



## *Executive Summary*

# **The Right Living Space**

**Housing and Accommodation Needs  
of People with Disabilities**

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### **Housing and Accommodation Needs of People with Disabilities**

*A Citizens Information Board/  
Disability Federation of Ireland Social Policy Report*

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# The Housing and Accommodation Needs of People with Disabilities

## 1. Focus of Report

This report is based on a joint study between the Citizens Information Board (formerly Comhairle) and Disability Federation of Ireland (DFI). The focus of the report is on the housing and accommodation<sup>1</sup> needs of people with disabilities as experienced by people with disabilities and their families as well as by voluntary and community organisations working with them.

A three-pronged methodological approach was used in the study to gain insight into the social realities and experiences of people with disabilities and their families – a survey of voluntary/community organisations, focus groups (involving people with disabilities and voluntary/community organisation representatives) and identification of case examples.

There was wide consultation with people with disabilities and with a diverse group of organisations working in the disability field. Some of the organisations consulted are housing service providers, others provide complementary support services and for some the main focus is on advocacy on behalf of their members. Feedback based on the experience of users of Citizens Information Services (CIS) throughout the country was an integral part of the study.

The report highlights key factors which impact on the ability of people with disabilities to access accommodation appropriate to their needs. It points to a need for new thinking which would address the accommodation and related support needs of people with disabilities in the context of social inclusiveness, equality of access and the provision of accessible and integrated living environments. This approach would be significantly different to the approach which sees the accommodation needs of people with disabilities being met primarily in the context of 'special needs housing'.

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<sup>1</sup> The terms housing and accommodation are used interchangeably throughout the report in order to reflect the complexity of need that exists across all categories of people with disabilities.

The study findings confirm and expand on many issues relating to the accommodation needs of people with disabilities that have been identified in recent years by both the voluntary/community disability sector and by Government. Areas where existing policies have fallen short are highlighted in the report. The main challenges for the emerging housing policy agenda in respect of people with disabilities are outlined and key pointers for policy-makers seeking to address these challenges are provided.

## 2. Housing Policy Context

The current housing policy context for people with disabilities is underpinned by a life-cycle approach, person-centred planning and the promotion of independent living, all of which inform the protocols and structures being put in place for the implementation of the requirements of the Disability Act 2005. These principles are reflected in the commitments set out in the social partnership agreement, *Towards 2016*, in the most recent Government policy statement on housing, *Delivering Homes, Sustaining Communities*, and in the new framework for social housing needs assessment currently being put in place.

The report explores how the issues identified in the study might translate into policy and practice and, specifically, how they might be addressed in the Housing Strategy for People with Disabilities to be drawn up by 2009. A number of recommendations are included in this regard which, it is suggested, should form part of the deliberations of the working group drawing up the Housing Strategy.

The study points to a considerable gap between policy aspirations and principles and experiences on the ground. While the research shows that, without doubt, valuable initiatives have been developed and that in some cases a good level of provision occurs, this is not comprehensive or reliably replicated in every circumstance where there is a housing need.

## 3. Key Issues Identified

### 3.1 People with disabilities with a housing need

There is a shortage of social housing generally and community-based accommodation for people with different types of disability, particularly in relation to accessible housing and the availability of appropriate supports to allow people to live independently in their own homes.

There is a considerable hidden housing need in that many people with disabilities of one type or another are living in accommodation not of their choosing. The following are identified as categories of people who are likely to have a housing/accommodation need that is not, or only partially, being met at present:

- adults in family homes when they wish to and/or would be better off living elsewhere
- some people in long stay residential settings
- some people in community group homes
- people awaiting discharge from hospital
- people without accommodation
- some people in nursing homes, for example, people with an acquired brain injury, people with MS
- people with Alzheimer's or other dementia who are not in appropriately designed accommodation

### 3.2 Limited housing options

In practice the housing options for many people with disabilities are limited because they frequently have specific, and often individual, design, location and support requirements. They are, therefore, at a considerable disadvantage in relation to people who do not have a disability. While some of the difficulties identified in the study relate to the specific needs of different categories of people with disabilities and to individual needs, many arise because of the lack of a strategic framework to support the provision of tailored housing and housing supports generally for people with disabilities.

### **3.3 Inadequate housing needs assessment**

Provision for housing needs assessment has not to date catered adequately or inclusively for the needs of people with disabilities, either individually or collectively. Needs assessment by Local Authorities has been inadequate in terms of identifying numbers or nature of need. There is a lack of clarity and transparency from service providers on how housing need and related support services are measured. In cases where a housing support need is identified, this may not always be delivered because of resource constraints.

### **3.4 Supports for independent living**

A key factor in enabling people with higher levels of dependency to live in community settings is the availability of supports for independent living, including Personal Assistant (PA), home support and home help. The general picture that emerges from the study is that, while there are some comprehensive support packages for independent living in place, supports for independent living are under-resourced. There is also a lack of clarity about entitlements and options arising from different models of delivery of supports for independent living in different parts of the country.

### **3.5 Accessibility**

There is insufficient attention given in Ireland to accessibility/lifetime adaptability aspects of housing design. Existing Building Regulations (Part M) provisions (currently under review) provide only for houses to be 'visitable' and indicate minimum dimensions for various facilities such as toilets and door widths. However, often a building will be compliant with regulations but not 'liveable in' by a proportion of the population.

### **3.6 Good practice**

There are clearly some innovations and good practice in accommodating people with disabilities in existence at local level. These include responses by local authorities and joint initiatives involving a local authority, a voluntary/community organisation and the HSE. Such initiatives generally involve strong inter-agency collaboration, the provision of supports to allow for optimum independent living and options for progression to more independent accommodation. Other initiatives incorporate a mixed housing element.

## 4. Addressing the Issues

### 4.1 A Continuum of Housing Provision

Addressing the housing needs of people with disabilities will require a significant shift in focus from viewing people with disabilities primarily as people requiring 'special needs' housing to one which sees their accommodation needs being addressed by a continuum of housing provision to cater for a wide range of individual circumstances. This means:

- further innovative models of provision for all categories of people with disabilities
- more use of general social housing for people with disabilities
- addressing needs within mainstream housing policy as opposed to segregated housing for people with disabilities
- the provision of a much wider range of housing options for people with disabilities than is currently the case
- additional transitional sheltered/supported accommodation with progression options readily available for all categories of people with disabilities.

### 4.2 Funding

A comprehensive housing/accommodation policy for people with disabilities will be resource intensive if it is to facilitate best practice in terms of housing options, integrated supports and accessibility.

There is a need for an integrated response from the relevant funding authorities and stakeholders – Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, HSE and Local Authorities, to better facilitate the delivery of support/care services in the context of housing provision.

### **4.3 Housing needs assessment**

The commitment to the development and implementation of a new and systematic approach to housing needs assessment and the recent introduction of new protocols for inter-agency collaboration are important steps towards inclusive needs assessment. The detailed working of these initiatives will need to be examined in the formulation of the National Housing Strategy for People with Disabilities.

### **4.4 Effective joint working**

Effective joint working requires that all stakeholders (people with disabilities, voluntary/community organisations, local authorities and the HSE) are involved in identifying needs and in considering the various ways of addressing those needs. Voluntary/community organisations have a centrally important role to play in identifying unmet need and in facilitating innovative responses.

The delivery of an integrated housing/key supports programme to allow a person with a disability to live independently in his/her community should be at the core of the Housing Strategy for People with Disabilities.

### **4.5 Person-centred planning**

The systematic adoption of a person-centred planning approach to identifying and meeting the accommodation needs of people with disabilities is essential. The policy aspiration of providing packages of individually tailored supports based on a case management approach needs to be translated into practice on the ground.

### **4.6 Accessibility**

As ageing populations are acquiring disabilities and people with disabilities are living much longer, housing design in the longer term must be based on lifetime adaptability.

It is essential that the new provision for adaptation grants, introduced in 2007, caters for all those in need of adaptations as a result of an acquired disability.

## 5. Housing Strategy for People with Disabilities: Proposals

A number of proposals are put forward for consideration in the formulation of the Housing Strategy for People with Disabilities, which is being developed as part of the implementation of *Towards 2016*. These proposals are aimed at ensuring transparency, standardisation and equality of access nationwide. The Housing Strategy must be underpinned by adequate resources in the short, medium and longer term and the proposals put forward should be systematically addressed with a view to their phased implementation as resources permit.

### 5.1 Housing and related support needs assessment

Assessment of housing need should include protocols for systematic consultation with individuals and, where appropriate, independent advocates to ensure that people's wishes are understood and accommodated as far as possible. This assessment should explore the appropriate mix of accommodation, supports and design to cater for optimum independent living.

Local authorities should give a person with a disability a housing services statement (akin to the service statement required for health and education services in the Independent Needs Assessment required under Part 2 of the Disability Act 2005) setting out the type of housing and the supports s/he requires and the timeline for their delivery.

### 5.2 Enhancing supports for independent living

There should be significantly increased provision of housing supports for people with disabilities and more provision for different models of support at both personal and community infrastructure levels.

Funding for house adaptations should reflect the level of need and funding levels should be reviewed every two years in the context of market prices and existing demand.

### **5.3 Improving inter-agency collaboration**

A community-based case management approach should be applied to identifying and meeting the housing and related support needs of people with disabilities.

A stronger national policy framework is required to ensure that local authorities and voluntary housing associations at local level work more collaboratively to specifically target and plan for the needs of all categories of people with disabilities.

### **5.4 Addressing the accessibility issue for people with physical and sensory disabilities**

There should be a general target for fully accessible and lifetime adaptable social housing based on best international practice.

Sufficient resources should be provided to ensure the strict enforcement of Part M of the Building Regulations following the introduction of new regulations and the strengthening of enforcement mechanisms.

### **5.5 Strengthening information, advice and advocacy**

All service delivery agencies relating to people with disabilities should adopt a stronger proactive approach to information provision based on the principles of quality service delivery and on best practice.

Statutory agencies and the voluntary/community sector should work together to ensure that people with a disability requiring housing and related supports have access to independent advocacy support as needed.



## Research Findings

### Survey of Voluntary/Community Organisations

- Despite progress in the area of policies for people with disabilities, the responses to the questionnaires appear to indicate a substantial discrepancy between the aspirations and principles of Irish social policy instruments in respect of housing and accommodation provision for people with disabilities and social realities as experienced by the respondents.
- Stated principles of housing policy, especially person-centred planning, supports for independent living and accessibility, were reported by survey respondents as being aspirational in many of the instances of housing need among people with disabilities encountered by these organisations on an ongoing basis.
- Respondents pointed to the limited options for owning their own homes available to the people with disabilities they encounter in their day to day work. People with disabilities depend to a large extent on local authority or other social housing and respondents stated that in their experience suitable housing for people with disabilities was in short supply.
- Low incomes/borderline poverty levels were identified by respondents as crucial factors in preventing access to adequate housing by people with disabilities.
- Respondents felt that there was a substantial underestimation by local authorities of housing needs of people with disabilities.
- Respondents pointed to the lack of a standardised national, transparent housing needs assessment for people with disabilities.
- Respondents stated that in their experience landlords in the private housing sector were often reluctant to accept people with disabilities or rent supplement/rent accommodation scheme tenants. Also, in the private rented sector, accessible dwellings are in short supply.

- Respondents reported that people with disabilities known to them are currently living in what they deem to be unsuitable or inappropriate accommodation.
- Emergency accommodation and sheltered/supported accommodation for people with disabilities were stated by respondents to be in short supply.
- Respondents expressed the view that people with disabilities experience difficulties in managing transitions from residential/hospital settings to living in the community because of lack of suitable housing resources and related supports and poor levels of collaboration between housing and health authorities.
- While respondents were aware of instances of people with disabilities being very successfully housed by local authorities in appropriately designed accommodation, they also identified shortfalls in local authority housing provision for people with disabilities. Respondents pointed to waiting lists which did not adequately reflect levels of housing need amongst this group. Issues of design and construction of local authority housing were also identified as problematic in relation to catering for disability over the life cycle.
- While the voluntary housing sector was seen by respondents as initiators of innovative housing provision for people with disabilities, access to such schemes was limited due to short supply and uneven geographical spread.
- Budgetary constraints, inability to purchase sites on the open market, lack of design expertise and lack of adequate support from relevant statutory authorities were identified by respondents as factors impeding the role played by the voluntary housing sector in the provision of housing for people with disabilities.
- Respondents identified the crucial role played by community group homes and sheltered/supported housing schemes in providing long term accommodation, particularly for people with intellectual disabilities. However, they noted the scarcity of such facilities in some geographical areas and only limited availability relative to demand in other locations. The respondents identified significant lack of resources in this vital area of provision for people with disabilities.

- Respondents highlighted problems their clients had encountered in relation to the Disabled Person's Grant, including maximum grant levels being inadequate to cover the cost of adaptations, problems locating builders to undertake the work, lack of availability of occupational therapists and significant delays in processing applications by local authorities. (A new Housing Adaptations Grant Scheme for people with a disability commenced in November 2007).
- Supports for independent living and community based services were identified by respondents as key components in meeting the housing needs of people with disabilities. These involve a wide spectrum of services from personal assistants (PAs) to home help services and on-call support services. Again, respondents reported these services to be in short supply relative to need and to be very vulnerable to cutbacks as agencies experienced budgetary constraints. Respondents also noted the dearth of social work, occupational therapy and physiotherapy services which they considered vital to an adequate response to the housing and accommodation needs of people with disabilities.
- Respondents identified six core issues vital to an adequate response to the housing needs of people with disabilities:
  - a person-centred planning approach with people with disabilities at the centre of the planning process
  - community supports for independent living
  - high levels of inter-agency collaboration
  - choice of housing options
  - enforcing high levels of design and accessibility standards
  - information, advice and advocacy as a key component to ensuring equality of access to housing services commensurate with need.

## Focus Groups

- There was a strong consensus across the five focus groups that there is a considerable hidden housing need amongst people with disabilities. According to focus group participants, many people with disabilities currently live in situations not of their choice, frequently with their family of origin, because of the very limited housing options available to them.
- Perceived social attitudes to people with disabilities were identified by participants as a key factor in shaping responses to the housing needs of people with disabilities. Focus group members stated strongly that society has not to date fully subscribed to the right of people with disabilities to live independent and autonomous lives, form separate household units, engage in family formation and carry out productive work. Attitudes still prevailed of expecting people with disabilities to be cared for in families of origin and by partners.
- Focus group participants expressed the view that failure to provide adequate housing options for people with disabilities undermined their independence and caused severe stress on personal and family relationships.
- Focus group members pointed to the urgent need for training for public service personnel in respect of housing needs assessment for people with disabilities.
- Accessibility was identified as a core concern which needs to be urgently addressed. Current building regulations fall short of delivering fully habitable housing for people with disabilities. The built environment continues to pose significant problems of accessibility.
- Focus group members expressed concern regarding the operation of the Disabled Person's Grant in relation to waiting time, amount of grant, difficulty for people with disabilities in making up shortfall between grant and actual building cost and in accessing builders to carry out the work.

- A significant absence of a co-ordinated approach to meeting the housing needs of people with disabilities was identified by focus group members. The involvement of a number of statutory agencies makes it difficult for integrated packages of housing provision and support to be put in place. Focus group members pointed to the need for a co-ordinated approach and for significant improvement in inter-agency planning and communication.
- Focus group members identified a number of areas where local authorities were providing clear information about eligibility criteria and prioritisation for social housing in respect of people with disabilities and suggested that these instances could serve as examples of 'best practice'.
- Information, advice and advocacy services were identified by focus group participants as crucial in meeting the housing needs of people with disabilities. Members felt that access to good quality information varied widely from housing service providers. The role of advocacy services was identified as a key element in ensuring that the housing needs of people with disabilities were adequately met.
- Focus group participants identified seven key priorities of an adequate policy response to the housing needs of people with disabilities:
  - equality of access for all people with disabilities
  - extending housing options and choices
  - a life-cycle approach to planning social housing
  - a commitment to the concept of independent living as a cornerstone of public policy
  - a commitment to person-centred planning with the individual person with a disability at the centre of the planning process and consultation carried out accordingly

- enshrinement of the concept of mainstreaming in the heart of housing policy to ensure mixed housing, mixed communities, choice of tenure, housing style, size and accessibility
- more consideration given to reasonably priced housing, shared ownership and loans/mortgages for those on low incomes.





The Citizens Information Board is the statutory body which supports the provision of information, advice and advocacy on the broad range of social and civil services to the public. It provides the Citizens Information website and supports the voluntary network of Citizens Information Services and the Citizens Information Phone Service.

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