

Retirement living

Legal update: Autumn 2011

Publication of the draft National Planning Policy Framework ('NPPF') has made it clear that the Government's agenda is now pro development. There is a clear recognition that the planning system needs to provide an increased supply of housing to meet the needs of present and future generations. The key message, however, is that this development must be sustainable development.

With increasing demand for retirement housing, the pro sustainable development agenda should perhaps be welcomed. Retirement housing can provide accommodation that fulfils the Government's objectives of creating sustainable and inclusive communities. The principle and definition of sustainable development is set out at the beginning of the NPPF and is split into three roles, which the Government is keen to have pursued in an integrated manner:

1. An economic role
2. A social role
3. An environmental role

Retirement housing has the potential to fulfil all three of the above objectives, and is well placed to stand out as a good example of sustainable development. In terms of playing an economic role, retirement housing can create many benefits. Forms of retirement housing can often generate much needed employment, for example, premises management or where domiciliary or nursing care is required. Wider economic benefits can also be created by increasing demand for local shops and businesses that supply goods and services. If attractive retirement housing alternatives can be provided to encourage the sale of family homes, this may also release some of £611 billion of equity held by homeowners over the age of 65 (Prudential equity release index, 2009), back into the economy.

In respect of providing a social role, more retirement housing is critical to meet the needs of present and future generations. Our population is ageing and the current limited supply and choice of retirement housing means there are few options, and what is available can often be expensive or undesirable. Freeing up of larger properties will play an important part in helping tackle housing targets.

Retirement housing can also create sustainable communities, where residents may eat together, grow their own produce, operate car clubs and arrange collective outings and activities.

In terms of an environmental role, retirement housing can be designed to meet the high levels of sustainability set out in the Code for Sustainable Homes, as shared buildings and shared facilities lend themselves to this form of sustainable living. As identified by the HAPPI report, older people can become increasingly sensitive to changes in temperature, and combined with spending more time at home, it is important for retirement housing to be designed to minimise the cost of heating and cooling. There is the demand, therefore, for retirement housing to become a leader in the provision of homes which are energy-efficient and well insulated, well ventilated and able to avoid overheating by careful design.

Conclusion

The NPPF reiterates the Government's goal of creating sustainable communities, and the belief that the "planning system can play an important role in facilitating social interaction and creating inclusive communities". The concern is, however, that those local planning authorities who have always resisted development will continue to do so. Local planning authorities may conclude that for all the sustainability criteria which retirement housing can meet, a proposed development has adverse impacts that significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits. We could see a return to planning by appeal, with the Planning Inspectorate taking a correct interpretation of the NPPF's pro sustainable development stance where the local authority does not have an up to date development plan.

The agenda for localism does, however, aim to give power to local people as well as local authorities. The fact that the NPPF is a slimmed down series of planning policies, leaves freedom for more choice, and the opportunity for local people to decide what they want in their area and how they will interpret sustainable development. Retirement housing has the benefit of being less controversial than other forms of housing, as well as being suited to meet the objectives of sustainable development. Accordingly, the NPPF and proposed changes at a local level, such as the introduction of Neighbourhood Plans, may enable local people to specify the type of development they wish to have in their neighbourhood, and provide opportunities to increase development in this specialist sector.

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