

# Creating age-friendly communities

An *Inside Housing* roundtable, in association with Alertacall, discusses ways in which older people can live independently, but also as part of a community. *Photography by Jonathan Goldberg*

What can the housing sector do to create age-friendly homes and communities? The UK has a well-documented ageing population. Currently, there are more than 11 million people aged 65 or over in England and Wales, according to the Census 2021, and in 10 years' time, this will have risen to 13 million – more than a fifth of the population.

Coupled with this is the fact that the UK has the oldest housing stock in Europe. Yet fewer than one in 10 homes are suitable for older people in England, according to the *Homes for Life* report by Centre for Ageing Better, as the growth of specialist housing has not kept pace with the ageing population.

The Centre for Ageing Better suggests that more “lifetime” dwellings are built that are adaptable, enabling a resident to convert the home as they grow older and therefore remain independent for longer, living in a community they enjoy and not becoming socially isolated.

So clearly the housing sector has a crucial role in tackling this societal issue. To discuss the topic, *Inside Housing* brought together a panel of experts for a roundtable, sponsored by Alertacall, a business that develops technology to improve well-being.

## Defining old age

Before diving into possible answers to the problems of housing an ageing population, the panel examines the idea of old age and talks about the dangers of defining older people as a group. “I feel we say ‘older people are like this, or like that’, but there are many people from different walks of life, who make different choices,” says Bruce Moore, chief executive at Housing 21. “When do you become old? Or when do you stop being yourself? I think you’re always going to be yourself.

“The population is getting older and will have different needs and requirements, plus the population is also getting more diverse.”

Requirements also depend on the geographical region. As Mr Moore explains: “We’re doing some work



“It’s really good to think about individual properties with community context and integration”  
Anna Kear,  
Tonic Housing



in inner city Birmingham and the ageing requirements that we’re addressing manifest themselves much younger than in a more affluent area.”

Robin Roberts, chief executive at Sutton Housing Society, points to a divide in the present older population. “For us, there are almost two categories we assist – where things are done on paper, it’s a personal approach where if you want us to sit next to you and fill in a form, we’ll do that. But if you want to do it yourself digitally, or need help with it, we’ll do that.”

Christina McGill, director of social impact and external affairs at Habinteg and co-chair of the Housing Made for Everyone coalition, highlights that often people are



keen to stay in their own homes, or their communities, as long as possible.

“Older people would really rather age where they are, whether that be in the actual property they are in, or in another property that is close by in the community,” she says. “Not many people see themselves taking up a fully specialist profession as they get older. It’s not necessarily something people visualise for themselves.”

James Batchelor, chief executive at Alertacall, agrees: “The reality is, we’ve got several hundred thousand, if not millions, of old people living in properties right now who aren’t going to be able to move anywhere. So we need to think about the now.”

Technology has a huge part to play in producing some quick wins, whether this is by maintaining contact through video calling, or simply making life easier by not needing to engage with equipment affixed to walls, as is the case with so many supported schemes.

Meanwhile, current statistics show that we are only building one accessible home for every 15 people who are going to be over the age of 65 by 2030.

For those who need to move as they reach old age, clearly more appropriate homes are needed. Mr Moore



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says: “It’s about balancing quality to existing residents, plus building more. And it’s not one size – it’s not only retirement living or only extra care or only villages – it’s across the spectrum.”

Another key aspect of older people schemes is accessibility – for example, wheelchair access. Anna Kear is chief executive of Tonic Housing, the UK’s first provider of LGBT+ affirmative retirement housing. She highlights one scheme where every property is wheelchair accessible. “This means that anyone can visit other inhabitants and go around the property,” she says. “Nobody is excluded – everyone can participate in everything and that’s a really important aspect of the community.”

She adds: “It’s really good to think about individual properties with community context and integration.”

Thinking about the lifecycle of a new building is also important, says Michael McLaughlin, digital lead at social value organisation HACT. “It’s about building properties that are fit-for-purpose through their lifecycle and building to a demographic – considering now how residents can continue living in a property when they reach 65.”

Downsizing is also another solution for some. ►



Participants	
	<b>Peter Apps (chair)</b> Deputy editor, <i>Inside Housing</i>
	<b>Monica Barnes</b> Resident ambassador, Southern Housing
	<b>James Batchelor</b> Chief executive, Alertacall
	<b>Michelle Dawson</b> Director of housing and community investment, Abri
	<b>Anna Kear</b> Chief executive, Tonic Housing
	<b>Levent Kerimol</b> Director of communities and social impact, Community Led Housing London
	<b>Christina McGill</b> Director of social impact and external affairs, Habinteg, and co-chair, Housing Made for Everyone coalition
	<b>Michael McLaughlin</b> Digital lead, HACT
	<b>Lisabel Miles</b> Housing policy manager, Age UK
	<b>Bruce Moore</b> Chief executive, Housing 21
	<b>Kathie Pearce</b> Head of sheltered services, Southern Housing
	<b>Robin Roberts</b> Chief executive, Sutton Housing Society
	<b>Ploy Suthimai</b> Innovation and change manager, Centre for Ageing Better



“Decision-making done collectively can be a way of bringing people together that generates a sense of belonging”  
Levent Kerimol, Community Led Housing London

11m  
People currently aged 65 or over in England and Wales

13m  
Estimated people aged 65 or over in England and Wales in 10 years’ time

Kathie Pearce, head of sheltered services at Southern Housing, says: “We have to ask people what they want. We can’t just build our way out of the housing crisis. There has to be a way of making it attractive for people to downsize.”

While the digital world has many benefits and can help people communicate, it is not a cure for everything. The Campaign to End Loneliness found that in England, 38% of those aged 75 to 84 live alone and over half (59%) of those aged 85 and over, with two-fifths saying television was their main company.

Human contact is vital, says Mr Batchelor. “It’s not just a moral obligation to deliver human contact to people, it also has a positive impact on health and social care,” he says. “We know that loneliness and isolation can be as acutely damaging as smoking.

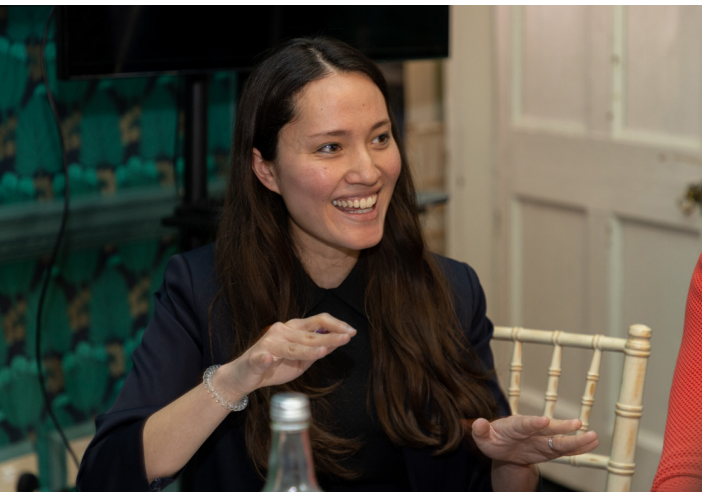
“At the moment, you’ve actually got a particularly disenfranchised group of people who have access to almost no digitisation that needs to be fixed. However, digitisation absolutely cannot come at the expense of human contact. If somebody wants to engage digitally or not, that’s their preference, but what’s important is to be interacting with people and not isolated.”

Mr Roberts says: “Sutton Housing’s approach is personal. Despite having only 500 homes, we employ a full-time community role and a range of ways to tackle isolation. We provide tablets, hold wi-fi cafes and send every resident a birthday card, which can be a great way to engage with those harder-to-reach residents.”

Mr Moore, meanwhile, suggests that often social isolation can be overcome through more informal contact, instead of structured engagement activities. “Sometimes it’s the chance encounters, such as chatting to your neighbour, that make a community,” he says.

And the issue of including residents in decision-making and social cohesion can be linked, suggests Levent Kerimol, director of communities and social impact at Community Led Housing London. “Decision-making done collectively can be a way of bringing people together that generates a sense of belonging. It allows people to make decisions that engender a sense of belonging to a place.”

Michelle Dawson, director of housing and community investment at Abri, adds: “It’s really important in communities that are multi-generational. How



communities thrive is through the mix of place and the people who live there.”

Choice is seen as an important factor. Ploy Suthimai, innovation and change manager at the Centre for Ageing Better, says: “We need the housing sector to deliver diverse, accessible and adaptable homes in lots of different formats, so people have that opportunity to choose, whether it’s assisted housing or a mainstream home, so they can stay in their own community.”

The type of community they feel comfortable in is also important, which is where Tonic has come in. Ms Kear says: “We had a gentleman move in with us as the area he was living in was not LGBT-friendly and he was scared.”

However, she stresses that the organisation’s schemes are not exclusive, based on someone’s sexuality. “We are not a gay ghetto,” she says. “We’ve had a lady move in who is straight and she wanted her son and his husband to come and visit her and feel safe.”

Monica Barnes, resident ambassador at Southern, believes the sector could do better at consulting with its customers. “I don’t think enough consultation takes place with older residents. It’s like landlords are saying, ‘We know best.’ That isn’t always the case.”



“I resent that people decide what I need without speaking to me first”  
Monica Barnes, Southern Housing

She adds: “For older people, it gives them a sense of satisfaction that their views and opinions are taken into account. I’m in that age bracket and I resent that people decide what I need without speaking to me first.”

Customer service is also more vital than ever for providers of housing for older people, says Lisabel Miles, housing policy manager at Age UK. “We often hear that customer service has been inefficient or hasn’t quite worked,” she says. “When you’re older, if you can keep your life under control, you can navigate it. But when little things go wrong, it’s the straw that breaks the camel’s back. And then everything unravels.”

Funding also remains an issue. Ms Pearce says: “The elephant in the room is funding. Financial support for support providers has been cut, decimated and made extinct with the Supporting People Programme coming to an end.” Supporting People was a UK government scheme to help vulnerable people live independently and remain in their homes.

Mr Moore says: “If we don’t address our ageing population and older people’s needs now, it’s going to have a huge impact on the whole well-being of society. I think we need to build more. There are so many problems caused by not having enough provision.” ●