Space to Move:
Making efficient use of homes for wheelchair users

Summary Report

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Introduction

This study follows on from the research report Mind the Step, (Habinteg, 2010), which gave an estimate of 78,300 wheelchair user households in England with unmet housing needs. The Mind the Step report argued for close strategic inter-linking between the three main solutions: Development of new accessible and adaptable homes; effective adaptations to existing properties across all tenures; and efficient allocation of wheelchair standard homes in the social rented sector.

Space to Move focuses on the issue of social housing allocations, where Mind the Step reported data showing that only 22% of vacant wheelchair standard homes in England were let to wheelchair user households (CORE 2008/09). The aims of this project were to investigate the reasons for this apparent inefficiency and to look at how the problem can be (and is being) addressed. The study was carried out in London, where the reported figure for the proportion of available wheelchair standard homes let to wheelchair user households (35%) is relatively high, although it still only accounts for about one in three wheelchair standard homes.

The findings for this study are based on in-depth interviews with representatives of twelve London borough councils, six housing associations and seven housing applicants or tenants.
The following points are viewed as contributing factors in the misallocation of wheelchair standard properties.

- Mislabelling of properties – a proportion of properties are wrongly categorised and are therefore misallocated.
- Short void turnaround time – local authorities and housing associations are penalised for long void periods and are under pressure to let properties quickly.
- Loss of revenue – properties that are empty for an extended period are viewed as returning a loss.
- Lack of access to the choice based lettings (CBL) website – some applicants are unable to use the internet and therefore cannot bid for properties. Where support staff are not available, this reduces the possibility of a property being allocated to a suitable applicant.
- Properties being rejected by applicants – this tends to happen for two broad reasons:
  - Design issues, such as: properties being too small (one bedroom and studio flats are frequently turned down); properties located on the first floor or above; small second rooms; buildings with only one lift; open plan kitchens or poor lighting within the property.
  - Location – properties may be rejected because they are too far from family, schools or local amenities.
- Lack of inter-agency working aimed at identifying households with specific housing needs.
- Staff training – limited (or no) training for staff to identify, categorise and allocate wheelchair accessible properties.

Key findings
• Lack of information – applicants not being provided with enough information, such as property details, location, whether assisted viewing is available and the number of people on the register.

• Applicants’ expectations – because applicants have access to information on all properties advertised on the CBL website, their expectations can be raised. As a result, applicants may reject properties that meet their needs but do not match their hopes or standards. They would rather stay on the housing register until a ‘dream home’ (or something close to it) appears.

It is also important to understand the processes that lead to a property being let to a non-wheelchair user household.

• Where a wheelchair user with high priority is not identified, some local authorities re-advertise the property and allocate it to a general needs applicant.

• Some authorities and providers operate a grading system, where if a wheelchair user is not found then applicants in the next priority group are considered and so on, until the property eventually goes to a general needs applicant.

• Local authorities hold discussions with community Occupational Therapists to determine whether there are known wheelchair users in need of housing who are not on the housing register. If it is decided that there are none, the property is offered to the next most appropriate applicant.
Recommendations

Space to Move has confirmed that allocation systems for wheelchair standard properties have inefficiencies. The reasons for this are complex and are influenced by housing providers, other local authority departments, housing developers and applicants.

The challenge for housing providers is to make practical and measurable improvements to the allocation of wheelchair standard properties. Housing providers should consider all the issues outlined in the full report when formulating and revising their policies.

The seven national recommendations are for local authorities, housing providers and their partners in social care, health and the voluntary and private sectors.

1. The effective allocation of homes to wheelchair users should be a strategic priority, not only for housing authorities and associations but also for adult care, children's services and local health agencies. The benefits include: Appropriate use of a scarce resource; fewer viewings and shorter re-let times; improved housing opportunities for people seeking independent living; more timely hospital discharge; and greater flexibility in responding to changing household needs.

2. Directors and Chief Executives should expect the allocation of wheelchair accessible homes to have strong elements of a personalised service. This includes: More specific information on applicants' circumstances and requirements; more proactive effort to identify suitable applicants; more information given on property design and layout; and more practical support, where needed, through the application process.

3. Local authorities and housing associations should investigate the extent to which wheelchair accessible properties are being misallocated and identify the main causes. This exercise should inform a strategy for increasing the proportion of properties let to households with a wheelchair user.

4. Local authorities, choice-based lettings schemes and housing associations should adopt a system that classifies levels of accessibility and is based on authoritative design guidance. Properties should be categorised and re-checked for accessibility when they become vacant, with the level of accessibility logged for future reference.

5. Local authorities, landlords and managers of choice based lettings schemes should consult with local access groups, organisations of disabled people and tenants’ groups in developing their policies and approaches to letting accessible homes. Local authorities and housing providers need to consider what changes they can make to improve their offers and ensure that there is enough variety (type, size and location) in new wheelchair standard homes.

6. Landlords and lettings managers should provide regular staff training, so that new lettings officers and other key staff understand the organisation's policies and responsibilities. Staff should be confident about categories of accessibility, how properties are assessed and how the information is held and used.

7. 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. To be effective, the policy calls for co-operation between local authority departments (housing and social care), health agencies and other referral sources, to ensure that disabled people in need get on to housing registers and can put themselves forward or be nominated for a home.
“They were saying that this was the only suitable property that was available... so we had to take it.”

Mrs W, a wheelchair user who moved to a property that is not wheelchair accessible following a period in hospital.

The full report ‘Space to Move: Making efficient use of homes for wheelchair users’ is available online at www.habinteg.org.uk or by contacting the communications team at Habinteg Housing Association on 020 7822 8700 or info@habinteg.org.uk