# Matching up?
# A pilot study of effectiveness in letting adapted social housing

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## FOREWORD

Horizon, part of the Link group, is an RSL providing homes for social rent and shared ownership in Central Scotland, and offering Care and Repair services, including adaptations, to older and disabled home owners.  As a landlord, 25% of our properties have been built to fully accessible standards suitable for wheelchair users, integrated into developments accessible to all. Our vision is for inclusive communities where individual housing needs are met, and our work is directed at outcomes of choice, control and equality of housing opportunity for disabled people.

Our properties are in high demand, we are able quickly to let them and we know that there is significant unmet need from households which include disabled people who need an adapted or purpose built accessible home. Yet we routinely hear from other landlords that they cannot always find suitable matches of tenants for their accessible homes, impacting on decisions about new building and on adaptations demand and costs. At the same time, we hear disabled people, their families and disabled person's organisations expressing frustration about waiting times, offers of unsuitable homes, and missed opportunities.

Horizon's Mind the Step Scotland study, 2012, estimated the housing needs of wheelchair users in Scotland. As importantly, it recognised that strategies for meeting unmet needs had to connect and integrate thinking about new housing supply, adaptations and effective allocation of fully accessible or adapted homes.  With need and demand rising, the effectiveness of approaches to letting adapted social housing was and is a topic ripe for investigation and we were delighted to collaborate with University of Stirling in developing the scope and design for this co-produced pilot study.

There are rich findings in this report, which formed the basis for a successful funding bid to DRILL (Disability Research for Independent Living and Learning) for Horizon, the University of Stirling and Housing Options Scotland to carry out a substantive 18 month study from July 2017. We hope the publication of the scoping study will provide information in support of the Scottish Government's commitments in A Fairer Scotland for Disabled People and to European Human Rights Commission Inquiry into the impact of accessible homes on independent living. We know it is already informing policy and practice changes in the participating landlords.

This pilot study was undertaken with the support and participation of several agencies including Local Authority, general needs RSLs and specialist RSLs, and most importantly of disabled people involved as advisors and participants. We thank them and the researchers for their contribution and commitment to this project.

**Julia Fitzpatrick**
**Managing Director, Horizon Housing Association**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Introduction

Policy and practice in relation to letting adapted and accessible social rented housing represents an important element in satisfactorily resolving the housing needs of disabled people.

However, relatively little is known about how the challenges of matching the specific needs of households to the design adaptations of vacant properties are resolved in practice; or about the experiences of applicants waiting for housing to meet particular needs relating to locomotive, sensory or cognitive impairments.

This pilot study sought to design and test a research method for evaluating the effectiveness of lettings procedures for adapted housing, utilising a co-production approach involving housing providers and disabled researchers and applicants.

### Context for the study

The research adopted the social model of disability as a framework to examine how people with impairments are disabled by social structures and physical environments, applying this model to the social rented housing application and lettings processes. A review of evidence indicated a continuing lack of supply of appropriate accessible and adapted housing to meet the needs of disabled people, including needs associated with aging of the population.

Disabled people may also require support to get by in housing which otherwise meets their needs, and the research was framed in the context of recent policy and legislation including:

- The Social Care (Self-Directed Support) (Scotland) Act 2013
- The Public Bodies (Joint Working ) (Scotland) Act 2014
- The Housing (Scotland) Act 2014 (and related guidance on social housing lettings practice).

A review of available evidence found very little research on the specific topic of lettings practice for adapted and accessible social rented housing or on the involvement of disabled people in researching the topic. Evidence did indicate, however, that disabled people remained disempowered in the housing system and faced a shortage of fully accessible properties across tenures and a lack of choice in relation to location of their homes. The limited evidence base on lettings practice indicated a need for an integrated approach to meeting needs which considered the physical design of housing, use of space, geographical location, and links to public transport and amenities.

### Developing Co-production Research Methods

Research for the pilot study concluded that best practice in housing provision for disabled people should incorporate service-user involvement and co-production

approaches wherever possible. Co-production is often considered the highest level of service-user involvement, by involving service users in the design and conduct of the research (or service development). The co-production approach necessitates adequate time and resources to support meaningful service-user participation in order to support and optimise disabled people's contribution to research.

The research methods used for this pilot study included:

1. A review of relevant literature and evidence on housing and disability, allocations practice and co-production approaches.
2. A peer advisory panel comprising disabled applicants and tenants who contributed to the research design and interpretation of the findings.
3. A local authority level case study of lettings practice comprising:

    a. A review of the local housing context.
    b. The recruitment of a self-identifying peer researcher (wheelchair user) to contribute to data collection, analysis and reporting.
    c. Pilot interviews with applicants/recent tenants where at least one member of the household was disabled.
    d. Pilot semi-structured interviews with local authority and registered social landlord (RSL) staff (housing strategy, housing frontline, social work and occupational therapy).
    e. Stakeholder discussion forums to review findings, including housing and service providing staff, peer panel members and disabled/peer researchers.

The research received ethical approval from the University of Stirling. The research programme was duly conducted with successful recruitment of the peer panel, case study local authority and RSLs, peer researcher and disabled applicants. In line with the evidence review on co-production, the time and resources required to implement the planned research were underestimated, necessitating considerable flexibility on the part of all partners to ensure adherence to the planned inclusive approach and the effective completion of the study. Lessons learned were incorporated into the design of a larger follow up study.

**Findings from the pilot Study**

Due to the pilot nature of the research, the findings from the study are largely illustrative. While they can't be used to draw generalised conclusions, they give an indication of different stakeholder perspectives with respect to matching disabled applicants and vacant accessible or adapted properties, as well as providing useful pointers for subsequent research.

Within one local authority area there was considerable variation across the local authority and RSLs in terms of the proportion of tenancies recorded as having a disabled household member, the proportion of new disabled tenants recorded in a year, and the proportion of disabled applicants on housing registers. Differences were likely to reflect a combination of stock profiles and housing management practices, with void property rental loss and average relet times for vacancies also varying quite significantly.

Housing Contribution Statements produced for Health and Social Care Integration Partnerships in the case study local authority and two comparator authorities were examined. These provided some indication of the relative priority given to meeting the housing and support needs of disabled people, but social housing lettings practice was not a main focus of these documents.

Interviews with housing and service provider staff identified some variation in how the classification of adapted or accessible properties was understood, despite the existence of guidance for practice. Staff also identified challenges with both choice based and points based lettings policy in terms of matching disabled applicants to vacant adapted and accessible properties. Some systems did not adequately distinguish who really required and could bid for/be considered for accessible or adapted housing. Some staff identified barriers to the use of choice based lettings systems by some disabled applicants but other staff felt appropriate support with the bidding process was available.

Interviews indicated that most landlords supported the Scotland-wide Homes2Fit accessible housing register but there was a lack of clarity around whether effective use was made of this service. The potential impact of an extended matching process on void property relet times was acknowledged and some suggestions were made for flexibility in practice to facilitate best use of the stock.

Barriers to effective lettings included:

- Challenges of building in accessibility to existing properties and avoiding the removal of adaptations.
- Lack of capacity to record up to date property information related to accessibility.
- A short term focus on prompt lettings rather than recognising the importance of meeting housing needs over the long term.
- Broader financial and staffing pressures in landlord organisations.

However, interviewees were also able to identify examples of effective allocations which achieved a good fit between property design and applicant needs. These examples demonstrated the significance of good initial design; flexibility or reasonable adjustment in application of allocations policies; and flexibility and creativity in developing technical or design responses to meet needs which otherwise would be difficult to meet. The importance of new supply of accessible homes was also highlighted as offering the most scope for providing homes truly tailored to a household's needs.

Key areas for improved practice identified by staff included: improved communication in the lettings process; enhanced staff training on inclusive design and meeting disabled applicants' needs; and adjustments to practice to take a longer-term perspective on health conditions and impairments. Ideas to improve practice included taking more account of the experiences of disabled applicants during the waiting, offer and early tenancy phases.

The three main themes which arose from the applicant interviews were their current housing needs and challenges; their experience of applying for housing; and their ideas for changes or improvements in lettings systems. In the main report, the experiences of our participant applicants are presented as individual case studies to allow their stories to be told from their perspectives.

A range of impairments were represented among children and adults in our participant households and their experiences highlight how both dwelling design and the wider neighbourhood or environment can either constrain or facilitate independent living for disabled people.

Participants' suggestions to improve practice included:

- Building more fully accessible properties to meet needs associated with health conditions and impairments over the long term.
- Better recognition of the full range of impairments in lettings systems.
- A single named contact to assist with disabled people's housing applications.
- Ensuring the needs of all household members are taken into account in the lettings process.

Stakeholder discussion forums reviewed the initial findings from the research and endorsed the co-production approach as beneficial for research and practice. Participants recognised the complexity involved in finding appropriate housing for many disabled applicants and identified some early opportunities to adapt practice or influence policy review.

**Conclusions**

A key conclusion from the pilot study was that a more substantive investigation of the effectiveness of lettings practice was potentially valuable for future policy and practice to better meet the housing needs of disabled people. In particular, more data on the experiences of disabled applicants on housing registers and moving into adapted or accessible housing was needed to better understand current practice. Such a study could also usefully investigate adapted and accessible social housing lettings within a more strategic framework for the operation of housing registers and lettings policies.

Overall, the co-production methodology worked well and the benefits of including disabled people's perspectives in the design, fieldwork and reporting stages were evident. Challenges which could be readily addressed in a larger scale study included providing enhanced support for participants who had mobility impairments which constrained their capacity to attend meetings through alternative mechanisms for involvement, or support with transport and costs. Adequate time needs to be allowed for recruitment, training and support for disabled peer advisers and researchers. Participants need to be supported to engage in feedback in ways which fit with their capacity and availability. The pilot study demonstrated the feasibility of interviewing disabled applicants, but it was also important to respect their preferences in relation to interview locations.

Key goals for a substantive follow up study include:

- Making effective use of available data on housing stock, lettings and relevant performance indicators to contextualise any new qualitative research.
- Adopting a longitudinal approach to follow the lived experience of disabled applicants and new tenants over a longer period of time (e.g. up to one year).
- Incorporating an 'action research' approach which assesses how landlords and service providers adapt practice in response to new research evidence, national level policy, and emerging guidance for practice.

## 1.0   INTRODUCTION

### 1.1   Rationale for this research

This report presents the findings from a pilot study to design and test a research method for evaluating the effectiveness of procedures for letting accessible and adapted social rented housing to disabled applicants.

The study has its roots in two 'sister' *Mind the Step* studies which estimated housing need among wheelchair users in England (Joseph et al 2010) and Scotland (Watson et al 2012).

Each *Mind the Step* study also identified a three-way approach to tackling unmet need for wheelchair user housing:

- Developing new homes
- Adaptation of existing homes
- Effective allocation systems.

This research focuses on the third of these strands – the contribution of allocations systems to meeting the housing needs of disabled people. The *Mind the Step* studies both made recommendations on lettings procedures which informed this pilot study:

- Local authorities and their partners should review how they use adaptations and housing allocations in extending choice and meeting unmet needs.
- Local authorities and housing providers should address barriers facing disabled people who are looking for a home, including specific barriers relating to the allocation of social housing.
- Local authorities should consider setting up or supporting existing Accessible Housing Registers (AHRs), which hold information on accessible properties and details of housing applicants requiring such properties.

Another key study which has informed this scoping research was '*Space to Move*: *making efficient use of homes for wheelchair users* (Joseph, et al, 2011), commissioned by Habinteg Housing Association. Drawing on data from London Boroughs, housing associations and applicants/tenants, this research examined social housing allocations, the reasons behind the unsuitable use of wheelchair accessible properties and the measures taken by social housing providers to address this.

A range of factors were found to contribute towards the misallocation of wheelchair standard properties. *Space to move* identified mislabelling of properties, where some were wrongly categorised and therefore misallocated. Landlords sought to minimise void periods and were under pressure to let properties quickly. Where properties were held empty pending 'a good match' there was an associated loss of revenue. Some applicants reported challenges in using websites for choice based lettings to bid for vacancies, and where properties were rejected by applicants this tended to be because either designs or location did not meet their needs.

*Space to move* also identified a lack of inter-agency working to identify households with specific housing need (e.g. between housing staff and occupational therapists) and limited training for staff to identify, categorise and allocate wheelchair accessible properties. Where a wheelchair user with high priority was not identified for an accessible vacancy, some landlords re-advertised the property and allocated it to the next priority group or a general needs applicant.

The 2011 *Space to Move* research concluded with seven key recommendations which, although some years later, still informed this study in the contemporary Scottish policy and practice context. These can be summarised as:

- The effective allocation of homes to wheelchair users should be a strategic priority for social landlords, and for health and care services, to ensure more effective use of a scarce resource.
- Lettings of wheelchair accessible homes require a personalised service including detailed information on applicants' circumstances and requirements, proactive effort to identify suitable applicants; more information on property design and layout; and more practical support through the application process.
- Landlords should investigate the extent to which wheelchair accessible properties are misallocated, identify the causes and develop a strategy for increasing the proportion of properties let to households with a wheelchair user.
- Allocations and choice based lettings systems should classify levels of accessibility, based on authoritative design guidance, re-checking properties when they become vacant and logging the level of accessibility for future reference.
- Landlords should consult with local disabled people's groups in developing approaches to letting accessible homes, considering what changes they can make to improve their offers.
- Landlords should provide regular staff training, so that key staff understand the organisation's policies and responsibilities and are confident about categories of accessibility, how properties are assessed and how the information is held and used.
- Local authorities and landlords should have a policy aim of letting every wheelchair accessible property to a household with a wheelchair user, unless there are good reasons why a particular property is not right for such households, embedding co-operation between housing, health and social care services to ensure disabled people in need get on to housing registers and can put themselves forward or be nominated for a home.

From the *Mind the Step* and *Mind the Space* studies, the need for a substantial research project to gather evidence on the barriers to effective lettings and effective use of adapted or purpose built social rented housing in Scotland was identified. Consequently, this study was developed for the Scottish context with Horizon Housing Association, using a co-production approach involving housing and service providers, as well as disabled applicants and tenants, in the design of the study. This feasibility study was commissioned to test co-production methods and then scope out and cost a larger scale study of effective lettings practice for matching adapted social housing and disabled housing applicants.

## 1.2    Terms used in this report

This research focuses on disabled people's experiences of social rented housing provided by local authorities and registered social landlords (RSLs, mainly housing associations) in Scotland. The term 'lettings' is used to include both choice based lettings systems (where applicants bid for advertised vacancies, usually according to some assessed priority level of housing need) and allocations systems where staff select tenants for vacant properties, based on points or other approaches to prioritising housing needs of applicants.

The term 'disabled' is used in its broad sense to include locomotive, sensory and cognitive impairments. The terms 'adapted' and 'accessible' housing are used to describe properties which have a range of adaptations to enable people with particular needs to more easily live in a property, and those which are constructed to wheelchair or other accessible standards such as 'Housing for Varying Needs (Scottish Homes, 1998; Watson et al 2012) or Lifetime Homes (Goodman, 2011; Lifetime Homes, 2016).

The focus of this report is on the matching process where either adapted or accessible properties become vacant and landlords seek to make an effective let to a household with a disabled person whose mobility or other needs will be addressed by the design/adaptations of the vacant property.

## 1.3    Outline of report

Chapter Two of this report sets out the wider context for the study, reviews recent literature on access to housing for disabled people and sets out the project aims and objectives.

Chapter Three presents the co-productive research method which was developed for this pilot study and Chapter Four presents the findings from the field work which was conducted to test the proposed research method.

Chapter Five presents the conclusions from the study including the proposal for a subsequent more substantive research project.

## 2.0    CONTEXT FOR THE PILOT STUDY

This chapter sets out the wider context for the feasibility study, including the underpinning social model of disability (and aging); the housing and social policy context for the research; and relevant findings from the existing research evidence on access to accessible housing for disabled people.

### 2.1    Housing needs within a social model of disability and ageing

The provision of adapted housing to meet the needs of those with physical impairments has been an important feature of the measures taken by social housing landlords to tackle the inequality experienced by disabled people in accessing suitable housing (Theakstone, 2011).

Around one in five Scots are recognised as disabled (Scottish Government, 2010a) but there remains a lack of a sufficient stock of accessible properties to meet needs (Adaptations Working Group, 2012).  Sim (2004) noted that 65% of Scotland's housing stock was built pre-1965 and 21% pre-1919, and that the design of older properties often posed challenges for accessibility.

Lack of a good match between property design and impairment can impede independent living and impact negatively on physical and psychological well-being (Imrie, 2004; Heywood, 2004). Dwelling design must also be considered in relation to the accessibility of external environments since the majority of public spaces have been designed without consideration of access for all (Bull, 1998; Newton et al 2006, 2007). This research adopted the social model of disability as a core framework to understand the ways in which people with impairments are disabled by social structures and physical environments.

From the 1970s, disabled activists and academics have developed the social model of explaining disability in relation to barriers faced by people with different impairments and debated the need to connect the social model of disability with health practice (Bricher, 2000). However, Humphrey's (2000) research comparing views of trade union members who were women, black people, disabled people and lesbian and gay people did raise some challenges to the social model in the sense of promoting a divisive, rather than an inclusive approach to disadvantage. Humphrey suggested researchers and disabled people should consider convergence of oppressed groups, emphasising shared ideologies and encouraging collaboration across groups to work towards a more inclusive society.

Other researchers have continued to argue the merits of the social model. Gronvik's (2009) Swedish study identified functional disability (e.g. identification of impairments); legal definitions relating to welfare benefits available to disabled people; and subjective disability where people voluntarily self-labelled as disabled. In Gronvik's study, young, single males were over-represented in functional and administrative definitions, while females were over-represented in the subjective definition. Gronvik explained this through the way in which functional and administrative definitions were tied to a persons' ability to participate in paid work and eligibility for welfare – considered a male dominated sphere of life. Gronvik also

suggested that males were more reluctant to self-identify with what may be considered a stigmatised minority group, illustrating the significance of the impact of disability definitions, even within a social model.

Stewart et al. (1999) provided a historical perspective applying the social model of disability to disabled people's experience of housing, highlighting the long term failure to design dwellings which are accessible to everybody and the resultant systematic exclusion of disabled people or people with impairments (p.6). Rather, the term 'special needs' housing was perpetuated by social policies underpinned by the medical model of disability. The historical analysis demonstrated how policy-makers were influenced by a model which medicalised impairments and constrained approaches towards the provision of accessible properties. The study acknowledged improvements in the 1990s but not to the point of adequately fulfilling disabled peoples' rights to live in accessible homes.

International research indicates that disabled people and older people often have similar needs in terms of the demand for more accessible housing and lived experiences of access barriers, as well as the need for an inclusive design for external environments (Moss, 1997; Priestley and Rabiee, 2002; Morbey et al, 2003; Bernard et al, 2007). Research in Canada revealed how access to ordinary housing for younger people with mobility impairments needed to deliver a 'dignity-enabling home' including: the ability to form and sustain meaningful relationships; access to community and civic life; control of daily activities; respectful relationships with attendants; opportunities to participate in school, work or leisure; and physical, psychological and ontological security (Gibson et al, 2011).

A biographical account by Ahmed (2013), a wheel-chair user living in London, identified a gap between public perception and the lived experience of disability. For example welfare austerity measures had a direct impact on the lack of choice, disempowerment and future prospects for accessible housing.

## 2.2   Housing and Social Policy Context

Much of the social policy background set out in *Mind the Step Scotland* remained relevant to this follow up study:

- the need for housing planning to consider significant growth in numbers of older people; exponential in over 75s where mobility issues and levels of wheelchair use start to become marked;
- the impacts of medical advance on numbers of disabled children and adults living longer and requiring or aspiring to independent living;
- the wider range of health or long term conditions giving rise to the need for additional space standards to allow care and support to be provided at home;
- increased numbers of disabled people with multiple and complex conditions to be managed at home;
- the shift in the balance of care from institutions to home;
- cultural and legislative shifts to personalisation and self-directed support.

(Watson et al, 2012).

Since 2012, legislation has followed as one means to address these challenges including the Social Care (Self Directed Support) (Scotland) Act 2013 and the Public Bodies (Joint Working) (Scotland) Act 2014, which introduced a legal framework for the integration of health and social care services. A considerable amount of work, with some associated research, by and for Scottish Government has focused on the role of adaptations to existing property to meet needs, but there has been no parallel focus on the role of allocations or new housing supply in meeting the housing needs of disabled people.

The needs of disabled housing applicants have been included in UK Westminster and devolved government reviews of allocation and lettings policies for social housing. Lettings of adapted/accessible properties form one element of law and practice on social housing lettings across the UK jurisdictions. The legal framework for Scottish social housing allocations can be traced to the Housing (Scotland) Act 1966 which introduced groups which should receive 'reasonable preference' in housing allocations, later consolidated in the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987 (with the additional category of homeless households) and later amended by the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001. The legal framework is more specific in relation to admission to the list than the relative priority which should be given to different types of housing need. Figure 1 summarises guidance issued since 2002, illustrating that extensive guidance is in place to assist landlords with prioritising households applying for assistance, including disabled people. Since 2001, guidance on housing allocations has anticipated flexible interpretation by landlords to meet local needs, provided they operate within the overall legal framework.

Most recently, the Housing (Scotland) Act 2014 increased landlord discretion on lettings policies, subject to the 'reasonable preference categories'. The housing needs of disabled people are not specifically listed as a reasonable preference category but are included as part of 'people who are living under unsatisfactory housing conditions and who have unmet housing needs'. However, priority to disabled people in allocations of adapted/accessible social housing has been recognised in the new powers to use temporary tenancies and to broaden possession grounds to ensure adapted properties can be effectively utilised for disabled people (Figure 1, Housing (Scotland) Act, 2014; powers not fully implemented during the research for this study).

Further guidance on new approaches towards the allocation of social housing was published by the Chartered Institute for Housing (2014) highlighting current practice and examples to explore how RSLs can develop their allocation systems and policies to meet local needs and best use of homes. The 2014 CIH guidance covered England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and indicated a similar direction for policy and practice as emerging from the Housing (Scotland) Act 2014. For example, allocation systems reviews should assist in making best use of housing stock, including ensuring properties are allocated to the most appropriate person and freeing up properties adapted for people with disabilities where households no longer require the adaptations.

**Figure 1: Guidance for Scottish Housing Providers on social housing allocations**

> **Housing (Scotland) Act 2001: Housing Lists and Allocations (Scottish Government, 2002).**
>
> Extended the 1987 provisions on housing lists to Registered Social Landlords as well as local authorities:
> - Section 19(1) of the 1987 Act (as amended by section 9 of the 2001 Act) sets out the entitlement for anyone aged 16 or over to be admitted to a housing list.
> - Section 20(1) of the 1987 Act as amended requires that in selecting tenants for their houses, all local authorities and RSLs must give reasonable preference
>   a) to persons who
>     (i) are occupying houses which do not meet the tolerable standard; or
>     (ii) are occupying overcrowded houses; or
>     (iii) have large families; or
>     (iv) are living under unsatisfactory housing conditions; and
>   b) to homeless persons and persons threatened with homelessness (within the meaning of Part II of the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987 (as amended by the 2001 Act).
>
> **Social housing allocations: a practice guide (Scottish Government, 2010b)**
>
> - Highlighted two key performance standards in regulatory framework for all social landlords (Section 1.5):
>   - ensure that people have fair and open access to housing list and assessment process; work with others to maximise and simplify access routes into housing;
>   - let houses in a way that gives reasonable preference to those in housing need, makes best use of stock maximises choice and helps to sustain communities.
> - Allocation policies to include: the outcomes the landlord wishes to achieve; what they will take into account when making allocation decisions; the priority for housing given to applicants with a variety of housing needs (reasonable preference, weight given to each of the reasonable preference groups); any lettings quotas, targets or local lettings plans; arrangements for assessing and verifying applicants' needs; house size eligibility criteria; situations where you may deviate from the allocation policy: arrangements for transfer applicants; arrangements for monitoring and reviewing your policies (Section 2.2a).
> - Social landlords to develop a monitoring framework to tailor the indicators and measures to policy aims; identify disparities or un-noticed discrimination in the operation of policy; and measure the impact of any policy change (Section 2.7).
> - Provision of clear information for applicants about their application, through realistic assessments to manage their expectations, such as up to date factual information about supply and demand; how long on average people in similar situations had to wait; and turnover in the area they want to live (Section 3.5).
> - Recommends that Common Housing Registers (CHRs) should become the norm across Scotland so that in every local authority area there is a single access route for applicants and a single database of all applicants (Section 4.1).
> - Restates the requirement for social landlords to make best use of the available stock and help to sustain communities, as well as meeting individual needs (Section 5).
>
> **Housing (Scotland) Act, 2014**
> The legal Framework for Social Housing Allocations: Statutory Guidance for Social Landlords (Scottish Government, 2016a):

- Introduces increased flexibility in social housing lettings for landlords.
- Duty to consult applicants and tenants on allocations policies.
- Responsibility to decide on priority of individual housing applications.
- Must give reasonable preference to:
  - homeless persons and persons threatened with homelessness and who have unmet housing needs (but not if they only become such persons as a result of a local authority landlord having regard to a 'restricted person'5);
  - people who are living under unsatisfactory housing conditions and who have unmet housing needs – including health and disability reasons;
  - and
  - tenants of houses which are held by a social landlord and which the social landlord selecting its tenants considers to be under-occupied.

Recovery of possession of properties designed or adapted for special needs: Guidance for Social Landlords (Scottish Government 2016b):
- Amends existing powers to include where no occupier required the adaptation and the property is required for a person who needs the adaptation.
- Provides flexibility to make better use of adapted properties as short term accommodation where at the point of allocation there is nobody requiring the adapted property.
- Terms to be set out clearly at start of tenancy and suitable alternative accommodation to be provided when adapted property needed for a disabled person.
- Short Scottish Secure Tenancy can be used in certain circumstances.

The needs of disabled applicants were also considered by the Allocations Policy Review Advisory Group (Scottish Government, 2009) which identified a number of issues that could impact on disabled people including:

- Difficulties accessing information and understanding different allocations systems.
- Lack of available adapted properties.
- Length of time taken to assess and implement housing support packages.
- Quality of housing stock information on adapted houses.
- Limited monitoring of equality information to inform policies.

Property location was recognised as important for disabled people when choosing where to live including ease of access to hospitals, employment, education, transport and shops. Concerns were raised that deaf people often had low priority in housing allocations because staff were not adequately trained to appreciate their impairment and how this impacts on their housing needs (Scottish Government, 2009).

Capability Scotland and the Glasgow Centre for Inclusive Living (2011) also explored disabled peoples' perspectives and lived experiences of housing. Recommendations included balancing the requirement to manage voids with the allocation of accessible and adapted housing to the right people. The report suggested that housing providers could develop partnerships to increase the availability of accessible houses for disabled people and that agencies involved in housing should do more to provide accessible information about disabled peoples' housing options. Furthermore, housing staff should undertake training in relation to accessible information and communication.

In 2011, the Scottish Government provided funding to Glasgow Centre for Inclusive Living (GCIL) to develop a Scottish Accessible Housing Register, now called Homes2Fit, for disabled house seekers. Accessible Housing Registers (AHRs) identify disabled people in need of accessible homes; identify accessible properties, their location and characteristics; and enable effective matching of people and suitable homes. AHRs have been developed and evaluated in London (Pawson and Sosenko, 2011), more widely in England (Housing Learning and Improvement Network, 2011), and in Wales (Shelter Cymru and Disability Wales, 2012). The London AHR helped standardise the categorisation of property accessibility, enhancing coordination across different allocation systems and research evidence has broadly supported the development of AHRs. Salient messages included engaging with the social model of disability, greater user involvement, time to be allowed for prospective tenants of adapted social housing to assess property suitability, moving towards standard definitions of property accessibility, and better recognising disability among those who face homelessness.

MacLean and Guy (2015) were commissioned by the Scottish Government to explore disabled peoples' housing pathways. The research uncovered key barriers to disabled peoples' access to suitable housing: financial/economic status (whether or not people could afford to buy a home or afford adaptations); supply/availability of appropriate accessible housing; and household composition (whether or not people lived with a partner, children, or parents). However, the study did not present detailed evidence on the process of matching disabled housing applicants to suitable vacancies.

## 2.3    Conclusions from the evidence review

Challenges remain around the stigmatisation of a disabled identity, and there remains scope for application of, and enhanced awareness of, the social model of disability as one strategy to improve law, policy and practice. Comprehensive and systematic searches of the research literature identified very little work relating to the specific area of lettings practice for adapted social housing, very much supporting the premise of the need for a substantive study of practice in this area. No studies were identified that focused specifically on involvement of disabled people in researching access to adapted social housing.

Research literature which outlined the ways that disabled people encountered disempowerment within accessible housing continued to focus on the shortage of fully accessible properties across tenures and a lack of choice in relation to location – rather than on the lettings process for social rented housing. The limited evidence base on lettings procedures for adapted social housing indicated the need for an integrated perspective including physical design of housing, use of space, geographical location, and links to public transport and amenities. The next chapter outlines the co-production approach to the scoping study and makes an initial assessment of the feasibility of a larger study.

## 3.0    FEASIBILITY OF THE CO-PRODUCTION RESEARCH METHOD

This chapter introduces the concept of service user involvement and co-production in social research. It then outlines the research methods adopted for the pilot study of allocations of adapted social housing, and reflects on the research process and implications for the feasibility of a larger study.

### 3.1    Service-User Involvement and Co-production

Our research revealed a consensus that best practice in housing provision for disabled people should incorporate service-user involvement and co-production approaches wherever possible. Again, studies mainly referred to how service-user involvement aimed to shape the provision of adapted housing (Imrie, 1999; Greenhalgh et al, 2015), rather than the lettings process, but the progression of research approaches towards co-production in service design and delivery offered a useful model.

Co-production is often considered the highest level of service-user involvement. The benefits of direct input from disabled people into policy implementation and service provision has revealed the cost effectiveness of involvement and enabled the management of competing voices within the policy-making process, without alienation of any viewpoints (Fisher and Robinson, 2010). People with 'intellectual disability' (*sic*) were successfully included in a co-production approach to design of environments, shaping the accessibility of a community, with the recognition that 'when access is improved for all who live in a community, invariably life is improved and more inclusive for each individual as well' (Sherman and Sherman, 2013, p.275). Ollerton and Horsfall (2013) also demonstrated that, with support, people labelled with learning difficulties could contribute insightful and competent critiques of the public sphere (p.627).

Co-production can involve working with service providers, as well as service users. Buick et al. (2015) defined coproduction as situations in which scholars and practitioners undertook research designed to produce knowledge that could be implemented to improve practice. They identified a 'research-practice gap' where scholars tended to be more concerned with rigor, and practitioners with relevance to their practice. Co-production was put forward as addressing this gap through joint working on each phase of the research process.

For Buick et al, three main strengths of co-production were of particular value. Complementary insights from the knowledge and experiences provided by insiders (practitioners) and the ability of outsiders (scholars) to provide alternative explanations of events derived from a broad, global theoretical base. Access to participants could be facilitated by practitioners and was otherwise often a time-consuming and challenging part of the research process. Practitioners can facilitate scholars' access to information, case studies, and participants. Co-production also helped integrate theory and practice. As data is collected and analysed and new knowledge is developed and shared, co-production partners can produce synergy and offer insights into issues, potentially developing ideas for new research.

Challenges of co-production included time demands differing between scholars and practitioners, with the latter focused on more immediate results in response to continuing and often urgent demands. Practitioners may also seek to have "veto" rights in research contracts, resulting in pressure on scholars to tone down or censor their findings. Finally, task and process conflicts may also emerge because of a lack of clarity and different expectations between the parties, creating a tendency to produce separate rather than joint outputs.

The Scottish Government supported pilot projects to develop co-production approaches to informing Local Housing Strategies (LHSs) in Scotland (Evans et al, 2011). These pilot projects aimed to establish what co-production added to the LHS development process, assess its impact on the decision-making process and evaluate the process applied to set up and manage the co-production approach. Both pilot local authorities highlighted that additional time was required for the co-production approach. Resources were needed to support participants and ensure training for leaders (Evans et al, 2011). Methods utilised in research to understand public attitudes towards disabled people (Scope, 2014) confirmed the need for disabled people to be involved during research design, implementation and monitoring of progress to break down barriers to access independent living.

Mechanisms for participation and inclusion included peer support amongst disabled people, the need for collective empowerment to tackle potential discriminatory public assumptions or stigmatisation, the need for disabled people to educate others on inclusionary measures and to work towards an co-ordinated approach across all required elements for independent living. A considerable amount of further guidance exists to support the co-production research process (e.g. Matthews et al, 2015; Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), 2016; Scottish Coproduction Network, 2016; and Independent Living in Scotland, 2016).

## 3.2    Aims and methods of the feasibility study

The overall aim of this scoping research was to design and test a research method to assess the effectiveness of practice in matching wheelchair designed and adapted social housing to households in need of such housing, with a view to identifying measures to efficiently match people and properties.

The team agreed that the pilot project would seek to develop a participatory research framework in which the research team, housing providers and disabled applicants and tenants could contribute to research design, analysis and reporting. Costs and design of a substantive study (e.g. over 18 months) would be dependent, to a considerable extent, on the feasibility of recruiting and supporting a degree of peer research contribution to the study. This pilot study sought to conduct some initial data collection and to develop, test and cost the proposed approach to participative research. The pilot study was conducted in a Central Scotland local authority where Horizon Housing Association had accessible housing stock and well-developed working relations with other Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) in the area as well as with the local authority housing service.

The research methods adopted for the pilot study were as follows.

**Literature review** (reported in Chapter 2 and the introduction to this chapter). The team conducted systematic searches in order to review research, policy and practice evidence on the letting of social housing designed for wheelchair users and the wider context of housing and disability – as well as literature on participative research approaches focusing on relevant co-production research and methods.

**Applicant/tenant peer research advisory panel.** In collaboration with partner housing providers, we sought to recruit a group of 4-6 applicants/tenants and support these participants to consider the proposed research design, and to contribute to research progress and interpretation of pilot research findings and recommendations.

**Development of a case study approach to analysis of allocations practice and planning to meet the needs of disabled applicants/tenants.**

 For the pilot study, the research would:

- Review local housing context and strategy to inform fieldwork.
- Recruit a mobility impaired/wheelchair using potential peer researcher and develop an approach to supporting him/her to contribute to the data collection, analysis and reporting processes.
- Develop an approach to recruiting a sample of social housing applicant/new tenant households which include at least one person who is mobility. impaired/a wheelchair user, willing to participate in an interview about their housing application experience; and undertake pilot semi-structured interviews with up to 5 participant applicants/new tenants ideally at differing stages in the application/allocations processes.
- Design and undertake pilot semi-structured interviews with stakeholder staff selected from Local authority and RSL strategy and frontline staff (including housing and social work/occupational therapy staff).
- Hold a discussion forum with stakeholders (peer panel, peer researcher, applicant/tenant participants and service providers) to discuss emerging findings from the pilot study and recommendations for main study.

### 3.3    Research ethics and feasibility of the research design

The research received ethical approval from the University of Stirling. Research participants included 4-6 members of a peer research advisory panel, 1 peer researcher, up to 12 stakeholders, and 5 disabled applicants/tenants, plus attendees at a discussion forum (many of whom participated in earlier stages of the research). Potentially vulnerable participants included the disabled applicants/tenants, disabled peer advisory panel members and the peer researcher.

The main method of data collection throughout this co-production research was semi-structured interviews, around 45 minutes in length. These were face-to-face meetings where possible, in order to build a rapport between the researcher and interviewee. As well as testing feasibility of recruitment, interview data provided insights into

current thinking and practice around the allocation of accessible housing from the different stakeholder perspectives.

Recruitment of potential participants was mediated through our practice research partners within the case study local authority. For stakeholder/staff interviews, initial consent was attained from senior managers in participant organisations, who then negotiated participation of other staff at strategic and operational levels. Staff interviewees were recruited according to their professional roles or in relation to their partnership working with the organisational case study (for example housing officer, occupational therapist, social worker etc.) Interviews were held in meeting rooms or office space in the work environments to conduct interviews in confidence.

Telephone interviews were used as an alternative where face to face interviews were not feasible. Fieldwork was arranged at the convenience of the staff and informed consent was sought from and agreed with each participant prior to interview. Potential tenant/applicant interviewees were contacted by letter or directly by staff from participating landlords. Given the short time-frame of the pilot study, it was envisaged that this would provide insight from which to develop a tracking methodology in a follow-on research proposal. Landlord partners negotiated initial consent to be contacted by the research team. It was anticipated that landlords would be able to identify potential wheelchair-user participants from housing registers (applicants) and allocation records (new tenants), and that some might also participate as members of the project peer advisory panel. Additional non-interviewee participants for the peer advisory panel were also recruited more widely via participating partners and disabled-led organisations.

A peer researcher was successfully recruited to assist with the project. The exact tasks were negotiated with the individual but were anticipated to include, for example, interviews with disabled applicants/tenants or policy review. Towards the end of the project, the research team arranged two parallel discussion forums with stakeholders (staff, peer panel, peer researcher, applicant/tenant). These discussion groups provided an opportunity to outline findings and discuss outcomes in relation to both the pilot research approach and some of the substantive research issues.

The ethical considerations were the recruitment process for potential participants and the facilitation of discussion around potentially sensitive issues with interviewees. To ensure prevention of harm, harassment or coercion, the initial recruitment process was mediated through practice partners, with guidance from the research team to ensure participation was through informed consent without any coercion or breach of confidentiality.

Project information and consent sheets were passed to potential participants on behalf of the research team. It was recognised that interviews with disabled applicants/tenants may touch upon stressful housing situations. The focus of the project was upon the matching process of accessible housing but discussions would explore potentially sensitive aspects around housing applications and lettings for households including one or more disabled person(s). It was crucial that participants felt empowered to voice their views. The project team aimed to enable this by approaching the interviews in a sensitive and reassuring manner, adhering to protocols for participant confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were made aware of the scope of the interview in advance as part of giving informed consent and reassured that they could withdraw consent at any time. If any participant became

distressed, the interview or activity would be halted to offer the opportunity to recompose or withdraw. Contact information was also made available for independent support and for a senior contact at the University of Stirling. Participants who agreed to be interviewed were asked to sign the consent form and provide audible confirmation at the beginning of interview recordings. Disabled participants may have physical, sensory or cognitive impairments, but only participants who were able to give fully informed consent were recruited for the study.

The co-production approach involved the peer advisory panel designing and developing the topic guide for the interviews. Findings from the literature review and data collection were shared with at the discussion forum(s) and responses fed into this final report. The discussion forum(s) included research participants and other interested stakeholders (for example other housing/service providers) subject to their informed consent to participate. Scribes took notes at the forum(s) to feed into reporting and design of a potential follow-on larger study.

In the pilot study face to face interviews were successfully conducted with 12 staff members, representing five housing providers in the case study local authority, as well as five applicant households seeking housing in the case study area, with effort having been made to identify a diversity of circumstances leading people to seek accessible or adaptable housing. Two stakeholder discussion forums were held in parallel with a total of 12 participants including the peer researcher, project research partners, representatives of participating landlords and service providers and one member of the peer advisory panel. Disabled applicants were invited to the discussion group but were not able to attend, for a variety of practical reasons (e.g. distance to travel) and it was recognised that alternative mechanisms for applicants to provide feedback on outline findings were needed for a future study.

The semi-structured interviews conducted with 12 staff representatives from across the case study local authority and four RSLs included participants who held roles related to strategic management and operational delivery, including lettings. For reporting in Chapter 3, participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Staff Interviewees**

| Participant pseudonym | Participant role |
|---|---|
| Barbara | Assistant Director of Property Services, Social Housing Landlord |
| Alice | Administrative Assistant, Contract Services team, Social Housing Landlord |
| Carol | Housing Operations Manager, Social Housing Landlord |
| Donna | Housing Officer, Social Housing Landlord |
| Elizabeth | Asset Manager, Social Housing Landlord |
| Mary | Housing Officer, Social Housing Landlord |
| Gail | Community Care Development Officer |
| Helen | Housing Services Team Leader, Social Housing Landlord |
| Isobel | Director of Housing and Care, Social Housing Landlord |
| Jacqui | Housing Officer, Social Housing Landlord |
| Diane | Housing Services Coordinator, Social Housing Landlord |
| Julie | Occupational Therapist Senior Practitioner |

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five households currently looking to move to an adapted or fully accessible property within the case study area. Two interviews involved more than one interviewee as the primary disabled housing applicant received assistance from a spouse or close relative throughout the application. Figure 3 presents the pseudonyms for each interviewee to protect their anonymity.

**Figure 3: Applicant interviewees**

| Interviewee Pseudonym | Role |
|---|---|
| Tim, Harry and Eva | Tim, Disabled Housing Applicant; Harry and Eva, parents of Tim |
| Kathy | Disabled Housing Applicant |
| Sam, Pam and Pippa | Sam, Disabled Housing Applicant; Pam, wife of Sam; Pippa, Daughter-in-law of Sam & Pam |
| Emma | Disabled Housing Applicant |
| Bryan | Housing Applicant, with disabled child |

The depth of data revealed in the case studies reported in chapter four suggests considerable potential for a larger scale study which engaged with disabled applicants and tenants over a longer period of time in order to better explore their experiences of applying for, being offered, and settling into adapted social housing.

Two of the applicant interviews were conducted by the peer researcher who provided the reflection in Figure 4. Similarly, the enthusiasm of the reflection suggests very considerable potential for a greater degree of involvement of peer researchers in a larger scale study.

**Figure 4: Peer Researcher Reflection**

Hello. I have been a wheelchair user for 28 years. My role was as a peer researcher for the project looking into the effective allocation of adapted social housing.

What attracted me to the project was the co-production approach of the study. It's about working together on an equal basis utilising our mutual strengths and skills to bring about positive change. As a disability activist this approach is important to me because it is not tokenistic and disabled people's input and contribution is equally valued. This is mutually beneficial resulting in better outcomes for disabled people and housing providers having more effective practices, policies and services.

Another reason I got involved was because I have an interest and involvement in social housing from a disabled person's perspective, I am a board member of two Housing Associations. I was also a social housing tenant 19 years ago and although that allocation was a straightforward process, I understand that's very often not the case for most people trying to obtain an adapted social housing property.

Although I was excited about my role in the project I was also a bit nervous about it but felt reassured from the support and training I received from the Project Researcher. I also felt that my direct lived experience as a disabled person and the skills I have gained from my working life and volunteering were relevant and would be useful. This ranged from participating in job interview panels to my role as a telephone befriender and completing a person-centred counselling course: through all this I have developed my active listening skills and learned the importance of confidentiality and being non-judgemental.

Being a wheelchair user I was unable to access the interviewees' properties. Although the first one was a bungalow it had one step but this was enough to prevent my access and the second property had a flight of stairs to access the property. This required us to meet in a public accessible place that the interviewees felt comfortable with and was of their choosing as we were very mindful of confidentiality as we would be talking about personal, sensitive and ongoing situations with the potential for people to get upset.

So, the interviews: it was vital that the interviewees felt at ease and were reassured about confidentiality and any identifying information would be anonymised; and although the project would not benefit them directly it could potentially help others in a similar situation in the future; and they did not have to answer any questions they did not want to and that they could withdraw from the study at any point.

The first interview took place in a garden centre cafe with two people which posed a potential advantage of giving sometimes different perspectives of the same situation but also a challenge because, discussing how they feel, one party may not share the other person's views and could possibly feel uncomfortable sharing that view. For example, if they were interviewed separately there could be different answers but this did not seem the case in this instance and you could tell they supported each other and mirrored each other's views.

The second interview took place in a Tesco cafe with the interviewee's children present, which posed the potential challenge of the children getting bored and distracted but this was not an issue as the children were very well behaved. I was also conscious that the children could be hearing sensitive information, but the father felt comfortable with our discussion.

I have thoroughly enjoyed my experience as a peer researcher it has highlighted how people think independent living can be achieved in different ways - by way of full integration and others who favour specialist units and shared accommodation. What it definitely is not is managing on your own.

It has also reinforced how many people are living in unsuitable housing, the massive negative impact this has on them and their families and the complete lack of adapted social housing. That's why it is vital we have an effective allocation of adapted social housing that has a unified and consistent approach working to best practice.

Finally, I hope the interviewees found it beneficial that the peer researcher self-identified as a disabled person who had a shared understanding of lived experiences of the issues involved.

In the final discussion forums, there was a general consensus on the benefits of co-production as important in ensuring that all perspectives were considered. The peer advisory panel member had been involved and consulted, although sometimes not consulted early enough to ensure optimum input. This peer panel member had contributed to research design and commented on interview questions. Participant landlords reflected on how they had faced some challenges in providing information on potential participants for the study. It hadn't always been easy to identify potential peer panel members or applicant interviewees, but existing personal relations with an applicant had been important in getting them on board with the co-production approach. This was less the case for tenants where it had been much easier to provide a list of potential peer participants.

Discussion forum participants also largely agreed on the benefits of the involvement of self-identifying disabled researchers in the study (one project researcher and one peer researcher). This had helped applicants to be less guarded in their interview responses, because the peer researcher had an overview of the issues, having often had personal experience of at least some of them. Some thought there could be potential for staff members to be more guarded or defensive with disabled interviewers, but those present were not aware that this had happened. It was mainly felt that this was a non-discriminatory approach and everyone felt at ease with the disabled researchers and other disabled participants in the discussion forum. Participants also felt that the topic guides and interviews had been well-designed, allowing researchers to steer the interviews and also talk about their own experiences (if appropriate/to identify with interviewees). It was also recognised that disabled people could be anxious, even when given the opportunity to lead on a research project.

### 3.4    Conclusions on feasibility of scoping study

The planned research programme was duly conducted with the successful recruitment of the peer panel, case study local authority and RLSs, peer researcher and disabled applicants. In keeping with the literature on co-production, the time and resources required to implement the planned research were underestimated, necessitating considerable flexibility on the part of all partners to ensure the planned inclusive approach and the effective completion of the study. Lessons learned were taken on board in designing a proposal for a larger follow up study. For example, the subsequent proposal included additional financial and practical support to enable participation of disabled researchers and participants, as well as realistic time frames for recruitment, data collection and analysis based on the experience of the pilot project. Although this was a small-scale scoping study, our pilot interviews collected rich illustrative data which is reported in Chapter 4.

## 4.0　FINDINGS FROM THE PILOT STUDY

### 4.1　Introduction

Although the findings from this pilot study are illustrative only and can't be used to draw generalised conclusions, they do give an indication of issues arising from the different stakeholder perspectives with respect to effective matching of disabled people and vacant accessible or adapted properties. This chapter provides some illustrative context on the case study local authority before reporting findings from staff and applicant interviews and the stakeholder discussion forums.

### 4.2　The case study area

The pilot study was conducted in a central Scotland local authority. The authority was a social housing landlord and four housing associations with stock in the area also took part in the scoping project. Across these social landlords, a mixture of RSL peer groups were represented including specialist, urban (more than 1,000 units) and urban (500-1,000 units). Background information about each organisation was taken from their Annual Returns on the (Social Housing) Charter (ARC) reports submitted to the Scottish Housing Regulator for the year 2014-2015.

Figures 5-7 show the proportion of disabled people recorded as existing tenants, new tenants and housing applicants within each organisation; while Figure 8 shows the variation in the percentage of rental income lost due to void properties and the average number of days to re-let a property for each housing provider. The information is illustrative only and it is acknowledged that in a larger scale study, ideally, a broader range of statistical housing data would be analysed to inform new qualitative data collection.

Furthermore, the ARC statistics need to be treated with some caution.The ARC seeks equalities information based on tenant head of household. Depending on how each landord completes the ARC, and the extent of the landlord's own information, there is a risk of considerable under-reporting of disability experiences. For example, figures may not reflect number of households containing a disabled person where the disabled person is not the tenant.

**Figure 5: Recording of disabled people in case study participant lettings data: total tenants**

| Participant | No. of Existing Tenants | No. of Disabled Existing Tenants | % of disabled tenants |
|---|---|---|---|
| Local authority | 35977 | 2068 | 6.0 |
| RSL 1 | 5510 | 751 | 14.0 |
| RSL 2 | 1391 | 271 | 20.0 |
| RSL 3 | 821 | 179 | 22.0 |
| RSL 4 | 4166 | 1423 | 34.0 |

Source: ARC reports 2014-15

The variation in the proportion of disabled tenants across landlords is likely to reflect a combination of demand from households including disabled people, the supply of appropriate accessible properties for disabled applicants and the effectiveness of lettings procedures. The variation is very wide from 6% for the local authority with general needs housing stock to 34% in RSL4 which may well have a much higher proportion of accessibly designed homes to let.

**Figure 6: New tenants in year 2014-15**

| Participant | New tenants in year | New tenants- disabled | % of new tenants - disabled |
|---|---|---|---|
| Local authority | 2878 | 218 | 7.5 |
| RSL1 | 682 | 43 | 6.0 |
| RSL2 | 126 | 24 | 20.0 |
| RSL3 | 67 | 19 | 28.0 |
| RSL4 | 810 | 325 | 40.0 |

Source: ARC reports 2014-15

The variation in the proportion of disabled households taking up new tenancies broadly reflects the overall pattern of disabled tenants. This is also the case for the proportion of disabled applicants (Figure 7) except that RSL2 has a high proportion of disabled applicants relative to tenants and RSL3 does not maintain its own housing register. As noted above, this data is subject to the limitations of recording 'disabled tenants' and 'disabled applicants' in the ARC system and may understate the true extent of impairments and disability among tenants and applicants.

**Figure 7: Housing applicants**

| Participant | No of applicants | No. of disabled Applicants | % of applicants - disabled |
|---|---|---|---|
| Local authority | 13083 | 1104 | 8.0 |
| RSL1 | 39899 | 10468 | 26.0 |
| RSL2 | 30851 | 7806 | 25.0 |
| RSL3[1] | 0 | 0 | 0.0 |
| RSL4 | 3528 | 1149 | 32.5 |

Source: ARC reports 2014-15

Figure 8 shows considerable variation in the proportion of annual collectable rent which is lost due to properties being void and there appears no simple correlation between total void loss and average relet time, other than for RSL4, which is significantly higher on both measures than the other participants.

**Figure 8: Void property rental loss and relet times, all property types**

| Participant | Percentage of Void Property Rental Loss | Average Property Re-let Time (days) |
|---|---|---|
| Local authority | 0.76% | 26.96 |
| RSL1 | 0.80% | 22.87 |
| RSL2 | 0.49% | 31.12 |
| RSL3[2] | 0.39% | 21.32 |
| RSL4 | 3.36% | 75.81 |

Source: ARC reports 2014-15

As an indicator of strategy towards disabled people's housing, the research examined the extent to which this was incorporated into the Local Housing Contribution Statement produced in relation to health and social care integration partnerships created under the Public Bodies (Joint Working) (Scotland) Act 2014.

The case study local authority was compared with two other Scottish local authorities. The statements were reviewed in order to explore the extent to which they addressed effective letting of adapted social housing.

Our case study Housing Contribution Statement included an explanation of the importance of housing for the health and wellbeing of people, and highlighted how housing is important for enabling independent living. The authority was continuing to increase housing built to wheelchair standard and to provide customised housing solutions for disabled people. However, the needs of disabled people might have been better addressed in relation to housing support. There was a section with evidence of the importance of, and requirement for, additional housing for people with physical impairments, learning difficulties or mental health problems. This section provided details on the number of public sector dwellings with adaptations,

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[1] Does not hold its own register
[2] Does not hold its own register

the number of wheelchair users with unmet housing needs, and the level of long term illness in the area. More than half of adults with learning difficulties lived in mainstream accommodation.

There was a clear outline of the issues related to disabled people and housing, and the aims of the Statement to address these issues. Although the Statement provided detail on actions to meet the needs of people with learning difficulties and physical impairments, there was little detail on the specific process of letting adapted social housing. A stronger connection could be made between the benefits of such housing for people with cognitive and physical impairments and the authority's aims to provide adapted social housing.

The comparative Statement from local authority B provided detailed information on the number of residents with physical impairments. Information on the number of households with one or more people who were long term sick or disabled was broken down by housing tenure, with information on the proportion of adapted dwellings and new supply of accessible housing. Local data was related to Scottish Government national outcomes for health and wellbeing (e.g. to ensure disabled people are able to live, as far as reasonably practical, independently and at home or in a homely setting in their community). Statement B provided a clear estimate of the requirement for housing for disabled people. The comparative Statement from local authority C also referred to the nine national health and wellbeing outcomes, and specifically outcome two for disabled people. However, key priorities to support the health and social care partnership did not mention housing for disabled people and the profile of housing and housing needs did not provide detail on disabled people, although the need for 'specialist forms of housing' was acknowledged as was the role of the local disabled persons' housing service.

The Housing Contribution Statements provided a 'snapshot' of local housing policy in relation to health and social care integration, giving an indication of the relative priority for meeting the housing and support needs of disabled people, but social housing lettings procedures were not a main focus of these documents.

## 4.3    Findings from staff interviews

Staff interviews used a topic guide developed from the core research questions for the pilot study and five core themes emerged from the analysis of these interviews: classification of adapted or accessible properties; the strengths and weaknesses of allocation and lettings systems for adapted social housing; examples of practice considered as effective lettings practice; barriers to effective allocations of adapted social housing; and scope for improvement or change. These themes are discussed below.

### 4.3.1   Classification of adapted or accessible properties

Descriptive labels for adapted or accessible properties often centred on the key feature of the property, such as a ground floor flat with a wet-floor shower. Participants provided examples of adaptations that can be carried out to properties.

For instance *'...ramps for the front door, it could be automatic door openers, it could be hoists, it could be a variety of things that are not standard'.*

Carol (Housing Operations Manager) also noted that adaptations include assistive technologies that support independent living especially for people with cognitive and sensory impairments. A person-centred approach to assistive technology was needed as a feature may suit one individual but not suit another. For example, a flashing doorbell could be helpful for somebody with a hearing impairment but cause confusion for somebody with dementia.

All participants expressed the definition of an adapted property in terms of a dwelling that had not been built to full accessibility standards, but had been adapted to enable people to live independently at home for as long as possible. This reduced costs associated with people moving in to care homes or hospitals.

 As Gail (Community Care Development Officer) outlined: *'We would define it in terms of ... a property that has been modified to maintain independence, to enable independence or even to restore independence. And there's lots of other things like, improve mobility and ensure that people have quality of life and confidence'.*

Some variation was apparent across approaches to categorisation of adapted or accessible properties among the five participant landlords. Figure 9 summarises some of the definitions which emerged in interviews. These did not tend to be a straightforward reflection of, for example, Housing for Varying Needs Standards (*Mind the Step,* p23), built on principles of inclusion and wider definitions of accessibility, and introducing a requirement that all new public housing should meet 'barrier free' standards. Such standards apply only to newly built, publicly funded housing.

**Figure 9: Classifying accessible and adapted social housing – staff interviews**

| Property Category | Staff Descriptions |
|---|---|
| General Needs Housing | Non-adapted properties, including those above ground floor level |
| Amenity housing | Small clusters of flats with no communal areas but with a 24 hour warden call system<br>Housing for those aged over 55 years |
| Retirement Housing | Clusters of 30-40 flats with a communal lounge, hobbies room, staff office and staff presence Monday to Friday |
| Sheltered Housing | Housing regulated by the Care Inspectorate with a higher level of support (than amenity and retirement housing), but now almost phased out |
| Very Sheltered Housing | Housing with highest levels of support from care staff |
| Wheelchair Accessible Housing | Properties built to barrier free standard |
| Adapted Housing | Ground-floor flats and bungalows that are adapted or fully accessible |
| Limited Mobility Housing | Ground-floor properties with some adaptations but unsuitable for wheelchair access, being phased out |

Helen (Housing Services Team Leader) gave an example of a development outside of the case study local authority where the property classification was under review. In a new purpose-built, accessible housing complex, upper flats had been categorised as general needs and had lift access plus generous accessibility features. The organisation wanted to re-classify these properties as 'Limited Mobility' (previously 'Elderly Amenity'). Limited Mobility accommodation was not suitable for a wheelchair user but contained accessible features such as level thresholds, wet-floor bathrooms or rise and fall kitchen worktops which would be beneficial to people with other mobility impairments but who did not require to use a wheelchair.

### 4.3.2 Strengths and Weaknesses of Allocation Systems

A Common Housing Register (CHR) operated in the case study area, for the local authority and a large number of 20 RSLs, although only five members shared the same allocation policy and points framework. Participant staff interviewees were largely in agreement that the diversity of allocation systems could cause confusion for housing applicants and occasionally, for social landlord frontline staff. Additionally, there was a mix of choice-based lettings and points-based allocation systems operating within the case study area. The CHR meant that applicants completed one application form to apply to the housing registers of all CHR members; although a variety of allocation systems were adopted by the five landlords who took part in this study.

Two participant landlords used the same choice-based letting system. Each housing applicant was designated with a priority pass to represent their assessed type and level of housing need, awarding Gold, Silver or Bronze status. Housing applicants were expected to bid online on a weekly basis, for suitable advertised properties. Donna (Housing Officer) reported that her organisation was experiencing challenges

with this approach especially for frontline housing staff. She explained that *f*eedback from other housing officers indicated that the system was not adequately distinguishing who really required, and could bid for, accessible or adapted housing. For example, it appeared that anyone awarded "medical priority" could bid for wheelchair accessible properties, necessitating time consuming checks by housing officers. At the end of the bidding process they may still not find an applicant who requires a particular property's features.

Concerns were raised by a few participants around the effectiveness of the choice-based letting online system for some disabled people in that an approach that requires continual bidding for advertised homes places the emphasis on the applicant to remember every week or created a barrier for those not well enough to bid (e.g. those in hospital). Others supported the online choice based system. Jacqui (Housing Officer) asserted that previous points-based allocations systems could reflect aspirational rather than actual priority need moves. Also, applicants who experienced difficulties with online systems could request assistance and alternative methods of engagement such as paper copies of the property advertisements or telephone assistance to submit a bid.

The other three participating landlords operated points-based allocation systems. These followed Scottish Government guidance on needs assessment[3] including applicants' current circumstances and the impact of their health situations on their capacity to live independently. These systems involved prioritisation through the award of points for specific aspects of housing need. Applicants only needed to complete one form, but all three landlords had different point schemes and prospective tenants were subsequently informed of how their applications would be managed on each landlord's housing register.

Most participant landlords had also pledged support to Homes2Fit, the Scottish Accessible Housing Register, although some participants were unsure whether their organisations had formally registered and actively advertised vacancies. Some also commented that the Homes2Fit system had not developed as far as anticipated in terms of simplifying the application process for disabled house seekers.

The five landlords reported different re-let targets for vacant properties. For instance Jacqui (Housing Officer) remarked that a target of 3 days could work where 28 days notice was given prior to a tenancy termination and there was a high demand for vacancies. Carol (Housing Operations Manager) commented that a balance needed to be struck in advertising an adapted property when the general turn-over of stock was low.

Staff interviewees discussed ways to address the situation where no suitable applicants were identified for a property from within the organisation's housing register and allocation system. Mary (Housing Officer) highlighted the opportunity to adopt a long-term perspective towards housing need. For example, applications capture current housing situations, but some people may have a long-term condition such as Muscular Dystrophy whereby a wheelchair accessible property would be required in the future. Carol (Housing Operations Manager) also clarified that there

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[3]  Guidance published in 2012 by the Scottish Parliament Information Centre at: http://www.parliament.scot/ResearchBriefingsAndFactsheets/Factsheets/SB_12-46.pdf

were limits on the length of time a house could be left void while waiting for a tenant who would be an 'exact' match. She stated that:

*'If we have a void and somebody comes on the waiting list, we will consider them as long as they meet the allocation criteria for that property which for some properties is aged 50 plus. Then we could allocate that property to them because if we hold on to it we've not got a guarantee so what we need to do next time is promote the waiting lists for that development. So the next time something comes up, we don't have that problem. Unfortunately, we need to get them allocated; we can't afford to have them sitting vacant too long'.*

In contrast, another landlord had a re-let target of approximately 25 days, in practice achieving around 20 days. Isobel (Director of Housing and Care) suggested that a different approach might be taken towards reporting of re-let times for adapted social housing for the Regulator's Annual Return on the Charter. For example where work in relation to adaptations extended the void period, these properties could be recorded separately. This approach had been supported by the organisation's board, provided close monitoring continued and rental loss did not increase by more than 2%.

### 4.3.3 Barriers to Effective Letting of Adapted Social Housing

Four interconnected barriers were identified by participants: building in accessibility to existing properties and avoiding the removal of adaptations; lack of capacity to record up-to-date property information related to accessibility; financial pressures to reduce staff resources; and the short-term focus of allocation systems rather than recognising the importance of housing needs over the long-term.

Participants highlighted how vacancies could pose a barrier to letting where properties had been constructed in a period when accessibility for disabled people was not considered, monitored or recognised to benefit other tenants. One interviewee explained how recently built properties contained design elements which were useful for all (for example dementia friendly design). Problems arose with properties built during the 1970s and 1980s, giving the example of housing for older people on a steep hill and three storeys high without lifts. Another interviewee explained how accessible design was now being introduced in to all properties (e.g. ease-of-use taps) and that this landlord wanted to ensure that all ground level accommodation was classified as amenity standard. Inclusive design training, with a focus on housing for disabled people, helped staff introduce inclusive features to the general design briefs for kitchens and bathrooms.

Barriers to letting could be overcome through carrying out improvements to the overall level of accessibility during cyclical upgrades, for example to kitchens (typically every 15 years) and bathrooms (typically every 20-25 years). The needs of individual tenants could be taken in to account and specific features incorporated into refurbishment. Such a focus on housing for older or disabled people had helped to refine cyclical repair processes for one participant landlord, for example using a person-centred approach to replace a wet floor shower with installation of a bath to assist with skin conditions.

Participant landlords also discussed landlords' lack of capacity to record up-to-date property information relating to accessibility. Most were expecting upgrades to their

IT systems in the near future which might help with this, for example by recording what types of adaptations existed in properties. Some interviewees observed that sometimes Housing Officers were unaware of adaptations until properties became vacant, particularly in upper flats with bespoke adjustments. Also, landlords did not always have full information on those properties identified as adapted. For example, a ground-floor flat may show as having a wet-floor shower and level access but may contain inadequate internal circulation for a wheelchair.

New IT systems could also facilitate better sharing of information across landlords. An example was given of a paper-based system being used by the local authority and RSL to keep track of property details for a sheltered housing development with over 50 lettings. A local authority interviewee pointed out that up-to-date property information was also helpful for assessing future housing needs for particular groups when planning for new house building. Currently however, different landlords' databases recorded accessible housing in different ways making it difficult to synthesise or compare stock information.

Thirdly, interviewees discussed the financial pressures to reduce staff resources. Some referred to the Scottish Government's introduction of integrated health and care partnerships which had resulted in organisational restructuring. It was acknowledged, however that more time was needed to evaluate any impact of restructuring on effectiveness of allocations.

A fourth barrier raised by participants around effective allocations of adapted housing was the short-term focus of lettings systems, rather than recognising the importance of long-term housing circumstances. This particularly applied to tenants with long-term health conditions which could deteriorate or where older age may reduce a person's physical capabilities. It was explained that an OT's role requires discussion of people's longer term needs, not only what they need in the next few weeks or months, but five years ahead. Lettings procedures could similarly take a longer term perspective where this information was available about applicants.

Housing applicants and tenants themselves may be increasingly aware of the likelihood of acquired impairments in older age. One interviewee remarked that it was proving more difficult to let upper-floor amenity flats:
*'Our amenity housing tends to be for people over 55 but we have struggled to relet them…. we find that that older people are looking for ground floor. We do have ground floor but there are a lot of upper flats too'.*

4.3.4  Examples of effective allocations of adapted social housing

Interviewees were able to provide examples which they considered to be effective allocation of adapted social housing, including:

- An adapted ground floor flat with a wet-floor bathroom and wheelchair access throughout where a family with a wheelchair user were able to move in without any further adjustments to the property.
- A family with a wheelchair user who had approached the Housing Association to enquire if a dwelling classified as 'amenity' could be adjusted. They knew that in their area, the number of accessible properties was low and were

actively looking at general stock that came available. They proposed that a level access entrance could be introduced to the side of a house which would provide adequate access for a wheelchair-user. After an assessment by its technical team, the Housing Association agreed and carried out the work in order to allocate that specific property to the family.

- A family with an autistic young son needed a larger property with separate bedrooms for him and his brother, as often he would be restless during the night and disturb the sleep for his brother to the extent that his brother stayed a lot with relatives. The usual allocation policy was one bedroom for two young boys to share. However, a person-centred approach enabled flexibility such that an accessible property was allocated, with separate bedrooms, ample space and level access to meet the needs of the young boy with autism and his family.

- A newly built three-bedroom bungalow was allocated to a family with a disabled child who used a wheelchair. The family moved from a privately rented upper flat where the son needed to be carried up and down the stairs. This new accessible property greatly improved the quality of life for the whole household.

- An allocation of a new house to a large family with a wheelchair user had been achieved by knocking two properties into one, with a slight loss on rental income. However, as bungalows for large households were very rare it was unlikely that this family would have received another offer in the near future.

These examples variously demonstrated the role of good initial design, flexibility or reasonable adjustment in application of allocations policies and  flexibility and creativity in developing technical or design responses to meet needs which otherwise would be difficult to meet. The importance of new supply of accessible homes was also highlighted by participants as offering the most scope for providing homes truly tailored to a household's needs.

### 4.3.5   Scope for Improvement or Change

Participant landlord staff interviewees identified three key areas for future improvement or change:

- Improved communication around matching applicants to individual lettings
- Adjusting allocations and lettings systems to allow for a longer-term perspective on health conditions and impairments.
- Enhanced staff training in relation to disability awareness and meeting varying housing needs of applicants.

A range of possible improvements to communication were suggested by participants:

- Better coordination across housing and social work services, assisted by improved IT systems so information could be shared across services.
- More sharing of data collection, for example where occupational therapists collect data on a property visit, this could usefully transferred to landlords' property records.
- Development of a shared IT system may help to refine priority categories and to harmonise housing and social work approaches.

- Improved communication between social landlords. For example, in a choice based system, if there was a lack of bids for, say, a property with a track-hoist, staff should be able to consult with other landlords to see if they had suitable applicants.
- With choice-based letting systems, landlords may need to be more pro-active in the matching of adapted vacancies with an appropriate applicant.
- Ideally the letting process should incorporate arranging appropriate housing support. It was thought that more could be done, for instance, to help maintain tenancies for people with mental health issues.
- Landlords could be more proactive in their inclusion of the service user perspective to help shape effective allocation of social housing:

*'To be honest with you I think you need to speak to the individuals who are going through the process. If you get their experiences then that will give you a picture of how everything works, what can be changed - because we're just dealing with the process, the administrative side, and dealing with the comments. Everybody is doing their best but it's the people who are going through the process who will know what works.'*

The second area interviewees identified was staff training, particularly on inclusive design and understanding of needs and fluctuating conditions. Some examples and suggestions were provided by interviewees:

- Training on inclusive design was provided by one RSL for its technical design team, with positive outcomes.
- The importance of ensuring that external environments are also accessible.
- Further benefits could perhaps be gained by extending inclusive design training to staff working in housing options advice, lettings and property management.
- There is a need to work with some applicants and tenants to explore housing options and choices for moving home. One interviewee felt some applicants perceived that moving out of an inaccessible property was 'giving up'.
- Staff training could support working more effectively with housing applicants to accurately record needs information in relation to how different impairments impact on their lived experience and requirements to facilitate independent living.
- Lettings policy and practice needs to better allow for the fluctuating nature of some health conditions. Lettings which at first appear not to make full use of all adaptations may be fully required if someone's condition changes.

### 4.3.6 Experiences of disabled housing applicants and tenants

The three main themes which arose from the applicant interviews were the range of their current housing needs and challenges; their experience of applying for housing; and their ideas for changes or improvements in lettings systems. The experiences of our participant applicants are presented as individual case studies to allow their stories to be told from their perspectives.

**Tim**

Tim is an adult with learning difficulties and lives with his parents Harry and Eva. Situated in a village community, the family home is an owner-occupied two-bedroom detached bungalow which is spacious inside and has a generous garden area outside. The main reason that Harry and Eva chose this property 20 years ago was its location within a quiet cul-de-sac. This meant that as a child, Tim could play outside without the risk of straying too far away. Tim was now applying for his own independent housing, with the help of his parents.

Tim's housing needs were connected with appropriate housing support, rather than with a requirement for a fully accessible property. Harry and Eva explained that challenges for Tim included maintaining concentration and a lack of perception of time or danger. In the kitchen Tim often required supervision to remind him not to place a knife in the toaster while it was switched on, or to check that the grill was turned off after use. There had been occasions where strangers had come to the door asking for Tim. Harry and Eva reflected that he perhaps gave out personal contact details to people he met making him particularly vulnerable.

Harry and Eva were sceptical about the shift from shared homes to community living for people with learning difficulties. In their opinion, adults with learning difficulties who they knew living locally with care did not appear to be completely happy. Once while in a restaurant for lunch, Harry commented that he saw a carer spend most of their time talking on a mobile phone rather than paying attention to or interacting with their client. They felt strongly that such situations must not happen to Tim.

One of the motivations to find appropriate housing and support for Tim related to his parents' health. Harry had Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), while Eva had received treatment for cancer. Both conditions resulted in fatigue and high degrees of pain that could disrupt their capacities to stay vigilant for Tim. However, Eva had obtained a medical certificate from her GP to verify that she was still fit to support Tim, indicating an element of distrust with social work services.

Due to insistence from the social work department, Tim has been registered for housing with the local authority and a housing association for over seven years. Social work services argued that it would take years before a house became available and that this would provide time for Tim to learn independent living skills. However, Tim was offered a property after just 11 months. Tim did not want to move. His parents and the housing association also agreed that Tim would benefit from more time to build independent living skills.

Harry and Eva felt that social work staff did not appear to understand the practicalities of Tim developing independent living skills and often failed to listen to the family. One social worker's insistence that Tim visit places to observe others with learning difficulties living in the community created emotional stress. The family GP recorded Tim's high blood pressure, noted his issue of bed-wetting and, during a one-to-one discussion, discovered that Tim felt unwanted by his family. The GP confronted the social work department to demand that they stop placing pressure on Tim to move out from his parents' home and adopt a person-centred approach for his well-being.

Harry and Eva were clear that some staff had been very understanding and had also given support towards independent living skills training. Some showed knowledge of technologies that could help Tim around the house and of potential shared-living opportunities that may suit Tim. Contrastingly, other staff had failed to recognise the importance of a consistent contact for Tim and tended not to fully appreciate the complexities of his housing needs. For instance, Harry and Eva reflected that it was crucial that Tim had consistency with carers and got to know them well.

**Kathy**

Kathy is 72 years old and is responsible for bringing up two grand-children (aged ten and 11 years), one of whom has learning difficulties. Kathy was allocated her current housing association property a year ago. It is part of a new housing development on the outskirts of a central Scotland town and has three bedrooms, two bathrooms and gardens to front and rear.

Kathy explained that she was applying for an adapted house in the town centre with room for her two grandchildren, because of a change her health circumstances and related affordability of transport. Kathy experienced pain in her hips, legs and back which made it increasingly difficult to use the stairs. Her current 10-15 minute walk to the bus stop was becoming more difficult. Her adult grand-daughter normally helped to carry shopping or provide a lift to the GP. Kathy's ten year old grand-daughter was at school nearby. Her 11 year old grand-son had learning difficulties and attended a specialist school in the town centre. Her grand-son was physically and verbally bullied by local children and was unable to socialise in after-school activities due to health and safety regulations. Kathy felt he was missing out socially as she was unable to afford the £20 taxi trip to the town centre where he could participate with his school peers.

Kathy explained that her grand-daughter helped to put her name down on the local choice based lettings scheme and on the home swap scheme to see if an opportunity arose in the town. Both are online systems and her grand-daughter logs in each week to check, but it can still be difficult for her to remember all the time. So far no swaps have come up and although her current property is part of a new housing development, Kathy is doubtful that anybody would want to move to her location mainly because the older housing looks in need of repair and the public transport links are poor. She commented that:

*'I don't think any anybody who would like to stay up here. All you see is "up for sale"; everybody seems to want to move out of here'* (Kathy).

**Pam**

Pam (57 years old) and Sam (51 years old) currently live in a two-bedroom, local authority ground floor flat. They took up the tenancy seven years ago and the flat met their housing needs at that time where they were both classed as having 'ambulant mobility'. The flat is in a block of nine where four properties are social rented tenancies and the others let privately. The front and back doors have steps and there is a shared garden area to the rear of the property.

Sam and Pam were applying for housing because his health condition had deteriorated and their current property no longer met their housing needs. For two years, Sam has used an electric wheelchair and their flat is not wheelchair accessible. Sam also requires assistance to shower using a bathing-chair on wheels, plus physical assistance to get out of the electric wheelchair while it is manoeuvred down the front door steps. As the flat is an older property, the concrete door surrounds and ceiling mean it can't be adapted for a track hoist, as Pippa explained:
*'Obviously if Sam's health deteriorates more then that's what needs to be looked at the hoist system to get him in and out of bed, in and out of his chair because that's going to involve more carers coming in. But at the moment he can get himself in to bed and carers come in to obviously shower him but as his health deteriorates, he'll need more care and that's where the hoist system comes in depending on how bad his health gets.'*

The current housing situation is exasperating and causes mental health issues for both Sam and Pam. Sam often feels depressed, mainly through frustration with his inability to do things for himself. Pam reported feeling upset at the strain this placed on their marriage and that often care professionals overlooked her needs when designing services around Sam. Pam was sleeping in the second bedroom since Sam's health condition made it difficult to share a bed and she needed to be careful not to trip over equipment.

Sam had applied for family and two-bedroom wheelchair accessible housing with a garden or small area for relaxation, in nearby locations. Pam explained that an outdoor space helped them to escape from frustrations:
*'In my old house I used to have some containers, I'm not a great gardener by any means but my late mum was and I seem to have taken from her. I used to love pottering about with the tubs etc.'*

Sam and Pam outlined that their short-term memory difficulties had posed a big challenge throughout the housing allocation process. Their daughter-in-law Pippa provided a lot of assistance with the online choice-based letting system but commented that:
*'It's a nightmare because you've got to remember to log on. They don't email you to remind you to go on or let you know if there are any properties ... which is annoying when you've got five children as well'.*

Pippa went on to described what she has managed to do so far for her in-laws:
*"To start with we've obviously applied for the transfer with the local authority. Because of the way that the housing register works in the area, it's called a common housing register, so if you apply to the council with that then that automatically puts you down for one of the biggest housing associations in the town. So that will give*

*you those two and above and beyond that I've applied to another housing association for them where we've also put in and managed to get a silver priority pass for the medical issues. And we've also applied to a housing association which does sheltered housing in the area and that's obviously the four main providers in the area'.*

Pam recounted that until recently they had been excluded from sheltered housing based upon age restrictions which she felt was age discrimination, especially when at the other end of their street there were accessible sheltered properties and Pam had heard that some were occupied by people more mobile than themselves. Pippa drew upon her knowledge of housing allocation systems from working within the care home sector. Additionally Pippa, Sam and Pam all agreed that the most helpful person during the housing allocation process had been their occupational therapist. She pointed out where to go for information, who to contact and understood the urgency of the situation.

Pippa remarked that she had read in a local newspaper that new housing was planned that will include accessible properties. However, they were aware that this would take time and one of the challenges Sam and Pam faced was lack of communication, without a specific housing officer. This was because they were moving to a new local authority area, not within the same area. Pam pointed out that their new house, new build or existing, needed to be in a good location for public transport, amenities and facilities.

**Emma**

Emma is 37 years old and has mental health issues. She was accepted as homeless at the time of the interview and seeking a wheelchair accessible property. She had spent some time staying in local temporary homelessness accommodation in a ground floor flat. However, issues arose with the care and support Emma needed and she had returned to stay at her mum's place. Emma was staying in a downstairs extension with a bathroom. Although the local authority had installed a ramp to the front door, internal space was very tight for Emma's needs:
*'I've got 2 wheelchairs. The one I'm in just now is an electric wheelchair and I've also got one for inside which is a manual wheelchair. The 2 wheelchairs are in my bedroom and you literally can't move'.*

Emma's current housing situation has been influenced by a recent stay in temporary accommodation. She recounted leaving her mum's house and staying at the homelessness facility for some four months. Although this temporary accommodation was not fully accessible, the main challenge Emma encountered related to the quality of care offered. Emma requires assistance with toileting, dressing, washing, preparing and cutting up food, going out, shopping, housework, laundry and ironing. She had experienced carers who said they did not know how to clean the floor. Emma tried to work with the same two carers to preserve continuity. However, neither they nor the care agency seemed to understand her mental health issues and how her moods could fluctuate. Sometimes this was triggered by frustration when tasks were not carried out the way that she would like, for example making up the bed.

Emma felt that cares services started from pre-conceived assumptions about her behaviour and showed little understanding that to Emma, how tasks were conducted was just as important as getting them done. Emma's social worker appeared to place pressure on Emma to perform as many tasks by herself as possible. For instance, Emma described that her wheelchair could enter the kitchen but was unable to turn or manoeuvre. This made reaching or pouring difficult and resulted in Emma burning herself when she had been cooking independently. Emma's social worker suggested that assistive technologies would benefit Emma but Emma herself commented that these technologies do not replace the necessity for human assistance with personal care.

Emma enjoys privacy and needs personal space especially given her mental health condition. She thought she had recently found an ideal home in a wheelchair accessible housing association property but the shared living arrangement put her off:
*'It's a bungalow, is cream on the outside and actually looks like a bought house. So cream on the outside and got a porch, driveway for the car and a little bit of a garden. It's absolutely beautiful and when I phoned to find out about it, it turned out to be a shared house and said no!'*

Emma reported that she had difficulty with the online choice-based letting system. At one point, she was informed that if she did not bid on a property, after 6 months she would be removed from the register. However, Emma failed to find any suitable properties in the areas she wants to stay in. Recently, a local authority housing officer began to assist her with the application process. The challenge, Emma asserted, lay with the social work department which was pushing her to return to the homeless accommodation.

An offer of an accessible house was made to Emma, but she turned it down. She explained:
*'There's one that has come up in high-rise flats. It's a bottom floor flat, but still not what I would want it to be. I would want to be in a bungalow ... front and back doors so I can get in to the garden. And I want care in place that's not telling me what or when I need care'.*

Due to uncertainty around the quality and level of support, Emma is reluctant to consider housing outside the immediate area. This is so that she can be near social and family support networks. She also reported that her location within the case study area was not too bad for external wheelchair access. In some places the kerbs were too high and the cars too fast but, she had made the local MP aware of the difficulties and hoped that environmental accessibility would improve in the future.

**Bryan**

Bryan is a single parent and has his two daughters living with him in the case study area. The older girl is aged eight years and the younger five years. The younger was diagnosed with Miller–Dieker syndrome (MDS) at six months old and requires 24 hour care. They have lived for 2.5 years in a local authority two-bedroom, ground-floor, ('four in-a-block') property, with an accessible bathroom and which has external access down eight steps.

Bryan remarked that he would move to a suitable property for his daughters' needs in any location. His five-year-old daughter was due to change from the use of an adapted buggy to a wheelchair soon and this would create difficulties negotiating the external steps to the property. She shares a bedroom with her dad with an adapted bed to shift her sleeping positions and a wheelchair with a standing frame to aid posture and movement. Bryan explained that their next property needed to be on one level, with a hoist in the bathroom, a wet-floor shower, no external steps and enough space to store his daughter's mobility equipment. The lack of space currently affected his eight year old daughter too.

Bryan recounted that his household had moved from a previous property that had poorer accessibility. The local authority had no suitable housing available and had proposed their current accommodation as a temporary solution. Bryan has applied to a housing association and the local council for housing. With the housing association, allocations are advertised through choice-based lettings and Bryan finds this easy to operate, while at the same time finds the local authority points-based system frustrating:
*'The CBL website is perfect for somebody in my situation. I can be pro-active and check it regularly. But the local authority housing, it seem that when you go it's rehearsed, they tell you the same thing over and over again: you know there's no light at the end of the tunnel and they make you aware that the houses are high demand and short supply'.*

However, the choice-based system had so far yielded no suitable properties. Additionally the local authority operated four types of waiting lists and Bryan had been informed that he was on the transfer list since they viewed him as suitably housed. He feels that the lack of accessible or adapted properties is the main barrier. However, he reflected that there had been a lack of contact from the local authority housing department or social work to update their records on their household conditions and that he felt frustrated that nothing was happening.

All of our participant interviewees asserted that more accessible housing needed to be built in the future. Emma pointed out that this would increase choice to live in a person's local area, while Pippa, Pam and Sam said that fully accessible properties would meet long-term health needs and avoid situations where disabled people became stuck in older, less adaptable housing stock.

Three households identified that application systems failed to adequately recognise support needs for people with cognitive impairments. There was a consensus that frontline housing staff as well as those at strategic level required more training around mental health awareness and disability equality. Interviewees highlighted

that, apart from those housing associations with an explicit focus on disability, housing providers and other agencies tended to lack understanding of the ways current housing difficulties could exacerbate or trigger emotional stress.

Participants said they would benefit from having a specific named housing professional to help them access and engage with housing application systems. As well as providing practical support to bid for advertised properties online, staff could remind housing applicants of next steps and coordinate any other required communication.

A single consistent contact could also have a role in challenging misunderstandings about independent living. For instance, Harry and Eva reflected upon the pressure they felt from social work services for Tim to live alone in the community. Similarly Emma voiced concerns that social work focused upon the quantity of tasks that she could complete unaided, rather than taking her lead on her needs and the level of support she required to achieve independent living.

Applicant interviewees highlighted that housing allocation systems could fail to take account of the needs of the entire household because of the focus on an individual disabled person. Pam pointed out that care and housing professionals designed services around one household member. For example, one community alarm bracelet was assigned to her and Sam as a disabled couple. If Sam wears it at night in bed and she has a fall in the kitchen, there is the risk that he will be unaware that Pam requires urgent help. Kathy explained how the housing application system failed to prioritise the ways her deterioration in health placed extra physical strain on her child-care capacities. A move to an adapted or accessible house would benefit her grand-children as well as herself.

4.3.7   Findings from stakeholder discussion forums

A summary of research findings to date was provided to inform the stakeholder discussions. Some participants had been involved in the earlier stages and some were new participants.

The stakeholder forums reflected on the co-production approach. Parallels were identified between support for co-production in research and the support provided for tenant scrutiny panels. Both should be about sharing information and power. It was useful to think about high levels of tenant involvement/scrutiny as being a co-production strategy to improve the landlord's policies and practice. Comparisons were also made with the local authority's wider co-production initiatives in terms of the input to the local housing strategy, though it was noted that operational staff were less aware of these activities.

The discussion forums recognised that for disabled people, finding appropriate housing was a very complex process. It was not just about level access and design of fittings, etc. The question was whether the disabled person could comfortably manage in the property? Did they feel independent? Also changes in care and support packages (which could result from financial cuts) could impact on ability to manage in a particular tenancy. These ideas could feed into future research design.

A number of discussion group participants could see the relevance of the initial findings to their own organisation or housing situation. One of the applicant interviewees was homeless and it was acknowledged that homelessness provision did not include enough adapted properties. For example in one management area there were 160 temporary properties for homeless people, of which only one was adapted to suit a disabled person. Landlord representatives also discussed how they did not get enough detailed information about an applicant's circumstances, including their social and support networks until too late in the process; because choice based lettings systems were not capturing this at an early stage. Few allocation policies gave much priority to support needs, which, for a family including a disabled person or an older person, may be much more significant than for someone who doesn't need those supports.

Issues of applicants' technical confidence, skills and time needed to engage with internet based lettings systems were noted. Someone who was managing disability or health in unsuitable housing may have all their time and energy taken up with managing daily living, not leaving time to remember that "today is the day the new vacancies get posted" and then have time to bid, and then to look at how that has gone. Others may be managing memory problems which meant they missed opportunities to bid. There was a need to look at how disabled people were supported to overcome these institutional barriers in choice-based lettings and IT systems in general.

The important role of occupational therapists was widely recognised although sometimes there was a disconnection between ideal solutions and what was pragmatically achievable. Similarly there may sometimes be a lack of technical understanding about what adaptations can be provided in a property. Participants could envisage that some learning from the research could be readily applied, indicating the possibility of an action research approach to a follow up study. Examples included:

- Current reviews of allocations policy meant an opportunity to look more closely at disabled applicants and lettings for adapted properties.
- Landlords could look at barriers to using internet bidding systems.
- Liaison with the Home2Fit accessible housing register could be reviewed.
- There may be scope to develop peer mentoring/advocacy mechanisms for applicants.
- The recommendation of a named contact and applicants not having to repeat their story multiple times could be considered, including more frequent follow up interviews with applicants self-identifying as disabled/with a disabled person.
- Staff training on inclusive/adaptable design of properties could be taken forward.

One housing provider gave an example of a specially designed and built property which had to be allocated to someone who was not disabled. At the time there wasn't the option to look more widely (than their own register) for a suitable tenant. This led to a discussion about void management and performance monitoring – and questions around how long would it be acceptable to hold a property for in order to get the best applicant match.

Some landlords conducted annual visits of properties to update records and note tenant expectations of change. Others had much less adequate property records. Some landlords would look more widely than their own lists to seek to let to a person with appropriate needs for the design of a vacancy. For the Common Housing Register, there was a need for an improved system to identify and classify adapted and accessible housing.

Participants discussed the likelihood of allocation policy reviews in the light of the 2014 Housing Act. There was some discussion regarding possibly offering temporary tenancies of adapted housing. The Housing (Scotland) Act 2014 allowed for Short Scottish Secure Tenancies (SSSTs) for adapted properties and this could be agreed by landlord and tenant, with assistance to move if a better match became available. Mutual exchanges might also be useful in getting a good fit of tenants and properties as applicants and tenants may have informal knowledge about availability and adaptations. Stakeholders also discussed the ARC (Annual Report on the Charter) reports to the Scottish Housing Regulator. It was suggested that data collection for ARCs could take better account of the need for some flexibility in allocating adapted properties.

Participants could identify examples of offers recognised as 'inappropriate' (not a good fit), which could affect people's health. However, one landlord reported very few refusals of adapted properties. Issues arose more often in relation to agreeing care packages than to the property being offered. Failure to put a care package in place could mean someone staying longer in an institutional environment. Some felt that applicants should have the choice to accept tenancies irrespective of care provision.

Finally, participants recognised the potential for discussing vacancies across landlords and local authority areas, possibly involving social workers, occupational therapists and care managers who may have valuable knowledge of applicants and properties.

### 4.3.8  Conclusion

The illustrative findings from the scoping study confirmed the persistence of challenges raised in the previous *Mind the Step* and *Space to Move* reports, suggesting that while some housing and service providers were responding to research findings, there remained considerable scope for an 'action research' approach to future research which might help facilitate continuing improvements in practice. For example, action research could examine the impact of policy review and staff training programmes on the effectiveness of lettings practice.

The complex experiences of applicants which emerged from pilot interviews strongly indicated the need for more in depth and longitudinal data collection on the experiences of disabled housing applicants. Ideally, research would examine the sequential stages of joining a housing register, needs assessment, waiting/bidding for a suitable property and settling into a new home (including arranging appropriate care or support services).

## 5.0  CONCLUSIONS

### 5.1  Introduction

This final chapter considers the how the research questions around effective matching of disabled housing applicants and suitable properties may be considered from a more strategic perspective. It then presents the study's conclusions on the feasibility of the pilot research method, the value of the illustrative new data collected and the key learning points for developing a more rigorous and robust study.

### 5.2  Changing context – a strategic approach to lettings?

Arguably, the housing and social policy context in which disabled people seek to meet their housing needs continues to become more challenging in terms of continuing constraints on the supply of accessible housing, as well as continuing welfare austerity for those reliant on social care and support, and on benefits as a source of income.

The most recent legislation relating to housing allocations gives landlords increased flexibility and discretion in terms of how they prioritise need, but there remains a strategic challenge around the inter-relationships between allocations policies and meeting the housing needs of disabled people. Strategy and policy on housing adaptations could be more rigorously linked to design and supply of new housing, as well as to allocations policies.

The study uncovered little research into, or monitoring of, quality of allocations policy reviews at organisation level, and the extent to which a strategic approach to lettings is taken (for example, local authorities and housing associations coming together to plan lettings). Our pilot study suggests there remains scope for a more integrated, strategic approach to housing application and lettings systems to enhance the effective allocation of adapted and accessible housing.

The use of lettings plans has been recommended in central government guidance (Scottish Government, 2010b) and has the potential to increase the effectiveness of allocations by taking both a planned and a partnership approach to meeting needs in a local authority area. Drawing on data on trends in vacancies, applications from disabled people and assessments of the needs of other groups on the housing list, local authorities and housing associations could plan how best to utilise vacancies arising in the course of a year, by anticipating trends and deciding how to apportion lettings in different places and of different types and sizes of properties to different categories of applicants. A lettings plan can highlight where practice on adapted and accessible housing needs to be enhanced in comparison to general needs vacancies, with a view to making optimum use of stock and meeting disabled people's needs as speedily as possible. Lettings plans could also be linked to housing options advice protocols.

## 5.3 Feasibility of research method

Overall, the co-production methodology for this scoping study worked well and could be further developed in a larger study. The benefits of including disabled people's perspectives in the design, fieldwork and reporting stages were evident. A number of challenges could be readily addressed in a larger scale study. For example, co-production involved participants who had mobility impairments and other constraints which made it physically impossible to attend meetings, necessitating flexibility in terms of the mechanisms for their involvement, or support with transport. Adequate time also needs to be built in to allow for recruitment, coordination, and training and support for disabled peer advisers and researchers. There is a need for a range of mechanisms to support peer advisory panel members to engage in feedback in ways which fit with their capacity and availability. The pilot study demonstrated the feasibility of interviewing disabled applicants, but it was important to respect their preferences in relation to interview locations.

Stakeholders broadly reported that the content of the scoping study was useful in informing future research and practice, and that the research instruments used had worked well, enabling researchers to explore the most relevant issues for lettings practice.

## 5.4 Value of illustrative findings

The pilot study revealed some illustrative findings which closely mirrored the *Mind the Space* study in England. Although this could suggest a lack of progress against previous recommendations, it also offers an opportunity for an action research approach to a follow up study, where changing landlord practice could be identified and evaluated.

Some disabled applicants encountered difficulties with online choice based lettings systems. It was suggested that having a single staff contact as a facilitator for effective monitoring and updating of their housing applications and circumstances would be beneficial. Applicant interviewees also valued the role of occupational therapists in discussing decision-making, sign-posting applicants to relevant information and providing advice around housing and support needs.

Age restrictions in lettings practice fail to recognise what Bernard et al. (2007) refer to as an optimum age perspective. This means acknowledging that health conditions fluctuate and that those living with long-term deteriorating conditions require the least possible disruption to living situations.

The pilot study suggested scope for some review of how landlords worked with the Scotland-wide Home2Fit accessible housing register. A future study could also better integrate the roles of Housing Options Scotland, and local housing options services in thinking about lettings and allocations of adapted housing.

A common theme running through the evidence review, staff interviews and applicant interviews was the need for social inclusion training across agencies involved with the housing application and lettings processes. This echoes Bricher's (2000) call for the social model of disability to be implemented in practice and Beadle and Santy-Tomlinson's (2008) finding that training on inclusive design improves awareness of

methods to enhance social inclusion. Inclusive design training helps staff to appreciate shared interests among different tenant groups (Humphrey, 2000) and put in to practice accessibility features that benefit a variety of household circumstances (Blackman et al, 2003). Appropriate training could help frontline housing staff better connect to development and design agendas, and to housing strategy; as well as supporting development and design staff to better understand applicant requirements and lettings practice.

## 5.5   Next steps

Building on recommendations from the modest existing evidence on improving the effectiveness of allocations of adapted social housing this scoping project suggests some potentially fruitful priorities for future, larger scale research which could produce more robust evidence for practice.

There remains a need to continually update the practice context in which accessible housing is delivered, including conducting up to date analyses of available data sets on housing stock, lettings and other relevant performance data.  At case study level, there are several analyses which, together and separately, could contribute to a more robust contextual framing of qualitative interview data from staff and applicants. These are: the interrogation or analysis of waiting/housing list data; review of allocations policies for the study landlords; systematic comparison of allocations procedures in terms of design of specific supports and application review processes where the application notes a disability or health related need for a specific location or house design; and an analysis of outcomes.

Research to date has drawn upon 'snapshot' interviews with disabled applicants and adopting a longitudinal perspective to follow the experiences of disabled housing applicants over a period of time and at different stages in the applications, lettings and settling in processes would add to our understanding of effective practice. The average waiting time for suitably designed and located housing relative to non-disabled applicants may be worth further investigation in a later study. Similarly there is scope for more substantive exploration of the types of offers disabled applicants received and the suitability of these (only one pilot interview really touched on this important aspect of the study).

Future research needs to build on policy and practice guidance and recommendations which already exist for social landlords by engaging in action research which assesses responses to recommendations, enhanced practice, and any barriers to change. Drawing on the findings from this pilot study, the research team developed a follow-up study as summarised in Figure 10.

**Figure 10: Summary of proposed follow up study - What works for adapted social housing lettings?**

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**Action research to enhance independent living for disabled people**

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?

Research Approach

This substantial study will track the experiences of disabled house seekers and examine social housing application and lettings processes to provide robust evidence for improved policy and practice.
The study will:
- Examine different stages of social housing allocations processes and landlord practice in letting adapted/accessible properties
- Inform housing providers of the lived experience of disabled housing applicants using their systems; providing sufficiently robust data to inform review of social landlord practices
- Develop action research to assess practice change among participating landlords during the study period, communicating findings as the project progresses and supporting beneficial change
- Ensure disabled people co-produce the research and recommendations, demonstrating what works in accessing appropriate adapted housing

The study proposes a comparison across up to three local authority areas in Scotland with different allocation systems will provide new and up to date evidence on disabled house seekers' needs experiences and outcomes over time in different housing allocation processes. The study will also take account of new/innovative approaches in social housing lettings across other needs groups, as appropriate. The experiences of, and outcomes for, disabled social housing applicants seeking a suitable home, will be examined over a one year time period enabling 'real time' experiences to be captured.

A three way co-production partnership approach will involve a leading housing advice agency for disabled people, a leading provider of housing for disabled people and an academic team with a disabled project researcher (plus recruitment of disabled peer researchers). Co-production mechanisms will ensure the voices of disabled housing applicants are the core focus of the research.

Proposed outputs:

- Full project report and recommendations for wide dissemination across Scotland and UK through established housing and disability sector networks,

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and disabled-led Project Advisory Board
- Further dissemination through international Housing Research Networks of which we are members

Anticipated Impact:

- ability to support national and local policy and practice change with robust data
- improvements and innovation in housing practice to support participation of disabled people
- identifying solutions to optimise matching of adapted social housing to disabled applicants in ways which maximise choice and control
- more disabled people able to access suitable homes and live independently
- more cost effective lettings.

Early impact will be monitored as part of the tracking interviews and feedback forums to determine impact on disabled participants and practice change among landlord participants, including attitude and approach to co-production in policy development and change; longer term impacts will be measured (by end of project and beyond), with reference to formal review of changes resulting from application of research recommendations.

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