

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/feb/28/10-ways-to-beat-loneliness-feed-chickens-mens-sheds>

## Live together – but not too together

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Shirley Meredeen, co-founder of the Older Women's Co-Housing group.  
Photograph: Andy Hall for the Observer

“It’s the weekends that can be difficult,” says [Shirley Meredeen](#), who has lived on her own in London for 36 years. “If I’ve not spoken to anyone for two days, I’ll feel low. But then I’ll ring a friend...” It is crucial, she emphasises, to work at friendship while young, to build up “credit” against future loneliness. “The trouble is people die off – my address book gets smaller all the time.”

At 85, the least interesting thing about [Meredeen](#), who is engaged and engaging, is her age. The first thing I notice are her dangly earrings – they make a statement. Why look dreary? And, if you’re lucky enough to be mentally hale, why not have fun and see off loneliness? With this in mind, Meredeen co-founded the [Older Women’s Co-Housing](#) group and, this summer, she will move into the first co-housing building for older women, in Barnet, north London. It will be a big day – it has taken 17 years to reach this point – and Meredeen has kept faith with the project throughout.

The idea came from another remarkable woman, Maria Brenton, an academic funded to research into older women and collaborative housing. Brenton became inspired by a Dutch model (there are 200 senior housing communities in the Netherlands) and smiles as she recalls the first meeting, in 1998, at which she presented the senior-co-housing concept to a group of older women. “Six of them went off like excited starlings to the pub afterwards...”

Their plan was to create a democratic community that would preserve privacy and protect against loneliness. Everyone would have their own front door – this would not be a commune, but residents (aged 50 plus) would meet regularly to share ideas, occasional meals and tasks (gardening/cleaning/legal issues – you name it) and be committed to mutual support. The housing would be socially inclusive (17 flats for sale, eight for social rent). Meredeen says: “We have two Iranian refugees and a Scandinavian, all different classes.” The selection process is slow, thorough and collective.

The statistics about loneliness in the UK are stark and, says Brenton, we are doing “sod all” about it. Fifty per cent of us do not know our neighbours. The majority of people over 75 and living on their own are women (she puts this down to “the cultural habit of men marrying younger women and women’s longevity”). Older women are often “isolated, self-neglectful and depressed as hell with no stimulus”. No wonder loneliness is bad for your health – “equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day”. It increases the risk of depression, dementia and heart attack – an expensive burden on the NHS. Co-housing cannot prevent dementia but, she says, “even if residents do have to shop out to care for people with dementia, it will be much later than if they had they been living on their own”.

Their project has been supported by the charities [Housing for Women](#) and the [Tudor Trust](#) and by [Hanover Housing Association](#), the developers that provided the capital to buy the Barnet site. But Brenton describes opposition from Barnet council to a development for older people in the borough and multiple other hitches.

The more she talks about their struggles, the more the scandal of our national indifference to old age comes into view. “It’s ageism,” she says. “We don’t want to look at facts. The local authorities know the figures but their heads are in the sand.” [Older people](#) themselves “aren’t demanding enough”, but she knows why: “There’s no solidarity because of the class system. Between the well-off old and the working class, undereducated old – between bridge and bingo – there are still huge divisions.”

Meredeen has no problem about being demanding – or proactive. After retirement, she founded [Growing Old Disgracefully](#), a network for older women living alone. “Many women of my generation had never written a cheque or driven a car – they’d depended on their men. When their husbands died – or left them – they were completely bereft. What we’re saying is: it’s not too late to start living your own life.”

She sees the Barnet scheme as a pilot: “We don’t want anyone else to wait 17 years.” And, already, it is being swamped with attention. Men have been asking, why can’t we have something like this? To which, Meredeen chirpily replies: “Why don’t you do it yourselves?”

After saying goodbye to this invigorating duo, I went to spy on the Barnet site. Like an unopened present, it is still under wraps – boards, sheeting, glassless first-floor windows. But I couldn’t help saluting it as I passed: it is such a triumph that it exists.

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