



Homes fit for purpose for an ageing population

In this blog Sarah Davis senior policy officer at the Chartered Institute of Housing and member of the Housing & Ageing Alliance, makes the case for develop person centred approaches to making our homes fit for purpose for an ageing population in a time of climate change. She looks at the urgency of improving homes for older people and the different agendas that social landlords must manage to achieve that.

Our homes are under the spotlight currently as rarely before; and right now, the focus is not only on the new homes we need – what these should be like and where – but also firmly on the homes we live in now and will continue to do so, well into the future. There are a lot of different agendas to juggle when it comes to improving existing homes.

- **The condition and quality of our homes is a known factor in health inequalities:** Cold damp homes that are expensive or hard to heat have an impact on our physical and mental health. Whilst this has been recognised in numerous studies over many years, it has been highlighted by the experience of many households, struggling in poor quality homes. Those groups most vulnerable to COVID-19 are often those most likely to live in poor housing; older people, those with existing health problems, people with lower incomes and ethnic minority groups (Centre for Ageing Better, [Homes, Health and COVID-19](#), 2020)
- **Meeting the challenge of climate change:** With 15 per cent of UK emissions coming from our homes, retrofitting existing home will be an important contribution to the goal of achieving a net zero carbon economy by 2050. The Good Homes Inquiry's final report ([Good homes for all: a proposal to fix England's housing](#), 2021) estimates that 26 million homes will require retrofitting in some measure - that equates to 1.6 homes every minute over 30 years (p27).
- **A new Decent Homes Standard?** The existing decent homes standard that has applied across social housing for over 20 years, is currently being reviewed by government, following the commitment made in the social housing white paper. Like the current standard, whilst applying in social housing, it is likely to be the measure by which the decency of homes across all tenures is evaluated. Over four million homes in the private sector, both rental and owner occupied, still fall short of the existing standard, nearly half of which are lived in by someone over 55.
- **Homes fit for us as we age:** About 80 per cent of the homes that will be standing in 2050 are already built. As a society we are living for longer, but our homes are poorly equipped to help us maintain safe and independent lives should we age with mobility restrictions or life limiting conditions. Inaccessible and unadapted homes have an impact not only on daily living but also on increased risk and experience of falls, accidents, and hospitalisation, and therefore stretched health and care services. The pressure and demand for help with adaptations to existing homes is growing; whilst government investment in disabled facilities [grants](#) in 2021/22 was £573 million, there were still around one million households who were not able to access all the adaptations they needed.

Although it is the climate crisis that is bringing a sense of urgency to act, collectively we need to find ways to rise to all these challenges to make our homes fully fit for purpose. That means working with tenants, residents, and owners to design measures with them. It provides the opportunity to align work to retrofit the home, with making necessary adaptations to improve the experience of living there for the householders; something that will be useful to encourage people to sign up to (and, for homeowners, to invest in) the work, particularly where it will be disruptive.

The initial lessons we can all take from social landlords is how best to frame the messages to encourage and incentivise people to understand and prioritise action themselves.

Many social landlords are working hard to understand the needs of their tenants and residents around the climate change agenda, what they understand about it, what their anxieties are and what they really need from the changes.

In the latest Orbit and CIH report into achieving net zero carbon ([Working with customers to make net zero carbon a reality, 2021](#)), a survey of 900 of Orbit's customers revealed that:

- Affordable energy now and in the future was a huge concern; one in four had gone without heating in the last 12 months to save money
- Whilst affordability and comfort were shared top priorities of customers across all the age range (98 per cent), for older people the ease of use of any heating system was also a high priority (97 per cent)

However,

- 40 per cent of those surveyed were aware of the term net zero carbon but weren't clear on exactly what it meant
- 17 per cent had not heard the term.

Getting awareness, understanding and shared sense of the importance of acting is a vital first step, but there is the potential for more.

Social landlords are already working on and planning for further work to achieve net zero; there is the opportunity for collaboration across landlords and councils to look at area-based improvement, and to capture the learning about what systems work, where, and how to use them effectively. All of this will help to inform local communities, homeowners, and private landlords. This real-life evidence and stories of what works makes a huge impact (as demonstrated in TPAS/ Platescapes' [report Residents' voices in the UK's net zero carbon journey](#), 2021) and could give them confidence to take steps to invest in and improve their homes too.

For older people who are homeowners, particularly where they have low incomes and low equity homes, making the right choice to improve their homes, and getting help to navigate how to do the work is critical as getting it wrong is costly and itself damaging to physical and mental wellbeing. It is easy to see how this could also feed into the concept of a Good Homes Agency operating nationally and locally as recommended by the Good Homes Inquiry. Potentially programmes of work by social landlords and councils might also be extended to take in low incomes older owner occupiers, for example on estates with right to buy homes of the same type. The same could be applied should any new Decent Home Standard lead to more work too, and critically ensure that the private sector is not left behind.

Each challenge set out above in itself is daunting, let alone many coming along at the same time. But it is time to think differently about how we can capitalise on the challenges and personalise the approaches to increase chances for older people across all tenures to live in affordable, decent and healthy homes.

This blog is also available on the [CIH website](#).

It is one of a series being produced by members of the [Housing and Ageing Alliance](#), a collective of local and national organisations working together to bring about improvements to the housing and living conditions of older people.