

Co-Living – A Questionable Model

Co-Living, not to be confused with co-housing (a model of mixed generation living), has gained in popularity amongst developers over the last decade as it has proved to be a profitable way of creating high-density housing in urban areas, where housing shortages are prominent.

Developers typically 'sell' the model to local councils as a wonderful combination of social utopia, which provides affordable housing to young people, and a way to fulfil local housing targets with high-density blocks.

These developments do not need to conform to a specific planning category, they are sui generis. The result are oppressively small units (bedsits) at inflated prices, typically starting at rents of £1000 per month. In Co-Living developments, which contain a proportion of 'affordable' units, those would cost a minimum of £800 per month to rent and would be well out of reach of the typical key worker that they are allegedly aimed at. Below we have set out five short case studies:

CASE STUDY 1

In 2019 The Collective in Canary Wharf, Tower Hamlets, London, was completed and reviews left by its occupants soon showed that the high-density development was in danger of turning into a 'slum' with mould and security problems a regular occurrence. In 2020 the operator went into receivership. The new operator uses part of the building as a hotel, where rooms can now be booked even for a single night at £150 - £200 per night (booking.com).

CASE STUDY 2

In July 2020, a development by Laurel Accountancy for co-living units in North Street, Bedminster, was turned down by Bristol City Council on the grounds that the buildings were 'too tall and out of keeping with the local conservation area' as the buildings were twice as tall as existing buildings. The small living spaces were deemed to be oppressive and were seen to have a negative impact on people's health. (Bristol Post 28.07.2020) <https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/five-storey-bristol-block-co-4372296>

CASE STUDY 3

In August 2021 Bath and Northeast Somerset Council deferred a decision regarding an application by the developer Watkin Jones for co-living units in St. Peter's Terrace, Bath and decided on a site visit as too many concerns had been raised. The application was subsequently refused. Bath Echo 03.08.2021 and 28.09.2021) <https://www.bathecho.co.uk/news/business/co-living-bid-flats-laundry-site-rejected-95879/>

CASE STUDY 4

In August 2022 a 4-storey co-living block in Battersea (57-59 Lombard Road) with a proposed number of 547 units, designed by Hawkins/Brown and developed by Greystar, was rejected over concerns of the co-living model, lack of affordability for tenants, height, impact on local transport and high density. It was deemed that this type of development would mainly attract transitory occupants and that it would prevent the building of self-contained residential units for which there is an identified need. It was pointed out that the emerging local plan seeks to 'resist this type of shared living development, especially on sites which can accommodate an open-market resident use.' One of the councillors pointed out that the units are of the same size as Travelodge rooms, which most people would not consider a suitable size to live in for any length of time. (Architectural Journal 05.09.2022)

<https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/hawkinsbrowns-battersea-co-living-scheme-rejected>

CASE STUDY 5

In September 2022, Liverpool City Council rejected the developer Crosslane's application to build 236 co-living apartments in the Baltic District of the city, in New Bird Street. Lack of affordability for tenants was a major concern and it was feared that the block would be a 'student development by stealth'. After the developer's appeal, the planning inspector upheld the refusal on the grounds that shared facilities were insufficient and that it failed to provide an appropriate mix of housing. Liverpool City Council saw this as a 'vindication of its local plan, which focuses on ensuring the provision of a mix of housing'. (LBN Liverpool 20.09.2022).

<https://lbdaily.co.uk/inspector-rejects-liverpool-co-living-scheme/>

In summary, our concerns with co-living developments are:

- the sub-standard space allocated to occupants (operators even allow double occupation for the tiny studios potentially doubling the number of tenants)
- the high density of the developments
- the unaffordable rents charged for these properties
- the physical size of such developments in relation to their neighbours
- the impact on local infrastructure (traffic, parking, ...)
- the experimental nature of such developments

Interestingly, all the above arguments against co-living blocks, which are already either approved in Exeter in Heavitree (The Gorge) and Harlequin Centre or applied for at Haven Banks or where planning is in preparation (Summerland Street), are equally valid. The blocks are too high, too dense, the units too small and the rents not affordable. They have a negative impact on local communities and neighbourhoods. They do not alleviate the local housing shortage. They are highly experimental in their nature.

As far back as 3rd December 2020, The Exeter Observer reported:

Jemima Moore, independent councillor for the Newtown and St Leonard's ward where the development [Harlequin Centre] will take place, said: *“Co-living is an experimental concept that is gambling with people's lives. It is an approach that seeks to maximise profits by squeezing as many people as possible into spaces that fail to meet national space standards. What this area of the city desperately needs is a mix of homes including affordable family homes.”*

Co-Living developments are simply lucrative investment vehicles for financial companies, who are trying to sell the myth of affordable housing provision for young people to many unsuspecting councillors across the country.