

# Matching up:

## A pilot study of effectiveness in letting adapted social housing

### Summary report

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## 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 ageing 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 review of the local housing context.
  - The recruitment of a self-identifying peer researcher (wheelchair user) to contribute to data collection, analysis and reporting.
  - Pilot interviews with applicants/recent tenants where at least one member of the household was disabled.
  - Pilot semi-structured interviews with local authority and registered social landlord (RSL) staff (housing strategy, housing frontline, social work and occupational therapy).
  - 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.

## Acknowledgements

This pilot 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. Thank you.

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

## Match me – what works for adapted social housing lettings? Phase 2

**Horizon Housing Association** has been awarded a £92,500 research grant by the Disability Research into Independent Living and Learning (DRILL) programme, as part of a £5m project announced in 2015 supported by the Big Lottery Fund.

Following the earlier scoping study, 'Match me' is an 18 month research project into the allocation of adapted and accessibly designed social housing coproduced in partnership by Horizon, Housing Options Scotland and the University of Stirling. The project will be steered by a disabled-led advisory group and will train and employ self-identifying disabled researchers.

Match me relates to the national policy of letting adapted social housing to best meet the requirements of disabled applicants. The research will be conducted in up to 3 local authority areas in Scotland with differing socio economic, urban / rural profiles and lettings systems.

The project will seek solutions to the following questions:

- How can disabled people achieve more, better and faster routes to independent living through social housing lettings?
- How can improvements to allocation policies and practices promote equal housing opportunities for disabled people?
- What support is required for disabled house seekers in the social housing application and lettings processes?
- How can adapted and adaptable housing better enhance independent living?

Match me will demonstrate what works for disabled housing applicants and what needs to change to achieve effective allocations, in quicker timeframes and with greater equality in terms of speed and range of housing options offered. The project aims to impacts on local and national policy and practice through robust evidence.

The partners will start work in July 2017.

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