than communitarian principles. There is evidence of more socially mixed groups where senior co-housing is publicly funded (Ruiu 2015), most notably in the Netherlands (Bouma and Voorbij, 2009). But the latter study also detected conflict within groups at an early stage where, because of local authority allocation processes, groups were not able to choose their own members. Attention is thus drawn to what is perhaps a fundamental tension around the concept of the intentional
community of like-minded individuals – a problem echoed by other studies (Baars and Thomése, 1994; Brenton, 1998).

Yet there is no reason in principle that senior co-housing groups should be the exclusive preserve of the middle classes. Although it may well be that professional middle-class groups are more lacking in the forms of proximate social connectedness and friendship that co-housing offers, problems of loneliness and isolation in later life are clearly not restricted to this particular group. Further, the idea of community-led, community-based ‘alternative’ housing is by no means an exclusively middle-class one: the co-operative housing movement in the UK, as perhaps the most widespread form of democratically managed housing, is open to all forms of tenure, and is most often based on tenancy rather than ownership models (CCH, 2016).

Further, potential demand might also be wider than senior co-housing’s current numerically insignificant numbers suggest, as very few people have so far encountered the idea. A recent BBC short film on the OWCH group moving into the first UK senior co-housing development was shared more than 60,000 times, with the essence of many of the some 3,000 overwhelmingly positive comments being ‘I’ve never heard of such a thing, where can I find more information?’ (BBC, 2016).

In this context, and given widespread forecasts of a rapidly ageing population overtaking the capacity of social care services, the concept of self-managed collaborative housing developments for older people could be regarded as an essential component of future social care policy.