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Viewpoint 119

Creating a Common Language for Specialist Accommodation: A Typology-Based Approach to Forecasting and Market Shaping

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Introduction

Planning future specialist accommodation is increasingly a shared responsibility between housing and social care. As demand grows and pathways become more complex, neither service can plan effectively in isolation. However, as recognised in the Older People's Housing Taskforce report¹, the core challenge is not simply coordination—it is the absence of a common language through which need, provision, and delivery can be consistently understood.

Housing brings expertise in supply, development, tenure, and deliverability; social care brings insight into support needs, eligibility, risk, and outcomes. Without a unifying framework, these perspectives often operate in parallel rather than in combination. A typology-based approach addresses this gap by creating a shared language that translates care needs into clearly defined accommodation models, enabling more effective forecasting and more intentional market shaping.

At its core, specialist accommodation should be understood not just as a housing product, but as a service model. The design of the built environment, the support offer, and the pathway into and out of accommodation are interdependent. Where these elements are not aligned, systems experience mismatched provision, delayed delivery, and poor long-term outcomes. A typology-based framework brings these elements together into a single, structured planning approach.

The planning challenge: from fragmented insight to shared understanding

In many local systems, housing and social care identify need in different ways. Housing may observe pressure in specific tenures or property types, while social care identifies unmet need across defined cohorts, such as older people, adults with disabilities, care leavers, or individuals with mental health needs. Without a shared framework, these insights remain disconnected, leading to inconsistent prioritisation and uncertainty about what should be delivered.

This challenge is amplified in specialist accommodation, where demand spans multiple cohorts with distinct pathway requirements. For example, individuals with high-level care needs may require clustered, purpose-built environments with integrated care infrastructure, whereas care leavers often benefit from dispersed, general needs housing that promotes independence. A typology-based approach makes these distinctions explicit, enables a wider understanding of housing with/without care choices in later life and embeds them into planning from the outset.

(1) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-older-peoples-housing-taskforce-report>

A typology-based framework for forecasting

A typology-based framework enables housing and social care to move beyond abstract descriptions of need and towards a structured method for forecasting demand. By categorising accommodation into defined types linked to specific cohorts and support requirements, it becomes possible to quantify future need in a more consistent and actionable way.

This approach supports a shared set of planning questions:

- What is the scale and nature of need across cohorts?
- How does this translate into specific accommodation types?
- What supply currently exists within each typology?
- Where are the gaps, pressures, and bottlenecks?
- What delivery models are most appropriate for each type?
- How should provision be sequenced over time?

By anchoring these questions in typology, local systems can move from generalised estimates to more precise demand modelling, improving both strategic clarity and delivery confidence. Overlay this with Housing LIN research data² on the housing preferences of older people, and one can build a more nuanced understanding of what older people want.

Building a shared evidence base

A typology-based approach depends on integrating housing and social care data into a single evidence base. Each service holds critical but partial insight. Housing data provides visibility of stock, pipeline, and market constraints; social care data provides detail on assessed need, support intensity, and pathway movement.

When aligned through typology, this data becomes significantly more powerful. It enables local authorities to map cohorts to accommodation types, identify where supply is insufficient or misaligned, and forecast future demand with greater accuracy.

A robust shared evidence base should include:

- Demographic and cohort projections
- Referral, assessment, and eligibility data
- Existing accommodation mapped by typology
- Pipeline and planned developments

(2) <https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/type/Older-Peoples-Housing-Preferences/>

- Turnover, voids, and throughput
- Pathway pressure points and delayed transitions
- Qualitative intelligence from providers and frontline teams

This integrated view allows systems to identify not just how much accommodation is needed, but what type, for whom, and at what point in the pathway.

Market shaping through a common language

One of the most significant advantages of a typology-based framework is its ability to support active market shaping. By clearly articulating demand in terms of defined accommodation types, local authorities can communicate expectations to developers and providers with far greater precision.

Wokingham Borough Council has operationalised this through a specialist housing design specification handbook built around a typology framework. This establishes a standardised set of accommodation types (Type A to Type G), each linked to specific cohorts, support models, and design requirements.

This common language enables:

- Developers to design schemes that align with identified need from the outset
- Commissioners to specify requirements more clearly and consistently
- Planners to assess proposals against strategic priorities
- Providers to understand the expected service and support model

As a result, engagement with the market becomes more proactive and less reactive. Rather than responding to speculative development, local authorities can guide the type, scale, and design of provision entering the pipeline.

Linking design to delivery

The typology framework also strengthens the connection between strategy and delivery. By translating care requirements into defined design specifications, it ensures that accommodation is purpose-built to support intended outcomes.

This reduces the risk of late-stage redesign, misaligned provision, or schemes that are technically compliant but operationally unsuitable. It also enables social care to influence key decisions—such as layout, accessibility, and support infrastructure—before land allocation and capital investment are fixed.

For housing, this provides greater certainty that new supply will meet identified need. For social care, it creates confidence that accommodation will support effective pathways and reduce reliance on higher-cost or out-of-area provision.

Improving outcomes and system efficiency

A typology-based common framework improves not only planning processes but also system outcomes. When housing and social care operate with a shared understanding of need and provision, they are better able to deliver accommodation that is appropriate, sustainable, and aligned to long-term independence.

At a system level, this approach supports:

- More accurate demand forecasting
- Better alignment between supply and need
- Increased consistency in scheme design
- Greater confidence for developers and providers
- Reduced delays and redesign costs
- Stronger long-term asset planning

It also creates the conditions for more effective prevention, enabling systems to identify where lower-intensity or alternative interventions may reduce the need for specialist provision.

Conclusion

Creating a common language through a typology-based framework enables housing and social care to move from fragmented planning to a more integrated, evidence-led approach. By linking need, design, and delivery, it provides a practical foundation for forecasting demand and shaping the market.

Used consistently, this approach allows local systems to articulate what is needed, signal this clearly to the market, and deliver specialist accommodation that is better aligned to both individual outcomes and wider system priorities.

The Housing LIN is delighted to be working with Wokingham Borough Council.

Note

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

About the Housing LIN

The Housing LIN is a sophisticated network bringing together over 15,000 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
- provide access to intelligence on the latest funding, research, policy and practice developments
- raise the profile of specialist and supported housing with developers, commissioners and operators, and
- attract business to help and support clients plan, design and operate aspirational housing and services for people of all ages.

If you found this Viewpoint of interest, the Housing LIN curates a set of dedicated webpages on housing for older people, including specialist accommodation, at:

<https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/browse/Housing/HousingforOlderPeople/>

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