



Impact report

The Age Friendly Social Housing Programme



Contents

Summary	Page 3
1. Introduction	Page 5
2. The programme in numbers	Page 9
3. Bringing housing associations together	Page 12
4. Improving older people's lives	Page 16
5. Creating age-friendly places	Page 26
6. Lessons	Page 30
7. Recommendations	Page 31

Front cover photo: This is Clinton, he's a Peabody resident and participated in the Southwark Health & Well Being event in 2024. He came along with fellow residents to make friends and connect with community groups in the local area.

Impact report: the Age Friendly
Social Housing programme
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Southern
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Stonewater
Wandle
Yorkshire Housing

Summary

The UK's housing stock is the oldest in Europe, making it poorly suited to the evolving needs of an ageing population. Many older adults live in poor-quality housing, leading to increased health risks, social isolation, and financial instability. While many housing associations already support older people, there is clearly more to do.

It is within this context that the Age Friendly Social Housing Programme was designed and delivered. The two-year programme sought to improve the lives of older adults in social housing by fostering age-friendly communities across three UK places: Bradford City Region, Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole, and the London Borough of Southwark.

This report reviews the key lessons and insights uncovered during this period, highlighting the ways housing associations, in collaboration with local people and partners, can create more age-friendly social housing and communities.

Key findings

To support more age-friendly communities, and bring housing associations and local partners together, the programme delivered a number of activities, ranging from installing aids and adaptations into older people's homes, delivering digital skills training, hosting multi-agency events to bring service providers and residents together, to administering a micro-grants fund to enable older residents to enact their own ideas. As a result, the programme had a significant reach and impact:

- 2,135 older residents were supported across the three places.
- £144,012 of energy debt was written off for 104 residents.
- 130 residents accessed £12,850 in additional grants and benefits.
- 35 housing associations were engaged in the programme, facilitating local collaborations to support older residents.

- 31 micro-grants were awarded to residents, supporting community-led activities such as gardening clubs, darts competitions, and other social engagement projects.

Whilst these provide a high-level indication of the programme's scale and reach, there were significant impacts in many areas, including:

- **Bringing housing associations together:** the programme created spaces for collaboration among housing associations, addressing the lack of existing structures that facilitate such cooperation. For example, in Bradford the programme revitalised a previously inactive age-friendly infrastructure, establishing a new Age Friendly Alliance. Elsewhere the Southwark Housing Health and Ageing Well group was formed, leading to increased collaboration between housing associations and health services.
- **Supporting digital inclusion:** the programme improved digital inclusion, offering courses that significantly improved the confidence and skills of older residents in using their digital devices and accessing services online.
- **Improving financial resilience:** in Southwark the programme provided personalized financial support to older residents, helping many manage their finances during the cost-of-living crisis.
- **Creating age-friendly places:** the programme supported the adaptation of homes to better meet the needs of older adults, with services like the Handyman Plus scheme in Southwark providing essential home maintenance.
- **Connecting people:** social connections were fostered through events and initiatives like the Make It Happen micro-grant Fund, which empowered residents to organize their own social activities.

Lessons learned

Based on our experience of delivering this pilot programme, we have identified several key lessons we hope others can use to enable more age-friendly housing:

- Dedicated local coordinators were crucial for the programme's success.
- Collaboration required more time and resources than initially anticipated, highlighting the need for more structured support and buy-in from senior staff.
- Peer learning is an essential and valuable part of any such initiatives, providing space for partners to share what's been working well, hear from specialists, and share challenges and solutions together.

Recommendations

The Age Friendly Social Housing programme has generated a wealth of learning and practical examples for how housing associations can better support the transition to age-friendly communities. We have identified seven recommendations that if adopted, will redefine social housing for our ageing population.

1. Create a culture shift:

Housing associations need to think more fluidly about ageing and not make assumptions about the experiences of people at certain ages. An ageing society should be prioritised like climate change – a shared societal change we are not adequately prepared for.

2. Re-design systems to enable collaboration:

staff need dedicated time to connect with their peers and other services. Involvement in collaborative forums should be positioned as an essential part of job descriptions, with adequate time and space allocated.

3. Think more deeply about health and safety:

The specific health and safety needs of buildings needs a review through the lens of an ageing

population to ensure that residents can live in their homes safely and independently for as long as possible.

4. Redefine social housing for an ageing population:

The housing sector has an opportunity to reimagine the definitions of social housing in light of an ageing population.

5. Leverage community investment expertise:

Community Investment teams and their close partners can play a greater role in informing wider housing practice, from the design of homes and communities through to the review of health and safety policies.

6. Be more visible:

Housing associations can support older residents through reviewing and developing the opportunities they have for in-person contact with the organisation.

7. Put social connections at the heart of housing:

There needs to be a greater emphasis on generating meaningful social connection activity, and more time and resource given to this.

We are grateful to all our partners across the three areas and in particular our key strategic funders, The National Lottery and Fusion21, as well as Stonewater, Yorkshire Housing, Wandle, Clarion Futures, Peabody, Sovereign (now SNG), Hexagon and Southern.

1. Introduction

The UK is an ageing society, with two out of every five people in England aged 50 or over.¹ Over the next 40 years, the number of people aged 80 and above is projected to more than double, reaching six million.² While this presents new opportunities, it also brings significant challenges, particularly in housing.

The UK's housing stock is the oldest in Europe, making it poorly suited to the evolving needs of an ageing population.³ Approximately 10 million people in England live in non-decent homes that pose serious health risks, disproportionately affecting older people.⁴

These challenges include:

- **Accessibility:** 91% of UK homes lack basic accessibility features, reducing mobility and increasing social isolation among older residents.⁵
- **Affordability:** Poor-quality housing increases heating costs, limiting the ability of older residents to afford essentials that support their well-being.⁶
- **Quality and condition:** Older residents are more vulnerable to cold and damp homes, leading to respiratory issues, physical pain, and increased illness.

- **Stability and security:** Poor housing can increase stress and anxiety. Around 3 million older people live in homes that negatively affect their health.⁷

Improving housing conditions for older people therefore offers immense benefits, not only for individuals but also for wider society. Research from the Centre for Ageing Better shows that addressing poor housing could save the NHS nearly £600 million annually, while reducing formal care costs by £1.1 billion. Investing £4.6 billion to repair serious hazards in homes could pay for itself within eight years due to health cost savings. Additionally, mitigating cold-related risks could prevent up to 9,000 deaths annually and save the NHS £325 million each year.⁸

The benefits of safe, well-maintained homes extend beyond health. They foster financial stability, promote independent living, and help older people maintain social connections. Investing in housing improvements is an investment in the nation's long-term infrastructure and wellbeing.

While many housing associations already support older people, there is clearly more to do. Given the systemic nature of the challenge, this includes more coordinated local action, especially in those areas with multiple social housing providers. With limited resources, it is not prudent nor effective for housing associations to engage individually with the challenges presented by an ageing society. It is within this context that the Age Friendly Social Housing Programme was designed and delivered.

1 Office for National Statistics, (2023), Profile of the older population living in England and Wales in 2021 and changes since 2011. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/ageing/articles/profileoftheolderpopulationlivinginenglandandwalesin2021andchangesince2011/2023-04-0>

2 Centre for Ageing Better, (2024), State of Ageing 2023. Available at: <https://ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-12/The-State-of-Ageing-interactive-summary-2023-4.pdf>

3 Resolution Foundation, (2024), Housing Outlook, Q2 2024. Available at: <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/housing-outlook-q2-2024/>

4 Centre for Ageing Better, (2021), The Good Home Inquiry. Available at: <https://ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-09/good-homes-for-all-a-proposal.pdf>

5 HM Government, (2020), English Housing Survey 2018 to 2019: headline report. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-housing-survey-2018-to-2019-headline-report>

6 The Health Foundation, (2020), Better housing is crucial for our health and the COVID-19 recovery. Available at: <https://www.health.org.uk/publications/long-reads/better-housing-is-crucial-for-our-health-and-the-covid-19-recovery>

7 Centre for Ageing Better, (2024), If we transform housing, we can also transform the quality of life for those immediately affected. Available at: <https://ageing-better.org.uk/blogs/transform-housing-we-can-also-transform-quality-life>

8 Centre for Ageing Better, (2024), Counting the Cost: The case for making older people's homes safe. Available at: <https://ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-05/Counting-the-cost-report.pdf>

1. Introduction continued

The Age Friendly Social Housing Programme

The Age Friendly Social Housing Programme was a two-year initiative developed by HACT in collaboration with funders and key partners in the social housing sector, including:

- Clarion Futures
- Fusion21
- Hexagon
- National Lottery Community Fund
- Peabody
- Southern
- South Yorkshire Housing Association
- Stonewater
- Sovereign (now known as SNG)
- Wandle
- Yorkshire Housing.

The programme sought to connect social housing providers with local networks, partners, and communities to create better places and services for ageing populations. Thirty-five UK social landlords participated in the programme, seeking to build local partnerships across three areas in the UK:

- Bradford City Region
- Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole
- the London Borough of Southwark

In each area, a part-time local coordinator was appointed to establish and manage a place-based partnership, either building on existing networks or creating new ones. The focus was on understanding and embedding the principles of Age Friendly Communities, enabling local people aged 55 and over to access and deliver a range of services. An age-friendly community is one where people can age well, live fulfilling lives, remain in their homes, and stay engaged with the activities and communities they value

for as long as possible.⁹ The World Health Organisation has developed this work further, highlighting the key domains of an age-friendly city or community. These are all areas of the built and social environment which can help to address barriers to ageing well. They include many of the things this programme focused on, including community support and services, outdoor spaces and buildings, respect and social inclusion, social participation and of course, housing.¹⁰

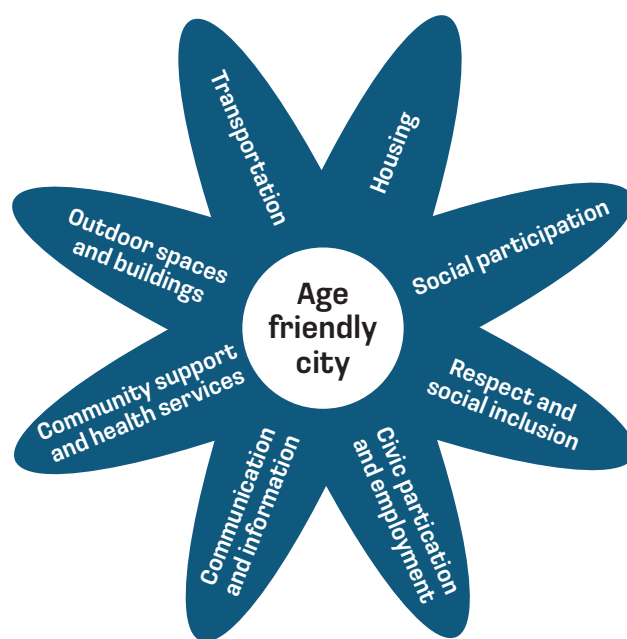


Figure 1: the World Health Organisation's Age-friendly Communities framework

⁹ Centre for Ageing Better, (2024), What's an Age-friendly Community? Available at: <https://ageing-better.org.uk/age-friendly-communities/eight-domains>

¹⁰ World Health Organisation, (2023), National programmes for age-friendly cities and communities: a guide. Available at: <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240068698>

1. Introduction continued

To achieve this vision, the two-year programme outlined five key objectives:

- Build on the learning and legacy of the seven year, £87m National Lottery Community Fund investment through the Ageing Better programme, to strengthen and sustain partnerships between housing associations and local age friendly ecosystems.
- Bring housing associations together to collaborate on shared priorities, amplifying the impact of their individual age friendly activities.
- Extend take-up of age friendly approaches among housing associations and their partners across specific communities and areas.
- Provide consistent advice, technical support and training to housing associations to build their capacity to adopt age friendly principles

and implement successful interventions and approaches to tackle social isolation and loneliness.

- Share learnings from the pilot programme between participating housing associations and across the wider social housing sector, using HACT and the Centre for Excellence in Community Investment's networks to showcase the work and make recommendations to the sector.

Within each of the areas listed above the programme has been applied differently, with the Southwark partnership including public health representatives for instance. The table (below) illustrates some of the activities delivered within each area, which are detailed later in this report.

Activity	Bradford	Bournemouth, Christchurch & Poole	Southwark
Age Friendly Alliance			
Age Friendly Social Housing Partnership Group			
Aids and adaptations			
Arts and crafts activities			
Chair yoga			
Digital skills training			
Financial Support Officer post			
Food provision			
Energy debt write-off scheme			
Fuel vouchers			
HandyPerson Plus			
Health and Wellbeing Event			
Make It Happen Fund			
Multi-agency community events (e.g. coffee mornings, Spring, Summer and Winter events)			
Older peoples' views and story gathering			
Social connection activities			
Social prescribing			
Southwark Housing, Health, and Ageing Well group			
Warm hubs			

1. Introduction

continued

About this report

This report reviews the key lessons and insights uncovered during the two years of the pilot, and aims to highlight the ways housing associations, in collaboration with local people and partners, have sought to create more age-friendly social housing and communities.

In doing so the paper explores the following questions:

- Who are the people and projects supported in each place?
- What new projects or collaborations have emerged from the programme?
- How does the number and attendance of age friendly projects change over time in these places?
- Are partners working differently and more collaboratively?
- What impact do projects and services supported through the programme have on beneficiaries, residents, community members, volunteers and other local stakeholders ?
- Has each place become more age friendly as a result of the programme?
- What lessons can we take for future collaborative working in and beyond the sector?

Methodology

This report has drawn on a range of existing data sources, including evaluation data for individual interventions, a spreadsheet of output data relating to programme engagement, as well as photos and stories. The key source of information for this report however is the ongoing collection of insights collated by programme coordinators, as well as programme manager's observations. This report therefore contains a wealth of information about the challenges,

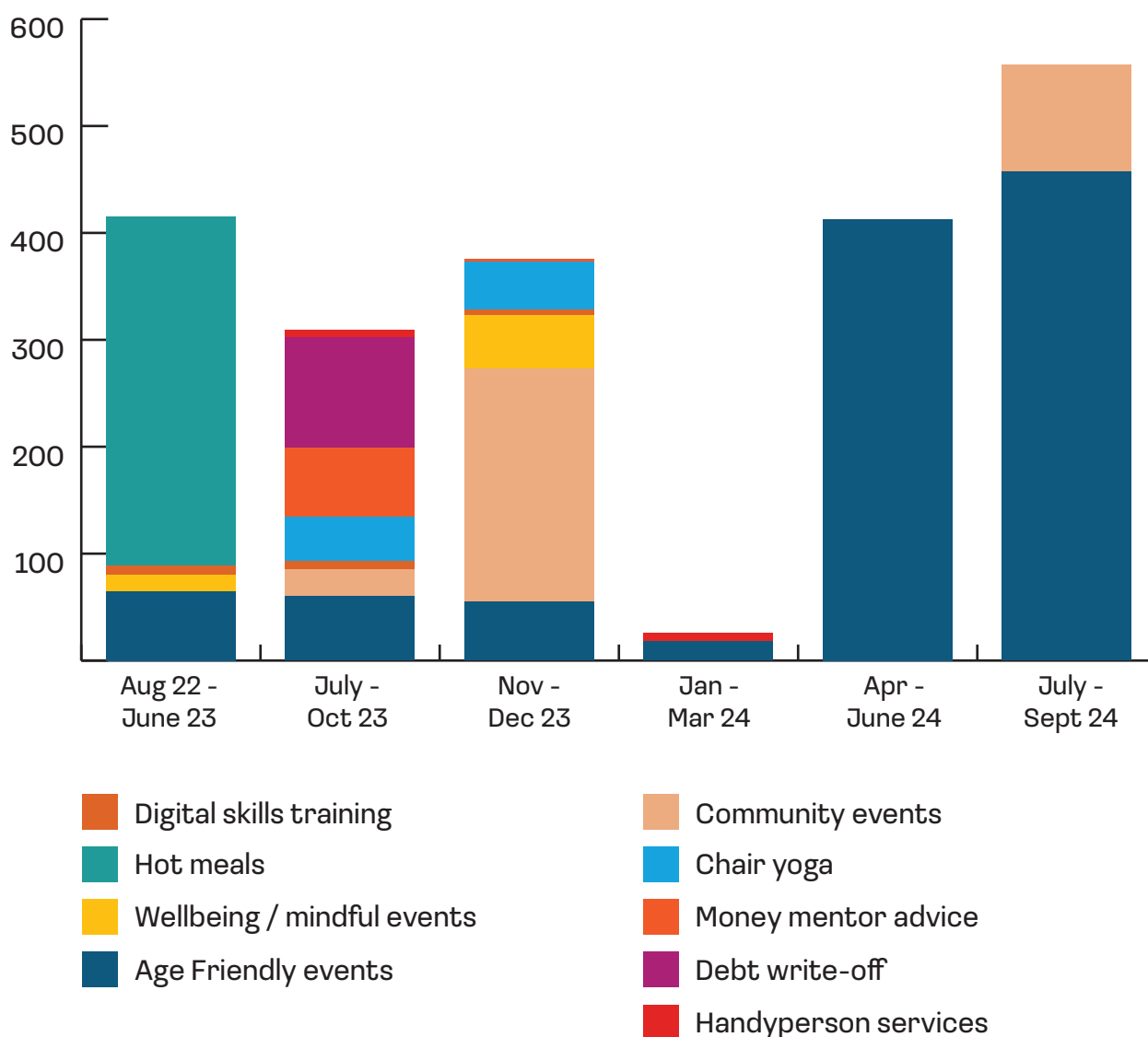
successes and lessons from the Age Friendly Social Housing programme. In sharing these reflections, we hope that other collaborative place-based projects can learn from this experience and deliver improved services for older people across the UK.

2. The programme in numbers

Who we supported

- 2,135 older residents were supported across the three locations (Southwark, Bradford, Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole) by the programme (see illustration below to see which services were accessed and at what stage in the programme).
- 104 residents had £144,012.20 of energy debt written off, providing significant financial relief.
- 130 older residents engaged with money advice services, accessing £12,850 in additional grants and benefits.

Number of people benefitting from Age Friendly services



2. The programme in numbers continued

What new projects or collaborations emerged?

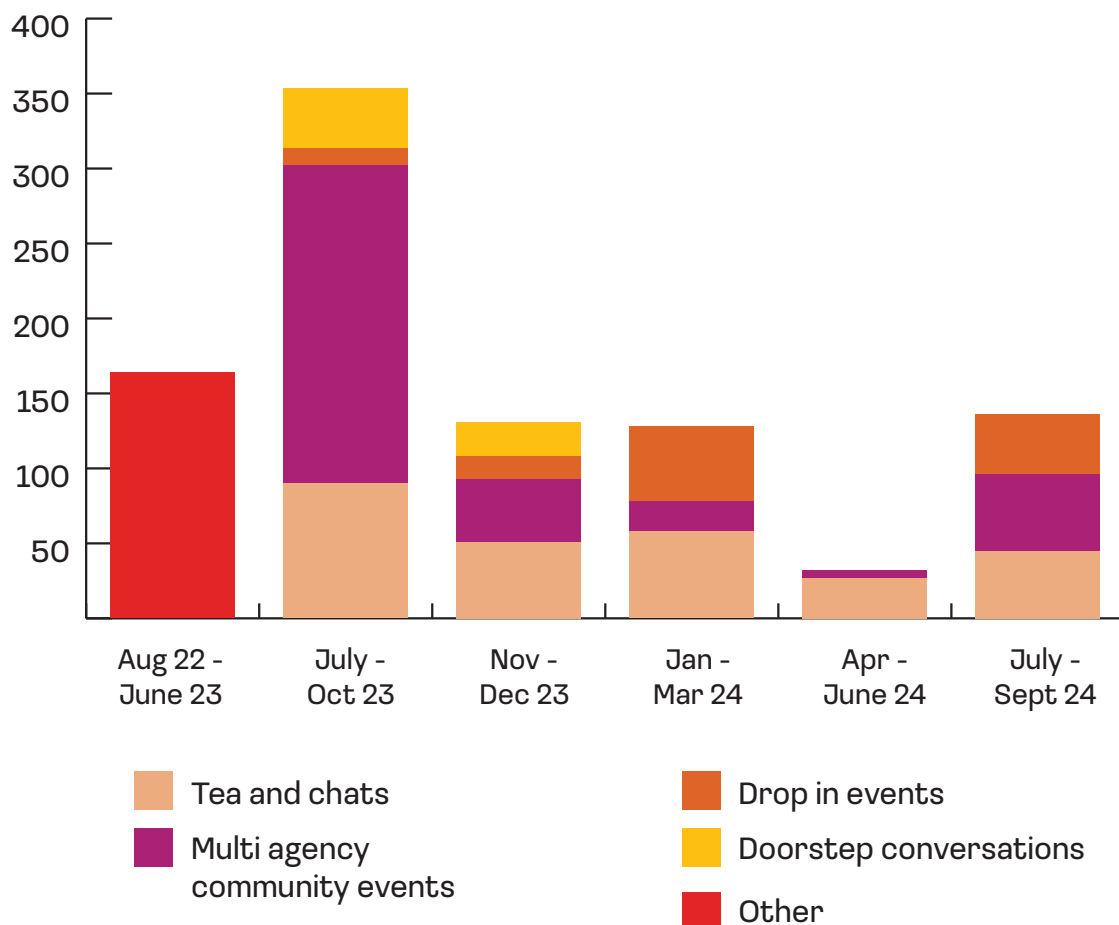
Make It Happen Fund:

- 31 grants awarded across different areas, supporting community-led activities such as gardening clubs, darts competitions, and other social engagement projects.
- 802 residents are estimated to have benefited from the projects funded through Make It Happen.

Attendance and engagement

- 693 community conversations held to identify local priorities and co-design age-friendly projects.
- 35 housing associations were engaged in the programme, facilitating local collaborations to support older residents.
- 95 new local partnerships were established across the programme's three areas.
- 538 meals served to 326 older people, supporting community interaction and social connection.

Number of people engaged through outreach and engagement



2. The programme in numbers continued

Social value creation

Social value helps us to measure and quantify the relative importance that people place on the changes they experience in their lives, through changes in wellbeing. This value can be captured and presented in different ways, including market value and HACT conducted an indicative social value analysis of the Age Friendly Social Housing programme.

Based on available data, HACT has calculated that the Age Friendly Social Housing Programme has created indicative of social value of at least £1,897,155 through a range community activities and engagements across the three pilot locations since the programme began in 2022. With total costs applied across the activities over the two-year period this would provide an indicative Social Return on Investment (SROI) of more than 3:1. For every £1 invested, an impact of £3.45 of social value would be created.

This figure is made up of both primary and secondary social value, the primary value being the wellbeing increase felt across data relating to the individuals engaging with this project, with secondary social value accounting for the value to wider society made through preventative spending/savings created when the primary wellbeing improvements are achieved.

HACT's measurement of social value focusing primarily on individual wellbeing as the determinant of social impact is a key approach to understand the benefits and meeting the objectives of this programme. Using HACT's local and national connections within the social housing sector, the programme has been able to evidence clear indicative social value delivered through working in partnership with local delivery partners. For the full Social Value impact report, please visit the programme's resource bank here: <https://hact.org.uk/collaboration/age-friendly/>

3. Bringing housing associations together

The Age Friendly Social Housing programme sought to bring housing associations together to collaborate on shared priorities, amplifying the impact of their individual age friendly activity. This chapter explores how the programme achieved this, and whether housing associations are working differently and more collaboratively as a result.

Creating space for collaboration

A key challenge observed during the programme is that current systems do not encourage or enable collaboration easily between housing associations. For instance, there were few existing spaces where housing associations operating within the same place could come together to share learning and collaborate. Without these spaces, there is a risk that effort is duplicated, and important lessons are lost. Additionally, there is a further risk that other partners in the system do not know how to access housing associations to collaborate or engage with them. As a result, many do not do so. The existing system effectively encourages siloed working.

The Age Friendly Social Housing programme facilitated space for more collaboration in each of the places it operated. In most instances, local working groups created by the programme were the only spaces where housing partners could come together to learn, share, and collaborate on how to develop their housing offer and practices to better support residents in ageing well in their homes and communities. Housing association staff often found it difficult to make time for these meetings and were frequently engaging as an act of 'goodwill,' going beyond the responsibilities outlined in their job descriptions. However, the benefits of such spaces became evident during the programme. These meetings provided time for learning, joint problem-solving, and solution-finding. They also created a space for partners, outside of the housing system, to engage with housing providers.

What this looked like in practice varied by area. For instance, in Bradford, the discovery stage of the coordinator's work uncovered that the existing age friendly infrastructure had withered away. There had been a lot of work around ageing and organisations working together but a combination of key personnel leaving and then the Covid-19 pandemic brought the network to a halt. The coordinator therefore established a Bradford Age Friendly Alliance, with quarterly cross-sector networking events involving housing associations, statutory organisations, community groups and local residents. As one attendee commented: "There's nothing else like this happening in Bradford."

In Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole, the programme brought together 10 different housing associations and partners who continue to meet once a month. They've collaborated and better understood each other as a result, including discussing procuring affordable transport services for residents for example. The shared space has also created opportunities for speakers from other organisations to talk about their work with a larger audience. As a group they have worked together to run a number of multi-agency community events and form opportunities for co-creation with their residents.

"I have discovered a whole range of organisations that I wasn't aware of and who are already providing opportunities for our residents. I very much hope that as a group of housing associations we can continue with the project – I think the networking has been the most beneficial aspect for me."

Housing association, Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole

In Southwark, greater collaboration between various partners resulted in older people becoming more actively involved in shaping the borough's approach

3. Bringing housing associations together continued

to age-friendly housing and services. This was primarily delivered through partner's participation in the Southwark Housing, Health, and Ageing Well group. This group emerged from a merger of the Age Friendly Southwark partnership and the Council-led Southwark Health and Housing Group. It aims to foster closer collaboration between housing associations, the council, and health services to improve the well-being of older residents.

Amplifying the impact of housing associations

A key lesson from the programme is that integrating age-friendly approaches does not need to be onerous or seen as an additional task. There were several examples of how doing so had in fact enhanced the value, and amplified the impact of the work housing associations already do. For instance, existing Community Investment teams and their close partners are often already well connected to older people in the community. They have good visibility of their strengths, challenges and needs for older people to live well in their homes. This knowledge is incredibly valuable but often underutilised. Better leveraging this existing insight can inform wider housing practice, from the design of homes and communities through to the reviews of health and safety policies. This knowledge can help strengthen the ability of housing providers and the wider support system to adapt and better meet the needs of older people. In many instances it already exists, requiring little additional investment.

Where additional investment was available, it helped to further amplify the impact of housing associations. In Southwark for instance, a Financial Support Officer post was created by Southern Housing, funded by Independent Age. The Officer worked across multiple housing association spaces and community events within Southwark, engaging older residents in various community settings, such as warm hubs and food provision sites. Spaces where older people were already gathering. Their aim was to offer personalised financial advice and assistance on matters like energy

bills, benefits entitlements, and money management. This approach ensured that older residents received one-on-one support in a familiar, community-focused environment. The Officer engaged with many residents, providing much-needed advice during the cost-of-living crisis. For example, 18 people were referred to energy advice services, while 29 people were referred to benefits advice services. Through this support, older residents were able to access additional financial support and benefits that they may not have been aware of or able to obtain on their own. This increased their financial stability and helped alleviate some of the pressures of rising living costs.



A member of the HSBC team alongside a member of the Wise Guys team at one of the Getting Ready for Winter events in Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole.

3. Bringing housing associations together continued

More joined up, more visible

Residents need to be connected to their housing association, community services and other residents to feel that they are part of a community. For many their housing association is a key anchor in the community, whose staff teams can link between the resident and the things that are available locally. Yet many residents are unsure about who to communicate with within their housing association, or who their housing officer is. Older residents are some of the most digitally excluded, so for many, online chat and online resources are harder to reach and navigate. They want more in person contact with their housing association representatives.

Similarly, local partners do not always have full visibility of how housing associations work. Multi-agency meetings, events and activities therefore provide an interface between housing associations and other sectors, unlocking greater collaboration, innovation and resources for delivering greater impact in communities. Housing associations have a vital role to play to create a whole systems approach to supporting residents.

In Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole, the programme improved collaboration and visibility among housing associations and partners by organising events and activities that brought people together in community spaces. One example of this were the multi-agency community events, which were designed to bring partners and residents together in local community spaces, such as independent living schemes, and to open up these spaces to more members of the community.

The events helped connect residents across different schemes and allowed housing associations and local partners to collaborate more deeply. For example,

at an event advertised as Getting Ready for Winter, HSBC staff connected with the team at Wise Guys, an IT repair and advice coffee shop, and now have a pop-up bank in the shop once a month. This is in response to the local bank shutting and residents feeding back at the events that they were worried about how they would do their banking moving forwards. Had they not attended the community event and struck up conversation with both residents and one another, the moment to create that connection may not have happened. Housing association teams made this possible through inviting partners to these events.

Following the success of these events, the programme expanded into Spring Forward and summer support events, which continued the practice of bringing people together in residential and community spaces. These gatherings helped residents engage with each other, fostered social connections, and allowed local housing associations and service providers to better integrate their efforts to support the local population. For example, residents were able to connect with Citizens Advice as well as get advice and support with fitting energy saving devices in their homes.

In Southwark, a Health and Wellbeing event provided a platform for community members to directly interact with local housing, health, and social care providers, while also fostering social connections and creating opportunities for learning. They brought together over 130 older residents and more than 70 partners from housing, statutory, and community services, facilitating conversations between older residents and service providers, including the NHS, housing associations, and the local authority.

“Something like this, a collaboration between housing associations, the council and

3. Bringing housing associations together continued

voluntary sector is so important so that we can make sure we can connect and tap into the areas and residents we don't normally get to meet with. Today was a great opportunity to meet other organisations, to engage, to see how we can work together... we're all in it and supporting the same cause. We just want to see our residents being supported, feeling that they matter."

Housing association, Southwark Health and Wellbeing event

Discussions at the event focused on housing-related health issues, such as frailty and the need for safe, accessible homes that support independent living. Service providers offered information and guidance on various health and wellbeing topics, including energy advice, benefits assistance, and other forms of social support. Referrals were made to relevant services, ensuring that older residents received the help they needed. These events were not just about service provision; they also provided space for residents to voice their concerns, needs, and ideas. This engagement helped shape the direction of local health and housing strategies, ensuring that services were responsive to the community's needs.

4. Improving older people's lives

A key ambition of the programme was to extend the take-up of age friendly approaches among housing associations and their partners, and build their capacity to adopt age friendly principles and implement successful interventions and approaches to tackling social isolation and loneliness. Ultimately, it aimed to create more age-friendly social housing in the three pilot places and improve the lives of older residents. As such, this chapter explores what impact the projects and services supported through the programme had on beneficiaries, residents, community members, volunteers and other local stakeholders.

Digital inclusion

The Age Friendly Social Housing Programme placed a strong emphasis on tackling digital exclusion and promoting digital inclusion among older residents, recognising that digital skills are increasingly essential for staying connected, accessing services, and improving quality of life.

In Bradford, the programme partnered with local organisations, such as Carer's Resource and Yorkshire Housing, to deliver a 6-week introductory course called 'Worth Connecting'. This course focused on providing residents with the basic skills needed to use digital devices and access online services, addressing a key barrier to social participation and access to support.

Key outcomes from this training included:

- the development of two Digital Community Champions, committed to sharing their learning on digital skills at future events, and as part of the Age Friendly Skills Bank which launched in January 2024.
- friendships and new social connections - the training created a safe space for social bonds to form and as a result new friendships were formed between tenants.
- multiagency uses for Community Hubs: another outcome of the training was a reported increase in interest in the use of the Community Centre, which

is under-utilised.

- sparking coproduction and motivating residents to take on leading their own workshops.

One of the training participants offered to run a follow-up session sharing his learning experiences with others and inviting neighbours to contribute to exercise sessions. The newfound confidence to take on running an event was a direct result of his engagement with the Worth Connecting Training:

"I can set up Facebook events now, and invite people to join this way, as well as when I see them in person. I know we all need to get up off our behinds more, and I feel like the best person to start something that will get us all moving!"



Margaret, one of the participants at the Worth Connecting digital training course.

4. Improving older people's lives continued

In Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole, the programme organised two 4-week digital skills courses aimed at improving the confidence and skills of older residents. These courses were held in accessible, familiar community spaces, including in an area of high deprivation with dense social housing. The courses were designed to be person-centred, meaning they focused on the specific needs and comfort levels of each participant.

At the beginning, many older residents lacked confidence in using digital devices or had felt increasingly isolated and unhappy due to their digital exclusion. Surveys conducted before and after the courses showed significant improvements, with 100% of attendees reporting increased confidence in using digital devices in addition to a general boost in their mood and sense of belonging. For example, participants appreciated being able to ask questions and receive one-to-one guidance during the sessions, which made the learning experience more comfortable and effective, particularly for those with additional needs, such as dyslexia.

The programme also empowered residents to help shape the digital inclusion activities themselves. For instance, in Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole, after the success of initial digital skills courses, there was a demand for scaling up these efforts across more schemes. Feedback from participants informed the design of future sessions, ensuring that the courses met the specific needs and preferences of the older people involved.

Finally, ad hoc support was also made available to residents. Digital skills experts were also present at the multi-agency community events and many people gained confidence by having a one-off support session there. This benefitted many people who wouldn't choose to go on a formal course, but were able to get questions answered specific to their needs at these more informal opportunities.

By equipping older residents with digital skills, the programme helped to reduce social isolation. Residents who were previously disconnected from online communication channels could now engage with friends, family, and services through digital means, enhancing their social inclusion and overall well-being.

Cost of living support

The cost-of-living crisis was an unexpected but significant event during this programme. As such, the programme actively supported older people through a variety of targeted initiatives, partnerships, and interventions across the different places where it was implemented. These efforts focused on providing both immediate relief and longer-term support to help older residents manage their finances and access essential resources. While the aforementioned Financial Support Officer role in Southwark was one notable way the programme supported people with the cost of living, there were many other examples.

Provision of hot meals in community spaces

In Southwark, one of the primary ways the programme addressed the cost-of-living crisis was through food provision projects. These projects involved distributing hot meals to older residents at community centres managed by housing associations and Age UK:

- Darwin Court (Peabody): Over 12 weeks, 289 meals were distributed to residents aged between 46 and 88. This initiative provided both nourishment and a safe, warm space for residents to socialise and receive additional support.
- Lewington Centre (L&Q): 121 meals were distributed over six weeks to residents, with many attendees regularly collecting meals for themselves and neighbours.
- Yalding Centre (Age UK Lewisham & Southwark): Similarly, 118 meals were distributed over six weeks, with residents benefiting from advice on money management and referrals to local services, such as chiropody and other Age UK support services.

4. Improving older people's lives continued

Warm hubs and energy advice

In response to the winter months and the escalating cost of heating homes, the programme helped establish warm hubs across the different areas. These hubs provided not only warmth but also a place for older residents to receive advice and assistance. For instance, in Southwark, the programme partnered with housing associations to offer energy advice services, referring residents to specialists who could help them reduce their energy bills and improve energy efficiency in their homes.

Partnerships with local organisations

The programme collaborated with various organisations to enhance its support for residents facing the cost-of-living crisis. For example:

- In Southwark, the programme worked with Age UK Lewisham & Southwark on a Handyperson service, which provided low-cost home maintenance and garden work for older residents, reducing their financial burden.
- In Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole, the programme partnered with local organisations like Citizens Advice Bureau and Ridgewater Energy during events to provide direct support on financial issues, ensuring that older residents could access expert advice on managing their finances.

Ongoing financial resilience support

The Financial Support Officer role (see case study pp17-18), warm hubs, and other related initiatives were not isolated efforts but were part of a broader strategy to embed financial resilience support within the communities. This was evident through sustained partnerships, such as the integration of financial support into the Southwark Housing, Health, and Ageing Well group, which aimed to provide continuous assistance to older residents dealing with rising costs.

Across the three places residents benefited from immediate financial relief through free meal provisions, energy advice, and access to benefits. For instance, several residents were referred to services that helped them with their energy bills, improving their financial situation. Through advice sessions and workshops, residents across the three places also gained greater knowledge of financial management, helping them to better cope with ongoing cost-of-living pressures. The programme also provided a supportive community environment, helping reduce the social isolation that often exacerbates financial stress.

Reduced energy costs and debt

Whilst rising energy costs were an integral feature of the cost-of-living crisis, the programme had a particular approach to tackling this issue that warrants separate profiling and examination. The challenge of older people in particular – of not being able to afford to heat their homes and the associated health risks that cold and damp homes then bring – meant supporting them with the energy bills became a key focus. A central component of the programme therefore was helping residents address their outstanding energy debts.

The programme team proactively contacted all partners, inviting them to apply on behalf of residents for support with energy costs and debt. This joined-up approach enabled wider outreach, getting support to residents more quickly. This support included providing one-on-one financial health checks - which identified opportunities for residents to access grants and support specifically aimed at tackling energy arrears, as well as direct engagement with residents in trusted community spaces to help them apply for financial assistance and negotiate debt repayment plans. As a result, the programme successfully wrote off £144,012.20 in energy debt for 104 residents, providing immediate financial relief. (continued page 19)

4. Improving older people's lives / case study

Case study:

Financial resilience project in Southwark

Jean, a 60-year-old former pharmacy worker from South London, found herself struggling with essential living costs after her health declined, leading to unemployment.¹¹ These health challenges also made it difficult for her to maintain relationships and carry out daily tasks, ultimately leading to social isolation and financial distress.

Living on Universal Credit, Jean began facing significant financial difficulties, including debt, rent arrears, and disconnection from her energy provider. She was forced to skip meals and go without heating, which further deteriorated her health. Jean also lacked essential items like kitchen equipment and warm clothing, while the prohibitive cost of phone credit resulted in missed GP appointments, exacerbating her health issues.

Unfortunately, there are many older residents like Jean who are “just getting by”, restricting their heating or not putting it on at all, as well as “skipping meals” to keep costs down. The Financial Resilience Project was launched in Southwark sought to change this.

The Financial Resilience Project, funded by Independent Age (via HACT) and delivered by Southern Housing, aimed to support older adults, particularly those over the age of 50, living in London. It was primarily targeted at housing association supported living schemes, people using housing association community assets, or those taking part in other Age Friendly Social Housing programme activities.

Key services offered included:

- Financial health checks
- One to one support to maximise their income

- Advice, guidance and where appropriate signposting to available financial support and services
- Support to apply for and access available grants and entitlements
- Group sessions relating to money or accessing support

The project focused on improving financial resilience and well-being among older residents like Jean, many of whom were facing significant challenges due to the cost-of-living crisis.

Southern Housing led the project, employing a Project Officer to deliver face-to-face financial health checks, build engagement pathways, and extend reach to isolated residents. The use of the Lightning Reach platform enabled thorough financial assessments to identify grants and benefits that participants were eligible for.

The project was delivered from autumn to winter 2023, during a period when the cost-of-living crisis was particularly severe. The project exceeded its targets, with a total of 286 residents engaged through a combination of financial health checks, one-on-one support, and community events. Residents like Jean.

Through a Lightning Reach financial health check, Jean was connected to various support services. She was referred to Southwark Council's income maximization team to apply for Personal Independence Payment (PIP) and received budgeting tools to repay her rent arrears. Grants were secured for essential kitchen equipment, and she received a £100 cost-of-living voucher and £294 in fuel vouchers. Additionally, Jean was provided with two winter coats, a free sim card with unlimited calls and data, and information on local community fridges.

¹¹Resident's details changed for anonymity

4. Improving older people's lives / case study continued

Many more residents also benefited from this project.

Key achievements included:

- Financial health checks: Using the Lightning Reach platform, residents received comprehensive financial assessments that led to successful claims for benefits such as Pension Credit, Housing Benefit, Carer's Allowance, and Disability Allowances. These efforts helped 96 residents access £462,438 in additional financial support.
- Fuel and food support: The project provided fuel vouchers for residents at risk of self-disconnection and supported them in accessing food support services, such as community fridges and food pantries.
- Group engagement: Coffee mornings, information sessions, and resident meetings were held to introduce the project and facilitate one-on-one support. These sessions helped build trust and provided a platform for discussing financial challenges openly in a supportive environment.

For Jean, this support reconnected her with her community and regained confidence. She regularly attends a community fridge and feels less isolated. Jean now has a better understanding of available financial support, is more confident in managing her finances, and reports an improved quality of life. She continues to receive support from Southwark Council and her landlord, expressing gratitude for the assistance that has helped lift a weight off her shoulders.

This is just one example of how the Financial Resilience Project had a significant positive impact on the financial well-being of the older residents it served. Other outcomes included:

- Increased financial resilience: 55 residents reported increased financial resilience and improved quality of life as a direct result of the project. This was evidenced through distance-travelled surveys,

which showed that residents felt more confident managing their finances and better informed about the support available to them.

- Improved access to benefits and support: Many residents were able to maximise their income by accessing previously untapped benefits and grants. For example, residents who successfully claimed Attendance Allowance saw substantial improvements in their financial stability.
- Tackling isolation and building community: By facilitating group sessions and working within trusted community spaces, the project helped reduce feelings of financial isolation and build a sense of community among participants. Residents felt supported not only financially but also emotionally, as the project addressed both their financial and social needs.

As another resident who had benefited from the support described:

"Thank you for helping me. I was so stressed and anxious about my debts, it was killing me. I am in a better place and feeling more hopeful about the future."

The project exceeded its original targets and demonstrated the importance of face-to-face engagement in building trust and delivering effective financial support. It highlighted the critical need for sustained interventions that not only address immediate financial needs but also empower residents with the knowledge and tools to improve their long-term financial resilience.

4: Improving older people's lives continued

The programme provided fuel vouchers to residents struggling to maintain their energy supply. These vouchers, often distributed during winter months, prevented self-disconnection and ensured that vulnerable residents could continue heating their homes during cold weather. For example in Southwark, some residents received up to almost £300 in fuel vouchers to help them stay connected to their energy supply. In addition to fuel vouchers, £100 cost-of-living vouchers were distributed to eligible Southwark residents, offsetting some of their immediate energy costs. In total, across all three places 232 households benefited from £51,989 in fuel vouchers.

As the quote below shows, the impact of residents' lives was significant:

“Thanks very, very much for paying off my electricity and gas debts. I have been depressed for a while because of these debts. I am happy that I will be able to turn on the heating this winter.”

Resident, Southwark

Finally, the programme supported residents in finding and switching to cheaper energy tariffs, which helped reduce their ongoing energy bills. This assistance was often provided as part of the financial health checks, where residents received personalised advice on optimising their energy spending. These interventions helped residents lower their utility bills in the long term by ensuring they were on the most cost-effective tariffs.

Reduced social isolation

The programme took a multi-faceted approach to reducing social isolation among older residents. By fostering community connections, promoting active engagement through events and activities, and providing support tailored to the unique needs of older adults, the programme successfully created spaces where residents could interact and build meaningful relationships. Two particularly important initiatives

within this effort were the variety of events delivered, and the Make It Happen micro-grant Fund, which empowered residents to take the lead in organising social activities in their communities.

Community events

The programme focused heavily on organising events that brought residents together, fostering social connections and encouraging participation in community life. Examples of these activities include:

- Health and Wellbeing Event: Held in Southwark, this event connected over 130 older residents with local partners from housing, health, and social care services. This gathering not only provided valuable information and access to support services but also created opportunities for social interaction, which helped alleviate feelings of isolation.
- Multi-agency community events: these events took a range of forms, both formal and informal. For example, informal coffee mornings provided a space for residents to socialise while also accessing information on financial and energy support services. Meanwhile, more formal seasonal events – such as Spring Forward and Getting Ready for Winter events in Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole, engaged residents in communal spaces, promote social interaction, and connect them with local services. These events were successful in bringing isolated older residents into the community, helping to strengthen social bonds.

Following these events, the Age Friendly team analysed their impact and what had worked well, identifying the following lessons:

- Co-producing the events with residents gave people a sense of involvement, empowerment and ownership, making it more likely that they will continue to engage in community participation activities.
- Multi-agency events connect people with wellbeing activities and services that they may not otherwise

4. Improving older people's lives continued

know about.

- The events included opportunities for people to overcome barriers to connection in a way that suits them. For example, in Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole the programme offered drop-in digital support, ultimately enabling people to be able to connect to services and loved ones.
- Community events improved people's sense of belonging because it gave them the chance to make micro-connections and build "weak ties". Weak ties are more acquaintances, familiar faces or even friendly strangers we might share a moment with. Gillian Sandstrom, a senior lecturer in psychology at the University of Essex, found

that participants with larger networks of weak ties tended to be happier overall. On days when a participant had a greater number of casual interactions with weak ties (e.g. a barista in a local coffee shop, a neighbour, a member of a yoga class or a fellow dog walker) they experienced more happiness and a greater sense of belonging.

- These events were critical in increasing housing association visibility, enabling people to feel connected to their housing providers and access the support they offer.
- When agencies and services come together, residents can be supported to address various issues and can be supported in multiple aspects

Case study: Gardening group, Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole

Using a small grant from the Make It Happen Fund, Ray established a gardening group to improve the communal spaces at his housing scheme. Other residents quickly got involved, helping in different ways - "some with heavy work, some with lighter work." All participants reported the project helped their wellbeing in some way – from the feeling of being part of a community, to being out in nature, having people appreciate what they're doing, losing weight and getting physically fitter.

As one resident described:

"I have cancer and only moved into this scheme four months ago. This project has transformed my life. It helps me forget my problems, I've lost 7lb in weight and feel much fitter, and I've got to know people really quickly."

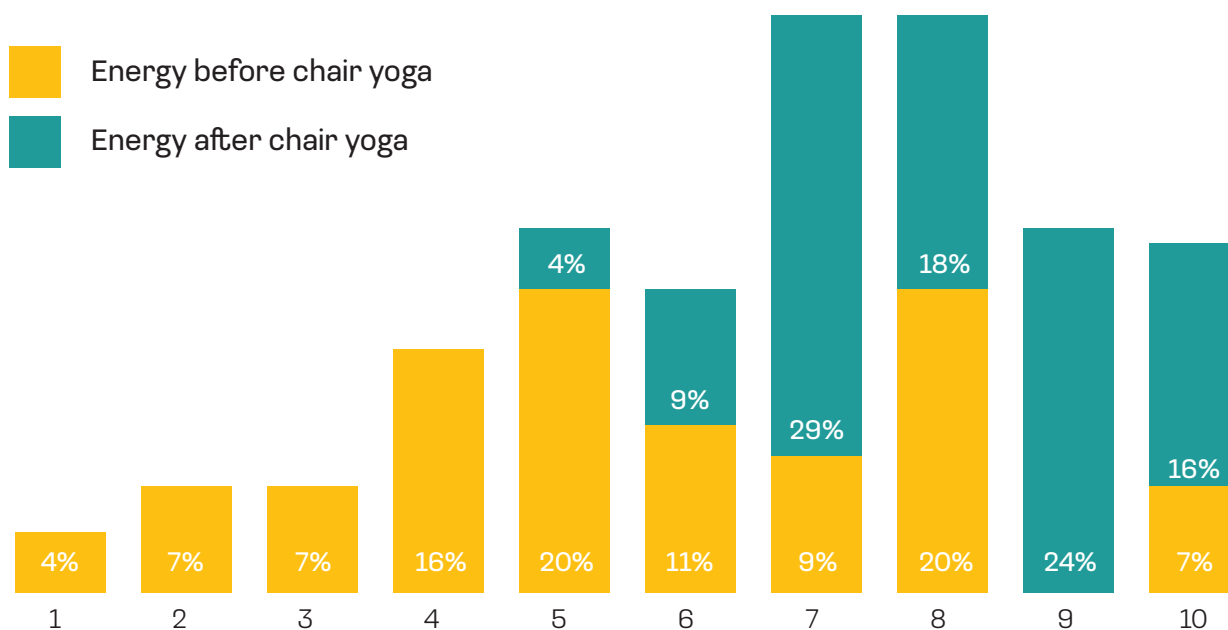
The act of gardening also gave them the opportunity to stop, connect and socialise with each other. Another recent resident described the benefits they'd experienced from getting involved with the project:

"I've had so many conversations with people who stop and talk when I'm gardening, who I wouldn't have got to know otherwise. It's helped me settle in quickly."

Visiting friends and families have also benefitted, commenting that they are glad their friend lives in such an attractive environment. Likewise, passers-by and neighbours (not living in the scheme) have requested tours of the gardens too. Residents say that they love to look out to the garden from their flats now, and more of them are coming to sit outside when the weather is good.

4. Improving older people's lives continued

Energy levels before and after Chair Yoga (Scale: 1 = Low; 10 = High) (n= 45).



of their wellbeing. As well as the long-term positive effects of connecting people to this support (including improved health, wellbeing, confidence), the sense that there is a support system behind every resident can improve a person's feeling of belonging to their community.

Make it Happen

The Make It Happen micro-grant Fund was a critical part of the programme's efforts to reduce social isolation by empowering residents to take charge of their social lives. This fund allowed older residents to apply for micro-grants of up to £500 to support the creation of activities, resources and events that they felt would benefit their community. These activities were resident-driven, allowing for a personalised and grassroots approach to addressing social isolation.

Staff were encouraged to have conversations about tackling social isolation with their residents – in coffee mornings, meetings and during one-to-ones. Coordinators also reached out to resident groups to have initial conversations about the opportunity, enthusing them to generate their own ideas and giving them the confidence to apply. Staff and coordinators then supported the applications and activities, ensuring that residents felt supported through the process.

A total of 31 grants were awarded to residents, funding a range of resources and social activities, such as pool competitions, gardening clubs, fish and chip lunches, inter-scheme darts tournaments and even the installation of a new bench halfway up a hill on one scheme. These activities were resident-driven and helped foster new relationships, encouraging social interaction, and providing a sense of community among

4. Improving older people's lives continued

participants.

“You won't feel lonely when you come here, you forget all the problems when you're making cards and doing exercises. The people are lovely, and I feel more confident mixing with people and in myself.”

Resident, Southwark

Residents reported a range of outcomes, including:

- Increased confidence and motivation to engage with others.
- Improved social connection and cohesion
- Improved health and well-being
- Residents also reported that the project built on and celebrated people's skills and interests.

Health and wellbeing

The Age Friendly Social Housing Programme had a notable impact on the health and wellbeing of older residents across the areas it served. This was achieved through a combination of social engagement, financial support, and tailored health and wellbeing activities. The programme's multi-faceted approach directly addressed both the physical and mental health needs of older adults, leading to measurable improvements in their quality of life.

In Bradford, the coordinator ran a range of different sessions including chair yoga, digital skills, and arts and crafts. Chair yoga for instance offers a range of benefits for older people, including enhanced strength, better balance and coordination, stress and anxiety relief, and improved circulation, among others. Evaluation of the Bradford sessions shows they had an immediate impact on attendees' confidence in their movements, as well as their mood and energy levels.

Whilst activities such as chair yoga are beneficial in themselves, the sessions were paired with 'Tea and Chat' sessions, which created an informal forum for

residents to reflect on their needs and ideas for making housing more age friendly. This outreach approach was also designed to support resident leadership, aiming to spark the coproduction of similar activities and events, and seeking community leadership on potential age friendly projects to fund. These sessions also acted as a way of signposting people to other local services, especially related to health and wellbeing. All these sessions were well received by residents. In each case, the coordinator worked with local people and housing staff so that they could run sessions after the conclusion of the programme, leaving this as a legacy.

This is just one example of how the programme improved older people's access to health and social care services. The programme also organised several events and partnerships with local healthcare providers, including:

- Health partnerships: The programme worked closely with healthcare services, such as Age UK and local NHS providers, to ensure older people could access medical advice, practical support, and preventive services. Health checks, information on managing chronic conditions, and advice on accessing services were made readily available during various community events.
- Referrals to health and wellbeing support: Through its collaboration with health organisations, the programme referred residents to services like mental health counselling, physical therapy, and social prescribing. Social prescribing is often used to help people who may be experiencing loneliness, social isolation, or health challenges that aren't solely addressed by medical interventions. It links them with community-based support and activities such as exercise classes (e.g. Chair Yoga), social groups (e.g. coffee mornings) and educational workshops (e.g. digital literacy). These referrals can help address underlying health issues that are exacerbating social isolation or financial instability.
- Practical support for independent living: A recurring

4. Improving older people's lives continued

issue emerging from the Southwark coordinator's engagement with residents was that many older residents struggled to maintain their homes and gardens due to declining health and capabilities – a trend also observed across the wider Age Friendly Social Housing Network.

In addition, many residents miss out on information of services they could benefit from, particularly since the pandemic and increasing digitisation of communications. In response, the Southwark partnership launched HandyPerson Plus, a service which provides residents over the age of 50 with support with household maintenance, from changing light bulbs, fixing broken fittings, or maintaining gardens.

Delivered by Age UK Lewisham & Southwark, the service built on the Southwark partnership's interest in social prescribing, providing holistic support for residents, linking them in with other existing services in Southwark and enhancing communication with residents. For example, the initial and ongoing interaction with the residents via both Age UK's handyperson who delivered the work, and their community facilitator who arranged the appointments, enabled the identification of additional social prescribing needs the customer may have. The initial call and subsequent visit not only acted as an opportunity to help the person at home, but to talk to them about other support needs they had, or to promote awareness of other activities and initiatives operating in their area.



John has lived in Dove Court for some years. He describes himself as a very contented and happy person, though he has concerns about how his independence will be affected by turning 80 and no longer being able to drive his car.

His key motivations for joining the Chair Yoga Tea and Chat outreach session were to learn how to practice mindfulness and exercise in chairs, to find out more about local Age Friendly activities, to build up confidence generally and, to meet other people.

As a result of the session John is now moderately confident at trying some Chair Yoga at home. John's priorities for Age-Friendly work in Bradford include transportation, social participation and community and health services. Due to the Chair Yoga session John reported an increase in energy levels from 7 to 9 (out of 10), and in mood from 9 to 10. He sees the priority of an Age Friendly City being that older people's voices are heard.

5. Creating age-friendly places

An age-friendly community is one where people can age well, live fulfilling lives, remain in their homes, and stay engaged with the activities and communities they value for as long as possible. The programme endeavoured to embed these principles across the three places it operated in. As such, this chapter explores whether these places became more age friendly as a result.

Age-friendly housing

Changes to older peoples' homes can make them more difficult to access and live in. For example, heavy fire doors can be difficult to open, making it more difficult for residents to enter or leave their homes. As our ageing population grows, many of the homes residents live in were not designed to meet this new reality. Aids and adaptations are therefore essential to enable older people to live in their homes safely.

The Age Friendly Social Housing Programme actively supported the development of more age-friendly housing in the three locations—Bradford, Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole, and Southwark—by fostering partnerships and promoting the principles of age-friendly communities. For example, in Southwark the programme worked closely with housing associations to adapt homes to better suit the needs of older adults, ensuring that housing better supported independent living and improved quality of life. This primarily took two forms:

1. **Handyperson Plus:** The Handyperson Plus service, delivered in partnership with Age UK Lewisham and Southwark, provided a range of essential home maintenance services that were previously inaccessible to many older residents. Tasks such as installing grab rails, securing loose carpets, fixing broken doors, and re-felting sheds were completed, all of which contributed to fall prevention and the enhancement of homes and gardens. The service was tailored to the specific needs of older residents, who often struggle with

mobility or financial constraints, making it difficult to carry out even basic home repairs.

2. **Aids and adaptations:** In addition to the Handyperson Plus service, the programme placed a strong emphasis on installing aids and adaptations in residents' homes to improve safety and accessibility. For example, in Southwark the coordinator championed for greater use of aids and adaptations, engaging in policy reviews, tabling the need for more aids and adaptations in multi-agency meetings and collecting the experiences of residents who were struggling to live in their homes without these vital aids and adaptations. These installations included fitting grab rails, installing stair rails, and making bathroom adaptations that allowed older people to maintain their independence and dignity. The process was co-created with residents to ensure that the adaptations met their needs effectively, while also working to streamline the application and installation process, which had previously been hindered by long wait times and bureaucratic delays.

The impact of these interventions was profound, as evidenced by numerous case studies from the Handyperson Pilot and aids and adaptations programmes:

- **Increased safety and reduced falls risk:** Many residents expressed relief after their homes were made safer. For instance, a resident from Southwark had their loose carpet secured, which had been a constant source of anxiety due to the risk of tripping and falling. Another resident had grab rails installed in their bathroom, which allowed them to safely navigate the space without fear of falling. These relatively simple interventions made a significant difference in reducing the likelihood of falls, a major cause of injury among older people.
- **Improved mental well-being:** The programme also had a positive impact on the mental well-being of

5: Creating age friendly places continued

older residents. One resident, whose toilet seat and kitchen shelves were fixed, reported a renewed sense of control and happiness in their daily life. They shared that the completion of long-overdue repairs lifted a burden that had been causing them stress for years. The satisfaction of having these tasks completed also encouraged them to re-engage with their community and access further support services through Age UK Lewisham and Southwark.

“Every time I see the new shelves it makes me happy. I feel a sense that things are getting done, these things have been hanging over me for a long time. Every time I would go into the bathroom, I would be reminded that I need to fix my toilet, and I would not know who to ask.”

- Enhanced independence: Many residents regained a sense of independence after adaptations were installed. For example, one client with rheumatoid arthritis was able to use their garden shed again after the roof was re-felted and garden debris cleared. They expressed that this seemingly small improvement gave them more space in their home and reduced their anxiety about safety. Another resident who had grab rails installed in their bathroom expressed that they could now bathe independently, restoring their dignity and self-reliance.
- Social and emotional benefits: The Handyperson Plus service also helped address social isolation by providing residents with opportunities to connect with the handyperson team and other support services. The residents who participated in the programme expressed gratitude for the human contact and the professionalism of the staff, noting that the workers were polite, tidy, and respectful of their homes. This social interaction, though centred around home repairs, also contributed to a sense of belonging and community for many older adults.

By addressing both the physical safety of their living environments and their social and emotional needs, the programme successfully enhanced the quality of life for many vulnerable older adults. In doing so it facilitated more age-friendly housing, reflecting the importance of these small but essential interventions in promoting independence, safety, and well-being among older people.

Creating social connections

The programme was instrumental in fostering social connections among older residents, encouraging interactions within communities that helped combat isolation, build friendships, and strengthen community bonds. Across all three locations the programme used a variety of methods to create opportunities for residents to connect with their neighbours, make intergenerational connections, and engage with strangers through community events.

In Bradford, the programme encouraged connections among residents by organising social activities through local community centres. One particularly impactful event was a tea and chat gathering, where older residents were invited to share stories over tea and cake. These informal settings allowed people who might have otherwise remained isolated to engage with others in a relaxed and welcoming environment.

In Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole, the programme leveraged the Make It Happen Fund to spark social connections through resident-led initiatives, which ranged from the purchase of a pool table for a communal area to the establishment of a community gardening group. The effect was significant in terms of supporting new social connections between residents, as the quotes below illustrate:

“We all need other people. That’s why it’s so good to see the lounge being used again...”

5: Creating age friendly places continued

“When I’m out in the garden digging, I have such a good feeling. It’s been great getting involved together and watching things grow. I have been amazed at how good it makes me feel when I’m out there.”

“You can’t imagine how this pool table changes this place. Residents are so happy.”

This relatively simple initiative – of asking residents what they want and then giving them a small grant to make it happen - successfully brought residents together to improve the communal spaces, and as a result they met people they’d never previously had the opportunity to connect with.

Improving access to services

A key feature and strength of the programme has been the way it has improved access to services for older people in each of the pilot places. The main ways it has done this is by creating new spaces and forums for residents and service providers to meet and connect with one another, as well as forming and nurturing new partnerships between housing associations and other local service providers. For example, in Southwark the HACT team worked with the local authority to create the Southwark Health, Housing and Ageing Well group. As the local authority described:

“The age friendly programme has been really impactful and useful for us as a council as well as for the partners around the table, because it’s brought us together into a group where we’ve been able to pull together our efforts and work on some tangible projects together.”

Local authority representative, London Borough of Southwark Council

This collaboration led to greater opportunities for joint working and better ease of information sharing, resulting in:

- the public health team working more closely with housing associations to communicate with local residents about health issues and advice.
- establishing a referral pathway with the local hospital, for children with acute asthma who live in social housing. This process served as a prototype for a service for older people with respiratory problems.
- the development of the HandyPerson Plus pilot service
- new partnerships formed between Southwark Pensioners Centre, Southwark Food Action Alliance, Southwark Charities, United St Saviour’s Charity and HACT’s London Food Insecurity Network, a coalition of housing associations working with The Felix Project to reduce food insecurity amongst social housing residents in London.

These are just some of the ways in which the programme facilitated better access to services for residents, by creating spaces for stakeholders to connect and nurturing these new partnerships. Likewise in Bradford the coordinator nurtured relationships with the council and other local partners. For example, following their attendance at the Age Friendly Alliance, Clarion and Places for People started to work together to map their community spaces and open digital hubs, while Manningham and Yorkshire Housing followed up a the talk delivered by dementia charity Meri Yaadein about more work around dementia awareness.

In Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole, engagement with the local council looked different. The coordinator linked in with the council’s Age Friendly Communities initiative, while council representatives also attend partnership working group meetings to feed into and support the work of this programme. As previously mentioned, there was also significant work to improve access to services online. In Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole, the Age Friendly Social

5: Creating age friendly places continued

Housing Programme provided digital skills training to help older residents overcome digital exclusion and improve their ability to connect with the outside world. The programme organised two 4-week digital skills courses that took place in community spaces, such as communal lounges in housing schemes. These courses were designed to be hands-on and person-centred, focusing on practical skills that helped residents use digital devices to communicate with family, access services, and participate in online activities.

The impact of these digital skills courses was significant. Older residents who previously felt isolated and disconnected gained confidence in using different technologies (e.g. laptops; smartphones; tablets). Post-course surveys revealed improvements in their ability to navigate online services and resources, manage their finances, and engage with social media. This, in turn, helped reduce feelings of loneliness and enhanced their sense of independence. The programme's success was evident in the 100% satisfaction rate among participants, with many residents expressing that the training helped them feel more connected to their neighbourhoods and improved their confidence.

6. Lessons

Based on our experience of delivering this pilot programme, we have identified several operational and tactical levers that help test and learn pilots mobilise quickly and generate impact. We hope others interested in furthering age-friendly can use this learning to improve their work.

Dedicated staff resource in local pilot areas

A collaborative programme that brings multiple stakeholders together to work towards a shared goal needs a coordinator at its helm. In the Age Friendly Social Housing Programme, the part-time coordinators have been the critical driving force in each place, acting as the connection between housing associations, residents and organisations. The role of the coordinator is both significant and substantial and in future pilots, we would look to recruit on to full time contracts.

Recruitment

Recruitment for all positions within the Age Friendly Social Housing Programme team took longer than anticipated. Consequently, more time needed to be invested by the programme manager into operational activities. If we were doing this again, we would provide a longer lead in for recruitment and set up time and budget for this accordingly.

Local partners need time for collaboration

A programme is only truly collaborative if members can contribute ideas and participate in project developments and activity. All of this needs time, which we know can be a challenge in the current context. In future projects, we would be interested to explore how staff engaged in pilots could have ring fenced time for pilot participation, including reviewing contractual adjustments and/or other methods that enable time and space to support their participation.

Recruiting to local collaborations

When building local partnerships and working groups, we have learnt that some discussions need decision makers in the room. This was not always possible. In future, we would look to build on this learning, refresh communications around expectations and try to identify which meetings most need higher level support to move work forwards. We would also look to ensure that the organisations represented in local working groups have senior staff buy-in and support for their participation.

Less can be more

At the start of the pilot, there was a tendency to want to do multiple things and share lots of information. From feedback, we've learnt that this can be overwhelming when you're receiving all of this. Going forward, we would take a different approach. This would include streamlining our local communications to reduce emails and agreeing a communications plan with each local partnership group.

Peer learning

This has been an area partners have really valued. We are pleased that many of the working groups have provided spaces for partners to share what's been working well, hear from specialists on topics such as dementia, and share challenges and solutions together. In the future, we would look to preserve and enhance these aspects of local partnerships.

7. Recommendations

The Age Friendly Social Housing programme has generated a wealth of learning and practical examples for how housing associations can better support the transition to age-friendly communities. We have identified seven recommendations that if adopted, will redefine social housing for our ageing population.

1. Create a culture shift

Housing associations need to think more fluidly about ageing and not make assumptions about the experiences of people at certain ages. An ageing society should be prioritised like climate change – a shared societal change we are not adequately prepared for.

The fabric of our communities is changing. With the number of older residents increasing in our communities, we have an opportunity to think differently about how we work. Housing associations can respond to an ageing society by developing more adaptable housing; investing in projects that connect people across all generations; ensuring our housing teams are trained and make every engagement count.

Here are three practical steps housing associations can take to create the required culture shift:

- Provide relevant training for staff around age friendly principles, making every contact count, dementia and ageism stigma
- Ensure all housing association departments have clear plans on how they support residents to age well, and that all teams have a foundational knowledge of age friendly principles.
- Be prepared to test new and innovative approaches to supporting the needs of ageing residents.

2. Re-design systems to enable collaboration

Staff need dedicated time to connect with their peers and other services. Involvement in collaborative forums should be positioned as an essential part of job descriptions, with adequate time and space allocated.

The current system does not encourage collaboration. The local steering groups we established through this programme were the only spaces where partners could discuss and progress practice around ageing well. Yet staff found it difficult to make time for such meetings, and were often engaging as an act of 'goodwill' rather than as a formally recognised part of their roles.

This programme has shown how engagement in multi-agency spaces enables useful local knowledge sharing, builds awareness of the live position of local services available and provides the opportunity for housing teams to be part of collaborative impact initiatives.

We've identified two ways housing associations can change the system to enable collaboration more easily:

- Staff could be given dedicated time to connect with peers and other services in the wider support system. Involvement in collaborative forums and projects could be part of their job descriptions.
- New roles could be developed with a specific focus on collaborative working and joining up between sectors.

3. Think more deeply about health and safety

The specific health and safety needs of buildings needs a review through the lens of an ageing population to ensure that residents can live in their homes safely and independently for as long as possible.

As our ageing population grows, many of the homes residents live in were not designed to meet this new reality. This increases the risks of trips, falls and hospital admissions, as much as exacerbating social isolation and the dangerous health consequences of loneliness and isolation. Aids and adaptations are therefore essential to enable older people to live in their homes safely.

7. Recommendations continued

Here are three practical steps housing associations can take to ensure more older people can live in their homes safely:

- Health & safety and maintenance/repairs teams could work more closely with community investment teams to support the implementation of aids and adaptations – an OT assessment is not always needed.
- Talk to residents about housing options in middle age and keep talking about it and communicate about aids and adaptations in ways appropriate to older people – not just online.
- Implement the ‘Adaptations without delay’ approach (RCOT) and train staff as Trusted Assessors. We have developed more tips in our learning report, ‘Promoting the Safety and Independence of Older Residents.’

4. Redefine social housing for an ageing population

The housing sector has an opportunity to reimagine the definitions of social housing in light of an ageing population.

Less specialist housing is being built and yet, the needs of an ageing population remain. Through our work in communities, we are seeing residents in general needs accommodation needing levels of support that were more traditionally seen or supported in sheltered housing schemes. For these residents, we have concerns that their needs risk being overlooked due to their being in general needs homes.

By taking the following four steps, housing associations can define social housing for an ageing population:

- Provide training across housing departments to build awareness of the varying needs of those within general needs accommodation.
- Employ dedicated staff who specialise in supporting older/ disabled residents in general needs.
- Deliver planned, proactive interactions with older

people/ disabled residents to assess needs holistically.

- Leverage insights from Community Investment teams and their close community partners to inform new definitions of housing criteria.

5. Leverage community investment expertise

Community Investment teams and their close partners can play a greater role in informing wider housing practice, from the design of homes and communities through to the review of health and safety policies.

Community Investment teams and their close partners are well connected to older people in the community; they have good visibility of their strengths, challenges and needs in order to live well in their homes. This knowledge is incredibly valuable insight and can help strengthen the ability of housing providers and the wider support system to adapt and grow to better meet the needs of older people.

Here are two ways housing associations can better leverage the expertise of their Community Investment teams:

- Setting up information-sharing forums within and across housing teams to ensure that community investment practices and insights inform wider organisation decisions.
- Ensure Community Investment teams have increased emphasis on taking this insight into new spaces across housing and civil society settings.

6. Be more visible

Housing associations can support older residents through reviewing and developing the opportunities they have for in-person contact with the organisation.

We have seen that many older residents are unsure about who to communicate with within their housing association. Many are also digitally excluded, unable to access or navigate online services. They want

7. Recommendations continued

more in-person contact with their housing association representatives. This relationship enables residents to resolve any rent queries, explore adaptations options for their homes, and learn about support available through their housing association or partners. Our programme learning indicates that this relationship contributes to residents' feelings of belonging to their community and feeling safe and heard.

Based on this learning, there are two practical ways housing associations can become more visible and accessible to older residents:

- Identify areas where there are high proportions of residents over 55 and focus in-person resources and contact in these areas.
- Collaborate with local partners to host regular community events, providing opportunities to connect and build relationships with residents.

7. Put social connections at the heart of housing

There needs to be a greater emphasis on generating meaningful social connection activity, and more time and resource given to this.

Residents told us they wanted more social activities, and through the Make It Happen Fund we saw that activities can come in many shapes and forms to encourage and enable social connection. From darts competitions to fish and chip nights, these activities stimulated conversation and created spaces for relationships to thrive. Social connection is a key wider determinant of health and is the heart of thriving, caring communities.

Three low-cost ways housing associations can support better social connections include:

- Housing teams should be trained, encouraged and given the time to have open conversations with residents around community activity planning, identifying needs and empowering residents to lead on their ideas.

- Housing associations can draw on and develop their connections with local partners to pool resources and provide a menu of activity with residents.
- Housing teams should actively work towards engaging with residents to identify barriers to involvement and generate solutions – for example, around mobility, confidence or community transport.

The Age Friendly Social Housing programme has already shown what is possible, delivering a comprehensive approach emphasising collaboration, adaptability, and proactive support for older residents, ensuring their housing needs are met with dignity and foresight. If we are to rise to the challenges and opportunities presented by an ageing society, it is essential for other housing associations to follow suit.

Next steps

The Age Friendly Social Housing Programme has demonstrated the value of testing and learning to create age-friendly communities. There is a significant opportunity to continue this work, with many groups in the pilot areas remaining active, ensuring that lessons learned are implemented and refined. In Bradford, Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole and Southwark, age-friendly initiatives will continue to evolve, providing ongoing support for older residents. Furthermore, these areas will integrate good practices from this pilot into future work, helping to embed age-friendly principles across housing associations and other partners locally.

This programme offers a roadmap for other areas looking to bring housing associations together to address the needs of an ageing population. Collaborative forums, such as those seen in the pilot, can be adopted elsewhere to foster cooperation, share learning, and drive improvements across the housing sector.

7. Recommendations continued

However, delivering age-friendly social housing requires significant staff time and investment. Future programmes must recognize the importance of dedicating resources to ensure that staff can engage fully in collaborative initiatives, community work, and capacity building. Continued commitment to these principles will ensure that older people have access to safe, accessible, and socially connected housing environments, improving quality of life across the UK as our population ages.



Thank you

Special thanks go to the dedicated Age Friendly Social Housing team:

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Contact information

If you would like to discuss the programme and its learning please do get in touch. We run an Age Friendly Network for the social housing sector to nurture and share good practice so please contact us if you would like to be involved in this too.

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