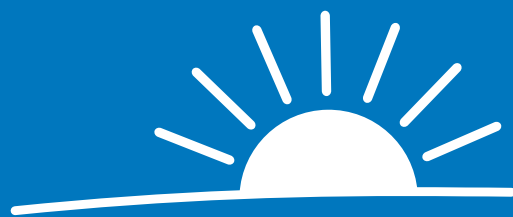


Surviving at the margins

Older Homeless people and the organisations that support them

a report for Help the Aged by Jenny Pannell,
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Help the Aged

Summary

Through the Older Homelessness Partnership Programme, Housing Associations' Charitable Trust (hact), Help the Aged and Crisis have funded 17 innovative projects throughout the UK, together with an evaluation of the overall programme. The programme was established in 1998 with the aim of providing long-term solutions for older homeless people, or those at risk of homelessness, by identifying, funding and promoting models of good practice. The majority of the funded projects provided direct services for older people vulnerable to homelessness, including street outreach and day centre services; resettlement and tenancy sustainment; and housing and benefits advice. A smaller number of projects developed older homelessness services through policy, research and training initiatives.

Chapter 1

Older people vulnerable to homelessness have become the 'forgotten homeless' in policy debates and service provision. Older people tend to be less visible and less vocal than other groups. This is reflected in policy initiatives and the research agenda, which concentrate on

homelessness among families with children, and single young people. More recent research identifies different groups of older homeless people and has begun to draw out specific, complex issues with respect to their vulnerability and needs. A number of related housing and social policy areas are currently under national and local scrutiny, and the report shows how their implementation will have a direct impact on the health and welfare of older homeless people and those at risk of homelessness.

Chapter 2

The experiences and stories of the older people involved in the research reveal a patchwork of older homelessness. Common circumstances and experiences can be identified, and often a multitude of issues combine to create complex and entrenched situations for vulnerable older people. The report uses five case studies to illustrate these situations and show what helps older people to avoid or escape a cycle of homelessness, and what hinders them from doing so.



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A number of striking themes emerge from the research which challenge images of older homeless people as 'tramp'-like figures who 'choose' such a lifestyle. Older people become, or remain, homeless because they are unaware of, or alienated from, services. Most have worked regularly in adult life and many have had spouses and children, and led settled lives until the onset of homelessness. Others have suffered trauma and abuse and this has contributed to their homelessness. Many are estranged from family and friends. This can be so even for those older people who have been securely housed in the past.

Chapter 3

The report profiles the breadth of work undertaken with older homeless people and reveals the great range and diversity of homelessness projects in the programme. One group of projects focused on resettlement and tenancy support roles, while others offered outreach, day centre, direct access and supported housing services. A minority of non-service delivery projects focused on developing homelessness services and researched the area. Key characteristics of the older people with whom the projects have worked are explored, alongside their presenting needs and the reasons for referral to older homelessness projects.

Chapter 4

This chapter gives a detailed exploration of how older people vulnerable to homelessness gain access to housing, care and support services. Both older people and project workers face gaps, weaknesses and barriers in using these services. However, innovative work in this programme has shown how it is possible to overcome these obstacles. Specialist staff can be key to the process. Their understanding of needs and available resources is coupled with skilled and sensitive approaches to work with often chronically vulnerable people.

When older people have been rough sleepers for many years, entrenched and complex difficulties are encountered, including far-reaching mental and physical health issues. Alongside more immediate needs, these older people also require assistance to adjust to a radically different lifestyle from the one they have become accustomed to, in order to move 'inside'. Other older people, successfully resettled into appropriate accommodation, may need ongoing support for some considerable time, if not on an indefinite basis, in order to remain housed. In between these scenarios are older people who need specialist advice and support in a range of areas, from benefits and money management to accessing different forms of housing, and mainstream medical and social care services.

Chapter 5

Older homelessness cannot be understood without an appreciation of the ways in which the benefits system impacts on older people, whether by helping them out of homelessness or, more often, pushing them into it. Older people vulnerable to homelessness become entangled in confusing issues around entitlement, complex combinations of benefits, and managing (or not managing) bureaucratic systems. Problems with Housing Benefit administration are a particular issue. Again, specialist workers can play a key role in advocating for older people wrestling with these problems. Specific recommendations for changes to benefits and the benefits system appear in this chapter.

Chapter 6

Voluntary agencies working in this area also 'survive at the margins', in a sector climate that leads to fragile organisations and fragile services. Voluntary organisations have provided services for homeless people over many decades. However, the culture in which they operate has significantly changed, as have the services they deliver in a more demanding, professional environment. For example, there is a greater reliance by funders on time-limited funding linked to specific initiatives, which heavily influences provision and delivery of services. Funding anomalies and other recruitment and employment issues create uncertain futures for projects and workers alike. However, it is older homeless people who experience the full impact of these when workers change or leave, or when services diminish or cease.

Chapter 7

The Older Homelessness Partnership Programme is set within the context of partnership working at different levels and the challenges presented by this. Partnership processes are explored between the three national funding charities, between them and the projects, and also between agencies involved with older homeless people at the local level. Importantly, partnerships with service users again raise the challenges of working with vulnerable people who 'don't make a noise, don't get heard'. The report argues that to ensure that users' own concepts of involvement are made possible and visible, broad and flexible interpretations of what constitutes user involvement are crucial. Developments in this area are also dependent upon realistic targeted funding to support active involvement by older homeless people.

Chapter 8

Policy and practice recommendations are directed at national funders, service delivery organisations, government agencies, and local government and other statutory providers. Emphasis is placed on raising the profile and highlighting the needs of older people vulnerable to homelessness at all levels of national and local policy-making. In addition, specialist services for these users should be linked clearly to the wider work of agencies operating on behalf of older or homeless people. This approach would create more viable opportunities for sustainable work in the area. Further targeted funding is needed to establish and address the needs of specific groups of older people at risk of homelessness.

For a copy of the full report, contact:

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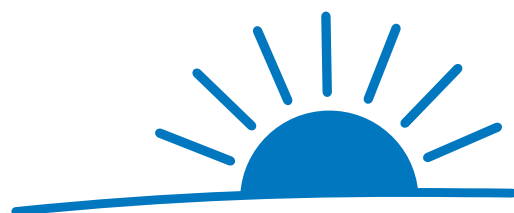
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Help the Aged

Working for a future where older people
are highly valued, have lives that are richer
and voices that are heard.

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