



MATCH ME -

What works for adapted social housing lettings? Action research to enhance independent living for disabled people.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



'Extended lived experience of inappropriate housing causes disabled people physical and mental harm'.

'Ideally, a single named contact should support disabled people to navigate complex application and lettings systems.'

'Flexibility in matching processes and lettings times can achieve more sustainable matches for adapted/accessible homes.'

Match Me: Executive Summary

Introduction

This summary presents the key findings from research into the effectiveness of allocations and lettings practice for accessible and adapted social housing in Scotland. Research to date has argued for a 'three pronged' approach to meeting disabled people's housing needs¹.

1. Development of new wheelchair standard homes for owner-occupiers and tenants
2. Support for home adaptations across tenures.
3. Efficient allocation of accessible and adaptable homes in the affordable and social rented sectors.

The study focused on the third strand, seeking to better understand the processes behind applying for and moving into social rented housing, from the perspectives of disabled people, as well as housing providers.

The research was funded as part of a wider programme of work on independent living and learning for disabled people. The study was conducted in collaboration with Housing Options Scotland and Horizon Housing Association. The research sought to be disabled-led by also involving self-identifying disabled peer researchers and advisory group members.

The study sought new evidence from an in-depth examination of three local authority areas including:

- **Hearing the experiences of disabled applicants and tenants** over an extended period (initial interview, interim follow up and second interview).
- **Understanding the approaches of housing providers** and engaging them in discussions about their practice and the experiences of applicants and tenants.

The research follows on from a pilot study (Anderson et al, 2017) that designed and tested a co-production approach for evaluating effectiveness of lettings practice for accessible and adapted social rented housing. The co-production method was replicated and further developed in the Match Me study, to address key research questions on how to improve disabled people's access to social rented housing.

The policy and research context for the study

The research identified a substantial body of legislation and policy which underpins strategies to meet the housing needs of disabled people – from the introduction of 'Housing for varying needs' in 1998, to the Scottish Government's 2019 guidance on delivering more wheelchair accessible accommodation across all tenures.

Nonetheless, research evidence and literature confirms the continuing, often negative, impact of unsuitable housing on the lives of disabled people. There remains a need for a

Anderson, I., Theakstone, D, Baird, C. and Jago, L. (2017) *Matching up? A pilot study of effectiveness of letting adapted social housing*. Horizon Housing Association.

¹Most recently, in Fitzpatrick, J., Lees, F., McDonald, E., and Galani, E. (2018). *Still minding the step? A new estimation of the housing needs of wheelchair users in Scotland*. Livingston: Horizon Housing Association

strong voice for further improvement to national policies and local procedures to improve disabled peoples' access to suitable homes. The Match Me research was also informed by developments in co-production research to support the involvement of disabled people, including peer researchers. The study explored to what extent co-production featured as part of local housing providers' commitment to service user involvement.

Research Method

The aim of this study was to examine the practices, policies and systems that enable effective allocation of adapted and accessible social housing, through four key research questions:

1. How can social landlords achieve more, better and faster routes to independent living for disabled people?
2. What improvements to allocations policies and practices will deliver equal housing opportunity for disabled people?
3. What support do disabled house seekers require in the social housing application and lettings processes?
4. How can adapted and adaptable housing better enhance independent living?

The study adopted qualitative research methods with the aim of better understanding the processes and experiences 'behind the statistics' on disabled people's access to housing. The research compared landlord practice and applicant/tenant experiences in three local authority areas in Scotland, to provide new evidence on disabled home-seekers' needs, experiences and outcomes. Within each local authority case study area, the following research methods were adopted:

- Contextual research on local lettings policy and practice.
- Semi-structured interviews tracking the experiences of a cohort of disabled home-seekers/new tenants over a period of up to one year (first interview, interim reflective follow up, second interview)
- Observations and discussions of lettings practice in the three local authority areas (focused group discussions)
- Feedback sessions in the three local authority areas to triangulate findings from disabled participants and housing providers, and to develop study conclusions and recommendations.

The co-production approach to the study was effective in achieving the following outcomes:

1. Involvement of a Project Advisory Group, including a number of self-identifying disabled people, as well as practitioners with expertise in disabled people's access to housing.
2. Review of local housing context and strategy to inform fieldwork.

3. Recruitment of self-identifying disabled Peer Researchers (two with mobility impairments and one with a visual impairment) and development of a supportive approach enabling them to contribute significantly to data collection for the study.
4. Recruitment of twenty-eight disabled social housing applicant/new tenant households each of which included at least one person who had limited mobility. These interviewees participated in face-to-face semi-structured interviews about their housing application experience. Interviewees were invited to take part in two interviews over the course of a year and between these interviews, to participate in a reflective account of any changes in their situation.
5. Observations of lettings practices in each of the three local authority case study areas. These sessions involved a combination of one-to-one semi-structured interviews and focus groups with staff involved with the allocation processes of adapted/accessible social housing. Participants included representatives from housing and social work/occupational therapy staff.
6. Local authority feedback sessions in each case study area with a total of 60 participants. These participants included peer researchers, service providers, tenant group representatives and local organisations/individuals involved with disabled peoples' housing issues.

For reporting, all data was analysed thematically to address the study research questions and triangulated across data sets (context/prior evidence, disabled home-seekers, housing providers). The action research approach enabled discussion of emerging findings with the Project Advisory Group and through the local feedback sessions, in order ensure the maximum degree of co-production of research findings and recommendations.

The experience of co-production and peer research

Reflections from the research and **co-production participants** on their experiences of involvement indicated a broad consensus on the benefits of a co-production approach. The research design, execution, analysis and dissemination have all been informed by the lived experiences of disabled people. Some individual participants **reported an increase in knowledge, self-confidence, and skills which contributed to their personal development.** Challenges for effective co-production research included ensuring enough time and resources for effective participation (concurring with prior literature). Some participants may need support to maintain motivation throughout a lengthy project period. Practical challenges included the inaccessibility and lack of public transport, as well as the inaccessibility of interviewees' homes. For those in receipt of benefits, the social security system does not easily enable short-term involvement of disabled people in peer researcher activities. For the Project Advisory Group, initial input in explaining the complexities of the research process (e.g. challenges of data collection in the field), as well as adequate resources to support involvement helped sustain participation throughout the project lifetime. The passion and commitment demonstrated by many of the Match Me co-production participants made a huge contribution to the study and added to learning for future research design.

The housing application process

“ Rachel – seeking a more suitable home Even with a stairlift installed, in order to use the upstairs toilet, Rachel has to make eight transfers between chair, wheelchair, stairlift and toilet – and back down again. This impacts negatively on her health and disability. ”

The three example local authorities used different systems to assess and prioritise housing needs: Priority banding (A-D) for elements of housing need; Group plus points (Transfer; General Need; Specialist/Adapted Property; Sustainable Communities); and Group Plus Points (Homeless, Transfer, Aspirational transfer or General group).

All three also had distinctive mechanisms for assessing health and housing need:

- Housing staff only (as considered to be a housing assessment and not a medical assessment);
- Completed Health and Housing Priority forms with supporting evidence are sent to the Health and Housing panel, which includes OT, SW, Housing staff; and
- Housing services staff, and if required, will ask for assistance from Social Work and health professionals.

None of our case study authorities requested medical practitioners to assess health-related housing need.

The Health and Housing **assessment processes thus demonstrated a shift towards the adoption of a social model of housing needs assessment, which better corresponds with disability rights frameworks than prior medical approaches.** Each local authority had some means of gathering and assessing supplementary information about health and housing needs that could lead to higher priority for housing.

Each local authority demonstrated considerable reliance on Occupational Therapists' and Housing Officers' knowledge of the needs of applicants, and of property types, to generate creative responses and appropriate housing offers. In particular, Occupational Therapists may have knowledge of people who are in need but not currently on the housing register, and this may avoid returning a 'hard to let' accessible property to general housing stock.

In all case studies, participants discussed, at some level, the impact of homelessness targets and the requirement to prioritise allocations to homeless people. While welcomed, these targets may impact on the housing availability for other priority groups, including disabled people, depending on demands for specific property types. Similarly, each local authority identified the potential of the Housing Options approach to improve advice and solutions offered to disabled applicants.

There was widespread recognition that not all properties which become vacant for re-let can be adapted to meet the needs of disabled applicants. Such information is vital so that

disabled housing applicants are rehoused in a property that improves their current housing situation. This may mean some applicants may need to widen their choices of location, especially in higher demand areas.

Important opportunities to improve practice emerged from interviews with disabled home-seekers and tenants:

- In households where more than one applicant had housing needs there was a requirement for better consideration within **allocations systems to fully reflect the overall needs of the household.**
- Applicants strongly favour a **single named contact to support them through the application process.** There was evidence from two local authority areas that a named Housing Officer or allocations contact, identified at the point of application, also provided benefits for the landlord, but one local authority thought this approach might be too resource intensive.

Lettings – matching up applicants and vacancies

Effective matching of disabled applicants to adapted/accessible properties involves several areas of lettings practice: core allocations systems; reletting processes; recovery of properties no longer occupied by a disabled person; nominations to Registered Social Landlords; and letting newly built dwellings.

For Local Authorities to be able to make better use of existing housing stock they need data from a full audit and assessment of existing housing stock to determine what properties have adaptations (and what these are), and what properties have the potential to be adapted. If this information could be collected during routine visits to the properties, rather than waiting for properties to become vacant, this would better inform future planning of the pool of potentially accessible housing. All three case studies discussed the potential effectiveness of new technologies in facilitating holding of up to date information on applicants' needs and the property characteristics in order to achieve effective matches.

Different methods of procurement of new build housing appear to result in different standards of specification and therefore of adaptability, and in turn accessibility to, homes suitable for disabled people. This could be addressed as an equalities issue by Local Authorities, Housing Associations and Scottish Government in commissioning procedures (for example, drawing on Scottish Government 2019 Guidance on increasing wheelchair accessible housing).

Practitioners discussed the housing management conflict between minimising rent lost on vacant properties, and acknowledging the extra time needed to successfully match vacant properties to disabled applicants. In one local authority, pre-approval of adaptations required to make a home accessible to disabled applicants removed some of the factors that can lead to a delay in re-letting an adaptable home. The case was also made for **flexibility in target letting times for adapted or accessibly designed vacancies.**

Offers and viewings

A high proportion of participant home-seekers received inappropriate housing offers, or no

offers at all, during the tracking study. Evidence indicates strongly that disabled applicants who remain without an offer of a suitable accessible/adapted social house over a significant period may experience negative and/or adverse emotional and mental distress.

Practitioner participants highlighted that having up-to-date property information helped to minimize the number of unsuitable offers of adapted/accessible social housing. This not only saved scarce resources for housing providers, but prevented causing unnecessary frustration for disabled housing applicants.

The research uncovered important evidence that the assessment of the suitability of an adapted/accessible property should not only consider the access and internal features of the home, but should also assess accessibility of the external environment and the opportunities for the applicant to maintain local support networks. Some disabled interviewees argued strongly that access to a garden should be recognised by allocation systems as a facilitator for emotional and mental wellbeing. Home-seekers also made the case that in order to tailor suitable offers, the needs of the entire household should be taken into consideration by allocation systems, not solely those of the main applicant.

Both practitioner and applicant participants highlighted the need for processes that actively manage housing applications. This may take the form of shorter review periods especially where there has been no offer of suitable housing for 6-8 months. Active management of housing applications would reassure those in need of housing and enhance the accuracy of information held on housing applicants' needs.

A potential area for future good practice was the increased use of **new technologies to provide virtual property viewings** for disabled housing applicants who are unable to leave their current unsuitable accommodation or unable to attend due to health or accessibility reasons.

Local authorities should ensure they make effective use of nominations agreement to suitable RSL properties. All housing providers could develop more effective mechanisms to seek nominations for adapted/accessible vacancies from other housing providers, if they have an adapted/accessible vacancy but no suitable applicant. This could be extended to seeking nominations from hospital discharge units and relevant third-sector organisations (including from outside of the local area if there is no suitable applicant on their register). Additionally, support could be provided to help disabled housing applicants navigate the schemes to arrange a home swap, possibly by improving coordination between multiple households to avoid withdrawals at a late stage in the process.

Moving in and making a home

“ Sam - emotional and social benefits of moving to an adapted/accessible property. Sam declared ‘I can do the dishes now, cook, move unaided around the house - and I’m rediscovering my relationship with my husband, whose stress is reduced by having fewer caring tasks’. ”

Participants discussed the moving-in process and the experience of settling into their new tenancy. Difficulties disabled tenants had faced in sustaining their tenancies included the need to more precisely adapt existing and newly built properties to fully meet their needs. Some required support to successfully prepare for and undertake a move to a new home. However, participants also emphasised the many social and emotional benefits they gained from moving to a suitable accessible/adapted property. There was evidence that some disabled tenants would benefit from **support to move-in, settle-in and sustain their tenancies**. Social housing providers should review their tenancy sustainment strategies to ensure they are inclusive of disabled housing applicants, and that they are empowered to make a new tenancy into a sustainable home. Improved communication between housing providers and support providers could lead to better joint working and more effective use of scarce resources to support tenancy sustainability.

Although co-production is enshrined in national policy development, it remains under-developed in local practice. However, good practice was identified in the Match Me study, including involving disabled people and housing professionals, enhancing service user feedback mechanisms and developing strategic approaches to the provision of accessible/adapted social housing and accessible communities.

There was considerable consensus across participant interviewees that construction of newly built accessible and adaptable properties provided significantly greater scope to meet individual housing needs, compared to adaptation of older housing stock.

Conclusions

Housing provides some of our most fundamental needs. It gives us a material base from which to build a livelihood and take part in the life of the community. Several key messages emerge from this research. The study has shown that while housing providers are proactive in reviewing policy and practice to better meet the housing needs of disabled people, there remains some ‘distance’ between landlord goals and applicant experiences. **Disabled people’s extended lived experience of inappropriate housing, while waiting for a more accessible home, clearly causes considerable physical and mental harm.** Improved understanding comes from hearing the voices of disabled people through co-production approaches in both research and in development of good policy and practice.

Allocations policies and choice-based lettings schemes remain complex and often difficult for disabled people to understand. Depending on their impairments, disabled people may need support with the application, viewing and moving-in processes. The complexity of disabled people’s housing needs means that the matching process for suitable adapted or accessible housing is also complex. What works for one household or property may not work for another – so there is often a need for quite individualised solutions. Potential practice improvements to speed up access to housing include making better use of technology to improve quality of data held on accessible/adapted properties and on the specific needs of applicants; flexibility in lettings practice to facilitate a good match; and flexibility in interpretation of disabled people’s housing needs (for example to recognise the needs of all household members and the importance of the external environment as well as housing design).

Adaptations can make some of our older housing stock more liveable for some disabled

people, but newly built accessible housing offers much more potential to appropriately meet complex mobility and other impairment related housing needs.

Our research findings support disabled people's requirements for:

- A commitment from Scottish Government for a national strategy to improve provision of accessible homes in Scotland.
- Clear guidance for robust local target setting for the delivery of accessible homes across tenures; this should extend beyond wheelchair accessible housing to meet the needs of disabled people with a wide range of impairments.
- A recognition that current design standards need updating and a consideration of the potential to create a new cross tenure design and space standard that incorporates universal design and full wheelchair access within mainstream housing.

Disabled people and their families should have equal housing opportunities and the right to an accessible home in the community that ensures and protects their human rights. Housing accessibility should be a national goal/objective - recognising that "accessibility" is different for different people in different circumstances. Adoption of universal/inclusive design standards across tenures would deliver huge progress towards achieving the goal of accessibility, including accessible and sustainable neighbourhoods, as well as accessible and liveable housing.

Recommendations

Recommendations below are addressed to Housing Providers and their partner agencies, Government and the Housing Regulator. Policy and practice going forward needs to prioritise the urgency of tackling the housing stress and exclusion faced by disabled people. A starting point will be the setting local targets for expanding the supply of accessible housing in line with Scottish Government (2019) Guidance and the evidence from this research will inform future lettings practice. We believe that the Scottish Government's approach to housing supply beyond 2021 gives us a real opportunity to make poor housing experiences of disabled people in Scotland a thing of the past.

Local Authorities and RSLs

Establish co-production groups across all 32 local authorities in Scotland involving disabled people across housing tenures, in order to inform decisions on housing and its interconnections with independent living.

Consider canvassing widely across partner organisations for nominations where an accessible or adapted property cannot be matched to any disabled applicants on the housing list, including local disability organisations and housing providers beyond the local area.

Scottish Government (2019) *Guidance for setting of Local Housing Strategy (LHS) targets to support the delivery of more wheelchair accessible housing*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

Explore the use of new technology to improve intelligence on adapted/accessible properties and to enable remote viewing for applicants who are unable to visit in person.

Develop standardised methods for classifying the accessibility of properties.

Consider developing a peer support network whereby, upon request, disabled housing applicants can be matched to an existing disabled tenant who has experienced the social housing application process.

Recognise that housing needs assessment for disabled people should include, for example, access to a garden for emotional well-being, access to local accessible public transport links and ability to maintain local connections, such as remaining with the same GP.

Review organisational policies or procedures that require a tenant, upon leaving, to revert the property to its original state (for example, changes made could be useful to a future disabled tenant).

Review allocations systems to ensure that applicants who can make some 'liveability' improvements to their homes while waiting for an accessible property are not disadvantaged in allocations or lettings priority schemes.

Scottish Government

Review operational support for the Scottish Accessible Housing Register, (which was rarely mentioned by participants in this study) as part of a national strategy to support the best use of accessible/adapted housing.

Utilise the model outlined in Still Minding the Step (Fitzpatrick et al, 2018) for the standardisation of approaches towards local housing need calculations, as part of strategy to increase the pool of accessible housing.

Continue to encourage local housing need assessments to produce local targets that are proportional in relation to the amount of new built accessible/adapted housing required across tenures.

Improve accessibility standards for new build social housing so that it is more economical and easier to adapt in the future.

Scottish Housing Regulator

Scottish Housing Regulator to recognise that void periods for accessible/adapted social housing may require additional time to allocate and carry out necessary adaptations before an applicant is able to move in. These properties could receive a specific specification that gives them exemption from standard targets for re-let times.



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