

Aids, adaptations, accessibility and standards

(England)

April 2024

Older people should be able to live in homes that support them to live independently and well with quick and efficient access to aids and adaptations.

Accessibility and adaptations

Accessible housing helps give older people independence, which is key to their broader health, sense of identity and quality of life. The most common major adaptation to an older person's home is the installation of an accessible shower. A recent study showed that the long-term impact of having a shower installed instead of a bath went far beyond the immediate ability to wash safely. The knock-on effect was a sense of confidence which enhanced the participants' ability to undertake other tasks and participate in the wider community.ⁱ

It can also reduce demand for social care, pressure on the NHS and the cost of caring for our ageing population.ⁱⁱ Something as simple as installing a series of grab rails can make the difference between someone continuing to live at home or having to move into a residential home.

There is an extreme shortage of accessible housing in England. 400,000 wheelchair users live in homes that are neither accessible nor adapted and only 19% of homes have step free access.ⁱⁱⁱ At the moment, our new build housing is not helping to address this shortage. In July 2022 the Government announced that it would raise accessibility standards for new build homes, but a necessary consultation on some of the technical details has not yet been issued. In the meantime, more than half of all local plans still make no requirements for any accessible housing.^{iv} Nor is there any requirement to include accessible features in any retrofitting work. The £20bn spent renovating homes in the UK each year does not increase the accessibility of our housing stock.^v

The Disabled Facilities Grant is the funding stream for means tested adaptation grants and in 2021/2022, 67% of local authorities took longer than the recommended six months to make an adaptation through the grant. The longest took over 24 months.^{vi} Getting adaptations can be difficult, particularly in the private rented sector.

Good repair

14% of homeowners over the age of 65 live in a non-decent home, as do 30% of private renters.^{vii} Older people in some areas have better access to funding options, handyman services and home improvement agencies than others.^{viii} Getting improvements in the private rented sector can involve pushing cases through an inefficient system of redress, something

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which is difficult for older, more vulnerable tenants. The proposed introduction of a Housing Ombudsman in the private rented sector would help to address this.

Public Policy Proposals

- The higher accessibility standards of Part M4, Category 2 should be introduced for all new build housing as soon as possible.
- Local authorities should focus on radically improving delivery of the Disabled Facilities Grant, implementing all areas of the guidance, and making proper use of the resources offered by Foundations, the national body for Home Improvement Agencies.
- Targeted information and advice, financial incentives and other measures should be considered to ensure that more renovation work, particularly that undertaken by those likely to age in place, incorporates accessible features which would help older people to live independently if they become less mobile. This should include structural features such as walls strong enough to take a grab rail, stairs wide enough for a stair lift, and also elements of design such as waist height ovens, good lighting and accessible utility controls.
- The Government should consult on the role of housing associations in administering the grant and whether a different funding structure could improve efficiency. They should also bring forward promised consultations on the means test and allocation of funding.
- Home Improvement Agencies should cover the entire country, modelled on the best practice in terms of delivery and use of funding options that we see in some areas.
- Local Authority enforcement teams must be properly resourced so that they can provide proactive, not just reactive, enforcement of social housing standards for older and more vulnerable tenants.
- The Decent Homes Standard should include stronger wording on adaptations and accessibility, with detailed guidance clarifying landlord and tenant obligations, best practice, solutions to common problems and information about funding options.

Want to find out more?

Age UK has agreed policy positions on a wide range of public policy issues. Our policies cover money, health and care, housing and communities, and equalities issues. See <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/policy-research/policy-positions/> for more information.

ⁱ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7654108/>

ⁱⁱ <https://injuryprevention.bmj.com/content/23/1/22.short>

ⁱⁱⁱ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5f044f27e90e075c53dfcf01/2018-19_EHS_Adaptations_and_Accessability_Fact_Sheet.pdf

^{iv} <https://www.habinteg.org.uk/download.cfm?doc=docm93jjm4n2829>

^v <https://probuildermag.co.uk/features/uk-homeowners-spend-21-billion-on-renovations-in-2021>

^{vi} <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1I030rM3Q2c0IAN1kcufHRxyobFFWDopKjEntG9PtcVs/edit#gid=1006971142>

^{vii} <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-housing-survey-2021-to-2022-housing-quality-and-condition>

^{viii} <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-housing-survey-2021-to-2022-housing-quality-and-condition/>
<https://ageing-better.org.uk/news/half-over-50s-who-want-home-renovations-are-unable-afford-them>