

## Older people's satisfaction with their housing

There are many common misapprehensions about the sources of housing satisfaction and dissatisfaction among older people. In-depth interviews with older people and the re-analysis of a major Scottish housing survey found that:

- f** The physical quality of the housing that they occupy is the most important factor in explaining older people's satisfaction with their housing. Damp, draughts and defects were the primary concerns.
- f** Older people who rented were more likely to be dissatisfied with their accommodation than those who owned their home. This was due to the poorer physical standards to be found in the rented sector; renting in itself was not a cause of dissatisfaction.
- f** Widowers are more satisfied with their houses than widows. This seems to be connected to the fact that widowers live in better quality housing than widows, rather than to differences in attitudes between men and women.
- f** The assumption that older people are happier in smaller houses did not hold true. A large house was not a source of dissatisfaction in itself.
- f** Contrary to widespread belief, people do not feel more satisfied with their homes as they progress through retirement. The average 85-year-old is no more likely to express housing satisfaction than the average 65-year-old.
- f** The differences in housing priorities between older and younger people are subtle rather than stark. However, with increasing age, well-designed kitchens and bathrooms, regular public transport, and accessible shopping assume a relatively higher importance.
- f** Neighbours and the wider neighbourhood are very important in determining older people's satisfaction with their house.
- f** Safety and security are a high priority for older people. Dwellings that would otherwise be highly satisfactory are unpopular where security is threatened. This applies particularly to ground-floor properties.

## Background

In the contemporary debate over housing, the issue of how users or occupiers regard their homes has come to the fore – the language of choice has placed more emphasis on expressed needs and citizens' own judgements of whether their circumstances are satisfactory. The momentum of current policy statements is toward the development of a housing system that scores highly in terms of user satisfaction. For example, the Tenant's Charter and performance indicators for landlords in the social rented sector give considerable emphasis to tenants' approval and their levels of expressed satisfaction with the services they receive.

Housing providers appear to be in agreement over the importance of accountability to tenants and users, and believe they should adjust their strategies and day-to-day practices to take account of such measures of performance. However, there is less certainty or consensus over how to do this. The complexity of attitudes and the variety of factors involved make measuring housing satisfaction a difficult task.

This study adopted two contrasting approaches to investigating housing satisfaction. It involved in-depth interviews with a range of older people in a variety of housing situations, which yielded first-hand accounts of older people's views about their housing, together with analysis of a large-scale survey of older people.

## Housing conditions

The most significant determinant of housing satisfaction among older people was the objective quality of their house conditions in general, and the presence or absence of damp in particular. Damp was the greatest source of dissatisfaction.

More than half of the older people in the survey identified one aspect of their house that needed attention. Ill-fitting and draughty windows were mentioned by one in three people. Damp was mentioned by one in four people. When people were asked about how their house might be improved, a top priority was given to heating and insulation.

## Tenure and satisfaction

Older people who rent their houses were more likely to be dissatisfied with their accommodation than owner-occupiers. This dissatisfaction was connected to the presence of defects and deficiencies in their accommodation that they could readily point to; renting was not in itself a cause of dissatisfaction. It was only when it came to explaining what makes old people *very satisfied* with their housing that

ownership itself was found to be important. At a basic level tenure is of less importance to older people than house condition.

## House type and size

House type rather than size was important in determining satisfaction. Amenity housing (housing with some design adaptations) and sheltered housing achieved the highest satisfaction ratings in the survey, with 75 per cent of all older people saying they were *very satisfied*. This compares to only 39 per cent of older people in ground-floor flats rating their accommodation this highly.

Ground-floor flats were rated the least satisfactory of all forms of accommodation by people living in them. Upper-floor flats were preferred even where there was no lift. For older people who can manage the stairs, the advantages of the quiet and security of a first-floor flat outweighed the inconvenience of access.

Of those people who thought they might want to move, a bungalow was the most popular choice. This was closely followed by a ground-floor flat. The unpopularity of ground-floor flats with people actually living in them may suggest that expectations are not always borne out by reality.

The survey found little evidence of older people complaining about too much space in their homes. A large house was not a cause of dissatisfaction in itself. Neither was a small house a source of satisfaction.

## Differences between men and women

Widows were less satisfied with their homes than widowers. There seems to be little evidence that this is a subjective difference in the way men and women evaluate their homes. It is rather that older women on their own are more poorly housed than lone older men.

## Getting older and housing satisfaction

There is a widespread belief that as older people progress through retirement, their satisfaction with their house increases and their level of tolerance of imperfect housing conditions rises. This research found no such relationship.

## Different priorities and getting older

The in-depth interviews revealed that older people had quite distinct housing preferences, which showed a subtle difference from those of younger people. The differences lay in two main areas: the bathroom and the kitchen.

The bathroom attracted most comment. The availability of a toilet on the same level as the living

room might be thought by younger people to be a luxury, but it assumes greater significance for older people. Wetroom-style bathrooms on the ground floor (which contain level tiled floors with a drain) were particularly popular and sought-after. Having a bathroom, or at least a toilet, on the same level as the living area was considered a real advantage.

The ideal bathroom situation for most older people would be to have both a bath and a free-standing shower cabinet or separate shower room. The small size of most bathrooms means that such provision is rarely practical; only one of the respondents enjoyed such conditions.

The large-scale survey also showed the importance of the bathroom. Twenty per cent of all improvements suggested by older people related to toilet facilities or bathrooms.

When it comes to kitchen layout, the needs of older people are again slightly different from those of younger people. Older people experience particular problems with the location of cupboards. The above-worksurface cupboards of the modern kitchen may be too high to be of much use, and the below-worksurface cupboards too low.

Placing a kitchen window above the sink or working surface makes it difficult to open, and can create extra problems for people with limited mobility. Generally speaking, older people's limited capacity to stretch and bend can make the modern kitchen difficult to use.

### Neighbours and the neighbourhood

When older people talk about their homes they refer both to the features of their house and to the wider neighbourhood and environment. Neighbours were the most popular subject of discussion during the in-depth interviews.

Neighbouring was a source of close, enduring friendship. But a clear distinction was made between friendships and acts of caring. By and large, caring amongst neighbours was limited to support during short-term illness or to minor services of a reciprocal nature, such as letting in the gas man or watering the plants when someone was away on holiday.

Both the positive and the negative impact of neighbours on the quality of an older person's life is considerable. The age of the neighbours was, however, of only slight concern.

A view of the street and people's activities was often felt to be an advantage in a house; many respondents enjoyed following the comings-and-goings. In fact, people were at least as concerned with the social aspects of their outlook as they were with any sense of aesthetics.

While people were concerned about the security of their home and neighbourhood, there was no evidence of older people becoming 'trapped' in homes which they had turned into fortresses. When asked about what could be done about crime, people mentioned such things as neighbourhood watch schemes, better lighting, and security alarms.

Outside the home, good quality public transport was of great importance to older people's satisfaction with their home. One topic which provoked a great deal of discussion was the demise of the local shop. The impact of out-of-town shopping on the quality and range of local retail outlets was a matter of great concern to many of the older people interviewed for this research.

### Measuring housing satisfaction

People's concerns regarding housing satisfaction varied according to the basic physical condition of their house and to the approach taken to investigating satisfaction.

In the standard survey, people focused on faults in the house such as damp, draughts and structural problems. They did not move much beyond a consideration of the basic conditions of the house. The survey approach resulted in a narrow analysis of housing satisfaction. In the in-depth interviews, however, if people's house conditions surpassed a basic physical minimum they then went on to explore in detail the things which make a subtle but important contribution to housing satisfaction – for example, the detailed designs of bathrooms and kitchens, shopping, neighbours and the wider neighbourhood. In both cases, there seems to be a minimum level of adequacy of basic housing conditions with which people declare themselves satisfied.

### About the study

The study was carried out by David Wilson, Peter Aspinall and Alan Murie from the Planning and Housing Department, Heriot-Watt University. It involved a re-analysis of a survey of 1,557 older people carried out by the Scottish Office in 1989. In addition, new data was generated by in-depth interviews with 47 older people selected to reflect different housing and household circumstances.

### Further information

More details are available in the form of a report, Factors Influencing the Housing Satisfaction of Older People. This is published by CURS, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2TT. Telephone: 0121 4145021.

### Related *Findings*

The following *Findings* look at related issues:

- 54** Support for young women homeless because of sexual abuse (Jan 92)
- 57** Provision of supported housing by housing associations (Mar 92)
- 58** Housing and community care (Mar 92)
- 71** Nutrition for elderly people in sheltered housing (Dec 92)
- 76** Disabled people's access to housing (Feb 93)
- 80** Housing provision for refugees (Mar 93)
- 85** Local authority responses to women and children escaping from domestic violence (Apr 93)
- 86** Housing provision for people with health problems and mobility difficulties (Apr 93)
- 99** Shared living in supported housing (Nov 93)
- 123** Adaptations for disability (Sept 94)
- 137** Home-owners' response to a repair and maintenance service (Feb 95)

For further information on these and other *Findings*, contact Sally Corrie on 01904 654328 (direct line for publications queries only; an answerphone may be operating).



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