

PREP for PRP's Specialist Housing Conference: 17 November 2009

Housing Standards - Towards Inclusive Design

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In the context of fierce debate around the affordability of Lifetime Home standards and the application of minimum space standards, PRP discusses the issues and proposes a pragmatic solution to achieving our aims for more inclusive design and therefore more sustainable housing whilst avoiding still further pressures on a housebuilding industry in the wake of the Credit Crunch.

Introduction

Much of the new housing stock built in the United Kingdom over the past few decades has been of relatively poor quality in terms of space standards, accessibility and energy efficiency. This has been particularly evident in the private sector which has been less stringently regulated and where the commitments of the developer largely cease with the completion and sale of the dwelling.

In response, the last few years have seen unprecedented debate on the subject of standards in housing and a series of new policy initiatives to address the quality and sustainability of new housing. The Code for Sustainable Homes was introduced in 2007 (with the target of Zero Carbon homes by 2016), Building for Life criteria were introduced in 2005, Lifetime Home standards are being continually reinterpreted and more widely embraced. Local Authorities are setting their own standards, Fire Regulations now place the responsibility with the developer and management, Secured by Design standards are becoming steadily more onerous.

National Building Regulations are under ongoing review and in the public sector the Homes and Communities Agency is in the process of reviewing the Design and Quality Standards as they prepare a new set of standards. Home Information Packs have been introduced and Energy Performance Certificates have now become obligatory.

Some of these standards are not particularly well drafted and leave scope for interpretation. Furthermore there is frequently overlap, lack consistency and this sometimes results in conflicting requirements. Those responsible for their implementation and assessment in terms of compliance are often under-trained and overstretched.

Government policy is proposing the mandatory application of Lifetime Home Standards to all new housing by 2013 and the question of minimum Space Standards is currently the topic of serious debate.

Meanwhile the global economic crisis and the resultant 'Credit Crunch' have thrown the house-building industry into crisis and seriously impacted on land values and the government's targets for the delivery of new homes. The costs of higher standards and more stringent regulation can only exacerbate an already precarious position for the industry.

So, how do we move forward towards achieving our goals for affordable and sustainable housing, holding on to our key aspirations whilst avoiding an over-regulated and inflexible legislative framework?



A PRP STAFF DESIGN COMPETITION

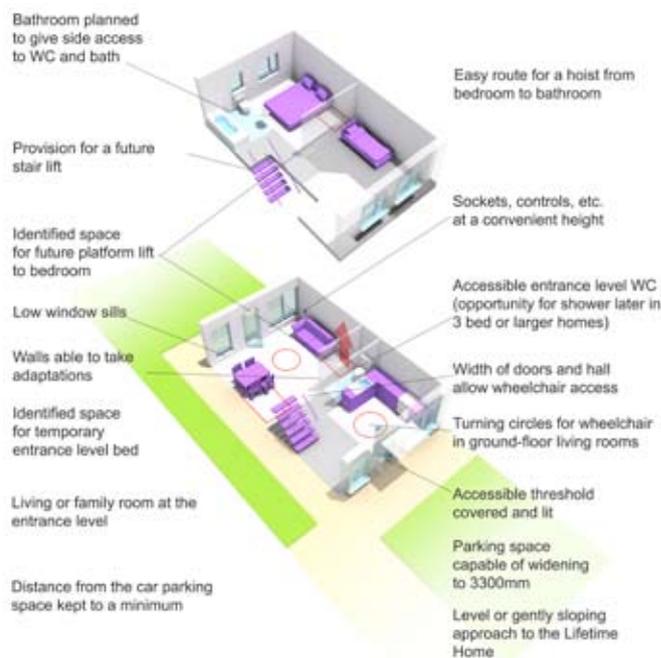
Examples of inclusive design that address a wider range of needs irrespective of age or ability is one of a number of major challenges currently faced by the house building industry and its designers.

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Lifetime Homes Diagram

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Lifetime Home Standards

The Lifetime Home standards were drafted nearly twenty years ago by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation to promote the concept of 'inclusive' design in new housing. They identified 16 standards which focussed on improving accessibility and adaptability within the home for those with restricted mobility and to suit our changing needs as we get older.

In the intervening period the LTH standards have become increasingly widely embraced by local authorities, housing associations and other government agencies and are now included as one of the assessment criteria in both the Code for Sustainable Homes and 'Building for Life'. Eight of the sixteen standards have now been included in the National Building Regulations albeit in a slightly modified form.

In their Lifetime Homes and Lifetime Neighbourhoods policy initiative published in 2008, CLG proposes the mandatory application of the standards for all new affordable housing by 2011 and for all new housing by 2013.

The case for us to move towards more inclusive design standards is clear, however, there are now serious questions being posed regarding the affordability of mandatory application of the standards for all new housing.

There are now, however, quite a number of built examples of homes which, whilst complying with the LTH standards, fail to deliver acceptable housing layouts or space standards. This is generally due to the larger circulation and ablution facilities eroding the size and proportion of habitable rooms.

Furthermore, there are inherent contradictions both between some of the standards themselves and between the standards and other criteria. For instance, there is no mandatory requirement for lift access to flats whilst the dwellings themselves need to comply with wheelchair accessibility. The Code for Sustainable Homes promotes compliance with the LTH standards. However, minimising external wall area (which the narrow frontage terrace house does most effectively) optimises the thermal performance of the home.

We are aware that the standards, which were loosely drafted, are currently under review. But will this go far enough? Empirical data needs to be gathered to substantiate the benefit of some of the standards in terms of affordability and practicality.

Is it sensible for all family homes to be designed for an overhead hoist to be fitted between the bedroom and the bathroom? This equipment is generally required where 24 hour care is provided to very frail people in an institutional environment. In the very rare instance of this being required in a family home it could be retro fitted in the event of a mobile hoist not being appropriate.

The same argument could be applied to the through floor lift. Indications are that through floor wheelchair lifts have only been fitted in an extremely small proportion of Lifetime Homes and it is generally the case that the manufacturer will need to adapt the floor opening to suit their equipment.

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Minimum Space Standards

A key contributory factor in our failure to deliver more inclusive design in our new housing, often despite the application of LTH standards, stems from the fact that much of it suffers from inadequate space standards.

This, in turn, is driven by the fact that homes are generally marketed in the UK on the basis of the number of bedrooms or habitable rooms rather than the gross internal floor area as is the case across most of Europe. Much of our new housing therefore offers cellular layouts with sub-standard circulation area and room dimensions as the housing developer seeks to maximise his returns in the face of prohibitive land values.

There is little doubt that if better space standards were adopted, many of the accessibility issues within the home could be avoided. So, on the face of it, minimum space standards would solve many of our housing quality issues.

However, this is perhaps a simplistic view. The housing developer will point out that accessibility extends to affordability and it is pointless building housing to space standards that are beyond the reach of first time home buyers and large sections of our population in terms of affordability, particularly in property hotspots such as London.

Innovative products such as the micro-flat for affordable city living would be immediately eliminated from our range housing typologies as non-compliant and more innovative design around maximising the use of space through open-plan layouts could be casualties of rigid application of minimal space standards.

Larger homes with compromised room sizes might be more than adequate if under-occupied, for instance, by a couple who might be using some of these spaces as their studies.



A MINIMUM HOUSING STANDARD

Affordable City Living a 35sqm micro flat concept designed for NHHT exploring a compact and stylish apartment for urban locations city centre locations for people seeking to break into the housing market.

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A pragmatic pay forward towards Inclusive Housing

We believe that a better approach to the introduction of mandatory minimum space standards would be to apply a similar approach to that which has already been adopted for the Energy Performance of homes.

We need a simple and easily comprehensible set of standards that deal with the issues of *accessibility and space* as these two issues are inextricably related. Furthermore, we need to move towards benchmarking and evaluating housing in terms of area rather than the number of rooms.

The Swedes offer a good example for a pragmatic approach for the implementation of inclusive standards in new housing. They have a simple set of standards, clearly illustrated and applied nationally to all new housing. This grades properties in terms of accessibility and space standards and provides clear illustrations of how higher, medium or lower standards can be achieved.

We could adopt a similar approach to benchmarking space standards by providing an area assessment of the home to a prospective purchaser as part of the Home Information Pack.

In our recent joint response, with a group of other architects [LBA, PTEa, & HTA], to the consultation round on the draft London Housing Design Guide, we referred to this approach as '*space labelling*'.

But here we are proposing that we go a step further by proposing a combined Space and Accessibility Standard rating perhaps using our current standards suitably amended.



A Response from 4 Architectural Practices to The London Housing Design Guide

For example, a Space and Accessibility Standards (SAS) benchmarking might assess a property against the following:

- Level A - Wheelchair Housing Standard
- Level B - Lifetime Home Standard (mobility standard)
- Level C - Design and Quality Standards* & National Building Regulations.

** Currently under review by the HCA who are merging the Design and Quality Standards with the English Partnership Standards.*

The Lifetime Home standard would need to be reviewed to revert to 'mobility standards' and omit some of the more onerous requirements related to wheelchair accessibility. Others, where appropriate, could be incorporated into the National Building Regulations.

The LTH standards might be strengthened in other respects such as around space standards and well proportioned rooms to avoid accessibility issues compromising spatial standards.

This approach would enable us to remove some of the inherent contradictions within the current standards where they go part of the way towards wheelchair standards.

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INCLUSIVE DESIGN

A balance is needed in terms of 'inclusivity' and 'affordability' in order to deliver homes that truly suitable for the user needs.

Local Authorities and other agencies could then apply this benchmarking to new housing through the planning system and, for instance, require that a new development should provide 50% Level A (SAS rated) housing, 25% Level B and the balance Level C. Their requirement could be sensibly applied on a site specific basis so that they might be less demanding in the context of a steeply sloping site or more demanding on a flatted high density urban development.

At the same time the regulatory system should allow a degree of flexibility. Rather than impose a set of standards, we should require that the developer 'comply or explain' his reasons in the event of non-compliance.

This more graduated approach towards higher standards would undoubtedly move us towards more inclusive and sustainable housing at a more measured pace at a time when the 'sledgehammer' might be the final blow for an industry under severe pressure.

This piece is intended to stimulate debate on the issue. It does not purport to provide 'the answer' to this very complex issue. Indeed, establishing the different levels in terms of space and accessibility standards would be a significant task in itself....