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<b>Authors</b>	Egbu, JU, Wood, GD and Egbu, CO
<b>Type</b>	Book Section
<b>URL</b>	This version is available at: <a href="http://usir.salford.ac.uk/37716/">http://usir.salford.ac.uk/37716/</a>
<b>Published Date</b>	2011

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# THE CHANGING FACE OF SHELTERED HOUSING FOR THE ELDERLY: PAST, PRESENT AND THE FUTURE

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For some years now, the UK government have discouraged any further development of sheltered housing schemes. Older people are living longer and their expectation and lifestyle are changing. They are also seeking sheltered home appropriate to their circumstances. The growing importance of housing provision for the elderly and the increasing needs and expectations of the elderly for improved housing provisions are becoming ever more pressing. Increasingly, sheltered housing providers are faced with issues of difficult to let housing stock. Also, concerns have been raised within the housing industry on the falling demands for small bedsit units. These small size bedsits were a significant part of sheltered housing provision dating back to 1960s and 1970s. As a result of the changing expectations of accommodation standards, many housing providers are now identifying the need to review their sheltered housing stock to ensure sustainability. A review of the changing face of sheltered housing over the years is documented. The main contribution is an extensive review of literature on the concept of sheltered housing; the development of sheltered housing and the evolution of sheltered housing over the years. A survey of sheltered housing provision is presented to illustrate changes that have taken place since the inception of sheltered housing 50 years ago. These findings have important implications for sheltered housing providers to provide functionally appropriate dwellings to meet the increasing demand, particularly of the elderly wishing to move into sheltered housing.

Keywords: housing, housing provision, sheltered housing

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In today's society, the ageing population creates one of the greatest housing challenges. A report by DCLG (2008) states that life expectancy of the older population is increasing more quickly as more people are living with disability or limiting conditions for longer and there is a higher proportion of the older age groups. Over half a million older people in the UK currently live in some sort of specialist home, one type of which is sheltered housing. Sheltered housing is a purpose built self contained accommodation with added facilities for older people who want to live independently in an environment that is secure. In CLG (2008) report, the UK government defined its objectives for the accommodation of elderly people, by offering older people diversity and choice in housing, sustaining a decent quality of life, a sense of well being, independence and social inclusion.

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Sheltered housing is also referred to a housing “schemes”, appears to be an answer to the problems of older people who are no longer able or willing to live in their own homes. Several studies (Fletcher *et al.*, 1999; Tanner, 2001 and Clough *et al.*, 2003) have indicated that older people are happy in their home and willing to maintain independence for as long as possible. However, as they become older and frailer, many choose to move into sheltered housing. According to the studies, the reasons for moving into sheltered housing are many. For some, it offers a sense of security and the reassurance of presences of a warden or scheme managers. While many people move into sheltered housing because of their failing health, others have difficulty maintaining large home, particularly after a partners’ death. For some, moving into sheltered housing reduces the worries of personal safety, loneliness, property maintenance and other practical issues.

Nocon and Pleace (1999) suggest that some elderly live in isolated areas or in areas with high levels of crime, which leads to anxiety about how to obtain help if needed. Hence, moving into sheltered housing relieves the fears of relatives who were worried about an older person living alone. The benefit in sheltered housing is often the sense of security which an on-site scheme manager can give. In recent years, there have been changes in the supply and demand for sheltered housing stock. According to Tinker *et al.* (1995), some sheltered housing units were becoming ‘difficult to let’. Also, housing providers are facing management problems in some older schemes which have bedsit units with shared facilities, no lifts, and an inconvenient or unattractive location (Barelli 1992; CLG, 2010).

This paper presents a literature review on the development of sheltered housing in the UK since its inception in the 1950s , and aims to identify the likely demands and requirement for the future. The paper is organised in such a way to facilitate achieving the objectives. First, the early development of sheltered housing is established before going on to discuss the present and future condition of sheltered housing and finally, the main conclusion drawn are presented.

## **THE DEVELOPMENT OF SHELTERED HOUSING**

In 1950s, the UK government encouraged the development of sheltered housing by Local authorities and housing association. Sheltered housing, which is delivered by both public and private sectors, enables older people to live independently with a suitable package of care and added security. However, Townsend’s (1962) publication of “The Last Refuge” highlights the poor living standard in homes for the elderly. He advocates that sheltered housing be a home where older people would lead a dignified life and still receive support if needed. Some researchers (Butler *et al.*. 1979 and Dixon 1991) noted that sheltered housing was being advocated as a substitute to the inadequacy and inhumanity of residential care homes, which often demeaned and sometimes physically and mentally abused the older people who lived in it. Furthermore, sheltered housing became popular because it was becoming increasingly apparent that, as well as sometimes being undesirable, residential care was expensive and was being used for significant numbers of people who did not actually need it (Neill *et al.*, 1988; Plank 1977). In addition, many elderly people did not want residential care (Salvage 1986). Kingston *et al.*’s (2001) study revealed that sheltered housing combines the best elements of residential care and neighbourhood communities.

The role and functions of sheltered housing in the community have changed since the first social housing was built. Sheltered housing offers a secure and social living

environment in which frail elderly people with functional impairments can remain independent and receive care when needed. On the other hand, with evolving demographic trends, the focus of sheltered housing is moving away from housing for older people to providing support that aims to offer a home for life through specifically designed housing with support known as Extra-care sheltered housing (Croucher *et al.*, 2006).

### **Sheltered Housing: Definition**

The term ‘sheltered housing’ includes a wide range of schemes, in terms of size, design, type of accommodation. It is a group of self contained accommodation or bungalow provided by housing associations to buy or rent. It is aimed at the elderly of pensionable age or those with a disability, who wants to live independently with the assurance of privacy, security and support. The Ministry of Housing and Local Government Circular (1969) defines it as “housing standards and costs: accommodation specially designed for older people”. According to Tinker *et al.* (2007), it is a group of flats or bungalows specially designed to provide independent living units for older adults with support needs. Bernard *et al.* (2007) define it as purpose-built accommodation that allows people to either rent or buy with a range of housing and care services provided. In addition, Croucher *et al.* (2003) describe it as housing with a range of facilities and activities, which generate opportunities for informal and formal social activity. Tinker *et al.* (2007) further states that sheltered housing was originally seen as a housing option intended for relatively fit, active and healthy older people who were under-occupying their existing accommodation and who required a limited amount of support.

Drawing from various definition by different authors, it can be noted then that sheltered housing typically offers facilities such as communal lounges, laundry facilities, disabled access showers, lifts, door entry systems, guest rooms and 24-hour emergency cover connected to a central control centre. Also, support is provided by scheme managers and other care agencies as needed to sustain a person’s independence for as long as possible. It has been argued that while sheltered housing remains popular with older people, there is a concern that it is not meeting the needs of the elderly as they become more physically frail or develop dementia (Phillips *et al.*, 2001 and Johnson *et al.*; 2010). Also sheltered housing stock in the UK is fairly dated, with less demand for bedsit, inadequate space standards and design that does not easily accommodate people with physical disability (Croucher *et al.* 2006). As a result of these inadequacies, the role of sheltered housing remains unclear in community care policy and the government has been discouraging any further development of sheltered housing schemes for some years.

### **Who provides Sheltered Housing?**

There are four main types of organisations which provide sheltered housing in the UK:

- (a) Local Council Sheltered Housing: Local council sheltered housing is only available to rent. There is no ‘right to buy’ local council sheltered housing.
- (b) Housing Association Property: A housing association is a non-profit making organisation which provides and manages homes for people who cannot afford to buy a suitable home on the open market. A housing association may be a charity, a registered trade or provident society or both.

(c) Voluntary Sector Sheltered Housing: There are some voluntary organisations that provide sheltered and very sheltered housing for older people to rent. These include Abbeyfield societies, which run supported sheltered housing in small family-style households with 8–12 residents. The residents are usually people over 75 years of age who no longer wish to live alone. Supervised by a house manager, the schemes provide two cooked meals a day. Residents furnish and care for their own rooms.

(d) Private Sheltered Housing: Sheltered housing that is available to buy has usually been built by private companies or developers, who are registered with the National House-Building Council (NHBC). Once all the houses or flats have been sold, the scheme is usually run by a separate management organisation rather than directly by the developer.

### **Sheltered Housing: the UK policy context**

A number of policies were introduced by UK government to meet the needs of older people in the UK. Many of these policies emphasized the need to provide quality services and to include older people in decision making. The Inter-ministerial Co-ordinating Group on Older People, set up in 1998 to develop an interdepartmental response to the needs of the ageing population across the UK, led to the development of Better Government for Older People (BGOP) in 2001 and also the publication of the report 'A Sure Start to later Life' (Social Exclusion Unit, 2006) dealing with social exclusion amongst older people with input from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), Department of Health (DH) and the Social Exclusion Unit. Local authorities are required to develop strategies for older people and to provide diversity and choice in the range of services available to older people. The Government published 'Quality and Choice for Older People's Housing' (2001) which set out a strategic framework for housing older people. The Department of Health and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister also established a Housing and Older People Development Group to track progress in implementing the strategy.

The UK government policy on sheltered housing has focused on four key areas for developing housing services for older people which can be summarised as; Diversity and Choice, ensuring the provision of services which promote independence and are responsive to all older people's needs and preferences. Information and advice; ensuring that information and advice are accessible to both professionals and older people themselves on the variety of housing and support options and solutions available. Flexible service provision; assisting local authorities and service providers to review housing and service models to improve flexibility and to meet changing needs taking into account the views of older people. Quality; emphasising the importance of the quality of housing and support services, both in terms of ensuring homes are warm, safe and secure and in monitoring the services provided.

### **CURRENT PROVISION OF SHELTERED HOUSING**

Sheltered housing was primarily a form of housing, not care. It was intended to be run by social landlords whose main concern was to meet housing need. Some commentators (Heywood *et al.*, 2002; Croucher *et al.*, 2006; Johnson *et al.*, 2010) noted that sheltered housing was not meeting the needs of existing tenants who were becoming frailer and physically impaired. Also, according to these studies, some sheltered housing have been left looking unkempt with poor decoration and badly maintained gardens and communal areas. Others are located in an undesirable area

known for high crime rates and are considered to be unsatisfactory by many potential tenants. Some sheltered housing have limited space standard and design, which mean that bedsits or flats with a shared bathroom or kitchen, or those without lift access, are not for people with physical and sensory impairments (Tinker *et al.* 2007 and Johnson *et al.*; 2010).

Tinker *et al.* (1995) noted that much of the sheltered housing stock in the UK is rather dated, with inadequate space standards and poor design not fit for purpose. Hence, in 1980s local authorities started building a new form of sheltered housing “extra-care sheltered housing”, which is generally sheltered housing with the addition of extra services such as meals, domestic help and care, sometimes with the provision of on site staff 24 hours a day. There is also communal areas and facilities, with housing linked to a central control. The Department of Health annual report (2005) described extra-care sheltered as “giving choice to very frail or disabled people whose care needs might not have been met by residential care”. Extra-care sheltered housing is mainly about ‘quality of life’ not just ‘quality of care’ (Riseborough and Fletcher, 2003). It has all the features of ordinary sheltered housing, however, it offers extra support to residents, including offering at least a meal a day, additional warden cover and assisted bathing facilities. It is designed for frail and disabled older people and those with specific needs, such as dementia, a learning disability or a history of homelessness. Oldman (2000) highlights three key points that distinguish ‘extra-care sheltered housing’ from ‘ordinary sheltered housing’: the provision of a meal; the provision of additional services; and the possibility of a more barrier-free environment. In describing an ‘ExtraCare’ scheme, Baker (2002) is more specific, noting not just care services, but support with domestic tasks and opportunities for social interaction both within and outside the scheme.

In contrast to sheltered housing, extra-care sheltered housing offers a new way of supporting the older people to live independently while providing 24-hour on-site care and support services that can be delivered flexibly according to a person’s changing needs. According to Oldman (2000), the provision of a meal, additional services and a more barrier-free environment distinguish extra-care sheltered housing from ordinary sheltered housing. Baker (2002) noted not just care services as part of the provision in extra care sheltered housing, but support with domestic tasks and opportunities for social interaction within the scheme as well as in the community.

Extra-care sheltered housing provides a more intensive level of support than standard sheltered housing. Due to the increasing demand, many extra-care sheltered housing are being built and others have been remodelled from sheltered housing complexes and residential care homes. One of the reasons older people move into extra-care sheltered housing is the flexibility of care provision; which is considered one of the main strengths of extra-care sheltered housing so that, as someone’s care needs change, a responsive service can be reconfigured around those new demands.

Therefore, the development of extra-care sheltered housing provides a further choice of accommodation to the elderly, as it responds to the need to ensure that older people have the option of living in a modern caring environment where they can live an independent life with care and support available when needed.

## **THE FUTURE OF SHELTERED HOUSING**

The current trend of the older people in UK is changing, with life expectancy increasing and people living with disability or limiting conditions for longer. Today,

most of the current sheltered housing stocks are not designed to meet people's changing needs as they grow older. Social landlords are facing management problems in some older sheltered housing schemes which have bedsit units with shared facilities, no lifts, and an inconvenient or undesirable location (Johnson *et al.* 2010). All of these factors impact on the future availability of sheltered housing for the elderly.

While there may be a common misconception that people automatically require less space as they grow older, the study by Croucher *et al.* (2006) suggests that older people would rather remain in the same sized accommodation as circumstances change. The current and rising generations of older people have lived a more privatised lifestyle than their predecessors and therefore may place greater emphasis on private space as opposed to communal spaces. Older people also tend to prioritise private green areas and a safe neighbourhood and while big gardens can be difficult to maintain as mobility and health declines, it has been suggested that large balconies can offer a manageable substitute.

Housing needs of older people are more sophisticated today. According to a report by (HAPPI 2009) older people need space to enable them to use the range of daily living aids now available such as walking aids and wheelchairs. A self-contained property is much more conducive to promoting independence and in future older people will find shared facilities unacceptable.

While the provision of sheltered housing now addresses the housing needs of a proportion of older people, many will choose to live in their existing accommodation (Jones, 2006). Government policies are aimed at keeping older people in their own homes through initiatives such as Quality and Choice for Older People's Housing (DH 2001), the Department of Health Green Paper Independence and Well Being and Choice (DH, 2005). The future demand and practicability of many sheltered housing in the social sector is not certain. A significant proportion of the sheltered housing provision today was built between the 1960s and 1980s and much of the design features are outdated, and not compatible with promoting independent living. As a result, there have been difficulties in letting some of these properties. While Government's strategy for housing in an ageing society (2006) recognises that spacious apartments are increasingly important, too often the current housing stock does not meet these needs. Communities and Local Government (2010) research has found that most older people now see two bedrooms as a minimum requirement for their home. A big attraction of sheltered housing has been the presence of an on-site manager.

It is anticipated that there is a growing market for spacious well-designed apartments and bungalows. The marketability of those homes to new entrants will depend on the quality of the lifestyle services and low level preventative care on offer. As people's care needs increase they should be able to tap into additional services. The key is flexibility of provision in housing and services, with sufficient range on offer to meet people's changing needs.

The Government's plan is to make sure there is a better and wider choice of options, which enable older people to lead active, independent and secure lives with access to quality services. Local authorities and housing providers are working together to develop a housing strategy for older people, which aims to ensure that they are able to secure and sustain their independence in a home appropriate to their situation. It also aims to support older people to enable them to make active and informed choices

about their accommodation by providing access to, and advice on suitable services and housing options. The future of sheltered housing for the elderly holds many challenges and opportunities. The Government's strategy for housing in an ageing society (2006) is ensuring that older people have more choice about where they live and the type of services that they receive.

## CONCLUSIONS

The challenges arising from the changing demographic profile and growing proportion of older people in the UK promotes the development of a range of models of housing and support that allow older people to live independently for as long as possible. Sheltered housing accommodation in UK, is helping to widen the scale of housing options for older people. The service has, therefore, evolved in response to these changing needs and new models of sheltered housing are being developed. Residents can live independent and fulfilled lives in specially designed accommodation that aims to offer a "home for life". The number of frail older people is growing even faster and older people's aspirations are also rising. Individuals increasingly expect services to respond to their specific needs and preferences. Flexibility, choice, independence, information and involvement are the key issues raised by older people in relation to the accommodation and services that they receive. Therefore, the paper concludes that future of sheltered housing will impact on the following key areas:

### (a) Buildings

Sheltered housing will be used as a community resource (vibrant community hub) for example with computer training, food cooperatives, malnutrition screening, falls prevention

The future sheltered housing building will be lifetime adaptable and assistive technologies be introduced into older people's homes as appropriate

### (b) Services

The service provided by sheltered housing staff will be focused people's needs and services may be delivered in a range of ways – floating support services

Care services will be delivered to people according to need and there will be good liaison between sheltered housing staff and health and social care staff

### (c) Service users

Individuals moving into sheltered housing be provided with accessible and timely information with regard to repair and upgrade schemes, and alternative housing options

Service users will be given clear information about the buildings and the services offered before they choose where they live and what service they want.

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