

Policy Position Paper

Older homelessness (England)

April 2016

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

Key issues

Age can be a significant factor in the vulnerability of homeless people. Older homeless people are often identified as those aged 55 and above, because homelessness and long periods of rough sleeping can accelerate ageing and health conditions associated with ageing. You are likely to die at a much younger than average if you become homeless. There are also more services designed for younger people than for older homeless people, who tend to fall in the gap between services for homeless people and those for older people. They have a lower profile and their homelessness is often hidden from view.

We do not have reliable up-to-date statistics on the true extent of older homelessness. The last comprehensive study was carried out in 1999. It is a serious concern that we do not have a current and accurate picture, but overall, we have seen an increase in homelessness which is likely to impact on many older people. Recent figures indicate that rough sleeping has risen to 6,508 in London alone¹. In England in 2013/14, more than 52,000 households of all ages were accepted as homeless². More recently, between July and September 2015, local authorities officially accepted 14,670 households of all ages as homeless - a 4 per cent rise on the same quarter of 2014³. These figures reflect only those who are deemed to be in 'priority needs' so do not give us a complete picture that includes all single people. However, some older people may be accepted as homeless if they are recognised as having a 'priority need' due to 'vulnerability'. Specialist homelessness agencies, like St.Mungo's, and Thames Reach, suggest that older people form a significant and particularly vulnerable group among the homeless population.

The key difficulties experienced by homeless older people include: a lack of specialist resettlement services and long term support; difficulties finding specialist housing to move on to from hostels that cater for people with multiple needs; a lack

¹ Available online at: <http://www.crisis.org.uk/pages/rough-sleeping.html>

² Available online at: http://england.shelter.org.uk/campaigns/_why_we_campaign/housing_facts_and_figures/subsection?section=homeless_households

³ Available online at: <http://www.thamesreach.org.uk/news-and-views/homelessness-facts-and-figures/>

of trust among older clients requiring a more intensive approach; an acceleration of the ageing process 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.

In the March 2016 Budget the Chancellor announced an additional £115m to address rough sleeping and to help people move on from hostels and refuges. This is welcome but will probably have a limited impact on older people living in unsuitable temporary accommodation. Changes to local authority duties towards homeless people allow the offer of short term private rented accommodation, but this may be inappropriate for vulnerable older homeless people, especially without on-going care and support.

In 2016 Kings College London supported qualitative research looking at the changing housing and support needs over time of older people who have previously slept rough, lived in hostels, or poor temporary accommodation⁴. Their research concluded that there is a need for a range of resettlement accommodation and flexible tenancy support to recognise the different and changing needs of those who have experienced homelessness. There is a notable lack of services designed for older homeless people.

Public policy proposals

- The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) should urgently commission up-to-date research on the numbers of older homeless people in England and use it 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.
- 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. (Homeless Link is a specific auditing tool that can be used by local authorities).
- 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. Older homeless people also need access to purposeful activity schemes to promote engagement within the community and to address loneliness and isolation.

4 FOR HOME and Rebuilding Lives studies: <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/policy-institute/scwru/res/hrp/hrp-studies/rebuilding.aspx>

- Older homeless people should be offered long term secure tenancies with on-going care and support.
- Local authorities must ensure that older homeless people have the same access to community care assessments and resources as other groups.
- Mainstream older people's services should be made more accessible to ex-older homeless people or offer support through specialist services. They should offer training and assistance to homelessness organisations working with older people.
- Homelessness projects should refer older homeless people to specialist agencies such as Age UK to ensure that they get access to support services and benefit entitlements.
- There should be more specialist housing schemes designed to give long term support to older homeless 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 easier access and referral to mental health services and counselling commissioned by local authorities and CCGs.
- There should be clear discharge policies and procedures for older homeless people leaving hospital or medical care to ensure they have access to settled accommodation.
- We need a commitment to extending specialist befriending schemes designed to address social isolation and to help older homeless people re-engage with their local community.
- Specialist workers are required in the homelessness sector to work with older homeless people and to ensure access to appropriate care and support.

All rights reserved. Third parties may only reproduce this paper or parts of it for academic, educational or research purposes or where the prior consent of Age UK has been obtained for influencing or developing policy and practice.

Age UK
 Tavis House
 1-6 Tavistock Square
 Londo WC1H 9NA
 T 0800 169 80 80 F 020 3033 1000
 E policy@ageuk.org.uk

www.ageuk.org.uk

Age UK is a charitable company limited by guarantee and registered in England (registered charity number 1128267 and registered company number 6825798). The registered address is Tavis House 1-6 Tavistock Square, London WC1H 9NA