



Access point: Improving housing choice for disabled people

In recent months, the Housing Learning and Improvement Network (LIN) has given attention to accessible housing design for older and disabled people and published a selection of viewpoints and case studies. These have largely considered how access issues are captured in building regulations, standards and practice.

This viewpoint explores the role of accessible housing registers in ensuring that accessible homes are let and managed effectively, ensuring that disabled people are supported to find accommodation that meets their needs and maximises their independence.

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October 2012

What are accessible housing registers?

Accessible housing registers were first developed some time ago in response to difficulties letting accessible and adapted accommodation. As highlighted in *Lifetime Homes, Lifetime Neighbourhoods: A national strategy for an ageing society*¹ “hundreds of millions of pounds are spent each year adapting existing homes. It is therefore vitally important to make the most of the existing stock of homes designed to be accessible and adapted dwellings”. This strategy outlines the benefits of accessible housing registers both in achieving savings and improving housing choice for disabled people.

The concept of accessible housing registers was to develop a method of making accessible and adapted homes available to disabled people who need them. They were originally developed by specialist staff and held separately to main housing management systems. Housing landlords would maintain a list of accessible properties and a list of disabled people needing accessible homes, and match these when a property became void. These were then developed to be integrated into mainstream lettings processes.

More recently, the London Accessible Housing Register² (AHR) has been marketed as a flagship accessible housing register methodology that integrates access information into mainstream housing management functions. It requires all properties to be assigned a category to distinguish between levels of accessibility and facilitate the lets of properties to households who need them. The Greater London Authority (GLA) developed the London AHR methodology in response to research findings that highlighted the shortage of accessible housing in the capital and the limited housing choices available to disabled Londoners. It is worth noting that the London AHR, despite its name, is not a register of accessible homes. The term is used to define the method of collecting and storing access information about properties on mainstream housing management systems and using this to let accessible homes more effectively.

Why do we need accessible housing registers?

To a disabled person, an accessible home is one in which they can live without barriers within the home that could reduce their independence. Accessible homes can enable disabled people to lead active and independent lives while enabling others to receive care safely in the home. Yet accessible homes are still in short supply with many older properties having steps to or within the property and/or limited circulation spaces and facilities. Many homes built before the Housing Corporation Scheme Development Standards (Mobility Standard Housing) were introduced in 1974 are not accessible. Homes that have been adapted are often not fully accessible as the adaptations improve inaccessible features often for a resident with specific needs. Few adaptations improve the overall accessibility of a home so making the distinction between accessible and adapted homes is important.

Disabled people seeking accessible accommodation are therefore restricted to a limited pool of properties. This makes it all the more important to ensure that those properties that are accessible are made available to those who need them to prevent further disadvantage in their property search. Where accessible housing registers have worked effectively, they have educated housing staff, from estate managers to allocations teams, about the shortage of accessible housing and the need to let properties effectively.

¹ - Communities and Local Government. *Lifetime Homes, Lifetime Neighbourhoods: A national strategy for an ageing society*. 2008.

² - A good practice guide for social housing landlords and training materials are available at: www.london.gov.uk/priorities/housing/housing-need/lahr

Living in an accessible home is known to improve a person's independence, reduce adult social care and housing adaptation costs and reduce admissions to residential care facilities. The London AHR project in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea has highlighted a need to have a strategic overview to cover accessible housing, adaptations services, planning and regeneration, and older people's service provision.

How are accessible housing registers used?

There is some variation in the way that accessible housing registers are used. In many places they have evolved from being a separate list of accessible and adapted properties to being a methodology for assessing properties and integrating access information into mainstream housing management functions. Some areas will use the accessible housing register information to advertise properties on choice based lettings (CBL) systems whereas others continue to let accessible homes directly to disabled housing applicants.

The London AHR is a framework for social housing landlords to assess the accessibility of their homes. By categorising properties using this framework, adapted or accessible properties can be identified at the earliest opportunity when they become void and then be clearly advertised through a choice based lettings scheme alongside other homes. The London AHR enables disabled home seekers to participate in choice based lettings schemes alongside other housing applicants. Information on access features of a property facilitate informed housing choices and improved allocation of accessible accommodation.

Adopting the London Accessible Housing Register

The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea was not unique in needing to find a way to meet the discrepancy between a rising demand for accessible housing and a severe shortage of suitable accommodation. In the days before CBL was introduced, staff would match housing applicants to property vacancies. CBL now enables housing applicants to view property adverts and bid for preferred properties. In the early days of CBL, the allocation of accessible housing was deemed a specialist area and many local authorities managed the lettings of these properties outside of CBL.

The Royal Borough undertook to implement the London Accessible Housing Register shortly after its launch in 2007. As one of the two pilot boroughs (the other being the London Borough of Tower Hamlets) much of the methodology was developed and tested in the initial months of the pilot.

The London AHR methodology includes categorisation of properties using building design criteria based on recognised accessible design standards, a framework for the assessment of housing need of disabled housing applicants and processes to advertise and allocate accessible homes to those who need them.

The objectives of implementation in the Royal Borough were to:

- deliver high quality access information on all properties advertised through choice based lettings;
- improve informed choice of housing for disabled people;
- ensure that accessible and adapted housing is used more effectively to meet the needs of disabled people;
- ultimately save money by enabling more adapted properties to be re-let to people who need the adaptation.

Extensive work was carried out to facilitate effective data collection, efficient property survey methods and appropriate allocation processes. This work included the development of data collection tools (using digital pens) and formed the baseline for the roll out of the London AHR across London. The Royal Borough undertook a stock survey across Council and housing association properties assigning a London AHR category to 90 per cent of the social housing properties in the borough. An allocations guidance document was written to supplement the Council's Allocations Policy enabling accessible homes to be let to those who need them through the choice based lettings scheme.

After the London AHR had been implemented in the borough, lettings figures showed that the allocation of accessible homes to those who need them significantly improved. The number of lettings to households with a disabled person more than doubled in the Royal Borough (from 77 social housing lettings in 2007-08 to 207 in 2009-10) as outlined in an independent evaluation of the London AHR, carried out by Heriot Watt University.³ The allocations team is better placed to identify accessible homes and ensure that they are made available to households who need them. The housing occupational therapy team is now providing improved advice on housing options for disabled people.

Reflections from a London borough

The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea first introduced the London AHR in 2007 and started using the accessible housing categories in lettings processes from spring 2009. From the outset it was apparent that detailed access information in the form of categories is of limited use to many disabled housing applicants. Applicants have a broad awareness of their needs but limited understanding of the different property profiles (for example the difference between a Lifetime Homes dwelling and a level access property that does not meet any accessible housing design guidance). Disabled applicants, much the same as other households on the housing register, are seeking properties in the right location with the correct number of bedrooms.

For staff, however, the accessible housing categories have been instrumental in enabling accessible homes to be identified in a timely and effective manner. All staff, not just specialist occupational therapists, now have an awareness of accessibility and can identify accessible homes to ensure that they are let effectively.

Introducing the London AHR has had some remarkable impacts. A much larger number of accessible homes are let each year than previously. This is because accessible homes are now being identified as such whereas previously accessible homes were often let as general needs housing. The AHR has been instrumental in breaking down the myths of what makes a property accessible. Inaccessible properties with an adaptation are now disregarded where the adaptation did not make the property accessible. General needs housing built to Lifetime Homes standards and level access accommodation in lifted buildings are now being correctly identified as accessible whereas previously they were considered general needs. Accessible homes now make up a fifth of all housing let by the borough.

Despite this seeming increase in supply, there are still challenges in letting accessible properties to households with a disabled person. There is a demand for accessible accommodation yet the proportion of lettings of accessible properties to disabled households is low. This reflects a national and regional pattern which was further explored by the Space to Move research

³ - Pawson, H. and Sosenko, F. *Evaluation of the London Accessible Housing Register*. Heriot Watt University, 2011.

undertaken by Habinteg Housing Association⁴. The research highlighted a number of reasons for the limited success of wheelchair accessible homes including location, poor labelling and short void turnaround times. Accessible housing registers are supported by the research though, having implemented the London AHR in Kensington and Chelsea, we believe that the AHR information has been of critical importance to housing staff and of limited use to disabled housing applicants who, for the most part, are unfamiliar with accessible housing design features.

CBL requires households to proactively search and bid for properties on a weekly basis. Disabled housing applicants are expected to seek accommodation that meets their access needs, is of the correct bedroom size and is in their preferred area. Even when a desirable property is found and sometimes visited on a multiple viewing, the household may not be successful in obtaining the tenancy to the property. This is time consuming for households who are already struggling with daily tasks in their existing accommodation. In this respect, CBL has not proved effective for disabled people as it is not achieving moves into accessible accommodation. As such we are reviewing the effectiveness of CBL for households in highest priority need who may need assistance with lettings processes.

The Royal Borough aims to facilitate moves of disabled people into accessible housing by:

- ensuring a higher uptake of lettings through targeted support to households who need assistance;
- providing better information to housing applicants on the supply of accessible housing thereby managing expectations;
- developing a strategic overview encompassing older people's housing, adult social care, environmental health (grants) and planning.

Overcoming challenges in developing AHRs

The London AHR enables social housing providers to make best use of accessible and adapted housing stock through accurate and consistent assessment of properties. Allocation of accessible accommodation can be facilitated through the early and accurate identification of suitable homes thereby enabling disabled people to actively participate in choice based lettings. This is most effectively achieved following comprehensive accessibility surveys of the housing stock rather than assessing individual properties when they become void. Stock surveys enable accessibility data to be collected through assessment of 10-20 per cent of homes (as many homes will have poor external access and/or have the same access features as other homes in the same block). Research indicates that savings accrued through better use of specialist resources could offset the set up costs for AHRs in five years.⁵

In their research into choice based lettings, Lomax and Pawson highlighted that some groups of users could be “disadvantaged by the proactive nature of the system”⁶ and that support services are critical in assisting users to make informed housing choices. In a previous article for the Housing LIN, Appleton and Molyneux agree that “there has always been a balance to be struck between meeting need and enabling choice”.⁷

⁴ - Joseph, G; Wise, C; Fu, D. and Watson, L. *Space to Move: Making efficient use of homes for wheelchair users*. Habinteg, 2012.

⁵ - Pawson, H. and Sosenko, F. *Evaluation of the London Accessible Housing Register*. Heriot Watt University, 2011.

⁶ - Lomax, D. and Pawson, H. *Choice-based lettings, potentially disadvantaged groups and accessible housing registers: a summary guide to positive practice*. DCLG, 2011.

⁷ - Appleton, N. and Molyneux, P. *The impact of Choice Based Lettings on the access of vulnerable adults to social housing*. Housing LIN 05.02.2009.

The problem with most accessible housing registers is that they are maintained separately to main housing management databases and often deemed to be a specialist resource which needs to be managed by specialist staff. However, access information should be collected by landlords and stored in mainstream data management systems and so the responsibility to manage the resource is undertaken by all staff involved in the void and letting processes

The future for accessible housing registers

Accessible housing is a valuable and limited resource and as such we have a duty to ensure that it is let effectively. Accessible housing registers should inform housing choice while not being used rigidly in the shortlisting of disabled people in a way that limits said choice. While wheelchair accessible homes, which are in shortest supply, should be ring-fenced for households with a wheelchair user, accessibility information about other accessible homes should inform housing suitability rather than dictate it.

It is clear that accessible housing registers play an important role in lettings processes, enabling staff to identify accessible homes and make these available to disabled people who need them. However, they need to be used as part of an advice and support package for disabled home seekers. We cannot assume that all disabled people in the highest priority need can use CBL. With the intention of assisting housing choice, there is also a danger of providing technical information which is poorly understood by those unfamiliar with housing design guidance. For example, the London AHR categories include category C, properties which meet the space standards of Lifetime Homes, and category D which are properties that meet the Housing Corporation Mobility Standards. Category C was introduced to monitor new build activity of Lifetime Homes properties but, as the London AHR is not a planning monitoring tool it does not serve this purpose in practice. In reality, category C and D properties are almost identical, they are both level access dwellings with wide corridors and door widths. If a simpler method of describing accessible housing is better understood by housing applicants then this should not be seen as diluting or dumbing down of the accessible housing register methodology but rather tailoring it to the audience who need to use it.

As local authorities and housing associations introduce accessible housing registers it is necessary to review their role in lettings processes. The initial aim of the London AHR was to improve housing choice for disabled Londoners and enable disabled home seekers to participate in CBL. If, as is suspected in some areas, some disabled people are unable to effectively use CBL then the London AHR is not delivering outcomes to its full potential. This is part of a wider discussion about whether and how CBL facilitates housing lets to households in highest priority need or simply those proficient in the use of technology and bidding processes. Similar concerns are being raised about the introduction of online registrations which may be difficult for some disabled people to use.

It is timely for the role and functionality of accessible housing registers to be reviewed so that lessons can be learnt from the organisations that have introduced it. That way they can continue to deliver key benefits to housing providers in making best use of their accessible housing stock, local authorities in managing demand for accessible housing and housing adaptations, and older and disabled people who are seeking to move to accommodation that better suits their needs.

And finally, in the light of the recent Department of Health White Paper⁸ and the encouragement

⁸ - Department of Health White Paper, *Caring for our Future: reforming care and support*. HM Government 2012.

for authorities to produce Market Position Statements, as advocated by the Housing LIN⁹, consideration should be given to facilitating a strategic overview of housing-related services for disabled tenants and older people to make best use of existing housing resources and maximise choices and opportunities through adaptation, regeneration, planning and commissioning of housing services.

Note

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

About the Housing LIN

Previously responsible for managing the Department of Health's Extra Care Housing Fund, the Housing 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.

For further information about the Housing LIN's comprehensive list of online resources and shared learning and service improvement opportunities, 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 you have an example of how your organisation is closely aligned to a 'Living Lab' approach or a subject that you feel we should cover, please contact us.

Published by:

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⁹ - Housing LIN/ADASS, *Strategic Housing for Older People: planning, designing and delivering housing that older people want*. Housing Learning and Improvement Network, 2011.