

MARGARET BLACKWOOD HOUSING ASSOCIATION

RESPONSE TO HOUSING IMPROVEMENT TASK FORCE REPORT

Margaret Blackwood Housing Association, (MBHA), welcomes the publication of the Task Force report and the opportunity to comment on areas we believe could benefit from further review in the second stage of the work of the Task Force.

As a general point we would have welcomed the mainstreaming of equalities issues throughout the report in line with the increased emphasis given by the Scottish Executive to equalities issues. The structure of the report does not, we feel, reflect the strenuous efforts of the Task Force team to ensure an in depth awareness of disability related issues during consultations with interested groups such as MBHA and the Scottish Disability and Housing Network. That said MBHA applauds and appreciates those efforts.

1. Summary of Key Issues

MBHA has for some time been concerned to highlight the inequalities in access to suitable housing faced by disabled people and their families across Scotland. There is a very significant shortfall in suitable housing for disabled people and their families across all tenures which is not highlighted in the introductory section. The Housing Reference Group Report “A New Threshold for Disabled People?” and in the 1996 Scottish House Condition Survey provided clear evidence on the shortfalls and we would have welcomed mainstreaming of this issue alongside property condition.

We recognise and agree with the picture painted in the opening section of the report but would suggest that point 11, could be strengthened by emphasising the lack of accessible information on repair, improvement and adaptations grants. Often, access to information – and more importantly, funding - depends on whether the individual knows where to ask, or who to ask.

2. Background to the work of the Task Force: the evidence base

No mention of the Housing Reference Group Report “A New Threshold for Disabled People?”

3. The extent of disrepair and Obsolescence in the private sector

We would suggest that point 27.3 Modern Standards, would benefit from consideration of “accessibility “ as a quality indicator. Local Authorities, under the Housing Act 2001, are required to quantify need and shortfalls in provision of suitable housing for disabled people and their families as part of their new strategic housing role. Consideration of accessibility of available housing would assist in achieving equality of housing opportunity for disabled people and their families.

Information on accessibility is already available in the 1996 Scottish House Condition Survey albeit at gross levels for Scotland.

A further key conclusion could be added here:

“ A significant number of disabled people and their families live in homes which would fail accessibility assessments and / or do not meet what would be regarded as an acceptable or modern standard.”

Page 24, paragraphs 72 – 74

Issues in respect of safety in the community, as well as the home, are a major concern for MBHA and many other housing providers in the public and independent sector. Currently, in conjunction with local authorities and other Registered Social Landlords, MBHA is investigating the potential of Supporting People funding as a means of meeting the kinds of

low level housing support needs catered for in the past by social services home helps. Such services could be available to own tenants, as well as owners and Council tenants.

6. Local authority powers for tackling condition problems in private sector housing – Key conclusion

We understand that the powers conferred on local authorities under the Housing Act 2001 enable them to give grants or loans to disabled owners for the acquisition and/or adaptation of suitable residential property. The Scottish Executive needs to produce good practice guidance, including examples of how the powers can assist disabled people and their families to access suitable housing,

Refer also to comments at 3 above on the strategic planning role of local authorities.

7. House buying and selling

Disabled people and their families face particular issues when it comes to locating suitable properties due to the speed of the process in Scotland and the lack of information on accessibility currently provided in standard estate agent schedules and sellers survey reports. Much time and effort is wasted in visiting houses which on paper may seem ideal but on sight are totally unsuitable. We have some reservations about the usefulness of large-scale property registers such as the RAMP project. Our experience suggests that if someone finds an ideal house they will remain in it for a lengthy period. We would suggest the introduction by the Executive of a requirement to include information on accessibility, at the point of sale, in both estate agent and sellers surveys provided to potential buyers as an alternative perhaps less costly information source.

In the same context, information on potential fuel costs, would be of real benefit to disabled / elderly people or anyone who may face long periods at home.

We agree overall with the findings in this section but would suggest that it is a more direct approach to redress the shortfall of suitable housing for disabled people in socially inclusive, mixed tenure new build developments that is required. This could be achieved through:

- Improvements to Building Regulations on access standards
- Application of Planning powers to redress shortfalls through planning gain, promote socially inclusive integrated development
- Use Council stock transfers to address shortfalls through remodelling, refurbishment, adaptations and new build to create more accessible stock

Concluding comments

Local authorities will have a crucial role to play in future housing provision; at present the focus should be on quantifying needs, identifying shortfalls, formulating plans to address these in consultation with all housing providers. This is a statutory obligation. Our contact with 28 authorities across Scotland suggests that many authorities have still to realise this, let alone worked out how they are to go about it.

We believe it is essential now, for the Scottish Executive to give clear guidance on what is required of local authorities in terms of methodologies, information sources and consultation with other housing providers. Part of this should be guidance from the Executive on opening up access to information on funding sources for repairs and adaptations, as well as point of sale information on accessibility through sales schedules and sellers surveys.

There is a need for consistency in approach to assessment and reporting of outcomes if national, and local, shortfalls are to be addressed in a co-ordinated manner.

MBHA have experience of successful partnership working with private developers in Renfrewshire and most recently in East Dunbartonshire. Nevertheless, it is clear that changes to Building Regulations are needed to encourage developers not only to raise the standard of accessibility in new housing, but also to fully comply with the Executives aims and objectives for social inclusion within integrated communities.

I hope these comments are helpful. If you need further information or would like to discuss further any particular points, please call either:

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