



Housing Issues Affecting Older  
Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual People  
in the UK:

*A Policy Brief*

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### **About the Author**

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## Background

This policy brief focusing on housing issues that may be faced by older lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB)<sup>1</sup> people in the UK is part of a series of policy briefs. Other briefs in the series include:

- **An introduction** to issues faced by older LGB people in the UK
- **Health care** issues faced by older LGB people in the UK
- **Social care** issues faced by older LGB people in the UK

Older lesbian, gay and bisexual people comprise approximately 5-7 percent of the population of older people in the UK, and to date, very little research has been undertaken to investigate what their needs are and how service providers can meet those needs.

## The Policy Background

The need for decent housing is one which transcends age and sexuality. Access to decent housing has major implications for the health and wellbeing of individuals. However, for older people, their homes increasingly become more significant in defining who they are. As individuals grow older, they are not only less likely to move, but they are also more likely to spend more time in their homes for a number of reasons which may include frailty and decreased mobility.

As people age, their housing needs may change. They may decide to 'downsize' and move to a smaller home. Even if they remain in their homes, their housing needs may change and adaptations may have to be made to their homes to enable them to continue living in them. Because of poor health (both mental and physical), it may become necessary for them to move into sheltered accommodation or care homes. However, only a very small proportion of older people (less than 5 percent) end up living in a residential care facility.

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<sup>1</sup> While transgender people have some experiences similar to those of lesbian, gay and bisexual people, many of the issues including their legal position regarding discrimination are different and therefore they are not included in the review. However, some studies on lesbian, gay and bisexual people which have also included transgender (LGBT) people are included in the review.

Earlier this year, the government published *Lifetime Homes, Lifetime Neighbourhoods: A National Strategy for Housing in an Ageing Society*<sup>2</sup>. This strategy aims to ensure there is sufficient appropriate housing available in the future for older people to relieve the forecasted unsustainable pressures on homes, health and social care services.

Older people tend to need easier access to facilities such as post offices and doctors' surgeries than the general community as well as easy access to social and leisure facilities.

For all older people, feeling safe in their environment and community is particularly important for them. For lesbian, gay and bisexual older people, one can argue that it is even more critical to them that they feel secure in their homes, communities, neighbourhoods and residential care and that they don't fear being stigmatized and discriminated against.

## 'Ageing in Place'

Many surveys have revealed that the majority of older people want to remain in their own homes whenever possible and where it is not, for as long as possible. A study by Counsel and Care and the University of Lancaster in 2003 for example, revealed that more than 80 percent of the respondents wished to remain in their own homes<sup>3</sup>.

With regard to LGB older people, a study in the United States found that housing is an enormously important issue for them and they ranked it as the top priority for action<sup>4</sup>.

## Housing Needs and Aspirations of Older LGB People

What are the housing needs and aspirations of older LGB people in the UK? Very limited research has been undertaken to explore the current housing

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<sup>2</sup> Communities and Local Government (2008). *Lifetime Homes, Lifetime Neighbourhoods: A National Strategy for Housing in an Ageing Society*

<sup>3</sup> Counsel & Care and the Dept of Applied Social Science at Lancaster University (2003). *Housing Decisions in Old Age*.

<sup>4</sup> Funders for Lesbian and Gay Issues (2004) *AgingInEquity: LGBT Elders in America*

situation and future needs and aspirations of older LGB people.

The most comprehensive primary research study was undertaken by Hubbard and Rossington in 1995<sup>5</sup>. They looked at the prevailing housing situation of LGB people at the time; whether they lived with others or alone, their housing tenure, proportion of income spent on accommodation, costs etc. They also looked at informal and community care provided by LGB people and future housing aspirations in old age. Consistent with other research findings, this study found that within the community, more gay men (57.5 percent) than lesbian women (38.4 percent) were likely to live alone with those at older ages more likely to live alone than those at younger ages. Living situations included partners as well as children.

A more recent study but one with a very small sample, was undertaken which found that similar to heterosexual older people, older LGBT people expressed the desire to live in their own homes for as long as possible<sup>6</sup>. For older LGBT, their neighbours and the neighbourhood in which they lived were a particularly key influence on their future housing decisions and the levels of satisfaction they expressed about where they lived. In this study, a particular concern among older LGBT people was in regard to their future care and housing needs. Most participants expressed the desire to stay in their own homes and have care provided for them within their homes should they need it. This was directly related to concerns about possible homophobic attitudes among staff and other residents in specialist housing or care homes.

## Challenges for Older LGB to Ageing in Place

As discussed above, while many older LGB people would like to live in their homes for as long as possible, they can face potential challenges to actually doing so. Their desire to 'age in place' may be

compromised by a lack of viable social support mechanisms which most heterosexual older people rely on and which enable them to remain in their homes for as long as possible.

The majority of older people with disabilities are able to continue living in their homes because of the informal care and support they receive from their families; particularly their adult children and spouses.

For many older LGB people who, compared to heterosexual peers, are more likely to live alone, are not likely to have a partner or children and who may be estranged from family, these informal care support systems may not be readily available to them. Therefore, many older LGB may have to turn to formal systems to support them whether within their homes, or within some type of sheltered accommodation or other residential care institution.

Turning to formal systems may present challenges for older LGB people. First, there could be potential financial implications associated with having to use more formal systems to provide the support they may need in their own home. Secondly, individuals may be concerned by the prospect of having a stranger who may be homophobic come into their home to provide care for them. For most people, their homes may be the only places where they feel they can be themselves. As stated in the report AgeInEquity<sup>4</sup>:

"in-home care is often preferred to institutionalization for all elders, but to an LGBT elder, having a stranger come into their home—maybe the only place that the elder was truly able to be out and express their gayness—can be...as terrifying as living communally with people who will presume that they are straight."

## Extra Care, Sheltered Accommodation and Care Homes

While older people would like to stay within their own homes for as long as possible, at some time, usually as a result of health problems, it may become necessary for them to move from their

<sup>5</sup> Hubbard, R and Rossington J (1995). *As We Grow Older: A Study of the Housing and Support Needs of Older Lesbians and Gay Men*. Polari, London

<sup>6</sup> Croucher, K (2008). *Housing Choices and Aspirations of Older People: Research from the New Horizons Program*. Communities and Local Government: London

homes into extra care housing<sup>7</sup>, sheltered accommodation<sup>8</sup> or a care home.

Leaving their homes can be traumatic experiences for older people as this can mean a loss of independence, leaving their neighbourhoods, and having to establish new social contacts. Older LGB people are particularly concerned about how their sexual identity may affect them if they have to move out of their homes into a new community<sup>5,6,9</sup>.

For older LGB people, moving into a care home or sheltered accommodation may resurrect memories of ostracism and prejudice faced in early years such as within educational institutions. If they have to enter into a care home, for example, they may be worried that being openly gay will put them at risk of being discriminated against and being stigmatized by both staff and other residents. Some individuals have stated that should they go into sheltered housing or a care home, it may be easier to 'go back into the closet' and pass off as heterosexual<sup>6</sup>. This could clearly have negative implications for the quality of life and wellbeing of a resident who must hide their identity.

Older LGB people may be particularly worried about how staff may react to same-sex friends who visit. Similar to the situation within their own homes, older LGB people who move into residential care, may have anxieties and fears about being 'found out' as carers may see their personal things such as books, or photographs which may present them as gay. They may also be worried about their

ability to socially interact with other residents. Most older people like to reminisce about times gone by and talk to others about their histories, their children and grandchildren and their lives in general. For older LGB people living in residential communities in which they are not out or which are not supportive of them, who do they talk to and what about?

In the few studies that have been undertaken in the UK on the housing needs and aspirations of older LGB people, they have expressed concerns about living in care homes that are predominantly for heterosexual people. Some have signalled that should they have to leave their homes, they would want to live in exclusively non-heterosexual communities for older people<sup>5,6</sup>.

### Are Residential Communities Specifically for Older LGB People the Answer?

While in a number of studies in the UK and elsewhere, some older LGB people have expressed the desire to live in gay, lesbian and bisexual only residential communities, others have been concerned about 'self – segregation' and the creation of 'ghettos'<sup>5,6</sup>. In the work undertaken by Hubbard and Rossington<sup>5</sup>, 83 percent of 117 lesbian, gay and bisexual people asked expressed that they wanted specific accommodation for lesbian and gay individuals (with more lesbians, 91 percent, compared to gay men, 75 percent) with this preference. The minority who did not, had reservations about creating 'ghettos' and worried about portraying their needs as being different from those of others.

While some older LGB people may be worried about self-segregation by living in communities exclusively for them, a number of communities for older LGB people have been built in the United States and some in Europe as well<sup>10</sup>. In the United States, however, the demand and interest in residential care homes specifically for LGB people has been lower

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<sup>7</sup> Extra Care Housing is housing designed with the needs of frailer older people in mind and with varying levels of care and support available on site. People who live in Extra Care Housing have their own self contained homes, their own front doors and a legal right to occupy the property. Extra Care Housing is also known as very sheltered housing, assisted living, or simply as 'housing with care'. Source: <http://www.housingcare.org/elderly-uk-assisted-living-extra-care-housing.aspx>

<sup>8</sup> Sheltered housing (also known as retirement housing) is a group of flats or bungalows where all residents are older people (usually over 55). With a few exceptions, all developments (or 'schemes') provide independent, self-contained homes with their own front doors. There are usually some common facilities that all residents can use - such as a residents' lounge, a guest suite, a garden and often a laundry. Source: <http://www.housingcare.org/jargon-sheltered-housing.aspx>

<sup>9</sup> Housing and Support Needs of Older Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) people in Scotland. 2004. PRECIS: A Summary Series of Recent Research from Communities Scotland

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<sup>10</sup> Smee J (2008). Glad to be Gay and Grey in Berlin's New Old People's Home. The Guardian <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2008/mar/17/longtermcare.gayrights>

than expected partly because of the high costs associated with these care homes<sup>11</sup>.

The research that has been done in the UK shows that while older LGB people may not necessarily want to have residential accommodation that is specifically for them, what they *do* want are mainstream service providers who recognize their specific needs and are willing to meet them. What is needed therefore, is to understand what the views and attitudes are of wardens of sheltered accommodation and care home managers to older LGB people and whether they have any understanding of what their specific needs may be.

Despite the merit and demerits discussed regarding specialist housing and older LGB, such housing, at the very least, should be offered as an option and one that is affordable.

## Attitudes of Providers

What are the attitudes of care home managers and wardens of sheltered accommodation to gay, lesbian and bisexual service users?

Very few studies have been undertaken which seek to understand the views and attitudes of wardens of sheltered accommodation and care home managers towards older LGB people<sup>5,12</sup>. In the research undertaken Hubbard and Rossington in 1995, 150 questionnaires were sent to wardens of sheltered accommodation who were selected randomly and to care home managers with response rates of 25 and 20percent respectively. While none of the wardens had received training on issues specific to sexuality, they were more understanding of the concept of equal opportunity compared to care home managers some of whom were openly hostile.

In the more recent research undertaken by older LGB people in Thanet, 149 questionnaires were sent to wardens of

sheltered housing, managers and owners of residential and nursing homes, care companies and day centres. While the overall response rate was 18 percent, wardens of sheltered accommodation had a very high response rate of 57 percent. Of the replies from Sheltered Housing Schemes, 43 percent said they had never had LGBT residents in their establishments but 31 percent said they had. Those who do not know amounted to 25 percent. The study found that among providers, there was confusion between "treating everyone the same" and equal opportunities.

An interesting finding from these studies is that most respondents stated they had never housed any lesbians or gay men or that they did not know if they had. These responses raise very interesting questions. For example, how do care home managers and wardens arrive at the answer of never having had a gay, lesbian or bisexual resident? Had they asked each of the residents about their sexual orientation and or did they just make assumptions that all their residents were heterosexual?

From the very limited existing research, it appears that wardens and care home managers in general, are not fostering atmospheres in which LGB people can be confident about being open about their sexual orientation and not be stigmatized or discriminated against.

## Summary and Conclusions

Housing is an extremely important issue for older LGB people. Should they need care, they are particularly concerned about potentially homophobic individuals coming into their homes, which are sometimes the only place where they can truly be themselves. They are also concerned about attitudes of management and other residents should they have to move into residential accommodation and whether they might have to go' back into the closet'. It is critical to raise awareness among housing providers and to encourage them to be more openly gay friendly. Some older LGB people have expressed the desire to live in retirement communities that are specifically for them and such housing should be provided as option.

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<sup>11</sup> Trevison, C (2008) Retirement Homes Court Gay Seniors - Baby Boomers Are Creating Need Demand. Global Action on Aging.

<http://www.globalaging.org/elderrights/us/2008/Gay.htm>

<sup>12</sup> "Opening Doors in Thanet" (2003). Equally Different: A Report On the Situation of Older Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgendered People in Thanet, Kent

## Resources

### **Stonewall Housing**

Stonewall Housing provides supported housing, advice and advocacy for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities in London. For more information visit:  
<http://www.stonewallhousing.org/>

### **The Navajo Charter Mark Scheme**

This scheme formally recognises organisations offering LGBT friendly services across Lancashire. Such a scheme could be used throughout the country to signpost users to 'gay friendly' service providers. For more information visit: <http://www.navajoonline.org.uk/>

### **Age Concern**

Age Concern produces information about funding residential care and in their resource pack: 'The Whole of Me – Meeting the Needs of Older Lesbians, Gay Men and Bisexuals Living in Care Homes and Extra Care Housing' it highlights for potential residents, things to expect in organisations positive about lesbian and gay issues

For more information visit:  
<http://www.ageconcern.org.uk/>

### **Shelter**

Provides housing advice to all.  
For more information visit:  
[www.shelter.org.uk](http://www.shelter.org.uk)