

Re: Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People

I was advised by one of your colleagues that you were the person to write to regarding the above report. I thought that the emphasis of the report on drawing together themes to provide a holistic view was very much the right approach - too often issues are looked at in isolation. I can only hope that the recommendations of the report are enacted in full and the aspiration of the 2025 target is rigorously worked towards.

As you will understand; because I work for John Grooms Housing Association, I was particularly interested in Chapter 4. [Note: JGHA is the largest independent specialist provider of wheelchair standard housing for people with physical disabilities. We manage and support tenants in more 1,200 houses - mostly in London & the South East but also the South West around Bristol and Birmingham]. We would certainly agree that disabled people face a number of barriers to accessing suitable housing. At the heart of this lies the chronic shortage of suitable barrier free housing for disabled people which, outside London, none of the draft regional housing strategies seem to be tackling with any vigour. We are very disappointed that the Government continue to resist the call for the use of accessible housing registers to be mandatory by local authorities. This is despite clear evidence - as you note - that their use saves money, gives a better service and results in more efficient use of available housing stock. Lifetime Homes Standard We welcome the Government focus on the adoption of the Lifetime Homes Standard. Designing in adaptability from the start of the building process is cost efficient in the long run as you observe. However it must be recognised that a lifetime home will not necessarily allow a wheelchair user to move into the house straight away and live there as flexibly/reasonably as a non-disabled person without substantial adaptations.

Although a lifetime home is designed to be flexible, and will meet the needs of the majority of people, it only guarantees access to the ground floor for the person using a wheelchair. Even then, access may only be on the basis that turning around in the entrance hallway involves going into a room off the hallway to do so.

Within a house designed to lifetime home standards, door widths may not accommodate an electric wheelchair user (especially the new larger versions) there may not be an internal area suitable for charging batteries or entrances will not have a long enough run up area.

A house designed to the higher wheelchair standard will fully accommodate the needs of a wheelchair user and will allow them to

participate in all aspects of family life (ie putting children into bed, preparing meals, etc) with the minimum of personal inconvenience.

Design features such as a through the floor lift and/or the provision of bathing/toileting facilities on both floors of the house (if more than one storey) are incorporated into a wheelchair standard home.

It is for this reason that the London Plan stipulates that all new housing must be built to the Lifetime Homes Standard with 10% to the higher wheelchair standard (or easily adapted to it). This policy will also start to tackle the chronic shortage of wheelchair standard housing as identified in a survey for the GLA in 2002 (London Household Survey - 2002). The survey found that:

- \*6% of households in London include someone with a physical disability, \*2% of households (56,000) included someone who used a wheelchair,
- \* 3,000 people live in inaccessible housing and need a wheelchair standard house
- \*20% of wheelchair users live above the first floor
- \*29% of people with a disability want to move within five years;

We would suggest that this situation is repeated across the country outside London although I am not aware of survey data which demonstrates this at a regional or local level. With the greater prevalence of disability in the last 20 years as more people survive an illness and people live longer, so the demand for wheelchair standard housing will undoubtedly grow into the future.

Designing for the car - An equality issue for disabled people

While JGHA supports the general requirement that communities should be designed to minimise car use; it cannot be totally excluded. For many disabled people the car is their only realistic means of transport and therefore independence. This means designing new housing schemes with a dedicated car space within a short distance of the front door, with level access, which is lit and covered. (A mother of a young man A (23) who is a wheelchair user told me that they didn't go out if it was raining. This was because A would get so wet while getting into their car as they did not have a covered parking space)

Design considerations need to go beyond this. The design of the site layout should keep circulation distances and changes of level to a minimum. Outside paths should provide unobstructed links to public places with minimal gradients and gradual bends. The location and layout of units should assist the integration of disabled people into the community as a whole. Housing schemes should be designed within the local community to have realistic access to shops, health

centres/GP surgeries, primary schools, parks, places of worship and the local community/leisure centre. Where ever possible sites with steep hills and busy main roads to cross to reach amenities should be avoided. As I indicated to your colleague, if you would or anyone else from the Strategy Unit would like to visit any of our wheelchair standard properties please do not hesitate to contact me.

With best wishes

Graham Nickson, Public Affairs Officer, John Grooms Housing