The role of housing in supporting the most vulnerable and engaging with society

The fourth part of this collection of essays is from:

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These three essays explore some challenges of meeting the needs of vulnerable people, including the elderly in care home settings and the opportunities of engaging with young people and involving wider communities in planning for sustainable growth.

Themes include:

- Innovative approaches to tackling the challenges of an ageing society;

- Reaching younger people and those from diverse background to contribute to planning for a green future;

- Use of digital engagement in building trust and embedding social value in development.

Homes for Healthy Ageing: the role of innovation

Erin Walsh

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The social and economic impact of COVID-19 across the UK (and indeed the whole world) is truly unprecedented. It has also been hard-hitting demographically, not least for our elderly population, whose vulnerability to the pandemic has been exposed in the starkest terms. Not only are they at greater risk of harm from the coronavirus itself, but they are also more profoundly affected by the stricter social-distancing rules put in place to protect them against it.

The home – once considered an Englishman's castle – can under the current conditions increasingly feel more like a prison. Whilst the challenges presented by an ageing society have been discussed in the UK for a long time, this pandemic throws into sharp relief the scale, significance and urgency of the challenges we are facing – both now and into any future that might emerge from the lockdown. And given the likely enduring nature and impact of the pandemic, it is that urgency with which we need examine the issues facing our ageing society that is increasing – especially when it comes to thinking about what can be done to make homes feel like safe places of refuge once more.

The scale and significance of the challenges

A recent ONS figure (8th May) shows that nearly 90% of COVID-19-related deaths registered in England and Wales have been among people aged 65 and over[1]. But this disproportionately high death rate is not simply due to the heightened vulnerability of the elderly to the virus – it is also indicative of the expansion of the UK's elderly demographic: today, nearly one in five British people are aged 65 years or over, and this proportion is on course to reach one quarter of the population by 2050[2].

As people get older, their health can deteriorate significantly. With time spent increasingly indoors, the quality of their homes has a pivotal role to play in health and wellbeing. However, the majority of older people are living in mainstream housing, which is often not fit for their needs. Below are just some of the key issues most likely to be exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic:

- **Lack of care** – Based on a study by the Local Government

1 Office for National Statistics (2020). Coronavirus (COVID-19) roundup. 2020.
2 Local Government Association (2017). Housing our Ageing Population.

Association, less than 1% of over 65s are living in housing with care[3], and many others do not receive the care and support they need for basic living functions. The pandemic has made this situation worse: as well as the higher risks of dying from COVID-19 itself, elderly people are also at increased risk of morbidity and mortality from other acute and chronic diseases due to reduced non-COVID-19 care[4]. We have all seen the devastating impact of the pandemic on care homes – but even looking beyond the acute phase of the pandemic, the ongoing impact of COVID-19 is likely to exacerbate the current care-related challenges. Future care arrangements will need to accommodate strict hygiene regimes and the threat of regular lockdown will disrupt the ability of suppliers to provide regular in-home care support.

- **Digital exclusion** – A report from Centre for Ageing Better shows that people aged over 55 make up 94% of those who have never been online within the UK[5]. This digital divide becomes more worrying in the COVID-19 context as more services such as shopping or interacting with local authorities move online. The issue is particularly acute among the poorest who rely on 'pay as you go' services and struggle to afford data[6].

- **Social isolation** – According to Age UK, nearly a third of people aged 65 and over live alone in the UK, and 1.4 million older people regard themselves as 'often lonely'[7]. Confronted with higher risk of becoming severely unwell with COVID-19, elderly people are also required to follow even stricter social-distancing guidance and avoid gathering with friends and family. Those who have been living alone are literally forced into a state of social isolation for the duration of the pandemic. This would inevitably have a very negative impact on their mental health and may lead to a range of other poor health outcomes. For example, insufficient exercise due to self isolation could result in health deterioration with subsequent fragility and falls, whilst a decrease in cognitive stimulation due to lack of contact with the outside world could aggravate cognitive and behavioural symptoms associated with dementia[8]. In particular, social isolation will disproportionately affect single seniors whose only usual social contact is outside their homes, such as at churches, community centres and day-care facilities[9].

Other issues often affecting older people's quality of life at home include dementia, a lack of accessibility and safety issues. All these are challenging enough on their own, but in reality they are usually combined and compounded by other issues such as underlying health conditions and poor-quality housing stock. As is now widely recognised, the UK still has

3 Local Government Association (2017). Housing our Ageing Population

4 Steinman MA, Perry L, Perissinotto CM. (2020).Meeting the Care Needs of Older Adults Isolated at Home During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *JAMA Intern Med.*

5 Centre for Ageing Better (2018). The digital age: new approaches to supporting people in later life get online

6 The Guardian (2020). Digital divide 'isolates and endangers' millions of UK's poorest.

7 Age UK (2019). Briefing: Health and Care of Older People in England 2019.

8 Steinman, MA., Perry, L., Perissinotto, CM. (2020). Meeting the Care Needs of Older Adults Isolated at Home During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *JAMA Intern Med.*

9 Armitage, R. and Nellums, L. (2020). COVID-19 and the consequences of isolating the elderly. Lancet Public Health.

some way to go in enabling its older citizens to live healthily for longer in their own homes.

Innovative approaches to tackling the challenges

Looking again at the three challenges outlined above, a variety of innovative solutions already exist:

- When it comes to the **provision of care**, there are various approaches to delivering complementary or alternative care. The most common are telecare services, which make use of environmental and personal sensors to monitor the safety and wellbeing of the elderly, thus enabling rapid response to concerns or incidents. There are also initiatives exploring how robots could be used to provide preventative and supportive care for elderly people at home. For instance, in an Innovate UK-funded project, engineers worked with elderly people and care providers to develop a prototype robotic system that could support older people with basic movements at home. The technology responds to voice, gestures or touchscreen commands, and has the potential to work with other smart devices to track users' health and wellbeing, in order to reassure authorised third parties, e.g. relatives or carers.

- **Digital inclusion** initiatives for the elderly include nationwide digital training programmes, such as NHS Widening Digital Participation and One Digital, both of which provide digital training and support to help create 'silver surfers'. There are also initiatives to install smart home devices or create bespoke applications to demonstrate how digital technology could support independent living for longer. For example, in a DCMS funded initiative in West Essex, some digital-savvy elderly people opened up their homes to be kitted out with new technologies, and the homeowners themselves were trained as 'digital boomers' to help other older people improve their digital skills. Another Liverpool-based initiative saw a tech company develop an age-friendly shopping app called 'Helping Hand', which connects directly to a major supermarket via a user-friendly interface, thus enabling elderly people to shop online more easily.

- Approaches to **reducing social isolation** include smart communication technologies that enable elderly people to be better connected with their family, friends and the wider community. New living models such as senior co-housing or intergenerational living allow elderly people to live in self-reliant but socially inclusive and diverse communities. A good example of this is the Older Women's Cohousing Community in North London – a senior community created and managed by like-minded females, with the aim of reducing loneliness and enriching later life in a collective way.

Gaps, opportunities and the way forward

As illustrated above, a range of approaches have the potential to help older people live and thrive in their homes and help mitigate problems that COVID-19 has exacerbated. Nonetheless, challenges remain. There

are various reasons for this.

1. The market for smart home based solutions is nascent and often, the products have been **developed for general-needs** rather than specifically for the elderly. And of course, none of them accounted for the impact of COVID-19. A user-centred design approach to re-purposing these tools would help drive adoption and impact.

2. There are also **market co-ordination barriers**. Whilst no one council working in isolation would offer a big enough market for the development of an ideal solution, collectively the market is huge. Similarly, the savings that preventative-technology-driven approaches could deliver to the NHS are substantial – but it remains unclear by what mechanism the NHS could subsidise such approaches in order to realise the benefits.

3. In the business to consumer market, the challenge is that the **technology solution alone is often not enough**. It would need to be bundled with a service package to be effective – but the big technology companies who can achieve scaled production are typically not interested in the service business.

The latent potential in this space is evident. The ageing population represent a large and growing market and the needs they have are clear enough in calmer times, and become ever more pressing in the era of COVID-19 and whatever comes next. To unlock the opportunity, we need to deconstruct the systemic barriers referenced earlier and bring together different parts of the ecosystem to create value propositions that are attractive to all parties. Sometimes all that is needed is for someone to take the difficult first step. After all, the best business to be in is that of the 'fast follower'.

With this in mind, Connected Places Catapult are bringing together stakeholders from across relevant sectors to take action and move the ecosystem forward. We are inviting key players from across industries to work with us on a series of healthy-ageing housing pilots across different parts of the UK to test and refine new ideas.

For each pilot, we will:

- Collaborate with relevant stakeholders to deepen our understanding of the specific challenges facing the local areas.

- Bring together technology suppliers, local authorities, housing providers and health and care professionals to develop solutions.

- Open up the opportunity space to a wide range of solution providers through a challenge-based open call process.

- Focus on solutions with the potential to scale and map out next steps to achieve this.

- Build validated business cases to allow the wider roll out of these solutions. We are agnostic to the route to market at this stage: there may be viable business to consumer propositions, but we are also interested in exploring models which involve a range of stakeholders from local NHS trusts to large corporates through to smaller community organisations.

As a neutral party in the ecosystem, part funded by government but independent from it, and with strong connections to academia, start-ups and place leaders, Connected Places Catapult is ideally placed to help overcome the system level challenges which are holding back the wider uptake of innovation in the healthy ageing space.

If you would like to get involved, then please do get in touch (email info@cp.catapult.org.uk). We will be focusing on areas of the UK with large and growing populations of elderly people; where the need is greatest – we're ready and waiting to hear from you.

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Our participatory future

Cllr. Professor Samer Bagaeen

These are interesting times: people keeping at least two metres from each other; a substantial number of schools closed; all public gatherings cancelled; the UK Government and those around the world putting together ever-increasing stimulus packages; landlords not collecting rent; the homeless being told to stay put in hotels free of charge; and workers furloughed on full pay in some cases.

In more than one city, in England, local authorities went on the hunt for innovative solutions to seek ideas from their residents about the path for a green future. This was before the increasingly louder and louder calls for a green future in the post-COVID-19 world began to take hold. With pollution in some cities halving on account of the lockdown – lower vehicle emissions as people ditch their car, attention has also shifted to the carbon emissions caused by our built environment and what can be done to reduce these.

As a forum for sharing ideas, citizens' climate assemblies have gained traction in cities like Oxford and Brighton and Hove. These assemblies bring together a small number of residents (50 in the case of Brighton and Hove), randomly selected to reflect local demographics, alongside a panel of advisors to help shape how a city could address the climate crisis and prioritise actions to take forward.

Oxford was one of the first cities to hold a climate assembly focusing on three themes: How do we use less energy? (buildings, transport); How do we make more energy? (transform our energy system); How do we improve environmental quality on the journey to net zero? (waste, offsetting). Biodiversity was considered within each of these areas.

With the pandemic still playing a major role in how we live our daily lives, the idea of the assembly in Brighton and Hove has gone back to being an idea. It has been pushed back into the autumn of 2020 allowing some thinking time into whether this was a good means of engaging residents in the first place, and, second, whether other digital forms could also be considered.

With the overnight shift to remote meetings using digital technologies and, in some cases, allowing for smaller and more personal virtual breakout rooms, could the conventional future, which the city political leadership had imagined only a few weeks ago, be changed already? As some of us, including our school children, are seeing this conventional future merged with a digital one, perhaps we can also imagine more than 50 players from our communities getting involved. Could we take

our citizens' assembly onto a digital platform? And if we did, could we ensure representativeness and effectiveness? There are problems with this and digital literacy remains a huge problem in the UK. The Lloyds Bank Consumer Digital Index report launched in May 2020 noted that an estimated 9 million UK residents (16%) are unable to use the Internet and their device by themselves. A further 16% of the UK population cannot undertake simple digital activities such as turning on a device, connecting to wi-fi or opening an app by themselves.

A recent report by Nesta in the UK published in March 2020 suggested involving citizens through dry and traditional techniques such as surveys, town hall meetings, and citizens' assemblies could be seen as tokenistic rather than leading to real change. Nesta imagined a future beyond citizens' assemblies involving play, immersion, sensing, creating and deliberating. Can we? And can we as urban agents be the leaders for real change? This is the challenge to all of our politicians, especially to the city's leadership, and to cities across the country.

If we go back to the matter of buildings and the decarbonisation agenda, and consider new government supported actors such as the Green Finance Institute, we see a renewed focus on innovative finance solutions and instruments, possibly green bonds. We also see a reference to engaging with communities.

That engagement, especially with the younger generation, remains a huge challenge. Developing the market for financing net-zero and resilient homes, after we legislate for this of course, is the easy part. It is the third step, that's the hardest one: getting owners and occupiers, across all tenures to buy into this. We also need valuation models of property to reflect this.

What we know for sure is that the proportion of sustainable property in the total building stock remains small. We are certainly not doing enough, in England at least. Latest government data shows that new houses produce 1.66 tonnes of CO_2 per year, and new flats produce 1.31 tonnes. From 2016, both figures should have been zero (they are not) and from 2025, we have to build more of these.

Is there a relationship then between sustainability and value? A cursory look at the property sector tells us that the financial added value resulting from sustainability is not sufficiently considered in property valuation, making it difficult for owners and residents to quantify the benefits from upgrading things such as energy performance.

There is no doubt that we must shift capital and investments towards transition activities and we should really look at the way that the building industry, and construction in particular, could shift towards zero emissions as quickly as possible.

The labour-intensive view of construction is a fragile model versus construction sites reliant on offsite and modular construction. The latter requires a similarly huge investment push as part of a decarbonisation agenda. MMC (Modern Methods of Construction) generally struggles to compete with traditional construction on capex prices. For both, there is a greater need to overcome the fragmented supply chains in construction - all procured on lowest price resulting in lower than anticipated outputs and a significant level of disputes. Putting value and social value first, creating loyalty in supply chains, and localising supply chains will no

doubt maintain supply and innovation during crises.

All of this is important in shaping our green future. Quite possibly though, the greatest challenge remains to reach local people and provide a feed of information to prioritise decisions and inform the master planning, the legislating, the building and the recovery. Within our towns and cities, reaching young people and those from more diverse backgrounds is a particular challenge.

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Building trust and reaching parts others can't: how better communications can help get the house building market back on track

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As the UK emerges from the lockdown and grapples with the after effects of COVID-19, now is the time to discuss the importance of communities in overcoming adversity. We've seen local volunteers assisting those most vulnerable, helping shielded neighbours, family and friends. Volunteer groups, coordinating thousands of calls for help, sprung up almost overnight to ensure that those in need are supported. The UK at its very best.

From a policy perspective, it highlights the notion that ideas only really come alive when local communities are involved. The key is to create a 'buy-in' so that communities are able to see tangible changes that policy will bring to their lives. Whilst local authorities were beginning to grasp the opportunity on public and private partnerships now is the time to accelerate conversations and engagement with communities using new technology, methods and partnerships. It's the very definition of meaningful engagement.

The naughty step

Some local authorities moved at lightning speed to up-skill members on technology so it was business as usual as quickly as normal. In London, and generally speaking the South East that is the case. Others moved at a far more pedestrian pace. What does this mean for housing? Well for those that moved quickly it means we are likely to see housing targets reached quicker, and an adoption of a digital meaningful engagement, and for those that didn't they'll be on the naughty step of MHCLG.

But, does it matter if they are on the naughty step? Probably, yes, when it comes to future financial settlements from central government and the new homes bonus. Levelling up can only really happen if you have a willing local authority to drive the agenda on the ground.

It would be remiss of us if we didn't make clear that there is not a "one size fits all" approach differing geographical and demographic factors mean public engagement must be flexible and proportionate.

Accelerated digital engagement

During these uncertain times, and the changes in working and lifestyle that this has brought about, we have seen an acceleration of digital engagement and it is vital to remember that whilst COVID-19 was the

occasion, it was not the cause of this.

To be clear, it is wrong to assume that the only solution to reaching out to broader audiences is via digital engagement platforms. For our audiences, traditionally local communities and local authorities, it must sit alongside traditional methods of engagement such as newsletters via post, freephone numbers, taking the time to have one-to-one interaction over the telephone and following up with hard copies of presentations for those who cannot access information online.

The wider adoption of remote technology was already being investigated across the public and private sector, and Local Authorities, as we intimated earlier, have been catching on. In planning and the communication protocols surrounding this, this now means updating their own definitions of 'meaningful engagement' to include digital offerings.

As such, the wider adoption of digital engagement creates the opportunity to reach a wider demographic within communities. Physical public consultations, usually confined to a community hall, held during a select period of time consistently attract the same demographic: retired and those that are not at work. However, the use of digital engagement enables those who are unable to attend a public consultation event in person the opportunity to take part and ensure that their views are considered. This includes groups such as young professionals and those who work during the day.

Digital engagement also allows far greater data capture which in turn means applicants and the local authority can see who has participated and use this data to refine future consultations.

Let's build trust

As we ease the lockdown and can see already construction sites back up and running its worth remembering the Government have not changed their target of 300,000 of new homes.

Only engaging digitally, or virtually, can we reach every corner of the community and hope to build trust between the planning adjudicator, developers, community stakeholders and elected officials. By engaging effectively with the community, we are able to fully understand their views and concerns – to strike a balance between the needs of the community and the local need for new homes.

Enabling Trust

Each planning officer, developer, community stakeholders and elected councillor is a potential 'trust enabler'. They each represent a pillar in the planning process and can either build or knock down trust in a scheme:

- Planning adjudicator – Be they planning officers or the Planning Inspectorate, they have a vital role in ensuring that local authorities meet their local housing needs and that future developments are positioned in the correct locations.

- Developers – As the commercial driver in housing delivery, developers have a key role in establishing trust with the local community and if done correctly, can strike a balance between their commercial aims and the needs of the wider community.

- Community stakeholders – Whether a local residents association or charity, community stakeholders are key to understanding the concerns and views of local residents and the wider community.

- Elected officials – These can include the local ward Councillors, Council Leader or Member of Parliament. Effective engagement is key to ensuring that they do not each become a galvanising force against the prospective development.

Social Value

Social value is the quantification of the relative importance that people place on the changes they experience in their lives. For example what worth might we place from living next to a community park? We know these things are important to us but are not commonly expressed or measured in the same way that financial value is. However, they have the potential to significantly add investment value to projects through the use of targeted engagement and an understanding of what communities want the most.

We have outlined below two simple potential policy initiatives that in themselves could help, but we believe, if taken together, could be transformative.

Policy Initiative 1: a new social value contract between the developer, community and local authority

This social value contract would create a commitment not just between the community and developer but also the local authority. In doing so, there would be a commitment between all three to enable the delivery of a set goal(s) that would run in tandem with the development of the site. Furthermore, it would facilitate a wider discussion during the consultation stage surrounding the local needs of residents and the wider community.

Accompanying the social value contract would be a social value charter. Every development over a certain sq ft should be publishing a social value charter as part of their planning application.

Policy Initiative 2: Formally include digital consultations into the National Planning Policy Framework to enable engagement to reach every corner of the community, unlocking the silent majority.

In doing so, digital consultation will encourage those who wouldn't normally have an opportunity to take part in the consultation, such as those that work unsociable hours, to share their views. This in turn will ensure the resulting data that is collected through surveys and polling will be more representative of the overall views of the community.

The government have recently updated their guidance, but going the extra mile will produce better planning results.

What's next?

As the lockdown eases we have a golden opportunity to think more creatively about how to engage the areas with the areas we live in, and how to create meaningful, long lasting partnerships. Lots of companies already do this, far too many don't.

If anything, we have learnt that we must maintain the essence of adaptability, so we can reach more people and better understand what they want for their areas and how we can build new communities for the future. This will ensure that the provision of new homes in an area is simply not just transactional between developers, the community and political leaders.

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