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## **How can social housing meet real needs of older people?**

**Age-friendly housing is a big challenge for the UK residential sector – but the development of a Manchester co-housing scheme shows how older people can have meaningful input into new communities**

**Mark Hammond and Niamh Kavanagh**

Tags: Cities and placemaking, Housing, Projects and people, Planning & development, Property finance & investment, Residential

**Like much of the developed world, the UK has an ageing society. The growing number of older people living in the UK has significant and widespread implications for the housing sector, including increased need for new and existing homes to be more accessible homes, and changing lifestyle aspirations that are not met with our current housing stock. Yet for some time older people have been largely peripheral to debates on improving housing supply.**

There has been no national strategy for older people's housing since Lifetime Homes, Lifetime Neighbourhoods, launched by Brown's Labour Government in 2008, was formally discontinued in the [2012 Housing standards review](#). This is surprising considering that [29% of UK households](#) include at least one person more than 65, and several studies have suggested high levels of unmet need among older people in the national housing market.

**Market misunderstands older constituency**

A challenge we face in the housing sector is that older people are often underrepresented in mainstream housing planning.

It is common for strategic regeneration frameworks and housing strategies to refer to first-time buyers, young families and professionals. Where older people are mentioned, though, it is often only in reference to extra-care housing – an attractive typology for some, but one that is problematic for many others who don't wish to live in age-segregated housing.

There is also investment in the middle and upper-middle market of retirement communities, particularly in the south of England. In these areas, many older people can command higher prices for their homes, allowing them to afford moves to retirement communities offering hotel-like levels of service provision, often with high monthly service charges to match.

Again, there is no denying a market for such housing; but it is important to recognise the diverse situations and motives that influence older people's experience of housing in later life.

### **Statistics debunk generational myths**

As a society we have created a narrative around an affluent baby boomer generation with the financial means to control their housing futures. However, this is not a universal experience. Among older people, the cumulative effects of inequality and disadvantage across different stages of their lives compound as they age, leading to significant differences in life experience.

Life expectancy varies between the richest and poorest neighbourhoods in the [UK by 23 years](#), while on average people living in more deprived areas can expect to spend twice as much of their life living in poor health.

Across the older population, other recent trends that prevent or drive people to move home in later life include:

- [increased levels of divorce](#) in later life
- greater [job insecurity](#) leading to changes in housing situations
- a significant number of [older LGBTQ+ people](#) facing systemic challenges entering the housing market
- More adult children who remain or return to their ageing parents homes, with [4.8m people adults \(18+\) in the UK](#) now living in their parents household

Together, these disrupt any simplistic ideas we might have around downsizing in later life. Achieving genuinely age-friendly housing requires planners, developers and designers to adopt a more sophisticated and inclusive understanding of the older people who might live in the places we create.

### **Age-friendly homes should adapt to diverse needs**

The [World Health Organization](#) (WHO) developed the concept of age-friendly cities in 2007 to ensure that homes, neighbourhoods and cities improve the well-being of older people by promoting inclusivity and interdependency.

The concept is grounded in the understanding that older people should have a determining influence on the places and societies in which they live, with more than 1,500 cities and municipalities globally adopting the model.

An important quality that underpins all age-friendly housing is that it adapts to the older people living there, not the other way round. It values older people as citizens with diverse tastes, desires, dispositions and identities, and allows them to express these in their day-to-day lives. This approach means as a minimum promoting the physical accessibility of homes, but also responding to factors that might exclude older people on financial, social or cultural grounds.

If we recognise the diversity of our older population's needs and aspirations, age-friendly housing can include specialist models, however, these models are not in themselves age-friendly if they are not provided in a way that allows interdependence, belonging and sociability to emerge. Specialist older people's housing in the UK can be seen as a spectrum, offering a range of choices depending on the level of care needs residents might have. These include:

- Retirement communities - age-restricted homes, often with communal facilities on site, but which don't offer on-site care support.
- Integrated Retirement Communities, sometimes called Extra Care or housing with care – self-contained homes with communal social spaces, but with optional on-site care support available 24 hour.
- Care homes, sometimes called nursing homes – communal living with higher levels of care and support, where residents occupying a bedroom and ensuite rather than having their own self-contained dwelling.

Recent examples such as [Appleby Blue](#) and the 2023 Stirling Prize-winning [John Morden Centre](#) exemplify the high standard of age-friendly specialist housing we are now seeing from some developers, as well as the diversity of options starting to become available in the UK.

### **Collaboration can enable suitable mainstream housing**

Equally, mainstream housing can and should aspire to create a good environment for older people, recognising the overwhelming desire among this demographic to live in mixed communities and the wider damage that age segregation in cities can cause.

Ensuring that mainstream housing is age-friendly doesn't require extra investment; but it might require developers and designers to consider older people's needs more carefully, or preferably collaborate with them directly to ensure these are better understood.

This could encompass everything from the way a development is marketed through to the kitchen ironmongery. The recent [Framework for creating age-friendly developments in Greater Manchester, 2021–2024](#), developed by the GM Ageing Hub at Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA), includes a series of points that might help any developer or designer interested in this agenda.

This notion of self-expression and self-actualisation is certainly the backbone of the high-end retirement communities we see, which heavily promote the active and sociable lifestyle that they can enable.

However, these opportunities should underpin our ambitions across all price points, including the social rented sector. Research conducted for the '[Co-creating age-friendly social housing](#)' project, also in Greater Manchester, shows how this can be done.

### **[subheading] Trust looks to co-housing to support older residents**

The project, established in 2022 using a research grant from the [Dunhill Medical Trust](#), investigates different ways that housing associations can collaborate with older people to enable them to age well in the places they already live.

For the Co-creating age-friendly social housing project, Manchester School of Architecture, Manchester Metropolitan University and University of Manchester have partnered with GMCA and three housing associations in Greater Manchester to pilot a series of innovative models

informed by the WHO approach, which argues that older people themselves need to be at the centre of making decisions that affect their quality of life.

One of the three pilot initiatives focuses on developing and establishing a socially rented co-housing community in collaboration with older tenants in south Manchester with the Southway Housing Trust.

The trust was established in 2007 following a stock transfer from Manchester City Council, and today it owns and manages around 6,000 homes, primarily across four neighbourhoods in the south of the city. In 2011, recognising that its tenant base was projected to skew older in the coming years, Southway began developing a specific workstream to create age-friendly neighbourhoods.

Alongside improvements to streets and green spaces and a long-term programme aiming to improve social participation, the trust proactively expanded its housing stock for older people, including new extra-care developments and shared-ownership retirement apartments.

Acknowledging the wide range of aspirations and needs that older tenants had, the trust continued to seek opportunities to diversify its housing offer to such tenants, and in 2018 began work with Manchester School of Architecture to explore the potential for creating an age-friendly co-housing scheme.

Co-housing consists of private dwellings that are complemented by shared social spaces where residents collaborate to create a community that promotes social interaction. While the model is growing in popularity and addresses the characteristics of an age-friendly approach to housing, most co-housing communities in the UK are not available to social tenants. Instead, it operates on a resident-led model, relying on owner-occupiers selling their homes to fund development costs.

Southway was keen to challenge this approach and understand how older social tenants could lead the development of new co-housing communities, and what processes groups might need to go through to achieve this.

### **Community engaged to develop vision for project**

In December last year, Southway began a communications campaign to inform older tenants about co-housing and invite them to join the project.

There were 23 tenants who responded to this call, with eight forming a core group to move the project forward. This group meets regularly, and is currently examining different examples of co-housing to explore how these might work for them in south Manchester.

The researchers at Manchester School of Architecture have developed a series of creative methods for these discussions, including the use of storytelling combined with generative AI to create concept drawings that will spark conversation about tenants' vision for the community.

Critically, these approaches seek to foster a sense of community between tenants, recognising that to succeed the core group will need to form strong social bonds and learn to self-organise. This even extends to residents cooking food for the meetings rather than Southway ordering in catering.

As the project has progressed, it has been supported by [GM Community-Led Homes](#), a community benefit society that provides advice and support. More detailed work to explore sites, funding options and management structures is due to begin later this year.

### **Collective responsibility can help fulfil wider potential**

Southway isn't alone in showing an interest in co-housing. Housing21 [<https://www.housing21.org.uk/>] has a strategy to develop ten co-housing communities in Birmingham, with a similar focus on making it available for those with limited financial resources.

Similarly, the UK Cohousing Network's report *Housing associations and cohousing* [<https://cohousing.org.uk/publications-and-research/>] provides recommendations for ways that such associations can support new and existing co-housing communities of all tenures. It aims to address the systemic development barriers that make provision of any kind of community-led housing so challenging in the UK.

Critically, the example of socially rented co-housing exemplifies the potential and opportunity for developers serving communities with limited financial means to offer attractive housing options for proactive older people, grounded in ideas of community, belonging and citizenship.

It is currently unclear what the new Labour government's approach to housing of older people will be, with the issue absent from both their party manifesto and public statements at time of writing. The recent [Older People's Housing Taskforce](#) will, however, provide an opportunity to kickstart the discussion in government. The Taskforce submitted their final report to

government ministers the morning that the 2024 General Election was called, with Angela Rayner's Department of Housing, Communities and Local Government obliged to respond to the findings and recommendations in the coming months,

While there is consensus that action must be taken, everyone must appreciate that realising age-friendly housing is a collective responsibility for the sector, not just something to be provided by specialist developers.

All designers and developers should engage with the diverse needs and aspirations of an ageing society, because the private market will not by itself address engrained inequalities in later life. Although social housing providers are undoubtedly under a lot of pressure, they would with the right support and incentives be well placed to lead the creation of diverse, inclusive places that support a good later life.

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