The impact of independent advice and information about housing and support options for people with learning difficulties

Designed to open up a wider range of housing and support options for people with learning difficulties, Housing Options is a national independent advisory service. A research project was established to explore the impact of Housing Options. This focused on both the barriers to innovation which users of the service experienced, and the extent to which they were able to achieve successful outcomes.

The service is working in a context where residential care continues to dominate services for people with learning difficulties. Many housing options are still not available to people with learning difficulties, with few living in their own home.

Individuals approached the service for help with a range of tasks, from advice on policy and practice, through assistance for people wanting to move on from residential care or inappropriate accommodation, to families wanting to plan for the future.

Those attempting to implement some of the more innovative options faced significant barriers, including a lack of support from some statutory agencies and the complexity involved in combining housing and care services.

In the wider context, the limiting factors identified included: the lack of information for users and families about local options; concerns about the affordability of small-scale ‘supported living’ from those commissioning services; and problems people with learning difficulties have in accessing mainstream housing.

Despite the barriers, some individuals had successfully enabled people with learning difficulties to rent or buy their own homes.

Those surveyed generally valued the service, particularly for its technical expertise. However, the lack of local support was a concern for some.

Housing Options also carried out ‘capacity building’ work with a variety of organisations. This in turn had supported a wide range of successful developments, although many organisations continued to express concern about the lack of a supportive policy framework.
Despite the increasing interest in ‘supported living’ services for people with learning difficulties, a range of recent studies has pointed to the limited numbers of people who have been enabled to live in their own homes (see, for example, Findings N49). Most people with this label have little option but to remain with their family or live in some form of shared living arrangement (a residential care or group home).

Following earlier case studies which explored various forms of home-ownership for people with learning difficulties, the Housing Options service was established to try and open up a wider range of ‘housing and support’ options, through the provision of independent advice and information. The service works in two ways: it responds to individuals who approach it with a range of specific queries, and it also carries out ‘capacity building’ training and consultancy activities with a range of organisations. The research focused on both aspects of this work.

**The views of individuals using the services**

Relatively few people with learning difficulties have contacted the Housing Options services directly; largely, it has provided technical information and advice to supporters working directly or indirectly on their behalf. Of 113 users of the service responding to a postal survey, two-thirds were people acting in a professional capacity, with the remainder being informal ‘carers’ (mostly family members, but including a few friends and advocates).

Just over 40 per cent of the professionals approaching the service were seeking advice as part of developing local policy or practice, for example:

"We were based in a local authority who were focused purely on residential care as the only option for people with learning difficulties. We wanted to a) inform carers/parents of possible alternatives, b) influence the local authority (to take) a wider perspective."

However, most professionals, along with the carers, were also seeking help with specific situations involving individuals with learning difficulties, many of whom wanted to move on from their current accommodation. Often the desire to move was said to have been triggered by problems with fellow residents in shared settings, along with a wish on the part of the individual for more autonomy:

"A problem with the current situation has been the lack of control he has over his current surroundings: e.g. who is in the house, the mix of residents etc."

"Of the people who moved in together years ago, it is becoming clear that they do not get on, and that is causing considerable problems."

However, some individuals also wanted help to leave other unsuitable housing, including housing they had inherited and which was now in a poor state.

About a quarter of the respondents were supporting individuals who wished to leave the family home in the near future, preferably for some form of independent living:

"A young man with Tourette’s syndrome wants to leave home. The family has been told by care managers that residential care is the only option available."

Finally, a further 19 per cent of respondents mentioned families who wanted to plan ahead and explore possible options before a crisis arose.

Respondents said that Housing Options dealt with a wide variety of topics. Depending on the circumstances, the issues discussed ranged from general reviews of the options to very specific advice relating to topics like benefits and legal matters. Reflecting in part the reputation of the Housing Options service, there appeared to be a lot of interest in ownership options, particularly shared ownership (over 40 per cent specifically mentioned the subject), and the use of Income Support to cover the interest on a mortgage.

A quarter of the respondents who had tried to implement the Housing Options advice experienced few, if any, significant problems. However, most experienced a range of difficulties. Lack of support from services (particularly commissioners or care managers in the statutory services) was the most frequently mentioned:

"Social services have a vested interest in nothing happening, thus avoiding care costs."

"The attitude of registration. They advised that these ladies needed 24 hour care ... and that this alone required them to use registered accommodation ... this is now being challenged."

However, another important factor was the sheer complexity of putting together packages of both housing and support:

"It's slow! Working with very complex situations."

As well as describing their particular situations, respondents were also asked for their perceptions of problems in the wider context. There was unanimity about the lack of information for people with learning difficulties and their families about the possible local options (71 per cent judged this to be either a ‘major problem’ or a ‘bit of a problem’ in their area). Similarly, 61 per cent mentioned concerns about the
costs of local supported living options on the part of local commissioners. Other problems included:

- A lack of suitable social housing for rent (56 per cent);
- An apparent reluctance on the part of social services departments to consider alternatives to residential care (51 per cent);
- Lack of knowledge or experience in implementing supported living options (51 per cent);
- The low priority for general needs housing accorded to people with learning difficulties (44 per cent).

As a result, some respondents expressed a degree of frustration with the statutory services:

"Someone who could have put a laxative in the bowels of social services would have been a boon."

Despite the problems, there were some positive outcomes. Nine respondents reported using the information provided by the service to help people with learning difficulties to successfully access some form of home-ownership, with a further 35 (31 per cent) predicting this might well happen in the future. At the same time, over a quarter of respondents indicated individuals were now renting their own homes (with a further 22 per cent hoping it would happen soon). In addition, five per cent mentioned helping a whole family move to appropriate accommodation.

In general, users valued Housing Options. For example, over half of those making a judgement (99 respondents in all) rated it as ‘very helpful’, compared with just five who judged it as less than helpful. The aspects of the service found to be most helpful included the depth of expertise on offer and the capacity of the service to point to examples already in place elsewhere.

In contrast, many left the question about the ‘least helpful’ aspects of the service unanswered, or indicated there were none. Where respondents did have reservations these tended to focus either on the lack of local support or factors outside the control of Housing Options:

"Advice undoubtedly right in principle, but getting local services to accept it or act on it is the problem."

Capacity building
Since the Housing Options service was founded in 1997, it has provided many workshops and training events for people working in housing and social care organisations, along with more detailed consultancies. Some of these organisations have taken this information and used it to develop local projects or strategies designed to promote housing and support options. A series of visits to a range of organisations provided an opportunity to look at the different tactics being used. The themes explored included:

- **The development of shared ownership**
  The ‘Sold’ programme established by Advance Housing and Support has enabled 20 people to access ‘shared ownership’ (part-buy, part-rent) as part of the ‘purchase and repair’ programme supported by the Housing Corporation. Similarly, the Notting Hill Housing Trust has sought to open up their large shared ownership programme to disabled people.

- **Local advice and support providers**
  Anticipating the demand for more local information, Housing Options had already had contact with a range of individuals and organisations offering local information. These ranged from consultancy organisations, through local MENCAP housing projects, to a personal assistant scheme operating as part of an organisation led by disabled people.

- **Organisations exploring ‘unsubsidised’ housing**
  Several organisations argued that reliance on Housing Corporation subsidies is an important factor limiting development (both in terms of the overall volume of subsidy available and the rigidities within the regulation of social registered landlords), and were seeking ways of getting round this. For example, Golden Lane Housing had substituted MENCAP resources for Housing Corporation subsidy. The resulting flexibility had enabled Golden Lane to help 50 people into shared ownership, as well as to start a programme for rent, all in a relatively short period.

- **The issue of devolution**
  Devolution is likely to increase already existing variation within the UK. Two of the organisations included in the study (Ownership Options, a Scottish equivalent of Housing Options, and Inclusion Glasgow) had been exploring the issues in a specifically Scottish context. Successes included establishing five examples of outright ownership as part of a hospital resettlement programme, using capital from the local Health Board.

- **The commissioner’s perspective**
  To provide some balance, the views of Barnet Social Services were sought in an attempt to look at the issues from a commissioner’s perspective. This acted as a useful reminder of the constraints that limit commissioners’ room for manoeuvre: the ‘perverse incentives’ presented by ‘preserved rights’ are a case in point.
• The wider policy context

While the more established projects could point to considerable successes, most participants in this phase of the study also commented on the continuing barriers. These included:

• The continuing ‘perverse incentives’ which encourage the use of residential care, particularly the significant numbers of people with ‘preserved rights’;
• The general lack of strategic planning by some local authorities;
• The low priority for people currently living in the family home;
• The lack of access for many people with learning difficulties to ordinary housing;
• Difficulties getting mortgages.

The implications

The Housing Options service appears to have had a significant positive impact. Options for extending and developing the service include:

• Extending local partnerships;
• Placing an increasing emphasis on capacity building;
• Responding specifically to the needs of commissioners, in particular in terms of developing a ‘Best Value’ agenda;
• Exploring ways of enabling people with learning difficulties to directly access information about housing and support options.

At the same time, the study demonstrates clearly that information and advice can only go so far. If supported living services are to become more than a relatively marginal phenomenon, substantial reform of the wider system will be required. Policy changes in the pipeline may well have some helpful effects, although they both have risks; without addressing the issue of preserved rights the abolition of the Residential Allowance may have little immediate effect and the impact of Supporting People will be difficult to predict. The recently announced strategic review of learning disability services may well bring a new focus. Indeed, the researcher argues there is a case for a series of demonstration projects which would combine technical support for innovation with the piloting of flexible funding streams.