

Sociable housing in later life

LOUISE BAZALGETTE AND JO SALTER OF DEMOS MAY 2013

DEMOS

#5 in a series of 10 think pieces from leading UK think tanks to mark Hanover's 50th year of providing high quality housing and related services for older people

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Key findings

New research from Demos suggests many older people are dissatisfied with existing mainstream and specialist retirement housing. The paper concludes that while sociable housing arrangements – such as cohousing – may be challenging to establish, these innovative forms of housing are valued highly by older people who might otherwise be exposed to the risk of social isolation and loneliness.

The paper says:

- Social isolation in old age is increasingly recognised as a threat to older people's health and wellbeing
- Inappropriate and poorly located housing can exacerbate – or lead to – isolation in later life, by narrowing social circles and cutting off opportunities to socialise with people of different ages
- Some older people fear social isolation but dislike the prospect of living in age-segregated 'ghettos' – a term they attach to some retirement housing
- Pioneering models of consciously 'sociable housing' that encourages more social mixing between different age groups – such as cohousing and Homeshare – are in their infancy in this country but the Demos research suggests they would appeal to many older people
- Such models could offer older people a more socially connected home environment but they will require greater support from local authorities and housing associations
- The Department for Communities and Local Government should lead work to remove barriers to sociable housing models
- Housing associations and developers should question whether housing that encourages age segregation is justified and find ways to ensure age-exclusive housing residents have the chance to socialise with the wider community.

About Hanover

Since 1963, when Hanover was founded, we have become one of the UK's leading specialist providers of retirement housing and related services.

We are a registered provider and manage almost 19,000 properties in over 600 locations. These include:

- Around 5,000 home ownership (typically leasehold) properties
- Around 14,000 properties for rent, including 3,000 Extra Care properties where residents can access 24-hour care on-site.

Hanover also manages a 24-hour, 365 day a year emergency response service, handling over 400,000 calls a year from over 20,000 residents.

By 2016, Hanover aims to develop 1,250 new-style homes for older people.

We operate in over 175 local authority areas across England and Wales with over 30,000 residents and customers.

We aim to be the leading provider for older people looking for high quality housing and related services.

About this series

The Hanover@50 Debate is part of our work around our 50th anniversary.

The debate aims to stimulate discussion around some of the key issues facing our society when it comes to our ageing population, with a particular focus on housing.

Sheltered and retirement housing is often perceived poorly, despite residents and tenants reporting high levels of satisfaction. So the concept of 'retirement housing' needs to change if it is to be a credible and positive choice for people as they grow older.

To help start the discussion, we have commissioned a series of think pieces and new research from 10 think tanks from across the political spectrum.

We've asked the think tanks to question the assumptions, challenge perceptions and consider the principles that underpin much of policy around housing and the ageing population.

We want to generate fresh ideas about future policy and provision of housing and services for older people that take account of social, economic and demographic change.

And we're hoping these pieces will help set an agenda for providing housing options and creating services that are age positive without being ageist by either prejudicing, or privileging, older people.

About Demos

Demos is Britain's leading cross-party think tank. It produces original research, publishes innovative thinkers and hosts thought-provoking events. It has spent 20 years at the centre of the policy debate, with an overarching mission to bring politics closer to people.

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Summary

In recent years the issue of social isolation in old age has received increasing attention as a policy problem and there is a growing interest among policy-makers in the importance of social inclusion to older people's health and wellbeing.¹ However, previous research and policy development on older people's housing options has primarily focused on meeting older people's practical and physical needs. There has been relatively little consideration of how older people's social needs are met through their housing.

We undertook this research to explore older people's perspectives on the type of social environment they want their housing and immediate community to offer them as they grow older. Our interviews and focus groups with older people found that many older people are very dissatisfied with the choice of mainstream and specialist housing options currently available to them. In particular, some older people are fearful of experiencing social isolation in mainstream housing, but dislike the prospect of living in age-segregated 'ghettos' offered by some retirement housing.

“Some older people are fearful of experiencing social isolation in mainstream housing, but dislike the prospect of living in age-segregated ‘ghettos’ offered by some retirement housing”

We recommend that the Department for Communities and Local Government should take a leading role in overcoming attitudinal and practical barriers to the roll-out of new housing models such as Homeshare and cohousing, which support older people's social integration. We also argue that housing associations and house builders must explore alternative models for older people's housing that actively support older people to remain embedded in the wider community, rather than institutionalising age segregation.

Social dimensions of ageing

Ageing and social participation

In recent years, research and policy literature on ageing has increasingly focused on social isolation and loneliness in old age as a social problem, with some research demonstrating links between social isolation, poor health and a higher risk of mortality.²

However, it is important not to exaggerate the scale of this problem among older people. Research by Professor John Cacioppo found that approximately a fifth of the general population experiences feelings of social isolation even when they are in the presence of other people.³ Some research also suggests that there has been a slight increase in older people who say that they feel 'sometimes lonely' and a slight decrease in those who report that they are 'never lonely'.⁴

However, while loneliness in old age is certainly something that public policy should seek to prevent and alleviate, it is important not to imply that loneliness is somehow an inherent condition of old age. Analysis of the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ESLA) has been able to distinguish a variety of factors that are (and are not) associated with an increased risk of social isolation within a cohort of over 10,000 adults aged 50+. Analysis of the ELSA by the Institute for Fiscal Studies in 2012 found that relationship status is a statistically significant predictor of older people's risk of 'social detachment'. This research found that single older people had double the rate of detachment from social networks than older people in couple relationships. Older people who were separated or divorced during the period of the study were also more likely to become detached from social networks than those in couple relationships. People who became widowed during the study period were the least likely to become detached from social networks.⁵

The IFS's study found that the strength of older people's social networks and rates of civic participation were not independently associated with their age (once other circumstances were controlled for). The authors observed that "simply getting older does not lead to withdrawal from most societal activities".⁶ Instead, older people's relative risk of experiencing social isolation or loneliness (the unsatisfied desire for social relationships) is attributable to a complex mix of personal characteristics and social circumstances.⁷

Age discrimination and age segregation

Recent studies by Age UK, WRVS and the European Commission have also highlighted the potential risks to older people's wellbeing and social integration posed by age discrimination.⁸ A 2008 survey by the European Commission found that 48 per cent of UK respondents believed age discrimination to be widespread,⁹ in comparison to a EU-wide average of 42 per cent.¹⁰ Another 2012 survey by the European Commission found that people in the UK are on average viewed as 'old' at the relatively

early age of 61.9 years (compared to 63.9 years for respondents across the EU as a whole, and 70.4 years for respondents in the Netherlands).¹¹

A 2012 study by the European Commission suggested that a lack of opportunities for positive social interaction between generations could be a potential cause of age discrimination in EU countries.¹² This may be particularly relevant to the UK, as EU-wide survey data suggests that the UK population is more concerned about age segregation than people in other EU countries. A 2009 Eurobarometer survey found that 76 per cent of UK respondents thought that there were not enough opportunities for older and younger people to meet and work together on shared projects. The UK ranked second highest on this measure, with only Portugal (at 84 per cent) ranking higher. In the same survey, 92 per cent of UK respondents (the same as the EU-wide average) agreed that 'local authorities should support initiatives that foster stronger relations between young people and older people'.¹³

Housing circumstances and social relationships in later life

While age segregation in the UK is clearly a concern, research suggests that some older people have very little access to any kind of social contact. Research for Age UK has revealed that physical isolation is a particular problem for some older people, with approximately 6 per cent of older people, or 600,000, leaving their house less than once a week.¹⁴ Data from the Office for National Statistics also show that increasing rates of older people are living alone. Whereas in 1971, 34 per cent of British women aged 65+ lived alone, by 2001 this had increased to 46 per cent.¹⁵ In 2009, 60 per cent of women aged 75+ lived alone, and 36 per cent of men.¹⁶

Previous research has found that older people who live alone are at greater risk of feeling lonely.¹⁷ However, living alone remains a poor proxy for loneliness, as much social contact can take place outside the home, or 'at a distance' by telephone or email, while people with low rates of social contact will not always feel lonely.¹⁸ There is also evidence to suggest that living with a large family is not necessarily protective against loneliness. One 2009 study found that the rate of multi-generational households was much higher within South Asian families (25 per cent) than amongst white families (5 per cent) but rates of loneliness among South Asian and white grandparents were fairly similar despite these substantial differences.¹⁹

Immediate living arrangements are clearly not the be all and end all in determining older people's risk of experiencing loneliness but for older people who are detached from social networks, well designed and managed specialist housing could potentially play an important role in increasing their opportunities for social interaction. The HAPPI panel's well-known 2009 study demonstrated that the design of specialist housing for people aged 50+ can help to support older people's social needs as well as their more practical needs for accessibility as they age by providing a supportive community.²⁰ Through a series of case studies, the HAPPI panel study illustrated how specialist housing can facilitate social interaction within and across generations, by providing shared communal spaces and cafés or leisure facilities that are available to tenants as well as the local community.²¹

However, a follow-up study published by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Housing and Care for Older People in late 2012 noted that the recommendations from the HAPPI panel's 2009 report had limited take-up, partly due to the economic circumstances surrounding its publication. Demand for specialist housing also remains relatively low – approximately 80 per cent of older people wish to remain living in their existing home.²² According to research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF), only 7 per cent of older households (excluding care homes) are currently 'specialist', in the sense that the tenancy is restricted according to age (e.g tenants must aged 55+, 60+ or 65+).²³ As the 2012 HAPPI report notes, this low take-up has knock-on implications for the rest of the housing market if small pensioner households occupy large family homes.²⁴

The 2012 HAPPI report suggests that older people might view specialist housing as a more attractive option if 'they could maintain links to family and friends and retain ties to the local community.'²⁵ However, there has been very little research specifically asking older people what type of social environment they want their housing to provide.

Methodology for this research

Therefore, to inform this think piece, Demos conducted detailed qualitative research with 34 older people (aged 60+) living in a variety of specialist and mainstream housing, to explore how their living arrangements influence their opportunities for social contact, and compare and contrast their various experiences and preferences. The methodology for this research included:

- 7 interviews with experts in policy areas including ageing, older people's housing and intergenerational cohesion (see list at appendix A).
- A focus group with 6 older people (4 women and 2 men) living in mainstream accommodation (predominantly owned rather than rented) and 2 additional interviews with women (aged 69 and 61) living in mainstream accommodation
- Interviews with 15 older people aged between 64 and 86, living in a specialist housing community for people aged 55 and over
- An interview with one older woman (aged 79) living in sheltered housing with her husband
- A focus group with 9 people aged between 63 and 80 (5 women and 4 men) living in a 'cohousing' community
- An interview with a 76 year old woman who was sharing her home with a younger woman through a 'Homeshare' arrangement

Definitions of the terms 'mainstream housing', 'specialist' housing, 'cohousing' and 'homeshare' are provided in the box below.

Definitions of the housing models explored in this research

- Mainstream housing: individual homes that are privately owned or rented, or rented from the social sector, which are 'not designated for any specific user group'.²⁶
- Specialist housing: groups of homes to rent or buy, which usually have some shared facilities, and are tailored to meet the needs of older people (these are usually available only to people aged over 55, 60 or 65).²⁷
- Cohousing: the UK Cohousing Network defines cohousing as 'intentional communities [...] created and run by their residents'.²⁸ Cohousing communities include individual private homes, as well as shared communal areas, which often include kitchens to enable residents to eat together.
- Homeshare: an arrangement in which a person who wishes to remain living in their own home but who requires additional help in order to do so, provides another person with accommodation in exchange for their help.²⁹

Qualitative research findings

The importance of personality and personal history in shaping social preferences

Participants in each of the discussion groups and many of the individual interviews thought that people's social preferences had more to do with their individual personalities than their age. In the words of a man who lived in retirement housing, 'If you're a loner, you stay a loner. If you're outgoing, you stay outgoing.'

A 76 year old woman, who shared her home with a younger woman in her 50s through a local authority Homeshare scheme, explained that she had never been somebody who did a lot of socialising, therefore this was unlikely to be a big feature in her old age. For this woman, her arrangement with her Homesharer was particularly important as it enabled her to continue keeping dogs (her great interest): 'this young lady exercises them for me, and cares for them when I am not here, and she is a real back-up in my life.'

Participants in the cohousing focus group explained that the success of their community was mainly down to their having shared expectations and outlook (as opposed to being of a particular age group): 'We've all made the decision to live like this, so we are willing to work with it and at it.' However, despite these similarities, the members of the cohousing scheme viewed themselves as a diverse community and emphasised the fact that there were no restrictive entry requirements.

Social contact inside and outside the immediate 'home' environment

Many of the participants who lived in mainstream housing, explained that they were very involved in their local community, therefore their social life did not revolve around their home:

"I am very involved in the local community, in various ways, in a community centre, the school governors, and this group, so I socialise with different people in various pockets associated with my activities."

"I have always lived in London, I went to school here, my working life was here, so I have many friends, and the children of friends in London, who are our main social group."

Several people also discussed the importance of socialising 'at a distance' via the phone and internet. One woman had family back home in India, whom she kept in touch with via e-mail. 'They all live miles away, but I am on the phone, every day and I spend a lot of time at the computer, e-mailing'.

Another woman, aged 69, who lived alone in mainstream housing, explained that as she lived alone, she needed to make a conscious effort to meet new people.

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However, this had its challenges as 'socialising is dependent upon income' and she lived in an expensive part of London. For many of the adults who lived in mainstream housing in London, the Freedom Pass was viewed as an essential means to enable a varied social life. One woman explained that 'my life would be transformed if the Freedom Pass disappeared', and said that the amount of money it saved her was 'colossal'.

The people who participated in the cohousing focus group all thought that living in mainstream housing as they grew older would be 'harder work' than cohousing, as they would have to make a particular effort to socialise rather than having a ready-made community surrounding them. They suggested that the concept of independence in old age was over-rated, and that 'interdependence' with others was a more realistic and appealing concept. One woman explained that 'When you've not got a job, a purpose, it's important to find a new one and living here, contributing here, gives you a new purpose in life. It gives value and meaning to still being alive.'

The people who lived in a specialist out-of-town retirement community generally appeared to have less varied social lives than the other groups. Some tenants explained that their entire social life relied on activities that took place in the communal area, which were organised by the housing managers or other residents. However, one of the tenants, who was involved in a church in the nearby town and had family living nearby, said that her social life was divided quite equally between the retirement community and the wider community in town.

The value of solitude and independence

While the majority of interviewees in all housing circumstances emphasised the importance of regular social contact with like-minded people, a number of participants also explained that they valued opportunities for solitude. One woman who was living with her children and grandchildren explained that 'If you lived in a household like I do, you would be glad to be alone sometimes.'

A woman who lived in the cohousing community explained that she had chosen this set-up because 'When my first marriage broke up, I really didn't want to be in a community that centred on a pub or a church'. However, she was also very clear that 'I'm not good with being with people all the time. I need my own space' and she felt that the option of cohousing 'gives you both'. Another man who lived in cohousing described the set-up as being like 'a village', which offers 'the combination of independence and the ability to easily socialise with people.'

A woman who was living in sheltered housing with her husband also explained that while she enjoyed the social side, it was important to her to have her own flat and independence from the other tenants: 'We are all individuals, same as when we were young. We've all got different ideas about what makes a happy life.' Some residents in the out-of-town retirement community also valued the opportunities for solitude as well as social contact. One man mentioned that he often watched television documentaries alone, and enjoyed this as a way of learning new things and keeping his mind active.

The importance of natural and created 'families' in later life

In most of discussions, family members emerged as people's most important and most frequent source of social contact. The main source of social contact that the retirement community residents had outside the estate tended to be with their families, including children, grandchildren and siblings. One woman who lived in mainstream housing commented, "if you have got children, and you have got family close by, that makes a big difference." When we interviewed Maria Brenton from the Older Women's Co-Housing group, which is working to establish a cohousing community for older women, she pointed out that families are increasingly mobile, which can present challenges for older people: 'when you're a family unit, you are making your own [supportive community], but then your family unit disappears if you are unlucky. People's kids go to Australia, New Zealand, then you have Skype and that's it.'

Some of the research participants who did not have family members living nearby appeared to have created social networks that were similar to family relationships. One man who lived in mainstream housing explained that he had been a long-term lodger with two families in the past, and now maintained regular contact with them: 'I helped the children with their education, and now probably they are like part of my family – or I am like part of their family.' The woman who was sharing her home through a Homeshare arrangement described her sharer as being 'like a daughter' and commented that 'it is just like having somebody in the family back home with me.'

In the focus group with adults who lived in mainstream housing, one woman argued that the government should make it easier for older people to live with their families, rather than investing in specialist housing: 'Would it not be better for the government to encourage young families to take in their mothers and fathers, and contribute a little to the family who does that?' Other participants in this group responded well to this idea, suggesting that financial support should be available to families to "upsized" or relocate to a new house that could accommodate an ageing parent. They suggested that this could be helpful to other members of the family as well, as grandparents could help with homework and childcare.

Views on specialist 'age segregated' housing

The group of older people who lived in mainstream housing responded with a unanimous 'no' when asked if they would like to live in a retirement community. One woman said 'I think not. I think I would rather be dead.' In another interview, a 61 year old woman who lived in mainstream housing described the idea of retirement housing as 'hell' and argued that 'If we were all trapped in little ghettos of the same people, it wouldn't help society and it wouldn't help the planet.' She reflected that there are currently not enough options for older people to choose from: 'What we currently lack is attractive non-ghetto like housing generally for people to live in, as they are older.' However, comments were not all negative and some participants recognised that specialist housing can give older people much-needed company, particularly if they would otherwise be living alone.

The woman who lived with a Homesharer acknowledged that she herself was not yet ready to give up her own home and move into a specialist accommodation.

However, she acknowledged that her sister's extra care flat 'suits her very well' and that this might be a suitable option for her too in the future, if she was no longer able to live in mainstream housing. Some residents of the cohousing community pointed out that retirement communities are often built in inaccessible locations, and can lack amenities and transport links. One woman explained that she this would not be an attractive option as she thought it was important 'to be near a community and to have a good transport system and to be living in a mixed age group'.

The members of the retirement housing community were more aware of the benefits of specialist housing. One woman explained that she had felt very isolated and unsafe when living alone in mainstream housing, and she had chosen to move to the estate because she wanted more opportunities to socialise with people of her own age. Other residents also emphasised the greater sense of security that they had in the retirement community; they felt safe in the knowledge that they had personal alarms and could seek the help of the estate managers if they needed to.

Intergenerational mixing and attitudes to other age groups

In the specialist retirement housing estate that Demos visited, tenants had to be aged 55 or above. However, the residents were emphatic that this was nevertheless a mixed-age community, with an age range of over 30 years. During Demos's interviews, one man in his 60s was explaining to a woman in her late 70s how to use her new digital hearing aid, while another resident had recently received help from a younger resident to use his laptop. However, some residents also expressed regret that the younger residents were less sociable than older residents, often because they had jobs.

It was also notable that some of the residents of the retirement housing estate expressed quite negative – and in some cases openly hostile – attitudes towards young people in their teens and twenties. This was not the case for the other older people who took part in the research, who were generally quite positive about young people. Criticisms of young people raised by this group included their lack of respect for their elders and their environment (e.g. littering), and lack of discipline. They seemed to feel that there was a gulf between their own attitudes and those of modern teenagers that this was almost impossible to bridge. Therefore, for some residents, living in a community of people aged over 55 allowed them to be around people who shared their values and expectations of behaviour. However, this negative attitude towards young people was by no means universal. One woman spoke of the good work she had witnessed by younger people involved with her Church and said that she thought it was unfair that young people were often viewed so negatively.

One woman explained that she had felt very isolated and unsafe when living alone in mainstream housing, and she had chosen to move to the estate because she wanted more opportunities to socialise with people of her own age.

The focus group with people who lived in mainstream housing mostly said that they had a lot of contact with younger age groups in their daily lives. One person commented 'I think that's the horror of retirement homes, that everybody is of the same age, just

waiting to pop off... God's ante-chamber, I call it.' A woman aged 69 said that she had lived alone for 10 years and that she deliberately sought out people from a variety of age groups to socialise with. Another woman aged 61, who lived in mainstream housing, said that she preferred social activities with mixed aged groups at her local community centre (rather than age-restricted groups). She said that this was because 'younger people are a bit more open and are willing to talk more and seem a bit friendlier.' Maria Brenton from the Older Women's Co-housing group, who currently lives in mainstream housing, pointed out that she lived in a diverse area, but would not call her west London street 'a community'. She explained that her neighbours have their own busy lives, so that 'you don't see them for weeks on end' even though they live in close proximity.

The woman who lived in a Homeshare arrangement said that she was pleased her sharer was younger than her because 'I prefer to be with younger people. I think if you are with younger people, it keeps you that way too.' She suggested that if she moved into residential care, 'I wouldn't feel as comfortable as I am with younger people. I would probably find myself getting on with the staff better than the residents.'

The cohousing residents were all clear that it was very important to them to live with other people from a variety of age groups. A 65 year old man explained that:

'One of the things I love more than anything is having the children running around in the safe place and seeing everyone getting on. For me, that's what makes it. We're not isolated; we're not supposed to be isolated. It feels like an enlarged family in many ways...there's always someone I can go to.'

A woman agreed that 'I must say that I love the opportunity to babysit for other people...I really value the mixture of ages here'. Another woman commented that 'we're here because we're people, not because of our age,' while a third said emphatically: 'I would not want to live in a one-age community.'

The woman who lived in a Homeshare arrangement said 'I prefer to be with younger people. I think if you are with younger people, it keeps you that way too.'

One cohousing resident also made the link between living in a multigenerational cohousing community and having a more positive attitudes towards teenagers: 'my own experience has been that it's very important in terms of bridging what can be potential flashpoints between generations and for me, that's one of the really important things about it. We can be welcoming to a group of people who often feel themselves to be rejected [...] It's up to us to be friends with our neighbours.' Another resident

observed that the Demos focus group was 'the first time we've ever sat down together because we're over 60'. The participants suggested that this was evidence that the members of the cohousing community viewed one another as individuals, rather than as 'old' or 'young'.

However, cohousing is not by definition a multigenerational community; Shirley Meredeen and Maria Brenton explained that the Older Women's Co-Housing group is currently seeking to develop a community of 'self-managing people over fifty, who generate their own sense of community and their own sense of communal obligations.'

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Maria explained this age prescription according to Canadian research which showed that the contentment of older people in an exclusively over-50s housing cooperative was higher than that of older people living alongside family groups, because 'in the mixed [housing cooperative], family needs were pre-eminent and older residents always came second.' However, Maria also recognised the need for 'an age range and new younger people coming in', to ensure that the group did not all reach old age and 'slow down' simultaneously. Shirley Meredeen also explained that 'We love mixed generations and we want to be in touch with them, we just feel that in our older age, there are advantages of being [older women] together'.

Challenges posed by ‘sociable housing’ models

The cohousing residents we spoke to in this research were clearly hugely enthusiastic about the social life and opportunities for ‘interdependence’ provided by their housing environment. However, they were also upfront about the challenges of establishing cohousing communities, which were both financial and social. A male resident stressed the social challenges involved in setting up a cohousing scheme: ‘it’s easy to think that because it’s there and perfect with all the facilities doesn’t mean everyone will love each other. The spirit can’t be imposed; it has to come from within every individual.’ A woman stressed the potentially prohibitive cost of developing cohousing: ‘it’s not a cheap option to move in here. You need to be able to afford to buy your own property and property prices are relatively expensive.’ She suggested that it would be important to make cohousing affordable to more people. When we spoke to Shirley Meredeen, she highlighted the challenges involved in explaining the unfamiliar concept of cohousing to local authorities in order to secure planning permission. Jo Gooding from the UK Cohousing Network suggested that to some extent the very idea of cohousing goes against the grain of mainstream British culture: ‘The trend that has persisted for a long time is of individualism, a consumerist approach to neighbourhood and to services.’

Alex Fox, CEO of Shared Lives, explained that the process of setting up Homeshare arrangements can also have its own difficulties. Some of these are attitudinal, as schemes that move beyond mainstream services can be ‘viewed as quite risky or suspicious’. There is then the challenge of establishing a viable funding model for local Homeshare schemes (particularly in the context of squeezed local authority budgets). Alex also pointed out that Homeshare schemes need to ‘get enough participants from both sides of the equation, to start making matches and to get some momentum behind the service’. This requires considerable marketing efforts and the ability to reach both older people and young people, when many local services will only have strong links with one of these groups.

However, while ‘sociable’ housing arrangements such as cohousing and Homeshare may be challenging to establish, the interviews for this research suggest that they are valued highly by older people who might otherwise be exposed to social isolation and loneliness. Jo Gooding argued that cohousing can help to ensure that older people are ‘integrated and have roles so they can make active contributions to the society, without signposting people automatically as care receivers and not care givers’. Alex Fox suggested that as Homeshare arrangements ‘straddle the private and professional’, they can provide ‘a real and lasting relationship’ that might otherwise be missing from people’s lives. He pointed out that ‘people aren’t just looking to have their physical needs met. They are looking to have a good life, which involves relationships and being able to give back and be a citizen as well as a service user’.

Looking to the future

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation estimates that over the next two decades our ageing population will require an increase in specialist housing of 40-70 per cent.³⁰ Our research for this think piece suggests that many older people are very dissatisfied with the choice of mainstream and specialist housing options currently available to them. Therefore, now is clearly an important moment to consider what housing options can be made available to meet older people's social, as well as practical needs.

The experts interviewed for this research were unanimous in the view that the discrepancy between older people's aspirations, and the types of housing that are currently available, is only likely to get worse. Susan Langford, Director of Magic Me, suggested that the baby boomers 'won't put up with just ordinary any more [...] therefore the range of design and feel of places has got to change to cater for people who are much more consumer orientated'. Amy Swan from the National Housing Federation also highlighted the fact that 'what works for generations of people in their 80s now might not work for generations in the future. It depends on people's background, what they are used to and what their expectations are.' Alex Fox expressed concern that the housing market is not currently responding to the need for housing models that can support different kinds of community such housing co-ops and 'semi-shared housing': 'I don't think we are building for ten or twenty years' time and there is a real lack of proper planning'.

Amy Swan and Susan Langford both highlighted the importance that access to a meaningful choice of living environment should not be limited only to older people who can afford to buy a home (approximately 18 per cent of people aged 55+ rent their homes from housing associations or the council, while 6 per cent rent privately).³¹ Amy Swan suggested that 'this is why local authorities have such a crucial role in terms of planning not only the care market but generally planning what housing is needed in the local community and where, and which tenures.'

As we have seen above, there is also some evidence from this research that living in age segregated 'specialist' housing communities may contribute to older people becoming more distanced from young people in their teens and twenties, increasing the potential for misunderstanding and resentment. Participants in our expert interviews also raised concerns about the social integration of older people living in specialist housing. Karen Croucher at the Centre for Housing Policy at the University of York observed that 'there are real issues around the porosity of retirement housing and how open it is to visitors and other social groups.' Alex Fox also observed that 'Any form of housing that is reserved exclusively for older people has an extra challenge to overcome in terms of inclusivity.' Susan Langford suggested that 'people think they would like to live with people their own age because its quieter, its safer, but maybe they are missing out on something, which they don't realise they will miss from normal life.'

Policy directions

As this think piece has shown, older people (like people of all ages) have hugely varying preferences for their social environment. While some older people are content to live in mainstream housing and socialise outside the home, others are concerned about growing isolated as they grow older, or have a greater desire for companionship and community within their immediate living environment. This research suggests that schemes such as Homeshare and cohousing have the potential to offer older people a more socially connected home environment. However, these schemes will require much greater support from local authorities and housing associations if they are to become available as a mainstream option for the next cohort of older people. The Department for Communities and Local Government should take a leading role in working with local authorities, housing associations, house builders and organisations such as SharedLives and the UK Cohousing Network to overcome attitudinal and practical barriers to the roll-out of these new housing models.

Housing associations and house builders should question the assumption that it is appropriate to design housing communities for older people ...Where older people do wish to live mainly amongst their peers, it is important that they have opportunities to maintain social connections with the broader community.

It is also clear from this research that the very concept of specialist housing which is segregated according to age is alienating to many older people, who strongly wish to live within a diverse community that will enable them to have meaningful relationships with people of all ages. Housing associations and house builders should question the assumption that it is appropriate to design housing communities for older people that effectively institutionalise age segregation and explore alternative models that actively enable older people to continue living within in a mainstream community context. Where older people do wish to live mainly amongst their peers, it is important that they should continue to have opportunities to maintain social connections with the broader community. This may require design features, such

as social spaces that can be shared by the wider community (as showcased in the 2009 HAPPI report³²) or geographical locations that ensure older residents have easy access to mainstream community facilities. In the future, age-limited communities should be just one of many housing options available to older people, rather than the default position in specialist housing.

Appendix A: Interviews with housing and policy experts

Demos conducted interviews with the following people to inform this research:

- Maria Brenton, Older Women's Co-Housing
- Karen Croucher, Centre for Housing Policy, University of York
- Alex Fox, Shared Lives Plus
- Jo Gooding, UK Cohousing Network
- Susan Langford, Magic Me
- Shirley Meredeen, Older Women's Co-Housing
- Amy Swan, National Housing Federation

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