

Project title

From crisis to prevention: enabling self-directed sustainable change in later life through the lens of home and socially sustainable communities.

Social purpose statement

The UK has an ageing population and public services are under pressure to move away from crisis-led support towards joined-up prevention, with a focus on neighbourhood health, connected communities and integration across public and voluntary sector services. At the same time, private provision is growing across property, finance, and health and wellbeing, as well as digitally-based interventions. However, it's not always clear how people find, assess and use support.

The Older People's Housing Taskforce (2024) found that people struggle to make decisions about moving or adapting their home in later life until life circumstances, often a health crisis, force change. Scheibl et al. (2019) similarly found that moves among a cohort of people aged 95+ were often prompted by health and care needs, highlighting the value of considering housing options earlier before challenges escalate. There is a need to understand why people struggle to make housing changes before they hit a crisis, even when they have financial resources and options, and what would better support people to make sustainable change.

The research will focus on women aged 65+ living alone, a group disproportionately represented among older people living alone, and explore what enables or prevents them from making sustainable changes in relation to their home and circumstances, considering gaps and connections between public, voluntary and market sectors from a person-centred and place-based perspective. It will consider how the findings could inform policy, service provision and innovation across sectors to better support people before they reach crisis, helping people maintain dignity, independence and quality of life for longer, and, in turn, helping public resources go further.

Project background

An ageing population and reduced public budgets are increasing pressure on public services and the need to support independence and quality of life in later life. One in four people in the UK will be over 65 by 2050, with the 85+ population expected to double (ONS, 2026). Women are more likely than men to live alone in later life: in England and Wales, 36% of women aged 65+ lived alone, compared with 23% of men (ONS, 2023).

Kingston and neighbouring Surrey communities are a useful geographical area for examining these issues across different urban and suburban contexts. Kingston's 65+ population is projected to increase from around 24,300 in 2021 to 37,000 by 2041. The borough has subsequently made healthy ageing and healthy life expectancy priorities (Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames, 2025). Its Age Friendly approach connects housing with social participation, community support and health services, while recent local research identifies a need for more information and support to help older people consider moving, adapt their homes or find suitable support (Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames, 2025).

Surrey's Housing Strategy identifies under-occupation as an important housing issue, including among older households, while recognising the challenges involved in moving from long-established homes (Surrey County Council, 2023). For older people, decisions about whether to stay, adapt or move may involve much more than the size or suitability of a

property, including independence, wellbeing, relationships, familiarity and connection to place. Understanding these perspectives may help identify what information, housing options and support are needed to enable people to make choices that work for them as their circumstances change.

Falls and fragility fractures provide a further example of the importance of earlier action: both Kingston and Surrey have identified bone health and falls as public health concerns, with preventative work aimed at reducing the risk of fractures and loss of independence (Surrey County Council, 2016; Public Health England, 2017). These issues highlight the importance of supporting people to make changes while they still have choices, before changing circumstances make change urgent. The research is particularly concerned with maintaining dignity, connection and independence in later life.

People's homes are integral to how people live and age. Suitable homes and neighbourhoods can help people remain active and independent, as well as connected to their communities, while inappropriate housing can increase the risk of falls and social isolation. Evidence from extra care housing also suggests that suitable housing can support independence and help avoid or delay costly moves into residential care (Housing LIN, 2019). However, making changes to housing can be complicated. People might adapt their home, move, change routines or seek support, with practical, financial, emotional and social consequences. Research has challenged the assumption that remaining in a familiar home is automatically positive. Wiles et al. (2012) found that older people understand ageing in place through security, belonging, independence, social relationships and connection to place. So what is of paramount importance is the relationship between people and place, rather than someone necessarily staying put in their current home (Boyle, Wiles and Kearns, 2015).

Research conceptualises home as a tangible, emotional and social space related to security, memory, belonging and control (Blunt and Dowling, 2006). Home can provide comfort and continuity while becoming difficult to manage, restrictive, unaffordable or disconnected from important places and activities. Social sustainability (Manzi et al., 2010) is helpful to unpacking the relationship between people, their physical and institutional environments, and the services, resources and opportunities available to them. It also helps consider how older people are situated within society, including inclusion, inequality, governance, social justice, and also social capital at a community level. The research will focus predominantly on people living within general housing and communities, rather than specifically in specialist later living environments, which make up a minority of provision.

The support landscape is also changing with a growing mix of public, voluntary and private provision at local and national level, together with digitally-mediated services and expanding property and health and wellbeing economies. This creates new options for people facing life and housing changes. However, scrutiny is also required as to who these approaches serve, how people interpret and use them, and where gaps remain between different types of provision (Johnston, 2026; Ofcom, 2024). Joss's (2015) work on innovation, governance and sustainable places provides a starting point for examining how ideas, services and approaches are influenced by institutional contexts and translated into practice. This research extends that perspective by considering how provision is understood and used by individuals, and how this affects their ability to make changes in relation to home and wider life circumstances.

Time is also important to understanding decisions about home in later life. Housing decisions are not only responses to present circumstances but involve anticipating uncertain future needs. Research on older people's housing decisions identifies temporal and spatiotemporal dimensions of home (Roy et al., 2018). This highlights the tension between preserving continuity and anticipating future changes in health, mobility, finances or social circumstances. The significance of these decisions may feel incapacitating even when options and resources exist.

The capability approach, developed by Sen and Nussbaum and applied to ageing by Grove, provides a further lens for understanding why resources and options do not necessarily translate into the ability to take action (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011; Grove, 2021). Confidence, social support, services and the physical environment can all influence what people are actually able to do. Sen's work on the act of choice is also relevant when people have to choose between options that may be less than ideal. For example, when someone does not want to leave their home but feels that circumstances require them to move (Sen, 1997). This helps the study consider not only whether options exist but how people weigh and experience choices when none of them may be wholly satisfactory.

Together, these perspectives would further develop research by connecting the individual experience of making change in regards to home, with the organisation of services and resources at place level, helping to identify where provision could better meet emerging needs before they become a crisis, and, in turn, contributing to better neighbourhood health and more socially sustainable communities.

Aims of the research

The research aims to explore what enables or prevents change in relation to home among older women living alone, including those with financial resources and options who may still feel held back or overwhelmed. It will consider how these experiences affect independence, wellbeing and how "at home" someone feels, and what this reveals about the relationship between people, place and wider systems of provision, and the development of socially sustainable places and communities. Likely research questions are:

- How do women aged 65+ who live alone experience, and make decisions about, change in relation to their home and community?
- What helps, or hinders, making the changes they want to make, and how do financial, social, emotional and environmental factors affect their situation?
- What do these experiences reveal about how public, voluntary and market provision is organised – spatially, culturally and digitally, where gaps arise, and how these might be addressed to better support people to make changes before they reach a crisis, and to contribute to more socially sustainable places and communities?

Research design

The project will use a qualitative, place-based and person-centred approach, combining secondary and primary research. Secondary research will review literature on home, socially sustainable communities, governance and innovation, ageing in place, wellbeing, housing and place, as well as relevant policy, demographic, housing and service-use data.

Semi-structured interviews will explore women's experiences of home and their local area, changes experienced or considered, what makes change possible or difficult, and how they understand and use available options and support. The research will not assume change is

always desirable or remaining in the same home positive. It will explore how people adapt, seek change or may feel unable to take action. Interviews may take place in participants' homes, community settings or familiar local areas (Kusenbach, 2003; Carpiano, 2009), with telephone or online options where needed. A sub-sample may use participant-generated methods such as photovoice, audio/video or journaling (Van Hees et al., 2017; Weil and Iyer, 2024).

Recruitment may take place through housing providers, local organisations, community venues and other settings, helping to reach people who are not currently engaged with formal services. My Yoga4Health work may also provide a route into the research population through community health provision, which can be self-referred or socially prescribed by GPs.

Contextual interviews with people working in housing, community, wellbeing, voluntary, public and commercial organisations will explore how emerging needs are recognised, how information and options are provided, where people fall between service categories, and how different forms of provision interact. Potential participants may include organisations such as Places for People (including Places Leisure Healthy Communities Programme), Staywell Kingston, Age UK Surrey, Housing LIN, Nesta, estate agents, financial advisors and solicitors, and Surrey and Kingston councils, as well as local community hubs.

Analysis will examine how policy and provision are translated into services and opportunities at place level, and how individuals understand and negotiate them. Primary research materials will be analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2021), using the capability approach and social sustainability as complementary frameworks. Primary and secondary findings will be brought together to identify gaps between policy, provision and people's experiences.

Supervisory team

This Human Geography PhD will draw on interdisciplinary expertise across Geography and Sociology, and the Centre for Research into Sustainability. Dr Jennifer Cole, Associate Professor of Global and Planetary Health, would be my lead supervisor, bringing expertise in health across the life course, socioeconomic and environmental conditions affecting health, and applying Sen's Capability Approach when considering how health information is sought, consumed and trusted through digital networks.

Professor Oli Mould would bring expertise in cultural and historical geography, particularly place, oral history, justice, mutual aid and community groups. This provides a strong foundation for the project's focus on home, place and socially sustainable communities. Professor David Gilbert's expertise in urban and social geography, particularly London and suburbia, would further support its focus on home and place as spatial contexts. Dr Lynn Tang would bring a sociological perspective on how people experience and navigate services, with expertise in mental health, inequalities, service-user perspectives and community development. Her qualitative research uses Sen's Capability Approach to examine service use, inclusion, community connectedness and wellbeing.

Funding

The studentship will cover the main research costs, with additional resources potentially useful for travel and other research expenses including possible venue hire.

Ethical considerations

The research will involve older women living alone, some of whom may be experiencing grief, health changes, financial pressure or uncertainty about the future. Participants will receive clear information and provide informed consent, with the option to decline questions, pause or withdraw within the agreed period.

Recruitment and interviews will not assume that living alone indicates loneliness, vulnerability or need. Recruitment through commercial or community organisations will be voluntary; recruiting organisations will not access participants' personal information without permission. The research will also seek to include people who are less digitally connected or outside established support networks.

Particular care will be taken for home interviews and local walks. Risk assessments, lone-working and safeguarding procedures will be followed. Data will be securely stored and anonymised in accordance with Royal Holloway's governance and data protection requirements. I will obtain an enhanced DBS check and undertake any further safeguarding training required.

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