Living Labs: a brave new world of customer driven extra care housing

This Viewpoint gives a personal view on the need for improvements in the way commissioners and providers of extra care housing involve and engage with existing and prospective residents. It suggests that 'Living Labs' offer co-created solutions that can meet residents' needs and aspirations, help co-design and co-produce related services and products, fuel innovation that translates into resident benefits, save money through reducing dependency, and motivate organisational change by building a closer relationship with residents.

Written for the Housing Learning & Improvement Network by
Jeremy Porteus

September 2012

Introduction

In recent months, the Housing Learning & Improvement Network (LIN) has published a selection of Viewpoints and Case Studies to stimulate discussion around citizenship, consumerism, choice and control. We have sought to raise the profile of these concepts within the sector and improve the quality of extra care housing. These learning and improvement resources have sought to challenge the way we plan, design and deliver specialist accommodation for older people.

In this Viewpoint, I want to go one step further. I hope to show how those working in the housing with care sector can use these think pieces and practice pieces to leap into a brave new world of user-informed services. Such services will 'poll' the living experience of older people and create an organisational culture that actively responds to the everyday lived experience of older residents. This will include co-producing the way specialist housing is designed and managed and how related care and services are delivered. In other words, co-creating a *'Living Lab'* environment.

The *'Living Lab'* concept

In my mind's eye, the phrase 'living laboratories' tends to conjure up images of scientific experiments being performed on 'specimens' in pristine white rooms. However, this is not about a scientific experiment: it is about recognising that people's lives fluctuate and how we respond to the implications of that. Indeed, the way extra care housing services are planned, designed, commissioned and delivered must be more flexible to reflect the daily experiences of older people and respond to any longer term housing and/or care needs or changes in their life course.

The concept of *'Living Labs'* has grown out of the social – rather than physical – sciences, particularly, as they apply to experiential-driven service design, social marketing techniques and consumer behaviour analytics.

In my view, housing with care providers, developers and commissioners could usefully adopt it to meaningfully engage with older people and their families, offering a tailored personal service and creating a smarter and more dynamic customer-to-business relationship. In the new economic climate we are operating in, this must make good business sense!

As illustrated in the Housing LIN Viewpoint by Margi Shand, resident involvement, tenant participation or user engagement with extra care housing residents is too often a one-off, tick-box exercise. She calls for a radical new approach.[1]

At present, it is usually driven by the needs and timetable of the landlord or service provider – often with a specific performance objective, task or contract compliance requirement in mind. It is not fully outcome-focussed and, if it was, the outcomes are more likely to be service outcomes rather than people outcomes. A glorified coffee morning with clipboards is not genuine user engagement, even if you do tag it as a focus group and upgrade the usual digestive biscuits to chocolate hob nobs!

---

[1] - Shand, M (2012). *A radical rethink is required in the way we involve and engage with residents of extra care housing*. Viewpoint No 28, Housing Learning and Improvement Network

As a Working Group report I was involved in a couple of years ago highlighted [2]:

- Resident satisfaction and wellbeing increases as a result of effective involvement. It leads to a greater sense of 'ownership' by residents and staff

- Staff job satisfaction increases as they work with residents to achieve results

- Listening to residents' feedback supports work to improve services and explore and plan future needs

- Sheltered housing residents have mobilised effectively against developments where they feel that they have not been consulted

- Tenant involvement and empowerment is an underpinning standard of the Tenant Services Authority.

But, you might be thinking, if terms such as tenant involvement, user engagement and empowerment are fuzzy and apt to be used in a tokenistic fashion, how much more does that apply to something as esoteric-sounding as *'Living Labs'* ?

It's true that a web search using the term throws up a fair amount of material that seems impenetrable and jargon-ridden. However, simply put, the way we should be collaborating with customers and drawing on their knowledge and experience in order to improve existing services are essential components of a *'Living Lab'*. In the world of specialist housing and care services, the prize is how we incorporate these to ensure that the needs and aspirations of those expected to live in such accommodation are realised now and into the future.

From rhetoric to reality

The European Network of Living Labs, which is linked to the European Union, says:

> *"A living lab is a real-life test and experimentation environment where users and producers co-create innovations. Living labs have been characterised by the European Commission as Public-Private-People-Partnerships for user-driven open innovation."*

It says that a *'Living Lab'* is involved in four main activities:

1. Co-creation: co-design by users and producers

2. Exploration: discovering emerging users, behaviours and market opportunities

3. Experimentation: implementing the scenarios within communities of users

4. Evaluation: assessment of concepts, products and services according to socio-ergonomic, socio-cognitive and socio-economic criteria.[3]

In their Housing LIN Viewpoint, Imogen Blood and Jenny Pannell outline how the idea of the Big Society will require fundamental changes in how a range of services for people living in retirement are supported and managed.[4] As they point out, given that this is taking place in a period of financial austerity there is concern that building this 'community capacity' will be

---

[2] - CHS/TPAS (2010). *Effective resident involvement and consultation in sheltered housing: a good practice guide for commissioners and providers*. Report from a DCLG working group

[3] - www.openlivinglabs.eu/aboutus

[4] - Blood, I and Pannell, J (2012), *Building Mutual Support &Social Capital in Retirement Communities*. Viewpoint No 23, Housing Learning and Improvement Network

seen as a way of providing a cheap substitute for jobs, services and facilities being cut. It cannot do that.

In a more recent Housing LIN Viewpoint, Lawrence Miller and Cormac Russell write that strength-based approaches encompass wider community assets and go beyond the provision of 'services'. They advocate an Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) approach, showing that when citizens address issues within their unique competencies they build social capital and social cohesion; not doing so depletes social capital and exacerbates social fabric issues. They state: *"The ABCD approach presents a positive challenge to organisations such as housing and care providers that work with older people: to nurture the growth of this social capital, to partner with older people and promote genuine partnerships."* [5]

In the current financial climate, Alex Fox from SharedLivesPlus sees user-led management as one way to ameliorate the impact of austerity. He says: *"The impact of the cuts can be mitigated, if only partly, if we give genuine ownership of the care and support system to the people closest to its delivery…There will need to be investment but investment in different places. Investment in advocacy rather than in gate-keeping. Investment in helping people, families and front-line workers to share ownership of services rather than in endless consultation."* [6]

All these views encompass principles that help define a *'Living Lab'*. However, the real test is how we move from rhetoric to reality. Are there lessons we can draw on?

Examples and outcomes

While still behind North America and Europe, here in Britain there are examples of deeper forms of engagement that in some ways draw on the *'Living Labs'* approach. I have listed a few below:

Play your cards right

Supported by the Housing LIN, Elderly Accommodation Counsel (EAC) has devised an entertaining method of consulting residents of retirement housing. This card-game resident consultation tool informs managers and housing providers on how their residents value their home, the communal facilities, the services they receive and their quality of life and lifestyle.[7]

The game involves the residents in small groups as well as individually, giving them the chance to discuss statements such as "we are consulted when it matters, and our views are taken into account", and then agree on ratings, but also to respond privately about any concerns or positive aspects about their home and/or services. Importantly, the outcomes feed into the EAC National Housing for Older People Awards, where the residents' scores determine the winning schemes and also point to areas for improvement. This year, over 2,800 residents from over 300 schemes participated. The 2012 Housing LIN award was won by School Court, Hednesford, Staffordshire.[8]

---

[5] - Miller, L and Russell, C (2012), *A Strength-based Approach to Ageing Well: the Housing Dimension*. Viewpoint No 30, Housing Learning and Improvement Network

[6] - Fox. A (2010) Age2Age – housing and multigenerational practice seminar notes, 28 Jan 2010

[7] - www.housingcare.org/providers/eac-resident-consulatation.aspx

[8] - www.housingcare.org/providers/housing-for-older-people-awards-2012.aspx

At Cairn Housing Association, Inverness, they chose to use the EAC Card Game as the basis for a large scale tenant satisfaction survey in their very sheltered (extra care housing), sheltered, retirement housing because they wished to:

- Minimise staffing resource requirements in the administration of the survey including survey development, collating responses and producing initial analysis of feedback

- Minimise staff influence on responses made by tenants to ensure integrity of information

- Demonstrate to stakeholders that they are responding to tenant feedback about the frequency of consultations and how these are conducted

- Ensure that the survey process is as enjoyable as possible for older participants, taking account of individual needs of their customers

- Maximise tenant participation and response rates

- Provide an opportunity to assess the appropriateness of the approach for future tenant satisfaction surveys.

Having individual court (scheme) reports has allowed them to easily share with tenants the feedback received and agree any actions they need to take to improve their services.

Also, the feedback has been extremely useful in assisting them when updating their self-assessment returns to the Care Inspectorate (the care services regulator in Scotland, equivalent to the Care Quality Commission in England) and demonstrating to funders their continued commitment to consultation and service improvement and, above all, offering residents a lasting say about their homes, care and support.

Partnerships with Older People

In Gloucestershire, an experiment has confirmed that one way of combatting 'consultation fatigue' or scepticism is actually employing and training older people themselves to carry out some of the engagement.

The team evaluating the county's Partnerships for Older People Project (POPPs), which had focussed on improving the lives of care home residents, recruited six older people as community researchers to evaluate one specific aspect of the POPPs project.

They were trained, paid and supported to interview residents about activity programmes in their homes. Their findings were included in the final evaluation report and several are now involved in reviewing public services for local authority or NHS organisations.

In a paper written jointly with several of the community researchers, Simon Evans, formerly Senior Research Fellow at the University of the West of England, concluded: *"At the heart of this successful project, and a key feature of meaningful and effective public participation, was the relationship between research partners (including the community researchers)… As with any relationship, the development of trust requires time, effort and patience from all partners."*

He said that paying and training the older people showed that their contribution was valued. Involving them at an early stage and including them in the process of developing the research reinforced this message and ensured they were fully engaged.

He concluded: *"Our experiences demonstrate that it is possible for academics to offer real and meaningful opportunities for older people as researchers, provided that adequate resources are provided."* [9]

Designing for inclusion

The Helen Hamlyn Centre for design's age and ability research lab works on practical design ideas that improve the lives of people of all ages and abilities. Its website outlines its approach: *"We address the major challenges of daily living, using techniques drawn from design ethnography and inclusive design to better understand needs and aspirations. We consider people as equal in the process, working closely with diverse groups of older, younger and differently-abled people throughout our research."*

Its current research themes include how design can help meet *"the major everyday concerns of people across the spectrum of age and ability… From completing daily tasks independently in the home through to issues such as health concerns, financial worries, reduced mobility and social isolation."* [10]

The Centre has worked with a well-known stair-lift manufacturer on a project that will shape the stairlifts to be used by the baby boomers. It was based on the idea that 'young old' people now in their late sixties or early seventies are very different to people now over eighty in the way they relate to technology, their attitude as consumers and their tastes and preferences in home furnishings and design.

For the manufacturer, the project allowed the company to look more closely at the desires and expectations of future customers and to meet them through a process of innovative design thinking. The Centre describes this as working closely with older people to understand their needs and aspirations to "create a portrait of ageing in the home".

For example, care homes have been recognised as a distinct form of *'Living Lab'* by some international agencies. While the Helen Hamyln Centre does not appear to use the term, it has run a project aimed at helping care home architects, designers and managers to reconcile the different and changing needs of residents. This resulted in design guidance on an open website. The guidance covers a range of subjects from large-scale site layouts of new homes to the details and furnishing of individual rooms. [11]

The Centre says: *"The aim is to influence the designers, specifiers and operators of future care homes to help create spaces that feel more like a home, that compensate for multiple disabilities and help older residents to build on their remaining abilities to remain active for longer."*

Smart Technology and Assistive Living

Drawing lessons from the United States in particular, a growing number of commercial organisations are embracing the concept of *'Living Labs'* as they seek new ways to ensure there will be a market for their goods and services in a society where the 'customer is king'. This includes testing out new telecare and telehealth devices and systems aimed at helping more people to live independently and healthier lives, as well as living longer ones.

---

[9] - Evans, S et al (2011). *Evaluating services in partnership with older people: exploring the role of 'community researchers.* Working with Older People Vol 15, Issue 1

[10] - www.hhc.rca.ac.uk/204/all/1/age--ability.aspx

[11] - www.bettercarehomes.org

This seems to be particularly the case in the United States, where the behaviour of residents is observed and data collected by researchers investigating the merging of new technologies with user-centred design. Interestingly, this work is reinforced and under-pinned by focus groups, formal interaction with residents, and other techniques, such as social media.

The use of the latter is articulated in another Housing LIN Viewpoint by Steve Ongeri. He writes: *"Some organisations say that social media help build trust with customers and engender a sense of belonging. From an older person's point of view, social media allow them to have their say, on their own terms."* [12]

Collaboration and personalisation working

The up2us project, funded by the Department of Health, covers pilot partnerships involving six housing and support providers in an alternative mutual model that could be a way forward in the era of personalisation and individual or personal budgets. The pilots are helping social care and support users to build local purchasing groups. The projects are helping people with individual budgets to increase their purchasing power by acting collectively to purchase their care and support.

In practice, the participants join a co-operative, retaining individual control over their own care but collectively sharing the responsibilities of employment, insurance, training, recruitment and other organisational burdens. Each partnership is developing links with other organisations such as user-led groups and independent advocates to address concerns that individuals will have little influence on the development and quality of service provision.

The partnerships are also responding to concerns that individual budgets could make existing provision unsustainable. Emerging findings suggest that collective negotiating will both increase service-users bargaining power and potentially afford some providers contracts of sufficient size that ensure an efficient service.[13]

Elder Experience Lab

Further afield, one leading American *'Living Lab'* effectively acts as a not-for-profit umbrella organisation "working with elders who open their lives to us".

The Business Innovation Factory (BIF) created the Elder Experience Lab in 2008 and uses an observational and ethnographic approach to understand how older people interact with their environments, utilize shared and private spaces, care for body and mind and stay connected with their friends and with the world.

While the BIF resource might be more product-focussed than the form of' *'Living Lab'* I am advocating here, its language and approach at least suggest similar goals.

Its website says: *"Too often the conversations about elder care innovation are dominated by the institutions that provide services. That conversation takes on a new dimension when the elder experience is put centre stage and elders, in their own voices, share first person insights about what works and what doesn't."* [14]

---

[12] - Ongeri, S (2012). *Older People and Social Networking*. Viewpoint 29, Housing Learning and Improvement Network

[13] - www.hact.org.uk/up2us

[14] - www.businessinnovationfactory.com/nhf

CASALA Living Lab

The model of testing through observation, augmented by intensive discussions, has been replicated in several European countries. These include the CASALA *Living Lab* in Dundalk, Ireland. The organisation's facilities include 'a reconfigurable model home' and a purpose-built development of 16 smart aware apartment homes constructed specifically for Ambient Assisted Living applications.[15] In common with the EAC card game, a residents' panel of e-journalists provided much of the content.

While *'Living Labs'* can provide tenants, residents and service-users with a chance to shape provision at the start, the concept is about more than co-production.

'Living Labs' embody the aspiration of on-going – almost continuous - engagement. It is about developing relationships with customers to share and learn from experiences – rather than responding to a particular problem. In England, the principles have been widely used, sometimes without having the tag *'Living Lab'* attached.

For example, in the private sector, some retirement housing schemes can take the form of residents managing their own properties through leaseholders associations. This follows the introduction of the Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Act 2002 that allowed leaseholders dissatisfied with their landlord's management arrangements to take control of the management of their property. This has been recognised as giving choice and control back to leaseholders, including many in private retirement housing. Interestingly, at the time of writing, government has been consulting on the Right to Manage and the findings from the responses are due out shortly.[16]

The last decade has also seen the slow rise of co-production and co-housing. The Social Care Institute for Excellence defines co-production as 'active input by the people who use services', not just as 'producers'. Local authorities, older people and voluntary organisations work together to design and deliver services.[17]

Imogen Blood's and Jenny Pannell's Viewpoint provides examples of how co-production has shaped older people's housing in Dorset and Brighton and Hove. This paper also highlights the leading role of the Abbeyfield Society whose work is driven by the belief that older people have an important role to play amongst their family, friends and communities.[18] In developing new schemes, the Society involves older people in the design process and this continues into the governance and management of the scheme.

Furthermore, the idea of co-housing is finally starting to gain ground in Britain, although there are many more schemes in countries such as Denmark and the United States. Co-housing schemes are based on the principles of participation and shared responsibilities but are also characterised by a genuine democracy in management.[19]

Three older people's co-housing groups have recently partnered with Hanover HA to develop sites. Others are aiming for a mutual retirement housing model where retirement housing

---

[15] - www.casala.ie

[16] - DCLG (2012). *Giving Tenants Control: Rights to Transfer and Rights to Manage Regulations Consultation*.HM Government

[17] - www.scie.org.uk/publications/briefings/briefing31

[18] - Ibid

[19] - Brenton, M (2008). *The Co-Housing Approach to Lifetime Neighbourhoods*. Factsheet No 29, Housing Learning and Improvement Network

is built on land owned by a community land trust which rents properties to tenants who will manage their development on a democratic basis.

Could this also be the way forward on implementing the recommendations of the HAPPI report and the co-creation of age-friendly housing to enable older people to live well at home? [20, 21]

Making sense of Living Labs

More widely, I believe that the *'Living Lab'* concept represents an extension of the personalisation agenda, tailoring housing and care and support services to the individual. Moving into extra care housing should not represent the completion of the relationship but an early staging post.

Successive governments have placed an emphasis on personalised services and genuine involvement of tenants or service users in the planning and delivery of services.

Published in July 2011, the Open Public Services white paper said: "People will be able to choose what sort of service they want and find the best provider to meet their needs." It continued: "In a world where people are making informed choices about almost every aspect of their life, amplified by the opportunities brought by new technology, public services have to be equally responsive to people's demands if they are to retain people's trust." [22]

Pledging that people should use their voice in designing and managing the services they use, the white paper makes clear that ministers' have a commitment to real user involvement. Furthermore, it pledged to work with councils and other partners to bring personalised budgets to the local care and support programmes, reiterated in the recent Department of Health social care white paper.[23]

The Open Public Service white paper also emphasised that genuine choice depended on people having access to information to make decisions and it pledged to ensure that happens. Some have spoken of overturning the conventional passive relationship between the users of services and those who serve them.[24] So what does this mean for housing with care, including extra care housing?

As highlighted in an earlier Housing LIN factsheet by Shena Latto and Nigel King, a central tenet of maintaining independence in later life in extra care housing is the promotion of independence and avoidance of institutional solutions to care and support, and the importance of user-centred approaches, in particular involvement in both the development and provision of services. *"At the heart of older people's ability to live independent lives lies their capacity to make choices; seek personal fulfilment through activities and relationships; and exercise control over their surroundings."* [25]

---

[20] - Homes and Communities Agency (2009). *Housing our Ageing Population: Panel for Innovation*. HCA

[21] - Porteus, J (2011). Living Well at Home. All Party Parliamentary Group on Housing and Care for Older People Inquiry report. Counsel & Care

[22] - Cabinet Office (2012). *Open Public Service 2012*. HM Government

[23] - DH (2012). *Caring for our Future: Reforming Care and Support* .HM Government

[24] - Pannell, J and Blood, I (2012). ibid

[25] - Latto, S and King, N (2004). *User Involvement in Extra Care Housing.* Factsheet No 8, Housing Learning and Improvement Network

In addition, they cite the importance of the early drivers of the Supporting People programme in recognising the value of a person-centred approach to shaping service delivery. They quote:

> *"Services which only involve people because they are required to, will tend to see involvement as a separate activity and not as an integral part of the process of empowering people and of delivering services. By contrast, services that see involvement as a means of facilitating independence and inclusion, can point to a range of ways that people have been provided with the skills and opportunities, not only to have a say in services, but to have increased control in how they live their lives."* [26]

However, whether one delivers this through regulation, standards or good practice, practice in the sector remains variable. As Latto and King stated:

> *"What is clear is that commissioners and providers need to take a thought-through and clear approach to user involvement. This involves, above all, clarity and realism about objectives (is the aim to inform, to consult, to stimulate, to engage in direct management and operation, to contribute to, or to have the power to make or veto decisions?) as well as a careful and facilitated development of techniques and opportunities for involvement."*

But, what is clear to me is that we need to move beyond 'lip service' of involvement and create a new social innovation movement that can ensure that extra care housing residents can exercise real choice and control. One such technique is the *'Living Lab'*. This is not about treating residents as 'specimens' in laboratory conditions, this is about adapting existing structures or building new ones to enable residents to determine or extend their autonomy and/or engage in wider community activities should they so wish. However, this will require a radical new way of working!

The way forward I am advocating therefore is for housing with care commissioners, designers and providers to pledge to commit to at least some of the following characteristics of 'a living lab' or comprehensive user engagement. They include:

- Explicit recognition that residents are consumers

- Commissioners and providers should state a commitment to some form of co-design in all new housing with care

- Use on-going engagement to create a living, changing portrait of the needs, wishes and experiences of their residents

- Promote and support active residents' or leaseholders' associations

- Explore options for working with local people seeking to constructively develop innovative forms of housing provision that meets the demands, needs and aspirations of an ageing population

---

[26] - ODMP (2003). *Supporting People – A Guide to User Involvement for Organisations Providing Housing Related Support Services.* HM Government

Conclusion

The recent collection of Housing LIN Viewpoints represents an exhortation and encouragement to providers and funders of housing with care and related services. Older people themselves increasingly expect to be in control of the housing they live in and the care and support that they require. By making a virtue of that fact, listening and learning on an on-going basis, providers, funders and developers can remain in tune with an evolving market and respond to changing demographics and expectations.

The *Living Lab* concept brings together many of the drivers and concepts that are shaping both public services and specialist housing for a generation that expects choice and genuine involvement. It is still an evolving concept but one that the Housing LIN pledges to be at the forefront in encouraging the sector to do the same – and, ultimately, for the good of older people demanding specialist housing. It's definitely a prize worth going for.

Jeremy Porteus is the Director of the Housing Learning and Improvement Network.

About the Housing LIN

Previously responsible for managing the Department of Health's Extra Care Housing Fund, the Housing LIN is the leading 'learning lab' for a growing network of housing, health and social care professionals in England involved in planning, commissioning, designing, funding, building and managing housing, care and support services for older people and vulnerable adults with long term conditions.

For further information about the Housing LIN's comprehensive list of online resources and shared learning and service improvement opportunities, including site visits and network meetings in your region, visit www.housinglin.org.uk

The Housing LIN welcomes contributions on a range of issues pertinent to housing with care for older and vulnerable adults. If you have an example of how your organisation is closely aligned to a 'Living Lab' approach, or a subject that you feel we should cover, please contact us.

Published by

Housing Learning & Improvement Network
c/o EAC,
3rd Floor, 89 Albert Embankment
London SE1 7TP
Tel: 020 7820 8077
Email: info@housinglin.org.uk
Web: www.housinglin.org.uk