

The Threshold Centre

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# BI-ANNUAL REPORT

2009-2011

## **THRESHOLD CENTRE : OVERVIEW**

The community has doubled in size during this period. All the units are now occupied, except one private dwelling that has been up for sale for the last 5 months. (It has been rented now for 6 months, and the tenants arrive in early October 2011). Our total complement, including 3 people renting rooms in the farmhouse, is now 18 adults and 3 youngsters ( plus 3 cats and one dog!). We have monthly business meetings, open to all community members, with 2 facilitators at each meeting. We operate on consensus decision making, and all members attended a consensus training course in March 2011. There is also a monthly "House meeting", for those who live in the house, to sort out any problems that may arise. The first weekend in November has been set aside for re-evaluation on how the community is working, both at a personal and communal level, and to see what changes may need to be made for the following year.

Work involved in the daily running of the community is slowly being delegated to Groups , each having an agreed annual budget, and reporting to the monthly meeting. (Reports of the Facilities, Education Sustainability, Finance, and Garden Group are attached at the end of this report) A 'House Love' team ensures that the communal farmhouse is kept clean and tidy, and Tuesday mornings has been set aside for communal work in the garden and any small tasks that have arisen. Larger practical tasks that residents have undertaken include tiling the new kitchen, painting walls and ceilings in the farmhouse, repairing the roof over the workshop and laundry, and preparing a plumbing plan in readiness for the upgrading of the heating in the farmhouse.

There are optional communal meals, either bring and share or cooked by residents on a rota, twice weekly, and there have been many spontaneous celebrations, as well as our involvement in Intentional Communities Day in May 2011.

### **EDUCATION GROUP report**

Our remit is to create opportunities for others to learn about and experience about cohousing, sustainability and living in community.

1. We run regular weekend courses on CoHousing, sharing our experience and knowledge to others who are thinking of setting up their own CoHousing community. In 2009/10 we had 32 delegates spread over 5 weekends. In 2010/11 we had 30 delegates spread over 4 weekends. Our aim for 2011/12 is for 30 delegates over 3 weekends. All members of the community help with these weekends in a variety of ways. Next year we are proposing to reduce the CoHousing courses from 5 to 3, and expand the remit of the weekends sharing our general community skills.
2. We have a monthly community Bring and Share Sunday lunch, where we welcome visitors. These have included visitors from USA, Canada, South Africa and Australia.
3. Wherever possible we try to respond to individual requests, to stay for a few days to learn more about our way of life, particularly when they have expressed an

interest in joining us as a member. Individual residents have provided accommodation on a private basis in such circumstances; with rooms also being used in the farmhouse. Approximately 10 people have visited us in this way

4. We try to respond to requests for day visits by groups. Over this last year we have had visits from Housing Associations , and other Communities. – these include Tor Homes, Langport, Camphill, Frome and Bridport, and a group of 25 students from Southampton University interested in Green Tourism.

5. We support the Garden group in the running of Garden/Work weekends. Last year a total of 22 visitors came on the 4 weekends, and this year so far we have had 27 visitors.

6. We try to keep our networks open. Amanda Pearson, a resident, is a director of the UK CoHousing Network, and is the communities link person with Housing Associations.

7. We encourage the use of our facilities for other complimentary courses. During this last year, a regular course has been run by 2 residents, on Permaculture and another by 2 residents on 7 Words, a Sufi based personal development system.

We have acquired a 20 ft. Mongolian yurt which we hope will provide an additional space for courses in the future.

### **GARDEN GROUP REPORT**

Our polytunnel is not only bursting with produce, but it also now proudly boasts a rainwater collection system. We purchased 2 large tanks and some guttering which runs along each side of the tunnel and into the tanks. It works a treat, and is so pleasing to see all that water being saved instead of disappearing into the ground, and it has meant that we have not used any mains water for watering the garden this summer. Any excess water overflows into our purpose-dug pond, which, being in that lovely clay soil, does not need a liner.

The raised beds, now totalling 20, are also flourishing. They have all been topped up with our own compost, horse manure from a local farm, chicken manure which was delivered in a huge steaming pile some 3 years ago and has only just been used up, and also some recycled green waste from a local recycling centre (Cary Moor). Much of this heavy work gets done on our Gardening/Work weekends (4 per year), when people come and give us their labour in exchange for free bed and board, and most of us join in. This year we have adopted a system whereby each resident adopts a crop, and is responsible for sowing, planting and ongoing care of that crop. It seems to work well and we have certainly reaped the rewards this year.

Our orchard has had mixed results. This year for the first time we have a respectable crop of apples, but the pears are still struggling, and indeed we have lost a few trees since they were planted in 2008. They do not like the cold and wet conditions in our

field. We have added a few different fruit trees over the last few years, including a cherry, a medlar and a walnut.

Other developments in the vegetable garden are mostly as a result of our Permaculture Course, which has been running since April this year, one weekend a month, coordinated and taught by two of our residents. Students on the course (including some residents) have created a herb spiral, planted perennial vegetables such as globe artichokes, planted an apple tree in a circle of companion plants, and planted an area with potatoes through a mulch of cardboard and straw, permaculture-style. One resident in particular was inspired by the course to plant up his own garden with edible plants amongst the flowers! We are also in the process of creating a medicinal herb garden.

The 'Village Green' now looks very green after being a sea of mud during the building process. We have left a few trees with some wildflowers in the middle and planted some herbs and herbaceous flowers around the edges. We have plans for a small water feature and we need to remove a cherry tree that died and replace it with a rowan tree.

Plans for next year include constructing an irrigation system in the polytunnel, using the rainwater collected in the tanks (possibly by means of a solar pump); also on the theme of rainwater harvesting, we will connect up water barrels around the buildings to collect water from the gutters. We hope to extend our cultivated fruit and vegetable areas further into the orchard, but it will be slow progress due to the unworkable clay soil, which needs the addition of copious amounts of organic matter prior to planting (and thereafter!).

## **Facilities Group Report**

Since its commissioning in November 2009, we have organized the supplier, Bioenergy Technology Limited, to undertake regular biannual servicing of our Fröling 100kW biomass boiler that serves all 14 units in the complex and the farmhouse. We clean the boiler monthly in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions, which takes about an hour, and use the ash on our garden. Currently we buy our wood pellets from Forever Fuels based in Maidenhead in Berkshire (<http://www.forever-fuels.com>) who provide an excellent service. Monitoring fuel level remains a manual task performed weekly in winter as each 5 tonne delivery generally lasts 4-6 weeks, subject to the weather.

We have also installed automatic timers on each of the three circulating pumps in the accumulator rank room (adjacent to the bicycle sheds), that serve the three underground heating mains. This means that we are not needlessly circulating hot water around the site overnight and wasting electricity.

Similarly, we have organized and supervised Kingspan Environmental, the supplier, to undertake biannual servicing of our biodisc sewage treatment system and the

associated pumping station between it and the discharge point adjacent to Oak Cottage. The unit needs desludging every 6 months and this is done by Wessex Waste.

Both the biomass boiler and the biodisc sewage treatment plant have proved to be extremely reliable.

Other work undertaken by the Facilities Group includes:

- Informing new residents how to use their heating and hot water controls
- Informing new residents & visitors what ***not*** to put down drains
- Managing our recycling facilities and activities
- Checking and maintaining the electric fence around our community garden to prevent livestock entry
- Laundry drainage checks
- Fire and smoke alarm checks in the farmhouse
- General maintenance & repairs to the farmhouse

Throughout the next year we aim to reduce our fuel use and cost by 10%. We intend to achieve this by switching off the biomass boiler for three months in the summer, using electric immersion heaters to generate hot water instead.

We also intend to produce some simple guidelines so that other residents can deal with minor biomass boiler 'faults' & 'failures' without having to call on the expertise of the Facilities Group or external servicing companies.

Our third major goal for the coming year is to upgrade all the heating and hot water services in the farmhouse. A quotation for this work has been sought from Shires Building Services – the designer of the biomass heating system that serves the rest of the complex.

Our greatest challenge this last year has been getting to grips with monitoring just how much heat is being used in each part of the complex as several battery-fed heat meters failed and proved extremely difficult to replace. This was eventually resolved by replacing all heat meters with mains-fed units in July 2011.

## **SUSTAINABILITY GROUP REPORT**

Our aim is to monitor our sustainability goals, and report back these findings to all members.

### **WATER USAGE**

1. Domestic water usage. Our goal is to use only 80 litres per person per household. In the last 8 months, our domestic water usage averaged 82 litres per day per person. Much of the water used for the washing machines is rain collected in a tank nearby.
2. Other water usage. All watering of garden crops now comes from rain water collected in either the 3000 litre water tanks next to Settebrook, or the newly acquired 2 500l. water tanks collecting water from the polytunnel roof. It has not been possible for close monitoring of water usage in the farmhouse, as the building is used for many purposes – courses, communal meals, and home for 3 residents. We propose that we put up information on the notice board of the monthly usage of water in the farmhouse, and set a realistic monthly usage target, to encourage everyone to use water sparingly.
3. We are in the process of fitting more water barrels on the down pipes of the old buildings to collect water for Permaculture agriculture use.

#### ELECTRICITY USAGE

1. PV Panels. The 26 panels have produced 11251KW over the last 18 months. We are in the early stages of looking at other possible sites for PV panels.
2. Domestic usage. Every household takes a monthly reading of their electricity meter (as well as their cold and hot water usage ) and receives a monthly bill.
3. Farmhouse usage, including the laundry and communal kitchen. This is monitored monthly. We propose that we put up information on the notice board of the monthly usage of electricity in the farmhouse, and set a realistic monthly usage target, to encourage everyone to use electricity sparingly.
4. We use a submersible electric pump to pump water from 3000l. tanks to water butts across the road for communal vegetable growing. Minimal usage.

#### RECYCLING

We aim to reuse materials as much as possible. (this includes Clothes swapping parties !) One resident takes it in turn to be responsible for the recycling bins etc.

#### CAR USAGE.

Three households do not have a car. There is a Pool car system in operation. We need to look at a system to encourage combining shopping trips.

## **FINANCE REPORT**

1. Accounts for yr ending 30 September 2010 ( see separate attachment )
2. Present Financial position.

### **Year October 2010/ September 2011**

At the start of the year the accounts held

Current account £10,884

Deposit account £49,958

On 14 September 2011 (ie two weeks before the end of the current financial year), the accounts held

Current account £10,543

Deposit account £68,881.

### **Current significant payment outstanding.**

We are about to pay the final build bills, which will be shared with Synergy, which amount to £25,000.

### **Commentary**

A preliminary review of the budgets suggests that the service charge budget was broadly in balance, with some items less than expected and others more than expected. The service charge will stay the same for the next year.

The house budget was broadly in balance, but we did not spend all the £3,600 allocated for maintenance.

We do not have a budget for individual households utilities bills, as households are expected to pay their charges on time these meet the bills. Over the year some households had developed arrears, so we put in place a policy to cover arrears and the intention is that people should not be more than one month in arrears. We had to make estimates for the cost of heat from the biomass boiler, and originally the estimates were too low and had to be raised.

The service charge budget includes an amount for a sink fund. £4000 or the deposit account is attributable to the sink fund. ( The additional increase in the deposit fund is due to a VAT refund relating to the building work)

## **Forward look October 2011- September 2012**

We now have better information on which to set the budgets for the service charge and the farmhouse budget, after a full year in operation. We also have better information on which to set the charge for heat produced by the biomass boiler.

We are expecting a significant maintenance bill to repair/replace the central heating and hot water in the farmhouse. The farmhouse has been cold and showers have not worked since the switch from the old boiler to the biomass boiler, and there were some problems before then. We are planning to use the heating engineer who designed the biomass system to design and install a new hot water system for the farmhouse, which will also take heat and hot water to the top floor. The cost of the repair could be more than £15,000 and if so a proposal will be made to shareholders.

We will also need to take decisions about the use of the top floor of the farmhouse. A group are exploring proposals, which will be brought to the full community and to shareholders. The option currently being explored is for a self catering studio flat and an additional guest room and bathroom. Fire regulations mean we will need a lot of fire proofing, as sadly 300 year old timber walls do not meet the requirements. Options will also be developed for financing the work. We cannot get a loan secured on the farmhouse, as it can not be sold alone, so we will need to raise an unsecured loan. We need to consider how much of the development account we can use, so that we do not have money in a deposit account earning less than the interest we are paying on a loan, beyond a suitable contingency fund.