

# Where the heart is

*Peter Kershaw highlights the need for investment planning to address the housing requirements of the disabled and elderly*



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Winston Churchill made a powerful observation in October 1943 about the impact of planning. He stated with absolute conviction that ‘we shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us’.

The potent truth behind Churchill’s observation is one reason why the current chronic under-supply of suitable housing in England is so deeply concerning for us all as we grow older. Fundamentally this is because we know that our homes – the very physical environments where we increasingly spend more and more of our time as we grow older – can either enable us or disable us.

The quality and location of our homes can make us feel in control of our lives, well-connected to others and fulfilled, or leave us feeling unable to manage, disconnected from others and lonely.

For these reasons housing and planning severely impact on both our physical and mental wellbeing and have become the silent backdrop to a number of key issues which we as individuals, families and the country as a whole will need to carefully come to terms with over the coming years and decades.

Stakeholders including housing associations, local authorities, universities, NHS leaders and individual developers can therefore approach these issues with a growing sense of purpose and justification – underpinned by the knowledge that opportunities exist for them to play a defining role in helping to make a valuable contribution to shaping future outcomes.

## **The growing need for disabled and elderly housing**

In this article I would like to play my role in helping shine a light on the opportunities and resources available

to stakeholders, including housing associations and local authorities, to assist them in moving forwards with the difficult challenges they may face in their efforts to sensibly make long-term strategic investment plans in relation to disabled housing for all ages and elderly housing.

At the recent Healthy Places for People conference run by BRE (the Building Research Establishment) on 28 March 2017, important concerns were raised that the investment strategies of some housing associations and local authorities often lack any long-term plans for developing future accommodation specifically catering for the needs of disabled residents of all ages and elderly residents.

This is based on a growing feeling that despite evidence illustrating the need for more housing schemes to cater for disabled residents of all ages, and for the elderly, housing associations’ and local authorities’ consideration of these groups in society still often only tends to be short term and operational at some organisations – with some other organisations actually having no future plans in place at all for future housing developments which specifically cater for disabled residents of all ages, or for the elderly.

## **Improving the evidence base for investment plans**

Specialist housing schemes are often complex issues for stakeholders, including local authorities and housing associations, to tackle in the current political and economic climate – with future specialist housing schemes often reliant on partnership working with other organisations. While acknowledging this, the point was nevertheless persuasively made by contributors at the conference

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that housing associations and local authorities should consider reviewing their investment strategies to more effectively take into consideration the evidential base, which shows that diversity of housing is needed now and in the future for both disabled residents of all ages and elderly residents.

Stakeholders should also be mindful of the evidence available around the housing expectations of these two groups of residents, and mindful of the differentials in specialist housing need across the country (which is made even more complex by the localised housing markets which have become such a feature of the current housing market in England).

### Public perceptions of housing schemes adapted to the needs of disabled and elderly residents

One such piece of evidence on the housing expectations of these two groups was undertaken by the Ipsos Mori Social Research Institute. As part of a wider programme of research and thought-leadership, Ipsos Mori was commissioned by Habinteg Housing Association and the Papworth Trust disability charity to conduct a survey of the public to consider their attitudes to 'accessible' housing. A nationally representative survey involving 2,074 face-to-face interviews with adults across Britain was consequently conducted between 16 March and 12 April 2016.

Their 'June 2016 Accessible Housing Survey – Public perceptions of accessible housing' began with the research aims of:

- improving the knowledge base about the housing and other circumstances and aspirations of disabled people, including those of working age and older people;
- enabling housing providers to make clearer and stronger cases to local and national government for housing provision suitable for disabled people by establishing a better evidence base; and
- developing radical new models of provision, including new approaches to design, financing and project delivery, and making the case for such approaches to social and private developers, local and

national government and the public more widely.

The conclusions of the survey are of interest to housing associations and local authorities when reviewing their current and future investment plans. This is because the evidence from the survey undertaken specifically illustrated that there is demand for a wide variety of different housing schemes to cater for disabled residents of all ages and the elderly.

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For example, when the public were asked about their future housing preference if they ever needed care or support in the future as a result of a long-term illness, disability or infirmity, the results indicated that although the majority of respondents (50%) favoured remaining in their own accommodation with some adaptations being made, a very significant group of respondents (25% – estimated to be equivalent to approximately 12.9 million across Britain as a whole) indicated that they would actually favour moving to a property specifically designed or adapted to enable independent living (if it was available).

Of those respondents saying that they would favour moving to a property specifically designed or adapted to enable independent living, nearly three-quarters said they would favour moving to accessible accommodation that had been specifically adapted for their needs – with only one quarter preferring to move to accessible accommodation which provides specialist care and support (such as sheltered, supported, nursing or residential accommodation.)

Further analysis of the survey results revealed that older people, owner occupiers, those that are currently not working and those with an annual household income of £25,000 or above are more likely than their sub-group counterparts to favour remaining in

their current property with adaptations than moving on to a specially modified housing scheme. In contrast those living in the private rented sector are more likely to favour moving to a different property specifically designed or adapted to enable independent living.

The survey was only based on people who were not currently in need of specialist housing but who were asked to hypothetically imagine their preference should they in later

life need specifically adapted housing. The results are useful in adding to the narrative around this issue because they highlight the significant percentage of people who would in theory favour moving to specifically adapted accommodation suitable to their needs if it was available, and when they would be more likely to make such a move.

### Forward planning

Early investment decisions and strategic forward planning is vital to ensure that organisations are well positioned to adapt to the future housing needs of disabled residents of all ages and the elderly.

In general, the results of the survey broadly illustrated that people's appetite for moving to specifically adapted property was greater before they entered their later years – and when they were not currently disabled. Consequently there is seemingly a great challenge emerging for stakeholders and policy makers to try and make accessible housing schemes available for people to move into at a time in their lives when such a transition in their living arrangements is something which they feel is within their control and something which they would choose to do as a sensible option to plan for their futures.

It is perhaps a result of currently not having enough suitable accessible

housing schemes available to encourage this easier transition that some disabled residents and the elderly (perhaps a significant number) are being left scared of making such a big and disruptive transition during their later years. The risk then is that significant numbers of residents could potentially be left in accommodation that is not well located or adapted to their needs and which makes their daily lives disabling and

- ‘Can do and connected’ who are usually in their 70s or 80s and often widowed. Poor health and lacking in disposable income, but higher than average levels of happiness. Strong social connections, can rely on others and have a positive outlook on life.
- ‘Worried and disconnected’ who are typically aged 70 or over and retired. Financially stable, but sometimes with poor

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daunting – rather than enabling and inspiring – unless modifications to their houses are possible and achieved (of which neither is ever a given).

### Lack of adequate housing supply

I believe it should be of alarm to all generations that approximately 93% of the country’s housing stock is estimated by the Centre for Ageing Better as not having the basic characteristics to allow for independent living.

The Centre for Ageing Better, who contributed to the BRE conference, are an independent charitable foundation specifically working for a society where everybody enjoys a good later life. Under the following headings at the conference, they created a helpful breakdown to illustrate the many diverse ways in which elderly people might experience later life:

- ‘Thriving boomers’ who are typically in their 60s and 70s, living with a partner. Financially secure, in good health, strong social connections. Highest overall levels of happiness.
- ‘Downbeat boomers’ who are demographically similar to thriving boomers. Financially secure, in good health, strong social connections – but only average levels of happiness.

health. More likely to be socially isolated, often due to bereavement or losing social connections they had through work. Below average levels of happiness.

- ‘Squeezed middle aged’ who are predominantly in their 50s, in good health, still in work. Squeezed for time and finances and in their homes. Caring responsibilities for children and parents, so less time for social connections and preparations for later life. Low scores of happiness, cause for concern about the future.
- ‘Struggling and alone’ who are distributed across all ages. Long-standing health conditions affecting their ability to work and have social connections. Likely to be living alone, with few people to rely on, and are more likely to experience financial insecurity. Lowest levels of happiness.

The Centre for Ageing Better ultimately wishes to see more people in future being able to say ‘I feel in control because I live in a suitable home and neighbourhood where I can be active and connected’.

### Resources for stakeholders

There are a number of organisations who can assist stakeholders in gaining

a more in-depth understanding of these issues and building an evidence base for supporting current or future investment plans to build schemes for the disabled of all ages or the elderly. The following list is by no means exhaustive:

- The Centre for Ageing Better ([www.ageing-better.org.uk](http://www.ageing-better.org.uk)) can help support housing associations and local authorities to more effectively plan for an ageing population.
- The BRE ([www.bre.co.uk/healthbriefings](http://www.bre.co.uk/healthbriefings)) have three particularly informative briefing papers titled:
  - ‘The Cost of Poor Housing to the NHS’;
  - ‘Homes and ageing in England briefing paper in collaboration with Public Health England’; and
  - ‘The Cost of Poor Housing in the European Union’.

For local authorities or housing associations also wishing to plan for a significant upgrade of their existing housing stock in order to better enable residents to remain living in their homes in old age, the BRE Housing Health Cost Calculator quantifies and demonstrates the health-cost benefits of housing improvements ([www.bre.co.uk/housing-health-cost-calculator](http://www.bre.co.uk/housing-health-cost-calculator)).

- The Housing Learning and Improvement Network (Housing LIN) ([www.housinglin.org.uk](http://www.housinglin.org.uk)) provides advice on specialist housing and care. Its ‘Dementia and Housing Working Group’ aims to promote the contribution of the housing sector to improving the health, wellbeing and quality of life for people living with dementia. They have also published a document: ‘Retirement Living Explained: A guide for Planning and Design Professionals’.
- The Retirement Housing Group (RHG) (<https://retirementhousinggroup.com>) is a membership organisation

which works to encourage the development of good-quality retirement housing and makes the case for a choice of housing for older people by:

- researching and demonstrating demand;
- alerting local authorities to the level of need in their area;
- engaging with central and local government to show how barriers to development can be overcome; and
- advising on how planning policies can meet the needs of older people.

### Possibilities for partnership working and innovative thinking

In my previous article ('Brownfield bonanza', *POJ33*, November/December 2016, p7) I outlined the finite development opportunities emerging from the government's One Public Estate programme.

One Public Estate is about central and local government working together to get better value from public land and buildings, with councils taking the role of 'leaders of place'.

The LocalGov website (at [www.legalease.co.uk/local-gov](http://www.legalease.co.uk/local-gov)) outlined that in Bedford, the councils are working with public sector partners including the police and NHS to free up surplus brownfield land in public ownership in order to deliver land for 700 homes over the next five years, and that most recently Essex County Council has entered an agreement to buy Essex County Hospital in Colchester – after three years and an initial rejection.

The One Public Estate programme offers technical support to councils, help with unlocking barriers and money to get initiatives underway. The scheme encourages a range of new councils and new proposals under its Phase 6 applications.

While long-term strategic accessible housing plans naturally take time to come to fruition due to the nature of multi-agency working and development finance, the rewards of planning early for new housing schemes and looking for opportunities on underused

areas of the public estate should never be overlooked.

Strategic planning for the housing of disabled residents of all ages and the elderly could, on paper at least, appear to be a natural bedfellow for developing underused NHS land if the spatial planning merits of the location stacked up. The impact of poor-quality housing on the NHS has, for example, been

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the subject of a number of recent studies.

### What role might universities consider playing in future accessible housing schemes?

In Holland it has been reported that a nursing home called 'Humanitas' was successfully set up to bridge the gap between young and old by letting local university students live there for free, reportedly on one condition – that they must spend 30 hours each month with the 160 senior residents.

There have also been reports of other mixed housing initiatives bringing the elderly and younger populations together within specialist housing schemes which, if replicated, could potentially play a small but important role in helping to reduce the growing number of all ages worryingly reporting to regularly feel lonely.

Universities, as part of their long-term campus and property portfolio planning, may therefore wish to reflect on whether they feel they have a role to play in mixed-use or accessible housing developments.

With student mental health becoming an increasingly worrying issue, the quality of student buildings (and what impact they have in shaping the welfare of their students) is also something that universities are closely considering.

### The importance of procuring planning and planning law experts

Stakeholders should be very mindful of the ongoing importance of having professional representation on board to oppose inappropriate planning applications or local plan representations which may affect land around their sites, or which may adversely impact on their

future development plans. It is important for stakeholders' future strategic development aims that they have somebody monitoring the political and planning landscape to analyse planning and political changes influencing their sphere of operation.

### A concluding call to action

I do hope this article has helped to shed light on the growing need for stakeholders (including housing associations, local authorities and universities) to consider the diverse long-term housing needs which exist for current and future disabled residents of all ages and the elderly, as well as revealing the resources available to assist them when undertaking research to build the evidence base underpinning their current and future investment plans.

I also hope this article helps to further encourage stakeholders to think innovatively about partnership working and devising well-thought-through long-term strategic investment plans to realise the widely beneficial development opportunities which are materialising around new accessible housing schemes.

The article should also play a role in highlighting the ongoing importance of existing housing stock for these groups being suitably adapted and planned for. ■