

Peter Costello

27 June 2016

The Secretary, Legal, and Social Issues Committee,
Parliament House,
Spring Street, East Melbourne,
VIC 3002

Dear Secretary,

Retirement Housing Submission – insensitivity to the needs of older people

My wife (aged 84) and I (aged 87) have lived in [REDACTED] for 17 years. My wife had a stroke four years ago and is no longer steady on her feet. Our only income is the age pension. We are typical of a large segment of the retirement village market.

For some years, water leaked from our shower through the wall and into our kitchen. We reported it regularly. The water rotted the studs and the plinth, and caused the plaster to disintegrate at floor level.

Similarly, for some years our shower was hard to adjust. We could never get it just right, it was either too hot or too cold. The Village arranged for a plumber to inspect it several times. He could not work out what caused the problem. Eventually, he suggested there was something wrong with the mixing chamber and recommended cutting through the plaster from the kitchen side to get at it.

Several units had similar problems. In 2014, the Residents' Council (the local name for the residents' committee) pressed the Village Manager at the time to schedule complete bathroom upgrades for the affected units.

Work commenced on our bathroom in June 2015. We moved out of our unit and stayed with our daughter for a little over two weeks while work was underway.

Our new bathroom looks good, but it is not elder friendly

There were numerous design problems with the bathroom as built.

The bathroom door opens into the room. If you are inside with the door closed and open one of the drawers under the vanity bench, you block the door from opening. If my wife had another stroke, this time in the bathroom, I would not be able to get to her. I complained about this safety problem, amongst others, several times. The Village Manager eventually had the builder modify the hinges, so the pins were removable, and thus the door was theoretically removable. I have tried to remove the door. I cannot.

The shower cubicle has no door. Also, it has no step or lip. Apparently, this design is known as a zero threshold entry. This feature enhances safety if done properly. The first time we used the shower we noticed a film of water ran towards the vanity basin. I complained. The Village Manager talked about installing a sliding door. He did nothing. I complained again. He talked of installing a sheet of glass to reduce the spray reaching the opening. He did nothing. Eventually, he had the builder install sliding door. It works well.

The toiletries shelf in the shower is too high on the wall and in an inconvenient place. Initially we had to keep some items on the floor and bend to pick them up. This was unsafe. We bought a shelf that fastens to the wall with suction cups. This solution is less than perfect.

The vanity mirror is unnecessarily large and takes up the whole length of the vanity unit. Our old bathroom had his and her' eye level storage shelves above the vanity. Now we have none. We have to store every item we previously had at eye level under the bench. This means we have to bend down to get at them. Why make old people bend down to get frequently used items? It's unsafe. I complained to the Village Manager. He talked about installing a shelf on the wall beside the vanity. He did nothing.

The bathroom floor is 1cm higher than the floor of the rest of the unit. This means our new bathroom has a 1 cm lip at the entry. It has always been there. We pointed out to the Village Manager that the company missed an opportunity to remove the lip. He countered that a 1cm lip was acceptable. He later had a metal strip laid along the lip. This increases its height to almost 2 cm but does make the lip more noticeable.

The new bathroom has no grab rails. The Village Manager advised us it was our responsibility to install grab rails if we needed them. The question is where? There is no obvious place. There is a towel rail on the wall just outside the shower we grab hold onto if we felt at risk of slipping. This towel rail was loose when we moved in. I noticed the wall lining was plaster rather than a thick fibre reinforced board that would take a grab rail.

The Village Manager had the towel rail reattached. Shortly after I slipped on the wet floor and grabbed the towel rail. It again came away from the wall. It is no substitute for a grab rail. If I had slipped inside the shower and grabbed the shower pole, I suspect it too would have come away from the wall.

I also complained about some workmanship problems. These problems and the fact that our unit was covered in builders dust when we returned to it led me to conclude that the Village Manager had not done an inspection before declaring it was ready for occupation. Surely that's part of the job?

The company that owns the village constructs multi-story residential buildings and develops housing estates. It owns more than 80 retirement villages with a total of something like 15,000 units. If any company knew how to design bathrooms to meet its customers' needs, it should be the one. If our experience is any guide, it has not got much of an idea. I understand from my golf club friends; some other retirement village owners are no better.

I ask the Committee to recommend the publication of a set of standards covering all aspects of retirement village design, construction, and workmanship. I suggest the Government cannot rely on the operators to do the right thing by elderly Victorians.

If Parliament protects me from legal action by anyone I have mentioned or identified, you may publish this letter and call me to appear before the Committee.

Yours faithfully,

Peter Costello

