

Aspire

Supporting people with spinal injury



Wheelchair Accessible Housing

Waiting for appropriate housing in England

Wheelchair accessible housing – waiting for appropriate housing in England

Executive Summary

Having a home to go to is at the forefront of a Spinal Cord Injured person's mind when they are ready to leave hospital after their life changing injury. Yet despite this obvious priority, our research can only confirm that 14% of people with Spinal Cord Injury are discharged to a permanent accessible property¹ after completing their rehabilitation programme at a NHS specialist spinal cord injury centre.

We found that around 24,000 wheelchair users in England are waiting for appropriate social or affordable housing. When matched with freedom of information responses on wheelchair accessible properties allocated to wheelchair users, we calculated that it would take 6 years to meet current demand if allocation rates continue at the current rate. This does not even take into consideration wheelchair users newly coming into the system looking for accessible housing.

Research also found that local authorities that had outsourcing arrangements were unable to provide details of their waiting lists and relied on housing associations and arm's length management organisations to take the lead in this area.

At the heart of the problem is the lack of housing options available to disabled people; there simply is not enough wheelchair accessible housing in the country to meet the needs of our population. Government data shows that fewer wheelchair accessible homes were built last year than in 2005. More wheelchair accessible housing would be a start and make sure that more people can live independently and go about their everyday lives. This paper calls for:

- Ten per cent of all new build properties to be wheelchair accessible so that stock levels around the country increase.
- A separate bidding scheme with a national register where wheelchair accessible homes are taken out of the general needs system when they become vacant and made available to wheelchair users waiting for housing on local authority housing lists first. This will improve allocation rates of wheelchair accessible properties to wheelchair users.
- Greater ownership of housing lists by local authorities so that, where there are outsourcing arrangements, they still retain control and oversight of the housing needs of disabled people in their locality.

¹ Aspire, 2012. *UK Spinal Cord Injury Discharge Data*.



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Introduction

Every eight hours, someone in the UK is paralysed by Spinal Cord Injury (SCI). Aspire is a national disability charity that provides practical help to people with SCI. Paralysis is permanent and there is no cure for SCI. It is no surprise that for those who are newly injured, where they are going to live when they get out of hospital is a major worry; all too often, they'll find themselves discharged to somewhere totally unsuitable.

Those who lived in a flat above the ground floor without lift access, or those with steps going into their property, will find themselves unable to get into their own home. Under housing guidelines, they are deemed homeless; a real wake up call for someone who has never had to worry about living in their own home before. For those newly injured, being unable to go home could mean that they face a delay in their discharge from hospital. The costs to the NHS are substantial and, worst of all, avoidable. An excess bed day at a Spinal Cord Injury Centre (SCIC) costs the taxpayer £354 per night;² money that can be much better spent getting someone's life back on track.

We have found that 20% of people with Spinal Cord Injury are discharged to nursing homes. When staff have worked so hard at SCICs, and resources have been invested to empower someone to live independently, it is disheartening to see it all go to waste. Such situations deny people their independence at a time when they should be ready to rebuild their lives. Research has found that the psychological impact of SCI people in a care home is devastating, with people left feeling depressed, lacking purpose to life and even having suicidal thoughts. Their life opportunities are severely impacted as being in a care home makes it harder to seek work, enjoy being active, develop relationships, or pursue other activities that would give them purpose to life.³ All of this is avoidable through better independent housing solutions.

The population changes have strengthened the case for more wheelchair accessible housing. We are seeing an increasingly ageing population and disabled people are living longer too, with many expected to live as long as their non-disabled peers. This means that we need housing stock across all types of tenures to better meet the needs of our population. Accessible housing is a perfect solution as it can be suitable for all. Access to the right housing is crucial in empowering people to live independently.

Housing in England

It is difficult to analyse the state of wheelchair accessible housing without looking at the picture and context of housing in the country as a whole. Data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) shows that there was a decline in all forms of house building in 2013 compared with previous years.

² UK Parliament, 2014. House of Commons Parliamentary Question. Column 992W

³ Smith B. and Caddick N., 2012. *Understanding the health and wellbeing needs of spinal cord injured adults in a care home*. Loughborough University.

Figure 1

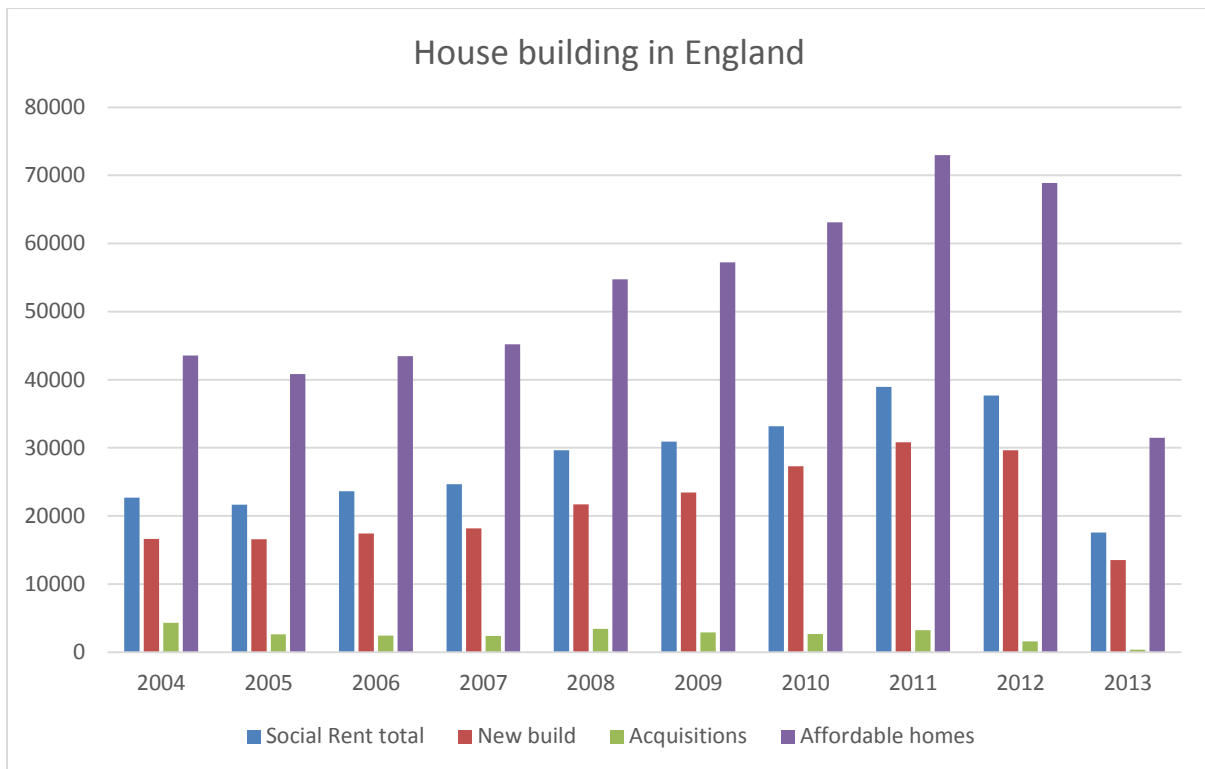
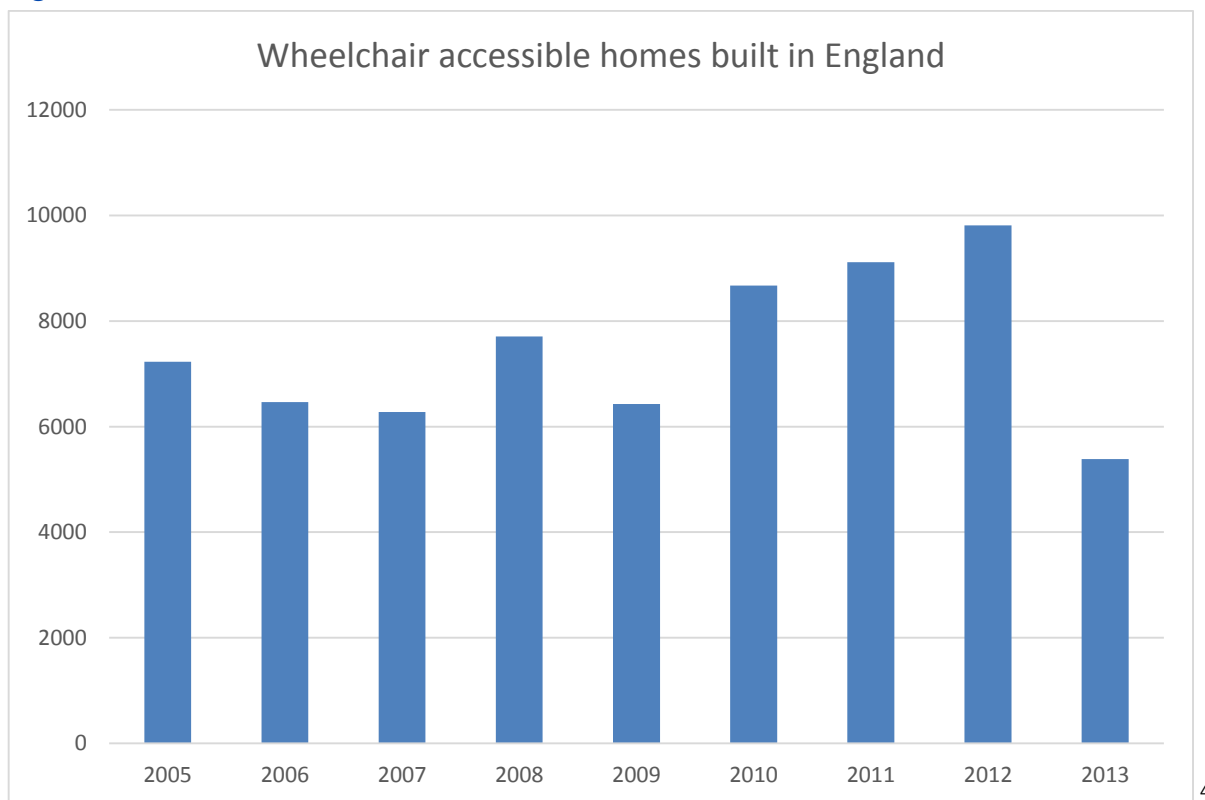


Figure 2



⁴ Department for Communities and Local Government, 2014. *The Continuous REcording of Lettings and Sales in Social Housing in England*.

Figure 2 shows that fewer wheelchair accessible homes were built in 2013 than in 2005.

A section of the 2014 Budget⁵ indicated support for house building schemes around the country to tackle this poor performance. However, there was no commitment to build properties that meet the long term needs of the population.

The London Plan (2004)⁶ made it a requirement for 10% of homes to be identified as wheelchair accessible or easily adaptable at the planning stage and described in the Design and Access Statement submitted with the planning application.⁷ This target is not being fully reached,⁸ as the percentage actually built is closer to 8%. Although progress is still to be made, it is positive to see so many new wheelchair accessible homes being built in London and there is no reason why requirements cannot be rolled out nationally to improve performance.

Recommendation 1 – National government should take ownership of the issue and set a minimum requirement for 10% of all new build properties across all tenures to be wheelchair accessible.

Aspire has consistently called for requirements set in the London Plan for wheelchair accessible housing to be applied nationally. This would increase the stock available for wheelchair users. However, the government's recent Housing Standards Review consultation indicated a lack of appetite to set targets for building accessible homes and indicated that these standards should be locally set.⁹ We believe that this was a missed opportunity for the government to take a strong lead on building more accessible homes. Without a national target, advocates for accessible housing will have to lobby local authorities individually to introduce them voluntarily. We recognise that this increases the risk of a post code lottery, but without national direction on this issue, pressure has to be applied locally too.

With changes in our population taking place at a fast rate,¹⁰ Aspire believes that it is imperative that the nation's supply of accessible housing increases now. If it does not, then we will fall further behind in making the changes that are necessary for people to be able to live independent lives and will always be in a situation where we are struggling to meet the housing needs of wheelchair users. Without a strong lead on this issue from the centre, there is a danger that there will be no progress on this issue.

⁵ HM Treasury, 2014. *Budget 2014*.

⁶ Mayor of London, 2004. *The London Plan: Spatial Development Strategy for Greater London, Policy 3A.5 – Housing Choice*.

⁷ Mayor of London, 2004. *Wheelchair accessible housing – Designing homes that can be easily adapted for residents who are wheelchair users: Best Practice Guidance*.

⁸ Mayor of London, 2011. *A Revised London Housing Strategy*.

⁹ Department for Communities and Local Government, 2014. *Written Ministerial Statement – Building Regulations*. Available at <

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/340590/13_March_HSR_Written_Ministerial_Statement.pdf> Accessed on 8th August 2014.

¹⁰ Cracknell, R., 2010. *The Ageing Population - The UK's ageing population has considerable consequences for public services*.

Waiting for Housing

The Local Authority Housing Statistics dataset for England in 2012-13 showed that 142,900 people on Local Authority waiting lists have been acknowledged by Local Authorities as needing to move on medical or welfare grounds.¹¹ This includes needs relating to a disability. There is no specific breakdown or data on the needs of wheelchair users.

In April 2014, Aspire began to gather information to assess the level of need for wheelchair accessible housing in England. We sent freedom of information requests to all unitary, metropolitan, borough and district councils in England with responsibility for housing. We asked for information on:

- Current numbers of wheelchair users on council waiting lists for housing
- The number of wheelchair accessible houses allocated to wheelchair users in each of the last five financial years.

We received valid responses with complete data on waiting list sizes from 72% of all authorities with housing responsibility. The local authorities that have supplied data on wheelchair users waiting for wheelchair accessible housing represent 77% of the total England population. The strong sample size means that we can be confident of projections and conclusions made using our data.

23,886 wheelchair users are in urgent need of wheelchair accessible social or affordable housing in England

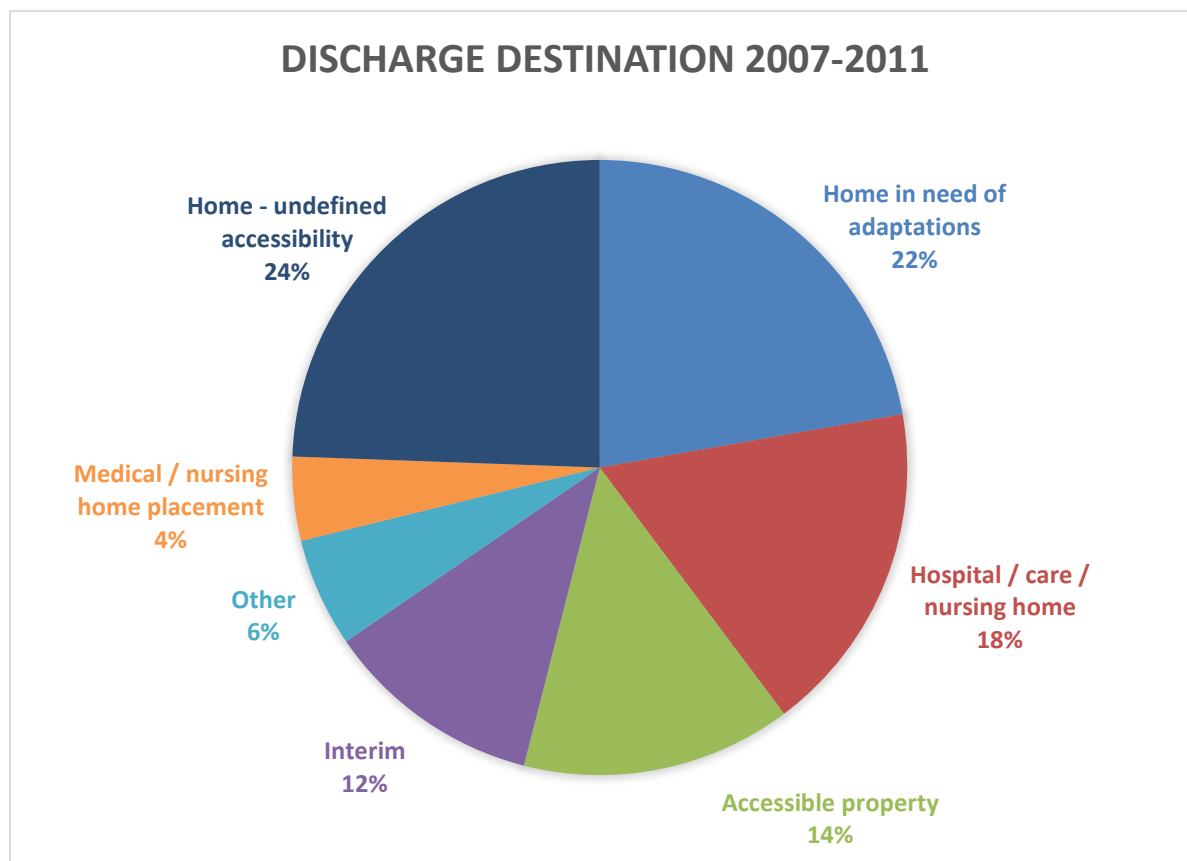
We found that 18,392 wheelchair users were on Council waiting lists for housing in England. Data supplied represented 77% of all local authorities in England. By projecting our results across the whole population, we found that there were nearly 24,000 wheelchair users in urgent need of wheelchair accessible social or affordable housing in England.

¹¹ Department for Communities and Local Government, 2014. *Local authority housing statistics: April 2012 to March 2013 England*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/266691/Local_authority_housing_statistics_2012_13.pdf Accessed on 8th July 2014
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Housing options following a Spinal Cord Injury

Aspire has been working with three NHS spinal injury centres in the UK to obtain discharge data and information about people with spinal cord injury. Over a five year period, we collated data based on the experiences of patients at SCICs.

Figure 3



Nearly 22% of people are discharged to nursing homes and other institutionalised settings.¹² This might mean that they are in an accessible environment, but this does not facilitate independent living. In an environment geared towards older people, opportunities for socialising, searching for employment and undertaking everyday normal activities are extremely limited. Once people have a place to live, they are often considered to be appropriately housed. However, research that we commissioned found that “care homes damage the lives of people with a SCI not just in the short-term, but also the long-term.”¹³

From our data, we can only confirm that 14% of people were discharged from a Spinal Cord Injury Centre to an accessible home. The chart above shows that 24% were discharged to a home where the accessibility of the property was not known; this is due to this level of detail not being clear in the data collated by the NHS. Nonetheless, the statistics above emphasise the real need for more people to be discharged to accessible homes.

¹² Aspire, 2012. *UK Spinal Cord Injury Discharge Data*.

¹³ Smith B. and Caddick N., 2012. *Understanding the health and wellbeing needs of spinal cord injured adults in a care home*. Loughborough University.

The number of people waiting for housing is likely to be much larger than 24,000 as, in our experience, wheelchair users accept tenancies that are not entirely suitable to their needs because of the lack of alternative options available to them. Too often, the lack of wheelchair accessible housing in an area means that the homelessness duty is ended by putting people into a nursing home or an institutionalised setting. Once people have a place to live, they are considered to be appropriately housed, but many would benefit from housing that better suits their needs. When people are housed, and authorities fail to classify their situation as interim, they lose their priority in the system.

After being discharged from hospital I eventually got rehoused by a Housing Association. The property was apparently 'wheelchair ok' but once I moved it was far from ideal. The hallway was too narrow for me to navigate through, I couldn't manoeuvre easily into the shower chair. It wasn't great to be honest. The simplest of tasks was just too much hard work. This arrangement was meant to be temporary but I ended up being there for 9 years!

Maz K

A recent report by Leonard Cheshire Disability shed further light on the conditions that wheelchair users are living in when they are not housed in an accessible place.¹⁴ Living in an inaccessible home can be highly restrictive for wheelchair users; it means they are often held back doing simple day-to-day tasks and find it difficult to get back to work or education. Leonard Cheshire's report echoes what many of our service users have experienced.

I was initially discharged to a hotel as my local council had no accessible properties available. I was supposed to be there for three weeks. There was no shower chair and the toilet was inaccessible. Getting in and out was a nightmare.

The council didn't explain anything; I ended up being bounced around different hotels for three months. Eventually I had to kick up a fuss.

They wouldn't supply me with any meals, so I survived on takeaways or cold food which my partner would bring me when she could. Her hands were already full with our new-born baby. There wasn't a fridge, or somewhere I could heat anything up.

I was newly injured, so not only did I have to deal with getting my head around that, but I also had to deal with the fact that I was stuck in a place that was totally unsuitable for my needs, away from my family.

I was really in bad way, it destroyed me. It was impossible having people around, the only place I could go for any privacy when people did visit was the loo! Being cooped up like this really affected me mentally, even after I finally got a house, I barely left home for two years.

Ricky Perrin

¹⁴ Leonard Cheshire Disability, 2014. *The Hidden Housing Crisis*.

Recommendation 2 – Wheelchair users should not lose their priority on housing lists when they have been housed in inaccessible accommodation or residential settings.

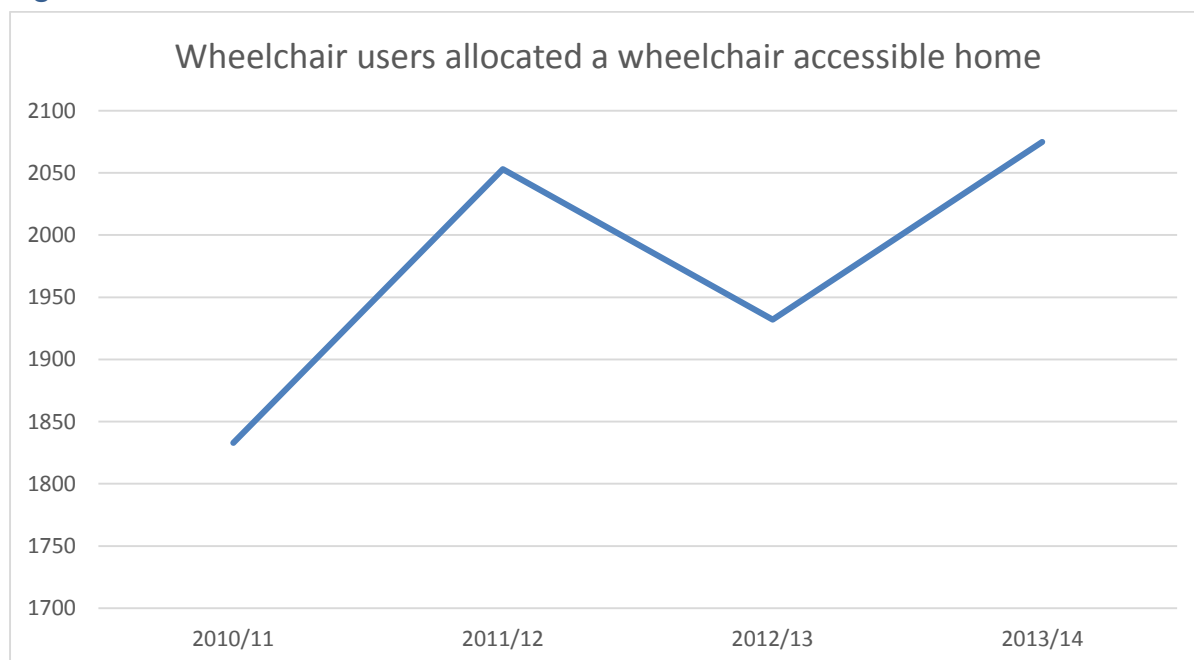
The waiting period for accessible housing can bring about severe hardship for disabled people. It is a massive disruption to getting their lives back on track and living independently.

Allocation of Properties

A Greater London Assembly policy paper revealed that in London, 70 per cent of wheelchair accessible homes in 2008/09 went to households with no wheelchair user.¹⁵ In addition, the Greater London Authority's Housing Strategy paper revealed that only 46 per cent of wheelchair users moving into a housing association home were allocated a wheelchair accessible property, while 68 per cent of lettings of wheelchair accessible homes were to households with no wheelchair user.¹⁶ More recent research by Habinteg showed that one in five wheelchair accessible homes are let to non-wheelchair users.¹⁷ Rates in London tend to fair better with one in three wheelchair accessible homes let to wheelchair users. Given that there is a shortfall of wheelchair accessible homes in England,¹⁸ it cannot be right that so many accessible homes are currently not allocated to wheelchair users.

Aspire collected data on how many wheelchair accessible homes were let to wheelchair users. The data we have collated can be matched to waiting lists that local authorities have for housing and allows us to make a direct link between allocation rates and waiting lists.

Figure 4



¹⁵ Greater London Assembly (2010) Equal Life Chances for All Londoners - Disability Equality: Greater London Authority Draft Disability Equality Scheme 2010-2011.

¹⁶ Greater London Authority (2010) The London Housing Strategy.

¹⁷ Habinteg, 2011. *Space to Move: Making efficient use of homes for wheelchair users.*

¹⁸ The Disability Agenda (DRC) (2007) Creating an alternative future.

Despite the decrease in 2012/2013, there has been a general improvement over the last four years with more wheelchair accessible homes being let to wheelchair users. However, when matched with the number of wheelchair users on lists, the results show that there is still a lot of progress to make.

It will take 6 years just to meet current demand for wheelchair accessible social or affordable housing

When matching allocation rates to wheelchair users waiting for housing, we projected that if we continue at the current rate of allocation, it will take six years just to meet current demand for affordable or social wheelchair accessible housing. This does not even take into account those newly coming into the system with a need for wheelchair accessible housing nor how many homes are even available.

At the moment, local authorities overly rely on choice based letting systems and proactive bidding. We recommend urgent action on improving the allocation of wheelchair accessible housing in the public sector.

Recommendation 3 – A national wheelchair accessible housing register with standardised classifications should be introduced.

Social and affordable housing providers should be able to upload details about the accessibility of properties on to a single web based system. The London Wheelchair Accessible Housing Register, which 25 London Boroughs are already proactively using,¹⁹ is a model that already exists that can be applied nationally.

Recommendation 4 – Wheelchair accessible properties should be removed from general bidding processes and made available exclusively for people with a need for accessible properties via a separate system.

A change in the system to make accessible properties available to disabled people would improve allocation rates and ensure that stock is allocated more efficiently.

¹⁹ Mayor of London, 2011. *A Revised London Housing Strategy*.

Recommendation 5 – Local authority housing departments should work more closely with health and social care partners to source wheelchair users waiting for accommodation when accessible homes become available.

When properties are available, housing associations and housing departments within local authorities often tell us that they struggle to find wheelchair users to live in them. A more joined up approach with health partners and social care departments within local authorities would help alleviate this problem as these departments are more likely to have people on their systems who require independent accommodation. A bidding system could be used by health and social care departments on behalf of their clients for housing.

Recommendation 6 – When there is a lack of choice in an area, people should be able to bid for properties in other authorities through the national wheelchair accessible housing register.

Because of the lack of accessible housing in the country, it is not unusual for there to be no choice at all in a locality for wheelchair users. People should have access to housing in other areas if there is limited choice in a local authority area. There is potential for dispute over funding and responsibility, especially when a person receives ongoing care and support; responsibility for housing and care should remain with the original authority in such cases.

Collection of Information

Any register will rely on there being accurate information about properties on lists. Most local authority housing stock has been transferred to housing associations or arms length management organisations (ALMOs). It was surprising to learn that some Councils had also passed on responsibility for waiting lists for housing too. This made it difficult to collect all relevant information from all local authorities and also indicates a loss of ownership of the issue by local authorities.

We do not currently hold a list of applicants awaiting wheelchair accessible housing.

The enquirer would have to contact the housing providers as we do not hold housing stock – we only provide nominations to them and they would, I hope, keep relevant details. Our main providers are Synergy Housing for East Dorset District Council and Sovereign for Christchurch Borough Council.

A response to our FOI request

Collection of information on wheelchair accessible housing is a huge issue. We spoke to one local authority in London who claimed they did not have much demand for wheelchair accessible housing in their area and that they were struggling to fill tenancies in such properties. We knew that was not true as Aspire had supported people needing wheelchair accessible housing in that borough and when we acquired two properties there last year, found that demand far outstretched supply. We

know from our work with local authorities that some housing associations and local authorities do not accurately record the number of wheelchair users on their waiting lists. If local authorities are not collecting basic information, the problem will never be addressed. Authorities must retain ownership of the issue.

Recommendation 7 – Where there are outsourcing arrangements, local authorities must retain responsibility for wheelchair accessible housing.

Recommendation 8 – Where Housing Associations and arms length management organisations are carrying out a public function on behalf of the Council, they should be subject to the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

With local authorities passing on so much responsibility to housing authorities, it is alarming that housing associations are not subject to the Freedom of Information Act. It means that vital information that enables effective scrutiny of performance is more difficult to access. We did find examples of associations that were cooperative and did provide us with a good response. However, most chose not to provide us with a response when we contacted them.

Conclusion

Wheelchair accessible housing deserves greater attention and priority amongst decision makers. In the housing debate, the demand for wheelchair accessible housing also needs to be addressed. A joined up approach which takes into account health and social care implications is needed. Such an approach has great potential to address the wider long term needs of our population.

All recommendations:

1. National government should take ownership of the issue and set a minimum requirement for 10% of all new build properties across all tenures to be wheelchair accessible.
2. Wheelchair users should not lose their priority on housing lists when they have been housed in inaccessible accommodation or residential settings.
3. A national wheelchair accessible housing register with standardised classifications should be introduced. Wheelchair accessible properties should be removed from a general bidding processes and made available exclusively for people with a need for accessible properties to bid for via a separate system.
4. Wheelchair accessible properties should be removed from general bidding processes and made available exclusively for people with a need for accessible properties via a separate system.
5. Local authority housing departments should work more closely with health and social care partners to source wheelchair users waiting for accommodation when accessible homes become available.
6. When there is a lack of choice in an area, people should be able to bid for properties in other authorities through the national wheelchair accessible housing register.
7. Where there are outsourcing arrangements, local authorities must retain responsibility for wheelchair accessible housing.
8. Where Housing Associations and arm's length management organisations are carrying out a function on behalf of the Council, they should be subject to the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

Throughout the report we have suggested practical and enforceable recommendations to help address the lack of wheelchair accessible properties in the country. We have made suggestions to improve stock allocation of social and affordable housing so that wheelchair accessible houses are let to wheelchair users.

Recent documents from government suggest that we are a long way away from introducing a minimum requirement for wheelchair accessible housing. But, there is no reason why local authorities cannot set rules individually. We will be approaching local authorities and targeting those in particular that have more work to do based on the information we have extracted from our freedom of information requests. If taken on board, our recommendations have the potential to make life much better for wheelchair users across the country and will go a long way to addressing the needs of our population.

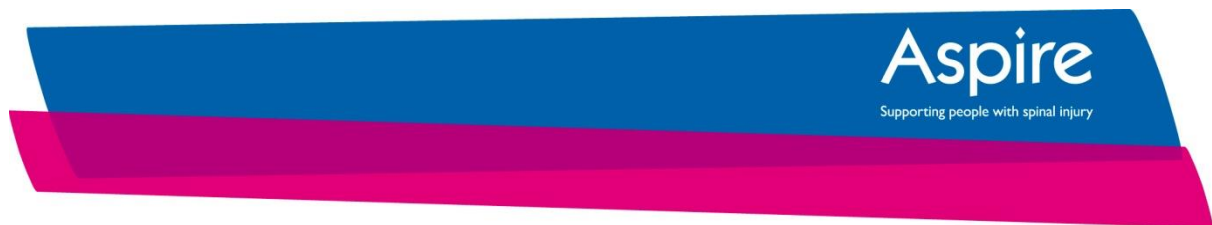
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