

Alan Jones, RIBA President

Opening Address – Shaping the future housing and care landscape for older people

Ageing in Place Conference

Introduction

First of all, I would like to say thank you very much for the invitation to this conference to talk about the pressing issue of how we house our ageing population.

It's heartening to see such a strong line-up of speakers who I know will bring a valuable variety of experience to the discussion.

At the Royal Institute of British Architects we recognise that changing age demographics are one of the greatest challenges facing the country and the sector over the coming decades.

76% of England's projected 6.6 million population rise by 2041 will be among those age 65 and older.

As architects, I feel that we have an important role in demonstrating how this challenge can be met. The only way to future proof the built environment is to ensure that principles of inclusivity are at the foundation of everything that we design.

That is why as an institute we talk about age-friendly design. It should not just be a question of designing something different to accommodate people who might have different needs. It should instead be a recognition that everything that we build should be suitable for everybody, regardless of age or ability.

Earlier this year the RIBA published a joint report with the Centre for Towns entitled A Home for the Ages: Planning for the Future with Age-friendly Design.

The purpose of this was to bring attention to a topic that is often underrepresented in public discourse on housing.

While I am speaking to a room full of people that understand the importance of this subject, the term 'age-friendly housing' has to date only been mentioned once in the history of the Houses of Parliament. That was by Lord Best who you will be hearing from at this conference later today.

As a sector, we must shout louder about this subject. We are facing a demographic time bomb and there has been a resounding failure within government and the sector to adequately plan for this. The social and economic cost of failing to get to grips with this issue threatens to be disastrous.

The new Government has already announced that it will focus on helping people onto the housing ladder. It is crucial that we in this room work to improve understanding in Westminster as to why this focus is too narrow and highlight a clear path forward for government.

I would like to open the speaking today by breaking this subject down into three parts. **Why** immediate action is required. **What** needs to be built to address unmet need. And **how** the sector and government should go about getting there.

By doing so I hope to set out a blueprint for how to move this important topic up the public agenda.

So Why? Why is this a matter of priority? On the face of it this is a reasonable question. The reality of the current housing environment is one in which resources are limited and there are many other areas that require investment.

Older age groups tend to be more likely to be in stable accommodation. They hold a greater proportion of wealth and are more likely to own their own home.

This has undoubtedly contributed to a housing policy environment which for the best part of a decade, if not longer, has centred on homeownership and meeting the needs of first-time buyers.

The problem with this reasoning is that it misunderstands the wider importance that our homes have on our lives.

A house is not just a roof over our heads, it's where we spend the majority of our time. Where we live, work and socialise. Where we grow up and grow old. In sickness and in health.

The cost of inappropriate housing on health can be substantial. This is particularly the case for older people who are more vulnerable, and also likely to spend increasingly more time in their home.

Assessing the need for more age-friendly housing must therefore begin with a recognition that housing and health are inextricably linked.

In our report, we estimated that the cost to the NHS of older people living in inappropriate housing could reach £1 billion by 2041. The current cost to health and social care combined has been estimated at over £2 billion per year. That's not to mention the social costs of ill health which can reduce confidence and lead to people becoming isolated in their own home.

The case for immediate action is compelling. We are all aware of the headline figures of how our population will age over the coming decades, which will exacerbate the costs of inappropriate housing.

Using data provided by the Centre for Towns on migration trends, we have been able to show exactly how this will impact on different areas in coming years.

Towns and villages will be the places most impacted by demographic changes. The past 40 years has seen a trend in which young people have moved away from these places in favour of large towns and cities.

This means that the working age populations of small towns and villages have declined while their retirement age populations have increased.

Using the same data to predict trends for the next 20 years, we can see that places are set to see their retirement age population increase by as much as 70% as a proportion compared to their working age populations. This is a trend that can be seen across the country, in every region.

Employing strategies at a local level to try and attract a younger demographic are not sufficient responses to this challenge. Rather than trying to change behaviours, places need to begin planning for the actual needs of their future population.

Local authorities are already struggling to meet the increasing costs of social care. For 2018/19 planned spend on adult social care equated to around 38p in every pound spent by councils. This is

not a case of asking local authorities to find savings through efficiency measures but a fundamental issue for the future of local government finance.

Providing the right housing for older people in the right places can help to ease this cost burden. Analysis by Southampton City Council found that 450 housing with care units would provide an annual health cost-benefit of nearly £900,000 per year. These are significant figures that provide an important solution to the question of how we meet funding challenges in the future.

In terms of the What there is a positive story to tell.

In the public imagination, specialist housing for older people often still brings to mind traditional care home models, which for most people are entirely out of sync with how they live their lives.

But the sector has come a long way from this.

There are fantastic examples up and down the country of innovative solutions to meeting housing needs for an older demographic.

Our report highlighted just some of these trying to draw from a broad range of examples.

The excellent bungalows built by Greenwich Council and designed by Bell Phillips Architects.

The innovative approach by Derbyshire County Council and Glancy Nicholls to designing specialist housing for people with dementia.

Through to the HAPPI Award winning later living community in Gloucestershire developed by Pegasus Life with Proctor & Matthews Architects.

A recurring theme within the case studies in the report was how the development relates to the community it is situated within. Even in specialist housing for older people, successful projects find ways of promoting interaction between residents and the local community, crucially maintaining a feeling of privacy and security for occupants.

This has both social and economic benefits. The cost of more severe forms of loneliness on health and social care services for those aged over 65 can be as much as £6,000 per person over a ten-year period. By designing in the right way, we can tackle problems with social isolation.

Location of housing is of course an important part of this but not the only part. For example, providing facilities open to both residents and the public, such as cafes or a library fosters neighbourly interactions and enables people to continue to feel a part of the community. At the same time, they are provided with the peace of mind that where they live can cater for their care needs, even if these change over time or suddenly.

Inclusive design can also maximise the ability of people to continue to contribute to the local economy for longer. The right development in the right place can provide a major boost to the amount spent locally on surrounding businesses but also increase working opportunities for older people in either paid or voluntary employment.

Age UK has previously estimated that the direct economic contribution people aged 65 or over, including paid and voluntary work, amounts to £61 billion per year. In order to allow people to get the most out of the later stages of their life, their home and neighbourhood must facilitate their continued active participation in society. The sad truth is that it's still far too common for existing housing to act as a barrier.

Sadly, design centred approaches to the provision of later living accommodation remain too few and far between.

Polling carried out by ComRes for the RIBA found that a quarter of people over-55 are currently considering moving home, yet half of those people said that they were being prevented by the lack of options in the housing market.

95% of over 65s currently live in mainstream housing. But only 7% of England's housing stock even meets basic requirements that enable most people to visit a home.

The introduction of mandatory higher standards of accessibility in London is welcome, but our research has demonstrated that it is smaller towns and villages that are most in need of accessible housing stock. Uptake of the higher standards has simply not been high enough.

The failure to address this has resulted in costly refurbishments for those people that want to continue living in their homes as they get older. To ensure that homes are future proofed there needs to be a focus on building housing that is adaptable to give people the opportunity to stay in their home if they want to.

Assessments of policies specifically concerned with older people in local plans in England have revealed the continued inadequacy of planning for and monitoring the amount of age-friendly housing being built.

This is a group that has the capital to engage in the housing market, but they are savvy consumers. They will ultimately decide that moving is not worth their while if the options available don't meet their ambitions for the later stages of their life.

Helping these potential movers to find the right home would have important benefits for the rest of the housing market. 3 in 5 of those that are considering moving home are at least partially motivated by the desire to move to smaller home. Providing people with a genuine choice will make available a substantial amount of larger family sized homes.

But to do this, the sector needs to be providing more of all forms of age-friendly homes. Whether it be for renters, buyers or social housing, there needs to be the right options available in all types and tenures.

The sector must also get better at providing homes for people in the middle. Examples highlighted as exemplar projects are often either higher-end housing or social housing, leading to questions over where those that don't fit into either category are supposed to live into their later years.

This is particularly important now that more and more people are finding themselves living in the private rented sector. We are a country used to older people living in secure accommodation,

usually that they own outright. This can no longer be taken for granted and will begin to change over the coming decades.

Comparatively poor conditions and lack of security in the private rented sector will pose an increasing risk as a greater proportion of the older population live in this housing.

In terms of the How, I'm sure this is a subject which we will hear much more on today. But I would like to make a start and suggest some areas of focus.

The Government's commitment to consult on raising the mandatory minimum accessibility standards was very welcome. The sector must now ensure we make our voice heard on this issue so that it does not fall off the political agenda.

From the government we still need clarity on the status of age-friendly housing within the planning and regulatory system. For example, the current use class order creates uncertainty for developers where it should do the opposite.

Local councils must also ensure that sufficient specialised housing for older people is allocated through local plans, including the allocation of specific sites. The sector has a role to play here, in tackling the stigma that providing housing for older people will be a drain on local resources and should be avoided, which still unfortunately exists in some places.

From the sector more broadly we must also continue to look for innovative solutions to meet age-friendly housing demand. There is a desperate need for more architects to be designing and more developers to be building age-friendly housing of all types and tenures. This means more clients that are willing to prioritise delivering these projects, and more willing to put design at the very centre of delivery.

We need to shout louder to make our voice heard about the importance of this issue. With an election looming, it is the time to be engaging with politicians to secure political commitments in manifestos.

There needs to be better engagement with the people that will live in the homes we build to understand what they want from their home and their community as they age. Only by providing attractive and appealing options will the proportion of older people living in specialist housing increase.

As architects, planners, clients, investors and anybody involved in the built environment, we must develop our understanding of how to create functional and beautiful housing with age-friendly principles at the heart.

To summarise I would like to end by saying that I believe that this is a positive story.

The recent report we produced highlighted just a few of the many examples of quality age-friendly housing from both the private and public sector in recent years.

There have been encouraging signs of increases in the number of funders and providers in the private sector focusing on age-friendly housing.

More and more evidence is being published on the economic and social value of specialist housing for older people.

The Government has committed to a social care green paper and has published new planning guidance aimed directly at building housing for older people.

All of this suggests that age-friendly housing is making its way up the public and political agenda.

But there is clearly more to do.

I am a strong believer that it is only by working together in partnership and speaking with a joint voice that we can provide the impetus to bring about the changes needed over the coming decades.

This conference is a fantastic opportunity to learn lessons and share best practice.

I hope today provides you all with an opportunity to identify where provision is already being done well and how to bring that success and replicate it in other areas.

I look forward to seeing the innovative ways in which we as a sector rise to the challenge of meeting our age-friendly housing need in the years to come.

Thank you