

# Access all areas

The Queen's newly installed Balmoral lift has put future-proofing on the agenda. Making homes mobility-friendly doesn't have to mean making them clinical, reports *Kate Watson-Smyth*



The installation of a home lift for the Queen has focused attention on the need to future-proof homes for an ageing population

When the Queen pulled out of the state opening of parliament for only the third time in her 70-year reign (the other two times she was pregnant) it felt like a moment. The Palace said that the 96-year-old was suffering from “episodic mobility issues”, something that will certainly affect more and more of us as the UK ages.

The Queen has also, it has been revealed, installed a wheelchair-friendly home lift at Craigowan Lodge on the Balmoral estate. And with that the issue of future-proofing is firmly on the agenda.

It's not before time. While 80 per cent of people say they want to remain in their own homes as they age and 20 per cent of over-60s want a new home to be future-proofed, only 9 per cent of British homes meet the basic standard of accessibility, according to the charity Centre for Ageing Better. That basic standard means level access, wide doors and hallways and an accessible bathroom.

Gordon Whistance, a designer who specialised in accessible interiors for the BBC1 show *DIY SOS* and now works on *Nick Knowles' Big*

*House Clearout* on Channel 5, says: “The expression ‘future proofing’ is simply shorthand for preparing for any known, or indeed unknown, developments in the way we will live in our homes. It could be mobility related, sight related or just getting older.

“It doesn't mean turning your home into a hospital. It means being mindful of the purchases you make and the provisions you consider during any building work you may do — fully accessible spaces can be gorgeous too.”

Ed Warner, the co-founder of Fine & Able, a company specialising in accessible bathrooms from design through to installation, says the bathroom tends to be the first room we think of when it comes to adaptability, and that with good design and clever product choices bathrooms can become adaptable spaces that flex to support you over time.

“Creating a future-proof bathroom means removing obstacles, clever changes to layout — such as reinforcing stud walls with plywood before tiling so they are strong enough to take grab rails later — and subtly adjusted heights to create a space that is easy to move around in and keep clean.

“This can all be done without compromising on style or looking clinical. But it means considering the things you don't want to think about — like a carer and wheelchair access should you ever have



the need — because planning this into the design process now is significantly more cost effective and environmentally sustainable than retrofitting down the line.”

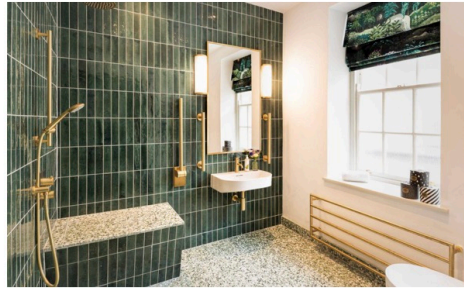
Warner is keen to point out that these design elements are practically invisible and make an accessible space for all. “Small children would fall over less with non-slip tiles and someone with a broken leg might want to sit down in the shower,” he says.

When it comes to lifts, while one imagines the Queen isn’t short of space, Warner suggests installing cupboards in the same place on each floor, which could be removed to make way for a lift shaft.

Katie Woods, a dentist turned influencer, has just finished renovating her holiday home in Salcombe, Devon, to be as accessible as possible. She spent about £10,000 on a downstairs bathroom and made sure the levels are the same from the front drive to the back of the garden — something that was not always easy in a 200-year-old house.

She installed toggle light switches and large handles as well as intelligent lighting activated by sensors in the hallway and bathrooms. In the bathroom, which is a beautiful green tiled space that is not remotely clinical, she made sure the doors were wide and added a shower seat.

“We tiled the seat the same as the walls, so it felt seamless, and heated it for comfort. The



**Katie Woods created an accessible bathroom in her Devon holiday home**  
SIMON TUTTY

sink is set lower, with no vanity unit, so there is space for a wheelchair, and the mirror is large and low,” she says.

“Everyone has their own accessibility needs, so it is impossible to cater for everyone. We don’t have a hoist or an accessible bath as the room isn’t big enough, but there is space for a mobile hoist that would fit people’s own slings. I wanted to create a place where accessibility wasn’t an afterthought and where it blended seamlessly.”

But what about the rest of the house? When it comes to the kitchen, if you can find space for an eye-level oven your future creaking back will thank your young flexible vertebrae.

Sandra Harris is in her sixties and recently renovated her house for her “golden years” after retiring in 2019.

Harris, who was a HR consultant for 20 years, says: “We looked at future-proofing under one heading: what should we do now that will help as we grow older and would mean less disruption later?”



**The lower island at Katie Wood’s holiday home in Devon allows wheelchair access. Design by Day True**  
SIMON TUTTY

Like Woods’s home, her ground floor is on one level, with easy-to-push sliding doors. She left a 2m space between the island and the rest of the room to allow ease of movement.

“In our last home we had a range cooker but with cast-iron pots as well,” Harris says. “There was an awful lot of heavy lifting. In addition to an eye-level oven, we opted for a hob with built-in extractor. It’s much easier to use than the range cooker with the multiple rings, and even just moving from one cooking zone to another is easier on a hob.

“We have a long shelf in the kitchen with some decorative items and a few cups and glasses. It means no reaching up into tall wall cupboards.”

Oh yes, those cupboards. Elaine Fraser, who has completed a course in dementia studies at Stirling University, says one investment that will pay off in later years is installing glass cupboard fronts so you can see what’s inside.

“Thought is now being given to memory problems in later



life where design can be very important and clearly visible,” she says.

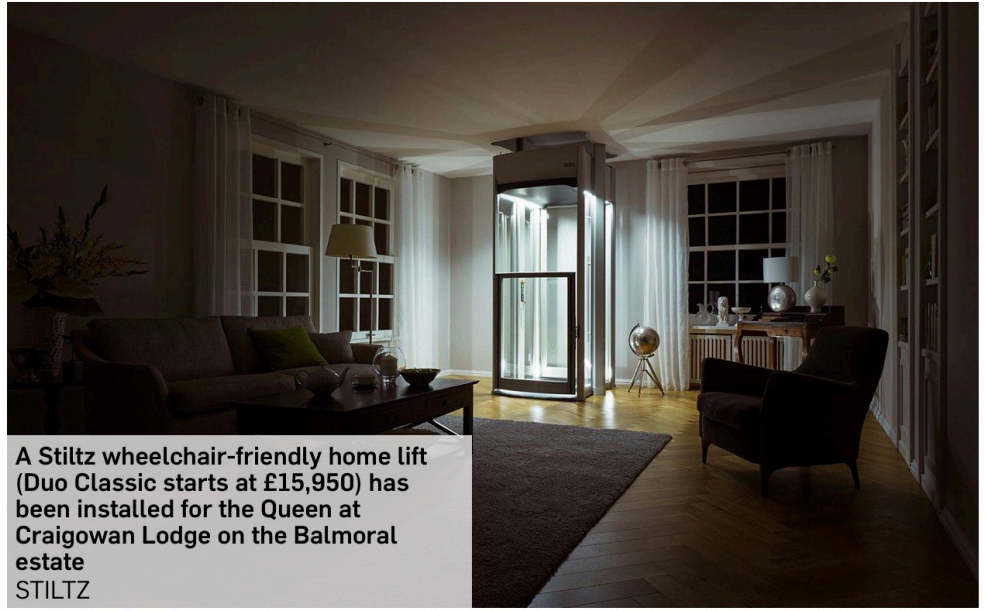
“It can also be helpful to change the flooring between rooms so that elderly people can immediately tell which room they are in.”

Jane Dale, who is living with dementia, says: “Simple and thoughtful day-to-day home redesign becomes a life-saver [when properly considered]. Living with memory loss and not a little confusion, what you can easily see, and therefore access, is the most helpful of all prompts. That takes enormous pressure off the energy reserves needed to negotiate dementia.”

When it comes to sitting rooms and bedrooms, we all know that the more floor you see, the bigger the room looks, so choosing furniture on legs is perfect. And a raised chair is also easier to stand up from than a low-level sofa.

Ligne Roset, the French brand famous for the design classic Togo sofa, has launched the Phileas, created to suit all the design lovers who had grown up with the Togo but wanted something a little easier to get up out of as they grew older.

Jo Williams, who uses a wheelchair after a spinal stroke in 2018, was determined to keep her home from looking clinical when she redesigned it. Williams, who works for the accessible design specialist Motionspot, has installed smart lightbulbs that she can control with her phone



A Stiltz wheelchair-friendly home lift (Duo Classic starts at £15,950) has been installed for the Queen at Craigowan Lodge on the Balmoral estate  
STILTZ

or voice, and found a modular corner sofa gave more space for her wheelchair between it and the coffee table.

“In the kitchen we paid close attention to where we put the white goods so I could reach as much of them as possible, and put the instant hot water tap to the side of, rather than behind, the sink.

“We removed the kickboard from under the units so the doors open to the floor and I can roll right up to, and under, the sink in my wheelchair. We added an island on shorter legs with an overhanging top so I can prepare food there.”

Her bathroom is a riot of colour, pattern and materials, while remaining fully accessible for her chair.

Whistance notes that most manufacturers of specialist furniture or equipment will have a bespoke section, so you can select designs, fabrics, colours or finishes to complement your home.

“These days it really doesn’t have to be dreary or institutional. Colour and pattern are so important and have a huge impact on our moods, how we live and flourish,” he says.

“Wider doors, larger hallways and landings are good where possible, as it’s not just moving around but also storing items like wheelchairs and walking aides when they are not in use.

“And simple things like buying a smaller dining table so there’s more space around it can be enormously helpful to people who need a bit more room to manoeuvre.

“It’s this sort of thoughtful change that can make someone’s home so much more comfortable for so much longer.”

*Katie Woods’s Smurf House is available to rent via Unique Holiday Stays; [uniqueholidaystays.co.uk](http://uniqueholidaystays.co.uk)* ■