

# Older homelessness

## (England)

July 2019

**No older person should find themselves homeless, either living in unsuitable temporary accommodation or sleeping rough on the streets**



“The Local Government Association, which represents more than 370 councils in England and Wales, warned that based on existing trends, the scale of elderly homelessness is set to double by 2025.”  
*The Independent, Oct 2017*

### Defining older homelessness

Older homeless people sleeping rough or living in temporary accommodation are often identified as those aged 55 and above, because homelessness and long periods of rough sleeping can accelerate ageing and the health conditions associated with ageing. The average age of death for a homeless person is 47 and 43 for women.<sup>i</sup>

A broader definition of homelessness considers the elements needed to allow somewhere to be called ‘home’. This should include levels of repair and accessibility, security and safety as well as affordability. There are a growing number of older people living in insecure and sub-standard private rented accommodation who need decent, secure and affordable housing. Older tenants

### Key statistics

**9-12%**

of rough sleepers are estimated to be 55+

**Over 2,500**

people aged 60+ were officially homeless in 2018 – double the number in 2009

**Around 4,000**

older people are estimated to be in hostels in any one night

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with an assured shorthold tenancy can be evicted on a 'no-fault' basis after 6 months. The loss of a private tenancy is a major cause of homelessness, combined with the absence of social rented housing options. Overall, we know that over 2 million older people are living in non-decent housing in England. Older people may struggle with excessive rents or energy costs. They may face domestic violence or abuse and have fears about their safety. All these different factors undermine the ability to call somewhere a settled home and can have a terrible impact on health and wellbeing. We also know that older homelessness is often hidden away and so does not appear in official homelessness statistics. This includes older carers who do not have their own accommodation and are forced to 'sofa surf'.

For those older people who end up sleeping rough or living in a hostel or other temporary accommodation there are fewer services available compared with those for younger people. This is partly because older people tend to fall into a gap between services for homeless people and those for older people. They have a lower profile and their homelessness is often hidden from view.

## Extent of homelessness

It is a serious concern that we do not have a current and accurate picture of the extent of older homelessness. Overall, we have seen a continued increase in homelessness since 2010 which is likely to impact on older vulnerable people. The Local Government Association (LGA) believe older homelessness in England and Wales is likely to double by 2025. Between April and June 2017, councils accepted 620 people aged over 60 as 'officially' homeless. This compares with 270 accepted as homeless between October and December 2009.<sup>ii</sup> More generally, a recent National Audit Office report<sup>iii</sup> said there were 4,000

## Decent homes

**Over 2 million  
older people live  
in non-decent  
housing**

Many older people live in housing situations that cannot be considered a home

**25 per cent of  
private rented  
accommodation  
is non-decent**

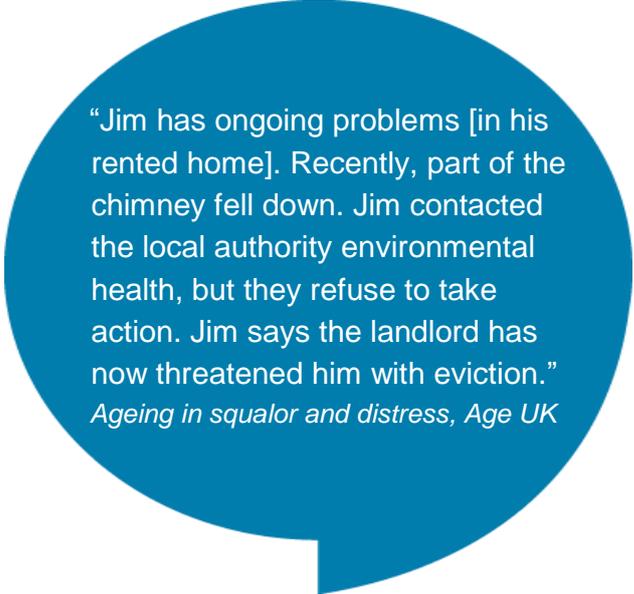
Older people need access to healthy, affordable and secure housing

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people sleeping rough with 77,000 households in temporary accommodation up to March 2017. This is a significant increase on the figure of 49,000 in 2011. The Centre for Policy on Ageing<sup>iv</sup> (CPA) estimated that in England on any one night around 400 older people age 55 and above may be sleeping rough and make up between 9 and 12 per cent of rough sleepers. Around 4,000 older people over 50 are estimated to live in hostels on any one night<sup>v</sup>. Of those older people living in hostels in London, around 40% of those over 60 have stayed for more than 5 years, which reflects difficulties with resettling older people into permanent housing with support.

The official figures for temporary accommodation show those accepted as homeless by their local authority and deemed to be in 'priority need'. Only around 4 per cent of statutory homeless households are older people (aged 50 and above)<sup>vi</sup>. Although the majority of those accepted as homeless are younger people, many older people do not apply to their local authority or may be denied help depending on the interpretation of the homelessness legislation by individual local authorities. Older people may still be accepted as homeless if they are recognised as having a 'priority need' due to 'vulnerability'. Older homelessness is often hidden in hostels or temporary accommodation so does not appear in official statistics.



"Jim has ongoing problems [in his rented home]. Recently, part of the chimney fell down. Jim contacted the local authority environmental health, but they refuse to take action. Jim says the landlord has now threatened him with eviction."  
*Ageing in squalor and distress, Age UK*

### Problems experienced by older homeless people

The key difficulties experienced by homeless older people include:

- a lack of specialist resettlement services and long term support; <sup>vii</sup>
- difficulties finding specialist housing to move on to from hostels that cater for people with multiple needs;
- isolation and lack of social engagement that undermines resettlement;
- poor access to health and social care services, intensified by lack of trust;
- vulnerability to bullying, abuse and exploitation;

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- an acceleration of health problems due to rough sleeping and poor conditions;
- frail older people being discharged from hospital on to the streets and not put in touch with the relevant support services;
- a high incidence of mental health problems, sometimes combined with drug and alcohol issues;
- and difficulties around identifying and treating older homeless people with dementia and learning difficulties.

## Current developments

The Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA) 2017 came into effect in April 2018, with the Government committing up to £550m<sup>viii</sup> to implement the legislation. The HRA is designed to prevent homelessness by placing a duty on local authorities to provide help and assistance to people threatened with homelessness within the next 56 days (previously 28 days). Theoretically, this should help many non-priority older people facing homelessness. However, local authorities contend that there is insufficient funding for advice services or to expand the supply of low cost housing. Many argue that overall increases in homelessness are linked to insecure private accommodation, rising rent levels and a cap on Housing Benefit payments. At the same time the supply of affordable council and housing association is insufficient as a result of reductions in home building subsidies. Future levels of funding for supported housing will determine the range options available to vulnerable older homeless people.

## Public Policy Proposals

- There needs to be an increase in the supply of decent, secure and affordable housing in the social rented sector to address an unacceptable rise in homelessness across all age groups
- The Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) should urgently commission up-to-date research on the numbers of older homeless people and use this as the basis for targeted action with local authorities and voluntary agencies.
- Nobody should have to sleep rough or live in unsuitable temporary accommodation, but priority action should be taken to support older people who are particularly vulnerable to the effects of homelessness.

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- All local authorities should be encouraged to carry out an audit of need that recognises the complex housing and support requirements of older homeless people.
- Long term resettlement support designed to help older people sustain their tenancies should be extended and developed. This could include help with cooking, managing money, gaining access to drug and alcohol counselling, access to social care and health services, and schemes to address loneliness and isolation.
- Older homeless people should be offered long term secure tenancies linked to on-going care and support.
- With increasing numbers of older people ending up in private rented accommodation there need to be greater security and regulation of rents to prevent the recurrence of homelessness.
- Local authorities must ensure that older homeless people have the same access to community care assessments and resources as other groups.
- Specialist workers are required in the homelessness sector to work with older homeless people and to ensure access to appropriate care and support. Where these cannot be provided, mainstream older people's services and homelessness organisations should work together to try to reach and support these people.
- Housing organisations and debt agencies should place a greater focus on proactive advice and assistance for older people facing arrears and debt that threatens to make them homeless.
- There should be clear discharge policies and procedures for older homeless people leaving hospital or medical care to guarantee they have access to settled accommodation.
- There should be more specialist befriending schemes designed to address social isolation and to help older homeless people re-engage with their local community.

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## Want to find out more?

Age UK has policy positions on a wide range of issues, covering money matters, health and wellbeing, care and support, housing and communities. There are also some crosscutting themes, such as age equality and human rights, age-friendly government and information and advice

### Further information

You can read our policy positions here; [www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/policy-research/policypositions/](http://www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/policy-research/policypositions/)  
Individuals can contact us for information or advice here; [www.ageuk.org.uk/informationadvice/](http://www.ageuk.org.uk/informationadvice/) or call us on 0800 169 8787

### Further information

Homelessness Factsheet (89) - Age UK. Available at: [https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/factsheets/fs89\\_homelessness\\_fcs.pdf](https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/factsheets/fs89_homelessness_fcs.pdf)

<sup>i</sup> Centre for Policy on Ageing (2017) Diversity in older age – Older homelessness

<sup>ii</sup> LGA (2017) 'Nation faces older people homelessness 'time bomb' – councils warn'. Available online at: <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/nation-faces-older-people-homelessness-time-bomb-councils-warn>

<sup>iii</sup> NAO (2017) Available online at: <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Homelessness.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> Centre for Policy on Ageing (2017) Diversity in older age – Older homelessness

<sup>v</sup> Ibid

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid

<sup>vii</sup> For Home and Rebuilding Lives studies: <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/policy-institute/scwru/res/hrp/hrp-studies/rebuilding.aspx>

<sup>viii</sup> Quoted in Guardian (13/9/17). Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/sep/13/government-rebuked-for-failing-to-address-homelessness-crisis>