



Housing LIN

*Connecting people, ideas and resources*

## Viewpoint 112

# All new housing should be accessible... What's the problem?

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# Introduction

In June 2022 the Conservative Government announced that it would make Part M4(2), the section in the Building Regulations that covers access for residential dwellings, the national baseline for all new homes. Those of us who have been campaigning for accessible housing for years gave a huge cheer as we thought that battle had been won. However, the Conservative government did not implement its announcement.

When Labour came to power just over a year ago we assumed that the previous government's intention would be honoured. After all, it was in power when it recognised the 16 Lifetime Homes standards back in the early 2000s that subsequently became Part M4(2).<sup>1</sup> However, despite vigorous campaigning and recommendations made by the Older People's Housing Taskforce<sup>2</sup>, there has been no serious acknowledgement of the importance of this issue. We are promised 1.5 million new homes in this government's housing plan. We hear a lot of political talk about their commitment to building more affordable homes but rarely the need for more accessible homes.

In the three years since the Conservative government announcement over 480,000 new homes have been built.<sup>3</sup> Some of these **will** be accessible because of policies in plans, for example, in Greater Manchester's Places for Everyone.<sup>4</sup> However, the majority will not.<sup>5</sup> Had the right national regulations been in place these homes could all have been accessible. Furthermore, in my view, the industry continues to build new homes that do not meet the changing needs of our population.

I've therefore been trying to understand the reasons **why** the Labour Government has not adopted the Accessible Homes standard as the baseline for all new homes. I outline my thinking in this Viewpoint for the Housing LIN. It is based on a talk I gave at the Housing 2025 Conference in Manchester this year.

Accessible housing is housing that meets Building Regulation M4(2), more or less what used to be known as Lifetime Homes (as highlighted above). Meaning that anyone with reduced mobility can continue to live there despite changes in their lives.

M4(2) means no steps to the front door, it being wide enough to get a buggy or wheelchair through, a downstairs toilet with space for a shower, walls strong enough for grab rails, stairs suitable for a stair lift, and movement space in bedrooms.

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(1) [https://www.housinglin.org.uk/\\_assets/Resources/Housing/OtherOrganisation/Accessible-Housing-Standards-2015-WEB.pdf](https://www.housinglin.org.uk/_assets/Resources/Housing/OtherOrganisation/Accessible-Housing-Standards-2015-WEB.pdf)

(2) <https://www.housinglin.org.uk/News/Government-publishes-the-Older-Peoples-Housing-Taskforce-report/>

(3) "Approximately 13,000 properties have been built each month that do not accord with the accessible and adaptable standard". Letter from Lord Best to the HSE Building Safety Regulator (20 May 2024)

(4) <https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/media/9578/places-for-everyone-joint-development-plan-document.pdf>

(5) <https://www.habinteg.org.uk/localplans/>

Homes meeting the M4(2) standard were called Lifetime Homes because they cater for a lifetime of challenges...

- Supporting disabled people to be more independent and therefore able to play a more active part in their community
- Futureproofing our housing stock for a time when our ageing population might need more support in terms of long-term health conditions

Lifetime Homes cater for a lifetime of changes *for all of us...* that time when you need to get a double buggy and toddler through the front door... space to put a cot in a bedroom... or come back from hospital needing a wheelchair temporarily to help your hip replacement to heal.

They mean that you can live in the same house *throughout your lifetime* – which research shows that most people would like to do. However, as revealed by Habinteg, only 9% of our current homes meet even the lowest level of accessibility.<sup>6</sup> I therefore wanted to better understand the reasoning behind the government's lack of commitment, posing the following questions.

## Is it because of the Cost?

As part of their consultation the Conservative government, in 2022, calculated the additional cost to build a home to the M4(2) standard to be around £1,400 per dwelling. Even if this has subsequently increased to c.£3,000 it is a negligible amount in relation to the cost of a new home.

Research shows that accessible homes would save both national and local government significant amounts. Delayed discharge, when patients remain in hospital despite no longer needing clinical care, is a major issue. It has been calculated that the direct costs of delayed discharges alone (excluding additional costs from activities such as cancelled operations or staff time spent arranging care packages) was at least £1.7 billion in 2022/23.<sup>7</sup> So, this housing policy would help fix the NHS.

An accessible home can also substantially reduce the need (and therefore the cost) for social care.

Raising accessibility standards would 'future proof' new homes for successive generations, saving some of the costs associated with adapting homes when this becomes necessary.

The maths is obvious. So, the problem surely can't be cost.

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(6) <https://www.habinteg.org.uk/latest-news/new-government-data-reveals-accessible-homes-crisis-for-disabled-people-1557>

(7) <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/insight-and-analysis/blogs/hidden-problems-delayed-discharges>

## Is it because of the Land Take?

I used to think of an accessible home as a bungalow in a large garden, and I suspect many people have the same misconception. However, this not the only possibility. A married couple I know negotiated modifications - off-plan - to a ground floor flat in a standard owner-occupied block to make it suitable for a wheelchair-user.<sup>8</sup> They lived in that flat for 20 years and saw two other families with wheelchair-users move in to other ground floor flats in their block. These modifications were all achieved within the envelope of the standard flat, so no extra land was needed.

So, the problem surely can't be Land Take.

## Is it because the Building Regulations need updating?

The Director of Building Safety has said (June 2024) that 'before any changes to the guidance to the Building Regulation (Approved Document M) there is a long-established practice to consult with the sector on the revised guidance'. The Building Regs for accessible homes have existed since 2015 so have been well tried and tested. Of course, they **do** need updating to take account of changing circumstances such as the increased sizes of wheelchairs and the need to store equipment and charge mobility scooters. They should be revised to also include requirements for neurodiverse people, and to take account of the need for homes to be digitally enabled. However, those revisions will take a while and - until they happen - surely the current standards will suffice?

So, the problem surely can't be the Building Regulations.

## Is it because Local Plans don't all require new housing to be to the accessible standard?

Habinteg have calculated that 70% of new homes due to be built over the next ten years won't be required to meet any of the optional standards to make them accessible and adaptable.<sup>9</sup>

However, there is no requirement to wait for these policies. As responsible developers, planners, architects... and humans... surely we should be catering for our future population without waiting to be forced by regulations?

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(8) Modifications included ironing out external issues such as dropped curbs and level thresholds; hanging the bathroom door to open into the hall rather than into the bathroom; achieving level entrance patio doors by 'dropping' the door frame - removing one course of brickwork below and moving it to above the frame - and bottom opening instead of side opening window frames. All carried out at zero or minimal cost.

(9) <https://www.habinteg.org.uk/localplans/>

I recently visited Talbot Mill, an iconic 19th century Manchester mill that is being converted for apartments.<sup>10</sup> Tim Heatley (co-founder of Capital and Centric who are doing the conversion) explained that all the apartments would be accessible, and that most would be wheelchair-accessible. Asked why he was providing wheelchair-accessible housing when not required by legislation his response was basically *"This is what the market wants"*. People recognise that the future is unpredictable and want the reassurance of a home that gives them flexibility. It clearly makes economic business sense.

So, the problem should not be the lack of Local Plan policies.

## Finally, is it because accessible housing looks institutional?

There are many architects who design social housing that is attractive as well as accessible. The Housing LIN has published many case studies on award-winning designs. I feature the iconic Ilchester Road housing development, in Barking, by Peter Barber Architects on the cover of this Viewpoint. And below are some further images of beautiful, accessible social homes that his studio has designed.



(top & bottom left) Ilchester Road, Barking, (bottom right) Duckworth Terrace, Greenwich

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(10) <https://www.capitalandcentric.com/journal/talbot-mill-hits-major-milestone-as-conversion-tops-out>

# In conclusion

Having considered all the reasons I can think of, I really don't understand why the government has not championed the accessible housing standard as the baseline for the planned 1.5 million new homes, when there are so many obvious financial and social benefits.

We have managed to make the built environment, public buildings, trams and buses more accessible in recent years, based on government regulation and guidance. But we continue to build inaccessible homes, when homes are probably a more important part of people's lives. It is time to get our house in order and adopt Part M4(2).

## Photographs

Photos copyright Morley von Sternberg

## Note

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Housing Learning and Improvement Network.

## About the Author

A retired town planner, Joan is a campaigner for accessible and wheelchair accessible housing. She is chair of the National Network of Older People's Housing Champions, a member of the Housing & Ageing Alliance, Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People and Greater Manchester Older People's Network, and of High Peak Access and Manchester Disabled People's Access Group.



## About the Housing LIN

The Housing LIN is a sophisticated network bringing together over 20,000 housing, health and social care professionals in England, Wales and Scotland to exemplify innovative housing solutions for an ageing population.

Recognised by government and industry as a leading 'ideas lab' on specialist/supported housing, our online and regional networked activities, and consultancy services:

- connect people, ideas and resources to inform and improve the range of housing that enables older and disabled people to live independently in a home of their choice
- provide insight and intelligence on the latest funding, research, policy and practice to support sector learning and improvement
- showcase what's best in specialist/supported housing and feature innovative projects and services that demonstrate how lives of people have been transformed, and
- support commissioners and providers to review their existing provision and develop, test out and deliver solutions so that they are best placed to respond to their customers' changing needs and aspirations.

If you found this of interest, check out the 'Design Hub' webpages curated by the Housing LIN at: <https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/browse/Design-building/>

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