

# Practitioner article

## Housing homeless disabled people

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# Shelter

## Older people and homelessness

**Karen Anne Doherty discusses how disabled people are often at serious disadvantage when it comes to finding suitable accommodation after becoming homeless despite their current priority need status.**

### Introduction

The Accessible Housing Solutions department at Glasgow Centre for Inclusive Living, GCIL (<http://www.gcil.org.uk/>), provides advocacy, advice and information for disabled people and their families with any housing need, including homeless people. We cover the Glasgow area and are an independent company and a registered charity. Our Board and the majority of our staff are disabled people. GCIL work with anyone who regards themselves as being a disabled person. We work from the perspective of the social model of disability i.e. that people with physical impairment/health, mental health issues, learning difficulties, etc face barriers to their equal participation in society.

### Homeless disabled people and priority need

The 2003 *Homelessness etc. (Scotland) Act*

(<http://www.opsi.gov.uk/legislation/scotland/acts2003/20030010.htm>) widened the definition of those in priority need to include not just disabled people themselves as homeless applicants but also households where a member of the household is a disabled person. The term 'disabled person' isn't in itself a term used in the legislation. Section 1(2) (a) of the Act refers to:

*'a person who is vulnerable as the result of old age, mental illness, personality disorder, old age, learning disability, physical disability, chronic ill health.....!'*

The Act also provides for more assistance with accommodation for those in priority need who are 'intentionally' homeless.

In most cases some evidence of being in priority need is required, for example evidence of disability benefits or supporting medical evidence.

### Impact on disabled people

What impact, if any, have the changes in dealing with those in priority need had on disabled people?

In our experience, at a local level, disabled people presenting as homeless are now more likely to have their homeless applications accepted and to be offered assistance. Examples of this include disabled people who have had properties repossessed due to mortgage arrears being found permanent accommodation through the homelessness legislation, as well as disabled people being assisted because they are in accommodation that is unsuitable for them because of physical access issues or other factors.

But, is it really all good news? Just because disabled people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness are more likely to get assistance, does this mean that their needs for temporary and permanent suitable housing are being met?

### Decreasing supply

Despite the increased duties on both councils and RSLs to meet the needs of homeless people there are still massive problems for disabled people in obtaining both suitable temporary and permanent accommodation. It has been widely reported in the media there is a serious shortage of social rented housing, both nationally and locally. In Glasgow this has been compounded through stock transfer and subsequent major clearance programs. In general there is little stock available. New build programs are nowhere near replacing the stock that is being demolished. There are major issues in particular for people who are wheelchair users or have requirements for particular levels of physical access. It has been estimated that in Glasgow there is currently a shortage of 4,246 wheelchair accessible and barrier free properties according to the recent *Report by Director of Development and Regeneration Services, Local Housing Strategy Update 2005*, Policy and Resources Committee ([http://www.local.housingstrategy.glasgow.gov.uk/pdf/Draft Consultation Documents for Approval.pdf](http://www.local.housingstrategy.glasgow.gov.uk/pdf/Draft%20Consultation%20Documents%20for%20Approval.pdf)):

*'Prevalence rates indicate a shortfall in barrier-free and wheelchair housing of 4,246 units. But it is estimated that some three-fifths of wheelchair housing is occupied by people who do not need, or no longer need it. There will therefore be a requirement for overprovision.'*

Recent new build programs have only been averaging 30 new wheelchair accessible and barrier free properties a year. If new builds continue to increase at the current rate it will take approximately 133 years to make up the **current** estimated shortfall of barrier free and wheelchair accessible properties within Glasgow. This is not taking in to account the need mentioned in the above quote for 'over provisioning' due to wheelchair and barrier free properties being occupied by those who don't need them.

In terms of temporary accommodation we are aware of 3 wheelchair accessible flats in the city that can be accessed through the Homelessness Partnership as temporary accommodation – 2 at the Hamish Allan and one in Margaret Blackwood Housing

Association's sheltered complex in Anderson. Much of the other temporary accommodation available is in high-rise flats, often in areas where property is low demand stock. This can lead to other problems, not only for people who struggle with getting in and out of lifts, or who would be stranded if lifts break down, but also for people, for example, who's mental health issues are affected by stress and the environment around them. There are also major issues for people from black and ethnic minority communities accessing accommodation in areas near the amenities and facilities they require. Accommodation for larger families is also an issue.

## **Support**

Another major issue relates to people who require support with either personal or daily living tasks. We have worked with a number of people who were receiving quite significant support packages in their own homes or tenancies that was suspended while they were in temporary accommodation. This left people unable to get dressed, access proper meals, use washing facilities, etc. Being homeless is a stressful situation for anyone, and most homeless people need more support at this time, not less.

The shortage of wheelchair accessible accommodation mentioned earlier highlights some of the difficulties disabled people face in accessing permanent accommodation. Many of the homeless people we work with have been in temporary accommodation for 12-18 months or longer.

The community casework teams don't have the time or resources to provide the assistance many disabled people need to make their own applications to housing providers or to look at other housing options that might be open to them. We are now finding that community casework teams are advising disabled people to contact services such as ours. Indeed, we are also increasingly receiving direct referrals from community casework teams asking our service to assist homeless disabled people they are working with to find permanent suitable accommodation.

## **Accessing permanent accommodation**

What happens if and when permanent accommodation does become available?

When offers of housing do come up they usually have to be considered within a very short time period. This is fine if people are more or less ready to move in. However, if it's a disabled person who needs an adaptation to be done before they can move in to the property or if they need a support package to be re-instated in another part of the city this can cause significant delays. Funding for an adaptation might not be immediately available. It might take time to transfer care management from one social work team to another. We have worked with people who have been unable to take up offers of permanent accommodation for both of these reasons. Or, someone may have to move in

to a property that isn't entirely suitable and wait for adaptations to be put in place, for example doors to be widened or suitable flooring to be laid.

The provision of adequate suitable accommodation and practical support for disabled people has always been grossly underestimated. It is difficult enough for disabled people to access housing and support services in general and the situation becomes even more difficult when the factor of homelessness is added to the equation.

## Current Strategy

There are a number of local authority and other strategies around which deal with various aspects of housing, support and homelessness. For example, the current *Joint Community Care Extended Partnership Arrangements 2004-2007* (<http://www.glasgow.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/307C2E3F-FB5B-400F-87BC-D098D29D213D/0/JntCommunityCarePlanLocalPartnerAgrmnt0407.pdf>) document identifies the lack of adapted accommodation for disabled people. However, the current *Homelessness Strategy for Glasgow* (<http://www.glasgow.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/AF5466A7-2427-4940-93DE-A56235F4AB07/0/HomelessnessStrategy2004.pdf>) makes no mention of the specific difficulties faced by homeless disabled people and no suggestions as to how gaps in provision may be met.

## Improvements Required

From the experience of our service in working with disabled people it appears that:

- There is a severe shortage in suitable temporary and permanent accommodation.
- There are no long term plans to increase the provision of suitable temporary and permanent accommodation, either locally or nationally.
- There is a lack of hard statistical data about the housing needs of disabled people.
- There is a lack of political will to improve the provision of accommodation that is suitable for disabled people, i.e. there is a continuous struggle to get this subject on the agendas of national and local statutory bodies and housing providers.
- There is a lack of flexibility in the provision of care and support packages for disabled people.
- There is no co-ordination between the provision of accommodation and support for homeless disabled people at a local level.

One option for improving the number of accessible properties, i.e. wheelchair accessible and barrier free, would be to follow the example of the city of London. The policy in the *London Plan on Accessible Housing* is *Policy 3A.4 Housing Choice* and it states that:

*'Unitary Development Plan policies should seek to ensure that:*

- *All new housing is built to Lifetime Home standards*
- *10 per cent of all new housing is built to be wheelchair accessible or easily adaptable for residents who are wheelchair users.'*

This policy is explained in more detail in the Supplementary Planning Guidance *Accessible London: achieving an inclusive environment* ([http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor/strategies/sds/accessible\\_london.jsp](http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor/strategies/sds/accessible_london.jsp)).

It applies to all new housing, including conversions and refurbishments including blocks of flats, for both private sector and social housing. The Lifetime Home standards are the 16 design features as set out in the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report *Meeting Part M and Designing Lifetime Homes* (<http://www.lifetimehomes.org.uk/>).

The London Housing Strategy - *Capital Homes: London Housing Strategy 2005-16* - also recommends Lifetime Home standards and wheelchair accessible homes. Copies are available from the Government Office for London (<http://www.gos.gov.uk/gol>).

## The Future

The 2003 Act also lays down the foundation for the eventual phasing out of the priority need test by 2012. The phasing out of the priority need test is meant to ensure that **all** those who are unintentionally homeless should be supplied with permanent accommodation, not just those in priority need. Malcolm Chisholm, Communities Minister, issued a statement (<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2005/12/21133010/30107>) on 21 December 2005 on this matter outlining the following:

- The supply of affordable housing will increase from more than 6.000 units this financial year to another 8.000 units by 2008.
- A key interim objective is for local authorities to reduce the proportion of homeless households that they see as non-priority by 50 per cent by 2009.
- A piece of work is to be commissioned as the basis of a five-year plan for affordable housing.
- The Executive is working with local authorities to ensure that local assessments of housing need are carried out on a more consistent basis and take account of the affordable housing targets to be met by 2012.
- Recognition of the need to provide support alongside accommodation.

- Local authorities need to adopt a housing options approach and to work with other agencies to put in place arrangements for groups known to be at high risk of homelessness.
- The Executive will provide money to fund new approaches to preventing homelessness.

This opens up definite possibilities for assisting disabled people. However, none of this will be useful unless all the relevant agencies recognise that there are major problems faced by homeless disabled people and make some coordinated effort to begin tackling them.

### **Further information**

If you would like to contact Karen Anne about this article, please send an email to [chip@shelter.org.uk](mailto:chip@shelter.org.uk) in the first instance.