Older people

Covid-19 briefing note: June 2020

This series of briefings address significant issues that are emerging in the UK as a result of Covid-19 that impact on the work of community investment. In each one, we have brought together available evidence to help you think about and plan future strategies and how resources can be directed. This briefing covers older people.

The current situation

In 2018, one in every five people in the UK was 65 years and over (18.3%), with this figure projected to reach around one in every four people (24.2%) by 2038.[1] Of those aged 65 and over, 45% are men, 55% women.[2]

Those over 65 years old are predominantly white (95%)[3] and married (59%), while 25% are widowed and 10% are divorced.[4]

The majority of people over 50 are grandparents – 67% of women and 58% of men – many of whom provide weekly care for their grandchildren.[5]

Most over 50s (60%) live in urban areas. A quarter (25%) live in rural areas.[6]

Over nine million people aged over 70 in the UK were told to isolate and shield from others because they were considered to be at greater risk of having severe cases of Covid-19.[7]

The impact of Covid-19

As at 29 May, 89% of all deaths involving Covid-19 in England and Wales were people aged 65 years and over. Of these, 54% were male, 46% female.[8]

All-cause deaths in care homes between 20 March and 7 May 2020 were more than double the expect rate with 20,457 excess deaths. [9]

A quarter of those people who have died from Covid-19 had dementia.[10] Aside from Covid-19 deaths, there were an additional 9,891 deaths from dementia in England and Wales in April, 83% higher than normal.[11] 95% of people with dementia are aged 65 and over.[12]

Just under 11% of all Covid-19 deaths in March and April 2020 had a coronary heart disease.[13] In the poorest fifth of the population, 25% of men aged 50 and over have coronary heart disease compared with just under ten percent in the wealthiest fifth.[14]

Social housing and older people

Over 44% of all social housing residents are older than 55 years old. [32]

Almost one in five of all the over 55 year olds in the UK are social housing residents.[33]

The social housing sector has always played a key role in supporting older people's housing needs. HACT has worked with social housing organisations for the last 60 years on older people's housing, including the first warden training for sheltered housing schemes in the 1970s, care and repair in the 1980s, and equity-based loans rural caretakers and housing options services in the 2000s.[34]

Clarion, the Centre for Ageing Better and HACT have set up the Age Friendly Communities network. Contact us for more information about this initiative.

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Mental and physical health
There is evidence that socially disconnected and isolated older adults are at increased risk of physical and mental health problems, including cardiovascular disease, stroke, depression, anxiety, dementia and premature death.[15]

Nearly half of all adults aged over 55 had experienced common mental health issues before Covid-19.[16] Older adults who have been isolating are more likely to experience a negative impact on their mental health.[17]

Vulnerable elderly people are more pessimistic and more likely to get overwhelmed by negative news, increasing anxiety and fear.[18] The SARS epidemic of 2003 was associated with a 30% increase in suicide in those aged 65 and older.[19]

Loneliness and isolation
There are 1.2 million chronically lonely older people in the UK. Half a million go at least five or six days a week without seeing or speaking to anyone.[20]

Certain sub-populations such as older people within the gay, lesbian and bisexual community and immigrants are more vulnerable to being lonely.[21]

Self-isolation disproportionately affects older people whose only social contact is out of the home.[22]

Older people have died at home alone of Covid-19 and not been discovered for up to two weeks.[23] "The Covid-19 pandemic is creating an epidemic of loneliness", according to Professor Martin Marshall, Chair of Royal College of GPs.[24]

Digital exclusion
Nearly half of those 75 and over do not use or do not have access to the internet.[25] Of the 4.8 million people in the UK who have never used the internet, nearly 80% are over the age of 65.[26]

People over the age of 65 who are online are much less likely (48%) to do their shopping online compared to the national average (78%), look for health information (30% vs 54%) or access online banking (35% vs 69%).[27]

The importance of understanding social impact for older people
Drivers of older people's wellbeing differ significantly from other age groups. When planning initiatives for older people it is important that their needs are taken into account.

[The UK Social Value Bank](#) reveals older people (50+) place particular importance on community safety and belonging, speaking to neighbours, social activities, exercise, and living in a tidy, well maintained and specifically adapted home.

Age data should be collected for a variety of reasons:
- It helps to understand how effective projects are in comparison to other age groups.
- It demonstrates if the specific needs of older people are being met.
- To develop effective age specific initiatives.
- It illustrates and identifies the specific project skills and approaches needed to maximise impact for older people.

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Poverty and hardship

Two million pensioners (16% of the total) live in poverty. 31% of Asian or Asian British pensioners and 32% of Black or Black British pensioners live in poverty, as do 29% of social housing pensioners.[28] The proportion of elderly people living in severe poverty in the UK is five times what it was in 1986.[29]

Adjusting for age, deaths in the most deprived areas of England have been more than double those in the least deprived.[30]

What does this mean for social housing?

With so many older people living in their homes, social housing organisations have a key role to play in supporting them during the current crisis. Most have been making welfare calls and should continue to make these throughout the Covid-19 crisis.

There are a number of intergenerational initatives that have emerged during the Covid-19 crisis ([see further reading](#)). You should consider intergenerational living when designing new homes.

While digital exclusion is an issue for older people, there have been increasing numbers of older people getting online during the Covid-19 crisis, so think about how you can deliver older people initiatives online.

Online exercise classes might help some of your older residents. There might be a need to invest in free wifi access and to encourage families to support older people to get online.

Straightforward, easily accessible (large font sizes, white space) written communication to older residents is critical, providing them, for example, with advice on exercise routines, how to socialise safely, access medication or get medical advice and request urgent repairs or adaptations.

Repairs to reduce damp, condensation or other defect that cause or inflame respiratory diseases should be treated as urgent.

Any fuel vouchers or hardship funds should be accessible both offline as well as online.

Community Insight datasets

There are numerous datasets in Community Insight that can be used to inform strategies and new initiatives for older people:

- Population over 65
- Probability of loneliness for those aged 65 and over
- Pensioners in poverty
- Red Cross Covid-19 Vulnerability Index for neighbourhoods
- People with a limiting long-term illness 65+

[Book a demo or find out more](#)

Further reading:

[Older People & Housing Action](#)

[The Lancet](#)

[NHS: Housing options for older people](#)

[Housing LIN](#)

[LGA: Housing our ageing population](#)

[The Centre for Ageing Better](#)

[Intergenerational ideas and resources](#)