

October 2007



## ***Homes for the future: more affordable, more sustainable*** **Aspire's response to the Green Paper**

Aspire are a national charity working with people with spinal cord injuries. We focus on offering practical services and guidance to ensure that those we work with have every opportunity to live independently. Much of our work involves housing; we operate a national network of houses that are used by individuals on a temporary basis, usually while they are adapting their own property or are waiting for accessible accommodation to become available. We also provide advice on adapting properties and building accessible accommodation to individuals, Housing Associations and local authorities.

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Aspire welcomes the opportunity to comment on this Green Paper. Housing issues are increasingly important to the whole of society and, unless steps are taken to address the problems that exist, the whole of society will suffer the consequences.

While there is much to be applauded in the Green Paper, it is also of concern that the needs of disabled people are not given greater consideration. Too often, improving accessibility is considered to be something that will happen voluntarily or is framed in such vague terms as to be of little use. Of equal concern is the fact that the needs of disabled and older people are frequently seen as the same; while there is undoubted crossover, there are also differences that must be tackled separately. This includes acknowledging that houses designed to full, wheelchair accessible standard are needed, and are needed now; currently there is a deficit of 300,000 such properties and the disabled people who need them have dramatically diminished life chances as a direct result. Lifetime Homes are not, in themselves, the answer to this critical issue – the premise of a Lifetime Home is that it can be simply adapted in the future, not that it solves the problem now. Even when a Lifetime Home is adapted, it will still not be ideal for a full time wheelchair user, particularly a powered wheelchair user, and so houses built to a more accessible standard must be worked into the plans for new builds.

Much of this Green Paper centres on the need to create houses where people will want to live. While this cannot be faulted in itself, Aspire is concerned that, unless improved planning is put in place to meet the needs of disabled people, many of our service users will continue to struggle to find places where they can live.

## **Key Points**

- Accessibility must be given as great a priority in housing planning as affordability and environmental sustainability.
- Lifetime Homes must become mandatory for all new builds. However, it must also be recognised that a Lifetime Home is not the ideal solution for full time wheelchair users; a significant number of homes built to a more accessible standard must be planned.
- Older people and disabled people, despite some notable overlaps in their needs, are not a homogenous group and cannot be treated as such.
- Housing Benefit does not provide those living in Shared Ownership properties the same safety net it does to those with standard mortgages. Increasing numbers of people who acquire a long term condition will lose their homes if this is not addressed.
- Accessible design is frequently misunderstood by individuals and organisations at every stage of housing delivery, including architects, builders and Housing Associations.
- There needs to be an attitudinal shift – from staff in housing departments, architects and builders – so that accessibility, and the independence that creates for disabled people, is given greater priority. Voluntary measures to improve attitudes will not do enough to create this shift.

## Detailed Response

### Section I

6. The Decent Homes programme has indeed improved much of the social housing stock. However, the Decent Homes programme has not spent money on raising the general level of accessibility of the housing. This has been a massive mistake. Improving accessibility must be brought in as one of the key criteria for any properties receiving funds through Decent Homes in the future.
8. The lack of wheelchair accessible housing in the UK is a cause of homelessness that has not been sufficiently tackled. Aspire research with one of the UK's Spinal Injuries Centres showed that only 30% of patients left hospital to return to a fully accessible house. A third of patients returned to their own home, even though it wasn't suitable for their needs while 20% were transferred to another hospital or a care home, mostly because there were no suitable alternatives. In our experience, most of those in care homes and hospitals will be homeless and considered a priority for re-housing, yet will remain in this situation for many months.
9. Aspire has recently worked with Ricky, a young man who sustained a spinal cord injury. Due to the lack of accessible social accommodation, his local authority placed Ricky into a succession of bed and breakfasts and hotels despite the fact that he and his partner had two young children. The result was that Ricky and his family were kept apart, while Ricky had to make do with accommodation where he had no access to kitchen facilities, despite the fact that he could not afford to eat out every day. Despite the implication that the practice has ceased, this is not an unusual situation for wheelchair users and their families.
13. It is a shame that, here and throughout this paper, the challenges and priorities for housing fail to include accessibility. Disabled people need to be able to live independently, and many government departments are working to ensure that this is a reality. However, there is currently a shortfall of 300,000 wheelchair accessible properties in the UK, and this number will only increase with the aging population. Until addressing this massive shortfall is seen as a priority, many disabled people will be severely constrained by their accommodation and denied the independence that most people take for granted.

The challenge extends beyond the physical – we frequently encounter housing staff who do not believe that full, accessible accommodation is essential. One young man that we have worked with recently has left hospital and was given little option but to return to his old house, even though he can only access the communal areas downstairs. He will therefore be sleeping in the living room and was advised that the housing department would see that the ‘local’ swimming pool – a 15 minute bus ride away – would allow him to use their facilities for showering. Changing the attitudes that see this as an acceptable solution is as vital as ensuring that enough accessible properties are made available across the UK.

25. Aspire certainly agrees that the housing decisions made now will impact on the life chances of the following generations. If the equality gap between disabled and non-disabled people is to be closed, it is essential that accessibility of houses is made a priority. Failure to do so will see diminishing life chances for many disabled people who will be denied the social and economic well-being that comes from good housing. Linda, for example, sustained a spinal cord injury when she was 32. During her lengthy stay in hospital the rehabilitation process gave her the necessary skills to live independently and return to her career as a school teacher. But with a lack of suitable housing in her area she was placed into a nursing home that denied her independence and gave her no opportunity to return to active society. Linda had to live there for eighteen months before a flat was available for her, by which time the skills learnt in hospital had been lost though lack of use and will have to be rediscovered before Linda can even contemplate working again.

## Section II – Chapter 1

8. The New Growth Areas and Points will deliver significant numbers of new properties. To ensure that these properties meet the needs of society and address the massive shortfall of wheelchair accessible homes in the UK, some of these new builds must be built to full wheelchair accessible standard. Aspire recommends that, as a minimum, ten percent of all new builds meet such a standard, with the remainder built to Lifetime Home standard. Although this still falls short of the number immediately needed, it will at least be a positive step in the right direction and act as a significant incentive to designers and builders to develop the skills needed to create accessible properties.
9. Any new funding that is provided must be done so on the understanding that the new developments must meet minimum accessibility criteria and that at least ten percent of the new properties will be to full wheelchair accessible standard.

12. Eco-towns, as carefully planned developments, present an ideal opportunity to ensure that the needs of disabled people are met. Along with the high standards of sustainability and environmental impact, accessibility must be made a key aspect of the design process.

### Section III

Aspire welcomes the assertion that new homes will be built to the highest design standard, providing that accessibility is seen to be an essential aspect of good design. Our experience of working with architects is that they have limited knowledge of accessibility and a reluctance to change the way they work to meet the needs of disabled people. Until there is a substantial cultural shift, Aspire fears that accessibility will not be considered integral to good design. The government is ideally placed to force through this attitudinal change by setting minimum standards and targets for increased numbers of accessible properties.

We look forward to reading the Department's *National Strategy for Housing in an Ageing Society* in the hope that it will do much more than merely further endorse the Lifetime Homes standard. Lifetime Homes are, undoubtedly, a positive step forward and Aspire firmly believes that every new property should be built to at least this standard. However, Lifetime Homes are not ideal for full-time wheelchair users – and particularly for powered wheelchair users – and do not represent a satisfactory solution on their own. As one wheelchair user remarked to Aspire's Housing Manager, 'a Lifetime Home is a great place to visit, but you wouldn't want to live in one'. Essentially, Lifetime Homes simply do not meet the needs of full-time wheelchair users who need the improved accessibility of a home built, or adapted, to full wheelchair accessible standard. Simple things like increased turning circle space, which the Lifetime Homes do not contain, can make a very real difference to the day to day life of a wheelchair user.

Aspire is also concerned that many of the specialist properties that we see being built with older members of society in mind are part of mini-complexes of sheltered accommodation. These 'retirement homes' are, despite possibly meeting the accessibility requirements of younger disabled people, not suitable for those who should be a part of a wider, mixed community.

## Section III – Chapter 5

Aspire is pleased to see that the government recognises that sustainable communities need to be “inclusive”. Far too often, however, the notions of inclusion that are endorsed clearly do not go far enough. Although the Disability Equality Duty should help improve this situation, wheelchair users and other disabled people still miss out when inclusion is given less priority than the more traditional designs and values that are regularly endorsed.

## Section III – Chapter 6

2. Aspire is delighted that meeting the needs of wheelchair users is seen here as an aspect of good design. Truly good design, of course, would be totally inclusive from the start – or at the very least easily adapted – and it is vital that ‘ghettos’ of accessible houses are not created within the new communities that are proposed. Too often Aspire has worked with Housing Associations and Planners who feel that it would be most appropriate to clump their wheelchair accessible properties together in the same street and thereby isolate the residents from their non-disabled peers.
  
9. Again, Aspire is pleased to see that the government believes that “houses need to be easily accessible”. However, by framing this within the context of an aging population, ‘easily accessible’ becomes something of a vague term that will possibly leave full time wheelchair users exasperated. Accessibility is an incredibly complex area, and an area that is still much misunderstood by the majority of architects, and it is vital that strict standards are laid down to ensure that wheelchair users of all ages – now and in the future – are not constrained by ‘good accessibility’ that doesn’t completely meet their needs or those of other family members. For example, we frequently see wet rooms that have been designed to meet an idea of accessibility; with no consideration given to the fact that the property might still need to function as a family home the designers fail to include a bath which would be much more practical for younger children. Similarly, the bathroom sinks are set at a ‘text book’ height for a wheelchair user – obviously, wheelchair users come in all shapes and sizes and there is no guarantee that a wheelchair user will even be able to get under the textbook height sink. Other family members, meanwhile, are likely to find the sink too low for them. Rise and fall sinks, of the sort used by Aspire in our own properties, can be adjusted to suit the specific needs of the user and cost a mere £70 more than a standard sink. Including such equipment from the outset would solve many of the issues that occur without significantly adding to the cost.

10. Aspire totally endorses the need for Lifetime Homes and firmly believes that every property that is built must meet this standard as a minimum. However, Lifetime Homes do not meet all the needs of a full time wheelchair user, even after the relatively simple adaptations are put in place, and therefore, on their own, are not enough. Meanwhile, there are countless older and disabled people who need accessible housing now and who should not have to purchase a property that they then have to adapt before they can live there. As well as the Lifetime Homes standard, Aspire wants to see wholesale commitment to full wheelchair accessible homes, with a significant proportion (Aspire recommends at least ten per cent) of all new builds meeting this higher standard.

While an increased focus on the needs of older people is important, it must be recognised that younger disabled people have their own specific needs too. There will undoubtedly be a considerable overlap between the needs of these two separate groups, but by not considering them separately then many opportunities to meet the housing needs of disabled people will be missed. Many of the 300,000 households who currently need a wheelchair accessible property will be made up entirely of younger people and their needs must be considered in their own right.

There is resistance amongst architects and builders to adopt the Lifetime Homes standard and merely 'encouraging' its use is not enough. The government must, if it is serious about meeting the housing needs of the current generation of older and disabled people, set this standard as a bare minimum for all new properties. This needs to be done without delay.

#### Section IV – Chapter 8

There is a clear need for more social housing across the board. But unless, in delivering increased numbers of social houses, the government ensures that a guaranteed percentage of the new builds will be to full wheelchair accessible standard, a significant level of the current demand will simply not be met. Whether the new social housing is delivered through local authorities, housing associations or the private sector, accessibility must be made a priority.

Aspire is, generally, against the principle of ring-fencing properties for a given section of society. However, in the current climate there is little option but to see ring-fencing as the only feasible way of reducing the inequalities faced by disabled people. By ensuring that only wheelchair users can use the wheelchair accessible properties there will be less competition and more chance that disabled people will be able to find somewhere suitable to live. In time, as ever increasing numbers of

accessible properties are built, this ring-fencing can be relaxed (subject to local supply and demand) and everyone given similar opportunities of securing the social housing they want.

4. Aspire recognises that there has been an increased demand for social housing from both the ageing population and from families unable to afford to buy houses. However, we are disappointed that recognition has not been given to the increasing demand from the growing numbers of younger disabled people who currently cannot find a property that meets their needs.
15. Aspire works closely with a number of Housing Associations around the UK to provide temporary supported housing to people with spinal cord injuries. Without this collaborative working, the residents who make use of the properties would otherwise be forced to remain in hospital or live in totally unsuitable housing.

Our partnerships with Housing Associations gives us a good insight into their working practices, including those of the specialist Associations providing housing purely for disabled people. There is certainly much to be proud of. However, while the generalist Housing Associations can be applauded for their delivery and for the new services that they introduce – including, of course, the Aspire houses – we also know from direct experience that they are not always so good when it comes to delivering properties suitable for wheelchair users. For example, one Housing Association we worked with proudly put in a wet room to improve access for our tenant who had a spinal cord injury. Their lack of experience in the design of wet rooms, though, meant that every time it was used the ground floor flooded. The same Housing Association took our advice and installed laminate flooring throughout the property as it makes propelling easier for wheelchair users. In doing so, they managed to create a ‘lip’ at the threshold of each room – this lip was big enough to mean that wheelchair users with limited upper body strength couldn’t independently access any of the rooms. Housing Associations, then, often have good intentions, but need to be encouraged to take more advice and gain experience of delivering properties that go beyond the standard designs they use regularly.

53. The Decent Homes Programme offered a fantastic opportunity to ensure that greater numbers of social housing was made accessible. This opportunity was missed. Future funding under the scheme should be used, at least in part, to improve the accessibility and adaptability of all properties that undergo improvements.

## Chapter 9

Understandably, many people need help to purchase a home of their own. This will include substantial numbers of disabled people who are, generally, on lower incomes than their non-disabled peers. Many people with spinal cord injuries will also need to purchase larger properties as a direct result of their impairment – to accommodate extra equipment or allow for a bedroom for their personal assistant, for example. Such requirements mean extra expense and consequently disabled people can be relatively further away from a position where they could afford their own house than similarly placed non-disabled people. If this situation is to be rectified then the generally sound plans proposed here, such as the low cost home ownership programme, must be made viable for disabled people. This will mean ensuring that a significant number of new affordable housing and shared-equity homes are designed to meet the needs of wheelchair users.

2. Many disabled people who do purchase a property have to make adjustments to it before they can actually live there. While the Disabled Facilities Grant scheme can help cover some of these costs, it is currently so limited and unwieldy that many people either cannot or will not apply for it if they need the alterations made quickly. Aspire wants to see stamp duty removed for any households that purchase a property and then need to make physical adjustments to it before they can live there. This removal of the duty will offset the costs of the changes and bring home ownership closer to a reality for many disabled people.

## Chapter 10

Housing Benefit will, subject to restrictions, pay the interest on your mortgage should you become disabled. This safety net is extremely important to those who sustain a spinal cord injury and who may be in hospital for up to eighteen months. However, with a shared ownership property, Housing Benefit will only pay the rent and not the interest on the mortgage component. With more shared ownership properties being made available, this situation must be rectified. Failure to do so will increase the likelihood that those who become disabled will lose their houses and put more demand on social housing.

## Section V – Chapter 11

Aspire has worked with a number of designers and builders and is constantly shocked by the general lack of knowledge that the industry has when it comes to including accessibility as a core component of new houses. For example, we've recently been working with designers of a new property that has been earmarked for use by a wheelchair user. Despite good intentions, we have had to correct numerous faults that, while they would not prevent a wheelchair user from living there, would certainly have hindered them and prevented them from accessing certain areas of the property altogether. Such situations have a dramatic impact on independence and family life. The faults have included things like failing to provide work surface space directly next to the oven – wheelchair users usually prefer to have somewhere to put hot trays down immediately as they cannot self-propel and hold a full baking tray in both hands. We also had to suggest the moving and widening of all the door frames to improve transition between rooms. While knowledge gaps are recognised in the Paper, this specific failing must be given greater recognition and more effort made to resolve the issue. By ensuring that a set percentage of all new properties are built to wheelchair accessible standards, the industry will be more willing to learn and develop the skills needed to build homes that meet the need of disabled people. The changing skills set that has seen builders respond to the Carbon Challenge shows that it is possible for the industry to change – but only when legislation is put in place that ensures that they do.

## Chapter 12

Whilst the problems created by a lack of accessible housing exist on a national scale, Aspire recognises the need to work locally to resolve many of the issues. The toolkits for local communities, for example, will – if planned correctly – help identify the level of demand for accessible properties and provide justification for increased targets for such properties to be built. In developing these toolkits, then, accurate data must be provided on the numbers of disabled people on housing waiting lists, what those disabled people's needs are and what accessible properties already exist within the current housing stock. Too often, attempts at providing such data fail because the data that is collected is inaccurate or incomplete; we have recently worked with an individual who, as a full time wheelchair user, was waiting on an accessible social housing property. The local authority operated a disability housing register and sent her to view a property they had listed as 'adapted'. When she got to the house she discovered that it had four steps up to the front door and no

alternative means of entrance. The house had been listed as 'adapted' on the basis of some grab rails that had been added. Clearly, such poor data does little but waste the time of both the tenant and the housing department.

On a local level, Aspire already works with Housing Associations and does so in areas that have been identified as having the most need of accessible properties through collaborative working with the discharge teams at hospitals around the UK. It is vital that such ways of working are expanded and used effectively on a larger scale by local authorities.

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