

Wirral Older People's Parliament



Report of the Wirral Older People's Parliament Housing Conference

25th May 2018

'The Value of Experience'

WOPP have been involved in housing issues since our inception in 2007. We have worked with local housing providers and the local authority to improve the housing options for older people on the Wirral and to improve housing information and advice.

In the last year we have made our own videos about older people's housing experiences and made submissions to the APPG inquiry into housing and older people. Subsequently we were invited to attend a number of sessions and give verbal evidence.

The focus for this project was to bring together the issues and concerns of older people who haven't moved in retirement. We targeted older people in Birkenhead and Wallasey because these are the most deprived parts of the borough and this is also the area where a huge new development is due to be built, called Wirral Waters.

We wanted to ask the questions – *'What's in it for us over 50s or in retirement? Will these new buildings be age proof, sustainable, healthy accessible and adaptable for age and disability?'*

Using the experience we have around housing in later life, we wanted to engage with these older people and those who are working on Wirral Waters to ensure that their voices are heard in the developments proposed.

We invited local MPs, the Council cabinet member responsible for housing, local housing associations, architects, the Fire and Rescue service and other housing support services to facilitate discussions and answer questions from participants.



Our promotional efforts worked with over 100 older people attending. Our biggest disappointment came when the MP for Birkenhead, Frank Field declined the invitation despite having said he is responsible for Wirral Waters coming to fruition.

The MP for Wallasey, Angela Eagle was also unable to attend. We were disappointed but were hopeful the Wirral Council cabinet member for housing, George Davies would attend to hear people's concerns and issues with the proposed development but he didn't show up, or send an alternative representative.

Peel Holdings, the Wirral Waters developer referred our invitation to Belong Villages who are building a specialist extra-care facility within development, which will be for sale or rent.

Our disappointment was compounded by last minute withdrawals because of personal misfortunes from the architect who specialises in dementia friendly design and the town planner with experience of age friendly design although they both contacted us as far in advance as they were able but it was not enough time to find alternatives to replace them.

The biggest let-down was Councillor George Davies, cabinet member for housing and planning who just didn't turn up. He did apologise later the following week and said he would meet with parliament members at a future date but that meant he missed the opportunity to hear the issues and concerns of local people over the proposed development and the impact it will have on their area and community.

Consequently, we had to rejig the programme for the day somewhat. As we didn't have all the expertise on hand, we enlisted the support of local housing providers, Magenta Living who are the largest local social housing provider and Alpha Homes

who are a Wirral based sheltered housing provider who have worked with us in the past, to support the table discussions and Wendy Cocks from Care and Repair England helped fill in some of the gaps.

Our invitation list was extensive but on the day, we struggled to get professionals to attend. Despite these gaps we did have enough people from other bodies, including the Fire Service and other support services present gather people's views and to give some answers on more general questions that were raised on the day.

The provision of transport enabled all to attend including one woman who hadn't been out of her home for several months. She and her husband were vocal about the lack of support in their situation.

The venue was attractive and accessible being in the Port Sunlight village which also helped with the recruitment of participants. Having the meeting there helped people to focus on what good design has been in the past and to look to what the future development at Wirral Waters could be.

On each table were resource packs for people to take away including information from Silverlinks' "Later Life Housing & Care Options", Wirral Age UK, "Home Share Possibilities" and Wirral Emergency Services booklet "Wirral Safety News" courtesy of Mid Wirral Crime Prevention Panel, together with leaflets and contact details for "Extra Help" cleaning services, and Community Connectors.



Programme for the Day

Welcome from Ray Johnston – chairman of Wirral Older People's Parliament.

Introductions of the topic for the day and those organisations present (at this point we were still hopeful that Councillor Davies would arrive).

Table discussion – People were encouraged to introduce themselves to each other and talk about their housing situation and what you would like to see.

Questions and Answers - The professionals then moved to a panel table where they were asked to answer questions from the tables.

The Chair then started the proceedings with a question he had:

"WOPP wanted to have this event following on from our involvement at national level with the APPG enquiry into housing and older people. The final report said that enough is not being done but proposed all the things we suggested: homes built for older people should be accessible, adaptable and sustainable. What are builders on Wirral Waters doing to meet these standards? How many places will be there be suitable for older people?"

Belong Villages talked about their plans for an extra care facility as part of Wirral Waters which will have 34 apartments, including 14 2-bed apartments and the care side will cater for 72 people with varying care needs. Their villages include hairdressers, cafes, gyms, social spaces and are, they told us, open to the public.

This kicked off a good discussion about what makes a home accessible and adaptable. With the images available of proposals so far that seem to include medium and high-rise apartments there was real concern expressed about older people living in tower blocks, particularly after the Grenfell Tower fire and this week's harrowing commemoration hearings at the public inquiry. There was real concern about evacuation procedures in a high rise building where so many residents may have mobility problems.

"Is it right that older people are going into apartments in high rise buildings? What if there is a fire? How will they all get out if you can't use the lift?"

The Merseyside Fire and Rescue service representative did all he could to allay people's fears talking about latest building standards and reviews of all high-rise buildings and cladding used.

"There was a report out recently that said older people should downsize and be paying for younger people to get on the housing ladder. But we can't find anything we want to move to or could afford to buy. We're stuck."

In the absence of any other voices, the two social housing providers talked from their experience. Alpha Homes have recently been doing a consultation with tenants in their supported living schemes. From this work they have learned that most people want to have options and many wished they had chosen earlier rather than when circumstances forced them to make a choice whether through divorce or ill health.



"While there is lots of discussion about getting younger people on the housing ladder and shared ownership, what about shared ownership in later life? There doesn't seem to be any on Wirral."

Unfortunately, we didn't have anyone who could answer this question.

"Well, why aren't more bungalows built?"

With the absence of the architects and Council spokesperson, this was left to Care and Repair England. Developers' usual response is that bungalows take up too much land and so would be too expensive. But Sheffield University Architecture School had been doing some work on this topic and come up with a number of Age Friendly house designs that would answer these questions. Papworth Housing Trust in Suffolk have also come up with a fully wheelchair accessible bungalow that has the same footprint as a 2-bed house. The challenge is getting developers on board.

"I live in a housing association bungalow. Can I buy it with the Right to Buy?"

The two housing providers were not sure but one did say she would like to think this was an option for herself! It might depend if it is part of existing sheltered housing scheme or if it was a stand along bungalow as someone in the North East was challenging his Council because he wanted to buy his bungalow so this may still be subject to case law.

"Do architects and builders really know the problems of getting older? I use a mobility scooter and would like to know that wherever I live, my scooter can come too. Some places expect you to leave them at the door and walk. Are they building accessibility and adaptability into homes and is there legislation that requires this? Doesn't the Council have to inspect the dropped kerbs to make sure they are even?"

With the Council member for Housing still absent, we weren't able to get a reply for this question.

"I have thought about where I want to live and have found a sheltered housing scheme near me but I don't know how to get in. I used to know the manager when my husband was a live but she has retired, my husband has died and I am visually impaired so I don't know how I go about it anymore. Who do I ask?"

This was one of several similar questions. In other parts of the region, Housing Options for Older People workers exist to assist people in this situation, offering support and advice. This will be something the Parliament can pursue as follow up to this event.

Issues raised which we (WOPP) will take forward:

1. Wirral Waters does not seem to have clear plans to build accessible, adaptable, sustainable housing for older people apart from one extra care scheme. There was no indication of the cost to residents for this facility so we don't know if this will be affordable for older people from Birkenhead and Wallasey.
2. Older people are concerned about living in high rise accommodation particularly in the event of fire and the risk to life because of the time and support needed to evacuate a high-rise building.
3. The cost of new housing can be a barrier to moving but shared ownership or right to buy for existing bungalows is something people would like to see available.
4. Build more bungalows and encourage developers to see the possibilities.

Next Steps:

In the absence of key decision makers, we are producing a short report of key points arising from the discussion and will take this to a follow up meeting with the Councillor Davies, cabinet member with responsibility for housing. We will then try to influence the developments at Wirral Waters through him.

We will share the report with local housing providers to encourage them to respond to the issues raised.

We have still to agree the final edit of the film of the event but anticipate using this to influence local and national housing policy and strategy.

Thanks to Care & Repair England and the Esmèe Fairbairn Trust for supporting this work.



Ray Johnston

**Chair
Wirral Older People's
Parliament**