

Accommodation in **CRISIS?**

Record numbers of people with learning disabilities will be in need of accommodation over the next few years at a time when mainstream funding is drying up. Ansley Workman of First Choice Housing Association outlines what needs to be done to face this challenge.



The Challenge

Official figures show that nearly 11,000 adults in Wales are registered as having a learning disability, although the true figure may be much higher, as registration is voluntary. Additionally, research has shown that the numbers of people with a learning disability is increasing, due in large part to advances in healthcare, with more and more children born and surviving into adulthood and people living longer due to better healthcare.

A recent research project completed in Sept 2009 on the number of adults with a learning disability across 6 North Wales

Counties predicted that the number of adults with a learning disability is likely to rocket by 1000 people - around 44% by 2021. The hike will lead to a 38% increase in council spending, costing the public purse over £20.3million. There is also a significant increase in the number of younger people identified as being on the autistic spectrum who may also fall within learning disability services and a significant number of young people transferring to adult services who will be in need of accommodation over the coming years.

Demand for housing is also likely to come from the growing

number of adults with learning disabilities who live with elderly or infirm parents who may not be able to continue caring for their children indefinitely. In addition there is a growing desire to bring back to their home area the many hundreds of people with disabilities who have had to be placed in costly 'out-of-area' accommodation due to a shortage of supply of appropriate services in their own communities. Of the 100 individuals with challenging behaviour placed out of the boundary of Abertawe Bro Morgannwg NHS Trust (Swansea, NPT, Bridgend, RCT, Merthyr, Cardiff and Vale) the total cost was in excess of £11,000,000.

Individuals and their families are also much more aware of their right to live independently with the support they need. For many individuals having suitable housing close to their own community is central to their quest to live independent and contented lives. However, a combination of circumstances is likely to severely curtail that opportunity unless the Welsh Assembly Government, local authorities, registered social landlords, the private sector and not for profit sector can plan effectively together to satisfy rising demand.

Social Housing Grant

Following the end of top slicing of Social Housing Grant (Capital grant from the Welsh Assembly Government) for hospital resettlement, Local Authority commissioners have had to bid for grant alongside all other Local Authority housing priorities. Additionally, accommodation for individuals with complex needs is costly in comparison with general needs housing and therefore, with limited resources, accommodation for people with a learning disability is often not a priority. Alongside this, as a consequence of the current economic climate, the Welsh Assembly Government brought forward Social Housing Grant from 2010/11 in order to stimulate the economy meaning that in 2010/11, apart from committed schemes, there is no new Social Housing Grant available. Indicators for 2011/12 and 12/13 are that Social Housing Grant will be limited.

Changes to the way in which Social Housing Grant is distributed and managed will take place in 2011/12 with SHG being allocated to Local Authorities (LAs), rather than Housing Association consortia, based on evidence of housing need. LAs will be responsible for allocating their "funding" to schemes which meet their strategic housing need and for programme management delivery, rather than WAG - WAG will take overview.

However, there are concerns over the ability of LAs to resource programme management and whether they currently have the expertise to do so. The Welsh Local Government Association and WAG will be working closely with Local Authorities over the coming year to try to ensure that there is a smooth handover. But unless LAs are able to evidence demand for accommodation for people with a learning disability and strong links are made between commissioners and Housing Strategy, people with a learning disability will not be a priority.

Lack of data

Against the background of growing need and shrinking resources, First Choice undertook research into the preparedness of local authorities to meet this challenge. Our findings certainly give cause for alarm. Essentially many authorities lack the information they need to inform their decisions and strategies and to plan for individual's housing needs. What is more alarming is

that planning processes are variable across Local Authority areas with, in some instances, poor understanding and links between commissioners and Housing Strategy Departments.

For example, although no longer required to do so by the Assembly Government, most local authorities still produce a Local Housing Strategy (LHS). However, of the 21 councils which did have strategies, 14 made no reference at all to learning disabilities. This is hardly surprising as Assembly Government guidelines on producing such documents does not include a 'learning disability' section under the heading of 'vulnerable groups.' Although the LHS is no longer compulsory authorities are nevertheless required to submit a 'Supporting People Operational Plan' (SPOP) to the Assembly. This is intended to provide information on the current supply of accommodation-related support within each area and to identify the future needs of vulnerable people, including capital requirements. The plan acts as a bidding document for funds to meet future needs, but our analysis of documents from the various local authorities found that only four of the 22 gave estimates of the number of housing units needed by people with learning disabilities. Each authority should also have a Learning Disability Accommodation Strategy (LDAS) which feeds into the LHS and SPOP. Our research found that only four authorities actually produced a LDAS.



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Welsh Assembly Government response to the Learning Disability Implementation Advisory Group's (LDIAG) proposed Action Plan

In December 2009 Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services, Gwenda Thomas, called the LDIAG proposed Action Plan, in which the main priority for the Welsh Assembly Government was new investment to expand the availability of supported accommodation, "not affordable". And although many other initiatives to improve the lives of people with a learning disability are welcomed the housing needs for people with a learning disability are still not being addressed. Professor David Felce, Co-Chair of LDIAG, outlined the problem succinctly in his response to the Minister, as outlined in the following extract:

"The Group made expansion of

the availability of supported accommodation its main priority for a number of good reasons, including:

- it and the previous Advisory Group have advised Ministers consistently over the last decade that demographic changes are outstripping the growth in the provision of out-of-family placements and resulting in increased dependence on family care,
- both groups have recommended a planned, strategic approach be taken to an expansion of supported accommodation that they see as eventually inevitable,
- the LDIAG remains convinced that this is an area that requires central commitment and co-ordination and some element of additional funding, as these services have high unit costs and the last ten years have

demonstrated that Local Authorities are increasingly struggling to respond to escalating need,

- service expansion in the last 10 years has not prevented an increasing reliance on extended family care, beyond what was already deemed exceptionally prolonged; that a crisis has not yet materialised is a testament to the commitment of families but a commitment that cannot be over-extended indefinitely,
- the failure to address the situation is inconsistent with the principles expressed in the 10-year strategy (Fulfilled Lives, Supportive Communities) and the Statement on Policy and Practice for Adults with a Learning Disability to support people to lead independent lives and for carers' needs to be recognised and supported,

- in particular, policy has stressed the importance of assessment on an individual basis and the influence that an individual with learning disability should have over where they live, with whom they live and their support arrangements, but any such self-determination is being severely constrained by the lack of availability of real options,
- the inconsistency between principles and actual strategic intent is in danger of belittling the principles,
- while clearly the timing of a request for central government investment has not been propitious, the LDIAG still believes that an opportunity to articulate strategic intent is being missed,
- in particular, the proposals outlined in the Action Plan attempted to keep the need for new investment to a minimum by estimating how much expansion could be financed through the reinvestment of efficiency savings; it is unlikely that local authority commitment to such specific reinvestment will be achieved without a clear strategic direction, programme co-ordination and some element of matched central funding, and
- without a clear plan to expand services that meet the quality standards set out in Local Community Living: Accommodation and Support for Adults with a Learning Disability, the mounting pressure for out-of-family

placements may encourage more institutional provision.”

Solutions

The solutions are clear:

- To drive this agenda forward there needs to be a strong dialogue between the Welsh Assembly Government and Welsh Local Government Association to ensure that the accommodation needs of people with a learning disabilities are addressed, underpinned by an agreed strategy, action plan and funding commitment
- Collectively we must be more innovative in our approach to accommodation provision. For example: the use of 100% private finance by Housing Associations and

new models of provision, such as shared ownership or leasehold schemes.

- Good quality information must be provided by Local Authorities on current and future need.
- Strong links need to be built between housing and social services departments to ensure that emerging demand is planned for.
- Without this many vulnerable people will miss out on the opportunities they deserve to live independent and fulfilling lives.

Ansley Workman is Chief Executive of First Choice Housing Association, Wales' only housing association specialising in the needs of people with learning disabilities.

