

## Planning authorities are failing to prioritise housing for older people in their local plans

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Developers have long complained that a major barrier to the delivery of more retirement living schemes to meet the needs of an ageing population is the planning system.



Proposed scheme: Blenheim Retirement Living recently submitted plans for its first scheme in Chobham, Surrey

And now, research conducted by law firm Irwin Mitchell exclusively for *Property Week* confirms they are right to call foul. Put simply, [most planning authorities are not prioritising housing for older people in their local plans and supporting documents.](#)

Irwin Mitchell's researchers studied planning documents at all 329 planning authorities in England, including 326 administrative districts plus the Peak District National Park, the South Downs National Park and the London Legacy Development Corporation.

Using search terms including 'elderly', 'older people', 'retirement homes' and 'care homes', they scoured documents to find evidence of both dedicated housing policies for older people and site allocations for homes aimed at older people.

Care homes are a considerably more land-efficient means of accommodating people - **Carl Dyer, Irwin Mitchell**

Councils were then graded according to a simple metric. If they both had a policy and had allocated sites, they received an A. If they had a policy in place but had not allocated sites, they received a B. If they had no policy in place but had allocated at least one site, they received a C. Finally, if they had neither a policy nor had they allocated sites, they received a D.

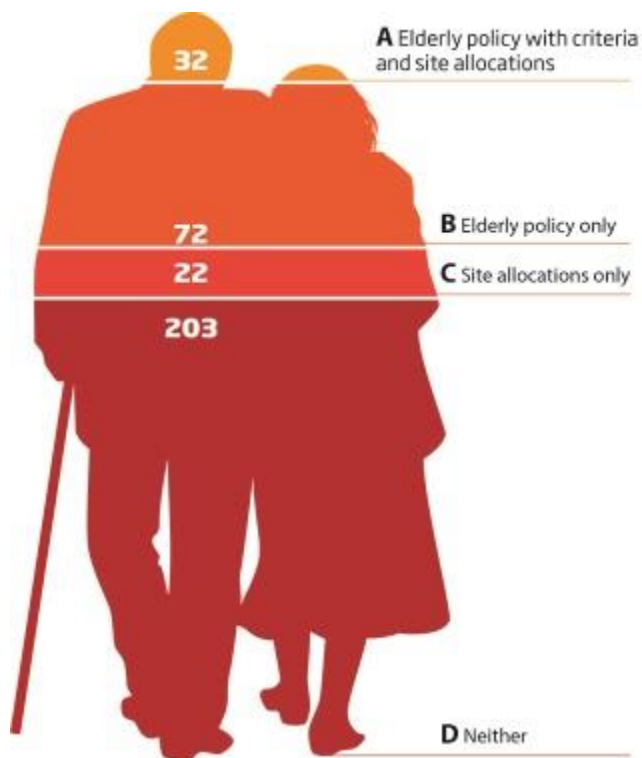
The results are pretty damning. Some two-thirds of authorities (203) scored a D. Conversely, just 10% of authorities (32) scored an A.

“At one level it is shocking, but sadly only in keeping with what we have discovered when promoting care home development around the country,” says Carl Dyer, partner at Irwin Mitchell. “Too many councils are simply not making adequate provision in local plans for the provision of retirement housing or for care homes.”

For Dyer, the situation is even more frustrating given that the planning system is ideally suited to tackling long-term problems. The fact that we have an ageing population is not new and the local plan system exists to plan for the needs of communities over long periods.

### Anticipating change

“The population is ageing - this is well known and well documented,” says Dyer. “It is a phenomenon that is happening slowly and over an extended time period. It is exactly the sort of change that our planning system should be able to anticipate and plan for, but that is simply not happening.”



### How councils are planning for older people's housing

What is more, the research indicates that there is little to no correlation between areas that have high demand for homes for older people and the places that are proactively encouraging their development.

For instance, among those areas that scored an A are Salford, Horsham, east Staffordshire, Crawley, Guildford and Woking, all of which have populations where the proportion of residents over the age of 65 is comfortably below the national average.

Conversely, despite the fact that the South West and the South East coastal areas have the highest proportion of elderly people in England, it is notable that - with the exception of Poole - none of the areas you might expect to be at the forefront of planning for older people's housing obtained a grade A.

[Eastbourne, east Devon](#), east Dorset and south Lakeland only obtained grade B. Meanwhile, Christchurch, Wealden, Kings Lynn and west Norfolk all scored D, despite having among the highest proportion of over-65s in England.

According to Dyer, many councils simply don't want to encourage more elderly people to move to their area, perhaps out of concern for the added burden it would place on their health and social care systems. "Too many councils appear to believe that if they plan for retirement housing and for care homes they will get more elderly people in their districts," he says.

"This ignores the fact that the elderly people and ageing people are already there and they will need increasingly specialist accommodation as they get older."

In order to get on top of the problem, planning authorities need to understand that the benefits that providing specialist accommodation bring aren't restricted to just older people. Rather, if suitable accommodation is provided, it can help alleviate wider housing shortages.

### **Land efficient**

"Care homes and most forms of retirement housing are a considerably more land-efficient means of accommodating people than traditional general market housing," says Dyer. "When people move into retirement housing or to care homes, they invariably move out of their previous residences, which become available on the general market."



Beechfield Court in Minehead

"Properly providing for the housing needs of the ageing and the elderly represents a land-efficient way for local planning authorities to address general housing needs. But they are not doing it. The clock is ticking and an opportunity is being missed."

The key questions are whether planning authorities will see sense and start to proactively plan for housing aimed at older people - or whether the firm hand of central government will be required to force them to do the sensible thing.

## Roll of honour: the A-grade authorities

- Bolsover,
  - Braintree,
  - Bromsgrove,
  - Central Bedfordshire,
  - Chelmsford,
  - Coventry,
  - Crawley,
  - East Hampshire,
  - East Staffordshire,
  - Fareham,
  - Guildford,
  - Havant,
  - Horsham,
  - Hounslow,
  - Liverpool,
  - London Legacy Development Corporation,
- 
- Maidstone,
  - North Warwickshire,
  - Poole,
  - Reading,
  - Salford,
  - Scarborough,
  - Sefton,
  - South Gloucestershire,
  - South Staffordshire,
  - Stafford,
  - Thanet,
  - Trafford,
  - Welwyn Hatfield,
  - Woking,
  - Worcester and
  - Wyre Forest.
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- *It is possible that in a few instances districts were assigned D because their policies for elderly homes and site allocations were simply not explicit enough or not easily retrievable. Site allocations in particular were often buried deep in one of a list of supplementary planning documents and not clearly marked, so it is possible that some allocations have been overlooked.*