

Factsheet 64

Specialist housing for older people

November 2021

About this factsheet

This factsheet contains information about housing intended specifically for older people, such as sheltered housing.

For more information about specialist housing for sale, see factsheet 2, *Buying retirement housing*. For information about renting from local authorities and housing associations, see factsheet 8, *Council and housing association housing*.

The information in this factsheet is applicable in England and Wales. If you are in Scotland or Northern Ireland, please contact Age Scotland or Age NI for further information. Contact details can be found at the back.

Contact details for organisations mentioned in the factsheet can be found in the *Useful organisations* section.

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1 Recent developments

- In **England**, the Government have announced a range of reforms to leasehold housing. Plans to abolish ground rents on new leases will apply to retirement schemes, regardless of whether '*transfer*' fees are charged, but not until April 2023 at the earliest. Plans to prevent houses from being newly sold as leasehold will not apply to retirement schemes. In this context, '*retirement*' means housing for people aged 55 plus.
- The **Welsh Government** is considering similar measures, see www.gov.wales/leasehold for more information.

2 Introduction

This factsheet is about housing designed or designated for older people. In most cases, this is people over the age of 55 or 60. Specialist housing for older people comes in many different forms, which can be grouped according to the level of support offered. Broadly speaking, there are three different levels of support:

- '*age-exclusive*' housing, where residents must be over a certain age to qualify, but little or no support is provided
- '*housing-with-support*', where residents receive support services such as an emergency alarm system, but staff do not provide care
- '*housing-with-care*', where staff provide care services such as help with washing, dressing, toileting, and taking medication

If you are considering specialist housing, think carefully about your needs and what level of support is right for you. Remember, services and facilities vary from scheme to scheme. Check what is available before you commit to moving in. It is also important to consider your financial resources. The cost of specialist housing varies, particularly between luxury '*retirement villages*' and other types of housing.

Sheltered housing

Sheltered housing is the best known and most common form of specialist housing. It is a type of '*housing-with-support*'. It is available to rent or buy, with the different options covered in section 5. Sheltered schemes typically have 20 to 50 flats or bungalows, with a basic range of shared facilities. You have your own front door and receive some level of support on-site. There is usually an emergency alarm system in each property, providing a 24/7 link with a control centre.

There is normally a scheme manager, also known as a warden, who may live on-site or visit to provide '*floating*' support. The scheme manager service may be carried out by a team of support staff. Meals, domestic help and personal care services are not usually provided, but you may be able to get a package of additional services from the local authority or a private care agency. If you need more support, section 9 covers extra care housing, a type of '*housing-with-care*'.

3 Is specialist housing right for you?

Although specialist housing for older people comes in different forms, there are common features:

- specialist housing enables you to continue living independently as (usually) a tenant or owner, with your own living space and front door
- many schemes are purpose-built for older people, meaning properties should be accessible and easy to manage
- most schemes provide some level of support, either day-to-day or on an emergency basis

This should help you to feel safe and secure, without compromising your privacy and independence.

However, the new accommodation may be in an unfamiliar area or further away from friends and family. If the property is smaller, you may not be able to take all your furniture and belongings and some schemes do not allow pets.

Other residents may be at different stages of their lives and may be more, or less, active than you. Charges for support and other services can be costly and vary over time, although financial help may be available (see section 8).

Instead of moving into specialist housing, you may want to arrange a package of care and support in your current home. Contact your local authority, who assess your needs and decide whether you are eligible for services. If you are eligible, you may have to pay some of the cost of care services, depending on your financial circumstances.

If you are not eligible for financial help, ask the authority what services they think you need. You can then arrange for a private company to provide these. Services include specialist equipment, home adaptations, support with domestic tasks and meals, as well as personal care.

For more information, see factsheet 6, *Finding help at home*, and factsheet 67, *Home improvements and repairs*. In Wales, see Age Cymru factsheet 6w, *Finding help at home in Wales*.

Support from Elderly Accommodation Counsel

In **England**, Elderly Accommodation Counsel (EAC) have an online tool called HOOP. This helps to identify aspects of your home you find most difficult, and local services and accommodation that may be suitable.

You can request a callback from an EAC adviser if you need more detailed advice. There are alternative arrangements if you do not have internet access.

EAC also have details of specialist housing for older people across the UK on their HousingCare website. You can search for housing of your preferred type and tenure in different areas. While HOOP is not available in **Wales**, other EAC services are, including this directory.

4 Choosing the right scheme for you

The facilities in specialist housing vary. There are various points you may wish to consider before deciding which scheme is right for you:

4.1 Location

Is the area easy to access? Is it familiar? How do you feel about moving away from friends and surroundings you know well? Are there hills to climb to and from the scheme? Is it sufficiently distant from noisy businesses, factories, or main roads? Is it on a busy flight path?

4.2 Local communal facilities

Is there easy access to shops, post offices, banks, chemists, and medical services? Is the scheme within reasonably easy reach of facilities like parks, libraries, places of worship, pubs, clubs and day centres? Are local services aimed at tourists and therefore not available all year round?

4.3 Transport

Is the scheme on a public transport route? What is the frequency of local bus or train services? If you drive or have regular visitors, is there adequate parking space and easy access from the parking area to your home? Is this free?

4.4 Social life

Will you be happy living somewhere occupied exclusively by older people? Are social events arranged? Will you feel out of place if you do not join in with others?

4.5 Pets

Some schemes do not allow pets, so check what the restrictions are. The EAC directory of specialist housing for older people lets you search for pet-friendly schemes.

4.6 Layout and design

If the flat is on the first floor or higher, is it accessible by lift? Are you comfortable using the lift? Check doorways and corridors are wide enough for walking frames or wheelchairs. Are there facilities available for storing scooters and charging the batteries?

How easy it is to operate light switches and sockets without stretching or bending? Is the flat easy to heat and ventilate? How secure is the scheme's main entrance and your flat itself? Will you have a good view from your window?

4.7 Size

A smaller property is likely to be more manageable, but will you be happy with less space? Will you have enough space for your furniture or to continue a hobby?

You may spend more time at home as you get older and a partner may need a separate room for health reasons. Think about how much space you need now and how your needs might change over time.

4.8 Noise

How noisy is the area and how good is the insulation both for outside noise and noise from neighbours? Is there noise from nearby facilities such as the residents' lounge, the laundry room, a lift, or a refuse chute?

4.9 Facilities for residents' use

Most schemes have a common room or residents' lounge and many have a guest room where visitors can stay. Check if there's a charge for using the guest room.

If you like to socialise, check whether the common room is well used. You may want to arrange a visit when there is a coffee morning or a similar event in the lounge so you can meet other residents.

What are the laundry facilities and what are the arrangements for using them?

4.10 The alarm system

Is there an emergency alarm system? Sometimes called a community or personal alarm, this is technology enabling you to call for help if you fall, are taken ill, or experience an emergency. The alarm is usually linked to a communications centre staffed 24 hours a day. If you need help, you call the centre using a telephone, pull-cord, or pendant you keep on you.

Try to find out about the reliability of the system and what action is taken if someone calls for help. The scheme manager may attend if they are available or the staff at the call centre may contact a nominated person or an appropriate service like your GP.

4.11 Scheme manager or warden service

Is there a scheme manager service and what level of support is provided? In the past, most sheltered schemes had a dedicated warden who lived on-site or visited every day.

They typically provided individual support for residents, organised social activities and carried out some housing management tasks like dealing with repairs. Individual support means things like help in an emergency, emotional support and help with welfare benefits and social care.

Nowadays, many schemes offer '*floating*' support instead. What this means in practice varies. You may get:

- regular face-to-face contact with a '*scheme manager*' or different members of a management team. They are unlikely to live on site and may support more than one scheme. Their duties may be similar to a warden; or
- support mainly by phone or via the emergency alarm system; or
- support only if you are assessed as needing it.

Find out about the arrangements at the scheme you are interested in. Is there a warden or scheme manager living on-site or visiting daily? If not, how often does someone visit the scheme?

Is there a dedicated scheme manager or a management team? What are their duties, do all residents receive the service, and how is it paid for? Can you opt out if you do not feel the service offers value for money?

4.12 Disability-related adaptations

Check a scheme's policies on making disability-related adaptations. Note that, as a legal minimum, landlords have a duty to take certain reasonable steps to ensure disabled tenants are not put at a substantial disadvantage. This applies in leasehold as well as rented housing.

A landlord does not have to remove or alter a property's physical features, but there are smaller changes that must be made if requested. This includes changing a term of your tenancy or lease agreement preventing you from making necessary alterations yourself.

If your agreement says you need to obtain your landlord's consent for alterations, consent should not be withheld unreasonably.

Your landlord does not have to make any major alterations to the '*common*' parts of the building in which your property is situated, such as the communal stairs, but may have a duty to improve the accessibility of facilities like a laundry room or swimming pool.

Check what their policies say about adaptations to these areas and seek advice from Shelter or a local advice agency like Citizens Advice, Age UK, or Age Cymru.

Note that, in this context, disability is defined as '*a physical or mental impairment*' that has '*a substantial and long-term adverse effect on [your] ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities*'.

5 Sheltered housing

5.1 Should I rent or buy?

Sheltered housing is available to rent from local authorities and housing associations, or to buy from housing associations and private developers. Some sheltered housing may be available to rent privately. You may hear private sheltered housing called '*retirement housing*'.

Whether renting or buying is the best option for you depends to a large extent on your current housing situation and financial resources. In some areas, there may be schemes available for people who cannot afford the full market price of a retirement property, such as shared ownership.

Buying

If you are buying, most retirement housing is sold on a leasehold basis. This means you have a landlord (the '*freeholder*') who retains some control over your property and how you use it.

Seek independent advice about your rights and responsibilities before you commit to buying. Bear in mind that retirement properties can decline in value and be difficult to sell on – ask about the potential re-sale value before you commit.

If you die, there may be restrictions on what your beneficiaries can do with the property and they may be required to pay service and other charges until the property is sold.

See factsheet 2, *Buying retirement housing*, for more information.

Renting

Renting is an option if you do not want, or cannot afford, to buy. There are benefits to renting, for example it may be easier to move if your needs change, and your landlord is responsible for repairs in your home.

You may be considering renting for the first time to free up equity in your home for your retirement. Think carefully about whether this money is enough to meet your on-going rental costs and other needs for a long period of time.

Seek advice about the impact of releasing capital on entitlement to benefits and social care funded by the local authority.

Some local authorities do not allow you to join their sheltered housing waiting list if you own a property, although they may make an exception if your current home does not meet your needs.

If you are considering renting privately, make sure you understand the terms of your tenancy and how easily you can be evicted. Most private tenancies provide very little security of tenure, although landlords may offer sheltered housing tenancies on more secure terms.

See factsheet 68, *Preventing evictions*, for more information.

5.2 Renting from a council or housing association

Most rented sheltered housing is provided by local authorities (councils) and housing associations. Demand for accommodation may be high in some parts of the country.

Who to approach

If you are a local authority or housing association tenant, ask your landlord whether you can transfer to one of its sheltered properties.

Some landlords operate internal transfer lists, while others fill all vacant properties from a local authority-wide waiting list (but may prioritise their existing tenants). Authority-wide waiting lists are also known as housing registers and are managed by the local authority.

If you are not a local authority or housing association tenant, contact the local authority housing department or local housing associations. Some housing associations accept direct applications, but they may grant tenancies with less security of tenure when letting properties in this way. They may also charge higher '*market*' rents.

Ask your local authority housing department for a list of housing associations who accept direct applications or use the EAC online accommodation directory. Check you are happy with the terms of a direct letting before you sign the tenancy.

The local authority housing register

Local authorities should ensure that '*priority*' for social housing goes to those in the greatest need. They must have a '*scheme*' setting out who is given priority.

If you make an application for social housing, the authority assess your circumstances against their scheme and give you a number of points or place you in a band. The higher your points or band, the more priority you have been given and the quicker you should be rehoused.

By law, you should be given priority if you:

- are homeless, regardless of whether you have made a homelessness application or are owed a duty by the authority under homelessness law
- live in housing that is insanitary, overcrowded, or unsatisfactory
- need to move on medical or welfare grounds
- need to move to a particular area to avoid hardship to yourself or others, e.g. because you need to give or receive care in that area.

Some authorities may not accept you onto their housing register if you do not fall into one of these groups or may give you low priority. Others may give you specific priority if you are looking for sheltered housing or waive rules that would otherwise exclude you from the register (for example, a rule that you must be living in the local authority area to join).

Local authorities must publish a summary of their scheme and give you a copy free of charge if you ask. They must make the full scheme available for inspection at their main office. You have a right to request information about the level of priority you are likely to be given and how long you are likely to have to wait for suitable accommodation to become available.

If your application is not accepted, you have a right to request a review of the decision. You should be able to request a review of your priority level.

The rehousing process

Your local authority scheme must set out the procedure followed in allocating accommodation. Allocating means making a letting through the housing register.

Most authorities operate '*choice-based lettings*' where you bid for properties you like. Bidding means expressing an interest in a property. In general, properties go to the bidder with the highest priority, but some may be earmarked for certain groups like homeless people or social tenants seeking a transfer.

If you think you may have trouble with bidding (for example, you do not have access to a computer), tell the local authority. They should tell you how you can access property listings, for example, at your local library or the housing office, and you may be able to place bids by phone.

If you have a disability covered by the *Equality Act 2010*, the authority should take reasonable steps to ensure you are not disadvantaged by a choice-based lettings system.

Applying to a different local authority

You can apply to a different local authority for housing, but authorities can take your connection to the area into account when determining your level of priority relative to others. Local connection can include family associations and other special circumstances.

In addition in **England**, a local authority has some freedom to decide who '*qualifies*' to join its housing register and who does not. As a result, many authorities operate strict rules that disqualify you if you have not lived in the area for a number of years. They may relax these in certain circumstances, for example if you are looking for a sheltered home nearer family.

If they do not, seek advice. It may be unlawful if they will not consider making an exception, particularly if you should be given priority by law.

Care Act 2014 statutory guidance states that, subject to certain conditions, if the care planning process determines your needs would be best met in sheltered accommodation, a local authority must provide your preferred choice of accommodation, which can be in another area.

6 Service charges

As well as rent or mortgage payments, you must usually pay a regular service charge. This typically includes contributions towards communal repairs and cleaning, grounds maintenance, servicing and maintaining lifts and security systems, and buildings insurance. It may include charges for support services, such as the scheme manager service and emergency alarm system.

The level of service charge varies depending on the type of specialist housing, whether it is for rent or sale, who it is managed by, and the specific services provided. It is important to be clear about the service charge level at a particular scheme, and any other charges payable, before you make a commitment.

You may expect to pay a service charge of £130 to £200 per month if you rent sheltered housing from a local authority or housing association. '*Housing-with-care*', such as extra care housing, is likely to come with a higher service charge because of the additional facilities and services provided – typically in the region of £250 to £400 a month. You may pay more if you buy rather than rent specialist housing. See factsheet 2, *Buying retirement housing*, for more information.

Some service charges can be covered by Pension Credit, Housing Benefit, or Universal Credit. See section 8 for more information.

7 Other charges

On top of the charges above, you must usually pay Council Tax, water rates, and energy bills. Some charges for water and fuel may be part of your service charge if they are for communal areas. This includes water to a communal laundry, or fuel bills for lighting and heating the corridors or communal lounge.

If you buy retirement housing, you usually have to pay ground rent to the freeholder and make contributions towards a '*reserve fund*' for major repairs. There may be a transfer or exit fee payable if you sell the property, rent it out, or if someone else moves in with you.

You must get a TV licence if you watch or record live television or watch BBC programmes on your laptop. This applies regardless of age, but you can claim a free licence if aged over 75 and in receipt of Pension Credit. In some schemes, you may receive a concession on your licence – check if this is the case in your preferred scheme.

Make sure you realistically budget for all charges. Factor in additional costs like telephone bills, internet bills and contents insurance.

Will you be able to keep up with payments in the long term and will you have a good quality of life once all charges are paid? Could you manage if charges increased in future?

8 What financial help can I get?

This section covers financial help available to meet the costs of living in specialist housing.

Council Tax and rent

If you have a low income, you may be able to get help with Council Tax and rent. You must apply to your local authority. See factsheet 17, *Housing Benefit*, and factsheet 21, *Council Tax*, for more information. In Wales, see Age Cymru factsheet 21w, *Council tax in Wales*.

Service charges

If you have a low income and are over State Pension age, you may be eligible for Pension Credit Guarantee Credit. If you buy a retirement property, this can include help towards some service charges, such as charges for cleaning communal areas and provision of a laundry room.

If you rent, you may be able to get this help under Housing Benefit or Universal Credit, depending on your age and circumstances. Seek advice if this applies.

Supporting People in England

Your local authority may run a *Supporting People* programme under which support services like the scheme manager service and emergency alarm system can be funded.

Check whether your local authority has a *Supporting People* programme and how it works. If not, ask them to carry out a 'care needs assessment' (looking at your needs for care and support). Depending on your needs and financial circumstances, you may be able to get support charges paid as part of a package of care services.

The Housing Support Grant (HSG) in Wales

The HSG is an amalgamation of three existing grants, including the *Supporting People* programme. The grant may be available for provision of alarms and monitoring services. There is further information and guidance at <https://gov.wales/housing-support-grant-practice-guidance>

You can ask your local authority to carry out a care needs assessment.

Getting help

If you need help to apply for benefits or are not sure whether you can afford to move into a particular scheme, contact an advice service like your local Age UK or Age Cymru. Note there are other benefits you can claim to maximise your income, and ways to reduce your outgoings.

Use the Age UK benefit calculator to check entitlements at www.ageuk.org.uk/information-advice/money-legal/benefits-entitlements/benefits-calculator/

9 Extra care housing

What is extra care housing?

This is a type of '*housing-with-care*', also known as '*very sheltered*' housing or '*assisted living*'.

Staff are usually available up to 24 hours a day to provide help with washing, dressing, toileting, and taking medication. There is usually an emergency alarm system, which may be connected to care staff instead of an external call centre. Domestic help, such as shopping and laundry, may be available and meals may be provided in a communal dining room or in individual flats.

Extra care housing is not the same as a care home, although some schemes are linked to a nearby care home (sometimes called '*close care*'). Living in extra care housing means living in a fully self-contained property with your own front door. Extra care housing can be rented or owned, meaning you have a legal '*interest*' in the property. Care home residents are usually licensees with fewer rights than tenants or leaseholders.

Nursing care, such as having wounds dressed, catheter care, or being given medication, is not generally provided by staff in an extra care scheme. It may be provided by a visiting district nurse.

What should I check for?

If you are interested in a specific scheme, make sure the services provided match your needs and are affordable to you. Check how often care staff are available and what happens if you require care out of these hours. Schemes providing personal care in **England** are monitored by the Care Quality Commission and you can contact them for inspection reports. In **Wales**, contact the Care Inspectorate Wales.

How do I get it?

Extra care housing is owned and run by a range of providers, including local authorities, housing associations, the Abbeyfield Society, and private companies. It is not available everywhere. Elderly Accommodation Counsel should have details of what is available in your area.

Placements in local authority schemes are often allocated following a social services care needs assessment. You may have to meet standard eligibility criteria, such as being over a certain age and requiring a set number of hours of care a week. Speak to your local authority social services department if you are interested.

In **England**, if you are assessed as needing extra care housing by social services, they should provide for your choice of accommodation, even if this is in another local authority area.

Some housing associations allocate extra care housing through the local authority, but it may be possible to rent or buy directly from them. Their eligibility criteria may be less strict than those of the local authority.

Private providers are likely to impose even fewer restrictions, but their housing may cost more and be offered on a less secure basis.

Even if you are considering renting or buying directly from a housing association or private provider, ask your local authority to assess your needs. If your needs are considered '*eligible*', the authority will carry out a financial assessment and may cover some, or all, of your care costs.

10 The Abbeyfield Society

The Abbeyfield Society is a charity providing accommodation for people aged 55 and over. They have over 500 homes, ranging from converted terraced houses in cities to purpose-built developments, offering varying levels of support. Some homes are provided by the national charity and some by local partner charities.

The traditional Abbeyfield model is a converted house with a communal lounge and between six and 12 bed-sitting rooms. Many of these rooms have en-suite bathroom facilities. Residents are provided with one or two cooked meals a day and support from a house manager and volunteers. Some newer Abbeyfield developments are larger and provide extra care accommodation.

Abbeyfield residents are either tenants or licensees. Tenants usually have more rights around security of tenure and repairs than licensees, so check the terms of the agreement before you sign and seek independent advice.

11 Almshouses

Almshouses are run by charities and offer low-cost accommodation for older people. Each charity has its own rules about the categories of people they can house.

For example, some almshouses were set up for retired workers of a particular trade or people living in a specific geographical area.

As a beneficiary of the charity, the resident is a '*licensee*' with limited security of tenure. Their rights are outlined in a '*Letter of Appointment*' provided by the trustees or the clerk to the trustees.

For further information on local charities that administer almshouses, contact the Almshouses Association.

Useful organisations

Abbeyfield Society

www.abbeyfield.com

Telephone 01727 857536

A national charity providing housing for older people with varying levels of support.

Almshouses Association (The)

www.almshouses.org

Telephone 01344 452922

The National Association of Almshouses.

Care Quality Commission

www.cqc.org.uk

Telephone 03000 616 161 (free call)

Independent regulator of adult health and social care services in England, covering NHS, local authorities, private companies or voluntary organisations and people detained under the *Mental Health Act*.

Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW)

www.careinspectorate.wales

Telephone 0300 7900 126

CIW oversees the inspection and regulation of care and social services in Wales.

Citizens Advice

England or Wales go to www.citizensadvice.org.uk

In England telephone 0800 144 8848

In Wales telephone 0800 702 2020

National network of advice centres offering free, confidential, independent advice, face to face or by telephone.

Elderly Accommodation Counsel (EAC)

www.housingcare.org/index.aspx

<http://hoop.eac.org.uk/hoop/start.aspx> (HOOP tool)

Telephone 0800 377 7070 (free call)

EAC hold details of specialist housing for older people across the UK, which can be viewed on their HousingCare website.

The online HOOP tool for England can help you to identify the aspects of your home you find most difficult as well as local services and accommodation that may be suitable. You can request a callback from an adviser if you need more detailed advice. If you do not have internet access, call the Freephone number. You are sent a leaflet to request a callback.

Shelter

www.shelter.org.uk

Telephone 0808 800 4444 (free call)

A national charity providing telephone advice to people with housing problems, including tenancy rights, homelessness, repairs and Housing Benefit.

Shelter Cymru

www.sheltercymru.org.uk

Telephone 08000 495 495

Welsh Government

www.gov.wales

Telephone 0300 060 4400

The devolved government for Wales.

Age UK

Age UK provides advice and information for people in later life through our Age UK Advice line, publications and online. Call Age UK Advice to find out whether there is a local Age UK near you, and to order free copies of our information guides and factsheets.

Age UK Advice

www.ageuk.org.uk

0800 169 65 65

Lines are open seven days a week from 8.00am to 7.00pm

In Wales contact

Age Cymru Advice

www.agecymru.org.uk

0300 303 44 98

In Northern Ireland contact

Age NI

www.ageni.org

0808 808 7575

In Scotland contact

Age Scotland

www.agescotland.org.uk

0800 124 4222

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The evidence sources used to create this factsheet are available on request. Contact resources@ageuk.org.uk

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