

ACCESSIBLE HOUSING LETTINGS & HOUSING ADAPTATIONS

PILOT PROJECT

1. Introduction

This report sets out an ambition to support households in highest priority need for accessible housing and to redirect households requiring high cost adaptations to accessible homes that become available for letting. It is recommended that this be achieved through the implementation of an Accessible Housing and Housing Adaptation pilot project.

The key objectives of the accessible housing pilot are to:

1. Allocate accessible housing effectively to those in highest priority need.
2. Make best use of funding for housing adaptations and existing accessible social housing stock.
3. Deliver services that are tailored to local needs and supply of accessible housing.
4. Work in partnership with housing association partners to make best use of accessible housing stock and funding for adaptations.
5. Maximise opportunities for joined up working between Housing, Social Care and Environmental Health to deliver housing adaptations in the context of wider housing options.

2. Supply and demand for accessible housing

In 2011/12 there were 123 accessible homes (AHR categories A-E¹) that became available for let; 62 A to D category and 61 E category properties). These made up 22% of the total social housing lets for the borough. Only 25 of these properties were let to households with an assessed need for an accessible home. Of the most accessible properties (A to D), only 10% of these were let to a household with a need for them. While there is a steady supply of accessible properties being let through choice based lettings, and a demand for accessible housing, the proportion of lets to the accessible homes to those who require them remains low.

At the end of the 2011/12 period there were 130 applicants with 700 'supporting health and independence' points and three applicants with 'emergency health and independence' points. This compares with an annual supply of 123 accessible homes. While there is still a limited supply for family homes, those with three or more bedrooms, there is sufficient supply of smaller accessible homes to meet demand.

¹ Descriptions of each Accessible Housing Category can be found in Appendix A.

It is understood that the proportion of accessible homes being let to households with a disabled person is low because:

- Disabled people need assistance with the practical and financial aspects of moving home.
- Short void periods are insufficient to allow a disabled person to prepare for a move.
- Housing applicants are unfamiliar with accessible housing design standards and less aware of the low numbers of accessible homes than housing staff.
- Households with high priority points refuse properties while waiting for their desired home with a perception that their high priority will enable them to remain top or close to the top of a shortlist. Location of the property is usually cited as the refusal reason.

The supply of accessible accommodation is predominantly made up of smaller bedroom sizes, i.e. one and two bedroom properties. These properties could also be suitable for households, already in social rented accommodation, who require high cost adaptations particularly if they live in under occupied family homes.

3. Demand for housing adaptations

Housing adaptations are designed to remove or alter physical features of a home to improve the independence and/or ability to support care of a disabled person. The Council supports the installation of adaptations to homes of all tenures including homes that are Council-owned, housing association managed, owner occupied and private rented.

Requests for major adaptations are mostly dealt with by the Adult Social Care Occupational Therapy Service. Assessments will consider the suitability of the existing home. Where there are access barriers within the home environment, the occupational therapist will take into consideration the range of options available. These include recommendations for the installation of adaptations and/or re-housing opportunities to an accessible home.

Adaptations to Council owned properties are funded by the TMO while housing associations take up 85% of the Disabled Facilities Grant allocation. Historically there has been a perception that there is a low supply of accessible homes and as such adaptation and allocation processes are designed to encourage adapting existing homes rather than relocation to an accessible home.

In seeking to make best use of existing resources, the Council aims to explore whether households needing high cost major adaptations could explore alternative housing options. Rehousing to an accessible home is now a viable option for disabled residents. With demand for adaptations increasing as demographics change and resources to fund adaptations limited, the Council should seek to carry out adaptations where:

- the property is adequately occupied (i.e. properties that are not under-occupied or overcrowded).

- the adaptation results in an overall improvement in the accessibility of the property so that both internal and external areas are accessible.
- the adaptation creates a property that is accessible beyond the current tenancy for future occupants.

Where a request for an adaptation does not satisfy the above criteria, re-housing to an accessible property of the correct bedroom size should be recommended.

4. Reviewing how accessible homes are let

Housing need and accessible housing need differ, and a household needing an accessible home will not necessarily be in high priority need for housing. For example, a wheelchair user applying for re-housing would be awarded a wheelchair accessible category (category A) but may not receive any priority points if they are living in suitable accommodation at the time that they apply. As such, points reflect housing need and priority while the AHR category reflects property suitability. Health and Disability points are awarded to households whose disability and independence are impacted by the quality and design of their existing property. The AHR category is reflective of housing suitability and not need. The points reflect need. To date support is offered to households needing the more accessible properties with resources channelled to seek eligible households with the assessed need for a given property category when an accessible property becomes available for let.

Figures suggest that the highest priority applicants are not necessarily waiting for the most accessible property types yet these households would still benefit from them. For example, an applicant with 1000 points with an assessed need for an E category property would receive less priority for an accessible home (A to D) than an applicant with 200 points who has an assessed need for a C property. It has been timely to reflect on the impacts of the AHR guidelines and this has suggested that resources should focus on those with highest priority for housing based on points priority. The AHR categories, of both the property and the applicant, should continue to be used to inform housing choices and suitability but the allocation of properties should be less prescriptive in attempts to match property type with applicant category.

Disabled housing applicants often require assistance to identify and view suitable properties. Support services, such as Housing Occupational Therapy, are initiated when an accessible void property becomes available with efforts made to identify an eligible (by AHR category) and interested household. Resources could be better used by focusing on housing applicants in highest priority need for housing, as reflected in their points, to expedite the moves of those who need accessible accommodation most. This could be enhanced through the delivery of a package to provide the support, financial and practical assistance that disabled need to move.

It is expected that this would:

- Reduce the waiting times of high priority applicants moving into accessible homes.
- Reduce the demand for high cost adaptations in social rented housing where alternative accessible accommodation is available.
- Improve lettings of accessible homes to households who need them.
- Use housing staff resources more effectively.

The perception of there being a shortage of accessible homes has led to lettings processes focusing on finding a best fit for void properties rather than proactively seeking accommodation for disabled housing applicants in highest priority need. Amending the AHR guidelines will put housing applicants as the forefront of service delivery. The new methodology will support housing applicants with the highest housing need to find suitable accommodation and will be less reactive to void property activity.

5. Improving service delivery

In seeking to improve both the lets of accessible properties to households who need them and effective use of housing staff support, the borough will need to address the potential barriers that are causing disabled households to refuse accessible accommodation. Lessons learnt from the sheltered housing pilot indicate that some households have difficulty engaging with choice based lettings and with the practical and financial tasks associated with finding accommodation and with moving home. This may result in there being a low interest in properties being advertised and properties refused being at the viewing stage.

Housing Opportunities staff should provide more support to disabled housing applicants in highest priority need for housing and facilitate moves. The pilot should seek to replicate the elements of the sheltered housing pilot which were deemed to improve the efficiency of lettings. Households with high priority for accessible housing through their health and independence points could be assisted through direct offers of accessible accommodation.

The Under-occupation Scheme offers a package of assistance to households wishing to move to smaller accommodation releasing family sized homes. This incentive is deemed effective in expediting moves. It is expected that there would be benefits of funding similar assistance for disabled households to reduce staff time and costs associated with repeat visits, re-assessments and ongoing support. A package of support could make use of existing services in the borough, such as the decluttering and handyperson services, but would provide a single point of contact for the housing applicant who needs them. The package could also include arranging and funding:

- packing and unpacking
- removals
- handyperson services
- flooring (only where specialist flooring is required)
- resettlement services such as submitting new benefit applications and changing addresses with utility companies.

To make best use of the budget and manage demand, eligibility criteria for the package would need to be established. Households that meet the any of the following criteria will be eligible for the enhanced support and rehousing resources:

1. Households with more than 700 health and independence points moving to an accessible property (Accessible Housing Categories A to E).
2. Households needing major adaptations to a property that is under occupied.
3. Households needing major adaptations to the access or structure of the current home (for example, widening doorways, large ramps, stairlifts).

Funding for removals and relocation will only be available to households who move to an accessible property that meets their needs. In the first instance, the pilot will be limited to supporting moves from and in to social housing properties. Requests for support to facilitate moves outside of the borough will be considered.

4. Funding

Estimates based on similar services offered by the Under-occupation Scheme indicate that removal and packing costs range from £700 to £1100 for studio to family sized accommodation. Based on the number of accessible voids and their bedroom sizes, it would have cost £100,000 to facilitate moves to each of these dwellings. For the duration of the pilot project (six months) and to cover minor alterations via the Handyperson service, a fund of £60,000 is required.

The Disabled Facilities Grant is a mandatory grant for essential adaptations for disabled occupants. The maximum grant available for a mandatory DFG is currently subject to a limit of £30,000 per application in England. The 2008 changes to the DFG programme removed part of the ring-fencing for the grant thereby allowing us to meet the needs of disabled people more flexibly². This funding could be used for works and schemes that would not be eligible for grant funding under the mandatory requirements of the DFG legislation but do meet the needs of local disabled residents; for example, funding removal and relocation costs for households moving to more accessible accommodation.

The DFG budget for the borough was under spent in last financial year with the surplus amount rolling over to this year when the budget is also supplemented by an amount from Health. This provides a good opportunity to be creative with resources and trial processes which could achieve cost savings in the future when grant funding is more limited.

Alternatively, the Housing Opportunities Team has access to two budgets: one for incentives (£75k) and another for relocation (£42k) which could be used to fund a package of assistance. The TMO have an additional budget for Housing and Social Services related expenditure.

² DFG : *The Package of Changes to Modernise the Programme, 2008. DCLG.*

The Housing Opportunities Team will assist social housing residents in finding alternative accommodation and assist with a package of services to facilitate the move. This will include assistance with arranging and funding reasonable removal costs, referral to the de-cluttering service and funding of minor works through the Handy Person Service at Staying First.

5. Monitoring and evaluation

Impacts from the introduction of revised accessible housing allocation guidelines and an enhanced support package for high priority disabled applicants will be measured through the evaluation of the:

- Number of moves of disabled households to accessible homes.
- Points priority of households moving to accessible homes.
- Time from application date to tenancy sign up.
- Proportion of first time lets of accessible homes.
- Cost benefit analysis of the move as opposed to installation of the required adaptation.

The pilot will also seek to collect information on the reasons that housing applicants give when refusing individual properties. This will enable the Housing Options team to consider the impact of refusal penalties currently being considered as part of the review of the Housing Allocation Scheme.

Outcomes will also be reviewed using Housing Lettings Performance Indicators. These will feed into existing reviews of the Housing Allocation Scheme, Choice Based Lettings and Housing Needs processes.

6. Recommendations

It is recommended that the Housing Department initiate a six month pilot to provide an enhanced support services to disabled people needing high cost adaptations and/or with a high priority for housing on health and disability grounds.

The Housing Department should seek to identify the service responsible for the implementation of the pilot project. It is suggested that the Housing Options and Housing Occupational Therapy teams are best placed to deliver the enhanced support.

A budget should be assigned to the project to cover the costs of removal and relocation packages as outlined in the process map (see Appendix C). Funding for the pilot could be sourced from the DFG under-spend or Health contribution.

Approval should be sought from Finance, Environmental Health and Adult Social Care Occupational Therapy services that will be impacted by the pilot project. It is recommended that a representative from the Housing Occupational Therapy Team sit

on the major adaptations panel that currently exists to authorise major adaptations. Staying First will need to be informed of the pilot project services.

Once in place, the pilot could commence for a six month period with a midpoint review. The pilot project should feed into the review of the Housing Allocation Scheme, Choice Based Lettings and Housing Needs processes.

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APPENDIX A: Definitions

This report relates to allocation of accessible housing and major housing adaptations:

Accessible housing: homes that have been built without, or adapted to remove, barriers which may limit a disabled person's independence. Examples of barriers include steps, stairs and narrow corridors.

The borough's social housing stock is predominantly inaccessible with more than three quarters having steps to access the dwelling. Homes that meet accessible housing design guidance make up less than 3% of the total social housing stock while step-free properties make up another 10%. However, despite the apparently low proportion of accessible housing in the social rented sector, these properties do become available for let in significant numbers.

An accessible housing category and details of accessibility features are stored on the borough's housing management database and Home Connections and attached to property adverts when they become void. The accessible housing categories are:

AHR Category	National Standards	Property Description
A - Wheelchair Accessible	Wheelchair Housing Design Guide - 2 nd Edition (2006). Stephen Thorpe and Habinteg.	Designed to meet the latest accessible housing design standards offering extra space and full access to all rooms and facilities.
B - Partially Wheelchair Accessible	Wheelchair Housing. Housing Corporation Scheme Development Standards.	Designed to older wheelchair standards or significantly adapted to provide extra space and wheelchair access to at least the entrance level of the property.
C - Lifetime Homes	Lifetime Homes. Joseph Rowntree Foundation.	Designed to meet the space standards of Lifetime Homes. Main features include a level approach/entrance and wider doorways.
D - Easy Access	Mobility Standard Housing (1974). DoE plus Housing Corporation Scheme Development Standards (pre-1999).	Main features include a level approach to the entrance, wider doorways and more space than in general needs housing.
E - Step-Free	No published design guidance.	General needs housing with a level approach/entrance into the property.
E+ - Minimal Steps	No published design guidance.	Has up to 6 steps to access the front door.
F - General Needs		Has more than 6 steps or ramp access that is steeper than 1:10.

Minor adaptations: auxiliary aids and alterations to physical features costing less than £2,000. These include grab rails, small ramps and over-bath showers. The distinction between minor and major adaptations is required as funding arrangements for each is different. Housing associations are expected to fund minor adaptations in their properties with grant funding being available only for adaptations costing more than £2,000. Minor adaptations for privately owned or rented properties, up to the value of £1,000 are installed and funded by the Integrated Community Equipment Service. The TMO will install and fund all adaptations (minor and major) in Council-owned properties.

Major adaptations: alterations to physical features of a home that cost more than £2,000. These include, but are not limited to, level access showers, curved track stair lifts and through floor lifts.

Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG): a mandatory grant for essential adaptations for disabled occupants. Owner-occupiers, tenants of local authorities, Registered Social Landlords (RSL) and private landlords, and private landlords themselves are all eligible to apply for a DFG. However, it is expected that adaptations to council housing stock are financed from other council resources such as capital receipts or the Housing Revenue Account. The maximum grant amount is £30,000.

APPENDIX B: Legal framework and guidance

The statutory responsibility for providing adaptations is the duty of the welfare authority under the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act 1970 while housing providers are governed by the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996 and the Equality Act 2010.

Delivery of housing adaptations is governed by:

- Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996
- The Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002
- The Housing Renewal Grants (Services and Charges) Order 1996
- The Housing Renewal Grants Regulations 1996
- Delivering Housing Adaptations for Disabled People: A Good Practice Guide June 2006 Edition.
- Disabled Facilities Grant : The Package of Changes to Modernise the Programme. February 2008. Department for Communities and Local Government

The Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996 and associated guidance provides the framework for the delivery of housing adaptations. A Disabled Facilities Grant must be approved for the purposes as outlined in Section 23 of the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996. A DFG must be approved if it is for one of the following purposes:

- (a) facilitating access by the disabled occupant to and from
 - i. the dwelling, qualifying houseboat or qualifying park home, or
 - ii. the building in which the dwelling or, as the case may be, flat is situated;
- (b) making
 - i. the dwelling, qualifying houseboat or qualifying park home, or
 - ii. the building, safe for the disabled occupant and other persons residing with him;
- (c) facilitating access by the disabled occupant to a room used or usable as the principal family room;
- (d) facilitating access by the disabled occupant to, or providing for the disabled occupant, a room used or usable for sleeping;
- (e) facilitating access by the disabled occupant to, or providing for the disabled occupant, a room in which there is a lavatory, or facilitating the use by the disabled occupant of such a facility;
- (f) facilitating access by the disabled occupant to, or providing for the disabled occupant, a room in which there is a bath or shower (or both), or facilitating the use by the disabled occupant of such a facility;
- (g) facilitating access by the disabled occupant to, or providing for the disabled occupant, a room in which there is a wash hand basin, or facilitating the use by the disabled occupant of such a facility;
- (h) facilitating the preparation and cooking of food by the disabled occupant;

- (i) improving any heating system in the dwelling, qualifying houseboat or qualifying park home to meet the needs of the disabled occupant or, if there is no existing heating system there or any such system is unsuitable for use by the disabled occupant, providing a heating system suitable to meet his needs;
- (j) facilitating the use by the disabled occupant of a source of power, light or heat by altering the position of one or more means of access to or control of that source or by providing additional means of control;
- (k) facilitating access and movement by the disabled occupant around the dwelling, qualifying houseboat or qualifying park home in order to enable him to care for a person who is normally resident there and is in need of such care;
- (l) such other purposes as may be specified by order of the Secretary of State.

The Equality Act 2010

The Equality Act 2010 (the Act) replaces the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) in seeking to tackle discrimination and promote equality. In the 2010 Act, disability is one of the protected characteristics covered by the new legislative duties. The Act has retained many of the duties from the DDA including the duty to make 'reasonable adjustments' to policies and processes, the built environment and provision of auxiliary aids and services.

While registered providers are not listed for the specific equality duties in the way that local authorities are, they do carry out public functions in the allocation and management of their homes. The Equality and Human Rights Commission advises that registered providers comply with the general duties of the Act when exercising its public functions.

APPENDIX C: Accessible Housing Allocation Process

