



What is the future of supported housing?

Supported housing has provided an important service for vulnerable people in the community for a long time. It always seems to be under a review of one kind or another and its future never seems to be clear and every opportunity seems to be uncertainty. However, the recent Department of Health Care and Support Specialised Housing Fund was oversubscribed and there is an increasing interest amongst funders, commissioners, developers and providers in what supported housing can offer.

In this viewpoint, I will consider the history of supported housing, where we are now and where we might go in the future.

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What is supported housing?

With supported housing under the spotlight under current welfare reform proposals by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) and what constitutes “exempt accommodation” for housing benefit purposes¹, it is not always clear what we mean by the term ‘supported housing’. There is no consistent statutory definition that describes it adequately. This sense of vagueness about what exactly supported housing is perhaps leads to weaker conclusions or evidence about what it delivers. The overarching objective of supported housing is to enable someone to live safely in their own home.

Estimates of the amount of supported housing in England differ. The House of Commons Library has estimated that there are around 170,000 benefit claimants in England living in supported housing.²

Perhaps one of the most useful descriptors of supported housing is that used by SITRA, the housing, care and support consultancy, which is:

‘Supported housing is an umbrella term applied to a whole range of housing solutions for vulnerable people’.³

This does not, however, give us much of a clue to how supported housing works in a practical way, or indeed how the ‘support’ element differentiates it from ordinary homes.

Supported housing seems to be constantly balancing on a precipice between success and potential failure, despite having reached lofty heights in providing housing based services to vulnerable people in the community.

Overall, the track record is good, but there is a frequent need to rely on more than one revenue funding source – one for housing and one for support. This can generate multiple scrutinies, and gives a confusing view that supported housing is a hybrid product, when its real purpose is to support vulnerable people in the broader community, by providing direct services.

In terms of housing types, supported housing covers a wide range of situations. These include:

Supported Living

Group Homes

Refuges

Sheltered Housing

Extra Care Housing

Hostels

¹ Ferres, G. & Ramsden, S., *Briefing: Reforming Social Security - A briefing paper for the ADASS housing policy network*, ADASS, 2013

² Wilson W, *Housing Benefit Reform – Supported Housing*, House of Commons Library, London, December 2012. www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN06080

³ www.sitra.org/home/

Furthermore, supported housing is characterised by:

- A community setting
- A wide range of different client groups that come together under the umbrella term vulnerable
- The delivery of person-centred support services to vulnerable people
- An ostensibly straightforward model
- Integration of services, and
- Complicated funding protocols

On the capital side, the Homes and Communities Agency capital funding guidance describes supported housing as either being designed or designated for providing support as follows:

Purpose designed supported housing

This is defined as ‘buildings that are purpose designed or remodelled to enable residents to adjust to independent living or to enable them to live independently and which require specific design features’. (There must be support services provided by the landlord or other organisation and, as a minimum, a building or scheme which has basic facilities of a laundry for residents or washing machines in living units provided by the landlord and communal areas and some living units designed to wheelchair standards).

Designated supported housing

This is defined as ‘buildings with some or no special design facilities and features but that are designated for a specialist client group with support services in place to enable them to adjust to independent living or to enable them to live independently’.⁴

However, “housing support”, or “supported living”, or “housing with support” all have the common aim to enable someone to manage on a day to day basis in their own home. Budgeting, meals, shopping and paying bills are all examples of services provided.

What all of these models have in common is that they are intended to maintain people in the community, by the provision of housing and support services. Sometimes, support is delivered in purpose-built designed buildings and sometimes is delivered to people in their own (not specially designed) homes.

The range of client groups is wide, but a community setting is an imperative. By ‘community setting’ we mean something that is not institutional, but there is a feeling that the boundaries may be getting blurred. In essence, supported housing should be a simple model but, in practice, it is complicated by rules, funding sources and the integration and blurring of services, not just at the operational level, but also at the strategic and funding level.

As outlined above, the services offered might include budgeting, paying bills, meals and shopping. Traditionally, support was delivered by support workers or a support team, more often than not in a specialist building, but now people in receipt of support services have more control over their own individual support budgets and in the way that they decide how the

⁴ www.homesandcommunities.co.uk/cfg?page_id=5567&page=24

services they need are delivered. A good example is the Guinness Trust's Vernon Gardens extra care scheme in Brighton, where a group of prospective tenants developed their own personalised model of care and support.⁵

The history of supported housing

In one way and another, supported housing has been around for a very long time. The almshouse is probably the earliest model in existence and it can be traced back more than a millennium.

The first recorded almshouse was founded by King Athelstan in York in the 10th century, and the oldest still in existence is thought to be the Hospital of St. Oswald in Worcester that dates from circa 990.

It is perhaps surprising that some of the features of these ancient institutions are still familiar in today's supported housing models. For example, the Hospital of Saint Lawrence in Cirencester was founded in the 14th century by Edith Biset of Wiggold to care for people with leprosy and was largely maintained by the alms of the townsfolk, and partly by income from lands and rents. The Hospital was later converted to an almshouse for women and has been in continuous existence as an almshouse ever since.

The politics of supported housing have been debated over the centuries. It seems therefore that some of the characteristics of modern supported housing may have a long history too. History also tells us that local townspeople took a keen interest in their new neighbours and complained about the funding, client group and management of the almshouse. Some things never change. NIMBYism has quite a history too.

Although supported housing has a long record of successfully providing services to vulnerable people in the community, there is an ongoing debate about what is encompassed by the term 'supported housing' and a recurring discussion about just how the housing and the services are best funded. To complicate things further, different types of service can be funded in different ways.

Structurally, supported housing could be said to be a mixed model, comprising various combinations of housing, housing services, on-site support services, off-site support services and sometimes care services. In general, the supported housing model aims to develop a synergy between housing and support and care services and looks to generate a 'more than the sum of its parts' equation.

Supported housing ought to be an example of the almost legendary 'seamless service'; an integrated model from the perspective of the person who lives there who 'cannot see the join,' but this is not always how it works out. Very nearly just as legendary, was the famous housing and care divide – often encountered, but rarely crossed, partly because no one could work out just where the crossing was!

However, the strength of supported housing in bringing together a mixture of facilities and services has historically created an interest in how the different elements are funded.

This is particularly the case when funding for different parts of the overall service come from a range of various sources. This in turn can lead to an emphasis from funders on reviewing

⁵ Hortop, G. & Day, N., *Delivering personalised support and care services in extra care housing*, Case Study No. 58, Housing Learning & Improvement Network, 2012

inputs rather more vigorously than outputs. The tendency is that funding for supported housing can become complicated at best and obscure at the worst and both of these challenges can obscure its effectiveness from the view point of the resident and commissioners, as well as impact on viability for the provider.

On the flip side of the coin, supported housing also has a tradition of financial ingenuity. In more recent times, a review of supported housing under the last Labour government produced some intriguing results. In their responses to the government's proposals for changes to the supported housing funding regime, a number of supported housing agencies were very keen to explain in some detail how inventive they had been in exploiting the funding system.

It is interesting to note that the Government of the time only just managed to fight off a legal challenge about its proposed changes to funding supported housing from an order of brothers founded in the sixteenth century. History is never far away where supported housing is concerned – even when it should be!

Then and now

Today's supported housing still includes some of the ancient institutions and some of the enduring features that characterised them, but is, overall, more a product of the sort of local voluntary action that saw the burgeoning development of housing associations in the 1960s and 1970s. Local and central government support for housing associations building and renovation activities also developed into funding for support services alongside capital support for building.

Although supported housing has proved very successful at delivering community based services to local people, the requirement for capital and revenue support has made it a more complex product. Planning, design, building, lettings and housing management are all more complicated and, from a financial point of view, there are more funding issues to be considered.

The term 'supported housing' covers a range of housing types and a range of support services with a broad range of clients. The support that individual customers require can be very different and their costs and their funding sources similarly so. Support, personal care and supervision are all supported housing activities, but may require different housing, management and staffing requirements and expertise.

It is both a strength and a weakness of supported housing that it is difficult to define precisely. The old idea of just a 'supported housing scheme' is no longer appropriate. Support services are supplied to people in many different housing situations, including tenure types.

It is the combination of accommodation and community delivered services that makes supported housing so effective. However, in my view, the combination is prone to fail, especially if just one of the required elements is not available for some reason, or is deemed poor value when reviewed. No effective overall measure of value covering all types of supported housing has been developed. There is a tendency to apply inappropriate measures that tot up the various elements without really considering the value of the whole.

A single supported housing scheme can require multiple sources of funding that together do not represent the ways that central and local government line up and dish out the cash. The needs of vulnerable people and the services that are designed for their individual requirements do not always fit within the broad competencies of government departments and local authorities.

There is still a tendency to count inputs, perhaps because it is difficult to put a precise value on a specific outcome.

It is also quite possible for a single supported housing scheme to have multiple sources of funding across the competencies of different government departments and different tiers of local government, as well as voluntary sector funding with additional funding from the clients themselves. In some ways, this is an effective use of multiple sources of funds, but the whole service may be at risk if only one of the contributions becomes unavailable. Over the years, there have been various attempts to create comparative measures, without much long term success.

Supported housing is still regarded as a valuable product by residents, funders and governments, although there is a dearth of robust, comparative evidence. Significantly, despite its community presence, not everyone sees it as a mainstream housing product; it is often seen as a 'niche' product. Perhaps this lingers from the time when supported housing was generally known as "special needs housing". Generally, supported housing is non-institutional and looks to promote the independence of its customers; although there are different views as to whether the ideal balance between choice and control is always achieved.

Demand for supported housing is growing as a consequence of broader social and demographic change, as it is deemed to be community based (which in political rhetoric across the party spectrum is deemed to be a 'good thing') and more economic than some other options, and perhaps more flexible. However, it still features in regular spending reviews and suffers from the ongoing lack of a settled, sustainable funding regime. There is still a sense of the old sociological/philosophical objectivism versus relativism debate as to whether it enables customers to be independent per se, or just more independent than they might have been.

In a similar way, supported housing is deemed to be non-institutional and this is true if most of today's supported housing is compared to some of the hostels of yore, but speaking personally, from many years experience in the sector, I have rarely been to a supported housing environment that I came away thinking that there wasn't at least a whiff of institutionalism. Integration now seems to be the goal of social policy, and there is wide spread consensus that it should happen, but hardly a clue about how this can be made a practical reality in a supported housing environment.

Some supported housing providers⁶ have gone a long way to adopt individual budgets that provide more personal services tailored to individuals' choices. The Orbit Charitable Trust⁷ has investigated how organisations can make themselves fit for purpose to work with older people and, in particular, organisations of older people.

In the 2013 Department of Health Spending Review there is a proposal to develop and fund integrated health and social care services and a holy grail like plan that joined up services will be the norm, not the exception. The prospect that health organisations might contribute funding for supported housing services is sensible where improved health outcomes are achieved.

This is a sensible idea given that effective support services are known to have a positive effect on health situations. But it would be even more effective if support and housing services with similar outcomes were also embraced.

⁶ www.lookahead.org.uk

⁷ <http://orbit-research.org.uk>

Support services operate at the point at which a number of different funding regimes come together, with an inevitable trading off of service against service. Since the removal of councils' ring fencing of support, under Supporting People arrangements, some local authorities have decided to manage support services within mainstream budgets, with the inevitable accusations that this has encouraged cost cutting and the loss or diminution of services.

There could still be room for more comprehensive user involvement in procuring and managing services, nearly a decade after the previous government examined the role of social capital in health outcomes. Despite this being heralded as the way forward, it hasn't really been made to work at scale.⁸

What is the future of supported housing?

What makes supported housing valuable is that it drops into the gaps between other services and makes them work for vulnerable people. There are many success stories; people who would otherwise have 'fallen through the net' have instead had good outcomes that have helped them stay independent.

As far as funding is concerned, revenue funding for management and services is probably more important than capital support for building projects. Not all supported housing projects require a non standard built form, although some - specialised housing for older people would be a good example - obviously do. If we didn't invest in capital projects the immediate impact could be less than the withdrawal of revenue support. As a result, the Department of Health's Care and Support Specialised Housing Fund⁹, administered by the Homes and Communities Agency and Greater London Authority in London, is a welcome injection of capital.

Yet, the multi-faceted role of supported housing means that an interest can be claimed by several parties. This should be a strength, but in a time of tight budgets, if one piece of the jigsaw is lost or changed, everything else can fall apart. However, it is fundamentally a community based housing product, although it may be designed in a particular way to make sure that its residents stay community based. Most supported housing cannot work unless revenue is available to pay staff to provide support services to people living in the specific housing environment.

There are many sources of revenue support funding and this can be generated by residents themselves, charities and central and local government. Government funding has traditionally come from the various incarnations of the Environment Department, but an argument can be made that support is more in the area of departments dealing with social security and health issues.

There is some logic in revenue funding coming from the same source as housing money, because supported housing is dependent on both capital and revenue streams and will not work without both being in place. There is an equally good argument that the part of government that benefits most from effective supported housing should support the service; for example, health and social care.¹⁰

⁸ Shand, M., *A radical rethink is required in the way we involve and engage with residents of extra care housing*, Viewpoint No. 28, Housing Learning and Improvement Network, 2012

⁹ www.homesandcommunities.co.uk/ourwork/care-support-specialised-housing-fund

¹⁰ www.frontier-economics.com/_library/pdfs/frontier%20report%20-%20financial%20benefits%20of%20investment.pdf

From a practical point of view, history tells us that co-ordination of funding is important. Supported housing will not work without financial support for the building and nor will it work without support to keep the services running.

Is the role of housing in support changing? Certainly, housing based organisations are still major players in providing the bricks and mortar aspect of supported housing and have a strong hand in providing the services themselves.

The trend in new sheltered housing provision for older people has been towards provision for frail older people through extra care housing at one end of the market and lifestyle provision at the other. At the more commercial end, there are good profits to be made and a range of lifestyle activities, accessible buildings and support provision appeals to some older people who have been able to release substantial equity in their old home. Some well publicised care company crashes suggests that care alone is not always a profitable activity.¹¹

However, this is not representative of supported housing overall. Whereas, in general, health is not always the major issue in supported housing, it is fast becoming the main issue in housing for older people and some housing associations specialising in this provision have begun to develop their own health related services, particularly in the area of dementia and end of life care. Although many of the services developed have proved effective there would doubtless be a funding issue if they were the norm. The services are not always self sustaining and may need extra 'health' inputs to make them work. As a result, some services could face uncertain immediate futures as the new landscape takes shape under current reforms.

Implications of current policies

One of the issues with supported housing is that it is relatively easy to construct policies with a focus on the outcomes required, but it is much more difficult to define how these will work in practice – in the real world and, if they do work, to sustain them.

On one hand, there can be too much process and detail, particularly in the ways that the planning system handles buildings that are somewhat different from the norm of dwellings.¹²

On the other hand, Supporting People, in 2003, talked about promoting independence and housing related services that complemented each other and care services and promoted the role of the third sector.

There again, ten years on, now that local authorities are able to judge the priority of housing support expenditure in their overall budget, there have been complaints that supported housing is seen as a lower priority than in previous years.

There have also been some successful experiments in community involvement and collaboration in supported housing; for example, the Housing Association Charitable Trust's Up2Us project.¹³ However, these are by no means widespread and more needs to be done.

¹¹ www.housinglin.org.uk/_library/Resources/Housing/Support_materials/Reports/SWmainreport.pdf

¹² www.housinglin.org.uk/_library/Resources/Housing/Support_materials/Viewpoints/Viewpoint_20_Planning_Use_Classes.pdf

¹³ <http://hact.org.uk/up2us>

Is supported housing considered as important as it used to be?

There is clearly a difference between support services and supported housing. In situations where there are not any special design implications in supported housing, new technology and new management techniques will increase the potential of delivering a proportion of people the support they need to live independently, without special housing designs. Even within specially designed accommodation, new technology can help customers communicate with each other and with housing and care professionals.

Housing 21, for example, has recently introduced computer portals (or kiosks) within some of its sheltered schemes so that residents can report repairs and the like and generally communicate with their landlord and the wider local community. This type of communication can also promote a different type of relationship between service providers and their customers.

Many landlords and service providers are now also using social media to communicate with their residents and, just as importantly, for customers to communicate with them.¹⁴

It must be questionable whether the dominant style of supported housing package that has been to the fore over the last thirty years has a future. This is not to say that it has not provided important services that have led to good outcomes for people, or that useful services should be wiped out. Changes need to be made to the infrastructure to mesh with broader changes in society. The ‘housing’ part of supported housing is, in one way, only a small part of the service. Going back to SITRA’s definition, there is nothing there that is not still relevant.

The majority of support interventions and solutions can still be played out in community housing environments, but the range and source of the solutions can be different. It would be nice to think that the broader built environment might be made more accessible. Progress here has been slow, despite the volume of research demonstrating how this can be made reality. There is still room for specialised housing designs, particularly where support services need to be delivered by on site staff.¹⁵

Product development and service innovations

Although the term ‘specialised housing’ is still used to describe supported housing and housing specifically designed for older people and people needing support to go about their daily life, it is really a very poor descriptor indeed. Greater consideration needs to be given to:

Tenure diversity: Supported housing is no longer mono-tenure, and it is no longer a form of housing that people do not aspire to. However, we need to make the best housing for vulnerable people the norm. The best designs already do this. There are positive indications that innovative service developments which involve and are based upon the requirements and aspirations of the people for whom supported housing is home are becoming more numerous. But, there is still much to do. There is room for more tenure diversity. In the rented sector, we need to come up with a funding model that is straightforward and effective and sticks around long enough to benefit today’s and tomorrow’s customers.

Localism and community engagement: Supported housing has been viewed as a community based model throughout its history. A fundamental purpose is for supported housing to be non-institutional and it has generally succeeded to meet this goal. Supported housing can also be a community model that can provide services to vulnerable people in the local area.

¹⁴ www.housinglin.org.uk/_library/Resources/Housing/Support_materials/Viewpoints/Viewpoint29_SocialMedia.pdf

¹⁵ www.homesandcommunities.co.uk/non-mainstream-housing-design-guidance

Although there have been some successful experiments in community involvement in supported housing, these are by no means widespread. Ideas of localism and empowerment still interest governments. The review of the government's Big Society and Ageing Well programmes recognised this and advocated that Holy Grail; joined up working. The feedback from participants in the programmes was that they all believed that traditional means of service delivery had to change.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has been sponsoring research examining how local people can develop and direct well-being services.¹⁶ Something similar would be very useful for support services. The research demonstrates how local workers are key to solving problems creatively.

Building design: Building design can also facilitate community interactions. The 'hub and spoke' idea' enables outreach services to be delivered across local areas.

Health partnerships: In some areas, partnerships with some NHS Trusts has enabled supported housing to play a significant role in providing greater independence and an appropriate home for people with complex needs or long term conditions who would have been 'housed' in institutional care.¹⁸ Partnerships with supported housing can be one of the ways in which National Health Service organisations can generate social value. One possibility could be using National Health Service land for supported housing.

Integrated care: It also seems that the Government takes the view that departmental responsibilities will be slightly realigned. The Department for Communities and Local Government will still be responsible for the built environment including housing, but the Department of Health's remit will include health, care and support or "care closer to home". Making sure that integration works at local level is the real prize.

Final thoughts

Supported housing is a product that has crossed the centuries and still has a role to play today. However, supported housing is a product that does not stand alone. It has a place at the table when broader strategic decisions are made. It is positioned far away from the old concepts of "special needs" and has an important role to play in generating successful housing and health outputs and outcomes.

¹⁶ Richardson L., *Working in Neighbourhoods, Active citizenship and localism*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York, 2012

Note

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

About the Housing LIN

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

For further information on this and about the Housing LIN's comprehensive list of online resources on capital and revenue funding specialist housing and opportunities for shared learning and service improvement, including site visits and network meetings in your region, visit: www.housinglin.org.uk

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

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