



Support to Relocate: Stoke-on-Trent's Under Occupier pilot project

The Housing LIN has been building up a collection of interesting resources to support commissioners and providers to better understand local housing markets for older people; predict future demand and supply of specialist housing; and make better use of existing housing stock. This includes work on developing Market Position Statements and viewpoints on “downsizing” (or “rightsizing” as it is sometimes called).

This case study looks at the “Support to Relocate” pilot project, delivered by Revival Home Improvement Agency, part of Staffordshire Housing Association, in partnership with Stoke-on-Trent City Council, to provide a holistic, tenant-centred approach to encourage older and vulnerable council tenants who are under occupying, to move to accommodation that will support their independence, and thereby free up family sized accommodation for homeless households and those in need.

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Introduction

This case study is an example of a successful approach to supporting older and vulnerable tenants in social housing to move to homes that will enable them to continue to live independently, and free up their family homes for overcrowded or homeless families.

Demonstrating the wider benefits that an appropriate move can make to the provision of care and health services will become ever more important, if we are to be able to continue to seek ways to enable people to “live younger longer”, and to make the case for continuing the funding for holistic approaches like “Support to Relocate”. Welfare reform and the under occupation penalty (“the bedroom tax”) are increasing the competition for smaller homes. As households where all claimants are pensioners are not included in current reductions of housing benefit for under-occupying council or housing association homes, opportunities for older people to move to smaller homes in the affordable housing sector may diminish.

The drivers for the pilot

Stoke-on-Trent City Council successfully applied to the Government’s “Homelessness Pot” for funding for a one year pilot “Support to Relocate” Under-Occupier Project until March 2013, and this funding has now been extended for a further year.

The project funds one full time support worker, located in “Revival”, the Home Improvement Agency, based with Staffordshire Housing Association. The purpose of the service is to encourage and provide practical support for mainly older people who are under occupying council owned accommodation. The targets of the pilot project are to ensure that households are adequately housed and can live independently, and also ensuring that the supply of social housing is maximised to meet the needs of the city.

The drivers for the pilot include addressing the Council’s Homeless Strategy and the Council’s statutory duties to assist people who are deemed homeless or under threat of homelessness. The outcomes increase availability of housing stock, and also bring benefits to the health and social care sectors, as the successful moves lead to reduced support needs and preventing admissions to hospital through improved health and reduced possibility of falls. The broad outcomes may also include improved mental health and cheaper heating bills which can improve health through warmth.

Stoke on Trent City Council faces a high demand for social housing with a limited supply, and the low turnover of social housing affects the City’s ability to address its homelessness responsibilities. During 2011-12, the council received 548 housing applications per month, whilst only 148 properties became available. As tenants have lifetime tenancies, there is often little incentive to move to smaller homes when children leave home, and so many tenants under-occupy properties which are much needed by overcrowded and homeless families. It is anticipated that welfare reform will lead many households to seek smaller homes to avoid the under occupation penalty on bedrooms that are deemed surplus to their requirements.

A holistic approach

Revival is a Home Improvement Agency providing a range of services to vulnerable people and older owner occupiers in North Staffordshire to enable people to remain independent in their own homes and helping them with repairs, improvement and adaptation needs. Services provided include “Home from Hospital”, Handyman service, decorating and gardening service,

fire prevention, falls prevention, repairs management services and energy efficiency advice. The agency operates a housing triage approach identifying issues that require urgent attention to get these resolved quickly, this is then followed by a housing options assessment of need both now and in the future. This may result in identifying a need to move home, which the agency support if required.

The Revival support worker for the Under-Occupier Project was the only specific new post funded and, although the scheme does provide extra work for other Revival staff, the structure of the team enables this work to be absorbed. All telephone calls are filtered by duty staff and enquiries are passed onto the appropriate support worker or case worker.

Revival has a wide knowledge of other forms of third sector and charitable funding and the voluntary sectors. Revival has strong working relationships with the three councils of Stoke on Trent City Council, Staffordshire Moorlands District Council and Newcastle Borough Council, although the project only addresses under-occupancy in local authority homes within the Stoke-on-Trent area. Revival also works closely with the Supporting People Team, the Disability Resource Teams and the NHS hospital foundation trust – the University Hospital of North Staffs (UHNS).

These close working relationships and the easy access to Revival's other services bring additional leverage into supporting people with the process of moving home. The "Support to Relocate" project adds value to the services they provide by combining holistic assessments of clients in combination with finding innovative solutions to problems. Local evidence suggested that for many tenants the primary motivation for "staying put" is the perceived effort of arranging and undertaking the practical elements of a move.

"Support to Relocate"

Marketing for the Project was done through a mailshot, and initially Revival wrote to 700 Council tenants who were thought to be under-occupying. Marketing materials focused on a holistic approach with support tailored to the individual, enabling them to make an informed decision about their own housing need. The initial contact letter focused on whether tenants felt their current home was too large for them, difficult to maintain, too costly to run and whether their property was suitable for their long term needs.

From the initial 700 letters, 34 enquiries were received about the support to relocate scheme resulting in 26 tenants expressing interest in wanting to downsize and use the support service. Out of the 26 tenants, 19 were aged over 60 years old with the eldest being 82 years old. The remaining tenants who responded to the letter had either disabilities or restricted mobility due to ill health.

Housing officers then carried out a housing needs assessment for each referral, and these were mostly done over the phone. Once it was established that they were eligible to 'go live' on the Council's transfer list, each applicant was visited by the Revival support worker. During these visits many of the tenants were given housing options advice about different schemes and other housing providers. A support plan was completed with the tenant at the visit to establish what level of support the individual needed and what work was needed to be completed to enable a move. During the visit the applicant also signed a disclosure of information form.

Stoke-on-Trent City Council then wrote to 4,000 potential under-occupiers in October 2012 to explain the forthcoming changes in Housing Benefit through Welfare reform and the options

available to them. The council set up a telephone hotline to answer under occupier queries, and if tenants are identified as in need of support to downsize the council will then pass on the details to Revival.

At present, the scheme has not been expanded to housing association tenants, with the possibility that the council could then nominate into the resulting vacancy. Staffordshire Housing Association has limited numbers of under-occupancy as most of their stock is flats and apartments, with houses mainly allocated to families. However, there may be an opportunity to expand into other housing associations, as some which were stock transfer associations may have higher levels of under occupancy.

The levels of support given so far have varied greatly but the emphasis of the support plan has been grounded in a person-centred approach that promotes independence and choice. Support given has included helping with applications to housing associations, organising the removal of unwanted furniture, booking removal companies and skips, organising lifelines (emergency response telephone support), liaising with energy providers, applying for community care grants, organising medication with pharmacies, completing paperwork for housing benefit and liaising with the disability resource teams, as well as other forms of support.

There have been 23 people supported to move so far with the average time from enquiry to the move taking place between 12 weeks and 24 weeks depending on at what stage the referral was made. There are at present 38 open cases and 32 clients that require support awaiting property offers. The target of 26 supported moves during the 12 months will be met. All the clients that have moved have freed up a minimum of 1 bedroom with most freeing up 2 or more and one client moving from a 4 bedroom to a 1 bedroom property.

Client feedback

Customer satisfaction surveys have been given to clients during a post move visit carried out 6 weeks after the move. Results so far are all very positive, with only one client saying that the move had not improved health or wellbeing, but giving positive replies to the other questions.

Amongst the questions were:

- Do you think the move has improved your health and wellbeing?
"I feel a lot better in myself and more relaxed" and "I am more able to cope"
- Do you feel the move has prevented a fall or reduced risks?
- Do you feel the move has made you feel safe and secure?
- Do you feel the move will enable you to remain independent in your home?

Other comments included:

"I didn't know about Revival before, but I'm glad they got in touch with me, as I had been thinking of moving, but had put it off because of the cost and hassle"

"Thank you all for supporting me all of the way, Susanne was brilliant with all her help, 10/10"

Success Stories

The following 3 individual stories highlight the success of the Project.

Mr P

Mr P had lived in a 4 bedroom property alone for a number of years. He had become depressed as his wife and daughter had both passed away whilst living in the family home. He felt the house was too large to cope with and too expensive to heat. Often when the support worker arrived he would be sitting on the settee with a duvet to keep him warm. In addition to this he also felt very unsafe at home as his mobility car had been vandalised on a number of occasions. It was very evident to the support worker that he wasn't looking after the property or himself. Mr P was supported to move to an apartment in a scheme for the over 55's and has since informed the support worker he has had a new lease of life, he feels safe and has become very house proud. He also feels his health has improved and has now as a result given up smoking.

Mrs H

Mrs H is 85 years old, and had lived for over 40 years in a 2 bedroom house. She was referred to the under occupier project in June 2012 by Revival's hospital discharge team after she expressed an interest in housing options advice, as she had been struggling to cope in her home prior to her hospital admission, and was housebound after her hospital stay, with difficulty accessing the bathroom.

In addition to the housing options advice, a support plan was completed with the client to make a holistic assessment of her needs. Mrs H received support from the under occupier project for over 5 months including, amongst others, contact with the local housing team, occupational therapist, and the NHS incontinence nurse. The handyman service was able to organise quickly a key safe and grab rails. Once a property was identified (a bungalow which has a wet room) for the client, the Revival support worker organised a removal van, the collection of unwanted furniture by a local charity, reconnection of gas supply to property, helped to pack/unpack, liaised with the disability resource team to supply a shower seat, organise the connection of care line and acted as an advocate in accessing health services.

Following the move the support worker carried out a post move assessment to assess if Mrs H had everything she needed, and wanted to remain living independently. This identified that Mrs H felt lonely and, following the support worker's suggestion, she agreed to a referral to Age UK's befriending service.

Had Mrs H remained in her initial home there would have been an increased possibility of further falls, a higher dependency on carers provided by social services as she found it difficult to use the bathing facilities, and the possibility of moving into residential care.

Links between housing and health are difficult to evidence and demonstrate but much research has illustrated that preventative measures are cost effective. Preventing a fall leading to a hip fracture saves the NHS £26,665.00 (ambulance costs, hospital stay, rehabilitation, GP visits etc.) and postponing entry into residential care by a year saves on average £28,080.00 (Croucher & Lawson February 2011).¹ The move to a smaller property also reduces the cost to the housing benefits budget.

¹ Lang and Buisson, 2008, Annual Cost of Care Home Report cited by Croucher & Lawson February 2011, *Communities and Local Government Handypersons Evaluation Interim Key Findings*

In addition to the financial benefits to other service providers, Mrs H will have reduced energy costs, helping her to remain healthy through warmth (it is estimated there are 30,000 to 40,000 excess winter deaths due to poor housing & heating per year amongst older people). Also her move to a smaller home has freed up her larger home for those at risk of homelessness. To conclude Mrs H's story, she feels safer, happy and more able to cope in her new home - a positive outcome for both the individual and the service providers.

Mr W

Mr W was referred to the under occupier project in July 2012 by the local council's community support team, he had been living alone in a 3 bedroom property since his mother had died and his father had gone into a home. The support worker carried out an initial home visit and completed a support plan with him, to make a holistic assessment of his needs.

Mr W has slight learning difficulties and multiple health issues including a brain tumour which often leads to seizures and falls. He was struggling to cope on his own and seemed to have little knowledge of practical living skills such as cleaning, cooking, healthy eating and personal hygiene. Mr W was depressed when he was first referred and reported that he had attempted to take his own life on two occasions. He had little in the way of a social network and spent most of his time alone. In addition Mr W was a hoarder.

The support offered to Mr W took place over a period of 5 months with weekly 2 hour visits providing intense support. The support worker also assisted with applications to other housing providers, and provided support with organising Mr W's medication in blister packs as he didn't know what time to take what medication, and these enabled Mr W to self-medicate with ease.

Through Housing Options advice Mr W made an informed decision to live in a sheltered scheme, due to both his health issues and his vulnerability (he had also been bullied). The support worker, with the assistance of the community support team, helped with de-cluttering the home, supplying boxes, packing, arranging and filling skips, organising the relocation, organising new energy suppliers and so on.

Referrals were also made for the client to social services for floating support and as a result Mr W received a skills assessment. The support worker also liaised with a Mencap support worker.

Following the move the support worker carried out a post move assessment to ascertain whether Mr W had everything in place to enable him to remain living independently. He had settled well and was receiving floating support from the community learning disability team to help with budgeting and healthy eating, as well as support from the warden at the sheltered scheme. He was mixing with other tenants, had made some new friends and was joining in group activities such as bingo which he was enjoying.

Moving has improved Mr W's health and wellbeing, prevented further falls, and provided him with a wider social network. Without moving Mr W may have been hospitalised numerous times and he may have reached crisis point. His former 3 bedroom home is now housing a family.

Building partnerships

Revival is working closely with the Housing Enabling Team and Supporting People Team working in SOTCC (Stoke-on-Trent City Council) and the benefits of collaboration are evident. Strong partnerships have also been formed with the Housing Needs Team and the Community Support Team. Referrals from the Housing Needs Team were initially slow but following the distribution of marketing materials to act as a prompt to housing needs officers there have been an influx of referrals. The marketing prompts were to remind Housing Needs Officers of the value of the scheme. The support worker also liaises with intermediate care social workers providing support to individuals with minimal support networks. The Project has also received referrals from Mencap support workers and from Revival's hospital discharge team which is made easier due to their locality.

Is the project sustainable?

The Steering Group have confirmed that the Project will continue for the next year and they have secured continuation funding from the Government's "Homelessness Pot". The initial 12 months was costed at £40,027, covering £5,000 each for removals and marketing, as well as staff costs, recruitment, travel and training.

Barriers to achieving the project's objectives

The objective of freeing up under-occupied social housing and supporting individuals to move to more suitable accommodation that meets their current and future housing needs is working, but the process can be quite slow as it does take a long period of time for a property to be identified. The council's allocation policy places under occupiers in the lowest band for transfer so the lack of priority given to under occupiers does not support the project well. Tenants do have a choice about the property they accept although the choice is limited due to the lack of availability of suitable properties. The standard housing allocations policy states that each tenant can be offered 2 properties but should they refuse both offers they are taken off the transfer list for 6 months. The Revival Support Worker gives housing options advice that offers individuals the opportunity of a more informed choice, such as transfer into housing association or supported living schemes and 4 people so far have moved to other housing providers.

Discretionary Management Lets (DMLs) were proposed by the steering group as a possible solution for some of the cases, to overcome the hurdle that the allocations policy poses. These are now being considered on a case by case basis by the Council and there has been one supported move through this process. If this approach does not overcome the problem of low priority, then the council steering group members would need to discuss possible reprioritising with the Council's policy makers. However, despite this barrier the moves so far have freed up 36 bedrooms, therefore preventing quite a number of homeless cases. Clearly the pressures of the "Bedroom tax" create many competing demands for "downsizing", and as pensioner households are exempted, their priority for moving to scarce smaller units may decrease. All the tenants supported to move have moved to smaller properties with lower rents so there has been no increase in Housing Benefit.

What lessons can be learned and what can be replicated by others?

There are a number of useful lessons that can be learned. These include:

- The individual tailored support that offers a person-centred approach and the holistic way in which support is provided is replicable, and the wider benefits this approach can bring can justify the organisational adjustments required to implement it. Revival has been able to demonstrate the benefits and secure an additional year's funding.
- The initial housing options advice is valuable. Many individuals the support worker in this case study talked to had little or no idea that other social housing providers existed. Housing options advice enables people to make an informed choice and some people supported by the project have moved to homes provided by Housing Associations.
- The "Support to Relocate Project" has established good partnerships and collaboration with a range of services and providers to enable a more holistic approach to meeting people's needs. This can lead to considerable efficiencies in service delivery, and to wider benefits in provision of care and health services. Some of Revival's key partnerships include the Council's Housing Enabling and Supporting People teams as well as the Housing Needs and Community Support teams. They also liaise with social workers and hospital discharge teams.
- The scheme is freeing up family sized accommodation and helping the City Council to address its considerable housing needs, as the moves so far will provide accommodation for needy overcrowded or homeless families.
- In replicating a scheme such as this, it is vital that housing allocations policies support the Project and identify under-occupiers as a priority, and that there is clear open communication between the support worker and the housing needs team.
- Welfare reform will increase demand for "downsizing" as people realise the financial ramifications of the reduction in housing benefit, and prioritising older people less affected by the changes will become more difficult unless the wider benefits of promoting independence are clearly understood.

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Note

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author, and not necessarily those of the Housing Learning and Improvement Network.

About the Housing LIN

Previously responsible for managing the Department of Health's Extra Care Housing Fund, the Housing Learning and Improvement Network (LIN) is the leading 'learning lab' for a growing network of housing, health and social care professionals in England involved in planning, commissioning, designing, funding, building and managing housing, care and support services for older people and vulnerable adults with long term conditions.

The Housing LIN welcomes contributions on a range of issues pertinent to housing with care for older and vulnerable adults. If there is a subject that you feel should be addressed, please contact us.

For further information about the Housing LIN's comprehensive list of online resources and shared learning and service improvement networking opportunities, including site visits and network meetings in your region, visit www.housinglin.org.uk

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