ACCESSIBLE SOCIAL HOUSING IN GWENT

A review of allocation systems

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Produced for: the Gwent Health, Housing and Social Care Partnership

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CONTEXT

Accessible Social Housing in Gwent reviews the allocation of adapted and accessible social housing in the five Gwent local authorities. It presents findings from research undertaken between October 2019 and March 2020, involving almost 200 people consulted through interviews, surveys and focus groups with disabled applicants and staff in housing, health, social care and third sector. The study, commissioned by the Gwent Health, Housing and Social Care Partnership, was undertaken across five Gwent local authority areas: Caerphilly, Blaenau Gwent, Newport, Torfaen and Monmouthshire.

KEY FINDINGS

Application, housing waiting times, occupational therapist (OT) assessments and categorisation of accessibility requirements

All accessible housing allocation systems in Gwent are embedded within Common Housing Registers. There are choice-based and needs-based approaches to allocations. Significant numbers of respondents reported that the systems are too complex to navigate or inaccessible despite being supported to apply. Just under 50% of disabled applicants surveyed were allocated an accessible home in less than 12 months. OT assessments are undertaken at the housing application stage in three areas and at the allocation of housing stage in two. Waiting times for OT assessments usually range from one to eight weeks. In some areas, significant proportion of suitability assessments is undertaken by housing officers rather than OTs. Most respondents reported strong preference for and identified clear benefits of OT assessments at the application rather than allocation stage. Applicants' accessibility requirements are categorised differently across the areas, ranging from three to six category levels in four local authorities; the remaining local authority is developing its categorisation system.

Assessing and categorising accessible properties, and 'matching' people to properties

The research demonstrated that 'adapted' housing does not necessarily mean accessible. In some areas properties are not categorised by their accessibility level; they are simply classed as adapted or not. Finding a home that is a perfect match is often not possible due to people's varied accessibility needs and shortage of housing available, and it is recognised that there will usually be a need to adapt a home to some extent.

The review highlighted evident benefits of proactive and early categorisation of properties based on accessibility. These benefits are strengthened by shared IT systems/databases of accessible properties, which allow timely analysis of availability and need. However, some felt that categorising all properties would be difficult. Virtually all stakeholders supported a regional categorisation of properties and applicants. The review demonstrates that accessible housing registers and allocation systems which are embedded in common housing registers can be as effective as stand-alone accessible housing registers, provided appropriate staffing, capacity and processes are in place.

There are benefits of OTs being involved when properties are allocated to advise on and assess the suitability of homes. Knowledge of applicants' needs, property features and early applicant and property assessments can result in an effective matching process. Flexibility in the matching process and communication between allocations officers, OTs and the tenant/applicant proved to be very important. Although local authorities and housing associations in all areas said that people with accessibility needs are always prioritised for higher level accessible properties, disabled people's experiences demonstrated varied practice. However, quota systems based on housing need banding in some areas prevent people in lower or higher bands from bidding for accessible homes which match their needs.

Direct lets and voids, offers and refusals

Most local authorities and housing associations make direct lets to people with urgent or complex accessibility needs, including addressing Delayed Discharge of Care from hospital. This takes away the stress and complexity of bidding for homes for these groups. Some social landlords are flexible on property void targets, focusing on suitable allocations, while others are more stringent. Most landlords had the same void turnaround targets for accessible homes as general needs homes. Short void turnaround times and varied practice relating to accessibility assessments of properties and applicants, means accessible properties are sometimes allocated to people without accessibility needs and vice versa.

Staff and applicants had different perceptions of what constitutes a suitable offer of an adapted home. Only half of applicants who were allocated a home said that it met all of their access requirements, and 17.5% said their needs were not met. Policies on the number of refusals of offers of housing differed between areas. In some areas two or three refusals were allowed after which the person would go down a band of need. In other areas, applicants would go to the bottom band or go down one band after one refusal and, after a second refusal, would be taken off the register. Some staff said that disabled people rarely refuse a home due to the shortage of accessible properties.

Staff involved in the allocation system, the role of housing OTs and staff training

Many people recognised that most housing staff do not have the knowledge to assess and allocate properties to disabled people, which results in a need to work closely with OTs and fully engage with applicants. Most staff said that dedicated housing OT's are needed to ensure the most positive outcomes for disabled applicants. In-house OTs in two housing associations played substantial roles in matching people to adapted housing.

Housing OT's based in 2 local authority housing options teams played a significant role in ensuring effective allocation of housing and had significant impact on housing strategy, development and meeting disabled people's housing needs. Less than half of housing, social care and health care staff had been trained on the social model of disability, and 30% of staff thought their overall training was insufficient.

Joint operational and strategic working, and hospital discharge

There were many examples of good practice of joint working between housing, health and social care staff. However, there were some concerns regarding the effectiveness of communication, referrals between partners and a holistic approach to meeting disabled people's housing needs. Health and housing staff identified a need to improve joint operational working for hospital discharge. There was support for improved strategic consideration of accessible housing need and allocation, and the impact of gaps on disabled people and services. A regional framework on accessible housing allocation could help strategic planning and enable better joint working to address gaps.

Health, housing and social care staff identified a need for more step-down accessible accommodation to enable safe and timely discharge from hospital. There was significant support for more and better coordinated 'hospital to home' discharge services to support patients to apply for accessible housing, meet patients' housing needs and to link with social landlords. There were strong arguments for earlier referrals to housing from health staff and a more holistic consideration of patients housing accessibility and other housing needs.

Adaptations and grants

Adaptations are sometimes taken out of empty homes for practical and financial reasons or when they are no longer safe to use. Some landlords store and recycle equipment or adaptations for use by new tenants. However, this practice is not widespread. The differing grant regimes dictate whether adaptations are made before or after a person moves to their home. This was confusing for tenants and some non-housing professionals.

Fitting adaptations in a person's current home usually lowers their priority for other more suitable housing. This can mean that some people's housing remains unsuitable for significant periods; some landlords/local authorities are flexible in how much priority they give in these circumstances. Landlords with their own budgets for adaptations (rather than Welsh Government grants) are more likely to recommend re-housing.

Monitoring and strategic oversight

Various forms of performance monitoring of accessible housing allocations are adopted. It was difficult to establish to what extent councils regularly monitor waiting lists in terms of applicants who have high accessibility needs. Strategic and joint analysis of accessible housing allocations, accessible housing need, housing development and adaptations and the extent to which these could work more effectively seems to be patchy.

Transparency, accessibility of the application process, and communication

Over three quarters of applicants were unaware of the allocation system for accessible housing before submitting their application. Some said the lack of transparency in the allocation process made them feel frustrated and confused. Most people applied for housing online; 25% of applicants found the process easy or very easy, and 38% found it difficult or very difficult, with significant differences between different areas.

Many online applicants said they would have liked an option to apply in person, which would have given them an opportunity to ask questions about the allocations process and system. Accessibility of the online systems was an issue for some applicants with sight impairments.

There were geographical inconsistencies in how applicants are kept informed about their application. Many applicants had positive experiences, but a significant proportion highlighted negative staff attitudes and poor disability awareness. More information specifically for people with accessibility requirements could be useful on the local authorities'/Housing Options' websites.

Assessment process and age restrictions

Many applicants had a good experience of the assessment process and found it useful. Some highlighted concerns of the length of wait for assessments and whether they were put into the appropriate priority band or allocated the most suitable home. Some disabled people as well as housing/social care practitioners highlighted that age restrictions on some accessible properties limited disabled people's options and access to housing. However, many housing staff said they consider younger disabled people for 'age restricted' homes, although this practice varied.

Support for applicants, and gathering applicant's views of their experiences

There is a need for more support or awareness of support for some applicants. Offering support to help disabled people move home should be considered by landlords. The need for better signposting/provision of housing support and information for applicants with access requirements was evident.

Gathering the views, feedback and input from applicants or former applicants with accessibility needs seemed to be patchy. Although satisfaction surveys and disabled tenant groups are used, there seemed to be little analysis of the wider experiences of the accessible housing allocation process and applicants' outcomes.

Accessible housing supply, planning, the private rented sector and housing developments

There was widespread agreement that accessible housing is in short supply, and there is an urgent need to develop more homes which are accessible and/or adaptable. Planning constraints and the building of accessible housing can be met with reluctance from private developers however some organisations developed strategies to overcome these barriers. Early assessments of accessible housing need and input on this issue from OT's/housing staff with knowledge in this area remains a significant challenge.

The input of Housing Options, social landlords and OTs into new developments does not always happen despite it being crucial to ensure that appropriate properties are built. Social lettings or longer-term leasing of private rented properties could help to increase the supply of adapted housing. Data and knowledge of accessible housing need feeds into housing strategy, but a clear strategic approach to increasing the stock of accessible housing through a mixture of adaptations, allocation and development remains a challenge. Health and social care staff said they would like to be more involved in housing strategy and development.

THE BENEFITS OF AN EFFECTIVE ACCESSIBLE HOUSING ALLOCATION SYSTEM

Overall, the report highlights how the investment of time and resources into the effective allocation, operational and strategic processes for accessible housing can have a substantial impact on people's long-term health and well-being, the prevention of hospital admissions, and can enable better and more timely discharge of people from hospital. Such investment has the added benefit of large cost savings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Overarching

1
Development of regional accessible housing allocation framework and guidance. The framework could help establish common ground and work towards more standardised and improved practice based on an agreement between partners. The framework could potentially encompass joint work on some of the below recommendations.

Timeframe: Medium term   **Resources:** Staff time   **Scope:** Regional

Capacity, skills and training

2
Focus on increase and exchange of practice and skills amongst housing, health and social care staff. This could be achieved through:
- Peer to peer skills and practice exchange
- Training, in particular of non-specialist staff (e.g. social model of disability, inclusive design, functional ability, specific health conditions, housing systems)

Timeframe: Medium term   **Resources:** Staff time, financial when sourced externally   **Scope:** Regional

3
Invest in Housing Occupational Therapists in housing options teams

Timeframe: Long term   **Resources:** Financial   **Scope:** Local

Allocation Processes

4 Explore opportunities for providing early OT assessments at housing application stage in all local authorities. Consider the content of assessments to focus on access barriers as per social model of disability

Timeframe: Long term

Resources: Staff time if within existing housing/social care teams Financial additional OT's

Scope: Local with potential for regional cooperation

5 Ensure robust processes are in place for prioritising applicants with accessibility needs for accessible properties, especially where banding-based quota systems are in place.

Timeframe: Medium to long term

Resources: Staff time

Scope: Local with potential for regional cooperation

6 Work towards common regional categorisation of accessibility levels of properties and applicants' accessibility requirements. Invest in proactive assessments, classification and mapping of accessible properties (potential for pooling resources to carry this out).

Timeframe: Medium to long term

Resources: Staff time and financial resources

Scope: Regional

7 Ensure there is a balance between meeting business needs and individual accessibility needs in decisions on void turnaround times.

Timeframe: Medium

Resources: Staff time

Scope: Local

Service accessibility and support

8

Review website information and accessibility including:
- Provision of more comprehensive information specifically on accessible housing allocation process and support available to disabled people
- Website accessibility audit

Timeframe: Short to medium term

Resources: Staff time Financial (if new regional website developed)

Scope: Local although a regional website/app with information & support could be considered

9

Consider reviewing current support arrangements and commissioning a pan-Gwent accessible housing support service for disabled people/people with access requirements including support with house-moves

Timeframe: Medium to long term

Resources: Financial

Scope: Regional

10

Provide clear information and policies on adaptations in the context of allocations for applicants and non-housing professionals including:
- Availability of adaptations pre and post moving-in date
- Adaptations to current housing for applicants in extreme need
- Decisions on whether adaptation or move is the best option for service users

Timeframe: Short to medium term

Resources: Staff time

Scope: Local with potential for regional cooperation

Adaptations

11

Jointly consider how to address the findings of WAO Housing Adaptations report[1] including the need for joint strategic planning and delivery of adaptations to make the system more equitable across tenures (including common pathways and single points of contact)

Timeframe: Medium to long term

Resources: Staff time

Scope: Regional

[1] https://www.audit.wales/publication/housing-adaptations

12 Consider carrying out a review of equipment and adaptation storage and recycling facilities/processes, including potential for using pooled resources or extended use of Gwent Wide Integrated Community Equipment Service by all partners

Timeframe: Medium to long term

Resources: Staff time, financial

Scope: Regional

Hospital discharge

13 Review and investment in a variety of step down and temporary accessible housing facilities

Timeframe: Medium to long term

Resources: Financial

Scope: Regional

14 Commission a housing focused hospital discharge service (align and address gaps in existing housing and social care discharge and admission prevention services)

Timeframe: Long term

Resources: Financial

Scope: Regional

15 Develop clear hospital discharge pathways including increased focus on early referrals to and communication with housing

Timeframe: Medium to long term

Resources: Staff time

Scope: Regional

Performance and applicant engagement

16 Increase engagement with and analysis of data on experiences and outcomes of disabled applicants/tenants. This can include disaggregation of existing survey data.

Timeframe: Medium to long term

Resources: Staff time

Scope: Local with potential for regional cooperation

17 Undertake regular monitoring and analysis of the performance of accessible housing allocation systems

Timeframe: Medium to long term

Resources: Staff time

Scope: Local with potential for regional cooperation (e.g. common indicators)

18 Increase activity on raising awareness of accessible housing options and processes directly with people affected (build on online engagement methods and tools developed in the lockdown period)

Timeframe: Medium term

Resources: Staff time

Scope: Local and regional

Strategy and stock

19 Consider investing in mapping of accessible housing stock onto centrally held database(s)

Timeframe: Long term

Resources: Financial

Scope: Local with potential for regional

20 Maximise the development of accessible housing through:
- Increased focus on early engagement of key relevant partners with the knowledge of accessible housing needs in housing development
- Increased utilisation of the planning system (including Section 106) and available funding (including ICF and SHG)

Timeframe: Long term

Resources: Staff time, financial

Scope: Local and regional

21 Improve the strategic focus on increasing provision of accessible housing, including:
- Granular analysis of accessible housing need with specific development targets feeding into housing, health and social care strategies
- Joint consideration of accessible housing allocations, adaptations, housing development as well as increasing stock via purchase & re-development through social housing partners

Timeframe: Long term

Resources: Staff time, financial

Scope: Local and regional

22 Consider widening eligibility for age restricted housing based on needs, area and availability.

Timeframe: Medium to long term

Resources: Staff time

Scope: Local with potential for more regional cooperation

23 Build on and learn from existing work of housing options teams with Private Rented Sector (e.g. social lettings, leasing schemes) to acquire accessible stock which can be used to address the needs of some applicants

Timeframe: Medium term

Resources: Staff time

Scope: Local with potential for regional learning