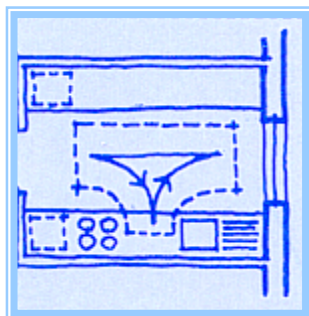


HOUSING IMPROVEMENT TASK FORCE – FIRST REPORT

A RESPONSE FROM THE
DISABLED PERSONS HOUSING SERVICE



2002

HOUSING IMPROVEMENT TASK FORCE – FIRST REPORT
A RESPONSE FROM THE DPHS

The DPHS welcomes the long overdue first report of the Housing Improvement Task Force (HITF). The DPHS offers comments and observations on the report from the point of view of a user-led organisation working with and for disabled people¹ and operating at the interface of health, housing and social work services. DPHS comments are also informed by the organisation's core values, where a person-centred focus and a holistic approach are regarded as paramount in delivering quality and sustainable housing solutions, as well as equality of housing opportunity.

1 Key Issues [pages 4-6]

In that section of the report dealing with what are described as 'key issues', the DPHS believes that the genesis of the report – criticism of the Housing (Scotland) Bill for dealing almost exclusively with the social rented sector only – has failed to prompt what is required. At Stage 2 of the Bill, the DPHS commented in a briefing² :

“The Disabled Persons Housing Service takes the view that the Bill has not fully engaged with the many aspects of what constitutes the housing market in Scotland, either in terms of the (current and planned) responsibilities of existing key players or in terms of the existing dynamics and relationships. It thus follows that the new order which would flow from the totality of the changes planned within the Bill will be limited in its impact on how well the housing market delivers what it is that people and communities need. That said, the DPHS welcomes many of the issues identified with the Social Justice Committee's Stage 1 Report as representing opportunities to enhance the potential impact of the Bill in those areas where equality is a major issue.

In particular, the DPHS continues to view the absence of legislation on the role and contribution of the private sector to the housing market as being a fatal flaw. The narrow focus of legislating only for the contribution of social rented sector perpetuates the discredited approach in concept and delivery which has resulted in a sustained failure to tackle the fundamental nature of Scotland's housing problems. It is only by focusing on the entire housing market and how it operates, that legislation, regulation and guidance can be brought to bear in a manner which markedly improves the options and choices in housing available to all people and all communities. While the planned Housing Improvement Task Force is welcome, and the proposed Index of Housing Quality is a sound concept, the fundamental thinking inherent in treating the two sectors separately in the legislative approach underscores an outdated attitude and acts as a real barrier to joined-up working on housing problems faced by people.”

This analysis remains relevant today, and the report perpetuates the flawed approach in continuing to examine, analyse, and recommend action from a baseline which sustains a

¹ 'Impairment' is the lack of part or all of a limb, or having a defective limb, organ or mechanism of the body; 'Disability' is the loss or limitation of opportunities that prevents people who have impairments from taking part in the normal life of the community on an equal level with others due to physical and social barriers (Swain et al, 1993)

² 'Housing (Scotland) Bill – A Briefing from the DPHS', April 2001

demarcation between private and public sector housing, instead of treating – and thus formulating policy change - the entire housing market as a whole. Until this entirely artificial divide is acknowledged and properly addressed, efforts in tackling the ineffectiveness of the housing market in meeting all the housing needs of all communities of people will continue to deliver fragmented and variable and unequal results.

Finally, the first question posed in this section asks “is there a problem about the condition of the private sector ?” From the perspective of the housing needs of disabled people the answer is an unequivocal “Yes”. Given that successive governments have deliberately avoided introducing universal standards of accessibility in housing design, there can be no surprise that the owner-occupied and private rented sectors of the housing market fail to provide a share of the required housing solutions needed to deliver equality of housing opportunity for disabled people.

DPHS RECOMMENDATION 1

- Universal standards of housing design, based on the ‘housing for varying needs’ standards, should be introduced.

2 Background to the Work of the Task Force [pages 7-9]

In that part of this chapter where the ‘evidence base’ is discussed, the DPHS is disappointed that its pioneering work in mapping housing need and supply for disabled people – and recognised in amendments³ to the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 – has been overlooked.

DPHS RECOMMENDATION 2

- The work pioneered by the DPHS in providing a person-centred evidence base on the housing needs of and housing supply for disabled people should be formalised within a national DPHS network resourced by Communities Scotland and the Scottish Executive.

In the section dealing with ‘Consultation’, the DPHS believes this reveals further flaws in the work of the HITF. Firstly, the composition of the Task Force itself reveals a continuation of the ‘usual suspects’ membership tendency in the formation of such bodies. The lack of representation from traditionally excluded communities and who could bring an informed, cross-cutting analysis of the housing market failings, is a failure which will affect the ongoing work and outputs of the Task Force. Continuing to rely on those who have been closely involved in evolving the housing market we have today for ideas on how to tackle its failings will yield few of the radical solutions required. Continuing to consult with traditionally excluded communities of people in an ‘arms length’ framework forms a barrier to those communities being part of the real partnerships for change which need to be created if the housing market is to change.

³ Clause 79(2)(ca) of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 – “the needs of persons in the area for, and the availability of, housing accommodation designed or adapted for persons with special needs”

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DPHS RECOMMENDATION 3

- That the Task Force membership include representation from excluded communities of people, including black minority ethnic communities and disabled people.

In that part of this section dealing with equalities, it is disappointing to find that the Task Force has not adopted the same principle on equalities which underpins the Housing (Scotland) Act⁴. If the work of the Task Force and any recommendations which flow from that work are not informed by this basic principle, it is inevitable that the housing market of the future will continue to deliver unequal opportunities for traditionally excluded communities of people, including disabled people.

DPHS RECOMMENDATION 4

- That the Task Force adopts the principle of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 on equalities.

4 Investment patterns [pages 19-29]

At para. 69, reference is made to the extent to which improvement grants contribute to the overall investment in housing, noting that only 4% of owners receive grant aid and that it represents just 5.5% of the total investment. Sub-para. 69.5.2 reports the fall, by over 40%, in the past 5 years of local authority spend in improvement and repairs grants. No extrapolation has been made of the impact on disabled people who require grant aid to carry out adaptations needed to their home. This is clearly a significant gap in the report.

DPHS RECOMMENDATION 5

- The impact of the substantial reduction in local authority spend on improvement and repairs grants on meeting the housing needs of disabled people should be quantified.

At paras. 73-74, reference is made to the common problems vulnerable people have in accessing information, knowledge, and expertise on organising repairs, improvements and adaptations. The DPHS model of an independent, user-led, ‘One-Stop-Shop’ which includes architectural services is one which provides a good practice model for dealing effectively with these issues.

⁴ **94A Equal opportunities**

(1) The Scottish Ministers and local authorities must exercise the functions conferred on them by this Act in a manner which encourages equal opportunities and in particular the observance of the equal opportunity requirements.

(1A) In providing housing accommodation and related services, registered social landlords 35 must act in a manner which encourages equal opportunities and in particular the observance of the equal opportunity requirements.

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DPHS RECOMMENDATION 6

- The work pioneered by the DPHS in providing an independent, user-led, One-Stop-Shop service to disabled people on repairs, improvements and adaptations to their homes should be formalised within a national DPHS network resourced by Communities Scotland and the Scottish Executive.

At para. 89, reference is made to a lack of awareness of options in housing. The DPHS welcomes this acknowledgement and would reinforce the information gap that exists, particularly for disabled people. Indeed, this was part of the core rationale for disabled people establishing the DPHS model in 1996. More recently, as part of the overall strategy in meeting that information gap, the DPHS has, in partnership with Ownership Options in Scotland and Margaret Blackwood Housing Association, launched a web site [www.housingoptions.info] where disabled people can start to gain the necessary information on housing options across Scotland.

DPHS RECOMMENDATION 7

- The work pioneered by the DPHS in providing a person-centred information, advice and advocacy service and empowering disabled people to find solution for their housing needs should be formalised within a national DPHS network resourced by Communities Scotland and the Scottish Executive.

Para. 92 and the following ‘key conclusions’ highlight the barriers to adaptations being provided for disabled people living in private rented accommodation. The DPHS would, again, underline the fault-line inherent in tackling the ineffectiveness of the housing market with a two-tier approach. At the time of the original proposals for a ‘Index of Housing Quality’ the DPHS commented⁵:

“It follows that the DPHS could only support implementing the Index through local housing strategies if the Bill is amended to provide an overarching equality statement and that, either in the form of further amendments or in subsequent guidance and secondary legislation, the intention of the DPHS amendments called for at section 79 of the Bill are implemented. It would only be in such a framework that the absence of a statutory basis for the Index could be countenanced, as the effect of these amendments would enable the individual to challenge the failure of local authorities to have plans for ensuring their home complied with the Index.”

⁵ ‘Housing Standards in Scotland-The Index of Housing Quality : A response from the DPHS’, April 2001

6 Local Authority Powers [pages 36-41]

In similar terms to the comments made on chapter 4. above, this section fails to offer an analysis of how existing local authority powers to provide grant aid towards the costs of adaptations are having an impact and how effective that is. This is clearly necessary to establish, amongst other things, the extent to which varying practice across Scotland acts as a barrier to equality of opportunity for disabled people in obtaining solutions which meet their housing needs.

DPHS RECOMMENDATION 8

- The Task Force review this chapter to include an analysis of the impact and effectiveness of current practice in delivering adaptations for disabled people.

In relation to para. 114 and the proposed ‘Index of Housing Quality’, the DPHS supports these ‘key conclusions’, but would look for them being strengthened with a direct linkage between national strategic objectives and the allocation of resources to support local authority local housing strategies. The DPHS response to the initial consultation on the Index said⁶ :

“The DPHS takes the view that an overarching formula established at national level, but which takes into account factors such as local need, current levels of housing quality, available resources and efficiency in service delivery, would be required for each Index element. This would enable local authorities “to decide on how to take action within their area” within a national context and thus ensure consistent progress across the country and avoid any post-code lottery.

As part of this national-local synergy, an accurate assessment of local housing need, for the Index element “*adapted to meet the housing needs of the occupant*”, should not rely solely on the methodology currently provided by such as the Scottish House Conditions Survey. Existing data sets are available in the form of waiting lists for Housing Improvement Grants for adaptations. Analysis of these could include : the total number on the list at a given time; the total number entering the list throughout each financial year; the average waiting time between registering a need and completing the adaptation; the customer profile; the number of completed adaptations per year; and the number of rejected applications per year. This data should be submitted by local authorities as part of the case returns required for informing the setting of Index targets and for the monitoring of annual progress by the Scottish Executive or the new Housing Executive Agency.”

“The DPHS finds it difficult to identify any merits in there not being a national uniformity of measures used to determine progress or, equally important, highlight lack of progress. If progress with meeting the person’s need for

⁶ ‘Housing Standards in Scotland-The Index of Housing Quality : A response from the DPHS’, April 2001

adaptations in Inverness is to be compared with a person in Irvine and is to be the person-centred principle at the heart of the work of the Index, the measures used must be common to all local authorities. This will provide for consistency of reporting and assessment of progress to improve housing quality nationally.

In the longer term a central body such as a national adaptations agency would be best placed to monitor and deliver this key element of the Index concept. This central body would ensure quality of service, user involvement, the reduction of adaptation backlogs - both locally and nationally - and the appropriate targeting of funds for adapting homes across all tenures from a much more simplified and person-centred funding regime.”

7 House Buying and Selling [pages 42-54]

At para. 147.2, the report acknowledges that disabled people looking to buy a home have information needs, in terms of accessibility, which housing market practice does not meet. In the immediately preceding para. on energy efficiency, the report acknowledges the same information gap and goes on to highlight it as a ‘key conclusion’

- Information on energy efficiency is rarely available to house buyers at present.

And yet the report fails to present a similarly worded ‘key conclusion’ on the needs of disabled people, instead shunting the issue on to the end of the chapter where ‘equalities issues’ are tagged on and wording the conclusion as :

- Households with disabled members find it particularly difficult to find properties that are adapted for are suitable for adaptation to meet their needs.

This issue is fundamental to the delivery of equalities in the housing market. At present, there can be no other conclusion than that the market of buying and selling houses actively discriminates against disabled people by failing to provide information which is basic to disabled people being able to make informed choices.

DPHS RECOMMENDATION 9

The ‘key conclusion’ at 147 should be extended to include ;

- Information on accessibility for disabled people is rarely available to house buyers at present.

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DPHS RECOMMENDATION 10

- The RAMP project being piloted by the DPHS should be rolled out across all Scottish local authorities within a national network of DPHS resourced by Communities Scotland and the Scottish Executive.

The Task Force, as well as failing to replicate the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 principle on equal opportunities within its work, also seems unaware of the Executive's piloting of equalities mainstreaming in Education and in Housing. Adding on equalities issues at the end of each chapter is not a mainstreaming approach.

DPHS RECOMMENDATION 11

- The future work of the Task Force should take on a mainstreaming equalities approach and any future recommendations on action should be underpinned by the same approach.