

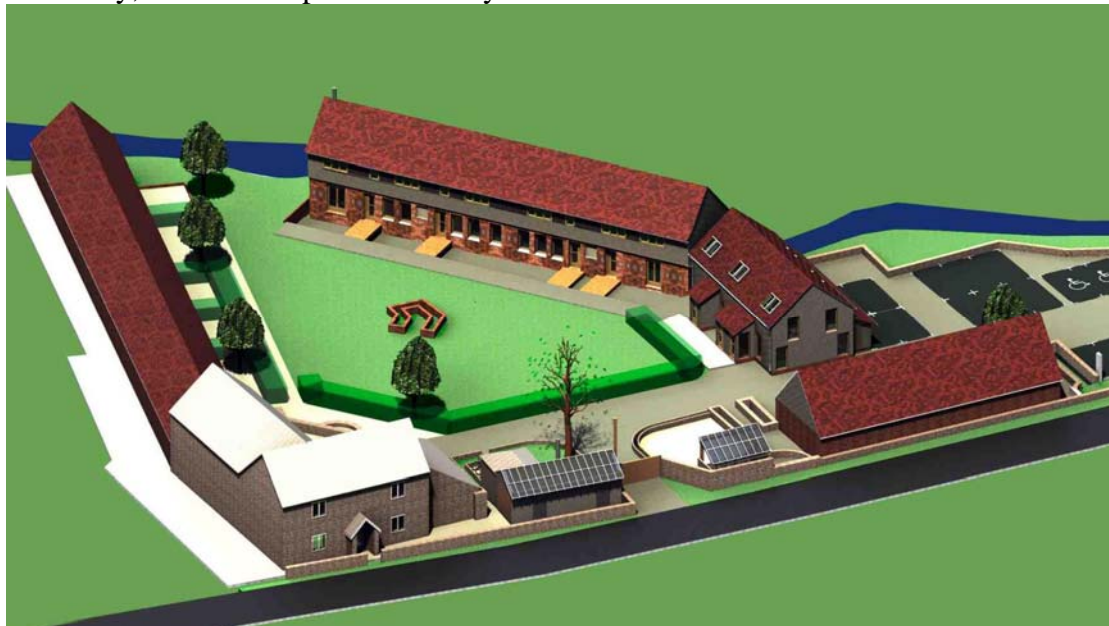
THE THRESHOLD CENTRE

Cole Street Farm, near Gillingham



Development Summary

The Threshold Centre is a non-profit sustainable education centre, whose main aim is to demonstrate and teach about cohousing and sustainable living. Cohousing combines self-contained living units with shared facilities to provide affordability, informal community, and a more ecological lifestyle. This is a summary of the proposals for which planning permission was given in 2008: building work is now underway, due for completion January 2010.



Architect's impression of the completed project.

1. Demonstration of sustainable living: The Centre will have one of the lowest ecological footprints in the UK. It will show how to cut carbon emissions for travel and food, which use twice as much energy as home heating. Cohousing enables a low-impact lifestyle by sharing resources, such as biomass (wood pellet) heating, car pooling, and market garden: all of which will be part of this scheme. The seven new cottages being created will have high levels of insulation, sustainable timber, etc, and the whole site will achieve an Ecohomes Excellent Rating. Other sustainable features include a 4kw photovoltaic electrical system, extensive recycling facilities, and rainwater harvesting.

The Threshold Centre will be an innovative, leading edge example of best practice both locally and nationally. Its plans have already attracted numerous national media features, and endorsement from leading environmentalists like Jonathan Porritt.

2. Affordable housing provision: The proposals include 14 residential cohousing units, of which 50% will be affordable housing: 4 rental, 3 shared ownership, operated by Synergy Housing Group, who are a partner in the development. This will be the first mixed tenure cohousing scheme in the UK, and cohousing is endorsed by the Homes and Communities Agency as a valuable new form of social housing.

3. Education Programmes: The Centre has been running very popular weekend workshops on cohousing since 2005: once building work is completed, the educational programme will be expanded to cover many aspects of sustainable living, using the facilities and people on-site to teach them. The Centre will be the first in the UK to combine cohousing with training facilities and with other super-sustainable features. In addition to the weekend workshops, there are gardening weekends, open afternoons, and evening groups.

4. Community Market Garden: A 1-acre site adjacent to the centre has been leased for this purpose, and is already well underway. The facilities include a large polytunnel, raised beds, and a newly-planted orchard of fruit trees with traditional local varieties. The market garden will be worked on organic methods by residents, visitors and local volunteers, and will provide most of the vegetables and fruit for the Centre's residents and guests.

5. Cutting Car Use: Because cohousing enables ride-sharing and on-site social life, audited car movements at the Centre are one-seventh of the UK average. The Centre operates a car pooling scheme, a limit of one car per household, and other measures to minimise car use for residents and visitors. Overall car use will be half the level under currently permitted uses of the site.

6. Provision and research for cohousing: Co-housing is a relatively new form of housing provision in the UK, but its benefits are well proven elsewhere. By having self-contained dwelling units with shared facilities, residents enjoy both independence and the benefits of community. The Centre will lead a research programme on the health and well-being benefits of cohousing, both generally and for older people. The Department for Communities and Local Government is one of several major bodies which have recognised such potential benefits from cohousing.

7. Community Interest Company Constitution: The site and shared facilities are owned by the Threshold Cohousing Centre CIC. This is a non-profit body with two external governor shareholders: Ecos Trust and East Dorset Housing Association. They will help ensure that the resident group achieve the educational, social and environmental aims of the project.

8. Development Scheme: The permission received involves converting a disused kindergarten and a storage barn, plus change of use for the main farmhouse and seven holiday cottages, and the creation of a small new biomass building. The completed scheme will provide 14 cohousing cottages, 7 of them for social housing, plus guest accommodation in the main farmhouse.

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