



Housing LIN

Connecting people, ideas and resources

A new Mayor's AGenda: Homes for older Londoners

Written by Jeremy Porteus, Director of the Housing Learning and Improvement Network and inquiry secretary to the All Party Parliamentary Group on Housing and Care for Older People

Sadiq Khan ran the London Marathon two years ago, raising money for a local paper's 'dispossessed fund' along the way. During the 26 miles, the man this month elected Mayor of our capital city will have passed thousands of family homes occupied by older London citizens who would cheerfully move to a more suitable home if only the right choices were available.

Many of those older London residents will be struggling to maintain the home in which they raised a family. Frailty or limited mobility may mean they struggle with stairs or bathrooms designed for the fit and mobile; the same challenges leaving them isolated and lonely behind a front door that opens on to a community they can no longer navigate or recognise.

And, despite the London "housing bubble", many will not have substantial amounts of equity in their homes and/or savings to make the move to a new home that meets their changing needs in later life, even if they could find or afford it.

However, one thing is for sure: the aspiring mayoral candidate will have run past few homes designed to meet the varying needs and aspirations of the rapidly growing numbers of older Londoners. As property experts Knight Frank recently observed¹, just 3% of new-build units in the pipeline or under construction are designated as being for 'elderly' people or sheltered housing. With 26,000 homes built in London last year, that suggests fewer than 800 specialist housing units were built for older people.

Mayor Khan clearly faces a challenge in this area – and to an extent his manifesto recognises it. Having placed the capital's overall housing crisis at the centre of his campaign, the Mayor backed new forms of housing such as community land trusts, co-housing and "*housing which allows older Londoners to downsize*"². We can only endorse those aspirations, particularly the latter two.

He also pledged to put "*good design and sustainability*" at the heart of the London Plan, something we endorse given that older people considering down-sizing are looking for well-designed, sustainable specialist housing.

¹ <http://www.knightfrank.com/research/uk-retirement-housing-2016-3770.aspx>

² http://www.sadiq.london/homes_for_londoners_manifesto

That pledge is reinforced by a related one to: *“improve planning and design policies to offer older Londoners more choice whether they are active older people, downsizers or in need of specialist and extra care homes”*. Furthermore, pledges to: *“retain in the London Plan targets for an new homes to meet Lifetime Homes standards and (for) 10% of new homes to be wheelchair accessible”*, can only be welcomed. It’s vital that he now uses the limited and often subtle powers his new office holds to turn those aspirations into reality.

A range of academics, housing professionals and developers – many of them Housing Learning and Improvement Network (LIN) members and supporters – stand ready to guide him and his team. Indeed, his advisors looking for confirmation on both the factors contributing to well-designed specialist housing and the benefits could usefully spend a few hours perusing Housing LIN case studies, recent winners of national housing design awards and – of course – the accumulating work being built on the foundations of the HAPPI reports³ (including reviews of progress by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Housing and Care for Older People, whose latest inquiry report, ‘Housing our Ageing Population: Positive Ideas’, is due out in a few weeks).

His team should also re-think, as much as they can within the restrictions that come with central government funding, the Mayor’s Care and Support Specialised Housing Fund. Under his predecessor the focus was on leasehold and shared ownership. Much could be gained by extending that focus to more affordable housing to rent or buy.

Mayor Khan should also work with the Government and the city’s boroughs to require every London local authority to produce a strategy for maintaining and improving the housing stock to support independent ageing. This would include helping those in privately-owned or rented housing.

City Hall can work with the boroughs to encourage developers to build more mixed tenure, accessible and age-friendly HAPPI homes that will encourage older Londoners to downsize. Here they can turn the problem of the capital’s raging property market into a benefit. In the recent Knight Frank report, we learnt that downsizing by one room releases, on average across England and Wales, £52,000 in equity. In London that figure is a staggering £126,000. While London developers inevitably face higher land costs, that figure is surely enough to incentivise building – and buying or renting – of specialist homes.

As the Housing LIN, and our many network members have consistently argued, getting the specialist housing offer right can unlock much wider health and wellbeing benefits.

³ http://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/browse/Design_building/HAPPI/

And, as the recent Demos report on loneliness in old age⁴ reminded us, it is in the big cities (and notably London) that people feel isolated and lonely in a sea of humanity. The same study reported that older people living in good retirement developments enjoyed levels of companionship well above their counterparts in the community – and were much less likely to be lonely.

Writing in The Guardian, Demos chief executive officer Claudia Wood and a member of the APPG inquiry panel said: “*creating sociable communities is going to be an increasingly crucial policy opportunity*”. She continued: “*More broadly, this thinking should be extended to underpin a more creative and community-focused approach to planning which better reflects the specific needs of different demographics.*”

In a city where people are often invisible and where the NHS and other public services face an un-matched range of pressures, doing the decent thing by our older citizens benefits everyone.

For Mayor Khan, it will, I’m afraid, be not a sprint but another marathon. Having run his first one in aid of the dispossessed however, he can be assured that the rewards of finishing this particular one will be just as worthwhile and highly visible.

Published by the Housing LIN, Monday, 16 May 2016

⁴ <http://www.demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Building-Companionship-Report.pdf>