

Housing for older people needs a strategy

It's an exciting time for the sector, which continues to be shaped by the needs of our ever-growing population
Anne-Marie Nicholson

The House of Commons Select Committee report entitled 'Housing for Older People Needs Strategy' was a positive indicator for the later living sector. It highlighted that development of housing with care for older people of all tenures is urgent, now more than ever before. It will have the most significant impact on peoples' health and wellbeing, while reducing pressure on the NHS at a time when we're living longer. It's imperative that we empower people to be healthier and more independent in their later years, especially with the life expectancy rate increasing.

PRP have over two decades experience of running an established 'Later Living' design team of some 40 architects, working exclusively in the older persons sector. We are the market leaders in the UK with a portfolio of completed projects from the past 20 years that extend beyond 200 and represent over 10,000 built dwellings or care beds for older people across the country. Our London experience stretches across 20 of the 32 London Boroughs, within which we have completed or have consent for 46 buildings representing some 2,100 dwellings or care beds for older people.

Though much has changed over the last ten years, something that hasn't is the variety of our projects. We have everything from 325-unit retirement villages to 30 bed care homes to design each year. Despite that one constant, it's undeniable that the later living housing and care sector has changed almost unrecognisably over the last decade. The dominance of affordable housing schemes developed with lots of grant funding and secure, ongoing revenue funding has all but gone away. Though there's no doubt that this era propelled the market forward and generated a greater understanding of what housing can provide for our older population, the models of 10 years ago are largely unviable now with only the most dedicated housing associations prepared to cross subsidise this form of housing.

To create viable accommodation that caters for a variety of needs, designers of today's later living housing need to have an eye on three key factors: security and safety to support vulnerability; comfort and appeal via spatial features and services on offer; and transparency of transactions, particularly any initial costs and services charges.

The rapidly increasing sales market is also changing the later living design approach. Selling to a last time buyer is tough, and so it should be. Kerb appeal, first impressions, lifestyle choices and aspirations all need to be considered, but we must not be fooled that this is all that matters. The devil really is in the detail, and this will only come from a specialist understanding and appreciation of the need to hide - not remove - some of the critical features that assist ageing minds and bodies.

Homes for those over-55 have previously been located in

quiet corners of the community or on the outskirts, but we're finally (and quite rightfully) seeing them integrated at the heart of new developments. A well-connected location is a key requirement for older people, but somewhere along the way a decision was made to place the housing further out based on the reasoning that older people prefer peace and quiet. One flaw in this plan was that it made it much harder for these residents to reach local facilities, and as a result the local economy failed to benefit from their community building abilities, eyes on the street and, increasingly, their disposable income. Another factor that should be a key consideration in design terms, is that people spend years building a community for themselves, and that this natural bond to one another and to a location is of great significance to an older person in particular.

It's not just the location that is important, though. Interiors are given much more priority now, especially because of developers needing to maintain a brand identity that distinguishes themselves from other providers. 10 years ago, we would have to wrestle the paint pallet from the well-meaning client to avoid the lurid colour choices in the residents' rooms, but they are now seeking our interior design advice from the outset, which is just one example of how far we've come.

Many schemes are also breaking the mould by breathing fresh air and new light into what were once previously dull and



Anne-Marie Nicholson is a senior partner at PRP and head of the later living team





airless communal spaces. Once an indulgent luxury, balconies are now a 'must' in new developments with designers working increasingly hard to offer the best use of communal space with the aim to impress, delight and provide relaxation to residents. Gardens should provide an opportunity for residents to interact and socialise, and be connected by attractive, walkways to provide an accessible and easy route.

One of our most recent schemes in Lewisham, completed by the Later Living team, brings all of these aspects into play, with the end result being the creation of a new community designed to revolve around the need to care and protect older people living in the area.

First built in 1963, the site was originally home to the Christopher Boone's Almshouses and has been sympathetically designed to consolidate the existing almshouse accommodation, as well as make the best use of the location, in terms of access to the high street and public transport routes, but also in relation to a residential care/nursing home operated nearby. The building typology is closely aligned with the aspirations and recommendations of the HAPPI report

Carefully arranged landscaped areas are at the heart of the development, with a circular, covered walkway that leads to a communal summer lounge, a terraced garden designed as a quieter space for residents, and a garden for those interested in horticulture and vegetable growing.

64 out of the 92 state-of-the-art homes are specifically for those aged over 57, with the building configured as a 'U-shaped' block that wraps around the beautifully landscaped courtyard creating an ideal environment for socialising and undertaking hobbies. The apartments are generous in size at 10-15 per cent larger than the minimum space standards, and all benefit from bay windows and large balconies.

As an industry our approach to later living is much better, many now understand the complexity of creating accommoda-

tion with bespoke but subtle specification differences to meet the needs of the individual user and therefore don't just 'dabble' by creating standard homes with features that will not suit the older person residing there. This serves as proof of how far the later living sector has come in just a decade and is still changing beyond recognition. With developers who can provide the correct accommodation entering the field we are now at a time of looking at what technology can shape the future of our later living sector and though specific to later living, built-in-home technology and off-site manufacturing seem to be leading the way.

To continue as leaders in the later living sector and develop our designs with the ever-changing target audience, we encourage feedback from the end user and not just our clients (the developer or provider). A reoccurring theme we are tackling currently, is that while technology changes at such a rapid pace, our older generation's understanding of it does not and that even the simplest of built-in home systems are quite confusing to use. To meet environmental requirements in new homes, these devices often come with a set of manuals explaining how they work in silo but don't explain how they work together within the home. This is confusing and overwhelming, so we're pleased to see an increase in retirement developers installing tablet-based technology. These systems are intuitive for the user and can be tailored to meet their individual care needs, as well as comprising smart home features such as heating control. These assistive technology devices support independent living while still providing contact with on-site staff, such as the concierge service so residents retain their independency.

It's an exciting time for the sector, which continues to be shaped by the needs of our ever-growing population. Designing with people in mind is at the heart of what we do at PRP, and our Later Living team is determined to create homes that provide older people with the lifestyle they've always had. ■

PHOTOS:
Christopher Boones
Almshouses in Lewisham
by PRP Architects

