

RTPI response to MHCLG consultation on Raising accessibility standards for new homes

December 2020

This is the Royal Town Planning Institute's (RTPI) response to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government consultation on [raising accessibility standards for new homes](#). This consultation considers how to raise accessibility standards. In particular, it asks how the existing optional accessible and adaptable standards for homes and the wheelchair user standard are used and how to improve this system.

Part M (Access to and Use of Buildings) of the Building Regulations sets minimum access standards for all new buildings, it currently includes optional technical standards for accessible and adaptable homes and wheelchair accessible homes. Planning policies set targets for the different categories of accessible housing and the Local Planning Authority (LPA) monitor designs at the early stage to ensure compliance. Building Control enforces the necessary details relating to internal features of the homes.

The RTPI's response highlights the current chronic shortage of accessible homes in England, as the number of people aged 65, and over is forecast to increase significantly. We therefore recommend that Government should progress options 2 and 4 in this consultation to mandate the current M4(2) requirement as a minimum standard in all new homes and set a minimum percentage of M4(3) homes in all areas.

More broadly, LPA's through robust and effective local planning policies can complement the increase in the number of accessible individual dwellings that will result from making the standards mandatory not optional. LPA's could achieve this by ensuring that access to the local area is a key consideration so that access to shops, services, greenspace is within easy, safe and comfortable walking distance of new homes. Otherwise, an accessible home risks becoming a 'gilded cage'. RTPI research¹ highlighted the benefits of location with the example of an extra care housing scheme in Hull showing how important such factors are at enabling people to live well. To achieve an inclusive environment planning and building regulations need to work together; effective enforcement, robust planning policies and mandatory requirements in the Building Regulations can result in a far more accessible, more equitable and more inclusive environment than we currently have today.

¹ RTPI (2020) [Dementia and Town Planning](#)

About the RTPI

The RTPI champions the power of planning in creating prosperous places and vibrant communities. As a learned society, we use our expertise and research to bring evidence and thought leadership to shape planning policies and thinking. As a professional body, we have over 25,000 members across all sectors, and are responsible for setting formal standards for planning practice and education.

General comments

1. Part M of the building regulations sets out three levels:

- **M4(1): Visitable Dwellings** – sets basic minimum standards for all new homes to provide level access to the main entrance, a flush threshold, sufficiently wide doorways and circulation space, and a toilet at entrance level. This standard does not future-proof homes, because they are not built to be easily adaptable. It is currently the only mandatory level.
- **M4(2): Accessible and Adaptable Dwellings** – These standards are slightly stricter than Category 1. They require no steps between the pavement and the main entrance, more space to move around in all areas of the home, and that features are easily adaptable to improve accessibility and functionality in the future as needed. E.g. the walls are strong enough to install grab rails if required.
- **M4(3): Wheelchair User Dwellings** - This is the only category intended to provide a home suitable for those who use a wheelchair.

2. Currently, local authorities set out plans for which standard of new homes will be built in their area. They can set out their expectations to developers of how many M4(2) and M4(3) houses are needed if they can show that there is enough demand from older or disabled people living in the area to warrant building these homes. Many local authorities lack the resources to employ access consultants or the in-house knowledge and understanding of the issues disabled people face. There remains a significant shortage of accessible housing in the UK. We recognise that the only way more accessible homes will be built is to make M4(2) mandatory. Serious consideration should also be given to making M4(3) mandatory in a percentage of new homes and these standards should be rigorously enforced.

3. **The evidence:**

- a. **Ageing society:** There are currently 12 million people over the age of 65 in UK, and over the next 20 years a significant shift in population age demographics is forecast²:
 - i. The number of people over 65 is forecast to increase by 40%
 - ii. The number of people 85 and over is forecast to increase by 72%
- b. **Local plan policies:** Under half of all local plans (138) set a specific requirement for a proportion of new homes to meet any form of accessible housing standards. Outside London 23% of new homes

² Office for National Statistics (2017), [Table A2-1, Principal projection - UK population in age groups. Release date 26 October 2017](#)



are set to meet any optional access standards³.

- c. **Supporting independent living:** the latest English Housing Survey showed that 9% of homes do and 91% of homes do not provide the four most basic access features⁴ being: A WC at entrance level, sufficiently wide doorways and circulation space, a flush threshold – main entrance door free of obstruction greater than 15mm in height and level access – no steps between gate/pavement and entrance door for a wheelchair to negotiate
- d. 93 per cent of older people live were estimated to live in mainstream housing⁵

4. We therefore recommend that Government pursue options 2 and 4 as set out in the consultation document:

- a. **Option 2:** *To mandate the current M4(2) requirement in Building Regulations as a minimum standard for all new homes, with M4(1) applying by exception only where M4(2) is impractical and unachievable (e.g. a new build flat above a garage). M4(3) would apply where there is a local planning policy in place in which a need has been identified and evidenced. OR*

Option 4 *'to mandate the current M4(2) requirement in Building Regulations as a minimum standard for all new homes with M4(1) applying by exception only, a set percentage of M4(3) homes would also need to be applied in all areas. So rather than local authorities setting a local planning policy for the provision of M4(3), a defined and constant percentage would apply to all new housing.'* This requirement should be amended to enable LPA's to set a percentage above the minimum required in the Building Regulations if the need for a greater percentage of wheelchair accessible homes has been demonstrated in their local plan.

5. **Viability and deliverability:** The consultation document highlights that *'planners need to strike an appropriate balance between requiring high standards in new housing on one hand, and the potential effect on the viability of developments on the other which may reduce the amount of new housing'*.

6. The document further suggests that the *'estimated additional cost per new dwelling is approximately £1,400 for units which would not already meet M4(2)'*. However, the evidence for this figure is unclear. For example, does it reflect the good practice guidance (British Standard BS 9266:2013 Design of accessible and adaptable general needs housing), which can assist in streamlining the design, and build process? Does this figure reflect the significant reductions to build costs introduced from the previous Lifetime Homes Standards requirements?

7. The document states that *'targets for accessible housing in some areas are watered down or waived entirely at the viability appraisal stage and the trade-offs with affordable housing have been regularly raised'*. The RTPI's submission to the planning white paper⁶ called

³ Habinteg, (2019), ['A forecast for accessible homes'](#), Insight Report, June 2019

⁴ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2020) [English Housing Survey 2018-19](#)

⁵ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2012) [Older people's housing: choice, quality of life, and under-occupation](#)

⁶ RTPI (2020), [RTPI response to the Planning White Paper](#)

on government to reduce the overall use of developer contributions to fund affordable housing, in favour of a substantially increased programme of grant funding for direct delivery by local authorities and registered providers.

8. **Health and social care:** The Alzheimers Society highlight⁷ the “*estimated £400 per day for a hospital stay, (NHS Data, 2015) and more than £700 a week on average to stay in a nursing home (Laing & Buisson, 2014)*”. More broadly, estimates show that non-decent and inaccessible housing costs the NHS £1.4 billion every year⁸. Research conducted⁹ for the RTPI found that affordable housing delivered through planning obligations saved the NHS £240 million in 2019. In addition, there are clear benefits to ensuring that people can be discharged home from hospital with the confidence that their home provides the appropriate access features.

9. RTPI Practice Advice on Dementia and town planning¹⁰ provides advice on how town planning can work with other professionals to create better environments for people living with dementia. There are around 850,000 people living with dementia in the UK¹¹. This figure is projected to increase to 1.6 million people by 2040. The advice explains that people with dementia may go into residential care homes earlier than they want to because their own homes are not designed to support independent living. It can also be expensive to adapt to meet their needs. An over-riding principle of the advice is that if you get an area right for people with dementia, you can also get it right for older people, for young disabled people, for families with small children, and ultimately for everyone.

Policy options

Q3. Do you support the Government’s intention to raise accessibility standards for new homes? Please explain your reasons

Yes. The quality and suitability of housing has a significant impact on the quality of life of the individual living in it. For older and disabled people this relates to their ability to maintain their independence and live fulfilling lives.

The adoption of the optional standards through viability testing and Local Plans has resulted in inconsistencies across the country, with variable levels of housing built to M4(2) and M4(3).

Estimates of some typical public expenditure savings made when adaptable and accessible homes are provided¹² include:

- reducing the need to make an early move to a residential care home and
- avoiding the need for a night’s stay in hospital due to temporary access needs not being met at home, it is estimated that such stays cost £400 per night to the NHS.

⁷ Alzheimers Society (2016), [Fix Dementia Homecare](#)

⁸ BRE (2016), [The cost of poor housing to the NHS](#)

⁹ RTPI, 2020: [Invest and Prosper: A business case for investing in planning](#)

¹⁰ RTPI (2020), [Dementia and Town Planning](#)

¹¹ Alzheimers Society (2019), [How many people have dementia and what is the cost of dementia care?](#)

¹² EHRC, Habinteg (2018), [Housing and disabled people: A toolkit for local authorities in England: Planning for accessible homes](#)

Q4. Which of the 5 options do you support? You can choose more than one option or none. Please explain your reasons, including the advantages and disadvantages of your preferred option(s).

We support **options 2 and 4.**

Q5. If you answered 'None' to Q4, do you think the Government should take a different approach? If yes, please explain what approach you consider favourable and why?

We support **options 2 and 4.**

Option 2

We make the following points regarding option 2:

- By making M4(2) mandatory this would help to free up LPA capacity by removing the need to make the case locally.

If implementing option 2, we believe government should also:

- Clarify that local authorities should set robust local policy for the level of M4(3) wheelchair accessible homes required in their area
- Set clear and strict criteria for exemptions from M4(2) where the lower M4(1) standard is permissible
- Establish a template for a national register of accessible homes and those seeking them, to be maintained locally.

Option 4

We make the following points regarding option 4:

- Freeing up local authority capacity by removing the need to spend time and resources trying to collate data to back up need, particularly as this is potentially unreliable.
- Simplifies the process and clarifies the requirements
- Option 4 is the only one which refers to requiring a certain percentage of M4 (3) wheelchair housing
- This appears a sensible approach based on NHS estimates of 1.2 million wheelchair users in the UK¹³ and with only 1% of homes outside London set to be wheelchair accessible properties
- As levels of accessible housing vary significantly across the country LPA's should be allowed to set a percentage of wheelchair accessible homes over and above the minimum standard set in Part M of the Building Regulations if they can demonstrate the need in their local plan
- Another factor Government should consider is that by increasing the number of wheelchair accessible homes across the country, many disabled people who wish to work will be able to move to find work in other towns and cities more easily
- This option does include an optional M4 (1) in 'exceptional circumstances'; It will be important to set clear and strict criteria for exemptions from M4(2) where the lower M4(1) standard is permissible.

¹³ NHS, [Improving Wheelchair Services](#)

Q6. Do you agree with the estimated additional cost per dwelling of meeting M4(2), compared to current industry standards, in paragraph 45? If no, please comment on what you estimate these costs to be and how you would expect these costs to vary between types of housing e.g. detached, semi-detached or flats? Please provide any evidence to support your answers.

No. There are multiple housing typologies and the cost of meeting these standards will vary considerably depending on the size and nature of the home. For example, the cost of making a home accessible in a block of flats will be very different to a small two bedroomed-terraced house, which will be very different to a large three or four bedroomed detached house.

It is unclear that the consultation document's estimated figure of £1,400 as the additional cost per new dwelling for units which would not already meet M4(2) reflects recent developments and this requires further analysis. Does it reflect the good practice guidance (British Standard BS 9266:2013 Design of accessible and adaptable general needs housing), which can assist in streamlining the design, and build process? It is also unclear whether it reflects the reductions to build costs introduced from the previous Lifetime Homes Standards requirements such as the following:

- **M4 (2):** requirements that have been removed include ceiling strengthening, knock through panel between bath and bedroom, and dedicated space for a bed within the living room.
- **M4 (3):** requirements that have been removed include the need for a car port, the bedroom to be alongside the bathroom (although desirable) and the knock through panel between the bedroom and bathroom.

Q7. Do you agree with the proportion of new dwellings already meeting or exceeding M4(2) over the next ten years in paragraph 45? If no, please comment on your alternative view and how you would expect this to vary between types of housing e.g. detached, semi-detached or flats? Please provide any evidence to support your answers

No answer – not enough information to comment.

Q8. Do you have any comments on the costs and benefits of the other options set out above. If yes, please provide your comments including any evidence to support your response.

No.

Q9. Do you have any comments on the initial equality impact assessment? If yes, please provide your comments including any evidence to further determine the positive and any negative impacts.

The Equality Impact Assessment provides no evidence of the comparative benefits of different options. We suggest that the 'do nothing' option will have a negative impact on the protected characteristics of age and disability because that option would not deliver any improvements in the accessibility of new housing stock. There are many positive impacts to increasing accessibility standards for new homes such as:

- **Pregnancy and Maternity**
Expectant mothers and new parents may benefit from increased circulation space and storage in order to navigate with pushchairs and store equipment.
- **Age**
Ageing populations will be able to remain in their own homes for longer (including people living with dementia) with the space to carry out adaptations such as grab rails and walk in showers, and the ability to use mobility equipment in and around their home, enhancing independence and quality of life.
- **Disability**
Individuals will have more freedom to choose where they want to live increasing their ability to find and retain employment in different parts of the country and to choose what type of dwelling enables them to function safely and with dignity in their own home.
- **Faith and/or race**
Some cultural backgrounds live in multi-generational housing with large families, meaning houses may require more bed spaces in certain areas, and with the ability to adapt housing to adjust to the changing needs of older family members.