

This blog is written by a member of the independent Commission. These views do not necessarily represent the views of the Archbishops' or the Church of England.

How can we best help each other flourish? That question lies at the heart of the rich hoard of recent reviews, reports, consultations on improving care and support. This Commission too is charged with suggesting how care could be better designed to meet the needs of meet the needs of future generations of disabled adults and older people. At one end of the spectrum lies the intricate, often complex daily care provided by skilled and dedicated workers. At the other lies the quiet, unobtrusive neighbourly support that spots emerging problems and helps prevent the isolation that stops individuals getting help as early as they should.

Thoughtful design of care is one challenge. Another is the careful physical design of the buildings where we live, and the spaces in between. Planners, developers and architects who work with residents to understand the interplay between human behaviours and the built environment know how to foster that quiet community support. HAPPI¹ building standards for new developments pay attention to the role of the balcony, the bay window, the route to the bus-stop. The SCIE's recent report² sets out a roadmap for the essential role of housing and public realm design in fostering that gentle neighbourhood support. It may now be a commonplace that smooth access works as well for those with pushchairs and bikes as those with rollators and wheelchairs. The truth remains that barriers to mobility create unnecessary dependence. Intelligent design, which pays attention to our interdependence, makes social connectivity so much easier to maintain.

Here are just three examples of the low-key benefit good public design can bring.

An abiding memory from the first Covid lockdown was musicians singing and playing from their balconies, putting on impromptu concerts for the delight of neighbours distanced, but connected. Debussy said that "music happens in the space between the notes". For some older people living in isolation, the balcony became the only place for any community engagement. An instance, perhaps, that demonstrates community support happening in the space between the buildings.

And the bay-window: we also saw picture after picture of older people in residential homes, gazing out. That simple 180 degree panorama enabled at least a visual connection to the neighbourhood, to family and friends when an in person contact was not allowed. Good window placement really matters, not just for light and connection to the world outside. Some sheltered housing schemes ingeniously offer independent flats which have their kitchen windows facing along the inside corridors. These create a kind of covered terraced street, down which neighbours can keep a gentle eye out for each other. Without the need for struggling with an umbrella.

Now that life has resumed beyond the front door, the well-lit accessible path that leads to the all-important bus-stop is a lifeline for so many older people. It symbolises connection beyond the front door to the places that make a continuing good life possible: the shops, the grandchildren, the pub, the church. The bus-stop offers shelter, good light, and a solid perching bench. Some rural bus-stops have been adapted as Bring One Take One libraries creating a gathering place for those whose bus-travelling days are done but for whom reading creates a connection. Here, the companionship of neighbours also means the chance to see how neighbours are doing, sharing information not just about needs but also opportunities. Stories of the bus-stop as a community hub are legion. Indeed, there is an extra-care scheme in south London that has positioned a bus stop in its front garden. No longer a stopping place on a Transport for London route; but where residents congregate and chatter in the fresh air. The safe place where one elderly resident, with a tendency to night-wander, will always be found: and can be safely gathered back in.

For designers, finding ingenious ways to foster human connection in the spaces in between is what helps communities help all their neighbours thrive.

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- 1https://www.housinglin.org.uk/_assets/Resources/Housing/Support_materials/Other_reports_and_guidance/Happi_Final_Report.pdf
- 2<https://www.scie.org.uk/housing/role-of-housing>

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