Tower Hamlets Friends & Neighbours

Staying in and shutting out

Feeling Safe at Home: older people, crime, exploitation and abuse in Tower Hamlets



Survey findings and national context · October 2026

Report by Rita Chadha, Chief Executive
Fieldwork by THFN befrienders

admin@thfn.org.uk · 0203 007 9120 · Charity No. 1099403

Staying in and shutting out

Feeling Safe at Home: older people, crime, exploitation and abuse in Tower Hamlets

Author: Rita Chadha, Chief Executive, Tower Hamlets Friends & Neighbours

Fieldwork: THFN befrienders

October 2026

Summary

One in three of the older people we surveyed feel unsafe in their own home, and more than three in four have been a victim of at least one crime or scam. Almost none of it reaches the police.

Headline figures from 43 older people



THFN Feeling Safe at Home survey, October 2026

In October 2026 THFN asked 43 of the older people we befriend how safe they feel at home. Most live alone and almost all have a disability or long-term health condition. The survey tells us about fear of crime, scams and anti-social behaviour. It does not capture the harms that our befrienders hear about most slowly and most privately: sexual abuse disclosed decades later, financial exploitation of people with learning disabilities, and abuse by people the older person knows and trusts.

Key points:

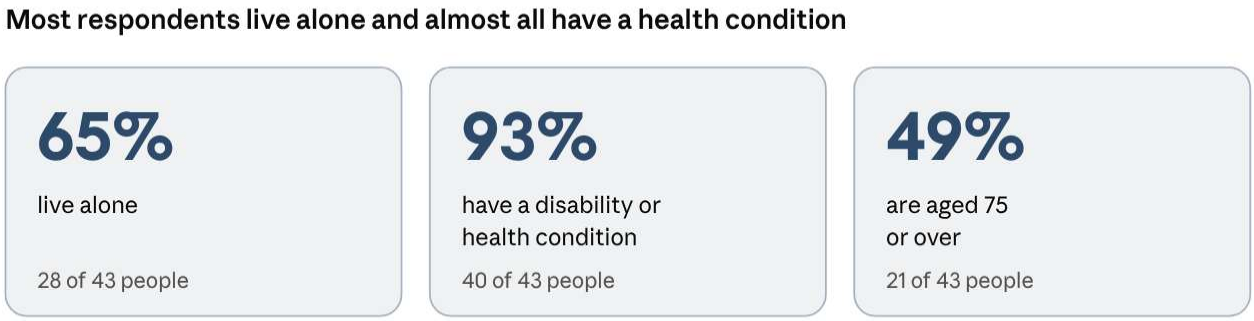
- **33% feel unsafe at home** (14 of 43). Only 12% feel very safe.
- **86% sometimes or often stay in, or don't answer the door or phone,** because they are worried about crime.

- **77% have experienced at least one incident** (33 of 43). Scams are the most common, affecting 60%.
- **Only 4 people told the police.** Most told family or friends, and 8 told THFN.
- **The damage is to health and confidence more than money.** Worry, poor sleep, loneliness and going out less were reported far more often than financial loss.
- **People want relationships, not gadgets.** Someone to talk to (37 people) and someone checking in (30) were the top requests.

The case for THFN is plain. Befriending is where fear is noticed, where scams are talked through, and where abuse is eventually disclosed. It is community safety work, even when it is not funded or recognised as such.

About the survey

The Feeling Safe at Home survey was completed by 43 older people supported by THFN in late October 2026. THFN staff helped respondents complete it.



THFN Feeling Safe at Home survey, October 2026 · 43 respondents

By age, 8 respondents were 55–64, 14 were 65–74, 14 were 75–84 and 7 were 85 or over.

Respondents live across E1 (16), E14 (11), E2 (9) and E3 (7). Around 17 described themselves as Bangladeshi or Bengali-speaking and around 14 as White British or English. Others identified as Jamaican, Italian, Somali, Jewish, Polish and Pakistani.

Three cautions apply:

- This is a sample of THFN befriendees, not of older people in Tower Hamlets as a whole.
- Because staff helped people answer, responses mentioning THFN may be higher, and criticism may be softer, than in a self-completed survey.
- Numbers are small. Comparisons between groups are indicative, not conclusive.

There is a further, more important limitation. We surveyed people we already know to be lonely, isolated and vulnerable, because that is why they come to THFN. Their wish for more companionship, and the high number asking for someone to talk to, is partly a reflection of that. We should not claim these results describe all older people in Tower Hamlets.

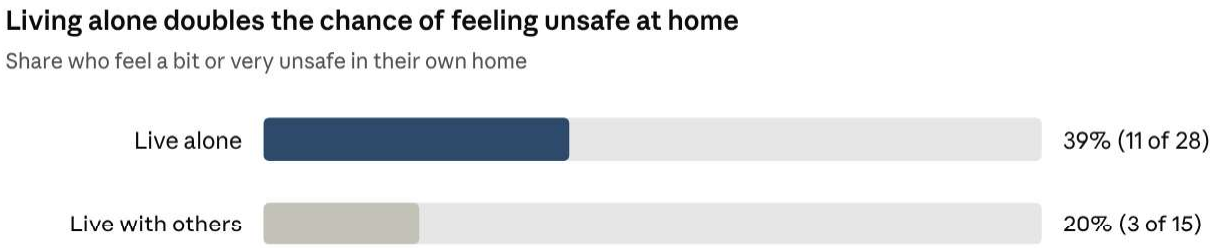
But the fear in these responses cannot be explained away by isolation alone. It runs through the answers of people who live with family as well as those who live alone, and through the comments of people with strong support around them. Older people told us about locks, door chains, cameras, unanswered phones and valuables they no longer keep at home. That fear is palpable, it is real, and it shapes daily life whatever else is going on.

Findings

Feeling safe at home

A third of respondents feel unsafe in their own home: 9 feel a bit unsafe and 5 very unsafe. A further 24 feel fairly safe and 5 very safe.

Living alone makes the biggest difference. **39% of those who live alone feel unsafe, compared with 20% of those who live with others.** Of the 6 people who often stay in because of fear of crime, 5 feel unsafe at home.



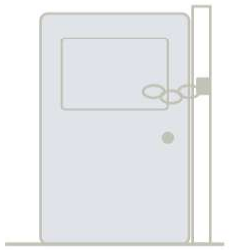
THFN Feeling Safe at Home survey, October 2026 · 43 respondents

Staying in and shutting out

36 of 42 people (86%) sometimes or often stay in, or don't answer the door or phone, because they are worried about crime. Only 3 said never. Several others told us they are housebound or bedbound but still fear someone coming into their home.

For isolated older people this matters. Not answering the door or phone protects against scams, but it also shuts out neighbours, services and friends.

Fear keeps many people behind a closed door



Door kept on the chain



Unknown calls left unanswered

86%

stay in, or avoid the door or phone, at least sometimes, because of crime

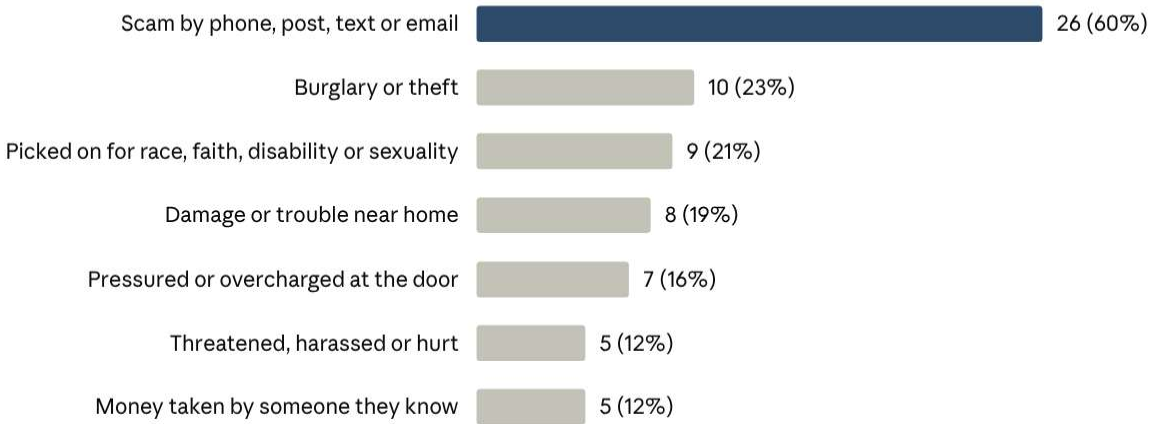
Illustration

What has happened to people

33 of 43 (77%) have experienced at least one of the incidents listed, and 16 have experienced two or more.

Scams are the most common harm: 6 in 10 respondents targeted

Respondents who experienced each incident, of 43. More than one could be ticked.



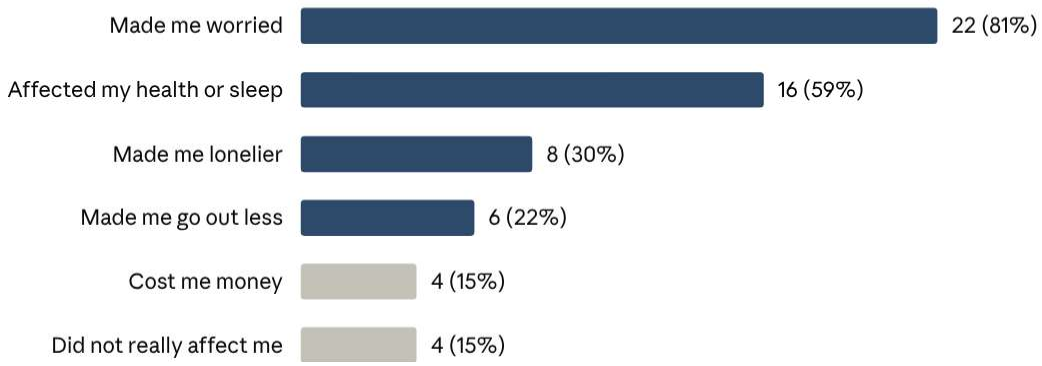
THFN Feeling Safe at Home survey, October 2026 · 43 respondents

Five people reported financial pressure from someone they know. That is abuse by any definition, and it appears in a survey that did not set out to ask about it.

The impact

Worry and poor sleep, not lost money, are the main harms

Effect of an incident, of 27 people who answered. More than one could be ticked.



THFN Feeling Safe at Home survey, October 2026 · 27 people who described an effect

Financial loss was among the least common effects.

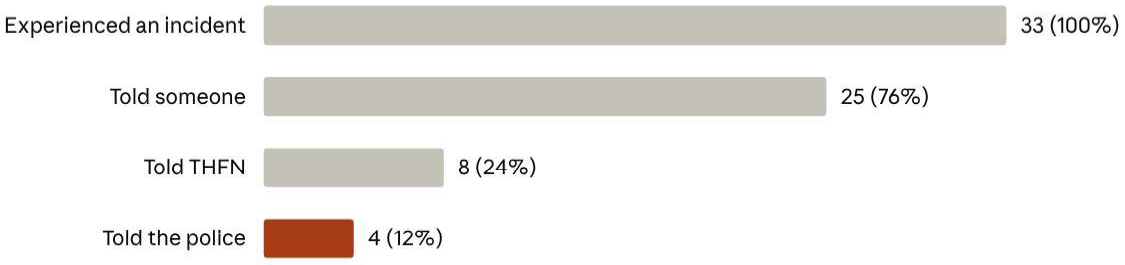
The harm is mostly to wellbeing and confidence. That is exactly the territory befriending works in.

Who people told

Of the 28 people who answered this question, 21 told family or friends and 8 told THFN. **Only 4 told the police.** Three told no one.

Of 33 people who experienced an incident, only 4 told the police

Respondents at each stage. Percentages are of those who experienced an incident.



THFN Feeling Safe at Home survey, October 2026 · 43 respondents; people could tell more than one person

Asked why they did not go to the police, 10 said they didn't think the police would help and 8 said it seemed too small. Three were embarrassed and 2 didn't know how. Low reporting means the true picture is invisible to the police and the council.

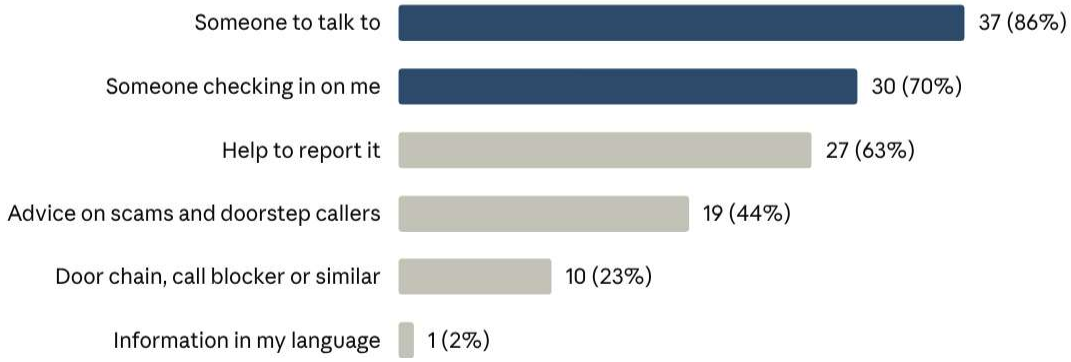
Staying in and shutting out (continued)

Feeling Safe at Home: older people, crime, exploitation and abuse in Tower Hamlets

What would help

People want contact more than equipment

What would help respondents feel safer, of 43. More than one could be ticked.



THFN Feeling Safe at Home survey, October 2026 · 43 respondents

People asked for contact and support far more than equipment. Over half want help to report, which suggests the gap is confidence and support, not unwillingness.

What people told us

The comments show how long fear lasts. Paraphrased examples:

- A woman burgled years ago by men posing as council workers still keeps no valuables at home and trusts no one she doesn't know.
- A man burgled by neighbours has three locks on his door and avoids social media and WhatsApp.
- A widow who had an attempted break-in three months ago is constantly on guard.
- A woman who witnessed her son being stabbed is now frightened to go out alone.
- Several people described scam calls about their bank or internet as frightening even when they recognised them.
- Several said advice from their THFN worker, such as hanging up on unknown numbers or telling strangers a family member is on the way, is what they actually use.

What the survey did not capture

The survey asked about crime and scams. Our befriending work shows that the most serious harms to older people are often private, long-hidden, or committed by people they trust.

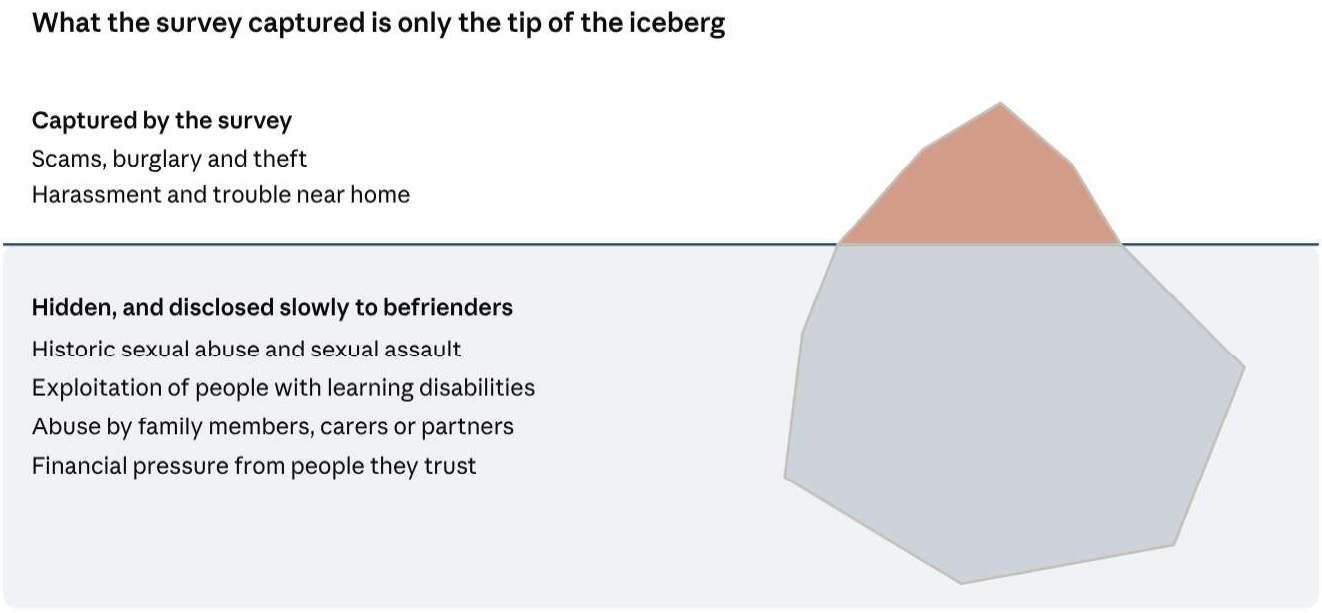


Illustration · harms described in this report

Late disclosure of sexual abuse

Older people often disclose abuse later in life, sometimes decades after it happened. THFN befrienders have received disclosures of historic sexual abuse and sexual assault from the older people they visit.

This reflects the trust a long-term befriending relationship builds. Many of today's older people grew up when abuse was not talked about, reporting was not believed, and services did not exist. A disclosure may come after a bereavement, the onset of illness, or simply after months of regular visits. It may be the first time the person has ever told anyone.

These disclosures need a safe, skilled response: listening, recording, safeguarding where anyone may still be at risk, and access to specialist support suitable for older survivors. They do not fit neatly into crime statistics and they are rarely funded.

Learning disability and exploitation

Older people with a learning disability face a particular risk of exploitation, because they may struggle to judge what is fair and may be reluctant to challenge.

In one case, an older man with a learning disability did a large shop and asked the shop's security guard to call him a cab home. The journey normally costs him about £6. He was charged £90. That is fifteen times the normal fare.

No one broke in and no one threatened him. Yet this was exploitation, and it is typical of the low-level, repeated financial harm that falls between services and is almost never reported.

Elder abuse

The survey did not ask directly about elder abuse: harm by family members, carers, partners or others in a position of trust. Yet it is a feature of our work. Five respondents still reported someone they know taking their money or pressuring them about it.

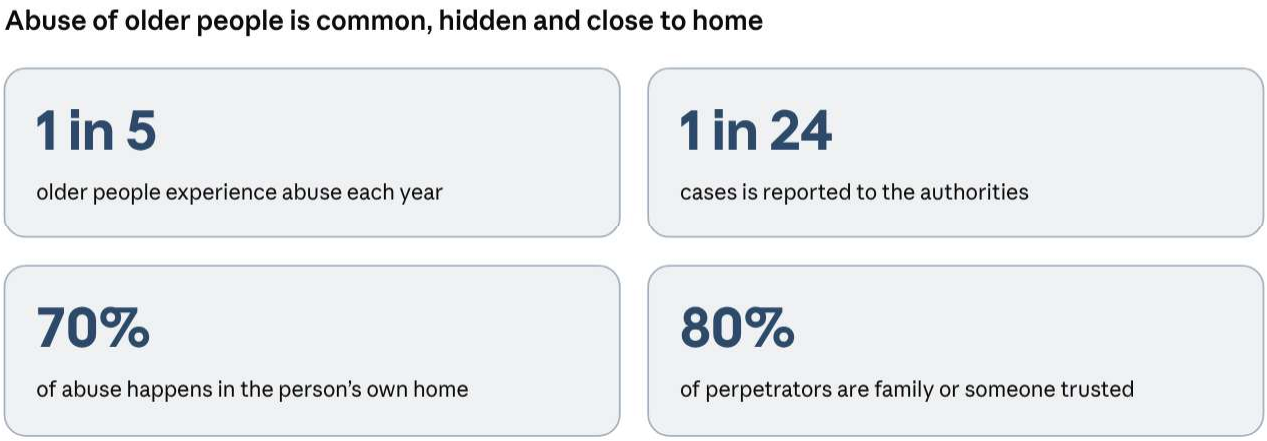
Elder abuse can be financial, physical, psychological, sexual or neglect. It is often hidden by the person's dependence on the abuser, by shame, or by fear of losing their home or care. Befrienders are frequently the only independent person who visits regularly, which makes them well placed to notice changes and hear concerns.

National context

Our findings are not unusual. National data shows that abuse and scams in later life are widespread, mostly happen at home, and are rarely reported.

Abuse of older people

Hourglass, the only UK-wide charity focused on ending the abuse of older people, estimates that:



Hourglass, Hidden Heist, November 2025

Hourglass also estimates that:

- Around 2.6 million older people across the UK are victim-survivors.
- Economic abuse alone costs older people more than £100 million a year.
- Almost 4 million older people a year could be experiencing abuse by 2030.

(Hourglass, Hidden Heist, November 2025)

Hourglass also estimates that abuse of older people costs the UK economy £16 billion a year, excluding economic abuse (Hourglass, Policy, Practice and the Law). Its 2025 Safer Ageing Summit described the sexual abuse of older people as one of the last taboos in safeguarding, which matches what our befrienders are hearing.

Domestic abuse in later life

The Crime Survey for England and Wales only began asking people over 59 about domestic abuse in 2017/18, and removed the upper age limit altogether from 2021. In the year to March 2025, 5.3% of people aged 60 to 74 and 3.4% of those aged 75 and over had experienced domestic abuse in the last year (ONS, Domestic abuse victim characteristics, November 2025).

The first study of this data found that partner abuse falls disproportionately on older women, while older men and women are equally at risk of abuse by other family members (Bows, Pullerits and Brennan, 2025). For decades, older victims were simply not counted.

Scams and fear of crime

Age UK research shows that fear of scams is changing how older people live, as our survey found:

- Almost a fifth of over-50s (4.9 million people) are afraid to answer the phone because of scams, and 2.8 million are afraid to open their door.
- 1.5 million over-50s say fear of scams puts them off going out.
- An average of 4 people aged 50 and over are scammed every minute in England and Wales.
- Older people who live alone or have cognitive impairment are at greater risk, and victims often experience shame, depression, isolation and declining health.

(Age UK, April 2024)

Independent Age estimates that 1.9 million older people in the UK have been scammed, losing an average of nearly £4,000 each, with many reporting lost confidence and anxiety afterwards (Independent Age).

Fear of crime and the Crime Survey for England and Wales

Fear of crime is a harm in its own right. It shapes how older people live long before, or even without, any crime taking place. In our survey, 86% stay in or avoid the door or phone at least sometimes because of it.

The Crime Survey for England and Wales, known until 2012 as the British Crime Survey, is the main national measure of crime and of how people feel about it. It consistently finds that older people are the least likely to be victims of crime. In the year to March 2016, 4.9% of people aged 75 and over had been a victim of crime, compared with 19.6% of those aged 16 to 24 (ONS, 2017).

Yet worry does not fall with age in the same way. The same ONS analysis found that people aged 55 to 74 were the most worried about online crime and identity theft, and identity theft was the crime people worried about most overall. Researchers often call this the fear–victimisation paradox.

For the older people we support, that paradox needs three qualifications:

- **The survey undercounts what happens to older people.** It interviews people in private households, so it misses care homes. Until 2017/18 it did not ask anyone over 59 about domestic abuse, and questions on financial abuse and receiving care at home were only added from April 2024 (ONS, Older people and violence symposium, 2024).
- **The harms older people face most are the ones least counted.** Scams, exploitation and abuse by people they know are under-reported, as our own reporting figures show.

- **The consequences are heavier.** A theft or a scam costs more, in money, health and confidence, to someone who is frail, isolated or on a low income.

The result is a cycle that our befriendees described to us in their own words.

Fear of crime feeds a cycle of isolation

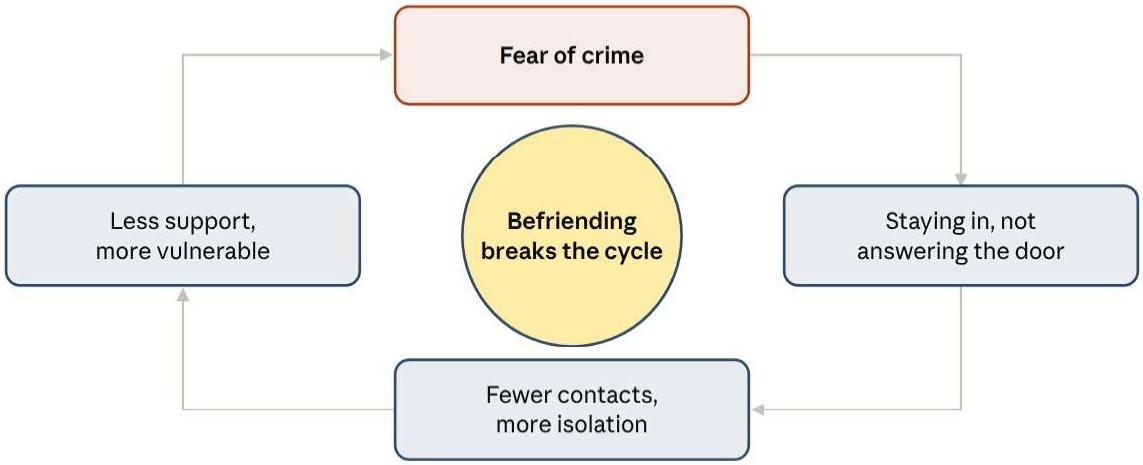


Illustration · drawn from what respondents told us

Fear keeps people indoors and cuts them off from neighbours and services. Isolation leaves them with less support and more exposed to scams and exploitation, which feeds the fear. A regular, trusted visitor interrupts that cycle at every point.

How Tower Hamlets compares

National surveys measure different age groups, so direct comparison is not exact, but our figures are strikingly high. Sixty per cent of our respondents have been targeted by a scam, and 86% stay in or avoid the door or phone at least sometimes. That is what national research would predict for a group in which most live alone and almost all have a disability or health condition.

The Tower Hamlets context

Our befriendees live in the borough with the deepest poverty in later life in England, and where crime and anti-social behaviour are residents' top concern.

Tower Hamlets: deep poverty in later life and high concern about crime



Sources: English Indices of Deprivation 2025 as reported by East London Lines; Tower Hamlets Annual Residents Survey 2025; Tower Hamlets Community Safety Partnership Strategic Assessment 2023–24

Poverty in later life

The English Indices of Deprivation 2025 show that 61.1% of older people in Tower Hamlets live in income-deprived households, the highest proportion in England, up from 49% in 2015 (East London Lines). Older people on low incomes have less room to absorb a loss and fewer options to adapt their home, move, or pay for help.

Crime in the borough

Tower Hamlets recorded 35,990 offences in 2023/24, up 9.5% on the year and above London's 6.1% rise. Per head of population, the borough ranked 8th in London (Tower Hamlets Community Safety Partnership, Strategic Assessment 2023–24). Several trends bear directly on older people:

- Theft from the person rose by 49% and personal robbery by 27%, matching respondents' fears about being robbed when they go out.
- There were 12,373 anti-social behaviour reports to the police, the 2nd highest count in London, with rowdy behaviour and nuisance neighbours the largest categories.
- Hate crime rose 19% to 1,238 offences, 2nd highest in London. Faith-related hate crime nearly doubled, with Islamophobic offences up 98% and antisemitic offences up 142%. One in five of our respondents had been picked on because of race, religion, disability or sexuality.
- Domestic abuse offences reached 4,139, the 2nd highest count in London.

How residents feel

The council's independent Annual Residents Survey, published in December 2025, found that crime and anti-social behaviour remain residents' top concern, ahead of the cost of living and housing (Tower Hamlets Council). The council has since launched an £8 million Anti-Crime Task Force and a new anti-social behaviour policy. The 2023 survey found that concern is higher in the south of the borough and that women feel less safe than men after dark.

Isolation and exclusion

Analysis by the Greater London Authority found that more than half of neighbourhoods in Tower Hamlets had four or more indicators of social exclusion among older people in London's worst 10%. The drivers were fear of crime, not speaking English well, income deprivation and long-term illness (London Datastore, 2016). The analysis is now ten years old, but each driver is still visible in our survey.

Why this matters for local planning

The borough's Community Safety Partnership Plan 2025–29 sets priorities on neighbourhood crime, anti-social behaviour and hate crime, and commits to an annual public meeting. Older people are rarely named in these plans, yet they are among those whose lives are most shaped by fear of crime. This report gives the Partnership local evidence it does not currently have.

What this means for THFN

Befriending is a front-line safety and safeguarding service for isolated older people. Our befriendees ask for exactly what we provide, someone to talk to and someone checking in, and they tell us things they tell no one else.

That brings responsibility. If older people disclose crime, exploitation and abuse to our staff and volunteers, we must be equipped to respond well, and the system around us must recognise that this work happens.

What people asked for most was someone to talk to



Regular contact is where fears are shared and harm is disclosed

Illustration

Recommendations

Befriending turns regular contact into safety



How befriending responds to what people tell us

1. **Strengthen safeguarding policy and practice for disclosure.** Review our safeguarding policy so it explicitly covers late disclosure of sexual abuse, economic abuse and elder abuse, and bring the updated policy to the next Board meeting. Refresh training for staff and volunteers on how to listen, record and refer.
2. **Build referral routes to specialist support.** Agree clear pathways with Hourglass, local adult safeguarding, specialist sexual violence services and learning disability services, so befrienders know where to go.
3. **Look closely at abuse by family members and carers.** National data shows most abuse of older people is by someone they know and trust, and five of our respondents reported financial pressure from someone they know. THFN should look at how befrienders recognise and respond to signs of abuse by family, partners and paid or unpaid carers, including when the person depends on them for care or a home, and how we raise concerns safely without putting the older person at greater risk.

4. **Offer help to report.** More than half of respondents want help to report. THFN can support people to report to the police, Action Fraud or Trading Standards, and to follow up.
5. **Continue practical scam and doorstep advice.** People are already using advice from THFN staff. This could be formalised into short, repeatable sessions and printed guidance, including in Bengali and Sylheti.
6. **Record what we hear.** Use the new CRM to record, anonymously and safely, disclosures and incidents by type, so THFN can evidence the scale of harm over time.
7. **Ask the questions the survey missed.** A follow-up, delivered carefully and with support in place, could ask about financial pressure from people known to the respondent and about abuse by family or carers.
8. **Share the findings and make the case.** Once trustees have approved this report, share it with the Tower Hamlets Safeguarding Adults Board, the Community Safety Partnership, the police and our partner organisations. Befriending should be recognised and funded as part of the borough's response to crime and abuse against older people.
9. **Develop a funding bid.** Use this report as the evidence base for a bid for safeguarding, scam prevention and advocacy work, and add it to the THFN funding pipeline.

Sources

- THFN, Feeling Safe at Home survey, 43 responses, October 2026
- Hourglass, Hidden Heist press release, 5 November 2025
- Hourglass, Policy, Practice and the Law: improving protections against economic abuse
- ONS, Domestic abuse victim characteristics, England and Wales: year ending March 2025
- ONS, People greatly overestimate their likelihood of being robbed, September 2017
- ONS, Crimes against older people: Crime Survey for England and Wales, symposium slides, 2024
- Bows, Pullerits and Brennan, Domestic abuse in later life: a secondary analysis of the Crime Survey for England and Wales, European Journal of Criminology, 2025
- Age UK, Millions of over 50s fear opening their doors and answering their phones because of scams, April 2024
- Independent Age, Online scams cost older people an average of £4,000
- East London Lines, reporting the English Indices of Deprivation 2025

- Tower Hamlets Community Safety Partnership, Strategic Assessment 2023–24
- Tower Hamlets Council, Annual Residents Survey results, December 2025
- Tower Hamlets Council, new anti-social behaviour policy, March 2026
- Greater London Authority, Social exclusion of older people in London, 2016

Case examples in this report are drawn from THFN practice and have been anonymised.

About this report and contact details

Author: Rita Chadha, Chief Executive, Tower Hamlets Friends & Neighbours

Fieldwork: THFN befrienders

For more information about this report, contact Rita Chadha at rita@thfn.org.uk.

For general enquiries about THFN and our befriending service, email admin@thfn.org.uk or call 0203 007 9120.

Tower Hamlets Friends & Neighbours is a registered charity, number 1099403.