



Personalising the Housing Offer – New Approaches to Housing with Support for People with Disabilities

What is the point of personalising care if we don't also personalise housing?

We are all constrained in our housing choices by our personal circumstances; age, financial and physical factors, geography, family circumstances and of course availability of affordable housing choices. But, even with these constraints they should not stop us exercising as much choice as we can in where and how we live and with who. So, how can we enable and support people with disabilities to access 'choice' in housing terms.

This case study is based on a presentation given earlier this year at the East of England Housing LIN Meeting in Cambridge. It gives a high level view at the introduction of a housing brokerage service in Essex and identifies the key phases and activities that took place.

Written for the Housing Learning and Improvement Network by **Sanna Westwood**, Director, Strategic Arc Ltd.

June 2014

Introduction

There are a number of ingredients that need to be in place so that housing choice becomes tangible and deliverable. These are well documented and understood but not necessarily all in the pot at the right time for example:

- The individual understanding that they can exercise choice and have support in place or being supported via Mental Capacity Act and Court of Protection activity
- Family support
- Social care or other input at the right time as people transition from thinking about moving to actually moving
- People and families understanding what can be afforded and then having affordable housing available at the right time
- Support agencies, social care and local housing authorities understanding what housing may be available and how this can be accessed
- Everything in place to make the move – from arranging utilities, benefit claims, furniture and of course FOOD
- Ensuring that the property is seen as part of a person constructing a meaningful life and relationships, rather than an end in itself

All of the ingredients needed for supporting people to make a move flow from effective commissioning practice, focused on outcomes and with people at the heart but ensuring that decisions are based on good information.

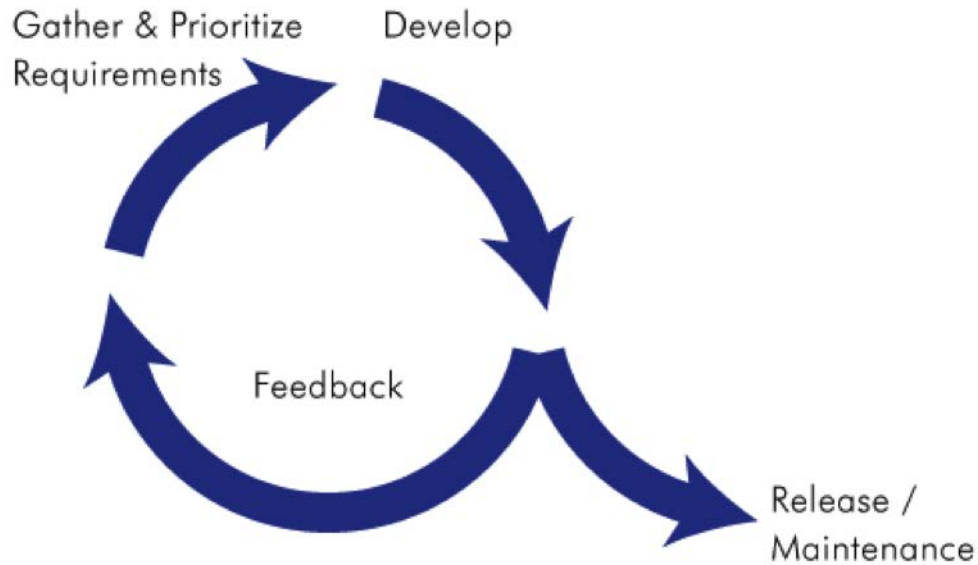
With the Housing LIN as a signatory to refresh the sector's commitment to 'Think Local Act Personal'¹, this case study takes a timely view at the introduction of a housing brokerage service in Essex. It identifies the key phases and activities that took place. Simply put, the County Council utilised all the elements of the Commissioning Cycle² but not necessarily in the commonly stated order of:

- Analyse
- Plan
- Do
- Review

The development of a housing brokerage service was an iterative process which enabled us to use the learning gained at every stage to refine the service offer. The below diagram is more representative of the activity described later in this case study.

¹ www.thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk

² Institute of Public Care (2011)



The Housing Brokerage Recipe – How to Make it Work for Commissioners, Housing Providers and Service Users

Housing brokerage

There are many different schemes and services calling themselves housing brokerage and all have their own merits. This case study takes a look at just one way of delivery housing brokerage that worked for a large shire authority and is as likely to be successful in unitary and metropolitan authorities where both housing and social care responsibilities are held. However, the activities engaged in are equally relevant to registered care, housing and support providers.

In Essex, the County Council was part of a NDTi Inclusion and Housing project³ which was looking at how moves from registered care to supported housing could be enabled and received some limited project support. Essex County Council didn't really have any fixed ideas about how Housing Brokerage should be but it did know about the local population and supply, and recognized that without enabling and supporting more people to move the county wouldn't achieve its commissioning objectives. The county had had recent success in supporting people to own their own homes and had also increasingly been working with the private landlord sector. It also felt secure enough that it could introduce a new concept into practice.

Phases of development

The evaluation of the housing brokerage was included in the NDTi project and a partner, Dimensions, was identified to help design a brokerage service. This was not a procured activity but based on existing relationships and a common understanding of the issues around sourcing housing. Dimensions are a housing provider for people with Learning Disability as well as being a support provider, but the majority of their activity is support, not housing, and in Essex they had very little housing stock. It was therefore considered that there was no conflict of interest for them in securing housing options for people.

³ www.ndti.org.uk/major-projects/past/housing-and-social-inclusion-project/

Over a period of months, Dimensions and the NDTi worked closely with Essex County Council officers to design a housing brokerage offer (it was not at that point a service) – and at that time we had not decided how it was going to be delivered or by who. Once the concept had been worked up, a business case for 12 months funding was drafted and approved – with the proviso that an evaluation of the service would be carried out at 9 months to inform future commissioning.

Dimensions agreed to recruit a Housing Broker funded by Essex County Council, and both parties set about writing a job profile and recruiting. We also put in place service agreements, looking at where the referrals into the service would come from and what information needed to be collected so that at evaluation time the right information was available to review.

Essex were to be the ‘gatekeeper’ of the service, so referrals would only be received from social work teams in order that the broker could build a service with a manageable case load (initially this was set at 15 at any one time).

As well as working with the people requiring housing, the broker had to establish relationships with social care teams, local authorities, housing providers, private landlords and estate agents. The initial intention was to restrict the service to a discrete geographic area (Essex has 12 Local Authorities) to reduce travel and relationship building time; however this proved difficult as the first referrals accepted needed to be achievable to test the concept. As time went on, more complex cases were handled, including home ownership and case load increased in a carefully managed way. The overall level of control was maintained at all times as we felt that staying person focused and delivering the best possible outcomes for people meant that unplanned and uncontrollable events had to be kept to a minimum and realistic time afforded to users of the service.

Essex already had in place a system whereby access to a great deal of the specialist housing was managed centrally and the brokerage service became an element of the case management process with social workers referring in for housing and their needs being reviewed and their suitability for housing brokerage identified. As time went on the broker took on more complex cases including moves from registered care settings.

Cost savings to the authority were in the main achieved but not in all cases, but in general terms housing brokerage paid for itself 7 times over in the first 12 months, either through direct savings or cost avoidance. There were 41 referrals of which 19 were housed and 15 still seeking housing at the end of the period.

As a consequence of the success of the project, the recruitment of a second broker was approved; specifically to cover people with physical and sensory impairments. This was not initially as successful as the learning disability service as referrals from the social work teams were fewer and the housing requirements focused on property that was either designed or adapted for their specific needs. To ensure that the second broker’s capacity was fully utilized, it was decided that he would work across both groups whilst building expertise in identifying suitable contacts for housing for people with physical and sensory impairments and working closely with the social work team. By working with both groups it did enable the service to be delivered on a geographic basis which had been the original intention.

What was important throughout were the following characteristics:

- > Communication
- > Co-ordination
- > Capacity Building

At the start, the broker was asked to collect detailed information on how much time was spent with each case: emails, phone calls, visits as we wanted to understand the time required to broker a housing solution. This proved very time consuming and after two months we reduced our information requests. What is clear was that dependent on the circumstances it could take from 6 weeks to 12 months to secure a housing option!

Ideally, a service would be defined and then marketed and promoted to the social work teams but in this case we did not really know what it would look like and we knew we did not have capacity to open it out to all social workers in the learning disability arena as that would have swamped the broker. However, there is a need for the social work teams to engage with the concept whilst maintaining high quality social work, which we now know is enhanced by having a specialist housing broker.

It would have been useful to have fewer referral points into the service i.e. less social workers/ teams but this could have hampered our understanding of the social worker requirements of a service. One of the simplest issues we came across was the scenario where three people were moving from the same residential care home, but operational teams identified three different social workers for the broker to work with and would not change their practice to accommodate housing broker requirements.

It was clear quite early that referrals were being received that were not 'tenancy ready' and over a period of time the referral eligibility criteria became much more tightly defined to ensure that only 'tenancy ready' referrals were accepted. Being 'tenancy ready' was to become the brokerage mantra: tenancy ready meant all referrals had had their ability to take a tenancy assessed, and if required MCA and Court of Protection activity finalized.

Once service users, families, other agencies, providers became aware of the housing brokers role they were very keen to engage and utilise the service. However, Essex County Council needed to maintain the gatekeeping role because of capacity and ensuring appropriate referrals.

So, what can be learned from setting up a housing brokerage? The following section outlines some of the key ingredients.

Lessons Learned - setting up housing brokerage

1. The ingredients of a successful housing brokerage service – or we can call it the 'analysis stage' of the Commissioning Cycle

Why would you look to putting in place a housing brokerage service?

- Do you have a clear policy and strategy that underpins the "why" of looking to expand housing provision?
- Do you have people living in residential care settings, moving through transition or with families who wish to move or who need an opportunity to discuss whether they would like to move? Do you know how many people are involved? How are you going to achieve these moves? Do you have a plan in place? Do you have a clear needs analysis that underpins the "how much"?

If you have a plan in place:

- Do you have capacity to deliver your plan? If not what are you going to do?
- Do you have a clear understanding of the resources you have available to tackle the issues?

If you haven't got a plan – you probably need one!!! (but only once you have a good understanding of the population you are looking at).

Some of the intelligence requirements before you start:

- How many people would be looking to move, who are they, demographic profile, type and location of housing they may be looking for and when, do they have capacity, personal finances?
- What is the local housing supply of specialist housing, how do you access it, are there already services that could be utilised, are there voids, are there people needing to move on?
- Do you have relationships with both social and private landlords, are they functional partnerships? Have you shared intelligence on current and projected need?
- Have you ever facilitated home ownership for people with disabilities?
- Do you know what other organisations are doing?
- Understanding the financial and legal implications of moves for the organisation and the individual.

A great deal of the above was available in Essex, although very little detail on individual housing needs, and for the effective delivery of a service this information is critical; hence the defining of eligible referrals into brokerage as needing to be 'tenancy ready'!

After all the above intelligence has been reviewed then it is time to plan...

2. Assembling the ingredients – or 'planning stage' of the Commissioning Cycle

- Has your analysis unearthed any gaps, what services are needed to fill these gaps, who is best placed to provide these services and deliver the required outcomes for both the individual and the organisation? Do you have a Commissioning strategy in place, and does it provide a mandate to change the way services are delivered, if not do you need to prepare a business case for support?
- Who is going to be responsible for the plan? Do you need to build on existing resource or bring further resource into the organisation? It is likely that any Strategy/plan will have numerous strands of activity that address the commissioning requirements and in housing terms – brokerage may be one of these
- If Housing Brokerage is an element of the plan, do you know what difference it would make to the organisation/individual? How much is housing brokerage going to cost and who will pay? Is it going to be delivered in-house or externally? Job profiles, referral routes, eligibility and service outcomes all need to be planned
- Do partners need to be engaged, are there any legal requirements to fulfill?
- How can you be sure that the 'right' people are supported to move? What information do you need to collect and will it tell you what you need to know for future commissioning?
- Don't forget to ensure that your evaluation criteria are articulated otherwise you will find (as many sadly do) that it is overlooked until it's too late to be designed effectively

At this stage it is suggested that a Business plan be drafted to secure the financial and human resource required to deliver a housing brokerage service. This plan should demonstrate its impact on local need and outcomes whilst meeting strategic objectives for the organization. The plan will need to include the impact on existing systems and processes and the financial and legal implications for the organisation.

3. Delivering a housing brokerage service – or ‘the doing stage’

So you know what you want and why you want it? You have got support for the development of housing brokerage, so you now need to go out and get it (or resource it internally). Indeed, local procurement policy will have a major influence at this stage.

Whether to ‘make or buy’ and whether to contract on a particular model (e.g. Payment by Results, gain share, setting up a co-operative or arms-length arrangement etc.) will of course also be influenced by your organisations philosophy and history. Whatever you do, ensure that you keep the ‘commission for outcomes but procure services’ mantra in mind, otherwise you may well end up with something you didn’t want.

4. Reviewing or evaluating the service and the outcomes achieved

Some questions that will need to be answered via the review process:

- Did the service achieve what it set out to do?
- Is the service viable and sustainable?
- How can we improve the service?
- Is there good practice elsewhere that could improve the service?
- What financial difference has the service made?
- Is the customer happy?
- How satisfied are partners with the service?

5. Conclusion

This was an exciting project. From the beginning, the team at Essex County Council knew what they wanted to achieve; in particular, more people able to access suitable housing options that enabled them to live as independently as possible. This was achieved.

Working in partnership with other organisations who also had expertise (Dimensions and the NDTi) at the early analysis and planning stages ensured that the county developed an effective housing brokerage service. Once the service was up and running the commitment and energy of the housing broker was critical to success and the outcomes achieved speak for themselves as the service delivered successfully for commissioners, individuals and housing providers. Overall, it was clear that this is very much an area that commissioners need to take more interest in and also use their skills in developing, as it will definitely not be a case of “one size fits all”.

About the author

Sanna Westwood is a Director of Strategic Arc Ltd, www.strategicarc.co.uk, and was formerly Commissioning Manager (Accommodation) at Essex County Council.

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.

Further information about the Housing LIN's comprehensive list of online resources and to participate in our shared learning and service improvement opportunities, including 'look and learn' site visits and network meetings in your region, visit:

www.housinglin.org.uk

Published by

Housing Learning & Improvement Network
c/o EAC, 3rd Floor,
89 Albert Embankment
London SE1 7TP

Tel: 020 7820 8077

Email: info@housinglin.org.uk

Web: www.housinglin.org.uk

Twitter: @HousingLIN