

The Mayor's Consultation Draft London Plan would effectively halt Care Home development in the Capital and may have wider implications

Town Planning policy has struggled to get a consistent and meaningful grip on the issues facing it in respect of the Nation's growing aging population. In particular it lags behind initiatives on pensions and care.

The background evidence is compelling: an increasing number of us are living longer and a larger proportion of the population is in the over 60 and over 80 age categories than ever before as post war population effects have worked their way through. The ageing of our population brings with it the associated effects of more people with age related frailty, be it physical or mental frailty.

While the general policy may suffer from a lack of direction, the picture in London is now very different. However, different in a way which will load additional costs and development burdens on the care home industry. The new consultation draft replacement London Plan policy states that new Care Home developments (and other forms of development catering specifically for older people) will have affordable housing requirements applied to them.

The draft Plan acknowledges the ageing population and the need for more specialist accommodation but addresses this by moving the "goal posts" for care home developers to a point at which they may not be able to win sites on the open market against rival residential developers.

London's population will change significantly between 2006 and 2026: the over 60's category will increase by 265,335 people. As an example, the number of people with memory related impairment is likely to increase by 11,833 over the same period, potentially giving rise to the need for 125 more specialist care homes on a very conservative estimate.

The key problem with this is that specialist accommodation for older people including care, is generally classed as falling within Use Class C2 of the Town and Country (Use Classes) Order, for planning purposes. Such uses compete with general residential developers, in particular, in residential and other appropriate locations for sites. Given the amount of non-revenue making communal and care accommodation which must be included in modern good quality care developments, such developments can only hope to win sites if they do not have the burden of also providing affordable housing. This principle has been accepted on all Use Class C2 care home development in the country to date, which is not surprising as care homes are acknowledged as facilities required to meet the needs of the community.

This new policy is unique in this Country and wholly new to London as it has not featured in any previous London Development Plan.

As a practical effect this policy would add additional costs to all care home projects having to include affordable accommodation. These additional costs will result in these developments being less competitive in the property market and therefore significantly less likely to win the sites in which to build.

The Plan needs to make it easier not more difficult to develop new accommodation for older people, providing a range of choices in new high quality, well located developments. That's the real challenge for London planners. Coincidentally the independent "Housing our Ageing Population panel for Innovation" has recently published its Housing Our Ageing Population Report. This supports the opposite approach to the subject advocating that housing for older people be given the same status as affordable housing in that it should be required as part of general housing schemes.

This clearly illustrates two completely different approaches to the issue 'who is right?'

The consultation period was up in January on the draft replacement London Plan. The next stage of the fight; (if this policy is pursued) will be the Plan's examination in public later on this

year and who knows how far this new approach to planning may spread?