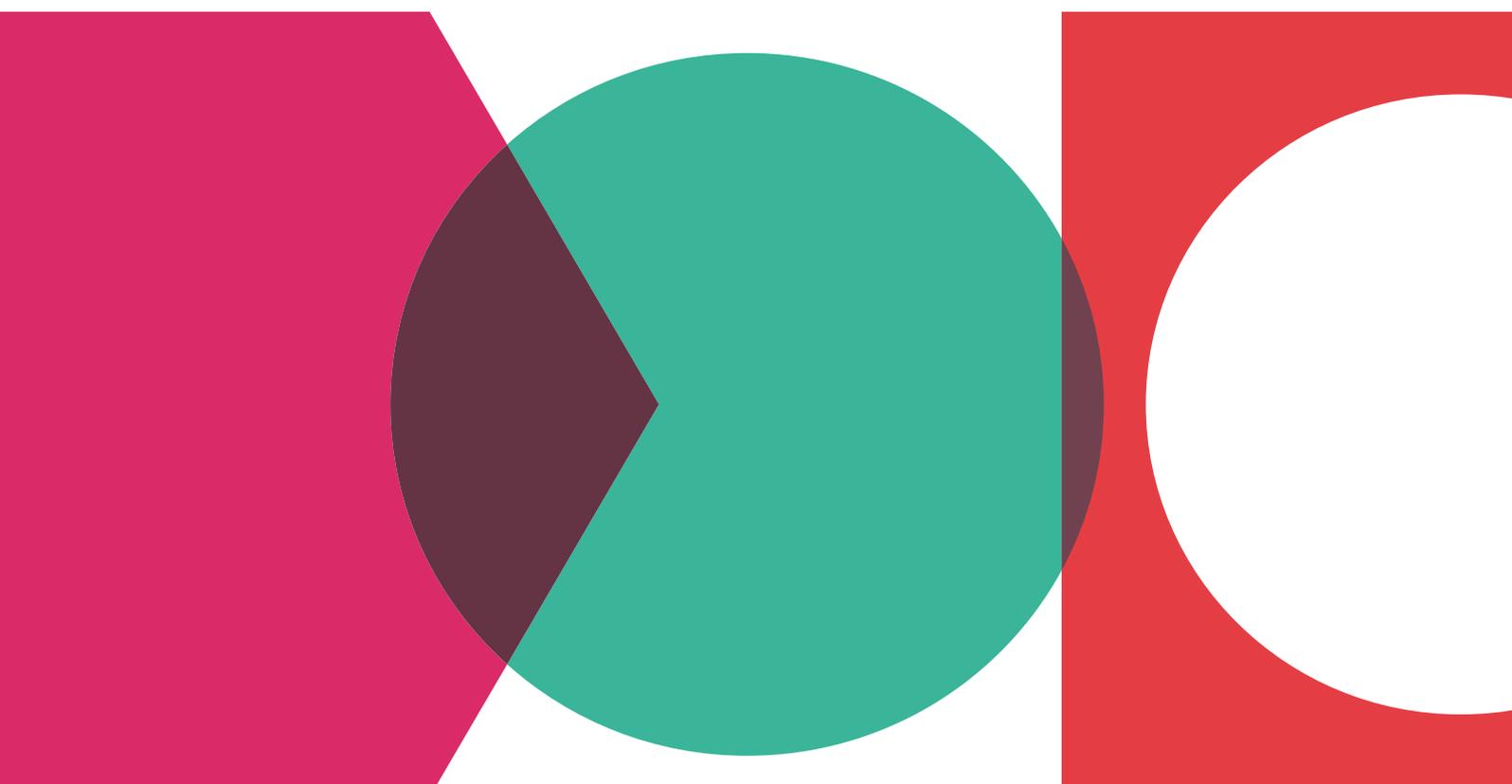# MORE THAN DECLUTTERING

INSIGHTS FROM ATTIC PROJECT VOLUNTEERS DECLUTTERING WITH OLDER PEOPLE

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Executive Summary

Background
The case for decluttering support for older people

In 2010, George Osborne, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, announced a series of public spending cuts totalling £83bn[1], and the years that followed were also characterised by further cuts to public services. These cuts included a 26% reduction in the number of older people receiving publicly funded social care between 2011 and 2016.[2] Most professionals and commentators believe that cuts to social care services have contributed to pressures on health services, and the Care and Quality Commission for Wales has found that too often health and social care services are not joined up.[3]

❝ There needs to be better integration between social care, the NHS, and housing. But this needs to start not at the system level, but with the individual and build up from there. ❞
– Older People's Commissioner for Wales, 7th May 2020[4]

Clutter is an under-researched and under-reported area of concern in older people's homes, despite having broad-reaching impacts. Problematic levels of clutter can put older people at increased risk of falls, accidents, and fire-related incidents. As well as physical impacts, clutter can be a source of stress, embarrassment and discomfort, which can negatively impact upon mental well-being and lead to isolation and loneliness. Clutter can also be a major obstacle to the completion of necessary repairs, adaptations, and improvements required to make a home warmer, more comfortable, or safer.

Finally, clutter can make downsizing or the transition to supported housing more difficult and stop older people moving to more suitable accomodation.

❝ Often space is needed to resolve housing issues. For older people who are unable to clear through their possessions themselves, either due to the physical challenge or because they feel overwhelmed at where to start, there's little service provision available to help and people find themselves trapped in unsuitable housing. There is a real need for services, such as the Attic Project, which help older people sort through their belongings in a compassionate way. ❞
– Attic Project, 14th January 2021

Over the last two decades, there has been a substantial increase in the marketised of decluttering services, but these are relatively expensive and therefore not accessible to all. There are only four third-sector decluttering services for older people in the UK, which differ in scope and cost to the client. A handful of other services provide a collection service for the removal of items but do not assist with decluttering itself.

The rationalisation of front-line support work has meant that informal support with domestic tasks such as decluttering and sorting has been eroded, and as a result discrete decluttering services are growing in significance.

The situation of older people in Wales

- 83% of older people are owner occupiers, and the majority wish to remain living in their own homes and communities for as long as possible.[5]

- After housing costs, 20% of people over the state pension age live in relative income poverty.[6]

- Almost a quarter (24%) of people aged 70-74 are limited a lot by health issues, which rises to around a third (35%) of those over the age of 75.[7]

- Almost half of people report feeling lonely sometimes, and 11% feel consistently lonely.[8]

- It is estimated that in 2017-2018 there were 56,000 households in Wales inhabited by an older person that experienced fuel poverty.[9] This is exacerbated by old and poor-quality housing stock that is difficult to make more energy efficient.[10]

Context
The Attic Project

The Attic Project – funded by the National Lottery Community Fund – is an innovative partnership project between 4 organisations:

Partner organisation	Organisation's aims	Role in the Attic Project
Care & Repair Cymru	The national body for Care & Repair in Wales that works to ensure that all older people can live independently at home in safe, warm, and accessible housing.	Project leads, managing governance, funding, marketing, monitoring, and reporting.
Safer Wales (Attic Project partners since January 2019, when they merged with VCS Cymru, who were the project's original partners)	Community Safety Charity which supports victims of domestic violence, rape, sexual abuse, exploitation, and hate crime.	Recruit, train, and manage Attic Project volunteers and coordinate reminiscence activities.
Care & Repair Cardiff and the Vale Newport Care & Repair	Provide services which support older people to repair, adapt, and maintain their homes so they can live independently in safe, warm, and suitably adapted homes.	Receive and assess new referrals, provide Casework services, and find appropriate handyperson/removal contractors.

The project has three main aims:

❶ to support older people to sort through accumulated items that prevent adaptations, repairs, or downsizing;

❷ enable memories to be shared through reminiscence, in order to reduce feelings of social isolation;

❸ reduce environmental impact by creating opportunities to recycle and reuse possessions.

The Attic Project relies on volunteers to provide support in decluttering and reminiscence with clients, who are referred to the service in a range of ways.

Methods

This project adopted a qualitative research design. Specifically, the research involved in-depth virtual interviews with Attic Project decluttering volunteers (n=6) which were undertaken between April and May 2020. These volunteers were involved in decluttering client's homes, although the Attic Project does also have volunteers who work with clients to do reminiscence activities. The interview participants were all aged over 50 and included two men and four women – representative of the demographics of the decluttering volunteers more broadly – and had been volunteers with the Attic Project for varying lengths of time, ranging between 9 months and 3 years. All interview transcripts were anonymised. Such a methodology helps to develop and understanding of the issues surrounding older people and clutter, but also the practicalities of addressing them.

Key findings

— Volunteers had a unique insight into the types of older people who use decluttering services and the nature of their needs and motivations for support, providing an added level of detail to caseworker reporting.

— The process of decluttering varied for volunteers from client to client, but shared experiences pointed towards the importance of methodical approaches as well as simply being a presence to catalyse the process.

— A client's route or referral to the Attic Project can have a direct impact on their motivation and therefore their mind-set towards decluttering.

— Volunteers developed supportive relationships with clients which motivated decluttering, but also provided emotional support when recounting unhappy circumstances or memories, as well as regular companionship.

— The majority of decluttering work was thought to be a lasting success at a significant point in client's lives, as their opportunities for further cluttering would be limited by their advancing age.

— Volunteers were unanimous that a decluttering service, such as the Attic Project, was needed – as indicated by its very high demand – but were unsure how it might be funded since it falls between and across areas of public service provision.

Recommendations
A joined-up decluttering service for older people

Publicising the service. Public Health Wales, Care & Repair, and Age Cymru should host information about decluttering service providers, and what to expect as a client, alongside information about the risks of clutter and unsuitable housing conditions.

Allow greater flexibility around the maximum hours of decluttering support by assessing the amount of support on a needs basis, with rolling checks on progress. Communicate these assessments to volunteers.

Continue to **work on the assumption that the maintenance of longer-term outcomes needs more than decluttering to be successful.** Encourage the commissioning/support research on the long-term outcomes of decluttering support, as well as the gaps in service provision for older people with clutter problems more broadly.

Work collaboratively with other service providers to **produce comprehensive roadmaps of client referral routes to and from the service** to further improve triaging processes into the project and integration of decluttering support with existing care plans.

Communicate signposting opportunities such as mental health support, cleaning, befriending and trusted tradespeople **more clearly to volunteers** through simple flow-chart style guides to give better awareness of available support services. Also, communicate what signposting and/or referral pathways have been made at the end of decluttering support to volunteers, to address any concerns they have about the continuing needs of clients.

Establish a system of accountability and safeguards when, on very rare occasions, volunteers do wish to provide support with small repairs or maintain social links with clients. However, organisational duty of care, especially in terms of protecting vulnerable adults, will remain of paramount importance.

Retain mix of volunteers and Decluttering Officers. Volunteers evidently foster supportive relationships with clients, so should be retained for less complex cases. However, reliance on volunteers limits it to people who can afford to do so, who may not share the same backgrounds as those seeking support, so it is also important to maintain or increase the number Decluttering Officers.