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Report backs government-funded older people's advice service

Analysis of FirstStop reveals that the service saves money and improves quality of life



A government-funded information and advice service helping older people to prepare for later life is proving a much-needed resource as Britain becomes an increasingly top-heavy society, a new report says.

The claims are made by the authors of a new study evaluating FirstStop, a free advice service for older citizens which helps them to plan for the future by supporting them on issues such as housing and care.

Researchers from the Centre for Housing and Planning Research, at the University of Cambridge, argue that resources of this type will become increasingly important as Britain's older population grows. Current estimates suggest that by 2025, more than one third of the UK's population will be over 55.

While the report's immediate concern is with welfare, it also stresses that a cultural shift is needed so that people think about the demands of old age and plan ahead accordingly. It adds that this will have a significant impact on the public purse.

Even the cost of treating an elderly person who has had a serious fall at home can be up to £30,000 a year. Advice services which, for example, help people to modify their home first to cope with increasing frailty, are of value not just to the individual, but to the taxpayer, the study suggests.

Dr Gemma Burgess, who led the research, said: “Most people want to stay in their own home as they age, but often through lack of support or preparation become unable to do so. This can mean older people move into residential homes, which is not only a move they do not want to make, but also one that is hugely costly to the taxpayer.”

“With better information and advice about how to deal with the housing, care and financial challenges of ageing from a service like FirstStop, people are able to remain independent in their own homes or move to housing that really suits them, not only saving the taxpayer money but, more importantly, improving the quality of life for older people.”

To date, there has been no consensus on the difficult issue of how to deal with the pending housing and care crisis that the country will face as Britain’s population gets older. Housing has often been left out of the mix. Over the last 12 months, however, there has been a growing public debate about how to meet the challenges of an ageing population beyond traditional concerns about pensions. In particular, the publication of Dilnot’s Commission on the Funding of Care and Support highlighted concerns around having to sell family homes to pay for care in later life.

Against that backdrop, the Cambridge study strongly endorses the FirstStop service, arguing that this model of information and advice provision is vital if the country is going to withstand the emotional and financial burdens of a top-heavy demographic. Academics from the Centre for Housing and Planning Research are involved in an ongoing project which is analysing and informing the service’s development.

FirstStop users can call a Freephone number, or visit a website, to obtain independent and impartial support on housing care options, their rights and financial support. Face-to-face advice is also available. It is a fairly new service but growing; 90,000 people visited its website in 2010/11.

Critically, the service networks relevant organisations both locally and nationally. The result is a “one stop shop” for users which enables older people, their families, or their carers to cut through the bureaucracy of multiple services.

The latest study involved a follow-up survey with service users which found that FirstStop is helping people prepare for old age efficiently and achieves a high level of customer satisfaction.

It also suggests such information services have a positive impact on the “hidden”, often emotional consequences of having to deal with the effects of growing older. Users said that they felt reassured and able to make better-informed choices about their future. The anxiety and stress of people who used the service, especially when it concerned big decisions like moving into care, was reduced and their sense of well-being improved.

A centralised, integrated advice service was found to have multiple benefits from a processual point of view as well. The study points out that users' details could be recorded for use in subsequent calls, enabling their concerns to be dealt with more efficiently. The integration of different organisations supporting older people also meant that these services were able to share information, encouraging more strategic, joined-up thinking.

The report concludes that the FirstStop national information and advice service for the elderly is key to instilling a culture of preparation, prevention and self-help across the UK to spare many people the worst costs of old age. It can also give people a clear and accessible means of getting support when they do hit a crisis.

Welcoming the study, Housing Minister Grant Shapps said: "This independent evaluation clearly demonstrates the value of the type of specialised housing and care advice provided by FirstStop, and the benefits to individuals and society of this advice being more widely available throughout the country at a local and national level. The Government is committed to enabling people to make an informed choice about their housing and care in later life. We are investing in the FirstStop information and advice service as detailed in the new Housing Strategy."

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For more information, please contact: Tom Kirk, Office of Communications, University of Cambridge. Tel: 01223 332300; Mob: 07764 161923; Email: thomas.kirk@admin.cam.ac.uk

Dr. Gemma Burgess is available for interviews on request.

The latest evaluation report can be found at:
<http://www.cchpr.landecon.cam.ac.uk/>