



Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission

Age UK response to the inquiry

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ABOUT AGE UK

Age UK is a national charity that works with a network of partners, including Age Scotland, Age Cymru, Age NI and local Age UKs across England, to help everyone make the most of later life, whatever their circumstances.

In the UK, the Charity helps more than seven million older people each year by providing advice and support. It also researches and campaigns on the issues that matter most to older people. Its work focuses on ensuring that older people: have enough money; enjoy life and feel well; receive high quality health and care; are comfortable, safe and secure at home; and feel valued and able to participate

ABOUT THE COMMISSION

The commission is an independent body that will advise government on how to promote and increase the use of high-quality design for new build homes and neighbourhoods. It will be responsible for developing practical measures that will help ensure new housing developments meet the needs and expectations of communities, making them more likely to be welcomed, rather than resisted, by existing communities.¹

OUR RESPONSE

1. Do you consider that securing 'beauty' should be a broad objective of the planning and development process - whether in the natural or built environment?

Yes - but as long as the definition of 'beauty' encompasses an inclusive and accessible approach to design to meet the needs of an ageing population. There has already been a great deal of thinking on accessible attractive design for both housing and the built environment. This seeks to combine functionality with aesthetic considerations that appeal to all generations.

2. Can you provide evidence of the best ways of creating homes and communities that have achieved a) sustainable and walkable densities b) high levels of public support c) high levels of well-being and d) environmental sustainability?

The World Health Organisation (WHO) have identified many international examples of age friendly cities and neighbourhoods that meet these criteria – taking an intergeneration 'age proofing' approach to the design of homes and communities.

More recently the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) have funded a number of 'Healthy New Town' pilots to demonstrate how the design of homes and communities can boost health and wellbeing whilst reducing pressure on the NHS. The extent to which the design of homes and places improves health and wellbeing should be part of the definition of 'beauty' used by the Commission.

We would expect the Commission to review the wealth of material developed by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (now part of the Design Council) bringing together attractive design and accessible homes and places, rather than reinventing the wheel.

3. Can you provide evidence of ways of creating homes and communities in other countries, which have been successful?

A series of reports by the Housing our Ageing Population Panel for Innovation (HAPPI) have reviewed the design of specialist retirement housing most likely to appeal to older people based on examples across Europe.

A similar study was carried out by Sheffield University in their report 'Designing with Downsizers'. Both approaches recognise the need to combine aesthetic values with functionality to build attractive accessible housing for older people seeking to 'right size'. Beautiful and functional housing that encourages 'rightsizing' is something the Commission should consider.

4. Do you consider that collaborative community and stakeholder engagement processes (such as planning for real, enquiry by design, charettes) are effective in securing more publicly accepted development? If so, at what stage of the planning and development process are they most effectively used?

There is huge value in engaging with older people at all the stages in the planning and development process with the aim of designing beautiful homes that appeal to all generations.

In the past we have seen good examples of this such as the 'Home for Life' initiative in Newcastle – which gave older people the chance to discuss and promote inclusive home design. We would expect the Commission to engage in a similar exercise involving a representative cross-sector of older people to allow them to influence definitions of 'beauty' and accessible home design.

5. Can you provide evidence on the benefits and problems associated with introducing, and enforcing, design methods such as master-plans, design briefs and design codes, in the creation of homes and communities?

An important consideration is the fundamental standards contained in the Building Regulations. Age UK and others have argued that optional Part M4 (2) Category 2 (based on the lifetime homes standard) should be universally applied to all new homes. Age UK and Habinteg have produced a leaflet – Home Truths – which demonstrates that building to these standards adds little to the cost whilst ensuring that new housing is fit to accommodate the future population – families and people who develop disabilities as well as older people. Improved space standards and access to green spaces also contribute to beautiful homes and places – although these considerations are obviously tied to broader issues related to planning and land use.

6. How ideally, could the planning and development process in England foster higher standards in design, over the long term?

The Government must end 'permitted development' and other loopholes that result in the supply of substandard unappealing homes. Although there is growing pressure to increase housing supply this should not be at the expense of meeting basic accessibility standards that should be the foundation for good housing design and beautiful homes.

There also needs to be sufficient funding for social housing to avoid inequalities in the quality of design according to tenure. Suggested reforms to the regulatory framework to improve the quality and accessibility of homes have been set out in reports by the Women and Equalities Select Committee, the EHRC and the APPG healthy homes and buildings. We would urge that the Commission to examine the recommendations of these groups to provide a solid foundation for its work.

7. What first steps do you think the Government should take towards fostering higher standards in design through the planning and development process?

The Government needs to issue its promised guidance on housing for older and disabled people as part of its obligations under the Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017. Ensuring that all local authorities have a housing strategy for older and disabled people is fundamental to increasing the supply of homes that balance functionality with aesthetic considerations that work for all generations.

ⁱ Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/building-better-building-beautiful-commission>