

Guest Blog: Housing an ageing society



We live in a rapidly ageing society. A girl born today has a 50% chance of reaching 100. By 2024, one in four of us will be over 60 and 2m people will be over 85. Although many will start our 'old age' healthy and active, we will inevitably become frailer as the growth in total life expectancy outpaces the growth in healthy life expectancy. As we live longer, more of us will suffer dementia at a time when social services are at breaking point.

A good later life depends on health, financial security and social connections. Helping people to stay well and maintain independence will improve the quality of life and reduce pressure on health services. Good housing can make a fundamental difference to health and well-being. A fifth of people aged over 65 rent their homes from a council or housing association; and one-third of housing association tenants are over 65.

The housing we provide in the future needs to be suitable for changing needs as people go through the different stages of ageing. It should be attractive, spacious and well located, safe and secure, affordable, warm in winter and comfortable in summer. And as most of our older tenants will live in general needs, we need to improve the '90% offer' for those not in specialist accommodation.

To prepare for our ageing population, we must be clear who the housing is for: gathering customer data in order to understand actual future needs rather than making decisions based on assumptions and stereotypes; recognising too that demand will vary between locations. This means examining population projections based on ONS, together with income levels, health statistics, tenure and social care needs.

There are over half a million sheltered homes in the social housing sector. Those with existing specialist stock need to assess its suitability. Does it comply with HAPPI standards? Are there bedsits and shared facilities? Is there lift access and communal areas for activities? Storage for large items like wheelchairs and buggies? Access to local amenities?

The options for such homes could be to continue as sheltered, convert to older person specific housing, remodel as extra care, or use for an alternative client group. Some sites could be redeveloped for general needs; some schemes will be suitable for more than one function. Adapting general needs properties would enable many to remain in their home environment comfortably and safely.

Just as important as the physical surroundings is the support for older people. This is not just professional help, but support from peers and volunteers. Loneliness is a major problem for many older people. Enabling connections between people and facilitating informal help plays a critical role in maintaining health and well-being.

In short, a great deal needs to be done, but much can be achieved at relatively manageable cost. First and foremost, we must refocus our thinking, recognise the challenge and display imagination.

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