



A Progressive Approach to Accessible Housing

This viewpoint looks at how accessible housing is currently designed and delivered and how outcomes might be improved. Its message fits well with the objectives of a cross-industry working group looking at how best to streamline the plethora of housing standards under the leadership of Sir John Harman. It also strikes a chord with the government's recently published Housing Strategy for England, 'Laying the Foundations' (DCLG 2011) and the New National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).

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Executive summary

Increased awareness of the issue of accessible housing has undoubtedly brought progress over the last twenty years, but we still lack a strategic approach to policy and practice which is logical and coordinated. There is concern that Localism could result in further fragmentation - perhaps even lead to a reduction in the supply of accessible housing at the very time that demographic evidence suggests we need it most.

We suggest that a new three tier standard covering a range of need, and based on Part M, Lifetime Homes and the Wheelchair Housing Design Guide, could provide a rationalised approach with the following aims and outcomes:

- **address the needs of an ageing population** by improving quality of life generally and playing a part in reducing the social care needs of older and disabled people
- **improve efficiency** across the industry by replacing, rather than adding to, current guidance, increasing clarity and taking a pragmatic and proportionate approach to need and cost
- **encourage implementation** by avoiding standards which are unclear, impractical, unenforceable or which reduce market appeal
- **assist local authorities** as they prepare for Localism by offering a coordinated range of accessibility benchmarks which they can adopt in varying proportions to suit local need and priorities
- **increase certainty** into the future by establishing a robust framework which is forward looking and adaptable - avoiding the tendency to re-invent the wheel
- **include supporting guidance** about the spatial implications of the three tiers of accessibility; recognising the inter-dependency of these two key issues

Introduction

This paper is prompted by a long-standing commitment to the principles of accessible housing and a desire to learn from recent experience and look at fresh ways of delivering more effective and more affordable solutions. Rather than rigorous evidence based research, it offers informed opinions and suggestions for achieving better outcomes faced with the imperatives of an ageing population and major national spending cuts.

In focussing on accessibility in new housing, we are fully aware that this is only one of the many issues which must be addressed in pursuit of the broad objective of sustainable development. Even a fully accessible home is of only marginal benefit if it is located in a neighbourhood devoid of support services or produces excessive carbon emissions. We return to these issues later, but within and around the home, accessibility – allied with space – is a major determinant of well-being; particularly as we get older or experience disability.

Current political reform also has a bearing on the timing of our initiative. Coalition pledges to reduce the burden of 'Red Tape' and introduce the Localism Bill and the New National Planning Policy Framework creates new risks and opportunities. Individuals and communities, and the local authorities who guide them, will need simple, effective tools and practices to help them establish sensible priorities as they take much greater responsibility for the way in which their new homes are designed, and their villages, towns and cities evolve.

In opening this debate, we have considered a number of inter-related questions which we have used to structure our thinking so far:

- what do we mean by accessible housing?
- is current practice meeting the needs of the population?
- what are the standards and tools available and are they working as well as they might?
- how could things be improved in the context of Localism?

What do we mean by accessible housing?

To some it means a home without steps to the front door, to others, non-slip flooring, raised toilet seats and grab rails - and to housing professionals it means Part M, Lifetime Homes and/or wheelchair housing. Either way there is no single definition. We can only say that some homes are more accessible than others and make this relative judgement more meaningful by defining functional criteria against which performance can be measured. In doing so, we need to refer to a range of mobility characteristics from fully ambulant to full-time wheelchair users.

Is current practice meeting the needs of the population?

The good news is that new housing today is more accessible than at any time in the past, due largely to the work of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and others in relation to the Lifetime Homes concept. Along the way, this led, in 1999 to the extension of Part M of the Building Regulations to cover new homes. But 'post Part M housing' makes up a very small proportion of our total housing stock, and even in terms of meeting current needs, we have a good deal of catching up to do, particularly as Part M reflects only a basic level of accessibility.

So as well as considering the rate at which we should expect to compensate for the current shortfall, we need to address the level, or levels, of accessibility which are appropriate in relation to demographic evidence about our age and mobility. This needs to happen at local rather than national level to address variations in existing stock as well as differing needs arising from local demographic trends.

What are the standards and tools available and are they working as well as they might?

Accessible housing is currently defined by three main documents each with national applicability though not all with mandatory status:

- **Advisory Document Part M of the Building Regulations (AD Part M):** mandatory regulation for all new buildings, including housing; 'owned and managed' by the Department of Communities and Local Government.
- **Lifetime Homes (LTH) :** a 16 point standard 'owned, managed and copyrighted' by Habinteg Housing Association; widely adopted through local planning policy including the London Plan which requires all new homes within the GLA to meet the standard. Also an optional component of the Code for Sustainable Homes.

- **The Wheelchair Housing Design Guide (WHDG):** a comprehensive best practice guide, 'owned and managed' by Habinteg Housing Association; also widely adopted through local planning policy including the London Plan which requires 10% of all new homes within the GLA to have the potential to meet the standard.

Each has reasonably well defined objectives and collectively represents a discernible, though not explicit, hierarchy of accessibility. Across all sectors, most new housing developments need to comply, to a greater or lesser extent, with all three documents. Together, they amount to over 300 pages of advice and requirements - just on the subject of accessible housing. Despite the worthy objectives, it is problematic to industry that they lie in separate documents and operate independently of each other. Each has its own structure and is subject to different revision timetables and enforcement measures, making contradiction and duplication inevitable. Paradoxically, the most onerous standard, the WHDG, is subject to the least consistent enforcement; sometimes none at all. At a practical level, the situation is further complicated by additional local guides, such as the Greenwich Wheelchair Housing Design Guide which is more onerous than the WHDG and has also been adopted by other boroughs in South East London. Crucially, none is supported by the spatial guidance which would help to ensure that enough space is allowed in the early design stages.

For these and other reasons, interpretation and implementation are very variable too; particularly for wheelchair housing. Other concerns about the cost and spatial implications, some inherent illogicality and incompatibility with some popular housing typologies compound the problem and raise numerous questions.

Perhaps the most poignant of these, is whether the 'more accessible' homes actually provide benefit to the people who need them. In the public sector, allocation policies for wheelchair homes, which often involve consultation with occupational therapists, seek to ensure that these homes are let to those who need them most. But needs vary widely and the experience of many providers and designers of social housing is that the process of trying to modify a standardised, though specialised, product to suit the needs of individual households, usually while construction is under way, is invariably fraught and unsatisfactory. Evidence is anecdotal, but it is clear that some tenants end up with more special features than they need or want; others with not enough and many never come to the top of the waiting list.

Similar doubts arise for different reasons in the private sector because, without any official designation, wheelchair housing is sold to any willing and eligible buyer. In reality, the cost of the extra space and extra features in a fully fitted wheelchair home often makes these properties very expensive to build, but very difficult to sell. The same features which have added to the price are those which have reduced the value. Experience suggests that these homes are likely to be beyond the means of most disabled purchasers at the outset, and over time may be modified to the point that they are no longer recognisable or suitable as wheelchair accessible homes anyway. In the absence of any kind of register, no one is able to advise either first-time or future purchasers where to look.

How could things be improved in the context of Localism?

To be effective, any solution must address the issues of wide-ranging need and an ageing population in the context of Localism, financial constraints and waning supply. It must also

be simple, sensible, proportionate and sufficiently robust to outlive political and economic cycles and suggest how things could improve further over time as well as work better now. In order to achieve these aims in practice, it must win the support of the housing industry by being logical and easy to use. Requirements must be lean and practical and recognise the importance of market appeal in promoting an issue in which the market has shown relatively little interest.

In principle, there would seem to be two options – start again or build on what we have. With either option, we have seen that the idea of a single standard for accessibility is fundamentally problematic. Designing all housing for the ‘worst case’ scenario would be simple but not proportionate whereas individually bespoke design would (in theory) be proportionate, but could never be simple! Both are hugely difficult in terms of cost and viability. The solution therefore seems to lie in some sort of benchmarking system which defines different levels of accessibility to suit different levels of need.

Before starting afresh, we ought to consider what we already have. Are there better ways of implementing improved versions of Part M, Lifetime Homes and the Wheelchair Housing Design Guide given that each embodies considerable expertise and has a useful degree of familiarity? Added to which, Lifetime Homes has found new momentum since its 2010 revisions. Individually, each standard could just be simplified and improved, but collectively they have the potential to be much more useful and effective.

The idea which we wish to explore is a consolidated three-tier benchmark for accessibility based on these three existing standards but with a greater bias towards more flexible, ‘care-ready’ provision which anticipates a degree of fine-tuning by individual tenants and purchasers. We suggest that by devising a single structure and presenting each tier as a logical progression of the one before, we could develop a much simpler tool which local authorities could apply to developments in a way which responds to the characteristic of their existing stock and addresses current and predicted demographic need at local level.

The tiers, which might be described as ‘baseline, good practice and best practice’, could also be supported by evidence-based spatial guidance. They would be implemented on a simple quota basis, possibly with incentives. Local authorities could define the percentage of new homes which are required to meet the good practice benchmark (based on LTH) and the percentage required to reach the best practice benchmark (based on the WHDG) – with a view to achieving continual improvement over time. The locally determined quotas could vary by tenure and typology, and be determined on a site by site basis if that was felt to be appropriate. Local authorities might also, for example, require larger developments to include a cluster of lift-served 1-3 bedroom flats, designed in a combination of good and best practice standards, specifically for older people.

The overall aim would be threefold:

- to increase choice by creating a better balance of dwelling types
- to raise the general level of accessibility
- to make it easier for people to move to a more accessible home within the same neighbourhood if they wanted, or needed, to

Without seeking to invent mechanisms that force people into the ‘right home’, we can promote a better fit by improving the housing offer, and keeping a register of what we provide.

As we noted at the start, accessibility, even coupled with space, is only one facet of what makes good, long-lasting housing. Local Authorities will need other tools to cover other issues, and again, useful precedents already exist – in practice, too many rather than too few. Of these many additional standards, Building for Life (which sets bronze, silver and gold standards for place-making and the external environment), and The Code for Sustainable Homes (which sets target levels of 1-6 for sustainable design and construction) are perhaps the most useful role models, and are widely used across sectors.

These documents are also far from perfect, but re-worked and combined with new accessibility benchmarks linked to space within the home, they have the potential to form the basis of a fairly comprehensive design and assessment tool-kit which could be used by housing professionals, local planners and local people to achieve better housing outcomes more efficiently.

The Housing LIN hopes that this Viewpoint will stimulate further thinking amongst policy makers, planners, funders/lenders, regulators, house builders and private and public sector housing developers about how best to design and plan accessible housing for our ageing population. We are interested in hearing your views.

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 ‘knowledge hub’ for a growing network of housing, health and social care professionals in England 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 on-line resources and shared learning and service improvement networking opportunities, including site visits and network meetings in your region, visit www.housinglin.org.uk

The Housing LIN welcomes contributions on a range of issues pertinent to housing with care for older and vulnerable adults. If there is a subject that you feel should be addressed, please contact us.

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