

Age Friendly Communities in the North

The ageing population is being described as one of the most significant challenges of the 21st century, and probably the single greatest challenge facing Housing, Social Care and Health organisations over the next generation. The Government has responded to calls for more integrated policy by placing older peoples' issues at the top of their agenda, and has set the housing sector some challenging targets to be delivered over the next 5 years:

- housing that supports healthy, active and independent living
- more mainstream and specialist housing for older people of the right type and the right location
- new housing planned and built to Lifetime Home standard by 2013
- housing and neighbourhoods which are more inclusive, attractive and sustainable
- new communities built to be Lifetime Neighbourhoods

At the same time, developments in design and technology are moving forward rapidly, so whilst there are a number of challenges, we felt it was an appropriate juncture to stimulate discussion and debate to raise awareness of the issues and to enable us to find out more about the approaches being taken and some of the challenges and barriers in getting there.

The Northern Housing Consortium (NHC) is now mid-way through a 2 year multi-disciplinary research project. We have consulted with older and younger people on the key features of an age friendly home, neighbourhood or service. We are putting that together with an understanding of what is happening in the policy world; innovation from around the globe; and knowledge of what the demographics are telling us, to build a holistic picture of what an Age Friendly Community in the North might look like in the year 2020 and beyond...

The Scale of the Challenge

There are now more pensioners than children. At a national level, older households make up almost a third of total households. And the majority (70%) own their own home, with only 5% in sheltered or care homes. Nationally, 49% of household growth to 2026 will be over 65's and the North East has the highest projected increase, with 65% of household growth to 2026 comprising households over 65. When we look more closely at which groups are growing fastest, we find that it is not the 'young old' of 60+, or the 'oldest old' of 100+, but the 'middle old' i.e. 85-100. Each of those groups represent radically different phases of life, with people losing different functions at different rates, and in different ways. The problems arise when our policies and our attitudes don't take this diversity into account. We can no longer regard the old as marginal, invisible or even as one category.

In the last century, life expectancy has doubled, as mortality rates from infections, heart disease and stroke have been slashed. And yet, despite this progress, the three Northern regions still have the lowest life expectancy in England. As we live longer, evidence suggests that we will be much more likely to live in ill health in 'older' old age. According to the ONS, life expectancy in the UK increased by 2.2. years in the last decade, but healthy life expectancy only increased by 0.6 years. In other words, our years of ill health have in fact increased by 1.6 years. These changes will have a significant impact on independence as we spend more time in our homes, and the mismatch between the designed world and our capabilities becomes greater.

It all sounds so pessimistic! We focus on the 'demographic time bomb' and 'looming pensions crisis' but it's not all doom and gloom when we consider the vast contribution that older people make not only to the economy in terms of spending, but also to society, in terms of the time spent volunteering and providing care. And, researchers (Demos) predict that the baby boomers and the generations that follow will revolutionise what it means to be old, because, having grown up in a consumerist society, their attitudes are so different to those of their parents. According to market research, they are more likely to be savvy, demanding and imaginative consumers of both products and services; seeking out information for themselves, and refusing to be defined by their age group. They will be prepared to shop around to find the best service, and will expect flexibility from providers to reflect their needs. And it is these trends that will fuel radical changes in expectations and challenge common assumptions

about how homes, neighbourhoods and services are designed. It will also mean that the public, private and voluntary sectors will need to adapt to take advantage of these challenges.

A Design for Life

Inclusive design must become part of mainstream thought in designing every aspect of our environment. We need to ask fundamental questions about the design faults of our most familiar and important home products. Our brightest designers should be challenging the everyday: stairs, chairs, baths, beds - everything - including the kitchen sink! We have seen an inclusive design revolution by simply adding wheels on suitcases. Once business wakes up to the massive and expanding market for inclusive design, then it will become the standard that everyone demands. The principles of inclusive design can be applied to housing and to neighbourhoods...we just need to think imaginatively and laterally about the full range of opportunities to make the step change that is required.

As well as learning from the private sector, we have been looking to our international neighbours for inspiration. Across the Atlantic, Canada is one of the most forward-thinking countries on ageing and is addressing the challenges through developments that not only offer good quality housing, but also good quality of place. Looking in the opposite direction, Japan is leading the way on technological developments that transform the ageing experience. Businesses are rolling out everything from easy access cars and automatic washing/drying toilets, to robots that dispense drugs and provide interaction to reduce dementia-related cognitive decline.

Wakamaru, Japanese Domestic Robot, in February 2003 Mitsubishi Heavy Industries unveiled the prototype of a humanoid robot called Wakamaru, which it is developing for elderly people and others living alone. The Wakamura's features include:

- use of a sensor to calculate the distance between itself and people and objects
- when the power runs low, it returns to the recharging unit on its own
- capable of recognizing the faces of up to 10 different people
- the ability to make simple everyday conversation
- the ability to contact family members living elsewhere when the owner's activity is out of the ordinary, such as the person spending a very long time in the bath or not responding when spoken to
- The ability to alert the owner by phone or e-mail if it detects a loud noise or senses a moving object whilst the owner is away.

Over the next 10 to 15 years, a technology consortium in Japan (known as CIRT) aims to help develop robots that will, amongst other things:

- assist the elderly with housework
- serve as personal transportation capable of replacing the automobile
- be capable of tidying up rooms, making beds, lifting/carrying older people and can arrange products on supermarket shelves, fold laundry and perform heavy-duty cleaning.

Telehealth Intelligent Toilet, Japan integrates telehealth devices into everyday objects. This has been jointly developed by Daiwa House Industry Co Ltd. and Toto Ltd. The toilet can measure the user's blood pressure, weight, body fat, and urine sugar level. While the user sits on the toilet, one of the devices gauges the urine sugar level, and another device built into a counter beside the toilet bowl measures blood pressure. After the user gets off the toilet, a scale built into the floor measures their weight, whilst body fat is measured by a device built into the sink basin after the user washes their hands. The data can be stored on a personal computer and software can then use the data to create graphs showing monthly and annual changes, and even offer advice on ways to improve the user's lifestyle. Incorporating convenience into the preventative benefits of telehealth devices could encourage the wider use of devices; it could be an answer to the problem of where to store equipment and the issue of the equipment looking too 'clinical'.

Car makers in Japan are focusing on how to make the driving experience age friendly.

Age simulation Suit, Nissan, Japan

By wearing the suit, a 25 year old engineer can get an insight into what it must be like for someone forty or fifty years his senior. The suit limits physical movement of the limbs by using joint stiffeners in the neck, back, stomach and knees to simulate the reduced flexion from conditions such as arthritis. The suit mimics both the change in body shape and the difficulty in getting into and out of cars often associated with ageing. Special goggles are worn to simulate visual impairments, such as cataracts.

Age Friendly Car, Toyota has teamed with the creator of Nintendo's "Brain Age" - Professor Ryuta Kawashima - to develop technology to make its cars safer for older people. Features are being developed such as:

- systems that can determine driving patterns and even stop potentially dangerous activities
- a system to slow the car if it detects that the gas pedal was pressed accidentally
- a navigation and climate control system that can help keep the driver awake and alert

Germany are leading the way on developing age friendly supermarkets.

Kaiser supermarket has features such as:

- better lighting, wider aisles, non slip floor, larger price labels and smaller packages
- shopping trolleys redesigned to be lighter and stronger, and equipped with drop down seats that can be used for a quick rest
- magnifying glasses on chains hanging from shelves and trolleys
- red 'help' buttons located throughout the store.
- a relaxation zone with comfortable chairs

Tesco – who hope to open the UK's first pensioner-friendly store - sent a group of over-65s to visit the Kaiser supermarket in Berlin. They will report back to Tesco bosses before a decision is taken on the proposed 60,000sq ft store in Newcastle, on the site of the city's General Hospital – next door to Newcastle University's Institute for Ageing and Health...

As a membership organisation, we are conscious that our members are working within the context of diminishing resources; shrinking capacity in the care system; un-ring fencing of existing budgets; issues around the need to tackle unfit stock; difficult decisions around decommissioning services to be able to provide more choice...and, not least, the economic downturn.

Whilst we cannot let this freeze the debate, these are some of the very real challenges that housing organisations are telling us they are facing so far.

A Northern Perspective

So what will an Age Friendly Community in the North look like? We have selected some key partners to work with us on this project, including design champions from local authorities across the three Northern regions; Northern Architecture to assist us with the visioning work, and, of course, our members. We know that high quality engagement with communities is critical to the success of the project, and have been carrying out a series of consultations with over 400 older people across the North. We will work with a range of local participants to help them articulate their dreams and aspirations for their local neighbourhood in 2020.

The NHC's aim is:

- To explore visions and aspirations, and ideas of diversity, through a series of walks and visual materials.
- To illustrate how an Age-Friendly Community can be achieved incrementally - what improvements can be made to local areas over the period of time up to 2020 and how can 'visions' for a healthy, convivial and secure place be achieved?
- To distribute project work to promote and encourage realistic solutions for our members to work towards creating an Age Friendly Community in the North by 2020.

For further information on the Northern Consortium's 'Age Friendly Communities Project' or to receive a copy of the Early Findings Report, contact Sarah Taylor, Policy Development Manager on 0191 5661000, or email enquiries@northern-consortium.org.uk

Ends

Notes to editors

1. The Northern Housing Consortium is a non-political, not for profit, member based organisation, whose members between them manage almost 90% of social housing in the North. Our main roles are:
 - To provide a comprehensive range of timely, relevant and affordable services for members with a distinct focus on Northern issues
 - To take a lead role in enabling the improvement of housing and organisational performance in the North
 - To work with Government and other bodies to ensure the region benefits from the resources and funding available to provide safe, vibrant, sustainable communities

Our provision of support is delivered across four themed areas: Quality of Life, Quality of Place, Performance Improvement and Investment & Resources.

Further information can be found on our website at www.northern-consortium.org.uk