

# Out in the

# COOLD



**Peter Archer**

The coalition has scrapped private sector renewal, cut Warm Front and abandoned the housing market renewal pathfinders. The elderly, disabled and poor will suffer

**O**lder people's health and well-being, and consequently their quality of life, are bound inextricably to the conditions of their homes and neighbourhoods.

Good housing is not merely an individual responsibility, in which the state should have no part; it links to a range of policy objectives that are critical to the coalition government. But in this age of austerity, we have a new policy – the state will play no role.

Without a murmur, the coalition government has axed a budget that was introduced more than 50 years ago. The private sector renewal budget is £317m for 2010/11. Next year, it will be zero.

The budget provides financial help both to low-income owner occupiers and private tenants and reaches the most vulnerable and poorest households, including older disabled people. Its removal will potentially have a dire effect on their health.

The cuts, and the demise of Warm Front in 2011 (page 5), will result in increasing costs for the NHS and a significant rise in the number of premature winter deaths.

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The changes signal a long-standing shift in responsibility for the condition of the housing stock from the state to the individual householder. A green paper on home improvement from a previous Conservative government, in 1985, pointed to owners



**Elderly at risk from cold weather** Photo: Peter Scholey/Alamy

'carrying the primary responsibility for keeping their property in good repair' but it also explained how the government would assist the most vulnerable.

There is no such commitment from this government. In fact, in the equality impact assessment that followed the removal of the private sector renewal budget, it said it could not assess the impact because it no longer collects statistics.

The private sector renewal and Warm

Front bombshells follow the closure of the Audit Commission's Housing Inspectorate, which for 10 years has driven improvements in local government efficiency and value for money. A cynic might say that if you plan to axe a major programme, you would first eliminate the body that records outcomes and expenditure.

The government will point to the protection of the disabled facilities grant budget, which in 2011/12 will rise slightly to £180m and helps older and disabled people to live independently in their own homes. In truth, this budget funds less than half of local authority expenditure on adaptations. The bulk of financial assistance comes from the now discontinued renewal budget through small care-and-repair grants and local authority contributions to the mandatory expenditure on adaptations.

Connections between house condition and health must be made to achieve the government's visions for health and social care. If these are not made, and a range of simple, value-for-money ideas are not acted upon, the housing conditions of older, low-income home owners will decline. This will be costly and have a disastrous impact on the nation's health. Cold homes already present a massive cost to the NHS and lead to about 35,000 premature deaths each winter.

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There are many people at risk. The number of householders aged 75 or more living in homes in serious disrepair increased by a third in the last *English house condition survey* and more than a million vulnerable older private householders live in non-decent homes. Many retired home owners and those on low fixed incomes are also at risk.

The coalition has ceased funding to the housing market renewal pathfinders. The nine programmes in northern areas with high levels of poor housing and declining housing demand began in 2003 and £2.3bn has been spent to date. It was to be a £5bn programme over 15 years.

Now, the scheme is in limbo. Currently, 32,000 homes are awaiting renovation and a further 30,000 properties are due to be demolished. Whole streets are boarded up, with the odd house still occupied. No one knows what will happen to them.

An earlier and more enlightened Conservative government in 1983/84 invested in England and Wales £1.1bn in home improvement and private sector renewal. Next year, the government will invest nothing.

So, Mr Cameron, is this another one of your progressive policies? At best you did not know the effect of these cuts, at worst the coalition doesn't care. But you have no excuse now, because I have asked the editor of *EHN* to post you a copy of this magazine to 10 Downing Street. I shall await your reply and comments with considerable interest. **Peter Archer is a CIEH trustee, housing consultant and chair of Care and Repair England. Email: Peter.Archer@THCP.org**

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