

## Building for an ageing population

### Introduction

Age UK welcomes the Government's decision to make housing one of its key policy areas. **Households headed by someone over the age of 65 are forecast to account for 84% of the growth in households between 2018 and 2043, and we already have a huge shortage of homes that are suitable for an ageing population.<sup>i</sup>**

**Over 90% of older people live in general mainstream homes** and the quality of their housing is central to their experience of ageing.<sup>ii</sup>

Ensuring that older people have access to good housing is key to tackling inequalities. People living in poor conditions have worse health outcomes, are more likely to experience loneliness and isolation and within the different tenures, are more likely to live in poverty.<sup>iii</sup> It is a two-way relationship. Poverty can lead someone to live in poor housing, but poor housing also perpetuates poverty. Case notes from the Age UK information and advice line set out again and again, the issues older people have accessing suitable housing and the extent to which a good, stable home underpins a life. If we are to improve outcomes for older people living on lower incomes, then improving their housing is absolutely critical.

**In some areas, substantial investment is needed but there is also much that can be done without significant extra cost.** The Government's plans to reform the sector and build 1.5 million homes must embed the needs of older people so that opportunities are not missed.

**Political and policy discussion about older people's housing is often limited to providing more specialist housing and encouraging more people to downsize. Both have an important part to play, but specialist housing will only ever accommodate a small minority of older people and a decision to downsize or right size is much more complicated than often assumed. Contrary to much commentary, a substantial proportion of the older population already moves home and getting more to do so is challenging. Many will choose to age in place.**

At the same time conditions across different tenures and for particular socio-economic groups vary substantially. Over 50% of renters aged between 45 and 64 have no savings and many will struggle to afford their rent in retirement.<sup>iv</sup> 70% of renters over the age of 65 say that they would find it difficult to find a new property if they had to move.<sup>v</sup> 1.35 million households headed by homeowners over the age of 55 are classified as non-decent and 50% of homeowners aged 50 to 70 say they are unable to afford priority repairs and maintenance.<sup>vi</sup> Only 12% of older people in all tenures have a home without steps up to the main entrance.<sup>vii</sup>

Different demographic groups are more likely to face particular challenges. 14% of people aged 50 to 69 from black ethnic backgrounds own a home outright compared to an average of 43% for all ethnic groups in England and Wales.<sup>viii</sup> Women over the age of 65

are over 1.5 times more likely to live alone than men.<sup>ix</sup> In 2022/2023 a third of wheelchair users in the social sector were placed in homes which were not accessible or adapted for wheelchair use.<sup>x</sup>

Affordability, security of tenure, condition, access to adaptations and the structural accessibility of mainstream homes impact older people's daily lives. We need to think about the different demographic groups that make up the older population in more detail, looking beyond specialist development and downsizing, and develop a strategy encompassing all these elements which address their needs.

We need to make sure that a strategy addresses the broad spectrum of older people from those living full, active lives to those who need housing with care, recognising that decisions people make when younger play out in old age.

Failing to do so will put further pressure on stretched social care, NHS and other resources.

### Factors to underpin policy discussion

- **Households headed by someone over the age of 65 are forecast to account for 84% of the growth in households between 2018 and 2043.**<sup>xi</sup>
- **91% of people over the age of 65 live in mainstream housing.**<sup>xii</sup>
- Good housing is key to an older person's well-being but also to the cost of caring for an ageing population. There have been lots of attempts to quantify the financial cost of a decent, stable, accessible home and a good environment. It is very difficult to put numbers on the benefit to social care, the NHS and other resources, but we know they exist. **One aspect of cost saving that isn't often discussed is the extent to which good housing sustains unpaid care. It is much easier to help a family member or friend with the odd task once a day, than go morning and evening to help someone get in and out of a bath, climb stairs and cook meals. The value of unpaid care is estimated at £162bn pa.**<sup>xiii</sup>
- Failure to provide good quality, adaptable and accessible housing for an ageing population is storing up financial and social problems for the future. Ultimately this cost will fall on the working population and so making sure that the homes we build work for older people is important for all generations.
- Discussion about older people's housing is often limited to the need for more specialist housing (care homes, retirement living, homes specifically designed for older people) and encouraging older people to downsize. Both have a role to play but the vast majority of older people live – and want to live – in mainstream housing and downsizing is much more complicated in practice than theory. **Some documents and policy discussion conflate the term “older people's housing” with “specialist housing” as if this is all an ageing population needs.**

- National planning guidance makes clear that local plans need to think about older people living in mainstream as well as specialist homes but too often the message isn't getting through. **The glossary definition talks about “People over or approaching retirement age, including the active, newly retired through to the very frail elderly”<sup>xiv</sup> so looks to a broad demographic but few plans really analyse what mainstream options the different older groups across this health and lifestyle spectrum need.**
- Downsizing/rightsizing sounds appealing – freeing up family homes, reducing under occupation, moving older people into more suitable accommodation – but getting more people to downsize will be challenging.
  - **More older people are already moving than is often assumed.** In 2021/2022, the English Housing Survey showed that only 2% of older homeowners expected to move home in the next 6 months, as against 5% of those aged 16 to 54; and 9% of older private rented households as against 20% of younger households.<sup>xv</sup> The difference in moving data for younger and older groups has led to the assumption that older people do not move home and discussion about how to encourage them to do so. **However, these older movers accumulate over a number of years and over time amount to a large percentage of the older population. IFS research suggests that 40% of homeowners and over 60% of renters aged 70 have moved into their property since the age of 50.** The percentage of people moving then falls slightly for those in their 70s and picks up again over the age of 80, driven largely by moves into some kind of residential care.<sup>xvi</sup> So, a substantial number of older people are already moving.
  - **Downsizing releases less equity than people often imagine.**<sup>xvii</sup> A Policy Exchange report concluded that downsizing does not add up financially in many parts of the country.<sup>xviii</sup> People are often moving to a home that is more central, in better condition and only a third move to somewhere smaller. IFS research suggests that the amount of equity released rises with age. Those over the age of 80 release more equity than younger age groups but people's appetite for the upheaval of a move reduces as they get older.<sup>xix</sup> So, the potential for equity release is likely to be greater amongst the older groups who are more reluctant to move on.
  - **Familiarity is both valued and useful.** Longstanding relationships with a community become increasingly valuable with age, as also a deep knowledge of the layout of a home for those with dementia. People often have a strong connection with an existing home. 96% of households aged 65 and over are satisfied with their current tenure, 95% with their accommodation and 90% with their area.<sup>xx</sup> Feelings about “home” run deep and 22% see leaving their home as “traumatic as bereavement”. Deeper conversations suggest that “we couldn't find what we were looking for” is often a convenient reason for preferring an existing home.

- **Size is not necessarily the issue and incentivising downsizing is difficult.** 80% of older people already live in homes with 3 beds or less<sup>xxi</sup> and if affordable an extra bedroom can be useful, offering a room for a couple to sleep separately, for working, a carer, lodger or to have friends and family to stay. A survey of new home buyers over the age of 55 showed under a quarter chose to buy a home with two bedrooms or less.<sup>xxii</sup> Bedroom numbers reduced with the age of the buyer but even in the 75 to 85 age band it was under half.<sup>xxiii</sup> Given these statistics incentivising downsizing by looking at bedroom numbers is difficult and if the metric is floor space then one runs into issues about the extra space for wheelchair accessible homes. A suitable home for ageing is more about an age friendly structure and the surrounding environment than size.
  - **Difficult to assess the best move. The default of staying is often appealing.** Moving also involves evaluating a large number of variables, thinking about where friends and family might live, future care needs, house prices, rent prices and possible changes to means tests and social care costs. These variables may be easier to evaluate as someone gets older and more elements fall into place, but again the timing of a move is difficult because as clarity comes, the desire to undertake a move reduces.
- So, the rightsizing narrative has a role to play. We may be able to encourage more people to move if we offer an attractive choice of suitable homes and there are trigger points such as bereavement or illness, but large numbers are moving anyway, and it is not a straightforward decision. **We need to accept that many people will choose to age in place, making the right decision for their own set of circumstances.**
  - Nor should we limit policy to a few solutions, failing to address the many other factors that could substantially improve outcomes for older people, particularly those struggling financially on lower incomes.
  - **A strategy must be broad, addressing the full spectrum of older people defined in the National Planning framework and include the many older demographic groups who are currently ignored, recognising that decisions made at younger years have long term implications.** For example, we need more options for:
    - **The 40% of homeowners aged 70 who will have moved into their home since the age of 50.** This is a substantial proportion of the older population and having moved, many will age in place. This group do not have the age friendly options they need, and this is a missed opportunity. **70% of over 55-year-olds say that a strong motivation behind considering a move is wanting a home better designed to meet their needs as they age.**<sup>xxiv</sup> However, many do not manage to find one. Only a third, for example, buy a home with a bedroom that is accessible at the same level as a kitchen or living area.<sup>xxv</sup> This group are not looking for a traditional idea of “older people’s housing”. One NHCB survey suggested that among over 55 homeowners who do move, 28% move somewhere bigger and 46% invest more money.<sup>xxvi</sup> Anecdotally, we hear of older people moving into new build homes marketed to younger age groups.

- **The 70% of renters over the age of 65 who say that it would be difficult to find a new property if they had to move.**<sup>xxvii</sup> Older renters may need specific features such as fewer steps or a shower rather than a bath. Getting adaptations in the private rented sector is not easy and only 12% of private renters over the age of 75 have level access.<sup>xxviii xxix</sup> Affordability is an issue. Older renters spend nearly 40% of their income on rent, against an average of one third for all age groups and **over 50% of renters aged between 45 and 64 have no savings.** <sup>xxx</sup> **Many will struggle to afford their rent in retirement.**<sup>xxxi</sup> **The Pensions Policy Institute estimates that if current trends continue the cost of housing benefit for older renters will increase by 40%, an additional £2bn pa.**<sup>xxxii</sup> Age friendly build to rent has a role to play.
- Those who need the stability of **social housing**. Even a reformed private rented sector will not be a suitable home for some older people. Age UK case notes show older people struggling to find suitable rented accommodation which is affordable at current Local Housing Allowance rates. This group need the stability of age friendly, accessible social housing.
- **And through all of this we have to recognise that older people do not think of themselves as “old”; rightly, because ‘73% of people aged 75-84 in England say they do not have difficulties with basic activities of daily living’.**<sup>xxxiii</sup> **They want a full and active life. However, at some point they might find daily life more difficult, so homes need to accommodate a range of need.**

## Policy solutions

Much can be done without significant additional cost. It is about incorporating the needs of an ageing population into all housing decisions and often small changes can have a considerable impact.

### New build

1. Local plans should be supplemented with clear guidance on how councils will specifically meet the needs of an ageing population, reflecting the full range of health and lifestyle needs identified in the glossary definition.
2. Given that the current wording is not translating into a sufficiently detailed analysis of what categories of housing older people might need within the mainstream sector, the wording must emphasise this element. It may require a check list of different demographic groups, income groups and tenures and examples of what should be considered.
3. All new homes should be built to the higher accessibility standards of Part M4 Category 2. We have a huge shortage of accessible homes and need new build to address this shortage. We can't second guess where an older person will live and match a certain number of accessible homes with those who need them. People move to a home aged 40 or 50 and may well stay there as they age. They

may have older family members to live with them, either permanently or temporarily, and need accessibility. To ensure builders can meet these higher standards they need to be competing to buy land on a level playing field. In many cases, there is little additional cost but where there is, all bidders need to be working with the same cost assumptions.

Optional standards haven't produced the number of accessible homes we need. Only 31.5% of new homes to be built in England 2020-2030 under the current system will meet accessibility standards which provide basic features such as a wall strong enough for a grab rail or plumbing which allows a walk-in shower rather than a bath.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Accessibility statistics for our existing stock have been well aired - only 9% of homes have the 4 features that allow a wheelchair to just visit, not actually live in a home.<sup>xxxv</sup> Much of our existing housing stock has steep narrow staircases, bedrooms on an upper floor, baths to climb in and out of and steps up to a front door. For those struggling to find a home they can afford, the shortage of accessible housing creates an additional challenge. Higher accessibility standards have to be mandatory to start to address this shortage.

4. We need to embed inclusive design. Case notes from the Age UK information and advice line show older people struggling with features of a home which could have been designed differently at no additional cost. One recent example involved an older person whose housing association kitchen had been refurbished but she was unable to reach the new cupboards; another, with a new bathroom found her walker slipped on the tiles.
5. Planning reforms must remove the barriers holding back growth in the specialist housing sector, for example providing a clearer methodology for assessing need, guidance on use classes and viability, more site allocation and greater awareness of the wider benefits. Despite the focus on specialist housing in strategy documents, we are not seeing enough homes built, particularly for those on lower incomes. The Elderly Accommodation Council estimates that less than 7,500 units of specialist housing will be built in 2024 across the whole of the UK.

### Existing Stock and wider strategy

1. The wording on accessibility in renovation in the Decent Homes Standard should be strengthened. It currently suggests that "Landlords may also want to consider .... ensuring that works undertaken do not make it more difficult to use for a person with disabilities, considering lifetime homes".<sup>xxxvi</sup> The wording has to be practical but also ensure that we make efficient use of money that is already being spent to address the current shortage of age friendly homes. It should also consider inclusive design.
2. We need to do more to encourage homeowners to think about age friendly features as they renovate. This might require changes to VAT or other incentives to drive behavioural change. Interestingly, over half of the £623m DFG annual budget is spent on replacing baths with showers.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Age friendly design would reduce the need for expensive adaptations.

3. We need to make better use of the Disabled Facilities Grant budget, ensuring that all local authorities look at how it is administered and where necessary make radical changes to ensure efficiency. In 2021/2022, the last year for which we have local data, nearly 70% of local authorities take longer than the 6 months guidance to process the grant.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Age UK has been involved in cases where it has taken several years to push applications through the system, three years in one case to get a grant for a shower which took less than ten days to actually install. Yet we know that in some areas it works well so it can be done, benefiting both individual older people and the taxpayer.
4. The new portal proposed as part of rental reforms can be used to increase the number of older renters living in suitable homes and getting the adaptations they need. In many cases there is a solution to a perceived problem which the tenant and landlord are not aware of. Clarifying responsibilities, giving better information about funding options, setting out solutions to common problems and best practice would reduce delay, conflict and improve outcomes for all parties. Recording accessible features would help renters identify suitable properties.
5. We need to spread best practice. There are for example, good Home Improvement Agencies in some areas, local authorities using innovative financing options to fund repairs for those on lower incomes and pockets of good information and advice about housing options. 50% of homeowners aged 50 to 70 say that they cannot afford the priority repairs they need, and this group are therefore likely to live in poorer conditions as they age.<sup>xxxix</sup> The support available to them varies significantly across the country and we need to spread best practice. In many cases there is no need to reinvent the wheel.
6. Enforcement teams in local authorities must be properly resourced. 30% of older people in the private rented sector live in non-decent homes<sup>xl</sup> and we know that older people are less likely to complain and less likely to push their own case through a complex system of redress. Where older people raise a complaint, it needs to be followed up efficiently and in some cases, enforcement needs to be proactive.
7. We need to address the issues raised in the APPG report into the regeneration of existing sheltered housing and follow its recommendations.

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<sup>i</sup> [Household projections for England - Office for National Statistics](#)

<sup>ii</sup> <https://ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-08/finding-the-right-place-to-grow-older.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> [Longer tenancies would be good news for older private renters the-health-impacts-of-cold-homes-and-fuel-poverty.pdf](#)

[How the nation's housing crisis is contributing to poverty amongst older people | Centre for Ageing Better](#)

<sup>iv</sup> [Living longer - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)

<sup>v</sup> [Hidden renters: The unseen faces of the rising older rental wave | Independent Age](#)



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- vii [EHS20-21 Older People s Housing - Ch2 - Tables.ods \(live.com\)](#)
- viii [Ethnic group by housing tenure and occupancy rating, England and Wales, Census 2021 - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)
- ix [Household characteristics - Office for National Statistics](#)
- x [Social housing lettings in England, tenants: April 2022 to March 2023 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)
- xi [Household projections for England - Office for National Statistics](#)
- xii <https://ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-08/finding-the-right-place-to-grow-older.pdf>
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- xviii [Building-for-the-Baby-Boomers-Jack-Airey-Policy-Exchange-December-2018.pdf \(policyexchange.org.uk\)](#)
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- xxi [Age UK analysis of data from the Office for National Statistics' 2021 Census for England and Wales](#)
- xxii [DownloadTemplate\\_4.pdf \(cam.ac.uk\)](#)
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- xxv [DownloadTemplate\\_4.pdf \(cam.ac.uk\)](#)
- xxvi [NF79 Moving insights from the over-55s \(nhbc.co.uk\)](#)
- xxvii [Hidden renters: The unseen faces of the rising older rental wave | Independent Age](#)
- xxviii [HOUSING-ASSOCIATIONS-AND-HOME-ADAPTATIONS-small.pdf \(foundations.uk.com\)](#)
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- xxx [English Housing Survey 2021 to 2022: private rented sector - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)
- xxxi [Living longer - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)
- xxxii [pensionspolicyinstitute.org.uk/media/fjgla1kv/202311-the-uk-pensions-framework-final2.pdf](https://pensionspolicyinstitute.org.uk/media/fjgla1kv/202311-the-uk-pensions-framework-final2.pdf)
- xxxiii [Age UK analysis of data drawn from wave 10 of the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing.](#)
- xxxiv [Insight report: A forecast for accessible homes | Habinteg Housing Association](#)
- xxxv [2018-19 EHS Adaptations and Accessibility Fact Sheet.pdf \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)
- xxxvi [COVER \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)
- xxxvii [DFG Review 2018 Summary.pdf \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)
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