

# Mainstream housing adaptations in London

An owner-occupied home in general housing stock adapted to make it suitable for a couple, one of whom is disabled.

The work was funded by the householders.

Adaptations can provide an accessible and visitable environment, but at a cost.



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## Staying at home

Despite the focus of this publication on the need to develop new models of housing, only 4 per cent of older and disabled adults move to a care home.<sup>22</sup> The rest will be reliant on their own resources and most prefer to stay in their own home: 67 per cent of over-85s still live at home, compared to only 19 per cent in institutional settings.

Most people in the UK live in homes designed before 1939. Stairs, upstairs bedrooms, irregular floor levels, narrow doorways and corridors, small bathrooms and kitchens, inefficient and expensive heating, gardens requiring constant maintenance and distance from shops and amenities all militate against ease of use by older and disabled people.

Such homes can be effectively adapted, but at a cost, and expert advice and grants are not always available, despite the efforts of organisations such as Care and Repair England and the network of local home improvement agencies.

## An example

An example of some of the issues that can arise is a home in a typical terraced street in London's Edwardian suburbs, occupied by two women in their 60s, Rosalie and Maria.

Rosalie has been a wheelchair user after she had an accident when she was young and has lived in this property alone since 1977. Over the last 25 years she has had to make few adaptations, having purchased the house from a wheelchair user, and she has needed minimal external care.

The most recent tranche of adaptations, featured here and carried out in 2002, cost £160,000 and were funded through the sale of Maria's house. These included enlarging, redecorating and re-equipping the house for two people.

## The adaptations

When it was built in 1904, the house was designed as two separate flats, with front and back staircases, but not self-contained. This phase of work involved moving the kitchen to the main living space and installing a disabled lift (£8,000 to provide access to the upper floor, which had to be levelled out and supported with new RSJs).



The new kitchen, by Design Matters, has wheelchair-height surfaces and sink and hob installed against one wall, with space underneath to allow for wheelchair access, and cupboards set at a low height overhead. A special height-adjustable stool was purchased for Maria to sit on while cooking, although she says she rarely uses it.

The lift was expensive, but crucial to the viability of the new arrangement. It opens directly into Rosalie's office upstairs at the back of the house, adjacent to a wall of storage space – always a problem for disabled people as they need a lot of equipment. There is also a wheelchair-accessible toilet upstairs.

Next door to the study is a new guest bedroom along with a small shower room. Maria's study lies at the front of the house on the first floor, and she has a separate bedroom and shower-room on the new second floor, reached by a new staircase. A hoist was installed in the downstairs bathroom at a cost of £2,000, and a simple alarm system installed in the bedroom. Rosalie's bedroom, at the back of the house, is also equipped with new electrics so she can use the television and other items from her bed. A hoist could be installed, if necessary. The bedroom opens through French windows onto an attractive garden, but the ramp was too steep for Rosalie to negotiate in her wheelchair and it was difficult for

her to get outside. A new timber deck was installed at the level of the French doors, which slopes down gently to the lower level, where a wheelchair-negotiable path winds down to the end.

The couple feel that they have 'future-proofed' the house well, and have learnt to look ahead. After a severe bout of arthritis, Maria realised that it would have been good to have extended the lift shaft to her bedroom at the top of the house but the added expense was a deterrent.

They also considered installing solar panels on the roof but at £16,000 this was too expensive. Rosalie's lack of mobility means that she struggles to keep warm so heating bills are high. Maria has a separate boiler to heat her own spaces in the house to a lower level than Rosalie's, and two years ago the loft was insulated to make Rosalie's study much warmer. They also plan to double glaze the living room windows.

The adaptations have made a huge difference to this 100-year-old terraced property. Rosalie now has access to nearly all the house, is able to have guests to stay, can work from home and is able to get into her much-loved garden.

## The future

However, both women are aware that their personal care requirements will increase. For the time being, the district nurse's daily visits are adequate, and the couple pays for a personal assistant to help with bathing, a gardener and cleaner. They hope that Maria's insurance policy will enable them to buy in more care in future.

Rosalie and her partner believe that if either one of them were to end up alone they would move into a co-housing community, where residents live in self-contained flats but have communal accommodation such as kitchens and dining rooms. Although their current neighbours help in emergencies, there is a limit to how much they can ask of them.

How easy it will be to find a suitable community is another question. The next few years will be crucial in establishing new options for older people, especially in the under-developed area of co-housing,<sup>23</sup> which is well established in the Netherlands and Denmark.

## Design and architectural features

- Series of adaptations to an early 20th century house.

## Points for residents

- An accessible and visitable environment.

## Management issues

- This is an example of future-proofing a building to enable the occupants to be independent and inter-dependent.

22 Audit Commission 2008: *Don't Stop Me Now*, cited in Housing LIN factsheet 29

23 Housing that combines self-contained homes with community living. See Pickering C et al, *A Different Way of Living*, Housing Corporation and Housing for Women, undated.

