

OLD GREY MATTER ARTICLE

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Women Pensioners

At least half the population over 65 are women, yet they do not match up to men's status in their pension prospects so one of the ten working parties of the National Pensioners Convention (NPC) is run solely by women and devotes itself to elder women's causes. An NPC briefing was submitted to government in June on 'State Pension Age Review' and 'Equalisation and Increases in the State Pension Age (SPA)', detailing how women, particularly those born between April 6th and December 5th 1953 have lost out in the acceleration of the SPA for women. The briefing can be found on the website at www.npcuk.org

The current October edition, number 38, Women's Network Exchange issued by the Women's Working Party (WWP) of the NPC, outlines issues of special importance to women having reached statutory pensionable age (SPA) and those approaching it. Rosie MacGregor reported on the NPC Pensioner Parliament held at Blackpool in June this year. Chairing a meeting of 200 plus people, she and Sarah Davies from the Chartered Institute of Housing led the debate on housing. Sarah defined 'home' as a place of safety, family, warmth, memories, own front door, bricks and mortar etc. She stated some useful statistics: 43% of all households are older people and of these 76% own their own home. However a staggering 2 million old people live in non-decent homes and 67% of owner occupier pensioners live in poverty. It is predicted that by 2033, 60% of households will be headed by someone over 65. The housing crisis has been a national disaster. When building new houses we need to ensure that they are future proofed so that they can be suitable for people as they get older. Yet housing developers are reluctant to take this on board as it is too costly and will harm their profits. There need to be more homes that are adaptable and energy efficient and at present there is a shortfall of specialist housing for older people and insufficient choice.

At the WWP's lunchtime meeting at Blackpool, the theme was 'Home Alone', women were asked to complete a questionnaire on the main problems of women living alone affecting quality of life. Replying factors considered in order of importance were: Home maintenance 79%, Health 64%, Lack of companionship 61%, Expense 48%, Affording socialisation 36%, Mobility 33%, Lack of transport 24%, No meeting place 18%. Other problems encountered were: Expense of personal alarms; cannot open bottles; help needed with cleaning; cold calling; needing advice; and cost of taxis. From the floor NPC secretary Dot Gibson said "I have been in sheltered housing for 20 years and the more help you get, the more independent you can be. Yet sheltered housing is being closed down and Housing associations are selling on to other associations. The 'right to buy' is leaving some tenants under the old tenancies and some under the new ones. In one foul swoop with the Housing and Planning Act the government has damaged housing for older people for ever. With cut backs from councils, such as fewer wardens, there's a big fight on our hands."

Others mentioned local authority cutbacks, inadequate supply of suitable housing for downsizing (this should be situated in mixed age housing close to amenities and transport), the shortage of sheltered housing (only available after reaching pensionable age), inadequate adaptation of homes, premature discharge from acute care without proper assessment, help needed for general home maintenance, the importance of remaining near friends and family, pay more attention to meeting the needs of ethnic minorities, promote 'Age-Friendly' cities and rural environments (seats, safe pavements, regard for the partially sighted etc.), making public transport a right and extending cover for Dial a Ride services.

Several people remarked that loneliness and isolation have an impact on health and well-being so the emphasis on independent living alone may be misguided and community life should be stressed more.

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