Housing and the Health of Older People

Introduction

Housing and where we live can have a significant effect on physical and mental health. This is particularly true for groups who tend to spend more time in the home, including older people.

Both the Northern Ireland (NI) and Republic of Ireland (ROI) governments have stated a policy preference for older people to live independently in their own homes for as long as possible, as they age. However, the implications of this policy aspiration have received less attention, particularly the relationship between housing and health.

This edition of the CARDI “Focus on” series examines the links between housing and health in older people, using the two examples of fuel poverty and falls.
Does the quality of housing affect health?

Research shows that the quality of housing has a definite effect on health, particularly for groups such as older people who spend more time in the home. For example, well designed housing options can reduce the level of admissions into residential care for housing related reasons (ADASS / Housing LIN, 2011).

In NI in 2011, 52% of people aged 60-74 years were in fuel poverty and 66% of those aged 75+ years were in fuel poverty, compared to 34% of the under 60 age group (Public Health Agency, 2013). In ROI, 24% of older people in a survey in 2011 described their home as too cold (Goodman et al., 2013).

20% of people aged 65-74 in ROI are somewhat afraid of falling and 7% are very afraid. In the over 75 age group, 28% are somewhat afraid of falling and 12% are very afraid (The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing, 2011).

Older people with low to moderate care needs can stay in their own homes, with adaptations to enable independence and full mobility. As care needs get more complex, other housing specialised options become necessary (Paris, 2011).

With the ageing population there will be policy challenges relating to housing if action is not taken to understand and cater for housing demands of older people.

Key findings

- Housing is important for the health and wellbeing of older people because well designed housing options can reduce the level of admissions into residential care for housing related reasons (ADASS / Housing LIN, 2011).

- In NI in 2011, 52% of people aged 60-74 years were in fuel poverty and 66% of those aged 75+ years were in fuel poverty, compared to 34% of the under 60 age group (Public Health Agency, 2013). In ROI, 24% of older people in a survey in 2011 described their home as too cold (Goodman et al., 2013).

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Fuel poverty

Of the many housing factors that influence the health of older people in ROI and NI cold weather and fuel poverty are particularly important. Older people experience a dual burden when it comes to fuel poverty (a situation where someone is unable to afford to heat their home to a level that is healthy and safe). They are more likely to experience fuel poverty than other age groups and are particularly vulnerable to health and social harm as a result.

Fuel prices and income are determinants of fuel poverty but energy efficiency of the home is also a major consideration. There are several factors that have an effect on whether or not a home will affect the health of older people through fuel poverty:

- Whether the home was built before 1960.
- A lack of an efficient central heating system.
- Whether the house is detached or semi-detached.
- A lack of attic, loft or wall insulation.
- Whether the house has double glazing (Goodman, et al., 2011).

Goodman et al. (2011) identified several groups of older people across the island of Ireland who are most at risk of fuel poverty. They are older people living alone, the rural older population in NI, older people with a chronic illness or disability, low-income older groups and older people with no central heating or who are living in poorly insulated homes.

Living in fuel poverty affects health in several different ways. If an older person is living in fuel poverty, cold weather increases the risk of death from existing cardiovascular disease, stroke and respiratory conditions (Goodman, et al., 2011). Illnesses such as flu, heart disease and strokes are exacerbated by the cold. In addition where a large proportion of income is spent on fuel, there may be less for items such as food, leading to a poor diet. Cold can also aggravate specific conditions such as arthritis (Public Health Agency, 2013). [any evidence of cold as a factor in depression in older people?]
Falls

Falls can have a direct impact on older people manifesting as fractures that require hospital admissions right through to being a cause of death. Indirectly falls can reduce confidence among older people who may confine themselves to their homes, thus increasing social exclusion and decreasing physical activity (CARDI, 2012).

Improving the physical health, mobility and balance of older people can help to reduce the number of falls. But quality of housing also has a significant impact, as housing adaptations such as adding guide rails and removing hazards such as steep steps can reduce the risk of falling.

A study by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on the benefits of housing adaptations showed that 62% of people who had minor adaptations to their homes (grab rails or handrails) felt safer from the risk of accident and 77% perceived a positive effect on their health. Major adaptations such as bathroom conversions or lifts transformed people’s lives, with respondents declaring themselves to be independent and confident following the adaptation work (Heywood, 2001).

There is evidence that older people may be less likely than other age groups to maintain housing standards. Reductions in income associated with retirement has been shown to have an effect on lowering demand for housing quality and subsequently for home repairs, particularly discretionary repairs (Crane, 1999). This can lead to the deterioration of housing quality leaving older people susceptible to poor health, falls or other injuries. Older people are also more susceptible to falls if they live in homes with poor accessibility.

Housing and older people in Republic of Ireland

Fuel poverty

Older people tend to live in houses that are not energy efficient and that may also lack adequate insulation or central heating. In ROI, almost half of all older people live in houses built before 1960. These older houses are more likely to lack an efficient central heating system and have problems with leaks or dampness (Goodman, et al., 2011).

According to the 2011 ROI Census data, 3% of people aged 65 and over live in homes with no central heating. Older people are also more likely to live in a home using oil for central heating, 50% of over 65s compared to 28% of 25-29 year olds (Central Statistics Office, 2012). In ROI, 24% of older people in a survey in 2011 described their home as too cold, while 62% were very worried or somewhat worried about the price of heating their home (Goodman et al., 2011).

Falls

There were 197 deaths from falls among older people in ROI in 2008 (Central Statistics Office, 2011). It has been estimated that as the population ages so the number of falls per year experienced by people aged 65 and over will increase from 148,000 in 2006 to 320,000 in 2031. 20% of people aged 65-74 in ROI are somewhat afraid of falling and 7% are very afraid. In the over 75 age group, 28% are somewhat afraid of falling and 12% are very afraid (The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing, 2011). By 2031, the number of falls resulting in death could reach over 600 (CARDI, 2012).

In 2010, 13,885 grants were given for people with disabilities for essential repairs or housing adaptations, with an expenditure of €99 million (Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, 2011). However, there are rising numbers of people in ROI with a disability – 13% of the population in 2011 compared to 9.3% in 2006 – as well as rising numbers of older people. As a result, more housing adaptations are required.

Housing and older people in Northern Ireland

Fuel poverty

In NI there is a high number of people living in fuel poverty compared to ROI. In 2011 34% of the under 60 age group were in fuel poverty. However, older people had much greater levels with 52% of people aged 60-74 years in fuel poverty and 66% of those aged 75+ years in fuel poverty (Public Health Agency, 2013). Older old age groups are particularly affected by excess winter deaths in NI. In 2011/12, there were 90 excess winter deaths among the 65-74 age group, 170 among the 75-84 age group and 230 among the 85+ age group.
In addition to being at a higher risk of living in fuel poverty, people aged 75 and over are more likely to be living in an unfit dwelling, although this situation is improving. In 2011, 1.3% of the over 75s lived in an unfit dwelling in NI, compared to 1% of those under 60 years and 0.2% of those aged 60-74. In 2006, 5% of the over 65s lived in an unfit dwelling. Many of the conditions that lead to a dwelling being considered unfit adversely affect the health of older people, including dampness in the home, inadequate heating or a poor water supply (Public Health Agency, 2013).

Falls

The percentage of people with a mobility or dexterity difficulty in NI increases with age. At the 2011 census, 11% of the total population had a mobility or dexterity difficulty. Among the 60-74 age group, this increased to 30%, by 44% for the 75-84 age group and 64% for those aged 85 and over.

According to the 2011 Census, 28% of people in NI aged 65-74 state that their daily activities are limited a lot and 21% say their daily activities are limited a little (NISRA, 2012). Census 2011 in NI contained a question on adaptation of accommodation, which can help to reduce the risk of falls in the home. As Figure 1 below shows, wheelchair usage (6.4%) and other physical or mobility difficulties (6.5%) were the most common adaptations.

Policy on housing and health

The governments in both ROI and NI have introduced measures to improve the quality of housing so that the health of the citizens is not as affected by where they live. These measures include energy efficiency grants, housing repair grants and housing adaptations for those with disabilities. However, with rising numbers of older people and people with disabilities, long-term planning on housing is required if people are to stay living in their own homes with no adverse effect on their health.
Republic of Ireland

Positive Ageing – Starts Now: the National Positive Ageing Strategy for ROI was published in May 2013. It notes the importance of housing for the promotion of independence and the attainment of a good quality of life. Objective 3.2 of the strategy is to “Facilitate older people to live in well-maintained, affordable, safe and secure homes, which are suitable to their physical and social needs” (Department of Health, 2013).

In terms of policy objectives for sheltered housing or supported accommodation, the National Housing Strategy for People with Disabilities 2011-2016 has the stated aim to “facilitate access, for people with disability, to the appropriate range of housing and housing-related support services, delivered in an integrated and sustainable manner, which promotes equality of opportunity, individual choice and independent living”.

Several means-tested housing grants are available for older people and people with disabilities in ROI. The Mobility Aids Grant Scheme provides grants for equipment such as chairlifts or level access showers that improve mobility in the home. Older people can also avail of a Housing Adaption Grant for People with a Disability if the work required costs over €6,000. If a house is deemed unfit for habitation, the Housing Aid for Older People Scheme can be availed of for structural repairs, replacement of windows and doors, cleaning and heating (Citizens Information Board, 2009).

In 2011, the ROI government launched Warmer Homes, a Strategy for Affordable Energy in Ireland. It sets out vision for improving the affordability of energy for low-income households; ensuring that people can live in a warm and comfortable home that enhances the quality of their lives and supports good physical and mental health (Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, 2011). In tandem with the strategy, two policy measures are in place to combat fuel poverty. Homeowners in ROI can receive grants to improve the energy efficiency of their home through the Home Energy Saving Scheme and the Warmer Homes Scheme provides a draught-proofing and home insulation service (Citizens Information Board, 2009).

There are several options in terms of housing for older people who do not own their own homes in ROI. Local authorities allocate houses for rent in accordance with a scheme of letting priorities. They may give priority to groups such as those with disabilities or older people. For people on waiting lists for such local authority accommodation, the authority may carry out improvements to private houses they may be renting in the mean time.

Home improvement loans are also available for low-income households. Voluntary housing associations are non-profit making organisations that provide rented housing for special needs groups, such as older people, people with a disability or people who cannot afford to buy a home.

Older people in ROI can avail of two types of special housing - low-support group homes and sheltered housing. The former are self-contained units that are often built around a day centre which provides additional services such as communal meals. Sheltered housing provides a higher level of support, including visiting health professionals, full time caretakers and other support staff. For older people who are renting accommodation from a private landlord, a rent supplement may be available to assist with rent payments (Citizens Information Board, 2009).

Northern Ireland

The NI Housing Executive has recognised the increasing need for specialist housing services with the ageing population, stating in 2008 “While many older people will have no particular need for specialist housing services, the increasing number that are very old indicates that demand for support services and specialised housing in advanced old age is set to rise dramatically” (NI Housing Executive, 2008).

The “Lifetime Homes” Standard is a series of 16 design criteria intended to make homes more easily adaptable for lifetime use at minimal cost. Initially developed in 1991 by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Habinteg Housing Association, Lifetime Homes can offer particular benefits to older people, disabled people and anyone with a physical impairment (Lifetime Homes, 2013). The Department for Social Development in NI requires all new build homes to adhere to the 16 criteria.

Warmer, Healthier Homes, a new fuel poverty strategy for NI was published in 2011. Covering 2011-2015, the vision is set out as “a society in which people live in a warm, comfortable home and need not worry about the effect of the cold on their health”. A primary aim of the strategy is to target available resources on those vulnerable households who are most in need of help, including spending money on energy efficiency and introducing a boiler replacement scheme (Department for Social Development, 2011). A Warm Homes Grant scheme is available to older people in NI, as is a Disabled Facilities Grant for works to the home recommended by an occupational therapist (NI Direct, 2013).
For older people in NI who are not owner-occupiers, the options for accommodation are similar to those in ROI. The NI Housing Executive is the public housing authority. It examines housing needs and housing requirements in NI and implements programmes to meet these needs. Older people can rent directly from the Housing Executive. It is also possible to rent from housing associations or rent privately. In NI, housing associations provide over 10,000 sheltered flats or bungalows for older people or people with disabilities. These are self-contained accommodations with the added benefits of communal rooms for recreation, a scheme supervisor service and 24-hour call centre support (NI Direct, 2013).

Housing a healthy older population in the future

In ROI, people over the age of 65 currently represent 12% of the total population (Central Statistics Office, 2012). This is due to rise to 22% of the total by 2041 (McGill, 2010). In Northern Ireland (NI), 15% of the population is in the over 65 age group (NISRA, 2012). By 2041, this age group is projected to make up 24% of the total population (McGill, 2010). With this ageing population, there will be policy challenges relating to housing if action is not taken to understand and cater for housing demands of older people.

Research into the future needs and demands for housing among older people in NI reveals that there is strong evidence that older people want to stay in their own homes for as long as possible, but access to suitable housing is not perceived as a major problem of older people. The research revealed a glaring lack of age-related data on housing expectations and preferences (Paris, 2011).

People with no current care needs can stay in their own homes with no adaptations, but require information on housing options for the future. Those with low to moderate care needs can stay in their own homes, with adaptations to enable independence and full mobility. As care needs get more complex, sheltered housing or other specialised options become necessary (Paris, 2011).

Figure 2: Policy challenges and options for housing and health
Figure 2 shows some of the policy challenges associated with housing and health for an ageing population, as well as the policy options available to best prepare the increasing numbers of older people to live independently in their own homes for as long as possible. The challenges include the growth in “older old” people, increasing numbers of people with chronic conditions and disabilities and income and health inequalities. With a higher percentage of older people as homeowners, more needs to be done to meet the challenges of fuel poverty and falls in the home.

Conclusion

Living independently in the home for as long as possible is the clear preference of older people across the island of Ireland yet there can be challenges associated with this for both physical and mental health.

With our ageing populations it is important that better planning is in place for adapting homes and providing housing options for increasing numbers of older people.

The challenges of fuel poverty and falls in the home show that policymakers must not only meet the current needs of older people in making the home a healthy place to live, but must also plan to meet the needs of greater numbers of older people in the future.
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