

Royal Institute of British Architects

Response to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government: Raising accessibility standards for new homes December 2020

The Royal Institute of British Architects is a global professional membership body driving excellence in architecture. We serve our members and society in order to deliver better buildings and places, stronger communities and a sustainable environment. Being inclusive, ethical, environmentally aware and collaborative underpins all that we do.

The RIBA welcomes this consultation. Architects have a key role to play in ensuring that homes are designed to be accessible to all and meet the needs of an ageing population. In 2019, we produced the report, [A Home for the Ages: planning for the future with age-friendly design](#). We welcome the fact that the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) recognised the importance of this report and is working to improve accessibility of new homes in England.

The RIBA is a member of the HoME Coalition; other members include the Centre for Ageing Better, Habinteg, Age UK, Care & Repair England, Disability Rights UK, Housing LIN, the National Housing Federation, the Chartered Institute of Housing and the Town and Country Planning Association. We urge Government to continue to engage with this group to ensure the best policy outcome to this consultation.

The RIBA supports the Government's intention to raise accessibility standards for new homes. We recommend that the Government:

- Implement **Option 4** with some additional conditions to ensure that we have the accessible homes we need going forward.
- Ensure new accessible homes also meet Nationally Described Space Standard (NDSS).
- Provide clarity on the cost calculations included in the consultation document.
- Investigate the social impact and cost to mental health of not increasing accessible housing, which is missing from the consultation document.

**Q3. Do you support the Government's intention to raise accessibility standards for new homes?
Please explain your reasons.**

Yes.

The RIBA welcomes the Government's intention to raise accessibility standards for new homes. The RIBA's 2019 report, [A Home for the Ages: planning for the future with age-friendly design](#), called on the Government to ensure all new housing that receives public financial support be built to M4(2) Category 2: Accessible and Adaptable Dwellings. However, we believe this must now go further, the Government must include making the accessible, adaptable design standard M4(2) the mandatory baseline for all new homes as the starting point.

The reality is that millions of people, particularly those who are older or disabled, live in homes that don't meet their daily needs. England's existing housing stock is not suitable for the diverse and changing needs of our ageing population, and often the new homes we build aren't either.

The thoughtful design and the specific integration of M4(2) will improve the lives of millions of people. Accessible housing is critical to achieving equality and adds social and financial value to society. M4(2) housing benefits everyone but particularly older people, those living with a disability, chronic health condition or reduced mobility.

In addition, the UK has the oldest housing stock in Europe.¹ Figures released in the English Housing Survey this year showing that an overwhelming 91% of homes do not provide the four main features for even the lowest level of accessibility – a home that is 'visitable'.² It is estimated that some 400,000 wheelchair users are currently living in homes that are neither adapted nor accessible/visitable.

We live in a rapidly ageing society. Within five years the over 60s will make-up over 25% of the England's population³ and this is a trend that is set to accelerate. Even though we have always grown old, the idea of accessible housing was only conceived 30 years ago, and only taken seriously ten years after that. As a result, most of our existing homes have been built with no regard to ageing.

While the various forms of retirement living are an excellent solution for many older people, over 90% of us still wish to remain 'at home' for as long as possible, even in homes that are far from ideal. These realities can no longer be ignored.

There are other pressing reasons to act now. Climate change demands that every new home we build today must be built to last, and this is especially important when it comes to preserving embodied carbon. Over the years, homes will be occupied by dozens of households, and despite having much in

¹ Nicol S, Roys M, Ormandy D and Ezratty V, The cost of poor housing in the European Union BRE, https://www.bre.co.uk/filelibrary/Briefing%20papers/92993_BRE_Poor-Housing_in_Europe.pdf, 2016

² Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, English Housing Survey 2018: accessibility of English homes - fact sheet, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/898205/2018-19_EHS_Adaptations_and_Accessibility_Fact_Sheet.pdf, 2020

³ Office for National Statistics, Population projections for regions: Table 1 (London: ONS, 2019) <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationprojections/datasets/tablea21principalprojectionukpopulationinagegroups>

common, they will all have different ideas about how they want to live and work. Their plans and needs will change over time – often in ways that they can't predict and that makes accessibility, flexibility, and adaptability extremely important.

The coronavirus pandemic has reinforced the importance of home. We know that daily life often poses particular challenges for older people and those living with reduced mobility, chronic illnesses or disabilities. The vast majority are living in homes that are far from ideal. They face daily barriers which can, and should, be eliminated or at least ameliorated.

The increase in the use of Permitted Development Rights (PDR) in recent years has allowed buildings to be altered without proper scrutiny from local authorities. While a significant number of homes have been delivered, the lack of regulation has seen a substantial number of extremely poor-quality homes since the policy was introduced. We are pleased to see that the consultation suggests that the M4(2) becomes the minimum requirement in Part M, it will apply to all 'new dwellings', and therefore include those achieved through change of use, rather than apply only to 'newly-erected dwellings', as it does now.

No one is disadvantaged by any of the features or components of a M4(2) home. The vast majority of people will not identify an accessible home explicitly, they will just find it easier to enter and move around inside the home, and appreciate the absence of steps, the wider halls and landings, the larger toilet and the other features that make daily life easier.

Q4. Which of the 5 options do you support? You can choose more than one option or none. Please explain your reasons, including the advantages and disadvantages of your preferred option(s).

The RIBA preference is for the adoption of **Option 4**. We also support **Options 2** and **3** as they represent significant progress from the current situation and would be the next best options.

We believe that **Option 4**, is the strongest option as it delivers on the priority aim of mandating M4(2) homes as the new baseline, with M4(1) applying only in exceptional circumstances where M4(2) cannot be achieved, and setting a nationally applicable percentage of new homes to M4(3).

Option 2 would also represent significant progress from the current situation as it delivers on mandating M4(2) as the new baseline, with M4(1) applying only in exceptional circumstances where M4(2) cannot be achieved. Our key concern here is that local authorities may not have the resource to identify and evidence the need for M4(3) homes.

Option 3 would also be welcome as it should result in more accessible homes being built. However, the RIBA recognises that there may be some situations including, for example, locations where the topography is particularly challenging, or on small, urban sites where there are insufficient flats to make the installation cost of a lift, and/or the ongoing service charges viable.

For these reasons, the RIBA preference is **Option 4**. Option 4 mitigates these issues by setting a nationally applicable percentage of new homes to M4(3), which has been successful in London, and allows for M4(1) homes in exceptional circumstances.

However, we believe that **Option 4** should be strengthened and requires additional conditions to ensure that we have the accessible homes we need going forward. These include:

- That the exceptions to M4(2) are confined to homes which, for tightly defined, practical reasons that are set out in revised Building Regulations, cannot reasonably achieve step-free access. The developer should be required to notify Building Control that a legitimate exception exists and explain the reason for this, giving details for each of the affected plots. If, and when, the Building Control Officer or Approved Inspector is satisfied that step-free access cannot reasonably be achieved, the exception(s) should be formally confirmed in writing.
- That the dwellings that are agreed to be legitimate exceptions in terms of their ability to provide step-free access, are still required to provide all other M4(2) features. The reason for this is to ensure that these homes are still accessible to as many people as possible, including those who use a wheelchair on a part-time basis, and those whose mobility difficulties are temporary. In other words, the exceptions are not for M4(2) as a whole, but solely for step-free access. This has broadly been the approach of the Greater London Authority since 2015 and worked well. We suggest that the exceptions should be a small sub-set of M4(2) to reflect their compliance with the other M4(2) requirements (defined as M4(2E) perhaps). This approach would also reduce the incentive for a developer to exploit the exceptions as it would reduce or eliminate the cost difference between M4(2) and the exceptions.
- That the number of exceptions is monitored, and the policy objectives and provisions are reviewed at least every 10 years to assess how well they are working.
- That the Government will consult on what the percentage of new homes are M4(3). It is unclear from the consultation document how the percentage of M4(3) homes will be decided. The Government should provide clarity on this to ensure an adequate number of M4(3) homes are coming to the market.
- There must be flexibility for local planning authorities to go above a national minimum percentage for wheelchair accessible homes, should they wish to.
- National and local government must support the development of a national accessible housing register so that it is much easier for wheelchair users to find and apply for suitable housing in whichever location and tenure they require.
- That M4(3) homes are monitored to ascertain how many are occupied by wheelchair users, how well they meet the needs of their occupants, and whether they are providing good value for money.

In addition, there is a clear omission from the consultation, and this is the importance of space standards. The RIBA welcomed the Government's announcement that new homes built under PDR must have minimum space standards. However, we believe this must go further and all new homes must meet or exceed the Nationally Described Space Standard (NDSS).

Internal space is especially critical when it comes to accessibility, and the NDSS was intended to support what is now M4(2). Without adequate space standards M4(2) will not be as effective as it should be. M4(2) was drafted with this interdependence in mind, so it does not provide sufficient safeguards to ensure enough space for a modest amount of furniture, as well as the space needed to move around and carry out daily activities.

Linking, or tying together, the NDSS and M4(2) within regulation, is still the best way to achieve what the two standards set out to achieve.

During the Housing Standards Review, linking or combining the NDSS and M4(2), was favoured by most of the participating developers because it reduces the number of permutations for each house type in their portfolio. They too, preferred regulation for the simplicity, certainty and level playing field that it provides.

With the NDSS linked to M4(2) it is unlikely that the occupants will have to choose between accessibility and furniture. Under the NDSS, all double and twin bedrooms have to be at least 11.5m². One of these bedrooms must be at least 2.75m wide, and the others, at least 2.55m wide. These are still not large rooms, but the requirements for minimum floor areas and widths make it far more likely that the occupants will be able to accommodate the basic furniture that is considered reasonable, while still being able to circulate around at least one of the double bedrooms.

Q6. Do you agree with the estimated additional cost per dwelling of meeting M4(2), compared to current industry standards, in paragraph 45?

If no, please comment on what you estimate these costs to be and how you would expect these costs to vary between types of housing e.g. detached, semi-detached or flats? Please provide any evidence to support your answers.

No.

The consultation provides a suggested cost (£311m per annum over a 10-year period) of mandating M4(2) across all housing in England and an estimated additional cost per new dwelling of approximately £1,400; it does not however, provide the assumptions that underpin these calculations. This makes it difficult to make a fair judgement on the costs provided.

Previous work commissioned by the Government in 2014 estimated that on average a three-bedroom semi-detached house would cost £1,387 per dwelling to build to M4(2) with space standards. This cost is similar to the £1,400 suggested in the consultation.

Assuming the £1,400 suggested in the consultation has been based upon the previous work by Government, it is specifically related to the extra cost of meeting M4(2) in a three-bedroom, two storey, semi-detached house and comprised two elements: the extra cost of the M4(2) provisions themselves (estimated as £521) and the cost of the extra internal space (estimated as £866).

However, the options presented in the consultation make no reference to internal space or the NDSS. It is unclear from the consultation if the £1,400 per dwelling includes the cost of ensuring adequate space standards.

Without clearer breakdowns of the calculations on how the suggested £1,400 was reached it is difficult to make a judgement on the actual costs of mandating M4(2) for all new homes.

Nonetheless, the cost of building accessible housing does not have to be problematic. When the Building Regulations are changed to reflect M4(2) as the minimum standard, the extra cost will be factored in by

developers when they bid for land. This means that there will be no impact on the profitability of the development and no extra cost to pass on to the end user.

The RIBA does not, therefore agree that raising the mandatory standard will result in any significant extra cost to developers.

Q7. Do you agree with the proportion of new dwellings already meeting or exceeding M4(2) over the next ten years in paragraph 45?

If no, please comment on your alternative view and how you would expect this to vary between types of housing e.g. detached, semi-detached or flats? Please provide any evidence to support your answer

No.

It is not clear what evidence base the figures included in the consultation are derived from. However, it is clear is that the existing number of accessible homes is inadequate for current needs, and that demand for accessible and adaptable homes will only increase given demographic trends.

Over the past decade, the English Housing Survey shows we have only managed to increase the number of households with at least one adaptation for a person with a disability by 1%, from 9% to 10%. Only 9% of homes in England have all four accessibility features.⁴

The proportion of wheelchair users that live in accessible and adapted homes has remained similar across the decade. 57% of wheelchair users live in an adapted home and only 16% live in an accessible home.⁵

Yet, increasing numbers of us are living into our 70s, 80s, 90s and beyond – within five years the over 60s will make-up over 25% of the English population.⁶ As the number of older people increases, so too does the proportion of the population with disability, accessibility and mobility requirements.

A survey carried out by the Centre of Ageing Better of local authority housing and planning officers found that 97% of local authorities say their need for accessible homes will increase in the next 10 years, with a quarter of local authorities surveyed describing their need for accessible homes as severe. Nearly 90% of

⁴ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, English Housing Survey 2018: accessibility of English homes - fact sheet, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/898205/2018-19_EHS_Adaptations_and_Accessability_Fact_Sheet.pdf, 2020

⁵ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, English Housing Survey 2018: accessibility of English homes - fact sheet, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/898205/2018-19_EHS_Adaptations_and_Accessability_Fact_Sheet.pdf, 2020

⁶ Office for National Statistics, Population projections for regions: Table 1 (London: ONS, 2019) <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationprojections/datasets/tablea21principalprojectionukpopulationinagegroups>

local authorities who completed the survey support campaigning for changes to accessibility standards in Building Regulations.⁷

In addition, the overall number accessible and adaptable homes across England is skewed by the high number of these homes in London. London's policy requiring 90% of new homes be M4(2), with the remaining 10% being M4(3), bolsters the national forecast which shows that 20% of all new homes will be built to M4(2) accessible and adaptable standard by 2030.⁸

Assuming the Government's suggestion that the proportion of new homes built to M4(2) was to increase to 30% without changes to regulation was accurate – this would still mean the majority of new homes would be unsuitable for the needs of our population. We would effectively be building in more costly adaptations for the future, and more health and care costs. This would also have a negative impact on carbon emissions through the need for retrofitting homes in the future.

Q8. Do you have any comments on the costs and benefits of the other options set out above? If yes, please provide your comments including any evidence to support your response.

As mentioned above, the consultation provides a suggested cost of mandating M4(2) across all housing in England it does not however, provide the assumptions that underpin the calculations. This makes it difficult to make a fair judgement on the costs provided.

Additionally, the consultation does not consider the cost of building a home today that will require adapting in the future. If homes are not built to be accessible from the offset, then these costs are simply pushed into the future and on to individuals, the Government, and the taxpayer. It is much more effective to build the type of homes we need now, rather than adapt unsuitable properties in future, often at huge costs. For example, the average Disabled Facilities Grant to adapt a M4(1) home is £7,000 (one-off payment)⁹ and the cost of residential care if your home becomes unsuitable is £29,000 per year.¹⁰ Both of these figures are significantly higher than the Government's suggested cost per new dwelling to meet M4(2) at £1,400.

Retrofitting is not only expensive, but in some instances, not practical because of the design of the home. Future proofing the homes we build now means that less adaptations will be required, and those that are can be achieved more effectively and at lower cost.

It is also unclear whether the consultation has considered the savings that would accrue because of reduced demand for the NHS and social care services. Making all new homes accessible and adaptable will mean that more people will be able to stay in their own homes as their needs change, rather than being forced to move prematurely and unnecessarily into supported or specialist housing which costs

⁷ Centre for Ageing Better, Accessible Housing Report, <https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-11/Accessible-Housing-Report-051120.pdf>, 2020

⁸ Habinteg, A forecast for accessible homes, <https://www.habinteg.org.uk/download.cfm?doc=docm93jjjm4n2151.pdf&ver=2575>, 2019

⁹ Foundations, The Disabled Facilities Grant Before and after the introduction of the Better Care Fund, <http://careandrepair-england.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/dfg-report-final-interactive-converted-draft-6-small.pdf>, 2016

¹⁰ Foundations, Linking Disabled Facilities Grants to Social Care Data: A freedom of information survey, <https://www.foundations.uk.com/media/4210/foundations-dfg-foi-report-nov-2015.pdf>, 2015

much more. It also means that they will be able to visit their family and friends safe in the knowledge that their homes will also be accessible. Returning home from hospital will be smoother and faster, the likelihood of falls and other housing related health problems will be less frequent, and people's need for care at home will reduce, all of which will free up much needed NHS and social care resource.

Finally, the consultation also does not recognise the positive social impact of building more accessible homes. RIBA research shows that 23% of homeowners believe that a better-designed home will increase their happiness; and that they'd be able to relax more (31%) and sleep better (17%).¹¹ The improved mental health associated with having a home that works for you, whatever your circumstances, should not be disregarded.

Q9. Do you have any comments on the initial equality impact assessment?

If yes, please provide your comments including any evidence to further determine the positive and any negative impacts.

Yes.

As mentioned above, no one is disadvantaged by any of the features or components of a M4(2) home. However, the Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) provides no evidence of comparative benefits of the different options. It would be beneficial for Government to explore the impacts of the evidence base for the different options to help inform which option will be the most effective at creating the accessible housing we require.

Other factors, such as house affordability have not been taken into consideration. Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation shows that disabled people or those with a disabled family member are more likely to be living in poverty, have additional costs associated with being disabled, and have less income due to lower pay.¹² It is likely that these people will also be living in smaller housing, in which M4(2) or M4(3) is less likely to be achieved. This has not been considered in the EIA.

¹¹ Royal Institute of British Architects, Pandemic Reveals Demand for UK Home Transformations, <https://www.architecture.com/knowledge-and-resources/knowledge-landing-page/pandemic-reveals-demand-for-uk-home-transformations>, 2020

¹² Joseph Rowntree Foundation, UK Poverty 2019/20: Housing, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/uk-poverty-2019-20-housing>, 2020