

The needs and aspirations of older people living in general housing

This review - drawing on existing research and discussion with older people and relevant professionals - examined how the needs of older people might affect planning neighbourhoods and individual homes. Originally commissioned to inform the planning of a proposed edge-of-town development in York, the work by Contact Consulting has broader lessons about the circumstances, needs and aspirations of older people. The review found:

- f** Large variations in age, circumstances and aspirations exist within the older population. Most older people do not require specialised housing; their needs are shaped more by lifestyle choices than by frailty.
- f** High levels of owner-occupation among those approaching retirement or recently retired will increase ownership in this group to over 70 per cent. The equity built up through home-ownership is also likely to be of increasing importance to the income of people in retirement.
- f** There has been an implicit assumption that older people will generally stay put or move to sheltered housing. Little attention has been paid to people moving within general housing, for example to a more energy-efficient bungalow. The assumption has also been that the need for space decreases with age. However, for many older people their lifestyles require at least as much space as earlier in their lives.
- f** Older people tend to need easier access to facilities such as post offices and doctor's surgeries than the general community. Older people from black and minority ethnic communities place greater emphasis upon requirements such as closeness to family members or places of worship. For all groups, easy access to social and leisure facilities is likely to enhance independent, active living and combat loneliness.
- f** Feeling safe as they move about their environment is especially important for older people. Whilst fear of crime might exceed the actual incidence, design that addresses the reality will also encourage a more robust approach to the fear.
- f** Most older people will wish to own their own cars for as long as possible. The increasing use of pavement scooters is another element to consider in the planning of roads and pavements.
- f** Older people increasingly expect to participate in decisions affecting the design, development and management of the homes and areas in which they live. There is growing interest in seeing old age as a time for more education and developing interests and activities.

Who are the older people?

The ageing of the population presents a range of challenges to housing providers. It is not just that there will be more older people in coming decades, or that they will represent a significantly higher proportion of the total population; their needs and aspirations will be different too. The large majority will live in general, rather than specialised, housing.

The number of older people within the UK population is increasing, particularly those surviving into advanced old age. This has predominantly been seen as a threat to the future sustainability of health and social care systems and of pension provision. Within the labour market, there is concern that there may be an insufficient supply of younger people to meet the requirements of service industries, most especially those providing care to people in advanced old age, but it is easy for these concerns to grow out of proportion.

The circumstances of individual older people are very varied. The factors that influence individual circumstances include health, income, gender, social integration, work history, child-rearing and caring history, location and housing conditions. Some will be characterised by good health and high levels of independence before some acute health episode leads to sudden decline and death. Others will suffer the steady attrition of chronic health problems that diminish the quality of their life for much of their old age.

There are many more women than men, and this imbalance becomes more pronounced in advanced old age. Some commentators speak of the "feminisation" of old age, pointing out that health, employment and income experiences of women differ from that of most men.

The impact of high levels of owner-occupation among people approaching retirement or recently retired will lift ownership to over 70 per cent. However, the distribution of income is very uneven, with over half the population of older people receiving the lowest 40 per cent of incomes.

The majority of people in early and middle old age live independent and active lives, in which they cope with most difficulties without recourse to outside help. Many live into advanced old age in the same condition. Most, including many who experience symptoms of frailty, make a significant contribution to

their communities in a wide variety of ways.

Whilst concerns for deteriorating health and diminishing functional capacity loom large, over-concentration on these problems can lead to a partial view of the experiences of many older people. For many, old age is characterised by increased opportunities for travel, for study and informal learning, for increased participation in existing hobbies or pursuits, or the development of new interests. The growth of the University of the Third Age and a growing interest in life-long learning is evidence of a desire among older people to see old age as a time of continuing development and not of decline.

The housing circumstances, needs and aspirations of the majority of older people who live in ordinary housing in at least a moderate state of repair, generally as owner-occupiers, has received little coverage in the literature. There is an implicit assumption that their housing options are generally to stay put or to move to sheltered housing. In reality, the options are more varied. Little attention has been paid to people who might choose to move within the general housing stock, for example to trade down or sideways to a more modern, thermally efficient, compact and easily managed house or bungalow.

Neighbourhood and community

The estate agent's mantra that the most important factor in judging a property is "location, location and location" applies with equal force to the housing choices of older people, but their need to be housed within a convenient distance of facilities such as shops, post office, doctor's surgery and so on is generally more important than in the general community.

There are five main ways in which older people may move about the area in which they live: by public transport, private car, bicycle and on foot. The use of pavement scooters is increasing. Most will wish to maintain their own transport for as long as possible, the attractions of car ownership being largely independent of age.

Whilst living with, or close to, other family members may be an aspiration for many older people, research has established that it assumes increased importance within black and minority ethnic communities. Their priorities in choosing a location

were also different: they see access to shops as even more important than their white neighbours. Most older Caribbean, Bangladeshi and Pakistani people also wish to live near a place of worship.

A single locality is unlikely to sustain all the facilities that might be needed to meet demands for social, recreational, educational and cultural activities, but for older people local access will be an important factor in their ability to access and maintain involvement in a range of pursuits.

Local schools can provide a context for educational activities, which may include access to daytime sessions alongside pupils, evening classes provided by adult education services, and groups focused on the life-long learning aspirations of older people. Take-up of craft activities such as pottery and woodwork, artistic activities such as painting, drawing and photography, and IT activities involving use of personal computers and the Internet, are all enhanced if the facilities and support for learning are of a high quality.

Personal fitness is increasingly recognised as a key element in ensuring a healthy old age. Take-up of opportunities to use modern gym equipment, under the supervision of staff qualified to advise on an appropriate fitness regime, has in many places exceeded expectations. Older people are heavily represented in "off-peak" membership schemes for commercial fitness centres.

Feeling safe as they move about their environment is especially important to older people. The fear of crime is an especially strong feature of older people's perceptions of the world in which they live. Design needs to take account of both the reality of risk of the crime and levels of fear of crime. The latter may be much higher than the actual incidence of crime. In the event, the design features that will address the reality will also help encourage a more robust approach to the fear.

Loneliness is a major issue for many older people, especially following bereavement. Whilst the planning of the physical environment cannot of itself prevent loneliness, it can easily exacerbate the problem. Design that brings people into contact with one another as they move about the neighbourhood, that provides convenient places to linger such as benches and shelters, even the provision of works of art that provoke the exchange of comment, can "put

people in the way" of human contact.

The marginalisation of older people within the communities in which they live can be overcome when opportunities are created through which the community can benefit from their skills, knowledge and experience. The Better Government for Older People Programme has demonstrated the enormous resource that exists among older people for influencing policy, evaluating services and ensuring inclusivity.

The home

The accessibility of the main facilities of the home and of the major living areas is a basic requirement for maintaining an independent lifestyle, and yet in many houses it is problematic.

How much space do older people need in their homes? The assumption that has informed design decisions for many years has been that, as age increases, the need for space decreases. One of the main arguments advanced against the early home improvement agencies was that they encouraged older people to under-occupy houses. Older people, it was asserted, should move from a house with three or more bedrooms and two living rooms to something much smaller.

The concept of "under-occupation" may carry weight with housing managers but not generally with older people. Whilst there are examples of people of advanced age who have retreated to occupy a small part of their house, often on the grounds that the remainder is inaccessible or too expensive to heat, these are a minority. For many, their activities and social patterns require at least as much space as lifestyles earlier in their lives. Room may be needed to accommodate hobbies, such as sewing or computing, and for visits from family and friends.

The need for affordable warmth assumes a high priority for older people.

Those considering a move in later life within the general housing stock will have concerns about the financial implications of decisions they make. The home they own represents a major negotiable asset. As attitudes change, from the assumption that the property should be left to children to the acceptance that this asset can be used to meet the needs of those who have amassed it, deploying housing equity to fund choice in old age is expected to increase.

A relatively new requirement for housing is that it

is capable of being "shut down" for periods of time. There are increasing opportunities for older people to spend time away from their homes, on extended childcare or "house sitting" duties, or on prolonged holidays, for instance (and they may have to spend time in hospital).

Conclusions

Fundamental to the understanding of the future housing needs and aspirations of older people is the recognition that they will be diverse. The population of older people is not homogeneous and providers must expect to offer variety to meet a wide range of preferences and circumstances. A concern for increasing levels of frailty has dominated not only the discussion about housing in old age but the entire debate about the ageing of society.

This study found that there are many other issues to be taken into account. Most of the years of old age that will be experienced by the large majority of older people will be shaped more by the lifestyle choices they make than by their future frailty. Room to house their computer and grandchildren, and the ability to close the house up for several weeks, will be as important as level access and ease in the provision of care.

Most of all, older people will increasingly expect to be consulted about the design of housing and housing services, and offered the opportunity to participate in the evaluation of what they receive.

About the project

This review was carried out by Nigel Appleton of Contact Consulting. Contact Consulting specialises in providing research and consultancy services, principally in the area of housing and care for older people but also around the management of housing adaptations and topics in the field of private sector housing.

Planning for the majority: the needs and aspirations of older people in general housing draws upon a desk study of literature from a range of disciplines and of statistical and demographic data. This was supplemented by discussion with older people and relevant professionals.

How to get further information

The full report, **Planning for the majority: The needs and aspirations of older people in general housing** by Nigel J.W. Appleton, is published for the Foundation by YPS (ISBN 1 84263 096 2, price £11.95).

The following *Findings* look at related issues:

- **Older owner-occupiers' perceptions of home-ownership**, Sep 99 (Ref: 939)
- **Home-ownership in old age: financial benefit or burden?**, Sep 99 (Ref: 949)
- **Planning for older people at the health/housing interface**, Apr 00 (Ref: 470)
- **The impact of housing conditions on excess winter deaths**, Nov 01 (Ref: N11)
- **Experiences and expectations of people leaving paid work after 50**, Oct 02 (Ref: 022)