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# Accessible social housing in Wales: a review of systems for assessment, recording and matching

Research Summary

Social research

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Accessible Housing Registers are one way in which social landlords can identify accessible and adapted social rented properties, and match them with the needs and choices of disabled people.

An Accessible Housing Register is a register that:

- identifies disabled people in need of accessible homes;
- identifies accessible properties, their location and characteristics; and
- enables effective matching of people and suitable homes.

There is currently no legal requirement on social landlords to provide this service, although they are encouraged to do so by the Welsh Government.

The Research Team (Shelter Cymru and Disability Wales) undertook a review of systems for assessment, recording and matching with social landlords across Wales to ascertain the extent of use of Accessible Housing Registers and alternative matching systems.

## Methods

The review involved the gathering of primary data from social landlords, wider stakeholders and disabled people who had experienced housing need.

The review was undertaken between July 2012 and December 2012.

Social landlords were primarily asked for their views via one of two online questionnaires. One questionnaire was aimed at social landlord staff that work at the strategic planning level while the other survey was targeted at frontline staff.

The second stage of the research involved:

- a series of one-to-one interviews with eight stakeholders (including social landlords)
- two focus groups with stakeholders
- a focus group with Occupational Therapists, and
- one-to-one interviews with six disabled people who had experienced housing need.

Dadansodi ar gyfer Polisi



Analysis for Policy

## Key Findings

The research found that all local authorities have a process for allocating disabled people to accessible housing. Fourteen local authorities told us that there is an Accessible Housing Register in the local authority area, whereas eight local authorities told us that either:

- (i) their process has some elements of an Accessible Housing Register;
- (ii) they are in the process of developing an Accessible Housing Register; or
- (iii) they have their own internal matching process.

There was extensive variation between each of the Accessible Housing Registers and how they operated, as well as differences between matching systems of those local authorities that do not have an Accessible Housing Register operating in the area.

We had a limited level of engagement with de minimis landlords in the current study<sup>1</sup>. However, those who did engage with the

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<sup>1</sup> Registered Social Landlords (also known as Housing Associations) in Wales can be divided into two groups. Large landlords are subject to the Regulatory Framework for Housing Associations, by virtue of the number of dwellings that they own for let being 250 or greater, and smaller landlords that are 'de minimis' who let less than 250 dwellings.

research told us that they do not use an Accessible Housing Register.

It is clear that there is no 'typical' form of Accessible Housing Register. Rather, there are a series of matching schemes operating under the guise of an Accessible Housing Register.

We received 40 survey responses from social landlord staff who were working at the strategic level, representing 37 social landlords. Just over half (21) of respondents said that they use an Accessible Housing Register to match disabled people to accessible homes and 19 said they did not. Out of 21 survey responses from frontline staff (representing 20 social landlords), 13 said that they use an Accessible Housing Register to match disabled people to homes and eight said they did not<sup>2</sup>.

There was evidence of variation in what social landlords believe constitutes an Accessible Housing Register. Despite this variation, the most common approach was to incorporate the Accessible Housing Register into the Common Housing Register.

### Social landlords receive referrals to their

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<sup>2</sup> We did not receive a response from every social landlord. Conversely, on occasion, we received more than one response from different members of staff of particular social landlords.

Accessible Housing Registers from a number of sources, the most common being the homelessness department, Social Services and Occupational Therapy.

All social landlords within the study agreed that the main rationale for setting up the local Accessible Housing Register was to make best use of existing accommodation and being better able to match the housing needs of disabled people with available accommodation.

Whilst the Welsh Government Strategic Equality Plan sets out its policy in relation to Accessible Housing Registers<sup>3</sup>, less than two fifths of social landlords said that the Welsh Government's policy on encouraging Accessible Housing Registers impacted on the establishment, or further development, of their Register

A quarter of social landlords stated that they were not aware of the Welsh Government's policy to encourage the use of Accessible Housing Registers (or did not know enough about it to comment).

Social landlords would like to see the Welsh Government provide financial backing for, and support the development of Accessible Housing Registers across

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<sup>3</sup><http://wales.gov.uk/topics/equality/equalityactatwork/?lang=en>

organisations and local authority boundaries using existing good practice. Nevertheless, there were some concerns about Accessible Housing Registers being made mandatory for social landlords.

There is insufficient monitoring of outcomes of social landlords' matching processes. At present, it is very difficult to report on quantifiable outcomes of the Registers (or equivalent matching system). Social landlords themselves recognise the issue of monitoring outcomes as a matter for future attention.

A number of the Accessible Housing Registers do not meet the criteria of a register that is accessible and promoted to the public, potential service users and their advocates. Rather, such registers might be better regarded as 'internal matching systems'<sup>4</sup>.

Social landlords who use an Accessible Housing Register were more likely to have an effective system for identifying accessible/adapted/adaptable properties and ensuring they are available to those who need them than those who do not use an Accessible Housing Register.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Stirling, T., (2009): Accessible Housing Registers in Wales

<sup>5</sup> Due to the varying nature of practice between landlords who said that they do and those that said they do not use an Accessible Housing Register, caution must be warranted when inferring differences between

Staff of social landlords who use an Accessible Housing Register were more likely to receive specialist training in matching people to their accessible home and feel more confident in their ability to do so.

Staff that use an Accessible Housing Register were more likely to consider a range of holistic needs amongst the people they assessed compared to those who do not.

There is more joint working between departments and organisations in order to best match people to accessible properties for social landlords who use an Accessible Housing Register.

Nevertheless, there is still room for better communication (for example, between all housing providers in the area) and continuing improvements in joined-up working both internally and externally for many social landlords.

The majority of frontline staff who do not use an Accessible Housing Register would like to do so in the future. Of those who do not want to use an Accessible Housing Register in the future, the

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the groups. Although we report the differences between groups in this report, we urge caution with generalising these findings to all social landlords.

reasons given include the perceived lack of suitability of their housing stock for adaptation and the perceived effectiveness of their current matching system. Nevertheless, service users would like to see all social landlords use an Accessible Housing Register.

The main impact of Accessible Housing Registers was ensuring that adapted properties are retained for the use of disabled people and ensuring that disabled people are being rehoused in sustainable tenancies.

Social landlords who use an Accessible Housing Register consider that the biggest consequence of not using one could be an increased risk that disabled people would be housed/left housed in unsuitable accommodation. They also saw the restrictions in public sector spending and Housing Benefit reforms as the biggest barrier to the future success and implementation of the registers.

Other barriers include: the cost and expertise needed; lack of staff resource; limited housing stock; managing expectations; lack of leadership on the issue and changing service user needs. Facilitators of setting up an Accessible Housing Register include: commitment and buy-in from all partners; good record

keeping and information sharing and strong partnership working.

The comparison of three case study Accessible Housing Registers (the ADAPT Scheme, Accessible Homes and Pathways<sup>6</sup>) was difficult due to each Accessible Housing Register employing a different implementation method, operating in a different geographical location and housing market, collecting different outcome data and using different formulas to calculate costs and benefits.

Nevertheless, there was anecdotal evidence that the savings made by the Accessible Housing Registers had outweighed the costs.

During our online survey, social landlords told us that, although they could not quantify the exact savings to other budgets as a result of their Accessible Housing Register, there had been likely savings to a number of areas including: healthcare, delay into residential care, the adaptation budget and Social Services.

Of the strategic survey respondents, one third thought that an Accessible Housing Register could be implemented in the private rented sector. In addition, just over

half of frontline staff who use an Accessible Housing Register agreed or strongly agreed that they should be used in the private rented sector.

Barriers to implementing Accessible Housing Registers in the private rented sector include landlord reluctance and security of tenure. Nevertheless, there is evidence of social landlords working with private landlords to match disabled people to accessible housing and an Accessible Housing Register in the private rented sector is seen as feasible with appropriate support from the Welsh Government and the public, private and voluntary sectors.

### **Suggestions for next steps**

The research highlighted the benefits of social landlords using an Accessible Housing Register. Therefore:

We suggest that each social landlord uses one to help effectively match accessible housing to disabled people.

We do understand that there are resource implications in doing this. We therefore suggest that, until it is feasible for all social landlords to have an Accessible Housing Register, those not currently using one should ensure that they have:

- implemented robust ways of collecting and using outcome monitoring data

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<sup>6</sup> (i) the ADAPT scheme that operates in Swansea; (ii) the Accessible Homes scheme that operates in Cardiff; and (iii) Pathways to Adapted Housing that operates in Rhondda Cynon Taf.

- put in place effective identification and matching systems to match disabled people to accessible homes
- offered comprehensive staff training to those working on the front-line
- considered the housing needs of disabled people holistically
- engaged in joint-working with a wide range of other departments and organisations.

We suggest that the definition of an Accessible Housing Register and the Welsh Government's policy on encouraging their use is promoted widely to social landlords. This includes the promotion of Accessible Housing Registers to de minimis landlords. There is extensive experience regarding the implementation and running of Accessible Housing Registers, negating the need for any social landlord to start from scratch or pilot any scheme they were intending to initiate. There are organisations with expertise in this field who could offer advice to social landlords in the early stages of developing a register.

We suggest that, ideally, eligible applicants should be recorded on both a stand-alone Accessible Housing Register and the local authority's Common Housing Register (or whatever policy or procedure

the social landlord has in place) in parallel so that disabled people can be considered for any accessible home or void property that could be adapted to their needs.

As accessible housing is a specialist field, there should remain a separate list in order to match applicants to properties effectively. Allowing applicants to be on both the stand-alone list and Common Housing Register (or whatever local policy is in place) would provide both choice and access to specialist expertise. There is evidence of success when registers are operated this way and closer linking in with established schemes would help ensure that registers are run effectively.

The aim should be to work towards a regional register that crosses local authority boundaries and links smaller landlords with larger social landlords to facilitate a more comprehensive register. This will help give disabled people more choice and mobility across Wales.

The Welsh Government is currently promoting regional working.

Each register would be centrally managed by project workers with specific expertise and would link up with each of the other registers in order to compile a national register and share good practice.

## **Suggestions for social landlords**

We suggest that social landlords who are looking to effectively match disabled people with accessible homes continue to ensure that they include the following in their practice:

We suggest that information about Accessible Housing Registers is widely and easily available in order to boost housing choices for disabled people. This includes ensuring that advertising and communication are accessible to all.

We suggest that staff dealing with Accessible Housing Registers should receive specific training on the needs of disabled people and how properties can be adapted as this is viewed as specialist work.

We recommend that user involvement in service delivery and performance monitoring is strengthened in practice. One possibility is to include disabled people using their experiences in the training of housing staff who are responsible for Accessible Housing Registers.

We suggest that all social landlords adopt the Social Model of Disability within the

organisation and ensure staff receive appropriate training.

We suggest that all frontline staff are able to signpost applicants to dedicated project staff dealing with an Accessible Housing Register in the area.

We suggest that all social landlords and departments work effectively in partnership to achieve positive outcomes in matching disabled people to accessible housing. Examples of departments that social landlords should work with include: Social Services, Adult and Child Services, Homelessness and Housing Options, Occupational Therapists and Health.

Due to the complexities of housing disabled people, we suggest that social landlords should consider separate void targets for adapted homes. They may also like to consider extending the timescale and/or number of properties disabled people can turn down before they are penalised if they do not feel the home would fully meet their needs.

We suggest that social landlords ensure that they are familiar with the definition of an Accessible Housing Register and ensure that their matching system closely follows this definition if they are to state that they use an Accessible Housing

Register. Social landlords should continue to communicate with each other to ensure that they are aware of what matching systems are operating locally and ensuring that good practice can be shared both within and between local authorities.

We suggest that social landlords develop stronger and more consistent monitoring of the outcomes of the Accessible Housing Registers. Social landlords need to undertake on-going evaluations to illustrate the cost benefits to other budgets and to the health and well being of disabled people.

We suggest that cross-boundary mapping of resources should be implemented and models of practice should be shared across local authorities to ensure choice for disabled people. This happens in some local authorities but it is not consistent across all authorities. The sharing of models of practice across boundaries is an excellent way to share knowledge and expertise and resources.

We recommend that social landlords consider policy and practice regarding under-occupancy particularly in light of welfare reform impact and the provision of adapted and/or accessible stock.

Although we understand that each Accessible Housing Register needs to take account of a region's local context and resources, we do suggest that, as far as possible, a uniform standard is ensured when assessing eligibility across the local authorities. For example, ensuring that a person assessed as eligible in one local authority would also be assessed as eligible in another local authority.

To achieve this, social landlords could look at the categorisation work undertaken in the London Accessible Housing Register to develop common categorisation of adapted properties across social landlord and local authority boundaries.

We suggest that the suitability of stock is assessed by social landlords, in the medium to long-term future.

We suggest that social landlords ensure any strategy dealing with adapted or accessible housing links in to the local authority's homelessness strategy as people who cannot find or sustain accessible accommodation might be at risk of becoming homeless.



## **Suggestions for Welsh Government**

We recommend that the Welsh Government continues to encourage the use of Accessible Housing Registers and ensures their effective operation. Encouraging cross-boundary work will help to make best use of existing resources and promote consistency, efficiency and cost-effectiveness. This also includes encouraging strong leadership across the sector to support the development of new skills and understanding.

We recommend that the Welsh Government encourages social landlords to work with the private rented sector to expand the adapted stock levels available to people. This is especially pertinent to increase stock in areas of Wales with high demand. We recommend specific work to raise awareness of disability and adapted properties with private sector landlords.

We also recommend the establishment of a pilot scheme in the private rented sector through a social lettings agency, but also recommend that this needs to be accompanied by a commitment to overcome the barriers associated with the private rented sector.

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