



## **Policy Briefing: Housing for disabled people in Wales**

### **Introduction**

1. **This paper briefly looks at some of the issues around disabled people and housing in Wales. It explores some of the key concerns for disabled people regarding access to and choice of housing and recommends some potential solutions to current issues**
2. A home is where people start their day and is the base from which they develop their lives. Whether the home comes through the Private Sector or Social Housing, it is important that it meets people's needs and supports their lives in the wider community. An appropriate home can support independence and wellbeing for disabled people, whilst inappropriate housing can increase dependence and isolation. Many disabled people experience restricted choice when choosing a suitable home and this has led to "*disability housing*" being regarded as a specialist area.
3. As the population of older people in Wales has been steadily increasing the pressure this is causing on public services has been widely acknowledged. **Many older people develop impairments later in life, leading to increased pressure on housing services for disabled people and on related funding such as the Disabled Facilities Grant.**
4. Four issues needing consideration when thinking about disabled people's housing needs are;
  - Property Design
  - Property Accessibility
  - Property Location
  - Community Involvement

5. These issues are basically the same considerations for the non-disabled population. The problem is that the design criteria of most houses do not meet the needs of many disabled people. Consequently disabled people fall outside the mainstream system, are treated separately, and cost more public money. The more “*disability housing*” can be mainstreamed, the greater will be the general understanding the issues, and potentially the more cost effective it will be on the public purse.

### **Current disability housing initiatives**

6. Moves have been made towards ensuring that disabled people have access to both suitable housing and information on accessible housing, however **the current initiatives, whilst invaluable to disabled people, are reactive and have failed to address the current gap between demand and supply for accessible housing. This housing supply deficit will only be exacerbated by an ageing population in Wales.**
7. Care and Repair primarily adapt private properties, lived in by older people. When adaptations are done to a private home, and this in turn comes to be sold, there is no way of ensuring that it is used by someone needing these adaptations.
8. Whilst disabled people have a right to the same choices in housing as non-disabled people, including the social housing, private rented and home ownership routes, accessible housing supply issues are inherently sustained when this is the most common route for adaptations.
9. There is an argument that, as the private sector provides 80% of all housing in Wales, this is where an independent register is required.
10. **Legislative requirements and/or voluntary agreements with private sector housing providers are essential to address concerns regarding constantly adapting new properties in order to market private sector adapted housing to disabled people when properties become available. Additionally savings can be made for both individuals and limited adaptations grant budgets if adapted housing is proactively marketed to disabled people.**

### **Social housing adaptations**

11. Whilst social housing providers are subject to equality duties under the Equality Act 2010 and have been subject to the requirement to provide adaptations for disabled people under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) for over a decade, progress on adapting properties and living environments has been woefully slow.
12. Not only are these adaptations provided on a reactive basis, generally only when a request is received, but there are substantial delays in adapting properties once requests are received. These delays have been linked to both deteriorating health and wellbeing for individuals and increased costs to the NHS due to delayed discharge.

13. **Both the DDA and Equality Act 2010 place a requirement on public service providers to make adaptations and ensure an adequate supply of accessible properties as an anticipatory duty. As it is predictable and indeed well-evidenced that there is an under-supply of accessible housing and an increasing demand for such housing, it is essential and legally required that housing providers make adaptations to properties to meet predictable demand, before such requests are received.**
14. Our experiences and those of our service users indicate that not only is there a lack of proactive adaptation and accessible property development, but that requests for adaptations are not completed within a reasonable timescale.
15. **All social housing providers should have an estates equality action and improvement plan, which should plan to meet predictable demand for adaptations to existing properties as soon as practicably possible. This should be a legislative requirement in its own right and a requirement of all housing-related procurement exercises by local and national government. Disabled people should be actively involved in the development and monitoring of these plans and compliance should be monitored and enforced.**

### **Accessible Housing Registers**

16. Housing for disabled people is clearly seen as a “distinct housing requirement” and consequently presented as something outside the mainstream development. However in practise disabled people’s housing needs are part of the overall picture, particularly as the population gets older and starts to generate greater demand for “accessible housing”.
17. For disabled people’s desire of integration and inclusion to be fulfilled within the housing sector, the key industry stakeholders (both public and private sector) need to be actively participating in the solution. Disabled people face barriers to finding suitable properties, both in terms of a shortage of properties and a lack of information on accessible housing, leading to suitable properties not being utilised fully by the disabled community.
18. **One short to medium term solution is to ensure that producing local Accessible Housing Registers becomes a legal requirement.** Accessible Housing Registers can be a powerful tool for delivering equal access to housing for disabled people and thereby promoting independent living for disabled people whilst **reducing the cost of adaptations by systematically ensuring that existing accessible housing is fully utilised by disabled people.**
19. Such registers need to include information that allows disabled people to have the same choices as non-disabled people, such as location and characteristics of the property. Information about the register and suitable property needs to be promoted in plain English and Cymraeg Clir and in locations where disabled people can easily access it, such as community centres and via equality organisations. Disabled

people need to be aware of Accessible Housing Registers in order to ensure that they are able to meet their needs.

### **Disabled Facilities Grant**

20. The current Disabled Facilities Grant provides an essential lifeline to many disabled people who find themselves in a position where they require adaptations to remain in their home. Having to move is not only difficult both in general and due to the lack of accessible housing supply, but can also result in increased isolation and a loss of independence, which in turn increases costs for statutory services such as health and social care.
21. **As an interim mechanism, to allow individuals to remain in their own home and retain their independence, maintaining and increasing the Disabled Facilities Grant is essential to ensuring that there is an adequate supply of accessible, affordable housing.**

### **Towards a sustainable, long-term, affordable solution**

22. As mentioned previously in this paper current disability housing initiatives are reactive and classify accessible housing separately from mainstream housing.
23. Proactively bringing accessible design into mainstream planning, design and building processes would increase the supply of adapted or adaptable housing and provide benefits for non-disabled and older people at the same time.
24. A successful mechanism for ensuring longevity of housing design, independence for people at all life stages and support for choice and flexibility is the Life Time Homes design agenda<sup>1</sup>.
25. Within these 16 design criteria arranged around 5 principles of inclusive design are simple alterations to the design of homes, which render them suitable for most individuals, including disabled people and families with children, by supporting easy adaptation and flexibility.
26. Applying these standards universally to new build properties wherever possible would, over time, enable older and disabled people to remain in their homes, whilst ensuring that accessible properties and choice of location become part of mainstream housing developments, rather than a specialist area.
27. Life Time Homes are not a substitute for adapted, accessible, specialist housing for a limited number of disabled people, but do reduce costs to health and social care budgets by enabling independence and reducing the need to move home later in life for many older and/or disabled people. Simultaneously by ensuring homes are built to these design criteria at the outset of building design it is estimated that the average additional cost is only £ 545-£1,615 per dwelling, dependent on the

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<sup>1</sup> [www.lifetimehomes.org.uk](http://www.lifetimehomes.org.uk)

experience of the home designer and builder; size of the property and whether the criteria are built into the design from the outset. This does not represent a significant financial burden when the savings to health and social care budgets through increased independence and the reduced costs of any future adaptations to the property are taken into consideration.

28. Most of the design criteria in fact attract little cost, such as wider parking bays; close and level access to the property from parking and public transport; wider doors and entrances; adaptable living spaces and fixtures and fittings at a height that can be used by a wheelchair user. The most significant cost is entrance level shower drainage.

29. **We therefore recommend that designing and building homes to the Life Time Homes standard becomes a statutory requirement for all new build housing in the social housing sector and some homes in the private sector.** This should be supported by guidance, information and training for planners, designers, architects and the construction industry and closer working arrangements between RSLs, Local Authorities, homebuilders and designers and the private housing sector.