



Building in Inclusive Design: A modern housing perspective

In this viewpoint for the Housing LIN, Habinteg Chief Executive, Paul Gamble, restates the case for inclusive design in housing and the wider built environment. As the innovators behind the Lifetime Homes Standard and the Wheelchair Housing Design Guide, Habinteg has a rich history in implementing inclusive design in housing for over 40 years.

Reproduced for the Housing Learning and Improvement Network by
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Introduction

As the government proposes to bring optional enhanced access standards for new homes into the Building Regulations for the first time, the value of inclusive design in housing needs to be strongly reasserted.

And, as policy makers look to address the UK housing supply crisis and meet the changing and diverse needs of our ageing population, a universal approach to delivering housing that works for all is imperative.

Inclusive design principles

This viewpoint sets out some of my thinking on inclusive design based on Habinteg's experience of providing inclusive homes and supporting both Lifetime Homes standards and the Wheelchair Housing Design Guide.

But first let's start with a definition:

"An inclusively designed built environment means planning, designing, building and managing places that work better for everybody – whether that place is a school, office, park, street, care home, bus route or train station.

Inclusive environments are:

- *Welcoming to everyone*
- *Responsive to people's needs*
- *Intuitive to use*
- *Flexible*
- *Offer choice when a single design solution cannot meet all user needs*
- *Convenient so they can be used with undue effort or special separation and maximize independence*

An inclusive approach to planning, design and management is an opportunity to use creativity and lateral thinking to make places that reflect the diversity of people who want to use them. Crucial to this is consultation with user groups, putting people who represent a diversity of age, ability, gender and community at the heart of the design process.

Inclusive design is the responsibility of everyone who works in the built environment: planners, those who commission new buildings and places, access consultants, designers, architects, engineers, surveyors, property owners and facilities managers."

This definition of inclusive design comes from the recently launched CABE/Design Council Inclusive Design Hub. It's a great working definition, but did you notice that it doesn't include housing?

Inclusive design is now the most common label for what has also been known as universal design and design for all. Different terms developed in a range of different cultures and countries but all relating to the development of a design principle aiming to include as many as possible.

The example we use at Habinteg most often, not least during staff induction, is the potato peeler produced by OXO Good Grips.

Sam Farber, housewares entrepreneur, noticed that his wife found it hard to use ordinary kitchen tools due to a slight case of arthritis in her hands. So he set out to create more comfortable cooking tools that would benefit all users. The research process included talking with consumers, chefs and retailers and gerontologist Patricia Moore was brought on board to help the developers understand the perspective of users with special needs.

The first group of OXO Good Grips kitchen tools was introduced to the U.S. market in 1990. The company describes them as 'ergonomically-designed, trans-generational tools' which 'set a new standard for the industry and raised the bar of consumer expectation for comfort and performance'.¹

We argue that good design isn't just about new products targeted at groups of individuals, but designing things that are easier for everyone to use. Taking this approach, OXO 'Good Grips' has gone on to be an award winning and commercially successful range, showing that it's often the simplest functional items that make things easier for everyone on a day to day level. The story of the peeler illustrates perfectly the advantages (both commercial and domestic) of inclusive design - just ask any Habinteg member of staff.



OXO Good Grips potato peeler

It's a message that has come of age, partially through the realization of the ageing nature of our society and because of the simple, obvious need to design products and services to meet the needs of as large a market as possible.

Inclusive design and rights

Habinteg's approach to inclusive design is rooted in the disability rights movement. Disabled people demanding societal change to enable everyone to fully participate in society. Using what was termed the social model of disability, the focus was how to change society, and in particular the built environment, to remove the barriers that prevented disabled people's participation. Using the model, it was the lack of accessible offices, shops and homes that caused the disability, not a person's individual impairments.

This approach challenged widely held practices that treated disability as an institutional or medical issue for much of the twentieth century in the UK and many other countries.

Perhaps the biggest single shift was in the United States where the 'Americans with Disabilities Act' (ADA) was passed in 1990, the culmination of a decade of disability rights protest linked to both the American civil rights movement and the emergence of vocal disabled war veterans from the Vietnam war. In 1995 the Disability Discrimination Act introduced a rights-based model to UK law: before the Act it was perfectly legal to discriminate against disabled people in many areas of life.

¹ <https://www.oxo.com/OurRoots.aspx>

Inclusive design is now seen as both a rights and design solution to the challenge of demographic change being experienced by all developed countries.

Every four years the Olympics provide a particular yardstick by which to measure progress on successful inclusive design. The practicalities of developing facilities for both the Olympics and Paralympics pose obvious challenges to designers, developers and architects.

It's pleasing to note that the 2012 London Olympics appear to have met those challenges in both the sporting facilities and the surrounding built environment, using the range of access standards developed over the years as the basis for design within the Olympic park, captured in another viewpoint for the Housing LIN by architect, David Bonnet, formerly chair of the Centre for Accessible Environments.² These have now been taken forward by the London Legacy Development Corporation as they seek to develop a whole new community based on those ideals, whilst providing a practical demonstration of what is possible across residential, commercial and public spaces

Inclusive design - The Habinteg experience

Habinteg was formed in 1970 through seed corn funding from the Spastics Society, now Scope. Concerned with the lack of housing opportunities for their disabled children, the founders sought new models of provision. A visionary architect, Alex Moira, started on a journey to identify best practice and unsurprisingly found a model in Stockholm - called Fokus – integrated housing designed for the needs of disabled people alongside other generic housing. He brought the concept back to the UK resulting in Habinteg's first scheme, built in the London borough of Haringey, which mixed 25% homes designed to meet the needs of wheelchair users with 75% general housing built to an early inclusive design standard.

It was this experience that led to the development in the early 1990's of the Lifetime Homes standard - the result of a joint project between the Helen Hamlyn Foundation, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Habinteg. The Lifetime Homes standard is synonymous with inclusive design in housing. The 16 criteria are an approach, a minimum set of requirements that describe key functionality in a dwelling, to meet a wide range of needs for visitors and residents and include features that can be easily adapted in key areas.

Lifetime Homes are all about flexibility and adaptability; they are not 'special', but are thoughtfully and inclusively designed to create and encourage better living environments for everyone. From raising small children to coping with illness or dealing with reduced mobility in later life, Lifetime Homes make the ups and downs of daily living easier to manage.

The development of the Lifetime Homes standard also focused on the needs of a wide range of consumers. Practically, the footprint of a wheelchair matches the profile of a person carrying shopping bags. The need for level access enables baby buggies to be brought into the home; a wider door enables IKEA furniture to actually enter a home without the removal of a window (been there, got the T-shirt).

Current policy issues

The Government's Review of Housing Standards has concluded its final consultation phase with the proposals likely to be implemented early in 2015.

² www.housinglin.org.uk/library/Resources/Housing/Support_materials/Viewpoints/HLIN_Viewpoint_36_Inclusive_Design.pdf

The new proposed national standards for access will entail three different standards, placing accessibility into the Building Regulations for the first time:

1. The existing Part M standard (Category 1)
2. A Lifetime Homes standard (Category 2)
3. A wheelchair standard based on the Wheelchair Housing Design Guide, (Category 3)

However, Category 2 and Category 3 are optional standards with local planning authorities being asked to determine what percentage of housing output should be built to each linked crucially on “financial viability” for developers.

At the same time, the public investment agency for housing, the Homes and Community Agency has been largely prevented from setting design standards for housing with any degree of public investment. While in London, the Greater London Authority continues to implement policy in place since 2004: 100% of new development to be built at least to Lifetime Homes standard, with 10% to be wheelchair accessible. These standards have been applied by developers in London for more than 10 years.

Habinteg, along with many others, have consistently argued that Lifetime Homes should be established as the base level standard for new housing.

Our concern with the proposed policy framework is that, however good the technical standards, their optional nature could cause a reduction in supply of accessible new homes just when we need them the most. Indeed, a recent report³ by Aspire underlined the pressing lack of wheelchair accessible housing, adding to Habinteg’s own 2010 Mind the Step⁴ research. Age UK point out that only 3.4% of homes have at least four recommended access features needed for someone with mobility issues to visit and that with an increasingly ageing society, with more disabled people, this is why they support Lifetime Homes.⁵ Leonard Cheshire Disability point out in their recent report that more than half of disabled people who’ve looked for accessible housing found them hard to find.⁶

Different approaches

As highlighted by a recent Parliamentary Group inquiry report by Demos⁷, much of the current debate on older peoples’ housing focuses on specialist development and, increasingly, ‘downsizing’ as an answer to both the demographic challenges of the ageing population and as part response to the general housing shortage in the UK.⁸

The debate highlights the relatively low percentage of specialist housing for older people in the UK in comparison especially with the US housing market.⁹

³ <http://aspire.org.uk/Data/Sites/1/accessiblehousing2014-aspire.pdf>

⁴ www.habinteg.org.uk/mediaFiles/downloads/98582073/Mind_the_step_onlineversion_pdf.pdf

⁵ www.ageuk.org.uk/Documents/EN-GB/Political/Age%20UK%20ID201813%20Housing%20Later%20Life%20Report%20-%20final.pdf?dtrk=true

⁶ www.leonardcheshire.org/sites/default/files/Hidden%20Housing%20Crisis%20July%202014.pdf

⁷ www.demos.co.uk/publications/theaffordabilityofretirementhousing

⁸ www.housinglin.org.uk/_library/Resources/Housing/OtherOrganisation/Demos_APPG_REPORT.pdf

⁹ www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/sheltered-retirement-housing-full.pdf

House builders have taken up this theme as a way of developing a potentially profitable segment of the market; flexing planning conditions and as a way of arguing against access requirements to be introduced more generally into building standards. Too often this argument has been supported by design professionals with an instinctive distaste for regulation.

In reality, the demographic challenge of an ageing society will fall on the existing stock of homes, dwellings that the social housing sector calls 'general needs'. Indeed, we know that 42% of households in social housing have a resident who was disabled or had a limiting long-term illness compared with a national rate of 17%.¹⁰

And, as has been seen with the recent A&E 'crisis', an ageing society is also placing unprecedented pressure on NHS and social services to manage demand for unplanned hospital admissions, on primary and/or residential care. NHS England's 5 Year Forward View¹¹ places an emphasis on more integrated at home care and support but there is surprisingly little mention of housing in this document. More encouraging is the Health and Housing Memorandum of Understanding and accompanying Action Plan. This recognizes that:

"Integrated health, care and support, and housing solutions could make best use of the budgets across the NHS, local authorities and their partners to achieve improved outcomes for less; for example, drawing on the Better Care Fund to support service transformation".¹²

While this is welcome, as the Better Care Fund includes monies that previously went to fund local authority housing Disabled Facilities Grants, it is crucial that such money finds its way to housing adaptations within an overall framework of understanding of the value of integration as reflected in the above quote. If this doesn't happen, more pressure will be put on housing finances, fewer adaptations will happen and health and social care will feel the negative impact. In my view, to deliver better coordinated care pathways, properties will need to be adapted to meet the changing needs of their occupants - whether that is level access showers, accessible toilets or low threshold doorways - and housing related care and support services that aligned to facilitate better care closer to home.

The vast majority of home occupiers are likely to continue to express a desire to age in their present homes and neighbourhoods. This desire may be challenged positively by better-designed homes, using HAPPI principles¹³, improved understanding of the needs of individuals to plan for ageing and increased capital investment for specifically designed new homes.

Or it may be challenged in a more negative manner; by the extension of the bedroom tax to older households, the promotion of the idea of generational inequality and increasing societal pressure to downsize.

There should be no division between those who want to see an increase in specialist housing development and those, like us, who wish to see inclusive design incorporated into all new housing. It is a false dichotomy to suggest that the two ideas are opposed.

¹⁰ Habinteg (2007) *Housing association guide to disability equality schemes and action plans*.

¹¹ www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/5yfv-web.pdf

¹² www.housinglin.org.uk/_library/Resources/Housing/Support_materials/Other_reports_and_guidance/A_Memorandum_of_Understanding_MoU_to_support_joint_action_on_improving_health_through_the_home.pdf

¹³ www.housinglin.org.uk/_library/Resources/Housing/Support_materials/Other_reports_and_guidance/Housing_our_Ageing_Population_Plan_for_Implementation.pdf

We need both, but for those that believe that this can be dealt with by the rapid growth of a specialized segmented market, let me ask this question: which new housing developments should not be inclusively designed? – those on steeply sloping sites, those intended as “starter” homes or areas with a low level of disability?

Are these the new neighbourhoods where disabled and older people are designed out?

Do we really want to start developing walk up tenement housing as an answer to our housing supply problems?

Building on the foundations of inclusive design in housing

For those of us that understand the vital need for the housing sector to take inclusive design seriously, it can be frustrating to see the resistance in some quarters. As a broad housing sector, we have a poor record of designing for specific needs, homes adapted and changing to market, environmental, consumer and demographic factors.

We need to urge the whole housing sector (and those responsible for the wider built environment) including local authorities, housing associations and private developers to loudly join the growing consensus for inclusive design and Lifetime Homes. Only a collective commitment can help deliver enough homes that are fit for purpose and built to last.

We know that any long-term, strategic approach to tackling the housing crisis must include standards that meet the need of older and disabled people in an ageing population. So a higher accessible default for ALL new homes, not optional standards that value financial viability and profit over people is required now.

As a housing association our message is simple; accessible homes are important in meeting the demands of our current, and most crucially, future tenants. Our colleagues in the social housing sector should reflect on their collective purpose in delivering social value. Providing houses that can be homes for everyone and adapted to meet changing needs should run DNA deep for all social landlords. They must be prepared to stand up and make the case for quality and deliver on these values, particularly when using significant sums of public investment to build new homes.

And finally, as I have highlighted, the housing community has a fundamental role to play in uniting the overlapping landscape of housing, health and social care strategy going forward. Inclusive design in housing just makes sense and it is as important now as it ever has been to make that case. Let’s continue to build on the foundations of inclusive design.

Note

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

About Habinteg

Habinteg is a leading national provider of affordable accessible homes and support services. We champion inclusion by providing sustainable neighbourhoods of Lifetime Homes and wheelchair standard properties for disabled and non-disabled people to share and enjoy. We use our expertise to challenge negative social attitudes, promote the rights of disabled people and improve accessibility standards within housing.

Habinteg
Accessible homes
Independent lives

Since 1970, our thoughtful designs and on-site support have enabled tenants to achieve and sustain independent living. Habinteg has over 3300 homes across 81 local authorities. One in three of our properties are designed specifically for wheelchair users, and the majority of the remaining homes have been built to an accessible or Lifetime Homes Standard.

www.habinteg.org.uk

twitter.com/Habinteg

About the Housing LIN

Previously responsible for managing the Department of Health's Extra Care Housing Fund, the Housing Learning and Improvement Network (LIN) is the leading 'learning lab' for a growing network of housing, health and social care professionals in England and Wales involved in planning, commissioning, designing, funding, building and managing housing, care and support services for older people and vulnerable adults with long term conditions.

For further information about the Housing LIN's comprehensive list of online design resources, including specific pages on HAPPI and Inclusive Design and to participate in our shared learning and service improvement networking opportunities, including 'look and learn' site visits and network meetings in your region, visit: www.housinglin.org.uk

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