



Adapting to the Challenges of an Ageing Population for Social Housing

The UK population, like in many countries, is ageing with wide consequences for society and the economy. One in six people in the UK are now over 65, an increase of more than one million from 2001. More and more people are living beyond 80. And the elderly living in couples or alone now make up 25% of all households. Almost one fifth of these elderly households live in social housing.

This viewpoint draws on research undertaken for the Department for Communities and Local Government that analysed the use of Accessible Housing Registers in a number of localities. It makes the case for improving access to information on local accessible and adaptable accommodation to enhance the housing choices of older and disabled people.

The research examined the allocation processes in detail, how they worked and how successful they were. With the scarcity of accessible and adaptable housing and increasing pressures on capital budgets for aids and adaptation, it found that having a local Accessible Housing Register in place not only improves the allocation of suitable housing to those who need it but also can ensure more efficient use of stock by reducing the cost of adaptations in the first year after a move.

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Introduction

The focus of government policy in the UK, and elsewhere, to date has been on a health care strategy for the elderly that projects more and more integrated social and health services provided in their own home rather than in institutions/hospitals (Department of Health, 2013). Most elderly people concur with this strategy but there are important consequences for the housing system as a result of this positive approach to independent living and the greater numbers aged over 80. As they grow frailer, older people will inevitably face restricted mobility in and out of their home.

As recognised in two All Party Parliamentary Group on Housing with Care for Older People inquiry reports (APPG, 2011 and 2012), at its simplest it will necessitate more and more specially adapted or 'accessible' housing stock. The technical term for this housing is 'accessible' because it is designed to 'mobility standards' or equipped with adaptations (e.g. ramps, grab rails, stair lifts) to support movement around the house.

The last Labour government policy went further and introduced 'Lifetime Homes' that could be flexible and functional for all. It set a target that all new English public sector funded housing is built to such a standard by 2011. This was part of a vision to see the delivery of a wider spectrum of housing and related care and support services delivered at home and within neighbourhoods, including repairs and adaptations, coordinating services around the person (DCLG, 2008).

Looking back, this policy framework seems almost idealistic and certainly seemed to fail to acknowledge the wider management resource issues that are increasingly dominant in a period of continuing fiscal constraints. A central question is how to balance need and choice with resource efficiency, and policies will increasingly need to demonstrate cost effectiveness in order to be adopted. In fact, cost effectiveness is often an over-riding argument.

Cost effective solutions

A cost effective solution requires more than simply the provision of 'accessible' or 'lifetime homes' it also needs better management of the (accessible) social housing stock.

The existing adapted housing stock needs be (re)used efficiently as it becomes available. Too often the expensive adaptations have to be removed at further expense when the next tenant does not want them (CIH, 2014).

In addition, if the specific requirements of a household with accessibility needs can be allocated to existing adapted housing then this too will save money.

In London, the Greater London Authority has 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. Research indicates that savings accrued through better use of specialist resources could offset the set up costs for AHRs in five years (Pawson & Sosenko, 2011).

This problem is highlighted by the consequences of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 that has enabled the reduction in housing benefit to claimants of working age that are deemed to be under occupying. This is often referred to as the 'bedroom tax'. The implications of this development for the letting and allocation of social housing are still to be fully felt but clearly the government expects under-occupying households to move to smaller housing. While households with disabled children and older people are exempt, the under occupying rules apply to disabled adults below pensionable age. This could lead to households moving out of adapted housing and seeking smaller adapted housing. In turn, this could lead to public expenditure removing and adding adaptations.

An accessible housing register

An *accessible housing register* (AHR) is a way to address these issues. An AHR is similar to a common housing register compiled by social landlords for an area except that it also identifies accessible housing stock, not just its location and size etc. An AHR could offer a comprehensive listing of accessible and adapted properties enabling accessible homes to be let via choice-based letting with bidders needing such properties given priority over all others. There are variations on this model including a more partial solution that simply lists available accessible properties rather than attempting a complete register of such stock.

AHRs are still in an early refinement phase and their effectiveness has not been fully assessed. A study of one AHR I conducted has recently been published in *Housing, Care and Support*, Vol 16 No 3/4, 106-113 (DOI 10.1108/HCS-08-2013-0012). It assesses the costs and effectiveness of one AHR which represents the state of the art. The analysis finds that the setting up of the AHR had substantial set up research costs in compiling a register of local accessible housing. However, detailed financial analysis suggests that an efficient full AHR could be more than justified by reducing the need for a relatively small number of adaptations in the first years of a tenancy.

Even so the analysis also finds that there is scope for the AHR to be more efficient in matching households' needs to adapted housing stock. There were still properties in the study area having adaptations removed at the same time as substantial expenditures were being incurred in adding the same features to others or replacing those removed. From a wider perspective, the letting data from the study indicates that households with accessible/adapted housing needs are already a substantial constituent of the demand for social housing. This demand will inevitably expand as the population grows older. The study concludes that an AHR is a useful catalyst for identifying and addressing accessible/adapted housing needs at a strategic level.

It should be noted that it may not be possible to match all adapted housing to households' needs even where the demand for accessible housing outweighs the supply, as in the study area. This is because of a choice based lettings system in which tenants bid for social housing. Housing choices and bids by (prospective) tenants are not simply based on whether a house is adapted but also its location (including nearness to relatives) and the other physical characteristics, for example, size and type. Nevertheless, AHRs provide a wider information framework for rational decisions as a basis to a more efficient allocations system.

Conclusion

To conclude, as reported by the National Housing Federation (2011), the profile of social housing tenants will grow more elderly in line with national trends. The demand for accessible housing will as a consequence increase substantially for the foreseeable future. Spending on adapting housing will have to rise to meet these needs. With continuing long term financial austerity there will be a growing pressure on social landlords to achieve value for money. The present debate on the integration of social and housing care needs to broaden, not just about the physical characteristics of housing but to encompass social housing allocations. We cannot afford a mismatch between the (excess) demand for accessible housing and the stock of adapted housing. The expansion of AHRs is the way forward to maximise housing resources and help meet the needs of the growing number of elderly tenants.

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Note

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

This viewpoint is based on the author's research blog at: <http://ihurerblog.org/>

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.

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.

For further information about the Housing LIN's comprehensive list of online resources and to participate in our shared learning and service improvement networking opportunities, including 'look and learn' site visits and network meetings in your region, visit: www.housinglin.org.uk

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