

Bucking the housing trend

Only the highest standards are acceptable for extra care housing, says **Les Bright**



It's always encouraging when the link between policy, strategy and practice is clear enough to be able to see the thinking behind a particular development. The July 21 announcement that funding will be made available for the construction of extra care housing schemes in 25 locations across England is a good example of just such clear linkage, following hard on the heels of the national strategy for housing in an ageing society (DCLG 2008).

The £80 million investment by the Department of Health is intended to provide just over 2,000 new, purpose-designed homes for older people with care needs. It acts as a focus for partnership-working between primary care trusts, local authorities and housing associations, and it continues a programme that has already delivered funding for around 4,000 flats in more than 70 locations in the past four years.

It is noteworthy that the Health and Care Minister, Ivan Lewis, chose to make this funding announcement accompanied by Sir Michael Parkinson, the dignity ambassador, during a national tour. Mr Lewis is an enthusiastic advocate of 'extra care' housing as the answer to many problems faced by older people and the agencies that work with them.

How we feel about our home influences how we feel about much else in our lives – and this applies throughout the life cycle, not just in old age. So, as some older people experience increasing frailty, deteriorating health and a growing dependence on others, the state of their housing, and way in which support services are organised, is vital.

Tenants of extra care schemes are seen as having greater choice and control over their lives as a result of having their own front door, and are assumed to have significantly more privacy than if they had moved into a care home. On the face of it, this seems like a reasonable claim to make. But readers working in other settings will know that upholding key

principles such as choice, dignity, privacy and control relies as much on the leadership of managers and the priorities of staff engaged in service provision as on the form of tenure – resident, tenant or owner. Care homes can and do perform well in these key areas, while some tenants may find choices open to them somewhat restrictive, having a negative effect on their wellbeing (Evans and Vallyelly 2007).

The sites selected received grants ranging from £1 million (Brighton and Hove City Council, Vernon Gardens) to £7.3 million (Lancashire, Brookside, Lancashire). One of the criteria used to assess bids for funding was that flats should include at least one double bedroom, thus enabling couples to remain together when one of them needs care – or significantly more care than their partner. This is a welcome consideration as from time to time examples of inflexibility and rigid assessment procedures lead to heart-rending stories of couples being separated after 50, 60 or more years of marriage. Even where the case for one partner being looked after in a home is accepted by both of them there can still be overwhelming problems of loss – emotional and financial (Clarke and Bright 2006) – that may be avoided if care was more widely available.



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At least one double bedroom enables couples to remain together when one of them needs care

Bidders also needed to show how their plans would accommodate people with dementia and make use of 'telecare' and other technologies. This meant that considerable thought had to be given to the overall design of the building and individual homes, and also to the way in which services would be arranged and – most importantly – which people are best suited to that style of living. If these issues don't receive sufficient attention then it is possible that an extra care scheme could become an unregulated care home, without any of the checks and balances to ensure that the highest standards are maintained.

Additionally, careful consideration of everyday aspects of life that indicate independent living, beyond bricks and mortar and operational protocols, is needed. For example, ensuring that there is sufficient space for the storage and re-charging of mobility scooters should not be underestimated as a potential source of friction between tenants, as anyone who has visited such schemes will know. Similarly, proximity and ease of access to shops and libraries and to family and friends is an important consideration. Providing extra care housing to enable more older people and those with dementia and long-term conditions to live in a home of their own has to meet the specification of housing for any one of us – location, location, and location ■

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References

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