

Older Brits trapped in isolated rural houses

Jerome Starkey, Countryside Correspondent

April 30 2018, 12:01am,

The Times

About 3.8 million older people live alone, according to a report

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A growing number of retired people are stuck in isolated rural homes with stairs they cannot climb, rooms they cannot afford to heat and gardens they cannot tend, a report says today.

Nearly half the households in the countryside will be comprised of people aged over 65 by 2039 but their housing needs have been ignored, the all-party parliamentary group on housing and care for older people claims.

Purpose-built homes for older people would cut the cost of care and help them to stay well for longer, the report says, but they are in short supply. They would also free up large, under-occupied properties for young families to move into, it adds.

“Despite the demographics, an ‘age-friendly’ housing market is still embryonic,” the report said. It recommended that councils should fast-track small developments in villages so that people could downsize locally and not have to move away from family and friends.

About 3.8 million older people live alone, of whom 70 per cent are women, the report said.

“New, purpose-built accommodation for those ‘right-sizing’ could preserve independence and reduce the need for care and support,” the report added. It recommended that councils look for “unused scraps of

land” on the edge of villages on which to build a handful of bungalows.

The population in the countryside is ageing faster than in the cities because youngsters move to urban areas in search of jobs while older people retire to rural areas.

Most of the rural homes built by large developers are designed with families in mind, the report said. “Major house builders and speculative developers want larger sites and have little interest in building for the local older population,” it added. “Despite government commitments to increase housebuilding nationally, special measures will be needed to secure homes suitable for older people, increasingly representing the majority of residents living in rural communities.”

Rural homes are 20 per cent more expensive than those in towns and cities. Only 8 per cent of rural homes are

affordable, compared with 20 per cent in towns and cities.

“We have a ticking demographic time bomb in rural England as our population ages rapidly,” Sue Chalkley, chief executive of Hastoe, England’s largest rural housing association, said. “Failing to act now will mean more loneliness, isolation and expensive trips to hospital as rural areas will be left with housing unsuitable for its population.”

The report said that Sajid Javid, the housing, communities and local government secretary, should restore local authorities’ ability to include affordable homes in every development. Affordable homes include council houses, housing association properties and houses that can be rented at up to 80 per cent of the market rate.

The report also said that councils should be able to withhold the right to buy “in areas where replacement development is highly constrained”.