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Supporting people with learning disabilities at the edges of social care in social housing and the private rented sector

BACKGROUND

Good quality, affordable, rented housing is essential for the delivery of appropriate social and health care for people with learning disabilities living in the community.

However, it is widely acknowledged that both the provision of housing and the availability of social care is increasingly constrained with budget pressures and a focus on crisis interventions.

Within this context, it is important to find out about the present experience of renting in the community for people with learning disabilities and how this can be improved and better supported into the future.

FINDINGS SUMMARY

This study highlighted:

- how people with learning disabilities can live successfully in their own tenancies in the community with a relatively low level of social care and housing related support;
- challenges in accessing appropriate rented housing for people with learning disabilities including a lack of choice, information and support to navigate housing processes (including moves as needs change);
- how gaps in social care support, and housing related support, exist in helping people to maintain their tenancies in the community;
- how employers and self-advocacy organisations, as well as family, provide some of the missing support;
- the lack of personalisation in both housing and support services and the need for reasonable adjustments in the provision of tenancies.

AIMS AND METHODS

The aim of the study was to understand the ways that people with learning disabilities who are on the edges of social care can be better supported to access and enjoy living in their own tenancies in the community, when this is their choice.

The first stage of the study involved nine major regional/national online events involving 100 people and a review of key local authority learning disability strategies.

The second stage involved 35 detailed interviews with people with learning disabilities living in social housing and private rented tenancies. Twelve interviewees also recorded their experiences of housing and home in a creative way using photographs and craft materials.

The study was a collaboration between academics at the Universities of York and Bristol, Learning Disability England, Housing LIN, Riverside, Stephen Lee Hodgkins, York People First and My Life, My Choice.

FINDINGS

Learning disability strategies

A stratified sample of 77 local authorities' websites were reviewed in England. A total of 20 local authority learning disability strategies/plans were identified which covered 26 authorities.

Nineteen of the twenty strategies covered housing in some way. Home, housing or 'where I live' were covered in 14 strategies. House or housing were directly referred to in 17 strategies. However, only three strategies mentioned social housing and only two strategies discussed private renting.

A number of housing themes were prominent, including the importance of choice in renting options and how renting could represent a cost saving for some local authorities compared to alternative settings. Housing was seen as a key feature of future planning particularly for those transitioning to adult social care services. Whilst some strategies reported successes in the provision of renting options, frustrations included the lack of housing stock and eligibility for care support for those with lower level needs.

A national consultation

A national consultation was undertaken, led by Housing LIN, that included one national and eight regional online events to discuss renting and support for people with learning disabilities in the social housing and private rented sectors. The events were attended by over 100 professionals and experts by experience.

It was reported that there was a shortage of appropriate rented housing. Social housing was often viewed as the preferred option for people with learning disabilities, although access was seen as problematic including via Choice Based Lettings.

Whilst there were some examples of positive experiences of the private rented sector, there were also concerns over the quality and insecure nature of the sector, including the overall suitability of the sector as people with learning disabilities were usually looking for long-term stability.

It was reported that many people with a learning disability had limited access to social care support, often due to cut-backs in funding meaning they did not always meet the eligibility criteria. Support with renting tended to come from family members or the voluntary and community sector. Some social workers did provide tenancy support but this was often time

limited when people moved. It was felt that flexible housing support works well.

Overall, it was considered that there was a lack of accessible information and advice on the housing and support options of people with learning disabilities. Similarly, there was a lack of information for housing providers, who could still view people with learning disabilities as complex and risky tenants.

Interview findings

The research team interviewed 35 people with learning disabilities living in their own tenancies (30 people in social housing; five people private renting). Interviewees were receiving a range of support including none (fourteen people): paid support between 1-20 hours (twelve people) and five people had flexible hours of paid support.

People were of varying ages, and lived across England. Most people identified as White or White British, with four people identifying as from a minority ethnic background. Single people, both men and women and people in couples and those with and without children were interviewed.

Housing experiences

Most of the people we spoke to were settled in their home, could afford their rent and were meeting their obligations as tenants. The overall finding of the study was that people were pleased to be renting their own tenancy indicating the suitability of renting for people with learning disabilities.

People did not get much choice when they moved to their rented place, mainly only viewing one or two flats or houses. This also reflects common experience with limited choice in social housing in England. For many this was not a problem as the places offered had met their needs. However sometimes the lack of choice was a problem. A few people had got stuck in poor tenancies and had needed lots of help to move to a better place.

Most of the people we spoke to lived in decent quality social housing homes. Some people needed housing to be adapted to meet their needs, this was usually undertaken though could take some time. Occasionally people needed to move and this could be hard to do. Many people reported problems with minor repairs and how this could take a long time to sort out and/or was not undertaken very well (and how advocates were sometimes needed).

In terms of housing, most people considered they had enough space and facilities, the main exception being those who had children living part-time with them. People felt it was important to have some outdoor space and preferred this when it was not shared with other tenants. Lots of people told us where they lived was sometimes noisy and this was something they did not like about their housing.

Renting in the right location was seen as crucial for a successful tenancy; this included being close to friends or family, transport and/or shops and other community facilities. It was also really important to live in a safe neighbourhood and to have safety features on properties. A few people had moved away from areas with anti-social behaviour issues that had caused them a lot of stress.

In terms of communication with landlords, many people stated that they did not really know the landlord and it was a bit impersonal; some renters felt that their landlords could listen better to them about any problems with their housing. The vast majority of people did not get easy-read information about renting or tenancy agreements, although they stated they would find this very helpful.

Most people wanted to stay living in their home into the future. This highlighted the importance of long-term tenancies, the limitation of shorter term tenancies within the private rented sector, and also the value of lifetime homes to accommodate changing needs over time.

Experience of social care

For the renters who had paid social care support, this was largely working well for them. However, there were some areas that people said could be improved, including: having more choice about how much support and where from; having more flexible support, and/or making support more person-centred. Even having just an hour of paid support a week really helped some people as it meant someone to help with tasks to do with renting like paying bills.

Renters told us that self-advocacy groups and employers quite often helped them with renting. Family also supported some people, particularly with initial moves and managing finances. Other support was sometimes plugging 'gaps' in more formal services and was 'ad hoc' as needed and not agreed in advance. Most people had a preference for having social care support in place, with some not feeling comfortable particularly relying on family or employers.

People were receiving very little housing related support from their landlords. People would have liked more support from housing officers, including a named person to help them with housing issues. Occasionally people had received help from housing officers in finding and moving into their rented accommodation - specialist assistance here had worked well.

Some people had experienced cut-backs in their care in recent years. This was sometimes the outcome of formal social care assessments; others chose to have either less hours or no paid support as they felt they could not afford it despite expressing that they felt they would benefit from it.

Overall assessment

Virtually everyone we interviewed recommended renting to other people with learning disabilities. Although there were sometimes challenges with some aspects of renting, and support was more patchwork than ideal, people liked having their own place and preferred this to other settings. It was clear that, with the right housing and support, renting was a positive and successful choice for people with learning disabilities.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The findings from this study clearly demonstrated that more people with learning disabilities should be offered the opportunity to rent their own place, particularly within social housing. The vast majority of people interviewed enjoyed living in their own tenancy and preferred this to other accommodation options. However, the study identified a number of improvements needed to ensure that both suitable housing and support options are in place.

In terms of housing, access to renting in both social housing and the private rented sector needs to be improved substantially. This includes providing more choice of properties and locations, as well as better information and support with the process of accessing housing. More accessible, easy-read information is needed at all stages. People also need formal, targeted support to assist with the process (and/or the process itself needs to be more accessible) - this could be via social care or specialist housing support workers within the council or housing associations. Housing providers also need more

information on the needs and capabilities of people with learning disabilities and to make reasonable adjustments to their processes.

The study also found gaps in social care, particularly in terms of low level support for ongoing needs. This was sometimes being plugged by informal carers, but self-advocacy groups and/or employers were also key players here. The role of these 'hidden' community support providers requires recognition and specific funding available to support this. In addition, in line with people's preferences, gaps also need to be identified and addressed within the formal sector. This includes reviewing eligibility criteria for social care as well as the commissioning of low level, flexible and 'preventative' services by local authorities. This will require better joint working and commissioning procedures between social services and housing (and health) to ensure a joined up approach is taken to meeting needs to ensure that people can rent their home if they chose to.

FURTHER READING

Quilgars, D, Leishman, E, Abbott, DWF, Clarke, S, Cooper, B, Hodgkins, S, Scarrott, P, Pollin, A & Beech, L 2024, '"I wouldn't change my flat for anything." Is there Scope for more People with Learning Disabilities to Rent their own Homes?', *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, vol. 52, no. 2, pp. 362-370. https://doi.org/10.1111/bld.12584

Leishman E, Quilgars D, Abbott D, Clark S, Cooper B, Pollin A, Hodgkins S, Scarrott P. Working collaboratively with an online advisory group of people with learning disabilities in covid-times: carrier pigeons, cats and drones. Res Involv Engagem. 2023 Sep 9;9(1):79 10.1186/s40900-023-00494-7

STUDY INFORMATION

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