

# Should I Stay or Should I Go?

## Issues for the Social Rented Sector

A summary of the findings of the evaluation of pilot local housing options advice services for older people of particular relevance to the social rented sector.

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### Introduction

The 'Evaluation Overview' highlights the main findings of the *Should I Stay or Should I Go?* programme evaluation. This summary focuses on the particular issues and lessons that have emerged with regard to the social rented sector.

It looks specifically at this issue for a number of reasons:

■ **There are ongoing policy discussions with regard to**

- *stair-casing into and out of owner occupation,*
- *'under-occupation' of family housing by older tenants*
- *the impact of choice based lettings systems on vulnerable groups*
- *the future demand for any special housing for older people*
- *the importance of Lifetime Homes Standards in new build*

■ **The demographic picture** – there has been a large increase in the level of owner occupation up from 57% in 1981 to 71% in 2004 (*Survey of English Housing, ODPM*). The growth has been predominantly amongst lower income groups, partly as a result of right to buy, and half of poor households are now owners. Limited consideration has been given to the sustainability of this tenure amongst an ageing population.

■ **Anticipated issues** –

- *availability of alternative housing options, particularly for lower income older owner occupiers*
- *possible future demand for extra care/ supported housing*
- *stair-casing out of owner occupation for older people*
- *encouraging a planned approach to housing in retirement and use of equity*
- *better design, space standards and adaptability of housing to meet the needs of an ageing population*

### About the evaluation

The following findings, conclusions and recommendations are based on the quantitative data collected from local pilot projects, plus qualitative data from face to face and telephone interviews with service users, housing options advisers, service providers, commissioners and planners undertaken with Sheffield Hallam University.

## Key findings about demand for housing options services

11% of the older people who used housing options services were social rented housing tenants (65% were owner occupiers). 11% were living in homes that lacked basic amenities and 35% lived in homes where one or more hazards were identified.

The largest proportion of service users (36%) were 80 yrs. and over. Poor health was the predominant reason for referral to the housing options services with 74% of those referred described as having health problems. 40% needed help with daily living activities or other support in order to remain living in their existing home.

*Even though the majority of service users were owner occupiers, 55% of the people who were thinking about moving when they contacted the housing options service were considering social rented housing as a possible option. 18% were considering purchase of retirement housing, 13% were considering a move within mainstream housing*

## Key findings about improvements to the housing situation of individual older people

### Moving home

The majority of people interviewed valued the service that they had received very highly. Those who had moved home valued it the most, with many commenting that they did not see how they could ever have moved without the help of the housing options service.

In 17% of closed cases the older person moved home, a minority compared with the majority who approached the service seriously considering a home move.

Those who did move predominantly left the owner occupied and private rented sectors and moved into social rented housing (39% of all who moved). 42% of movers left houses and bungalows and moved into flats. The predominant move was into sheltered housing (59%).

The age group most likely to move were those of 80 yrs or more. Whilst 36% of service users were 80 yrs or over, 44% of people who moved were in this age group.

#### ■ **Main reasons for older people moving/wanting to move**

- *Health decline/disability*
- *Mobility/access problems eg public transport/ services*
- *Home maintenance*

#### ■ **Obstacles to moving**

- *Affordability and availability of suitable alternative housing to buy*
- *Allocation/availability of suitable social rented housing*

#### ■ **Emerging Issue**

- *Some older home owners are unable to meet their housing needs through purchase in the open market (usually due to lack of available stock or inadequate equity). Their only (and in some cases preferred) option may be to move to social rented housing – if it is available.*

## Reasons for not moving home

Some people did make a positive choice to stay put once they had received information and advice. Housing options services also helped many to access adaptations and other support.

However, some older people did not move home because of a lack of suitable alternative housing (28%) or because they decided that their current home was preferable to the options available (20%). It is reasonable to conclude that if better housing options had been available considerably more people would have moved.

Amongst the reasons that people did not move home that are of particular relevance to the social rented sector are **space standards/design issues and location**.

Space standards were mentioned by some of those interviewed as an important factor in making the decision not to move.

*You could get the flat into this room, you could get a cup and saucer and a kettle in the kitchen and that's it. Where do you put anything? Mrs M*

And whilst the majority of those interviewed who had actually moved were content with their new homes, three quarters of these mentioned missing the space in their previous homes:

*We've had difficulty in coming to terms with the smaller house and the lack of facilities. .. My wife calls it her Wendy House because it's so small. We moved from a large 3 bedroom house. ... Now we're in a one bedroom bungalow. Mr G*

This is perhaps an important message to developers of housing for older people – that future generations are going to be even less likely to accept poor space standards and limited choice of what is on offer for older people's housing.

Location of housing for older people emerged as a particularly important issue. Proximity to public transport, shops and services can be of equal importance to the quality of the building.

## Other lessons for the Social Rented Sector identified by the housing options services

### **There are problems with ageist housing allocation systems – but the Homelessness Act has had some positive effects on lettings practice**

- *Example:* Older people were only offered sheltered housing, or at best a bedsit or small one bed flat, if they were over a certain age, even if they wished to move within the general stock.

*Example:* The removal of a blanket ban on owner occupiers being able to apply for social rented housing increased access to sheltered housing amongst owner occupiers.

### **Choice based lettings arrangements can be particularly problematic for some older people**

- *Example:* Where potential tenants have to react quickly to weekly advertisements of available accommodation, frailer older people, those with some disabilities or where English is a second language are greatly disadvantaged. One housing options worker was scanning the weekly vacancies flyer trying to keep in mind over 50 service users who wanted to move home.

## There may be a latent demand for shared ownership/equity stake housing

- *Example:* Where an older person did not have enough equity to purchase retirement housing and was therefore going to sell their home and rent, they would have preferred to invest the equity from their former home in their new property. This may be of particular relevance in Regeneration areas where clearance is planned and older residents will not have enough money from compulsory purchase to buy suitable new homes.

## Lettings policies and management practice may need to be reviewed to better meet the needs of older people, particularly those moving across tenure

- *Example:* Practice changes were made by a housing association following the experience of pressure being put on an older person to make a decision on the spot to accept a property offer. There had been no understanding of how momentous a decision this was for the older person who had lived in their current home for most of their adult life. Training of front line staff in the social rented sector is needed to create greater awareness of housing options (including staying put and support at home) for older people and to foster improved empathy and understanding.

## Recommendations for the Social Rented Sector

- The preferred option of the majority of older people is to stay put in their existing home for as long as possible. Housing providers should work together with health and social care planners to enable this through adaptation or practical help around the home.
- Amongst a significant minority of older people, moving to a more suitable, adapted home is a better option. There is a need for practical help and support through the process of decision making and moving home. Enabling such moves can contribute to the wider housing market through creating vacancies in larger family homes. Housing providers should look seriously at supporting such initiatives.
- Fresh thinking is required in the social rented sector in terms of the development of new models of housing for an ageing population and application of better design/space standards in order to 'age-proof' all new housing developments. Mixed tenure developments and shared ownership initiatives are needed to reflect the national shift in tenure patterns, particularly amongst lower income groups.

## Find out more

General information about housing options services is provided in the leaflet "*What is a Housing Options Service?*"

Further evaluation summary reports and the more detailed Sheffield Hallam University Evaluation are available from the Care & Repair England website [www.careandrepair-england.org.uk](http://www.careandrepair-england.org.uk) – click on '*Housing Options*'.



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