# Might the fifteen-minute neighbourhood transform what we want from housing in old age?

*In this blog David Sinclair, Director of ILCUK and member of the Housing & Ageing Alliance, considers the importance of the location of the home and the concept of the 15 minute neighbourhood.*

The relationship between the location of our home and the services we need is coming under sharper focus as a result of climate change, COVID-19, new technology, and the ability of more people to work from home.

Yet there has been little focus on how these trends might impact on the housing choices we make for old age and little planning for how the private and public sector work together to adapt to the new normal.

New inequalities are emerging with some people overwhelmed with services while others don't have their basic needs met.

The idea of a fifteen-minute neighbourhood offers opportunities for rethinking the relationship between our home and our community as we age. But if we are to maximise the opportunity of the vision we need to think more about how the needs of a diverse older population is met within this framework.

**Where we live is important – but COVID-19 has highlighted that our local communities aren't meeting our needs**

COVID-19 has highlighted that for many of us, our home is not as physically connected to our community as we thought it was. During lockdown we were told to stay at home for all but essential purposes and as lockdown relaxed we were told to "stay local".  With lockdown many of us realised that the things we really wanted and needed were no longer close to our homes.

The development of hub and spoke services across health and beyond has taken a U turn over recent decades as commissioners have consolidated services and developed specialist services further from where we live. Yet we know that the location of services relative to our homes influences their use. In 1986, for example, Professor Les Mayhew published *Urban Hospital Location* which found that better geographical organisation of health care facilities would contribute significantly to a better and more effective health service.

We can all be pretty complacent that there will be services when we need it in old age. As we get older, at a point where access to services may be more important than ever, many of us choose to move out of denser cities into rural and seaside towns.

**But it doesn't have to be that way**.

The concept of the **fifteen-minute neighbourhood** (and the one-minute neighbourhood) has developed over recent years, gaining increasing attention from policy thinkers, academics and planners across the

world. The broad idea is of a utopian ultra local vision of community very close to our homes. In a fifteen-minute neighbourhood we might find our work, the shops we need, our health services and education close by.

COVID-19 highlighted that far from an impossible dream, it was possible to deliver services closer to where many of us live. Lots of us found we could work from home or nearby. GP's invested in telehealth services which meant we didn't have to travel unnecessarily.

Even before COVID-19 our retail services were trying to adapt their offer in a world of pretty ubiquitous online offers. Supermarkets have been opening smaller stores closer to people's homes. The [retail bank is trying to reinvent its role on the high street](1) (1) and there is once again growing interest in the idea "white label" transactional branches offering other financial services closer to where people live. Last mile transport is being transformed and over recent years we witnessed a rapid growth in local services using adapted cycles and e bikes for deliveries (e.g, Pedal Me) and even household repairs such as plumbing (2).

**Unless we plan inequalities will grow**

A debate on inequalities quickly emerged alongside COVID-19. Some people found the services they relied on for a decent quality of life were not accessible locally. Some of us didn't live near a green space or didn't have access to high-speed internet.

The dominance of the car in town and city planning alongside centralisation and consolidation of public and private services have changed the way our communities look over many decades. New housing estates have been and continue to be built in areas with relatively few local services. Those of us who don't own a have found local services harder to reach.

A lack of planning has allowed financially unsustainable but vital public and private services to move away from some communities whilst other communities are overwhelmed with choice. In some London postcards, residents can now order food from literally thousands of restaurants and have it delivered to their home within an hour. At one point Regent Street had 36 different operators doing recycling (3).

**There are major challenges to the new utopian vision in an ageing UK**

The idea of a fifteen-minute neighbourhood may well challenge the sort of housing we need across our life course and the sort of choices we make about our housing options for old age. But there are challenges to its implementation in terms of ageing.

And while the framework of the fifteen-minute place is potentially useful, we need to better understand older people want and need within fifteen minutes of their homes and how different these are from what younger people want.

Planners will have to consider how the vision of the fifteen-minute neighbourhood can work in villages and towns as well as cities, particularly if these places have a higher proportion of older residents.

We also need to ensure that planning for the fifteen-minute neighbourhood doesn't focus on just the essentials but also on how community is built and maintained and how meaningful engagement in society is supported for people of all ages.

The growth of services and products at home is also being challenged by a lack of infrastructure. The lack of parking provision for service providers and delivery vans for example, is becoming more apparent in many towns and cities already overwhelmed by traffic. Pavement parking is potentially an inadvertent victim of poor planning, making communities potentially less walkable for old and young alike.

The lack of people to staff the services we want and need close to our home is another major limiting factor. The UK taxi shortage (2) for example will have a significant impact on the ability of some older people to access the services they need for example.

Our ageing population isn't just older, its more diverse than in the past and the way we work, care and play is changing. Our gender, ethnicity and disability impacts on how and what we need in the place we live, no matter how old we are. Yet the design of place around the needs of men (4) means that we aren't well serving everyone's needs. The vision for the fifteen-minute neigbourhood needs to recognise the diversity of our needs

**So what happens next**

The fifteen-minute neighbourhood could be a useful framework for planners to adapt local communities for us all as we age. It puts the home at the centre of our services and in many ways enhances it's importance.

COVID-19 has accelerated change in the way services are delivered to our homes and as such our housing options need to account for this.

But unless we find ways of planning which recognise the diversity of ageing experience, we risk the fifteen-minute neighbourhood exacerbating rather than tackling inequalities.

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**The Housing & Ageing Alliance** continues to make the case for concerted, cross sector and inter-departmental action that will:

- *Enable older people to live independently and well wherever they choose, remaining in control of their homes and lives*

- *Create age-friendly homes, neighbourhoods and services that enable people to live healthy, fulfilling lives, involved with families, friends & neighbours and contributing to their communities in later life*

- *Create integrated housing, health & care policies all aiming to enable people to live safely & well at home as they age*

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