

The housing, care and support needs of South Asian elders

This research project looks at some of the practical challenges that South Asian elders face in meeting their housing and support needs. The project also captures some of the positive work being done by voluntary and community organisations, local authorities and housing associations on their behalf. This Innovation and Good Practice report for the Housing Corporation makes recommendations for policy makers and providers for the long term benefits of all concerned. It was undertaken by The 1990 Trust and jointly funded by the Housing Corporation and the Housing Associations' Charitable Trust (HACT). The full research report is available from the Housing Corporation website.

Introduction

There are now more people over 65 than under 18 in the UK with the 85 year old and over group the fastest growing segment of the population. This figure is set to double in number by 2020.

This challenges society to change its view of old age and the way in which services are financially resourced, planned and delivered.

Progressive ageing of the non-white ethnic groups is anticipated in the future, but this will depend on fertility levels, mortality rates and future migration if, as anticipated, the black and minority ethnic (BME) groups form an increasingly large percentage of the UK's older population.

Taken together, these developments necessitate a changing approach to the provision of care for South Asian elders. A substantial element of this research records the views and preferences of this part of the UK's population, as well as listening to their providers and carers.

The project sought to:

- investigate the housing aspiration and support needs of South Asian elders living in their own homes, including their demand for sheltered housing;
- ascertain the support needs of those who care for older relatives/friends;
- interview local authority officers, voluntary and community organisations, health service providers and housing associations to get an understanding of some of the key issues that impact on the planning and delivery of services and support to South Asian elders;
- map the journeys of elders who are living in culturally appropriate sheltered housing and their experiences of living there; and
- produce a national directory of culturally specific housing provision as a practical resource for elders, their carers and professionals in statutory and voluntary agencies.

The cities of Brighton, Bristol, Leicester, Leeds and the towns of Ashton under Lyne and Walsall were selected for this research as they have some BME communities settled in clustered areas and others that contain smaller BME communities in rather more dispersed areas.

The majority of the elderly people who participated in the research were over sixty years of age and came from a wide range of backgrounds.

While some were owner-occupiers living with their families, a number lived on their own or in sheltered housing schemes, whilst others lived with their families in privately rented accommodation.

All the participants were from Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Indian communities.

Key findings

The research found that the majority of South Asian elders had only a limited grasp of what services were available because:

- there was general lack of communication on what is available;
- they do not speak English and were therefore reliant on children to sort things out;
- they did not know who to contact for information;
- there was a lack of confidence on the part of elders;
- there was a lack of interpreters.

To combat these findings the project says service providers should adopt the following strategies:

- review current strategies for the dissemination of information and advice;
- work with community workers to impart information to communities;
- empower and resource communities to help themselves, thereby giving them the capacity to act as key sources for the dissemination of information and advice.

Though many of the South Asian elders interviewed still enjoyed the support of their families, lifestyle and cultural changes being experienced by South Asian communities were presenting challenges to this support.

Many elders spoke of the isolation and loneliness they were themselves experiencing and also witnessing among their peers. The assumption that South Asian communities looked after their own was emphatically challenged by the elders themselves.

The paper makes two recommendations with regard to cultural change and isolation.

- service providers should investigate the possibility of expanding community-based day care provision;
- South Asian communities themselves need to ensure that discussions on cultural and lifestyle changes and their impact on care, support and housing needs of elders are promoted and discussed in a sensitive way.

Elders also felt that local authority policies and services generally let them down.

Two clear recommendations emerged from the research with regard to participation and consultation by local authorities:

- agencies within local authorities should visit where the older people meet or reside;
- if participation is to be continued, consultation needs to be a two-way process, with the results of the consultation being fed back to those taking part in the process.

A number of elders also felt that housing was delivered in an unfair way and that they were in a position where they had to help themselves or get nothing. This contrasted sharply with the perception that white elders were perceived to be getting easy access to support and services.

The paper makes three key actions with regard to equitability:

- local authorities should examine the funding arrangements for older persons' groups to ensure that monies are allocated equitably;
- service providers need to be aware that the term BME (and, indeed, 'South Asian') is something of a catch-all for a wide range of diverse (in terms of origin, culture, religion and language) groups;
- local authorities should ensure that older people are empowered to make their own decisions on where to live on the basis of informed choice.

Sheltered housing was perceived by many of the South Asian elders questioned to be the same as residential and nursing homes. Therefore many who did not know about sheltered housing viewed it negatively or as irrelevant.

The authors make a number of recommendations, aimed at ensuring that information about, and provision of, sheltered housing is appropriate for South Asian elders.

These include:

- information about sheltered accommodation to South Asian elders needs to be made available. As well as being descriptive, this should cover aspects of provision such as access and financing;
- visits to sheltered housing schemes (either culturally specific or of mixed ethnicity) should be arranged for BME older people by service providers.

Many of the owner occupiers interviewed stated that sheltered housing was not an option they wanted to explore. Other reasons for their reluctance to consider this type of housing included stigma relating to care and inheritance issues.

The 'Care and Repair' system has changed, with older people now required to take out loans for renovations. This carries a major implication for some South Asian elders living in inner city properties requiring renovation who may be reluctant to take out loans. In addition, some South Asian elders may be unable to consider loans due to religious considerations such as Shariah Law.

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The paper's findings point to the need to:

- ensure that elders are supported to make informed choices and judgements about their housing and support options;
- ensure that they are made aware of options such as 'shared ownership' and 'homebuy';
- overcome the issue of inheritance and stigma.

Current funding for some organisations in both the voluntary and statutory sectors is not sufficient to address the levels of need (both present and projected). While day-care and luncheon clubs provided good opportunities to stave off isolation, there was confusion about eligibility.

Other key findings with regard to care are that:

- there is a need for more information, advice and support;
- in hospitals, the introduction of the post of discharge co-ordinator is beginning to contribute to better discharge arrangements for elders;
- there is lack of culturally appropriate provision in terms of care home provision.

Overview of research

The findings from this research project point to a number of action areas for all housing associations to consider. Effective community engagement with local community and voluntary sector groups should be at the heart of this action. It was felt that housing associations can make a positive contribution by resourcing community and voluntary sector organisations so they can assist in promoting awareness and knowledge of sheltered housing schemes and other housing options.

Housing associations could also set up day-care provision and provide floating support. Research showed that these initiatives are tangible ways in which relationships can be developed between South Asian communities and housing associations, contributing to a shared understanding of needs within local communities.