Introduction

The national agreement *Towards 2016* and the housing policy statement *Delivering Homes, Sustaining Communities*, focus on the life cycle approach, with one of the key life cycle stages being people with disabilities. It has been acknowledged that people with a disability often have fewer choices in terms of providing for their housing and accommodation needs and the vision set out in the agreement is that ‘Every person with a disability would have access to appropriate housing’.

Ireland is experiencing a major demographic transition in which it will have an ageing population, with an increasing disability prevalence driven by ageing and increasing survival rates among those affected by disabling injuries, conditions or illnesses. Figures from the 2006 census indicate that there are 393,785 persons with a disability in Ireland which represents 9% of the total population.

The voluntary housing sector is a significant provider of social housing to people with disabilities and with the commitment for the provision of a National Housing Strategy for People with Disabilities, it is timely to examine existing and planned housing measures for people with disabilities by housing associations, to highlight the challenges in providing accommodation and make recommendations on how these obstacles can be overcome.

Housing provision by the Voluntary Housing Sector

The voluntary sector has a key role to play in delivering housing for people with disabilities working in partnership with disability support providers and other mainstream services. There are a range of housing models provided by housing associations and, while there is a clear indication that no one model fits all, these are a key component of the provision of housing to people with disabilities in Ireland.

Notwithstanding their common objectives, these housing associations vary in the range of services available and the accommodation provided. The ICSH carried out a survey of members in 2006/2007 to create a profile of provision of accommodation for people with disabilities by housing associations in Ireland in terms of location, level of support, number of units and resources and funding. A total of 120 organisations took part in the survey and information was received on over 267 housing schemes across the country. The following report is a summary of the main findings of the survey:
Design features
Some level of design / adaptation design features were reported in a total of 105 schemes. This ranged from wheelchair access and compliance with Part M to two organizations providing complete, purpose built accommodation for the particular disability group.

Types of Care / Support Provision
Housing associations provide practical and functional support to tenants which allows them to sustain their tenancy and live independently in the community. It is important to distinguish the housing related support including personal and social support and health related support. Many of the housing associations who responded to the survey were providing communal meals, laundry, security, wardens and houseparents with very little revenue funding and relying on fundraising and donations. Even where funding was secured from the HSE, this is applied for on an annual basis and therefore it is difficult to provide a service for tenants who require ongoing support. Over half of the housing associations who responded to the survey indicated the need to review and develop the funding line for provision of care and support to tenants.

Staffing
From the survey, the staff most commonly working within the schemes are domestic staff followed by support staff. The housing associations relied heavily on the HSE for the provision of staff to the scheme and where the HSE did not provide staff, the support service was limited for tenants. The majority of housing associations did not have the resources to employ staff directly and where they did, this was limited to manager or administrator roles.

Resources / Funding
Housing associations were asked to provide information on sources of revenue and other funding received by the scheme. From the 82 organizations providing accommodation for people with disabilities, a total of 65 declared to be in receipt of HSE funding. On further analysis, while housing associations indicate receipt of HSE funding, for a number of organizations it is the services that they link into to provide the support and care to their tenants that are HSE funded and not the housing association itself.

Allocations
It is clear from the figure below that the HSE was the main source of referrals for housing associations providing accommodation for people with disabilities (125 schemes reported the HSE as a referral source), the second most reported source of referrals was the local authority (95 schemes).

Future Development
A total of 88 organisations indicated their intention to develop further. If all plans come to fruition, a total of 1,156 units of accommodation will be provided with the assistance of the DoEHLG Capital Assistance Scheme.
Challenges for the Sector

As expected there was varied opinion when members were asked to highlight the challenges they face, but also significant consensus about a substantial number of issues.

Housing Assessment
Currently the housing needs assessment is the main gateway for individuals with special needs to access social housing and, traditionally in previous assessments, groups such as people with disabilities and the elderly are significantly under represented. Organisations noted the difficulties with the assessment process and the importance of a clearer system that people with disabilities are aware of and can access.

Lack of suitable sites and properties
A number of members reported increasingly being forced to consider sites outside the town where land is cheaper but developing here would present problems for tenants with disabilities.
Organisations highlighted the increased difficulty in securing suitable second hand properties that will meet the needs of their tenants.

Funding Limits
Several issues were raised in relation to the capital funding available for the development of accommodation for people with disabilities. Many felt that the limits restricted the quality of the housing that could be provided as there are many assistive technologies and physical adaptations that can allow a person with a significant disability live independently with a low level of support. Housing associations highlighted the problems of securing the 5% contribution required under the capital assistance scheme with some management boards feeling that this is too great a liability.

Design Issues
The needs of people with disabilities can often be confined to the regulatory minimum and with increasing demand for suitable housing for people with disabilities, the concepts of lifetime adaptable housing and universal design are being more widely discussed by organisations providing and planning housing for people with disabilities.

Scheme Approval
Members reported frustration at the development and approval process for providing accommodation under the Capital Assistance Scheme. Many organisations felt that the approval process was too drawn out with some stating that their scheme took over 18 months to receive approval. The protracted development process was cited as a disincentive to housing associations planning further schemes despite the need for housing for people with disabilities. The uncertainty in terms of approval process and subsequently completion and handover has an impact on the housing association linking in with prospective tenants.

Housing and Care
Ensuring collaboration between departments, agencies and providers at all levels was reported as a key aspect of improving the existing system for providing housing for people with disabilities. Members highlighted serious gaps in the practical development and management of schemes where there is a care dimension. Two organizations reported that there was a ‘lack of confidence’ from their local authorities in dealing with the needs of people with disabilities. Some members also felt that the system was ‘wholly fragmented’ particularly the links with the HSE for both housing associations and local authorities.
Within the development of collaboration and interagency working there should be long term planning to ensure a strategic approach.

Revenue Funding
One of the main challenges reported by many of the respondents was the absence of defined revenue funding available to housing associations providing accommodation for people with disabilities. The absence of revenue funding for basic services such as meals, laundry and transportation prevents housing associations providing these basic supports to the tenants.
Significant difficulties and frustration was reported by a number of organisations in relation to gaining HSE commitment to provide support / care for the proposed tenants in a scheme. This commitment is required before the scheme can be approved.

Location of Units of Accommodation for People with Disabilities Provided by Housing Associations
Developing housing opportunities – Tailored Housing and Housing Supports

There is a need for a deeper understanding of the housing needs of people with disabilities and their families, of the need for customized requirements and lifetime adaptable housing.

It is important to note that the housing needs of people with disabilities also change over their lifetime. Dwellings that are not adaptable and funding and assessment structures that cannot accommodate the changing and dynamic needs of disabled people and their families will affect the well-being and participation of people with disabilities.

Assessment of Housing Need

In the past housing need would be identified primarily in relation to the need for physical adaptations to homes. This now needs to be rebalanced with the care and support aspects in determining housing need coupled with a greater promotion of the waiting list in terms of supported housing options / housing associations. In order to allow for more up to date planning, the current triennial housing needs assessment should be re-adjusted to more periodic assessments.

Improve the quality of housing information available

There should be greater promotion of the housing assessment process to inform people with disabilities that this process is a gateway to a range of housing options. This will involve a proactive approach from housing providers and advocates for people with disabilities.

Improve the range, supply and quality of housing options available

After the housing assessment and advice process a key factor will be ensuring that there is adequate supply of a range of housing options for people with disabilities. As well physical adaptations there is a distinct need to enhance the housing choices available and develop supported and sheltered housing options. This is in keeping the Government commitment to the life cycle approach. As well as the provision of lifetime adaptable housing, people with mental health issues also need accommodation of an acceptable standard.

Design Standards

The creation of accessible mainstream housing and services can be directed by modifying the individual’s immediate environment or providing assistive technologies to optimize their functionality within that environment. New homes should be built to be accessible for all. This can be achieved by addressing the Lifetime Homes criteria at the design stage and by ensuring that all spaces are utilized effectively, innovations in residential design can be achieved.

Capital Funding

The Capital Assistance Scheme (CAS) has grown as a funding mechanism to provide accommodation to all categories of people with disabilities. In order to meet demand, there should be an annual revision of the capital funding limits to remove the stop-start approach. Housing association capital funding limits should also be aligned to local authority limits where applicable. The capital and revenue funding processes should be synchronised at the approval stage between the local authority and the HSE.

Site funding and the communal facilities grant should also increase to support higher capacity within the sector.

Revenue Funding

A service agreement in relation to the care and support elements should be agreed by all three stakeholders: the voluntary housing association, HSE, and the local authority. This service agreement should clearly identify the roles and responsibilities of each party and the service being provided to the tenant. It should also be linked to a personal care plan and also staffing requirements in a voluntary housing project for people with disabilities.

Interagency co-operation

From the perspective of ICSH members delivering housing for people with disabilities, there is a need for a coherent approach at national policy level as well as at delivery / local agency level. It is essential that there is a designated person within each HSE area appointed to liaise with the Housing Officer within each local authority to facilitate the proper planning and co-ordination of accommodation and support for people with disabilities.

Protocols will be required from the HSE in relation to project planning and ongoing management issues. The protocol developed should clearly outline:

- Process for applying for support costs for social housing projects where there is an ingoing care / support dimension in addition to accommodation needs
- Clear system of approval for projects in planning including agreement on indicative funding levels, staffing levels etc,
- Issues regarding acquiring land particularly from HSE landbanks
- System for re-appraisals of staffing levels, move on agreements with tenants whose dependency increases and ongoing referrals for vacancies.

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