

Home Truths

Rebutting 10 myths about building accessible housing



All new homes should be accessible and adaptable

There is a crisis in housing supply. We need to build a lot more housing and there is a growing consensus across the political spectrum that all new homes should be built to accessible and adaptable standards.

This makes sense economically and socially, and would mean many more older people could live active independent lives as they age, and significantly reduce the cost of improving their home if circumstances change.

However, some developers and the bodies that represent them have challenged local authority plans that require more accessible housing. Loopholes in the planning rules could result in a whole new generation of housing that is not fit for the future.

This fact sheet addresses ten common myths about accessible homes that are often used to argue against further progress.

Background

Accessibility standards can increase the adaptability of new homes, leading to a range of benefits. Such standards can include stronger bathroom walls to make it easier to fit grab rails, or stairs designed to make it easier to fit a stair lift if required. In homes with three beds or more, the downstairs WC can be converted to a wet room for showering. This 'accessible adaptable' standard is known as 'Category 2' and sits within Part M Volume One of building regulations and was introduced in October 2015. It is based on the Lifetime Homes Standard which was developed to enable a home to suit the changing needs of a wide range of occupants over its lifetime.

Part M4 (1) Category 1	The legal minimum standard and provides some basic access features	Compulsory
Part M4 (2) Category 2	Known as the accessible adaptable standard	Optional
Part M4 (3) Category 3	Designed to meet the needs of wheelchair users	Optional

Part M(4) Categories 2 and 3 are 'optional', which means they can be set down in a local plan if there is sufficient evidence of local need and the overall plan remains 'financially viable'. Once established in a plan, development permissions should include conditions detailing the proportion of Category 2 or Category 3 homes that need to be provided within any given development.

A number of local plans have been challenged by developers, who assert that the local authorities have failed to demonstrate the need for Category 2 or 3 homes. This causes substantial delays and there is widespread concern that the new homes being built, where such objections are successful, will be inappropriate for the needs of our growing older population.

Several parliamentary and non-governmental bodies have considered the evidence¹ over the past five years. All agree that Category 2 should be a minimum standard and that we also need to make sure we build an adequate number of wheelchair accessible homes.

What are Age UK and Habinteg calling for?

- We want **regulation to ensure all new homes are built to accessible, adaptable standards (Category 2) as a minimum** so that it is easier for older and disabled people to remain independent for as long as they wish and to have adequate choice in the housing market.
- We also want **10 per cent of new homes to be built to wheelchair accessible standards** to make up for a shortage of homes built for the specific needs of wheelchair users.
- In the interim **the Government needs to amend planning regulations to protect the discretion of local authorities to decide the number of accessible homes built in their area.** Unless the Government provides this guarantee very few accessible homes are likely to be built.

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Busting ten myths about building accessible homes

Myth 1. ‘Current building standards go far enough – we don’t need all new homes to be more accessible.’

Wrong!

- There is a massive shortfall in accessible homes. Only 7 per cent of our housing stock meets basic accessibility standards – such as a level entrance.² Many existing homes are difficult and expensive (or simply impossible) to adapt to changing requirements. We must ensure new homes don’t fall into this trap and let down future generations.
- Category 1 homes are not guaranteed to offer sufficient accessibility and adaptability to meet future needs. For example, toilets can be very small and difficult to use, even if they are on the entrance level. Increasing rates of disability and our ageing population, mean many more people will need to adapt their homes in order to be independent – so maximising the accessibility and adaptability from the outset makes economic sense.
- Without improvements, more older and disabled people will have difficulty getting in and out and around their houses and be more likely to have falls. This will put increased demands on our already stretched health and care services as well as seriously undermining older people’s health and independence.

Myth 2. ‘Accessible adaptable homes look different so they are unattractive to homebuyers.’

No!

- The Lifetime Homes principles delivered in Category 2 make it easier and cheaper to adapt a home if someone’s circumstances change, whatever their age. It is about walls that are strong enough to install hand rails or stairs that easily take a stair lift when needed, and corridors

and door ways that make life easier and less hazardous for people with sticks or walking frames. These are all unobtrusive features that make it less problematic to adapt the home if needed to help someone get around it.

- The requirement for an accessible bathroom is popular. In a recent survey³ a third of people said they would be more likely to consider a property if it was easier to use the bathroom and they had step free access through the front door.
- Designs for accessible homes can require some additional space. But many households welcome a bit more space regardless of their stage of life. For example, wider corridors and doorways are useful for getting in and out with pushchairs and shopping. A bathroom with more manoeuvring space is great for families with young children.
- We should not oppose home design that offers reasonable and necessary additional space especially given that according to the Royal Institute of British Architects the UK has some of the poorest space standards in Western Europe.⁴

Myth 3. ‘People may not want to buy accessible housing.’

Most people recognise the need to build better.

- A recent survey by the Centre for Ageing Better found that ‘72 per cent of UK adults think all new homes should be built to be suitable for all ages and abilities’. They also found that ‘48 per cent don’t think society does enough to enable people to live independently and safely at home as they grow older.’⁵
- Greater insight is needed about consumer attitudes and more should be done by government and the industry to promote the benefits of accessible adaptable Category 2 homes.

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- While welcoming some of the beneficial features such as space and light, many consumers are unfamiliar with the idea of the ‘lifetime’ homes and the full range of advantages offered by the Category 2 standard. Improvements in the quality of homes at a relatively low cost are unlikely to deter them, especially if they know the many potential benefits to them and their family.
 - Understandably most of us don’t think about accessibility unless we become less mobile – which can happen at any age. So more information for the consumer is vital.

Myth 4. ‘Isn’t it a lot more expensive to build to Category 2 standard?’

No it isn’t!

- Additional building and space costs are relatively low. A report commissioned by the Government estimated that on average a three bedroom semi-detached house would cost an extra £521 to build to the Lifetime Homes Standard itself, with a further space cost of £866 – an overall total of £1,387 per dwelling.⁶ This is a very small percentage of the price of a home on the market.
- We need to compare this extra cost with what we (the public) will need to spend as the result of inaccessible homes over the longer term. This includes the cost of trips and falls at home, and pressures on the NHS and social services for those unable to continue living independently.



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Myth 5. ‘Surely “starter homes” should not need to be built to an accessible standard?’

You don’t know who will live there in the future.

- The concept of a ‘lifetime home’ recognises the possibility of our circumstances changing over time and that the accessibility and adaptability of our home can be critical. This is true for individual households but it is also true for the dwelling itself and the needs of the different households that will live in it during its lifetime.
- First time buyers should be able to expect housing built to a high standard at a reasonable cost. Over the years homes originally designed for first time buyers will be passed on to others. A new build home should last several hundred years.
- Regardless of whether you are a young first time buyer or an older person seeking to ‘right size’, quality and usability are critical – so having real choices when it’s time to move will benefit all aspects of the housing market.

Myth 6. ‘There are too many building standards and developers can’t be expected to conform to them all in every building.’

They should. The full range of building standards are necessary to provide safe, decent housing into the future.

- All housing needs to meet safety standards. Other aspects like energy conservation and flood resistance are also important. Accessibility is equally important for the future usability of every newly built home.

Myth 7. ‘Is building accessible homes sometimes just impractical?’

Very rarely.

- Since 2004 London has implemented the Lifetime Homes Standard (now updated to Category 2) as the minimum standard for all new homes with cross-party support. This shows the construction industry is perfectly able to build homes economically to a higher accessible standard. There is no reason this couldn't happen outside London.
- Physical challenges such as very steep slopes or where homes are being developed over shops may mean some features promoting accessibility are harder to deliver. If national policy were set to make Category 2 the default minimum standard we would expect enough flexibility to allow developers to make the case to reduce the accessibility features in a particular development where they are proven impossible to meet.

Myth 8. ‘Wouldn't forcing some companies in some areas to meet accessible housing standards put them at a competitive disadvantage or reduce the rate of building?’

Not if the Government made Category 2 the default standard for all new housing.

- It may be true that having different baseline standards for accessibility in different places can create a competitive disadvantage. That's why we need a level playing field created by making Category 2 (based on Lifetime Homes) the default standard for all new build homes, with a suitable proportion required to meet the Category 3 wheelchair housing standard.



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Myth 9. ‘Shouldn't the Government subsidise the developers to build more Category 2 homes?’

No need – if it's an industry standard then the marketplace will adjust accordingly.

- The long-term social and economic benefits of building accessible homes are clear to everyone, including those working in the construction industry.
- The Local Government Association claim that homes built today would theoretically need to last for 2,000 years at the current rate of housebuilding.⁷ It's becoming increasingly important to consider how spending on new homes today will equip them to cope with future challenges, including an ageing population as well as flooding and extreme weather.

Myth 10. ‘Wouldn't it be better to build more retirement housing rather than making all new homes accessible?’

Only a tiny minority of older people live in retirement housing. We need accessible general needs housing even more.

- The overwhelming majority of older households (96 per cent)⁸ live in ordinary housing and this is unlikely to change dramatically in the future.
- Some older people do choose specialist retirement housing. But this sector still represents only around 2.6 per cent of the overall housing stock across the UK.⁹ Even if we doubled the number of retirement schemes being built it would still represent a tiny minority of homes.
- Over the lifespan of a home it will be expected to accommodate many different people with different requirements. It makes sense to ensure that all new homes are accessible, flexible and adaptable regardless of whether they are initially built for first time buyers or any other group.

References

- ¹ Housing for older people: Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee report Feb 2018. 'Building for Equality: Disability and the Built Environment: Women and Equalities Committee April 2017; Housing and Disabled People, Britain's Hidden Crisis: Equalities and Human Rights Commission 2018
- ² 'In 2014, just 7% (1.7 million) of homes in England had all four accessibility features that provide visitability: level access to the entrance, a flush threshold, sufficiently wide doorsets and circulation space, and a toilet at entrance level. English Housing Survey' (2015)
- ³ The Hidden Housing Market. Habinteg Housing Association and the Papworth Trust (2015). Available online at: www.habinteg.org.uk/reports-and-briefings/the-hidden-housing-market--1043
- ⁴ The Case for Space. RIBA (2011) Available online at: www.architecture.com/-/media/gathercontent/space-standards-for-homes/additional-documents/ribacaseforspace2011pdf.pdf
- ⁵ News release. Centre for Ageing Better. (Feb 2019) Available online at: www.ageing-better.org.uk/news/accessible-housing-crisis-poll-shows-brits-want-suitable-homes
- ⁶ Housing Standards Review Cost Impacts September (DCLG 2014). Available online at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/353387/021c_Cost_Report_11th_Sept_2014_FINAL.pdf
- ⁷ www.local.gov.uk/about/news/confidence-new-builds-falls-average-house-england-will-have-last-2000-years
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