

This looming ageing crisis needs some grown-up solutions

It could be as serious a threat as climate change, yet so far politicians have barely considered what needs to be done about our ageing population

A government minister says it's as big a crisis as the financial crisis. A charity director says it's as huge a threat to our way of living as climate change. And yet it is something rarely discussed in our public debate. It is called Getting Older.

We all are, and Britain is – and all the measurements of prosperity and success applaud it. Longevity has become a prime measure of social progress. If the French or Germans edge ahead of us on longevity, it's reported as a national failure; nothing describes Russia's social disaster more eloquently than its average life span.

So hoorah for us that in 20 years' time there will be [2.9 million Britons aged over 85](#). Except, of course, that the crisis I'd like to talk about is that so many of them are doomed to a wretched, lonely, horrible final decade of life. And when I say "them", reader, I may well be talking about you.

Will you be among the [1 million or so people suffering from dementia](#), or their partners or carers? Most of us react to the thought by flinching away from it, or making some deflating joke about taking out membership of Dignitas. The huge problems of ageing looming over us are exactly like climate change in this way – we know in our hearts what is coming but in our daily lives most of us shut the knowledge out. It's too much.

Ageing is unlike climate change, however, in that it isn't media-friendly or sexy – no flax-haired young activists, no global summitry, no vast gimmicks, no galleries filled with "ageing art", no rock star campaigners, no Hollywood.

Here's a statistic worth chewing on. Today there are four working people for every retired person. The cost of shouldering decent living for the retired already feels heavy. But in 45 years, when many of our children will still be working adults, there will be just two workers for every retired person. And do you know what? That's impossible. It's unsustainable. It won't work.

So what's the answer? Mass euthanasia? Slums for the aged? The importation of tens of millions of young African or Asian people to fill the workforce? Outlandish thoughts, perhaps: but where are the inlandish ones?

The Guardian organised a conference in London last week on older people and ageing Britain where, I'm delighted to report, there was evidence of creative and even optimistic thinking on all sides. You won't read about most of these issues on front pages, and rarely on inside ones. And they are unlikely to top the election agenda either.

Labour, at least, are looking seriously at social care. Following a long consultation, a white paper on funding is expected early in the new year, favouring some kind of compulsory insurance to cover the cost of care. That cost could, of course, be minimal for me, and huge for you, or the other way round – and neither of us knows which.

Then there's the huge housing problem. Around 60% of us live in the suburbs, where nine-tenths of housing is three- or four-bedroom houses. Yet 60% of us live in one or two person households – in other words, there is an older generation, aged from the mid-50s upwards,

racketing around in large family homes, often hard to heat, while young families can't find houses with enough bedrooms and a garden.

We have made home ownership our national religion – an Englishman's home is his castle and all that – and are generally reluctant to move. Yet surely it is not beyond the wit of government to find ways of helping, through the tax system and through working with local authorities. Older people in large homes should be encouraged not to hang on to them to give their children a post-funeral windfall, but to downsize.

"Where to?" is the obvious question, and a good one, because out of 175,000 homes built each year just 5,000 are specifically designed for older people. This is insane. In Germany and the Netherlands, there is far more building for older people, and it can be wonderful. Because of eyesight and mobility difficulties, these homes need bright light, views and the latest heating technology. But they don't need to be so big.

One speaker last week, Claire Rayner, spoke movingly of the simple design changes that can make things so much easier. Why are electric plugs at ankle height, not waist height? Why can we not have subtitles for the hard of hearing at cinemas? Why, as television and computers merge, can we not have TVs as a link to the outside world, monitoring blood pressure or weight, linked to the local church service or exercise class?

Loneliness is one of the biggest problems older people talk about. As the Young Foundation reported recently, [7 million people say they have a "severe" lack of social support](#). Having older people's accommodation clustered but inside the community helps, but so too can technology. It's being developed already, particularly in Japan, but this is surely a huge market for the future. Ministers talk optimistically about Britain joining the green technology revolution, and winning new markets there. But what about the grey or silver technology revolution? Where's the cheerleading for that?

I don't mean to suggest that this is a crisis which will be dealt with only by government initiative. It is intimate, all around us in our families and streets, reshaping our lives. The Institute for Public Policy Research recently pointed out that the "sandwich generation" has morphed into the "club sandwich", seeing grandparents in their 50s and 60s coping with elderly parents and grandchildren simultaneously. Many of the solutions will be private, and many will be messy: nothing replaces the family, however it's structured.

But government ought to be leading this, talking about it as much as about climate change or the banking crisis. Let's get away from the irritating but trivial loose change of politics and put the ageing issue at the heart of the pre-election argument. So far, frankly, Labour and Tory announcements on social care are mere gimmicks, whether it's [Labour's free social care for around 200,000](#) of the poorest or the Tories' £8,000 upfront payment for free residential care. Both ideas barely scratch the surface of what needs to be done. Politicians don't like bringing more bad news, we're told, just as news organisations like to concentrate on upbeat, advertiser-friendly fluff.

We deserve more than that, don't we? We need to recognise the demographic crisis facing us and hear grown-up proposals for handling it. Westminster: stop treating us like children; we're much (much) older than that.

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