

Difficult to let sheltered housing

Sheltered housing has been a popular choice for many older people, housing providers and policy makers for many years. However, some of it has now become difficult to let according to a new study by Anthea Tinker, Fay Wright and Hannah Zeilig of the Age Concern Institute of Gerontology, King's College London. The research found that:

- f** There is a real and widespread problem for both local authorities and housing associations in England and Wales. Ninety-two per cent of local authorities and 79 per cent of large housing associations had some difficulty to let sheltered housing.
- f** 'Category 2' sheltered housing (which usually has a warden service, some communal facilities and an alarm system) was the most difficult to let.
- f** Often a combination of factors contributed to schemes being difficult to let. Bedsits and shared bathrooms were unpopular. Letting difficulties arose when schemes were located in 'problem' areas or where local shops or public transport were lacking. Over-provision was cited and the impact of the growing number of ways in which elderly people can remain in their own homes.
- f** The clear message is that elderly people will not accept sub-standard accommodation, unless they are desperate and have no alternative. Many people believed that they would only be made one offer of sheltered housing and felt pressurised into accepting this.
- f** Nearly all the housing organisations had attempted to do something about the problem. Refurbishment, marketing strategies, lowering the age limit, providing a higher level of care and admitting another group (such as younger old people discharged from long-stay hospitals) had all been attempted with mixed success.
- f** Although there may be too much sheltered housing (mainly Category 2) in some areas, this is not the case for all areas and for all types of sheltered housing.

Policy context

Although difficult to let housing has been of concern for many years, sheltered housing has not featured to any extent as a problem. It is of concern to Government because this kind of accommodation attracts public subsidy and best use should be made of it. Management difficulties and loss of income make it a problem for local authorities and housing associations. Tenants may find themselves in housing which is sub-standard and may be demoralised by living in a scheme regarded as difficult to let.

The scale and nature of difficult to let sheltered housing

The national surveys showed that three-quarters of local authorities and housing associations had a definition or criteria for difficult to let sheltered housing. The most common ones were a combination of void levels (empty property) and refusal rates (property which was refused by tenants). This was closely followed by numbers of refusals.

Ninety-two per cent of local authorities and 79 per cent of large housing associations had *some* difficult to let sheltered housing. All regions and all types of local authorities had experienced this problem. But most local authorities and housing associations did not have large amounts of sheltered housing which was difficult to let. Commonly less than 10 per cent of their sheltered housing was difficult to let.

The most difficult to let schemes were 'Category 2' which is the most common type of sheltered housing (Table 1). This usually has a warden (not necessarily on duty for 24 hours a day), communal facilities and an alarm system. Forty per cent of local authorities and 36 per cent of housing associations found between 1-9 per cent of such housing as difficult to let. But 8 per cent of local authorities and 14 per cent of housing associations had over half their Category 2 stock as difficult to let. Over half the local authorities and housing associations surveyed had some 'Category 1' housing, originally designed for more active people and where communal facilities are optional, which was difficult to let. More surprisingly four-fifths of housing providers had some - usually between 1-9 per cent - of their 'Category 2 1/2' (very sheltered housing, where extra care is provided) which was difficult to let. One-third of the providers had more than one category which was difficult to let.

Table 1 Number and percentages of local authorities and housing associations which had some difficult to let sheltered housing by category, England and Wales 1994

	Local authorities		Housing associations	
	no.	%	no.	%
Category 2	253	87	110	83
Category 1	146	50	81	61
Category 2 ^{1/2}	73	25	24	8

Source: National Survey

Why some sheltered housing becomes difficult to let

A dislike of bedsits and shared bathrooms is a major reason for schemes becoming difficult to let. They might have been acceptable when they were built but are not now. Older people now expect higher standards. Some schemes were badly sited and were a distance from shops, transport and other amenities. Others were in run-down areas. Rural areas posed special problems where there did not appear to be enough elderly people in the area to fill the schemes. Other reasons were over-provision of sheltered housing in the area, the high costs of some schemes, and the growing number of ways in which elderly people can be enabled to remain in their own homes - older people are less and less likely to consider moving to sheltered housing in their sixties and seventies. Sometimes only part of a scheme was difficult to let, such as a first floor when a scheme lacked a lift. There were often a combination of factors at work.

Why people accept tenancies in difficult to let schemes

Interviews with elderly people living in difficult to let schemes found that the most common reason for moving into the scheme had been problems with their previous accommodation. Other reasons included wanting to be near relatives (with a few who wanted to get away from them) and illness. Very few could have remained in their previous homes because their problems were virtually insoluble, for example they were being evicted. Most, four in five, had been offered their tenancy very quickly - in under six months. Hardly any thought that they would receive more than one offer and one in three felt under pressure to accept. Some elderly people had no physical or mental disability and were often desperate for accommodation. Difficult to let sheltered housing was all they were offered.

Most studies of sheltered housing show a high degree of satisfaction with both their homes and the schemes. Although almost a third appreciated the

company of other tenants, more than half had something critical to say and 12 per cent were emphatic that there was nothing that they liked about the scheme. Criticism focused on bedsits, shared bathrooms, poor access and the upkeep of the buildings and surrounding areas.

What can be done about difficult to let sheltered housing

Nearly all the local authorities and housing associations had done something about their difficult to let schemes. As Table 2 shows they used a variety of ways to overcome some of their problems. It should, however, be remembered that few have been evaluated.

Refurbishment

Refurbishment was the most popular strategy for local authorities. The usual option was the conversion of bedsits to one-bedroom flats but other action included the installation of lifts, redecorating the scheme and improving communal facilities. Inexpensive solutions such as redecorating and sprucing up the scheme and the surrounding area were helpful.

Marketing

Housing associations were more likely to try to solve the problem by marketing the schemes. The most popular option was advertising in the local press. Marketing is a good way of increasing lettings but may be a double-edged sword if the scheme fills up with discontented people.

Reviewing allocation policies

Both local authorities and housing associations undertook this. In the main this consisted of lowering the age limit (which could bring problems to the scheme over free television licences which are only allowed for people of pensionable age). There are also problems when groups other than those for whom the scheme was intended are given tenancies, for example, people discharged from psychiatric hospitals, homeless elderly people with a high degree of physical and mental problems and the very frail. Allocating tenancies like this may fill the scheme but was found to build up problems later on either because they needed more support than was provided or because existing tenants were unhappy with it.

The profile of tenants interviewed in the difficult to let schemes reflected these changes in allocation policies. Compared with national (DoE) figures the tenants appeared to be younger, more likely to be men and slightly more likely to be divorced, separated or single. There were similar proportions who seemed to be fit and slightly more in the highest dependency categories. Those entering the schemes

in the last two years were even more likely to be younger, male and less dependent.

Changing the use of the whole scheme

Some local authorities and housing associations adopted this strategy. This sometimes involved enhancing the level of care to provide for frail elderly people but sometimes it was to change it for other groups such as young single homeless people.

Disposal of the scheme

This was the most drastic procedure adopted by some organisations. This might mean handing the scheme on to another organisation - for example from a local authority to a housing association. In a few cases it meant demolishing the property. The problems of finding new homes for existing tenants must not be underestimated.

Most housing providers adopted a number of different strategies, sometimes combining a number in a single scheme. Few strategies have been fully evaluated. There is no guaranteed route to success. But one clear message is that it is crucial to consult and work with tenants.

Table 2 Action taken to reduce the incidence of difficult to let property

Type of action taken	Local authorities		Housing associations	
	no.	%	no.	%
Category 2	253	87	110	83
Refurbishment	195	67	48	36
Reviewed allocation policies	145	50	84	64
Marketing strategies	140	48	86	65
Change of use/client group	102	35	32	24
Disposal of scheme	40	13	8	6

Source: National survey

Conclusions

- Difficult to let sheltered housing is a real and widespread problem for both local authorities and housing associations.
- This does not necessarily mean that there is too much sheltered housing. There may be:
 - in some areas
 - for some types (notably Category 2)
 - for certain groups of elderly people (such as those who do not need much care and could remain in a non-specialised home of their own).

- For the immediate problems of existing schemes there are many solutions (see above) but short-term solutions, such as filling schemes with elderly people who are desperate for accommodation or those with psychiatric problems, may cause immediate tensions with existing tenants and be building up trouble for the future when inadequate care is provided. Refurbishment, especially converting bedsits to one-bedroom flats and providing individual bathrooms, is recommended. Changing the use of the whole scheme may be sensible.
- The needs of existing tenants must be at the forefront of all policies and they must be consulted at every stage.
- *Future schemes* should only be provided where there is a clear need. Bedsits, shared communal facilities, such as bathrooms, and badly sited schemes are unacceptable.
- Some elderly people going into sheltered housing would do just as well in small mainstream housing.
- Elderly people in need of housing should be fully informed of the options available and that they may be offered more than one alternative. They should not be offered sheltered housing when they neither want nor need it.
- Liaison with other agencies such as social services and health authorities is essential when groups with care needs are to be housed.
- Advice from the Department of the Environment and Housing Corporation on issues such as procedures and grants for changing schemes would be welcomed by local authorities and housing associations.

About the study

The research was based on a national survey of all local authorities, all large housing associations and a sample of small housing associations in England and Wales. There was a high response rate of 80 per cent overall (290 local authorities and 132 large housing associations). A follow-up telephone survey was carried out. Case studies were also carried out in 4 local authorities and 4 housing associations and these included looking closely at their most difficult to let sheltered scheme. In the case study areas interviews were held with a total of 17 senior managers, 6 middle managers, 10 wardens and 68 tenants living in difficult to let schemes. One consultative seminar and one conference were held. The research started in January 1994 and was completed in September 1995.

Further information

The full report, *Difficult to Let Sheltered Housing*, by Anthea Tinker, Fay Wright and Hannah Zeilig is published by HMSO (price £17.50, ISBN 0 11 321964 4).

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Published by the
Joseph Rowntree Foundation
The Homestead, 40 Water End
York YO3 6LP
Tel: 01904 629241 Fax: 01904 620072
ISSN 0958-3084

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