



A grand plan

From a build perspective, the refurbishment of a kitchen or bathroom for a disabled tenant should not be substantially different from any other project – but it does come with unique challenges. Josephine O'Connor of Vinci Facilities offers some advice and emphasises the importance of planning.

The secret to working with disabled tenants is never to take them for granted. The actual build work required for the refurbishment of their flat or home is no different from any other, but the big difference is appreciating the level of disability of the resident themselves.

That might seem obvious, but all too often in our society – and, therefore, in construction – it is too easy to simplify disability and pigeonhole people using simple definitions such as wheelchair users, visually impaired people or the elderly and infirm. Disability is far more wide-ranging and this is the challenge.

For contractors, the real skill is in properly assessing, then understanding and appreciating the relative disability and the nature of the tenant's condition. Once this is judged then a project can be planned

sympathetically and efficiently – working around the requirements of the individual within the brief set out by the landlord.

Understanding an individual's needs

Disability ranges from wheelchair users with some use of their legs and those who are totally wheelchair-bound to someone whose ability to interact socially is restricted due to a condition such as autism. Before any work starts, we have to understand what the individual needs. We need to ask how exactly we can help improve the quality of their life – what extra things other than just a new kitchen or bathroom will make the difference to their day-to-day routine.

This means there is a requirement for contractors to invest their own time in a thorough customer- or tenant-liaison process



– ideally to establish a one-to-one relationship with the tenant. It is vital to not just assess the built fabric needs of the tenant, but to build trust and educate them about the physical process of the refurbishment – because for many mobile people living in social housing, let alone the disabled, such work can be upsetting and intrusive at the best of times.

For disabled people, this means second-

guessing their concerns and making the transition from the old life to the new life in a refurbished property as good as it can possibly be. Essentially this involves a resident consultation and often means extensive liaison with tenant officers, families and in some cases an assigned carer as well as social workers and doctors. Perhaps more importantly, it also means adhering to strict protocols set out by the landlord and following safeguarding procedures. The key thing is that tenants – no matter what their degree or type of disability – are kept informed and reassured of the project plans.

Meeting the relevant legislation

All of this occurs in parallel to the actual preparations for the refurbishment work itself. Again the theme of compliance is ever-present throughout any planning. All works will need to be assessed to make sure they meet with building regulations and DDA legislation – not just the practical physical daily needs of the tenant.

This means considering the extras that make all of the difference alongside the



compliance issues. Door widths might need altering to make it easier for wheelchair users to move around their home. At the same time, passageways and halls might need different finishing for ease of cleaning, access or maintenance – for example, floor surfaces will need to be a lot more durable.

It might be helpful and more energy-efficient for some tenants to have their homes fitted with motion-activated lighting, or perhaps some other technology to enhance their quality of life. To an extent, this might seem over the top for what might start out as looking like a simple social housing bathroom or kitchen refurbishment – but in these situations the needs and comfort of the end user must always be the priority. To that end, it is almost always the case that contractors and

landlords will need to bring in expert advice from occupational health advisors.

This can take time – but it is time well used. Once all of the details are agreed then the contract managers and their teams can carefully plan and phase the work; agreeing at which stage each trade will enter the property and timing the project to the hour. In some instances we have discussed a refurbishment project with a tenant and their landlord for almost 18 months. Then, once the plans are finalised and a date has been set the works might finish inside of 11 working days with tradesman working around each other at pace to finish the job and cause as little intrusion and disruption to the tenant as possible.

So, the answer is never take the tenant and their disability for granted; focus on their needs and what will improve their quality of life – and then plan and plan and plan again.

Josephine O'Connor is business & community investment manager for Vinci Facilities.

Readerlink 135



specifybristan.com