

SCOTLAND'S NATIONAL PLANNING FRAMEWORK 4 THINK PIECE – BLOG – PLACES FOR DISABLED PEOPLE

Introduction

The Scottish Government is keen to bring together views and ideas from a wide range of sectors and to explore the priorities Scotland's fourth National Planning Framework (NPF4) should address.

In the twenty-second in a series of Think Pieces, Susie Fitton, Policy Development Officer for Inclusion Scotland, sets out her thoughts on Scotland2050 and specifically places for disabled people. The opinions expressed are that of the author and we hope that they will stimulate debate and discussion. Think Pieces will be published over the coming weeks.

The burden of proof – making the case for accessibility

For almost 15 years I have been making the case for more accessible housing in Scotland.

I am conditioned to hearing from disabled people who have fractured bones from falls at home, parents describing how their disabled children are being washed at school because they can't access their own bathroom, or disabled people in their twenties talking about being discharged from Spinal Units into nursing homes because there are simply no accessible houses available.

The figures I use to emphasise that we have a housing crisis in Scotland for disabled people now trip off the tongue. Over 17,000 wheelchair users living in unsuitable homes across Scotland, set to increase by 80% by 2024; 62,000 people going without an adaptation that they need and over 61,000 people who can't get up or down their own stairs.

The recent statutory inquiry by the Equality and Human Rights Commission gave us all the evidence we need that we have a severe shortage of accessible and adapted houses across all tenures in Scotland.

There has undoubtedly been progress – from the introduction of 'Housing for Varying Needs' in 1998, to the Scottish Government's 2019 guidance on delivering more wheelchair accessible accommodation across all tenures.

All too often however, change is incremental and painfully slow. We are told this may be a 'generational issue' and we see long-term strategies and 'forward looks' when what we need is urgent action.

There seems to be a worrying complacency that Housing for Varying Needs design guidance for social rent, current building standards in the private sector, and the provision of adaptations will meet the housing needs of disabled people into the future. In short: the work around accessibility has already been done.

However, the picture on the ground is very different. 73% of Scotland's Housing Stock was built before 1982 and is therefore not subject to more recent accessibility requirements.

Much of this stock includes pre-1919 tenement flats and post war terraced houses that in many cases cannot be adapted to meet the needs of disabled people.

The newer "Barrier free" homes that do meet general Housing to Varying Needs Standards, while offering choice for some disabled people do not provide the ease of access required by many others, or the additional space needed by wheelchair users. In relation to new build housing in the private sector, the Building Standards in many cases leads to houses being built that may be 'visit-able' by a disabled person but which do not provide sufficient space standards to make them liveable in.

We know an aging population will lead to more people with impairments due to long-term health conditions or frailty. As well as an increase in future demand for wheelchair use indoors and outdoors, there will be a rise in the number using mobility devices such as wheeled walking frames or two walking sticks that require similar accessibility standards to wheelchair users.

To respond to the housing needs of an aging population we need to be ensuring accessibility and greater space standards in all new homes across tenure. We also need proper funding and less bureaucratic systems for supporting adaptations and effective allocation of adapted social housing.

At the very least accessibility and space standards that meet disabled people's needs should be central themes of Scotland's National Planning Framework, as the spatial expression of the Government's Inclusive Growth Strategy.

Do we really need to provide any further evidence to make this happen?

Biography

Susie Fitton is the Policy Development Officer for Inclusion Scotland, a national Disabled People's Organisation. She has worked on disability and housing issues since 2005, firstly for Ownership Options (now Housing Options Scotland) and then as Senior Policy Adviser for Capability Scotland. She is also a board member of Horizon Housing Association.